DANCING

THE PLEASURE, POWER, AND ART OF MOVEMENT

GERALD JONAS

PREFACE BY RHODA GRAUER

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Opposite: Ballet class, United States, c. 1914

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To Barbara, Phoebe, Sarah, James, and Peter

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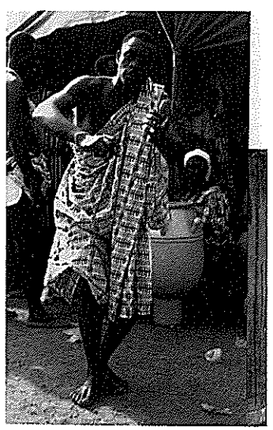
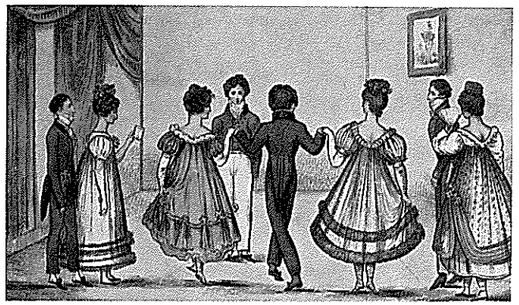
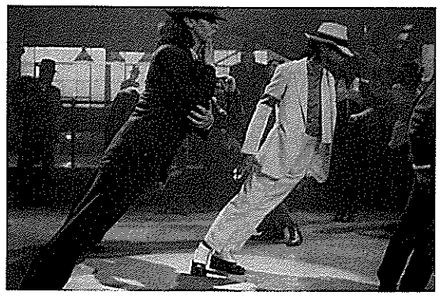






Preface

My earliest dance memory is of the Ditmar sisters sitting through gym class whenever we square danced in grade school. They said it was against their religion to dance. At the time I took this as just one of those strange things about religion: I wasn't allowed to eat pork, my friend Barbara had to eat fish on Fridays, the Ditmar sisters couldn't dance.

Another vivid memory is of a class in ballroom dancing my parents sent me to. Here we were forced to embrace boys we had never met, breathe into each other's faces, and drag around the floor in a series of steps that we were told would leave us looking and feeling like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Well, I had seen them on television, and you couldn't fool me. What we did in dance class was completely embarrassing. Who would have guessed that only a few years later I would use what I had been taught to conquer the cutest boy at the prom in a steamy tango which left my friends in shock, the teachers frozen in place, and me confined to my room for three weekends?

Dance was mysterious. Sometimes you did it, and it was good—like square dancing in gym class—unless, of course, you were the Ditmar sisters. Sometimes you did it really well, and it was bad—like applying the intimate rhythms of the tango to "seduction" instead of "socializing." Although they were not always intuitively clear, dance had its rules; and there were serious consequences if you got them wrong.

Dancing, both the television series and the book, takes a close-up, cross-cultural look at the rules, messages, and meanings embodied in dance around the world. Dance, like language, is found in all human societies. And like language, dance has power. The universality of dance is easily explained: the human body itself is its vehicle. All societies acknowledge its power and harness it according to their fundamental values, aesthetics, and mores. You can learn a lot about a society from its dances, but reading the culture-specific "languages" of dance can be tricky.

For example, rules concerning gender identity, often expressed as ideals of modesty, are embedded in the traditional dances of most societies: women's movements are generally more restricted than men's; men can do high leg extensions but women can't; male dancers do not touch the legs of female dancers, and so on. In the classical ballet of the West, however, women extend their legs, reveal their bodies, and are lifted by men who hold them firmly by the legs. Does this mean that Western society is somehow less "modest" than other societies? Hardly. In fact, the Judeo-Christian West, where ballet developed, has often been more puritanical about the body—its physical functions, its erotic power—than many other parts of the world. What classical ballet tries to do is transcend the physicality of the dancers' bodies by creating the illusion that the dancers are ethereal beings—nymphs and sylphs and such—for whom the rules of touch and extension do not apply. Ironically, classical ballet, often considered the height of elegance and beauty in the West, has shocked people elsewhere in the world who might go naked but who would not dream of touching someone of the opposite sex while dancing.

To comprehend a dance, we must open ourselves to the culture from which it springs; conversely, as we begin to gain insight into a dance, we are on a path to understanding the culture that produced it. This is the basic premise of *Dancing*.

The idea for *Dancing* was born in Hawaii in 1978. Perched in a gallery of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, I watched a small group of musicians and dancers perform a series of traditional hulas. Pua Kanahele, seated on a pandanus mat, beat out a rhythmic pattern on a large gourd shaped like an hourglass, while she chanted ancient songs in the Hawaiian language honoring the goddess of the volcanoes, Pele. The dance itself, performed by four students of Pua Kanahele and her mother Edith Kanaka'ole, startled me. As director of the dance program of the National Endowment for the Arts, I was in Hawaii to attend the annual meeting of the American Dance Guild/Conference on Research on Dance. I had spent most of my career in the American professional dance scene, and had seen literally hundreds of dance performances from the largest ballet companies to small avant-garde groups performing in drafty lofts and overheated garages. But nothing in my experience had prepared me for this.

To begin with, the space allotted for the dancing was about fifteen square feet, hardly room enough for a small leap. In any case, the dancers' feet never left the ground. This hula was utterly unlike the "hulas" I had seen in Hollywood movies. Instead of rapid hip gyrations, the dancers' movements evolved naturally and gracefully out of a complex stepping-in-place motion in which the knees were slightly bent and the feet rocked gently from a flat-on-the-ground position to a heel-lift with the weight resting on the ball of the foot. Instead of a Dorothy Lamour sarong or grass skirt, the dancers wore loose-fitting skirts and tops. Finally, they were both—by the standards that had informed my own life—very, very big women (each weighed more than two hundred pounds). I had no idea of what I was seeing, but I was determined to find out.

During the rest of the conference I saw many kinds of dance from the Pacific region, ranging from the exquisitely refined Balinese wayang wong, with its articulated finger movements, highly expressive eyes, and glorious costumes of red, green, yellow, and gold brocade, to a ceremony called Obon led by members of the Japanese community in Hawaii. Obon is an annual event to honor the souls of ancestors. The dancers form a large circle and perform simple steps more or less in unison to the beat of a single large drum. I have never felt more a part of something than when I fell in step with about two hundred other people dancing in homage to the generations that came before us.

Before I left Hawaii, I learned that the dances I had seen served many functions beyond entertainment. The aesthetics of each were completely strange to my Western eyes. Though the large hula dancers initially appeared to be unattractive, I learned that their shape is, in fact, a highly desirable sign of beauty and status in traditional Hawaiian culture. Clearly, there was a lot to learn. Upon my return home, I quickly contacted my brother, Victor, an ethnomusicologist. He sent me off in a direction of exploration that led to this book and series.

