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Dance Alive!

Jackie Marshall-Ward

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I feel very honored (I think) and slightly apprehensive at being given the privilege of being the opening speaker at this conference. By tomorrow afternoon I may be a distant memory!

Dance and Heritage – a very broad title. We have obviously inherited our heritage and it will be different for all of us. What we have in common is an awareness that we have been, and are still being, influenced by the past, and are indeed, products of it in all aspects of life. Moreover, we are creating tomorrow's heritage. In the context of dance we are faced with fundamental problems. We know both instinctively and intellectually that mankind has always danced. But because of the ephemeral nature of the process, recording it and trying to reproduce it has, until recent times, been incredibly difficult and open to all sorts of random elements. To interpret the written descriptions of dances without the benefit of watching an actual performance inevitably leads to different interpretations. So much must have been learned by “word of foot”, so to speak. The natural idiom of a given period is unknown to us. So many instructions are sketchy because there was no need to be anything more. There was an understanding of what was meant because people were using their existing knowledge up to that point to inform performance. We are faced with a variety of sources, from the barest outlines to the most detailed descriptions of choreography and steps, not to mention the memories passed down the generations. The word “preserve” is often used in conjunction with “heritage”. This has unfortunately connotations of aspic and therefore not a word I would use. I prefer to

think of heritage as something to be celebrated and seen as a continuum of which we are part.

So, how do we go about it?

The answer is simple – we must tell people about it – we must show them – we can hopefully inspire them to participate in it. This means education and since one of the suggested topic headings for this conference is “Historical Dance in Education” this is my starting point. I don't propose to embark on a definition of “historical dance” any more than I wish to measure the length of a piece of string.

I chose my title very deliberately to express what dance means to me. It must be alive, even when it's called “historical”. Dance on the page does not exist as dance. It is merely a series of words or choreographic symbols attempting to describe or record, often imperfectly, a physical phenomenon. The creative process itself only becomes effective when carried out with living bodies. Dance only truly exists when performed and can only be truly learned through “doing”. I can study texts for inspiration, and attempt to visualize, but the dance exists only on the page and in my head until I start on a physical interpretation of what is on paper.

Full credit must be paid to the vast and dedicated amount of research undertaken over the years. Thank goodness it is ongoing. I am sure that this work is seen as a means to an end, that end being performance with as much authenticity and integrity as possible. We must be constantly examining what we do and teach and acknowledging that we shall probably never arrive at the definitive answers to the problems set us by the masters

of the past. But it is this that makes for excitement and keeps interest alive. This is what we must convey to others to enable interest in historical dance to become more widespread, in particular to the next generation. As the word “historical” gradually encompasses more and more recent dance forms such as the Charleston and the Black Bottom it is to be hoped that more and more young people are attracted to what, for many of us, seems like the day before yesterday. We can't let it fade and die with us.

Nowadays, of course, it is possible to learn from videos, a method widely used for exam syllabuses, but still for each individual the dance only exists when he or she performs it. None of the ways of learning dispenses with the need for a teacher who can interpret and demonstrate what is required, and this not on the strength of one or two workshops. I'm sure we all have our own horror stories concerning those who feel fully qualified to teach on the strength of three branles.

Until recent times the only ways to appreciate dance were to observe live performance or to perform oneself. Similarly, live performance was the only way to experience music. How better to enjoy it than to dance to it? How much more enlivening it is to interact with musicians than with a CD player! Historically, dancers and musicians were essential to each other. Let's revive and foster that relationship because in so doing a mutually enjoyable partnership is recreated and the whole is certainly greater than the sum of the parts.

Such co-operation gives rise to curiosity on the parts of both dancers and musicians as to the particular skills of each other. Instrumentalists playing early music often have no idea what the dancers are doing when performing a pavan, galliard or minuet. When required to accompany the dance they can find themselves re-learning the music and adopting new techniques. This is an expansion of their existing knowledge and can therefore be said to be broadening their musical education. It's even better if they are willing to try the dances for themselves.

Suddenly tempi and phrasing assume a whole new significance. I'm sure we've all emerged panting from a galloping galliard and catatonic from a plodding pavan! The changing rhythms of a balletto are best achieved by musicians familiar with the dance, and who can be expected to count the multifarious repeats of the country dance when it is so much easier to know it well enough to recognize when it is finished by observation? Music well played will inspire the dancers and often act as an aide memoire as we must dance without dots. We must foster this relationship, particularly when working with children, who often have very little contact with “real” music.

From working with live music I have calculated that I am able to increase my productivity (I hope you appreciate the business jargon) by 50%. In other words give better value to the class.

So what is historical dance in education? I choose to interpret the word “education” in the broadest sense. First and foremost both dance and education are for everyone. 25 years of teaching experience has convinced me of this. As a teacher it is my responsibility to enable everyone who wants to to enjoy dancing, irrespective of age and ability.

I have been called upon to teach all ages of children in relation to the National Curriculum, and all ages of adults, some with learning and physical difficulties. As many of you know, I work regularly with Marion Panzetta, so that I rarely have recourse to the dreaded CD, and she has calculated that together we have enabled literally thousands of people to experience early dance for the first time; in fact, speaking of children, about fifteen thousand. I often hear, “Are we going to have to dance, Miss?” as if they were about to be subjected to some sort of vile punishment. This from boys who will break dance at the drop of a hat and love to demonstrate their prowess.

