Dance History: Current Methodologies
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I.

Colleagues around the world tend to complain that dance history is considered, in academic circles, a poor cousin, still “too young” to be respected. Yet, disciplines like social history, musicology, and art history have shown their interest by opening conferences and journals to dance presentations. The question we must first ask ourselves is whether dance history is on an equal academic footing with its sister disciplines (1).

— Is it producing enough first-rate scholars engaged in in-depth studies of original research?
— How many of these deal with periods prior to the twentieth century?
— Are the requirements for a masters degree in dance history as demanding as, for example, those for art history and musicology, where a minimum of two languages is often required in order that students be prepared for original archival work in Europe and elsewhere?
— Is recent research, ostensibly in dance history, concerned really with the history of dance, or rather with trends appropriated from the current interest in anthropology, literary criticism, cultural studies?
— Is technology a substitute for archival research?

The tendency to specialize in the twentieth century has produced several generations of students who know—and care—little or nothing about what came before. This has resulted in a dearth of teaching faculty capable of supervising students in fifteenth-nineteenth century dance and, on at least two occasions that I am aware of, in students being steered away from their particular research interests in favor of projects in which their advisors have felt qualified.

Indeed, the American Academy in Rome has had a choreographer as a fellow but, though open to the possibility, has never had a dance history scholar as recipient of the Rome Prize in the Humanities. According to the Academy, this is either because no one has ever applied, or because the applicant was considered unqualified. A similar problem has arisen at the Berenson “Villa I Tatti” in Florence, now part of Harvard University, which gives grants to scholars in Renaissance studies, art history and music. The project for an interdisciplinary conference there on the fifteenth-century choreographer Domenico da Piacenza—his times and art, has encountered difficulty in finding, not social historians, musicologists, art and theatre historians, or iconographers, but dance historians who have engaged in new research in the last ten or fifteen years!

Where is all this leading to? Is it surprising that the discoveries of new documents and dance sources in Renaissance and Baroque dance have largely been the prerogative of musicologists? In Italy, the archives and libraries—unique repositories of documents concerned with dance in festivities, payments to dancing-masters, libretti and scores, and so on, from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries—have barely begun to be tapped. The seventeenth century, the latest field of exploration for art histori-
ans and musicologists, one that has proven unexpectedly and excitingly rich, is practically untouched by dance historians who are, for the most part, uninformed, uninterested, and untrained. No amount of “new technology,” increasingly present at dance conferences as the latest totem, can replace the human digging into what is preserved of the dance of past centuries.

I am also concerned with some of the themes and methodology of current dance history research. I have recently read two works-in-progress by dance historians, and one by a musicologist, which have gender and fifteenth and/or sixteenth-century Italian dance as their theme. In each I found the presentation extraordinarily superficial and characterized by blatant omissions of choreographic and historical (socio-economic and cultural-political) evidence in order to flesh out a predetermined hypothesis. With the many documents yet to be found, and the information about dances and dancing-masters of which we have just begun to hear, conclusions and interpretations need to be open-ended, including, at times, a note of conjecture. Yet these young scholars, who are, unfortunately, not alone, have no qualms about reading a limited number of sources, brought to light by others, and drawing “absolute” (though highly subjective) generalizations. Even established scholars do not hesitate to jump centuries and mix countries to make their points. Simplistic and polarized approaches will not, I fear, “promote” dance history as a serious academic discipline. Nor will they contribute to solving the problems of funding for dance research.

Furthermore, whether the study is circumscribed and focused, or the subject is generic (Choreographing History, History/Text and the Body), recent “historical” research is presented too often in a language understood only by those initiated in the vocabulary of literary critical theory.

What is most worrisome of all is the difficulty, on the whole, in establishing a dialogue between the “document-based” historians and the “deconstructionists” or “post-structuralists” (“feminists” and not) due to the lack of language, interests, and basic assumptions in common. (Unfortunately, the lack of interest in—and respect for—early dance on the part of twentieth-century scholars can also result in condescension, ridicule, and rejection of the work of colleagues.) Perhaps this column will start a dialogue so that we can begin to understand each other better and enrich dance history scholarship. It is encouraging that at this very moment a host of scholars and performers, from a variety of countries and disciplines, are working together tackling, for the first time, Gennaro Magri’s dance career and treatise (1779) for the 1996 SDHS Conference.