Until recently, serious dance scholarship in the West took forms that proceeded in isolation from one another: dance criticism/history (which tended to evaluate dance qualitatively according to aesthetic judgments) and dance ethnology/anthropology (which tended to focus on the larger cultural functions that dance serves). The former disciplines were usually applied to the dances of the Western world, the latter to the dances of the non-Western world. The challenge of *Dancing* was to combine these two approaches and apply them to dance throughout the world. In pursuit of this goal, we have avoided the typical presentation organized historically or geographically. Instead, we have identified a number of important ways in which dance functions in human societies—always keeping in mind that while dance is a universal human activity it does not play the same role in every culture. The functions we settled on were each allotted a chapter in this book:

Dance as an emblem of cultural identity, with a focus on clashes between societies;

Dance as an expression of religious worship, with a focus on Nigeria and Europe;

Dance as an expression of social order and power, with a focus on royal courts;

Dance as an expression of cultural mores, with a focus on gender-specific behavior;

Dance as a classical art, with a focus on ballet in the West and kabuki in Japan;

Dance as a medium of cultural fusion, with a focus on the intertwining of African and European dance traditions in the Americas;

Dance as the creation of individual artists, with a focus on the twentieth century in America;

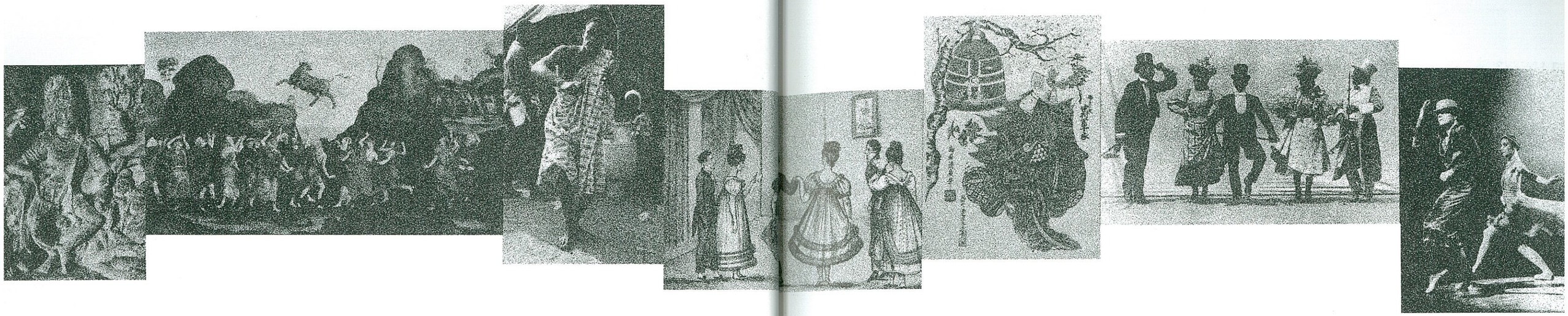
Dance as an indicator of who we are today and where we are going, with a focus on electronic media.

From the corpus of world dance, we have selected examples that offer cross-cultural comparisons between theatrical and nontheatrical dance forms as well as insights into important historical issues, such as the evolution of dances, the struggle to preserve traditional dances, and the adaptation of old dances to new purposes. Though our examples represent only a small fraction of world dance, they were chosen because they shed light on larger, more universal issues. By delving deeply into specific examples, we hope to generate an understanding that can be applied to dances and cultures worldwide.

Dance today is not simply cross-cultural but pan-cultural and planetary; dances are borrowed, degraded, adapted, and transformed at rates unparalleled in the past, with consequences that cannot be predicted. There has never been a more exciting time to be part of the dance world—and anyone who has ever danced, watched a dance, or wondered why someone else was dancing is part of it. Which includes, most definitely, the Ditmar sisters.

One final note: Over the years that I worked on this project, I learned that the dynamics of dance are as close to the dynamics of life as any art I can imagine. Dance changes with every body that dances; it changes with the time, the country, even the weather; it does not have one history but many. *Dancing*, the series and the book, present one set of stories about dance. There are many more to be told.

Rhoda Grauer



Chapter 1
The Power of Dance

Under a father's eager palm, the taut skin of a mother's belly ripples once, then again, prodded from within by a force that only a mother and father could identify: "It's a hand, no, a foot, an elbow, maybe a knee. . . ." Whatever the limb, the happy parents take its stirring as a sure sign of new life; they attribute to the quickening fetus a command, however rudimentary, of a basic human impulse: the thrusts and flexions and twists and turns of self-generated movement.

The impulse to move is the raw material that cultures shape into evocative sequences of physical activity that we call dance. This phenomenon is universal. Courting and courtly dances; wedding dances and funeral dances; dances of healing and dances of instruction; dances to arouse, amuse, or uplift onlookers; dances to usher in the seasons and dances that appeal directly to the gods; dances that tell stories and dances that seek to create a formal beauty that cannot be put into words: There is no end to the variety of purposes to which the dancing body can be put. But meaning as well as beauty is in the eye of the beholder; and one person's shudder of religious ecstasy may be another person's shimmy of sexual abandon. So intensely personal is dance, so closely linked to cultural identity, that when people disagree about the meaning and value of specific dances, the resulting confusion may breed contempt, anger, even violence. To question or belittle other people's dances is to challenge their right to be themselves. As the famous line of W. B. Yeats reminds us (and no book about dance would be complete without quoting it): "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

The classical court dance of Cambodia has embodied the essence of that country's national identity for over a thousand years. From the ninth through the middle of the fifteenth century, the great Khmer empire ruled much of Southeast Asia from its capital at Angkor, in what is now northwestern Cambodia. Hundreds of carved reliefs on the magnificent temples in and around Angkor depict ranks of bejeweled dancers in elaborate headdresses and diaphanous skirts emerging foamlike from the sea to shower blessings and prosperity on the land. These were no figments of the artists' imaginations. The royal treasury supported thousands of court dancers who played a central role in the fertility rites and ancestor worship through which the empire maintained itself. During the twelfth century, King Jayavarman VII paid honor to the spirits of his mother and father by adding over three thousand dancers to those already in service in temples throughout his realm. According to historian Paul Cravath, "The extent to which dance and dancers were integral to the social and religious fabric of Cambodia is perhaps unequaled in world civilization."

When Angkor was sacked by Siamese armies in the mid-fifteenth century, among the treasures the invaders carried away with them were court dancers and musicians. But even though Angkor was abandoned for a time, the dance tradition survived; royal dancers, wearing gilded headdresses resembling those on the temple reliefs, took part in the funeral processions of Cambodian kings well into the twentieth century. Until 1970, an all-female troupe known as "the king's dancers" lived in the king's palace in the contemporary capital of Phnom Penh, where they continued to perform the ancient ritual dances and dance dramas based on Cambodian myths and folk tales and on Sanskrit epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. For years the star of the troupe was the daughter of Prince Sihanouk, the last reigning monarch.

The classical dances of Cambodia are marked by a slow, almost hypnotic pace and smooth, wavelike, synchronized movements; performers may stand in one spot for long periods, with one leg raised and bent behind them at the knee, while their fingers, taut with controlled energy, curl back toward their wrists in the characteristic gestures that are said to form a dance within a dance; through special exercises and long practice, fingers and elbows become so supple they appear to be boneless. As we will see in Chapter 3, the highly refined court dance of Cambodia has much in common with dances that express the hierarchical structure and tradition-bound perspective of other royal courts, both past and present, around the world.

The Khmer Rouge, who captured Phnom Penh in 1975, were determined to wipe out every vestige of Cambodia's "feudal past." As potent symbols of that past, the royal dancers were hunted down, imprisoned, put to death. Yet subsequent events have confirmed the power of the dance to serve as a rallying point for national consciousness. After the Khmer Rouge were overthrown in

One of the largest religious complexes in the world, Angkor Wat was built by the Cambodian king Suryavarman II (c. A.D. 1112–1153). Nominally a Hindu temple devoted to Vishnu, Angkor Wat embodies two linked ideas which are also to be found at the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Java: the cult of the devaraja, or god-king, in whose being is centered both religious and secular power, and the World Mountain, which is the axis of the universe and the underlying structural principle of religious architecture. In this view, the central section of the monument rises above one of the two water tanks that border the great roadway leading from the monumental gate to the temple itself.

Opposite: Students and teachers at the National Khmer Dance School, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 1991.

The celestial females found on the great temples of Cambodia evoke the style of life at the Khmer court in its heyday. The two celestial dancers (above) decorate a pillar in the Banyon at Angkor Thom, an enormous monument syncretizing aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism—but largely celebrating the god-king himself—built by King Jayavarman VII (c. A.D. 1181–early thirteenth century). Details of the pose of these figures are echoed by the two children (right) dancing at Angkor Wat in 1923.

