"SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW,
SOMETHING BORROWED...":
ECLECTICISM IN POSTMODERN DANCE

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Joshua Lee Monten, A.B.

The Ohio State University
2001

Master's Examination Committee
Professor Karen Eliot, Adviser
Professor Johannes Birringer

Approved by

D. Karen J. Eliot
Adviser
Department of Dance
ABSTRACT

The rising use of quoting and eclecticism represents a distinctive development in the field of concert dance choreography in the United States. In this thesis it is argued that an examination of quoting and eclecticism—also called *bricolage*—is of crucial importance for understanding many features of the contemporary dance world: new modalities of creating meaning, communicating with an audience, and training performers.

Nowadays, without the *modus operandi* of eclecticism, a dance work is liable to appear naïve, predictable, monochromatic, or just quaintly old-fashioned. Numberless are the postmodern choreographers whose work is said to draw upon an eclectic, quirky range of movement, or create a fusion of disparate elements; legion are the modern dance teachers whose technique classes offer their own idiosyncratic, culled-from-many-sources movement. The present work traces the development of eclecticism from the *divertissements* of classical nineteenth-century ballets and the compendiums of world dances in Denishawn productions, through the modernist choreography of Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, and George Balanchine. A distinctive employment of quoting begins to appear in the 1970's, during the latter days of the Judson Church movement. Special attention is devoted to the work of Twyla Tharp and Bill T. Jones: the former for her role in popularizing eclecticism and for her characteristic use of double-coding,
irony, and uncertainty; the latter for his consistent use of *bricolage*—even after it lost its shiny veneer of novelty—to explore themes of crisis, hybridity, and diversity.

The study concludes by examining contemporary models of dance training, whose eclectic breadth departs considerably from the intense, narrow focus of earlier (modernist) programs. Rather than being immersed exclusively in Russian-style ballet or Graham or Limón classes, many of today's performers are expected to have studied a broad range of dance styles, and to be able to move between them swiftly and fluidly. These changes indicate a fundamental shift in the "discipline" of dance training (understood in a Foucauldian sense) and in the concrete experience of what it means "to be a dancer."
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the members of my committee, Dr. Karen Eliot and Dr. Johannes Birringer, for the help and support—in a surprisingly diverse number of ways—that they have offered during my two years in Columbus.

For their encouragement and contributions, I thank Candace Feck, Melanie Bales, Kristin Horrigan and Louis (Paul) Ocampo.

I have been quite fortunate to receive financial support from a number of institutions, which has enabled me to broaden and deepen my understanding of dance in its multitudinous forms. I thank the Department of Dance, the Council of Graduate Students, the Office of International Studies, and the Latin American Studies Program. I also thank the Rotary Foundation for an Ambassadorial Scholarship to study in Argentina which I received prior to my arrival at OSU.
VITA

July 4, 1975

Located in Peekskill, New York

1993-97

A.B. summa cum laude,
Phi Beta Kappa,
Literature and Cultural
Anthropology, Duke University

1998-99

Student,
Department of Contemporary
Dance, North Carolina School of the Arts

1999

Guest Student,
Taller de Danza Contemporánea del
Teatro General San Martín,
Buenos Aires, Argentina

2000-01

Graduate Associate,
The Ohio State University

PUBLICATIONS

Joshua Monten, editor and contributor. The Sermons of Francisco de Avila:

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Dance
(Performance and History)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................... ii  
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................... iv  
VITA ....................................................................................................................... v  

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO ECLECTICISM: .............................................. 1  
CHAPTER 2: A SHORT HISTORY OF ECLECTICISM ........................................... 10  
CHAPTER 3: ECLECTICISM OBSERVED ............................................................. 23  
  Twyla Tharp .................................................................................................... 23  
  Bill T. Jones ................................................................................................... 31  
CHAPTER 4: ECLECTIC TRAINING .................................................................... 39  

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................... 51
CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION TO ECLECTICISM:
THE STATE OF THE ART

The lights on stage are dim and cool as four silhouetted, robed dancers perform a formal medieval Spanish dance—slow and austere, accompanied by a sedate viola melody. Suddenly a woman rushes onto stage and begins dancing an energetic, low-to-the-ground, arms-flailing phrase of West African-style movement. A man enters and joins the woman in her incongruous movement, while the unperturbed Spanish dancers continue their careful figures, seemingly unaware of the riotous dancing taking place a few feet away. This is from Bill T. Jones's evening-length dance, You Walk? (2000).