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II.
To write in brief on such complex issues is to court disaster. For the documenting historian, therefore, I base this summary of my concerns on several of my own publications (1).

In Dance Research Journal’s study of changing methodologies (23/1 Spring 1991 pp. 1-16) new history was not directly addressed. It has become even more urgent that the insights of recent theory are absorbed. Historians tend not to do this, whether from a fear of “theory,” and an allegiance to empirical method; or from uncertainty about how far “interpretive reasoning” can go before becoming fanciful; or from a preference for stating the “facts” from which others may
deduce what they will. Dance scholarship, in this form, cannot survive the challenge of post-structuralist thinking. A response to our pluralistic world is required.

The influence of post-structuralist theories matches the postmodern arts’ highly verbalised position. It shows us the importance of the relationship between a dance form and its discourse. Even dance history which looks at pre-twentieth century forms cannot escape this radically different view. We have to recognise that we are part of a community of (dance) language users which controls and determines the world whether we like it or not. Ignoring the late twentieth century, its dilemmas and frustrations, and retreating into known patterns of scholarship risks “congealing” dance into “the residues of the intellectualisations of past ages” (2).

History, seen as discovering the “truth,” has to be replaced by a multiplicity of accounts, constructed in the present, just as chronological accounts of influences give way to a more complex mapping of events. Many historians recognise that it is no longer sufficient to proceed on a Sachs version of dance history (3), that “primitive tribes” will, in due course, mature to “our” more sophisticated state, a view long exposed as ethnocentric, patronizing and patriarchal.

A similarly bold step has to be taken in looking again at the theoretical basis on which dance historians construct their narratives. Recognizing the importance of interpretation, from the first statement of the problem, from the first selection of archives and materials, is vital in developing awareness that all knowledge is partial; that power is embedded in the discourse of the subject. Accurate and careful documentation remains essential for analysis of dances as for history, for anthropology as for reconstruction; but it is never enough on its own. The term “document” has to be understood widely, post-Foucault, to reflect the fact that every document is generated especially for the purpose of its author. While this is obvious where contemporary interviews and new dances are concerned, the selection of archival texts and photographic material is especially sensitive.

Scholarship must act more positively on the insight that the researcher is always deeply implicated in adopting particular interests and viewpoints. Little dance history reveals the strategies that intervene in the writing of a supposedly factual account. This is relevant not simply because the data is often fragmentary, but because of the subjectivity of the researcher. What is important and what is not? Exposing the basis on which these decisions are made requires a highly sophisticated awareness of the processing of material and familiarity with modern critical theories to maintain a sceptical mode of operation.

Reliance on scholars from other disciplines needs to be balanced by the issues central to dance. Those outside dance frequently focus on the metaphorical use of dance in literature, for example, or its religious significance in figures of speech. Foster (4) points to the paradox of dance scholars conceptualizing the body as a “natural object” while denying its physicality—a position tantamount to making the dancing body invisible.

In writing narratives of dance history, prior accounts overlap with current accounts. There may be many texts which occupy the space between these narratives in which meaning is created. The lack of stable points of origin or closure and the multiplicity of echoes created in this space make dance history both perilous and exciting.

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visions in the discipline of dance history,” and “The
dance text as exclusion zone,” papers presented at the
1994 and 1995 conferences of the Society for Dance
History Scholars (U.S.A.), published in the confer-
ence Proceedings; “Theoretical issues in dance re-
search: characterizing the discipline,” paper presented
at the 1994 conference of the Netherlands Society for
“Discourse in dance: its changing character,” Opening Lecture at the fifth Study of Dance Conference,
Border Tensions: Dance and Discourse (1995, Un-
iversity of Surrey), printed in the conference Procee-
dings, 1-9. “The congealed residues of dance history:
a response to Richard Ralph’s ‘dance scholarship and
academic fashion,’” forthcoming in Dance Chronicle.

2. Burgin, V. The End of Art Theory (Atlantic High-


4. Foster, S. Choreographing History (Bloomington,
IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).