Among the many issues that dance anthropologists address is how children acquire the dance "language" of their own culture. This photograph, of a young girl in Pokhara, Nepal, practicing a dance step while her friends clap in rhythm, captures a scene that is acted out in most societies.

1979 by Vietnamese-backed forces, the new communist government made it a priority to restore the dance (with the aid of a few surviving dancers and teachers) as a way of establishing its legitimacy in the eyes of the Cambodians. Meanwhile, thirty-five royal dancers who had escaped from the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge came together in the United States to form the Khmer Classical Dance Troupe, whose performances have heartened the thousands of Cambodians now living outside their homeland while introducing the glories of Cambodian dance to new audiences. Each troupe claims to be the true embodiment of the ancient tradition; in keeping with this tradition, the dancers are literally sewn into their costumes of sequined and hand-embroidered silk and velvet before each performance.

All dance is charged with power. To explore the idioms and sources of this power, a relatively new field of scholarship called dance anthropology views dance in its social and cultural context. Encoded in the form, technique, and structure of every dance are meanings and values of importance to the dancers and to those who share their view of the world. This is as true of the participatory dances that everyone does at social functions like weddings as it is of the dances performed by trained specialists for spectators drawn from the community as a whole or from various self-selected elites.

Wedding dances are found in a great many societies. In those that trace their roots back to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the dancing is usually kept separate from the wedding ceremony itself. This ceremony takes the form of a sacred ritual involving a formal procession and other symbolically structured acts, such as an exchange of vows and rings, ritual kissing and wine drinking, the breaking of a glass, and so on. Significantly, none of these acts is thought of as dance. Only when the ceremony ends does the dancing begin—traditionally with a waltz performed by the just-married couple before the assembled guests. This dance, which inaugurates the secular (that is, nonsacred) part of the celebration, follows a strict protocol of its own. As if to demonstrate that weddings unite not just two people but two families, the bride and groom separate after a few turns and begin inviting their relatives and in-laws to dance until the floor is filled with dancing couples from both families. At a Jewish wedding, a group of men may lift the bride and groom up on chairs and dance around the hall with them, or the dancing may take the form of a hora, an all-inclusive circle associated with both Eastern European Jewry and the modern state of Israel.

As we will see in Chapter 2, it is no accident that wedding dances in most Western societies are relegated to the secular part of the celebration; the Judeo-Christian tradition has always been uneasy about the role of the dancing body in sacred settings. This ambivalence can take many forms; among Hasidic Jews—who not only dance joyfully at weddings but, unlike their coreligionists, dance during divine worship as well—all dancing is strictly segregated by gender.

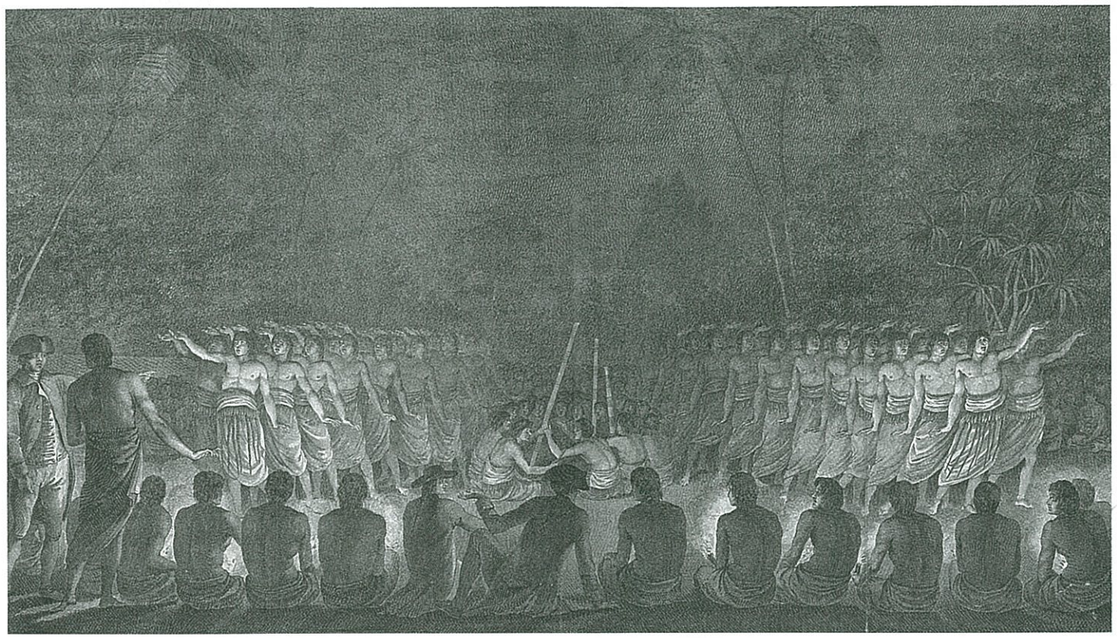
The distinction between sacred and secular, which looms so large in the Judeo-Christian tradition, has little meaning in most non-Western cultures. In the communal religious ceremonies of such cultures, dance often plays an indispensable role. Precisely because their underlying assumptions about dance and the body are so different, Europeans and non-Europeans have often clashed over such issues as what the proper function of dance should be, and what kinds of dance movements are appropriate in a healthy society.

Natives & Europeans

> The women came down [to the beach] and stripped themselves naked and made all the alluring gestures they could to entice [the sailors] onshore again. . . . "

The year is 1767; the writer is Samuel Wallis, captain of HMS *Dolphin*, the first European vessel to make landfall on the Polynesian island now known as Tahiti. Wallis had no doubts about the intentions of the native women; when he ordered his men to stay onboard, the women pelted the ship with fruit and shouted what sounded like jeers in their native language.

This moment of first contact—like some bizarre science-fiction scenario—was repeated again and again during the European "discovery" of the South Pacific. In most cases the Europeans were struck by the initial friendliness of the natives, by their uninhibited (to European eyes) sexuality, and by their propensity to express themselves through dance. Speaking of the Tahitians, a French sailor reported that "their existence was in never-ending merrymaking." Captain James Cook, a keen observer who visited Tahiti a few years after Wallis, described their dances



John Webber, an artist who traveled with Captain James Cook on his third voyage (1776–79), sketched the head of a dancer in central Polynesia (top), showing a distorted facial expression of the sort that so disturbed the captain. Polynesian dances, like the Tongan "dance of the night" (above), performed only by men, published as an engraving in Cook's and James King's Voyage to the Pacific Ocean *(1784) after a sketch by Webber, quickly became the most powerful symbol of South Sea island life to Europeans.*

in more detail. To the accompaniment of a chanting man beating on a shark-skin drum, bare-breasted women wrapped in ankle-length bark-cloth skirts moved their hands and arms in elegant gestures, while shaking their hips in rotatory motions "with a velocity that excited our astonishment." Cook found the dances of the youngest girls (eight to ten years old) "indecent." He was also offended by the "demonic" expressions the dancers made by distorting their lips—a feature of the dance that seemed to give great pleasure to the natives themselves. One oddity the early explorers noted: Although the natives rubbed noses to express affection, kissing was unknown, as was Western-style couple dancing in which a man and a woman face each other and place their hands on each other's bodies in public.

The European missionaries who followed the first explorers to Polynesia learned more, and liked less, about the native dances. On Tahiti and its neighboring islands, where food was usually plentiful, men and women seemed to dance at every opportunity, day or night—to please their gods, to celebrate the completion of communal work projects, to praise their chiefs, and, apparently, for the sheer fun of it. They

Contemporary Tahitian dance combines features of traditional dance forms, such as alternating ranks of men and women who perform gender-specific steps, with elements borrowed from the West or from other island groups.