* * * * *

In the midst of an intricate, abstract terre-à-terre variation in Twyla Tharp’s Push Comes to Shove (1976), a ballerina arrives in a simple first-position stance—and then her torso suddenly topples forward and her hands flop to the floor. “I’m so pooped,” her body seems to say, “I can hardly stand up!” A moment later she rolls back up, regains the exalted, impervious demeanor of an American Ballet Theatre soloist, and continues her strenuous variation.

* * * * *

Disjunctive moments such as these interest me. Common though they may be nowadays, I will suggest in this thesis that they represent a distinctive development in the field of concert dance choreography in the United States.
Taking disparate movement styles and *quoting* directly from them—assembling dance spectacles *eclectically*, borrowing freely from various sources—these formal devices have become increasingly common in the choreography of the past thirty years. Choreographers, now recognized as *bricoleurs* (scavengers, handymen and -women), find materials for their dances in ever more varied locales, from the detritus of yesterday’s modernist dance styles, to social dance forms, to Latin American and Asian martial arts, to (as in the scene from *Push Comes to Shove* just cited) the common, uninflected gestures and motions of everyday life.

For students of postmodern culture in many of its other guises, the rise of eclecticism and quotation—also known as *bricolage*, the French term for assembling objects from haphazardly found ingredients—is a well-recognized fact. Major works in the field—such as Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, The Logic of Late Capitalism*, Charles Jenck’s *Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, and Jean François Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition*—all address the topic at length.¹ In the field of dance scholarship, however, eclecticism (or *bricolage*) has not attracted the careful attention which I believe it merits.² Sally Banes’ landmark study of postmodern dance, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1987) touches on the subject only obliquely, and in passing, with tantalizingly brief references to eighties-style “pastiche” (xv), various choreographers’ appropriation of “language and language-like systems” such as hand gestures and American Sign Language (xxix), and the “use of popular

¹ Indeed, these works have provided a historical context for the present study, as well as many of the theoretical tools it relies on in its interpretations of modern and postmodern culture.

² Nonetheless, the present work builds upon previous dance scholarship which addresses the phenomenon of eclecticism in dance. I refer to Arlene Croce’s many reviews of Twyla Tharp’s choreography (1982, 1987), and to the work of Susan Foster (1985, 1997), Randy Martin (1998), and Sally Banes (1994).
genres and allusions to popular performance styles” (xxx). In this essay I suggest that the rise of eclecticism is of crucial importance for understanding many features of the contemporary dance world: new modalities of creating meaning, communicating with an audience, assembling materials, and training performers. Sketching the historical spread of eclecticism and quoting—and examining the consequences this has had for dance-makers, performers, and viewers of contemporary theatrical dance in the United States—these will be the principal aims of the pages that follow.

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines to quote as to “repeat or copy..., usually with an indication that one is borrowing another’s words.” Eclecticism is defined as an “outlook or method” which “borrows freely or is derived from various sources and systems.” As I understand them in the context of dance, these “sources and systems” can include traditional or contemporary dance styles, individual choreographic styles, other conventionalized movement practices (like swimming or directing traffic), or characteristic gestures taken from the vernacular movement of everyday life.

To flesh out the significance of these concepts, I’d like to perform a closer reading of the previously-mentioned incident from Tharp’s Push Comes to Shove. To review: one thing is quite suddenly something else. A ballerina suddenly stops “dancing” and momentarily topples over in a gesture of exhaustion. The continuity of a phrase of geometric clarity and metronomic precision is unexpectedly interrupted by what seems like an alien way of being in one’s body: a quotidian and unrefined toe-touch. Neither the phrase nor its interruption is particularly novel in and of itself (one rather expects an

---

3 For the purposes of this essay, I use a slightly more limited operational definition of “eclecticism” than is generally common. For a definition of terms, see the beginning of chapter 2.
ABT soloist to toss off a faultless *enchâinement*, one expects someone working particularly hard to be faint with exhaustion) but the juxtaposition of the two does have a certain significance to it. If only for a single moment, the illusion of congenital virtuosity and incorruptible perfection is revealed to take quite a bit of effort. Elegant choreography performed by a so-called “Athlete of God” (*pace* Martha Graham), shows itself to contain certain sharp, embedded grains of unrefined, vernacular material, which seem utterly foreign to the canons of classical ballet. Perfect and imperfect, refined and vernacular, all come together, and if only for a moment, the audience laughs and marvels.

