

Abstract of “Expression in Dance”

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This study, *Expression in Dance*, grew from my time in India as a Fulbright Lecturer, 1984, and as an American Institute of Indian Studies Fellow, 1988. In my field work I interviewed dance teachers and dancers as well as leaders in other arts. I asked them questions about their point of view on the issue of expression in dance or in their own work for the few who were not dancers.

On my first visit, I learned from the dancers and other artists that abstraction in dance was an aesthetic with which they were uncomfortable. It was the aspect of modern American dance in particular which made them uncomfortable. At the same time, some of the artists I met were considering if it would be possible to retain their classical technique and still find elements of modern thought about theater and dance which they could use to enrich their experience. When I returned in 1988, my research was field work taping interviews with dancers and artists about expression in dance. In my own experience as a dancer performing through the US and in many other countries, as a choreographer whose work was performed by modern dance and ballet companies in the US and abroad, and as a teacher at that time, it appeared to me that expression was the element with which many American dancers were least comfortable or with which they least identified their art.

This study's second purpose was to reflect upon the ways in which studying expression could serve as a way to help Americans gain understanding of the core of Indian classical dance, and for the Indian artists to find an approach to abstract art in American dance.

In addition to gaining an intellectual understanding, at this time, there were dancers seeking to add to the way their art worked. In America, there were dancers who looked for a broader emotional context for their work but who had no training or experience from which to develop it. In India, some classically trained dancers looked for ways to expand the reach of their art, sometimes through use of contemporary literature or through different use of the stage. Seeing dance through the idea of expression in the other culture could be a useful aid. I was told by some of the esteemed dance figures with whom I talked that my presence as well as my questions had led to changes in the way they and their students thought about these issues.

The question of whether art is primarily expression or not continues today. It is a question which spirals through the history of much of modern Western art. This study reflected upon those issues in the particular time when the interviews took place, in the late 1980's.

While the specific focus of my presentation to the Fulbright Association was dance and a particular aspect of dance, the bigger subject of it is how one culture might understand another culture and my idea of dance as a doorway for that understanding.

My research findings are the reflection of the points of view gathered in my field work interviews. For this reason, it is important to name the individuals to whom I turned for

information, guidance, their personal philosophy, and from whom I gained understanding and inspiration. The following is a partial list of those whom I interviewed or with whom I discussed this question. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, Founder and former Academic Director, The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, Kamaladevi Chattopahyay(now deceased) President, India International Centre Jiwan Pani (now deceased), Director, Kathak Kendra, New Delhi Singhajit Singh, Manipuri guru Ravi Shakar Smita Shah, Film maker, Bangalore.

Uniformly, across boundaries of age, region or religion and with leaders of different traditions of classical dance, all agreed on this subject. Expression simply is what art is. Each article of the performance alone and in total was itself a kind of expression.

The questions that arose in my interviews continue to be discussed today, although the passage of time has added to the evolution of the ways we dance and look at or experience dance. The commentary of the interviews shows that it is a question whose study allows a bridge from one culture to another. This is not at all meant to change what the artists do, but to give the broader society a way to understanding through understanding dance.

Quotes from the presentation:

“My Fulbright Lectureship changed my life. It was no mere, pleasant interlude or curious detour in a well planned career. It was not even a purposeful pursuit of established research. It would be fair to say that India reached out, grabbed me, and pulled me into the world.”

“...I think that taking the subject of expression and seeing how it is treated in both places [India and America] can lead to understanding and appreciation. It creates a window through which one might see why the opposite art is behaving the way it does. This does not propose that one might then be better able to proselytize one's own aesthetic, quite the contrary. It suggests a step toward engaging in each other's way to experience the world.”

“In the tapes that I gathered, every one of the artists, young and old, began with bewilderment over what I could be asking about, it was so obvious.”

“One cannot know India without knowing its dances and in knowing something of dance, one might meet this wonderful, complicated place.”

“I was affiliated with Viswa Bharati University and spent a week there at the beginning of my trip...During my first visit there, a group of art students, not dancers, had seized a building, spread the word, found a tape recorder so that I could present a full concert to students on the campus.”