& Polynesia

also had an elaborate dance theater. A fleet of up to seventy canoes made a circuit from island to island carrying a troupe of actor-dancers called arioi, who had renounced ordinary life to devote themselves to the cult of Oro, god of rain and fertility. Some of their canoes were rigged with platforms for performances, so that the singing and dancing could begin even before the fleet reached land. Once on shore the performances continued through the night in houses specially built for this purpose.

Among the high points of the performances were mime shows featuring men with mock phalluses fashioned from distended animal bladders; their grossly exaggerated portrayals of sexual intercourse provoked the audience to waves of laughter, as did their satirical skits about the shortcomings (sexual and otherwise) of the most powerful chiefs. Under the rigidly hierarchical system that dominated life on these Polynesian islands, only the arioi were permitted to make fun of the ruling class in public—not unlike the court jesters of medieval Europe.

The first representatives of the newly formed London Missionary Society arrived in Tahiti in 1797 and began converting the principal chiefs and local priests. The arioi, who offended the new order both by their devotion to the old gods and by their open sexuality, were suppressed. Within a few years, no trace of their society could be found. By the 1820s dancing of the traditional kind was prohibited as immoral, and the prohibition was extended to all activities associated with dancing—even the making of bark cloth. But the islanders, despite their mass conversion to Christianity, continued to dance in private, away from the prying eyes of missionaries. When the somewhat more tolerant French ousted the English from control of Tahiti in 1842, the traditional dances began a slow comeback, although it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that dancing in public received official sanction. By this time, the Western custom of kissing was widespread.

Today, dance is again a significant part of Tahitian social life. Much of the music now uses Western scales and harmonies, the words of many traditional chants have been lost or are no longer understood, and few if any dances have been preserved intact from the pre-Christian era. But basic Tahitian attitudes toward the body have remained unchanged. In a society whose primary unit is still the extended (as opposed to the nuclear) family, troupes of dancers in alternating ranks of men and women still perform gender-specific steps that retain their age-old associations for the islanders. Similar steps are found in the tamure, the dance that Tahitians do in nightclubs and dance halls, which fuses Western-style couple dancing with traditional Tahitian body movements. In the characteristic male step, the men keep their heels together and their feet more or less flat on the ground while they open and shut their knees in a flapping scissors movement; they are careful to keep their hips stationary, because a man who sways his hips from side to side looks effeminate to a Tahitian. Meanwhile, with bent knees and weight balanced on the balls of their feet, the women rotate their hips rapidly. Both sexes keep the pelvis thrust forward with the head erect and the arms posed and virtually motionless; the main action is below the waist.

style.

According to the Tahitians themselves, the message of the dance can be paraphrased as follows: "I am young, healthy, and attractive. I know who and what I am, and I am happy with myself." The clear contrast between the movements of men and women illustrates one source of the power of dance: It serves as definer and reinforcer of gender distinctions perceived to be vital to the survival of society—especially an island society that could not easily recruit newcomers or encourage migration to neighboring communities and therefore had to rely on the control of reproduction to maintain an optimal population. As dance anthropologist Joann Keali'inohomoku puts it, "When the shocked missionaries concluded that sex was central to Polynesian culture, they got it exactly right." What they failed to appreciate was the social and religious context of the dances they witnessed.

reproduction

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans have come to view Polynesia more as an earthly paradise than the fallen land that the missionaries tried to save. Today, Tahitian dancers on the beach at dusk (below) enact a vision of free and joyous movement in a setting of natural beauty.

Even the most spontaneous dancing occurs not in isolation but as part of some culturally shaped event; without an understanding of the activities that surround and sustain the dancing body, it is impossible to grasp the full import of the dance.

If the dances of Tahiti and Cambodia embody important aspects of those societies, the dances of the West must say something important about the societies that were nurtured in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As we will see in the next chapter, the couple dances that form so prominent a part of the European heritage probably go back to the late medieval period in southern France, where the ideal of courtly love caught the imagination of itinerant troubadours and their audiences. Later, the male-female couple dance found even more exalted expression in the duets of classical ballet.

Ballet, which is the quintessentially European form of dance drama, had its origins in the court entertainments of Renaissance Italy and France. The earliest ballets were participatory spectacles in which kings and queens and courtiers danced and listened to noble masquerades declaiming poetry that praised the court in high-flown metaphor borrowed

Ballet & France

Opposite: A benchmark date in the changing Western idea of Polynesia was the departure of the French painter Paul Gauguin for Tahiti on April 4, 1891, in search of an experience outside the conventions of European culture. Key among the works that he painted there was Ia Orana Maria *(1891), an Adoration of the Virgin that combined Christian and Polynesian themes. Gauguin portrayed the worshipers as native girls, in traditional dress that would hardly have met the approval of the missionary. In a gesture that united East and West, he adapted the postures of the worshipers from photographs of celestial dancers on the reliefs at Borobudur in Indonesia that he had purchased at the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition.*

At a wedding ball at the Louvre on September 24, 1581, the bride and groom share the first dance. The occasion is the marriage of the Duc de Joyeuse and Marguerite de Vaudémont, painted by an unknown Flemish master working at the French court.

from Greek and Roman myths. To be assigned a role in these spectacles was a mark of honor for a courtier. Only slightly less structured were the frequent balls around which the social life of the court revolved; the social station of each gentleman and lady was revealed by the order in which they danced, couple by couple, before the assembled nobility; those of highest rank danced first, a protocol echoed today in the custom of reserving the first dance at a wedding for the bride and groom (who are treated as royalty for a day).

Out of the court spectacles of Europe's grandest monarch—Louis XIV of France—evolved the wordless dance drama we know as ballet; during its evolution many ideals of courtly bearing and behavior were refined into aesthetic principles. As we will see in Chapter 5, the emphasis on an erect, uplifted body with an unbending torso and shoulders pulled up and back can be traced to ballet's origins at court. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, ballet had been recast into a theatrical spectacle performed by professional

dancers for paying audiences. To ensure a supply of trained dancers, schools were established; instruction was based on a repertoire of positions, exercises, steps, and movements which European ballet masters codified under a technical vocabulary of mostly French terms (pirouette, entrechat, etc.) that are still in use.

For the largely upper-class audience, going to the ballet was a social event of great importance; being seen at the theater by the right people was as important to some spectators as the stage spectacles they went to see. But the core of the experience remained the dancing of skilled professionals who were applauded for their feats of expressive and athletic grace; as time went on, more and more attention was directed to the dancers' appearance of lightness and the seeming effortlessness with which they launched themselves through the air, as if gravity were nothing but a minor inconvenience to the dancing body. During the nineteenth century, audiences took delight in the illusion of weightlessness projected by ballerinas in toe shoes. In its resolve to prevail over, rather than accommodate, the forces of nature, ballet gives expression to one of the characteristic aspirations of Western societies.

Although much has changed on and off the stage, the ballet schools of today are lineal descendants of the ballet schools of the Baroque era. Would-be ballet dancers begin training their bodies at the age of nine or ten. As long as they continue to perform, no matter how exalted their position in the ballet company, dancers attend class daily because they cannot afford even the slightest diminution of control. What they do to achieve and maintain this control has been lovingly described by Lincoln Kirstein, the impresario who brought George Balanchine to New York in the 1930s and who helped him found both the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet:

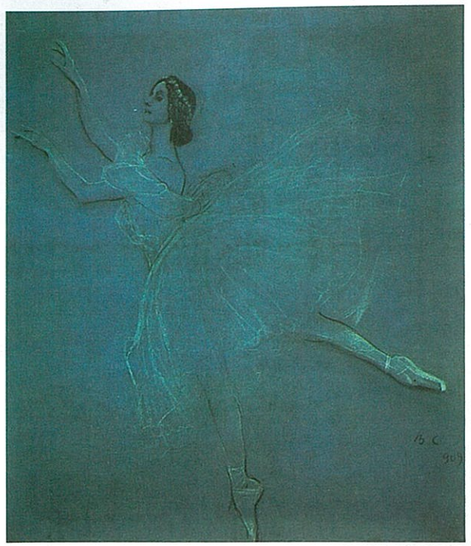
"The daily lesson, lasting an hour and a half, is not a rehearsal but a training session, identical in progression for both beginners and accomplished professionals. It commences slowly with the body supported by a barre, permitting canonical correctness impossible without this aid. Later, students are released into the hall for center practice. Slow movements are followed by faster (*adagio* to *allegro*). The lesson ends with practice in toe shoes for girls and aerial action for boys.