*Push Comes to Shove* was first performed in 1976, and seems to have caused a certain frisson of transgression for the balletomanes in the audience. Although the extent to which “characteristic moves from one tradition are intercalated into phrases from another” is relatively common to Tharp’s work in the 1970’s (Foster 1985:49), I can only surmise that seeing a ballerina inelegantly stretching her hamstrings or seeing the lead male (usually danced by Mikhail Baryshnikov) dance a razzmatazz softshoe tap number before launching into his more traditional multiple *pirouettes* and *grands jetés en tournant* was a relatively novel and disquieting experience for the work’s first viewers. Twyla Tharp was a pioneer of using eclectic methods of dance composition, and this was one of her first pieces performed by a classical ballet company before an audience of thousands. Having arrived in the New York dance scene a few years after the Judson Church group had begun making their own so-called postmodern dances, Tharp offered her own version of what up-to-date dance could be: highly kinetic and urbane,

---

4 Another crossover “modern ballet” was Tharp’s landmark *Deuce Coupe*, choreographed for the Joffrey Ballet in 1973.
virtuostic and eclectic. Taking movement ideas from a dozen sources,\textsuperscript{5} the most recherché oddities and crassest banalities would be fused together into the most unlikely combinations. Other choreographers (Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown, especially) had previously demonstrated their fascination with choreographing surprising turns of events, but few had traveled so far from home in their search for novelty.

In 1979, dance critic Marcia Siegel called this "raffish, ragpicker jumble of ideas... one element of a new style that is Tharp's alone" (1979: 352). A funny thing, however, about the interconnected, ever-new era of postmodernism in general—and about the community of dance-makers in the U.S. in particular—is that certain innovations can spread like proverbial wildfire. Faster than you can say "intellectual property rights," the technical, compositional, and presentational innovations of last week are snatched up by the choreographers of today. For reasons that surely relate to Tharp's influence as well as larger trends outside of the dance world, Tharp's "ragpicker jumble of ideas" didn't take long to become par for the course.

An analysis by Charles Jencks in the context of postmodern architecture may be helpful here. Commenting on constructions like Philip Johnson and John Burgee's AT&T Building, a sleek, steel-and-glass skyscraper topped by the ornate cornice of a giant Chippendale chair, Jencks noted that

\begin{quote}
If our pattern books today include four hundred building systems, if "local" materials now mean everything down at the hardware shop,
then our natural vernacular is eclectic if not polyglot...[and] bound to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{5} Foster cites "pedestrian movement, modern dance, ballet, jazz, tap dance, baton twirling, social dance, pantomime, and, most recently, boxing" (1985:49). The list of sources seems to shift from year to year, as Tharp's research brings her into contact with new sources.
be infected by these mixed sources. In semiotic terms, the langue (total
set of communication sources is so heterogeneous and diverse that
any singular parole (individual selection) will reflect this. [Jencks
1981:127]

This accretive process seems to hold true for the dance world as well. Perhaps
because of the diverse curricula of dance training programs, perhaps because
of the frequency with which obscure, sub-cultural movement forms are
popularized and incorporated into the melting-pot of metropolitan dance-
making, perhaps because of the "explosion of modern literature" (and surely
dancing as well) "into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms"
(Jameson 1991:16-17), the "total set of communication sources" available to
choreographers has never been larger.