Reluctance is soon dispelled, particularly for boys when the galliard is presented as a fitness exercise to music, and they are given

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the opportunity to jump and turn and exhibit the sort of footwork seen on the football field. It then becomes an easy matter to turn it into a dance. Much social dance contains elements of games and mime. Thus drama provides a useful tool, as it gives children permission to behave in an unfamiliar way without embarrassment. The same can be said of adults! I must say that it was quite a challenge to teach the galliard to a class of adults, all of whom said that they could not jump! But even a seated galliard with the correct footwork is better than no galliard at all! The term now means something.

References to dance abound in literature. One need look no further than Shakespeare for confirmation of this and many papers have been written on the subject. It is so exciting to see the delight on people's faces when the reference becomes a physical reality. Macbeth's witches certainly knew a thing or two about doubles and many a quadrille still goes on for "the better part of the night".

Dances were composed to provide conclusions to Restoration plays, but how often do we see the "dance for the play" in today's theatre? Why not?

I would suggest a lack of education in the broadest sense and either an inability or unwillingness to undertake the research into the dance. The script is respected so why not the author's intentions as to his finale?

We must confront head on the "it'll do and anyway no-one will ever know" mentality. For a start, we do know, and increasingly so do many others. It is nothing short of insulting to assume that observers have no knowledge, and irresponsible to neglect the duty of giving the correct information to the less well informed. Education should be everywhere.

One naturally adapts one's approach to the class as it presents itself. Increasingly, I face groups of children, perhaps thirty or forty of them, from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds with all the cultural and linguistic diversity one would expect from such a group. This is a challenge, but not a

problem. All children like to move to music. What is often new for them is the experience of moving as a group, not to mention the dreaded holding hands. Simply expect them to do it, and they will.

The beauty of the historical repertoire is that it contains something for everyone, from the simplest branle to the most technically demanding baroque solo and is therefore not limited to the young and talented. How often do we hear "I can't dance. I've got two left feet and I'm totally unco-ordinated"? I refuse to accept this. How many of these people can drive a car, let alone clean their teeth and walk down the street! A difficult accomplishment with two left feet!

In an historical context dance is the crystallization of life in a specific period and as such adds a dimension to existing knowledge and experience. To approach history through dance, or for that matter, dance through history, enables the individual physically to inhabit the past, without the risks attendant upon membership of one of the many battle re-enactment societies. Suddenly one is exposed to the excitement of exploring aspects of life which have a bearing on what happens on the dance floor. Social mores, dress, language and languages, and even architecture suddenly become relevant and knowledge of these adds to the enjoyment of performance. To add life to an historic building is enlightening for visitors and what better way to inform as to the intricacies of dress than to see movement. All this is education.

The educational value of historical dance goes beyond simply learning more history. The gulf between it and so much modern dance, both social and performance, can seem enormous, even though they are part of the same continuum. Diaghilev's ballet (choreographed and danced by Nijinsky) *L'apres-midi d'un faune*, shocked and horrified as did *La Volta* in its day. Nevertheless, both were products of their time and part of an ongoing process. Throughout history considerable technical demands are placed on the body in terms of footwork and

posture, and it is vital to develop an awareness of the space one inhabits, particularly in relation to other dancers. Many children and even adults find this very difficult. For children it provides a vital lesson in consideration for others. Historical dance is generally not a solitary or introspective occupation. It helps us to develop the antennae to relate not only to partners or sets but also to onlookers so that mutual pleasure may be enjoyed.

For everyone huge demands are made on concentration, something complained of as lacking in today's young. Memory, both physical and mental, is developed along with the valuable lesson that application and practice are rewarded with increasing levels of competence. There is something for everyone to achieve without the competitive pressure of feeling a failure if one does not come first.

In the context of the continuum of dance the study of any period informs what has gone before and what comes after. In order to appreciate fully where we are now it is necessary to know where we have come from. Dance is constantly evolving to reflect its context. No dance form springs out of thin air; it is a product of ongoing exploration and experimentation and the natural human thirst for novelty and change. An observer of the classical ballet of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will have a much deeper understanding of the performance if he is aware of the style and steps of the eighteenth. Similarly, modern ballet and contemporary dance could not exist and excite us with innovation without firm roots in the classical discipline of earlier times. However, caution is required when delving into the distant past where no precise written records exist and we are relying on the reports of observers and pictures produced at the time.

By all means let's use our imaginations, but let us be informed as to the many other factors influencing social interaction. We cannot "be" medieval, Victorian or even our own grandparents, but we have a duty to be as informed as we can be before embarking on

any kind of reconstruction, particularly if this is to be placed before the general public.

We must not accept second best, but at the same time we must respect the genuine efforts of others, however imperfect they may be. There, but for the grace of God, go all of us at some time. We can change attitudes, increase knowledge, dispel myths and most important of all, we can give pleasure and bring enjoyment which provide the easiest way to learn. The opportunities before us are endless and the future exciting. I want people to dance.

We know it's vital for life and so did they:

Plato – *To dance well is to be well educated.*

Jean Dubuffet – *Dancing is the last word in life.....in dancing one draws nearer to oneself.*

Margaret N.H'Doubler - *If we can think, feel and move, we can dance.*

Pamela Brown – *There is room for dance in everyone – from walking to music in someone's arms to the Rose Adagio.*

In conclusion, I should like to change the phrase "Historical Dance in Education" to "Historical Dance – an Education", for such it is.