"At the start . . . the pupil grasps the barre. Before moving, one must stand well. Pelvis is centered, neither tipped back nor forward. Abdomen is drawn in, diaphragm raised. Shoulders drop naturally; head is straight, eyes front. Arms are carried downward, rounded from shoulders to fingertips. The desired "turn-out," in which, with heels together, the feet are spread to form an angle of 180 degrees, supporting the erect upper body, is only slowly gained. Muscles eventually accommodate it without strain, but this is neither a swift nor easy process. However, the turn-out offers maximum base and support for any movement; it is the bedrock of ballet style and practice."

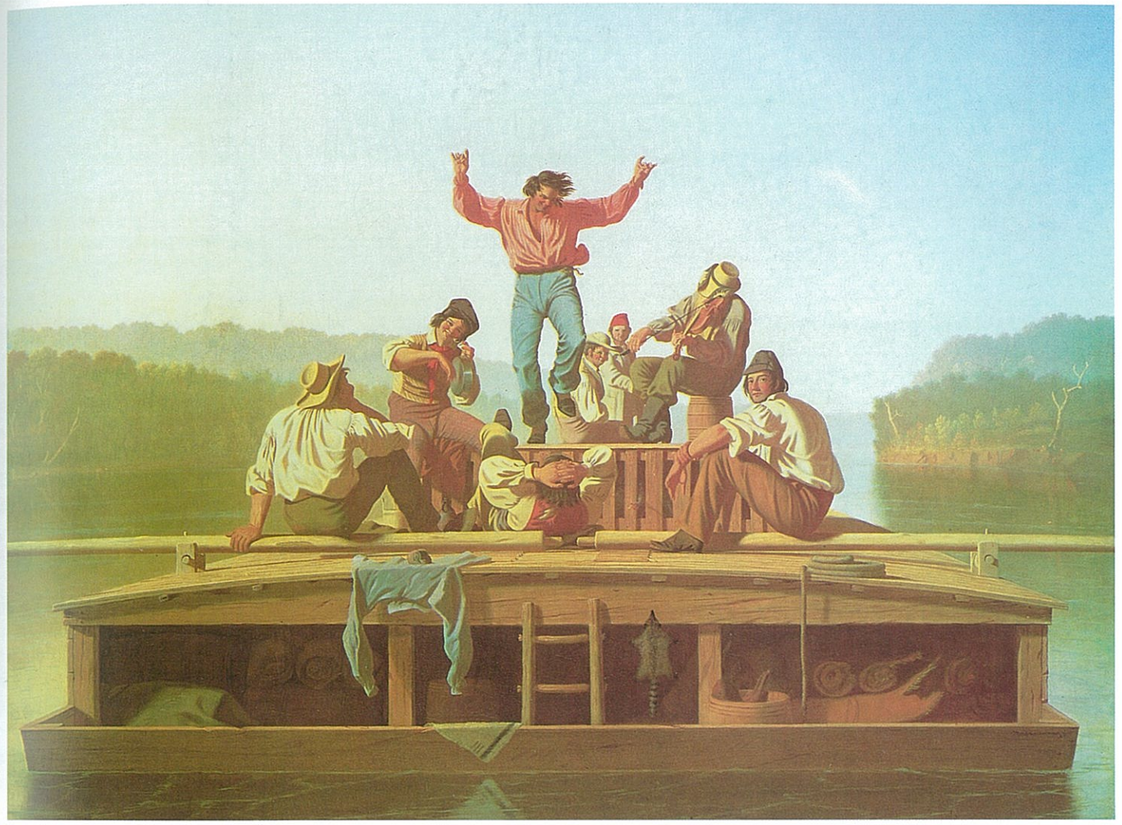
As a form of dance drama, ballet has drawn its plots from a variety of sources over the years. After the use of Greek and Roman mythology waned at the beginning of the nineteenth century, librettists experimented with European

"The desired 'turnout' . . . is only slowly gained": students at the School of American Ballet, New York.

folk tales (especially those with supernatural elements), legends set in exotic locales (especially those involving foreign royalty), and stories about star-crossed lovers from the upper and lower classes. This century has seen the emergence of the "plotless" ballet, which probably makes even greater demands on the bodies of dancers since, in the absence of a plot, it is the dancing itself that forms the subject of the ballet. Balanchine always insisted there was nothing "abstract" about such a ballet: "Two dancers on the stage are enough material for a story; for me, they are already a story in themselves. . . . Much can be said in movement that cannot be expressed by words. Movement must be self-explanatory. If it isn't, it has failed."



The illusion of weightlessness projected by a ballerina in toe shoes is captured in the delicate draftsmanship of Valentin Serov's 1909 poster design of Anna Pavlova in Les Sylphides *(left). Pavlova (1881–1931) trained at the St. Petersburg Imperial Ballet Academy, today—after numerous name changes—the Vaganova School, which has probably trained more great ballet dancers than any other school in the world. In a rehearsal studio, students at the school (below) adopt the universal posture of ballerinas at rest: back straight, feet with slight turnout. The school was renamed in 1957 in honor of Agrippina Jacovlevna Vaganova (1879–1951), a dancer, teacher, and choreographer whose teaching system forms the basis of ballet education in many schools around the world.*



When a dance performance succeeds, it can transform passive spectators into active collaborators who may actually feel their bodies moving in sympathy with the dancers onstage; at such moments, energy flows back and forth between performers and audience, and exciting, unpredictable things can happen. This transforming experience is not restricted to the theater. No stage, costumes, makeup, or music are required for what might be called the impromptu dance performances of everyday life.

Mark Twain describes such a moment among the rough-and-tumble raftsmen whose drunken quarrel Huck Finn observed one foggy summer night on the Mississippi. There were thirteen men in all, and when one of them started singing a very long, very loud, and very boring song, the others told him to leave off in no uncertain terms. Taking offense, the singer "jumped up, and began to cuss the crowd" and challenged the whole lot of them to a fight. In response, the biggest man of the thirteen got to his feet and announced to the others:

"'Set whar you are, gentlemen. Leave him to me; he's my meat.' Then he jumped up in the air three times, and cracked his heels together every time [and started boasting], 'Look at me! I'm the man they call Sudden Death and General Desolation! . . . Stand back and give me room according to my strength! Blood's my natural drink, and the wails of the dying is music to my ear!' . . . All the time he was getting this off, he was shaking his head and looking fierce and kind of swelling around in a little circle, tucking up his wristbands, and now and then straightening up and

The dances you find yourself doing without remembering how you learned them have always been with us. The American painter George Caleb Bingham's The Jolly Flatboatmen *(1846) shows a scene that was becoming increasingly rare by the 1840s, when steamboats had all but replaced flatboats on the Mississippi River. The raised platform on which the dancer stamps his feet amplifies the sound; in jigging contests in Ireland today judges often sit underneath the stage to better evaluate the speed and precision of the dancers' percussive steps.*

beating his breast with his fist, saying 'Look at me, gentlemen!' When he got through, he jumped up and cracked his heels together three time, and let off a roaring 'Whoo-oop! I'm the bloodiest son of a wildcat that lives!'

"Then the man that had started the row tilted his old slouch hat down over his right eye; then he bent stooping forward, with his back sagged and his south end sticking out far, and his fists a-shoving out and drawing in in front of him, and so went around in a little circle about three times, swelling himself up and breathing hard. Then he straightened, and jumped up and cracked his heels together three times before he lit again (that made them cheer). . . ."

The potent relationship between dancer and audience is at the heart of one of the world's oldest uses of dance—the dance performed for an invisible audience of spirits, ancestors, deities, and other entities whose goodwill is considered necessary to the well-being of the community. This kind of dance was central to the lives of the people who inhabited the North American continent before the Europeans arrived.

Only in a few cases, such as the Hopi of the arid Southwest, have Native American societies managed to keep their traditional dances intact in the face of efforts by outsiders (from conquistadors in the sixteenth century to missionaries and federal agents in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) to suppress or modify them. For at least a thousand years the Hopi calendar has revolved around a cycle of danced ceremonies that are performed in every Hopi community. Although not everyone dances every dance, all those who attend are thought of as nondancing participants since their faith in the efficacy of the ceremony helps make it spiritually powerful.

Through dance, the Hopi get in touch, quite literally, with the forces of nature that govern the world. The ultimate purpose is to bring rain to the patient crops in the fields. One of these rain dances, the Snake Dance, is held in late summer after months of preparation which includes the gathering of live snakes by the initiated men of the community. According to Hopi belief, snakes come from "another world" under the earth and are brothers to the spirits who control the clouds and rain. During the dance, live snakes (including rattlesnakes) are carried reverently in the hands and mouths of the dancers, who chant prayers to them about the people's need for moisture. Everything contributes to the act of invocation: the fringed sashes worn by the dancers symbolize falling rain, the sound of the gourds they shake recalls the sound of falling rain. At the end of the dance, the snakes are released in the hope that they will return to their underground homes, tell their brother-spirits how well they were treated on the surface, and urge these spirits to answer the people's prayers for rain. The Hopi believe that their sacred dances are instrumental in providing life-giving moisture not just for themselves but for the entire world.

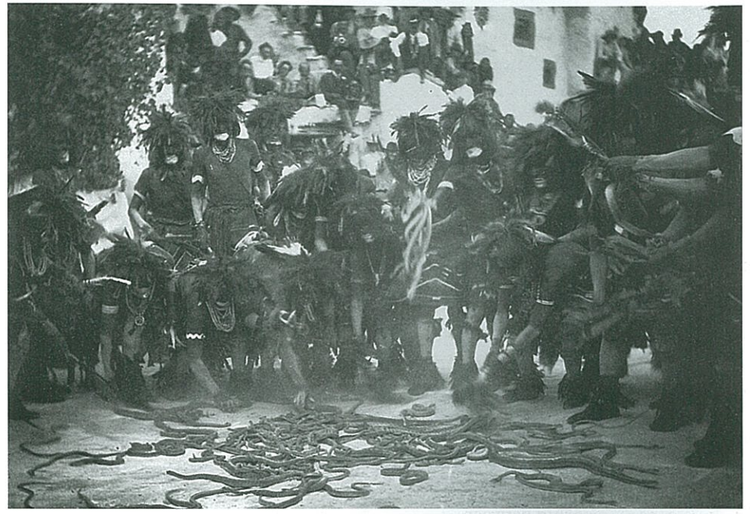
On the more fertile plains to the north, conflicting cultural expectations about dance led to tragic consequences in what has been described as "the last Indian war." During the nineteenth century the westward pressure of white settlers, backed by the U.S. Army, swept aside the armed resistance of various Plains tribes and decimated the herds of buffalo on which the tribes depended for many of the necessities of life. A decade after the Civil War most Plains Indians were confined to reservations. Unable to feed themselves, groups like the Sioux and the Cheyenne became dependent on handouts from U.S. government agents. When the promised quantities of food failed to arrive, tempers shortened. The authorities, mindful of the power of dance to focus discontent among the Plains tribes, banned all danced ceremonies.

As if in response, a ceremony known as the Ghost Dance appeared in the late 1880s. The Ghost Dance was linked to a messianic prophecy by a Western Paiute leader named Wovoka (c. 1856–1932). Wovoka prophesied the coming of a great earthquake; this natural convulsion would bring back the prairie grasses and the herds of buffalo that had thrived on them. All nonbelievers would be swallowed up in the transformation, but those people who hastened the change by zealously devoting themselves to the Ghost Dance would rejoin their resurrected ancestors on a new-made earth of peace and plenty.

Like the Hopi, the Plains Indians believed in the transforming power of dance. Dance was good for the body and good for the spirit and essential to integrating the two. The natural world pulsed with powers; since the same powers animated the human body, the body could serve as a kind of lever to bring about changes in the world. Some kinds of dance led to states of altered consciousness; through trance it was possible to make contact with the ancestors who lived on in another realm and who provided wise counsel in times of need. Threatened with starvation and the destruction of their way of life, thousands of Plains Indians gathered at remote camps throughout the West where they danced for days at a time until they fell to the ground in a trance. Many of the dancers experienced visions in which revered ancestors confirmed to them the prophecy of Wovoka. Among many Sioux warriors the belief spread that anyone who wore white "ghost shirts" would not be harmed by the white man's bullets.

The Ghost Dance brought together, in a common cause, members of tribes that had long been enemies. The dancers (mostly but not exclusively men) formed a large circle and moved slowly in a clockwise direction, advancing with the left foot and following with the right in a dragging step, while singing and chanting in unison. One of their songs proclaimed: "I bring the whirlwind that you may see each other/ We shall live again!" A non-Indian eyewitness recorded this description of the Ghost Dance: "Sometimes before falling the hypnotized subject runs wildly around the circle or out over the prairie. . . . In many instances the hypnotized person spins around for minutes at a time like a dervish, or whirls the arms with apparently impossible speed, or assumes and retains until the final fall most uncomfortable positions which it would be impossible to keep for any length of time under normal conditions."

Hopi snake dancers, Walpi, Arizona, 1903. No photographs of this sacred ceremony have been permitted since the early decades of the century.



Alarmed by the numbers of Indians who rallied to the Ghost Dance, government authorities acted to contain what they saw as the imminent threat of armed resistance, although Wovoka had explicitly preached against war. There followed a series of violent confrontations in which Indians wearing "ghost shirts" as protection against bullets were gunned down by rifle and Gatling-gun fire. At Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the U.S. Seventh Cavalry massacred an entire Sioux encampment including hundreds of women and children.

To ensure that the Plains Indians did not rekindle their resistance, government authorities continued to discourage all ceremonial dances until the 1930s, by which time many of the dances existed only in the memories of a few tribal elders. In an effort to save what was left, the informal intertribal gatherings known as powwows were recast into formal dance competitions. At these new-style powwows, traditional dances were passed from the older generation to younger Indians who had previously had no chance to learn this part of their heritage. Today, powwows have become major events, drawing thousands of participants and spectators from many different tribes to long weekends of dancing and socializing. Tourists may attend, but the performances are basically by Indians for Indians.

In traditional North American Indian dances, the dancer's knees are usually bent and the body tilted forward toward the ground. Head movements can be elaborate, especially when miming animals; the arms are generally kept close to the body except for gestures that imitate birds. Chants, drums, rattles, and bells attached to the dancer's legs provide the typical accompaniment. But the highlight of most powwows is the "fancy dance" competition in which young men decked out in ornately beaded and feathered outfits display the fastest, most difficult footwork. The purpose is not to reconstruct with scholarly accuracy the dances of the past but to

style.

The American painter Gilbert Gaul was employed by the federal government in the 1880s to make pictures to illustrate the census of 1890. Gaul made sketches and photographs to assemble material for paintings that he executed in his studio, and it seems clear that he either witnessed the Ghost Dance or interviewed participants for this painting of c.1890. The dancer on the right is wearing a Ghost Dance shirt.

Opposite: Today, powwows are held throughout the West. The highlight of these events is the fancy dance competition. Here, men compete in fancy dancing at a powwow in Denver, Colorado, in 1991 (above left), and a young woman fancy dancer does an athletic dance called magic moccasins at a powwow in Gallup, New Mexico, in 1988 (above right). The fringes on the woman's shawl crack like whips as she spins. Powwows open with a grand entry of the dancers, like the one below at the Windriver Reservation in Ethete, Wyoming, in 1978. The dancers—Arapaho and Shoshone—are wearing traditional ceremonial costumes of the northern plains.

inspire pride in a common heritage. And no matter how fancy the jumping and twirling gets, the powwow dances always dramatize a closeness to the earth that Native Americans share with other dance-centered cultures—a closeness manifested by an insistent stamping of the feet with knees bent, as if the entire body were acknowledging the pull of that nurturing presence so many of the powwow cultures call "the mother."

As in the Ghost Dance ceremony, the power of dance is often associated with the experience of trance. Trance is found in some Native American ceremonies today but not in powwow. In modern industrial societies that trace their development through Western Europe, episodes of trance are usually treated as extraordinary events, peripheral to the concerns of daily life; trance may be equated with such out-of-control behavior as drunkenness, sleepwalking, or being hypnotized. Hypnosis, the most studied trancelike experience in the West, remains a scientific question mark; skeptical researchers have so far failed to find reliable physical signs to distinguish a hypnotized from an unhypnotized person.

Dominant Western attitudes toward trance are greatly at odds with the experience of the majority of the world's population. A team of scholars who surveyed 488 societies on every continent reported that at least 437 had "one or more institutionalized, culturally patterned forms of altered states of consciousness." Whether described as trance or altered consciousness or ecstasy or a dissociative state, the experience is obviously too common to be called abnormal. People undergoing trance may report being "possessed" by a supernatural force or being. Not surprisingly, experiences of possession tend to be approached with that mixture of fear and exhilaration known as awe. Because these experiences are considered both dangerous and desirable, they are embedded in rituals that allow the community to support, guide, and protect the individuals who go into trance. In some, but by no means all, cases, special foods, drinks, smoking materials, or regimens of exercise and diet—all of which can affect the human nervous system—play a part. But rituals in which trance is induced solely by drugs or fasting or meditation are the exceptions. More typically, the rituals are communal events structured around rhythmic movements of the body that fit most definitions of dance. Indeed, the entire event involves a kind of choreography; everyone present has a well-defined role in helping the initiate attain a state of trance, perform certain functions while in trance, and return to a normal state.

Through dances of different types, Korean shamans and African fetish-priests and evangelical Christians and Indian outcastes and Javanese Muslims open channels of communication with the powers-that-be. According to the people who participate in them, these danced rituals reliably produce tangible benefits for both the individual and the society at large—including such benefits as knowledge of things past and to come, good health and good fortune, and a reassuring sense of belonging to a supportive community in a daunting but ultimately comprehensible world.

Kerala & southwestern India

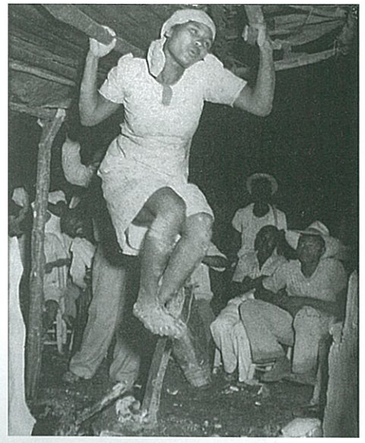
Where such views predominate, the power ascribed to the dancing body is quite literally awesome.

One such place is the state of Kerala in southwestern India. This narrow strip of palm trees, rice fields, and white-sand beaches extends for some two hundred miles between the mountain range known as the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Over the centuries, Kerala has absorbed cultural influences from the north, from the Muslim world, from Europe, and from the East without losing its own identity. The caste system, which came to India with the Aryan tribes that conquered the north sometime after 1500 B.C., is firmly established in Kerala; but so is a reputation for independent thinking and a tolerance for new ideas. For years, the state of Kerala had the only freely elected communist government in the world. In the temples of Kerala, the gods of the Hindu pantheon, especially Shiva, Lord of the Dance, are fervently worshiped; but many Keralans continue to honor the older gods who were in place before the religion of the north arrived. Among these are the serpent gods and goddesses who inhabit carefully tended groves behind certain higher-caste houses. They are powerful but capricious deities whose enmity can bring bad luck in the form of disease (especially skin disease) and infertility. To guard against such ill fortune, the serpent deities must be propitiated from time to time in a danced ritual of possession that has the power to make the invisible visible, and to bond the individual to the community and the community to the cosmos.

The people who perform this ritual belong to an outcaste group known as Pullavas. As outcastes they are not allowed to enter traditional Hindu temples; even their presence in higher-caste homes is thought to be polluting. Yet when a higher-caste family feels the need to get in touch with the deities of their own serpent grove, they call on the Pullavas. The correct performance of the ritual in all details is crucial to its efficacy; throughout India, as in many other societies, such rituals are entrusted to specially trained groups or lineages who pass down the requisite knowledge from generation to generation.

Depending on how long it has been since the serpent deities were last invoked and how much ill fortune the higher-caste family has suffered, the serpent ritual may be performed for as many as twelve consecutive nights. At the agreed-upon hour, a family of Pullavas arrives at the higher-caste compound to construct, in the well-swept courtyard before the main house, a ritual space. This consists of four stripped banana-tree trunks, about four feet high, set in the ground ten feet apart, and hung with palm fronds, flowers, and little "birds" woven and folded like origami out of palm leaves.

When the space is properly consecrated, the Pullavas begin to create an elaborate floor painting of a mandala, a ritual diagram that shows eight cobra-hooded snakes intertwined within an abstract representation of the original forest home of the serpent deities. Using dried half-shells of coconuts in which two small holes have been punched, the Pullavas drizzle lines of variously colored powders made from ground rice, charred rice husks, spices such as turmeric, powdered leaves, and lime. They work in



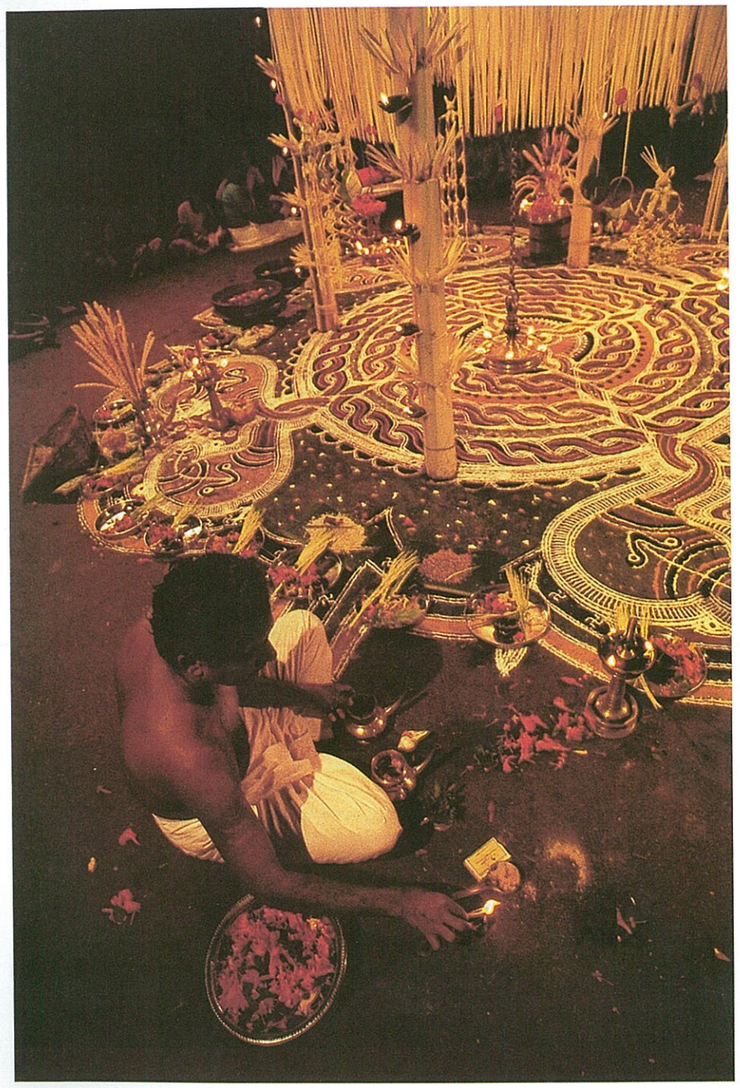
silence, four, five, six at a time, without getting in each other's way, squatting over the developing mandala and adding white, red, green, yellow, gray, and black powders according to a time-honored pattern. The addition of powdered silver highlights is a recent innovation.

The making of the mandala is itself a dance of creation, a performance witnessed not only by the family sponsoring the ceremony but by their neighbors in the village who come to be entertained as well as uplifted. When the mandala is complete, mounds of rice, coconut, spices, plantain, flower petals, sprays of incense, and other offerings are laid on banana leaves around the perimeter. By now the sun has set and the scene is illuminated by oil-fed wick lamps and a few dim electric bulbs. In the flickering light, the mandala is revealed as an exquisitely prepared table, a feast literally set for the gods.

Now it is time for a higher-caste priest to bless the offering and remove the stigma of its creation by the family of outcastes. This blessing takes the form of a dance in which the priest, barefoot and bare-chested, wearing only a white dhoti wrapped around his waist, circles the mandala in a clockwise direction, carrying first a basket of flowers, then a flaming wick, while four Pullava men and women pound out repetitive, percussive music on traditional instru-

Entranced dancers (top), under the power of the evil witch Rangda, press daggers against their own flesh during a Barong ceremony in Bali, Indonesia; they are kept from harm by the influence of the Barong, a lion-figure that embodies the forces of good. When illness or some other calamity menaces a community, this ceremony restores the balance between good and evil. The entranced vodun worshiper in Haiti (above), enacting a ritual with roots in west and central Africa, dances through the hot ashes of a fire before the eyes of the religious community.

The mandala created as a temporary abode of the serpent deities during a possession ritual known as Sarpam Thullal, in Vellarthanjur, India, 1991.



ments. At no time does the priest step inside the sacred space defined by the painting.

When the priest is finished, a young Pullava man performs what is known as a "fire massage" around the rim of the mandala. Like the mandala itself and the mounds of food and incense, this dance—in which the young man does somersaults, twists his body into serpentine postures, bounces up and down on his belly, rubs lit torches over his bare skin, and puts out the flames in his mouth—is an offering, an act of devotion. At the same time, it is a performance (a "circus" in the idiom of the Pullavas) designed to hold the interest of the audience during the hours-long ritual. Some of the movements are borrowed from the drills and exercises of a local form of martial arts.

The climax of the ceremony is the appearance of two young girls who earlier led a procession to the serpent grove behind the house where they invited the deities to come join them in the mandala. The young girls, clutching palm-leaf brooms, sit cross-legged in the middle of the painting; the food offerings are removed (these become the property of the Pullavas), and under the influence of the repetitive, percussive music, the girls begin to toss their heads from side to side; within minutes they have been possessed by the serpent deities who, when questioned by the headman of the Pullavas, give their names in the local language and confirm their acceptance of the night's offerings. During this stage of the ceremony, members of the sponsoring family (especially widows and divorced women) may go into trance and express grievances against other family members; the deities, speaking through the girls' mouths, may suggest specific remedies to restore family harmony.

Finally, the two girls, still possessed, begin to slide around the mandala on their haunches, erasing in a few minutes, with convulsive body movements, sweeps of their long hair, and jerky motions of their brooms, the design that the Pullavas took so long to create. Only when the mandala is obliterated can the gods return to their grove behind the house and the girls, after slumping into a comalike sleep, regain their senses.

Caste in India, though inherited, is thought of as occupational; the Pullavas are considered outcastes because, like the castes that dispose of the carcasses of dead animals, their job is to cleanse the community of "pollution" and in so doing they inevitably become polluted themselves. While discrimination based on caste is now against the law, and education and political reform have opened up new opportunities for those at the bottom of the social pyramid, the traditional ceremonies (and with them the traditional occupations and the traditional arts) retain much of their power. There is nothing theoretical or speculative about this power: To those who perform and witness it, the serpent ritual not only works, it is *seen* to work—in the bodies of the fire-dancer and of the possessed girls, in the sense of community that the spellbound spectators share, in the reaffirmation of an order that (according to the most revered traditions of Hindu thought) sustains and justifies all creation. Such is the power of dance in a dance-centered culture.

Style.

Contemporary Indian dance, which intertwines religion and aesthetics, can trace its roots back some two thousand years in a culture that defines dancing as a primary activity of one of the most powerful Hindu deities, Shiva. At the great religious monument of Ellora in central India there are some thirty-three caves that contain Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu shrines. Rameswara (cave 21) contains one of the earliest representations of the dancing Shiva, dating from c. A.D. 640–75.

It should be clear by now that any attempt to define dance must take into account the great variety of dancelike behavior found in cultures around the world. For this purpose, the analytical categories of classical Western thought are far too parochial. As we will see in the next chapter, Plato and Aristotle lumped dance together with the other mimetic (representational) arts. Aristotle distinguished it from music by stressing what it lacked: "Rhythm alone, without harmony, is the means of the dancer's imitations, for even he, by the rhythms of his attitudes, may represent men's characters as well as what they do and suffer." The idea that dance should "imitate" nature has stayed current in the West, if only as a foil for competing viewpoints. Aestheticians, usually with their eyes fixed on ballet, have argued that the first duty of dance is the creation of beauty. Nineteenth-century poet Théophile Gautier, who wrote the libretto for *Giselle*, declared, "The dance is nothing more than the art of displaying beautiful shapes in graceful positions and the development from them of lines agreeable to the eye."

One problem with defining dance in strictly Western terms is that few people outside the European tradition think of dance in isolation from the other arts, from religion, indeed from the daily activities of life. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, dance is so much a part of everyday experience that defining dance is akin to defining life itself. According to a nineteenth-century observer, a common greeting exchanged when two Bantu met was, "What do you dance?" A contemporary African scholar, when asked why dance was so important to the Asante, put it this way: "Why do we dance? We say we dance because we are alive and not stones. Have you ever seen a stone dance?" In India, which has a tradition of aesthetic analysis going back two thousand years, dance has always been considered part of a larger dance drama with transcendental ambitions. While the Indian tradition distinguishes between pure dance and interpretive or imitative movement, the goal is a single artistic experience so powerful that it can trigger spiritual enlightenment.

In an attempt to do justice to all possible traditions as well as all possible experiments by contemporary dancemakers, scholar Roger Copeland half-seriously suggested that dance be defined as "any movement designed to be looked at." This would presumably include everything from professional wrestling to professional sleight-of-hand to the impassioned hand gestures of a litigating attorney—not to mention the strictly automatic reflex movements induced by a physician's rubber mallet.