Nowadays, without the modus operandi of quoting and eclecticism, a
dance work is liable to appear naïve, predictable, monochromatic, or just
quaintly old-fashioned. Numberless are the choreographers whose work is
said to draw upon an eclectic, quirky range of movement, or create a fusion
of disparate elements; legion are the dance teachers whose technique classes
offer their own idiosyncratic, culled-from-many-sources movement
sequences. Besides Tharp, other well-known choreographers and ensembles
who employ bricolage are Séan Curran, Mark Dendy, Rennie Harris, Bill T.
Jones, Meredith Monk, Mark Morris, Tere O'Connor, and Jawola Willa Jo
Zollar of the Urban Bush Women; Inbal Pinto in Israel, Dairakudakan in
Japan, Pina Bausch in Germany, Matthew Bourne in England, De La Guarda
and El Descueve in Argentina, Maguy Marin and Philippe Decouflé in
France....
A complete list would have to mention the names of perhaps half of today's professional dance-makers, including many choreographers who work primarily with ballet companies, theater productions, or music videos; choreographers from around the world, from Poland and Taiwan to Burkina Faso; as well as numberless student choreographers, from Julliard to the University of California at Long Beach to the University of Buenos Aires. Two surprising late-hour additions to the list would be modernist stalwarts Martha Graham and Hanya Holm, whose work in the 1980's (such as Maple Leaf Rag and Jocose, respectively) lightheartedly poached material from earlier, more serious phases of their careers. And this is still quite an incomplete list, for if we move away from the more exclusive end of the high-art/low-art continuum, we note that quoting and eclecticism have become the sine qua non of contemporary movement composition, that which allows choreography to interface and crossbreed more fluidly with contemporary music, visual art, film, video, and web production. Carnival parades in Rio de Janeiro, breakdancing demonstrations in Union Square, MTV videos, aerobics classes in Bordeaux, cheerleading competitions in Dallas, video-games on the

---

6 Clearly, not all "postmodern" choreographers—or choreographers in the present "age of postmodernism"—exhibit this symptomatic tendency, eclecticism. For instance, see the work of Trisha Brown, Lisa Race, and Ron Brown, each of whom seems content to elaborate very personal dance languages without resorting to obvious interpolations. Still, for other reasons, it is common to consider their work "postmodern." I refer the reader to Charles Jencks' account of "Late Modernism" (1987:32-38) and Fredric Jameson's account of "uneven development": "Some parts of the economy are still archaic, handicraft enclaves; some are more modern and futuristic than the future itself" (1991:307).

7 The high-art/low-art distinction, by the way, has been nearly inundated by the flood of bricolaged dance and media. Where could we possibly place Twyla Tharp's choreography for the popular movie musical Hair, or the trash-talking, T-shirted dancers in Tere O'Connor's Hi Everybody!, or the modern dance-trained go-go dancers who stand on the podiums at the Glow nightclub in Columbus and demonstrate the refinements of release and African-based dance technique to the grinding audiences below? See John Seabrook's recent Nobrow (2000) and Jameson's Postmodernism (1991:2-3).
Sony PlayStation: as likely as not, moves will be swapped between these different locales with only the slightest of reservations or logistical difficulties.

Let's return to our first example one more time. *Push Comes to Shove* is occasionally revived by ABT and (since 1986) it has been available on video. It still seems to be popular, although it could no longer be said to be capable of producing much of a "frisson of transgression." In a cycle familiar to generation after generation of avantgardistsavant-gardists, what is countercultural, far-out, shocking, etc., becomes mainstream shortly thereafter. Can we imagine the sort of theater riots that famously followed the première of Nijinsky and Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* being repeated in the U.S. in the year 2001?

I think not. The issue is, in part, that in the year 2001, "we are all Bohemians," and a semblance of transgression carries with it a quite certain (but tacit) cachet. More fundamentally, however, it is because not even radically disjunctive quoting or tremendously varied eclecticism can be considered particularly transgressive anymore. Eclecticism is dead; long live eclecticism! Now that the novelty and shock value of dance *bricolage* have lessened, the question facing dance-makers and -viewers today is *what to do with eclecticism and quoting now that we have grown accustomed to them*.

In the work which follows, I suggest that dance eclecticism has become one more item in the box of tools which choreographers have at their disposal. What eclecticism means depends on how it is used. As the history of eclecticism in dance is examined in chapter 2, the particular cases of Twyla

---

Tharp and Bill T. Jones' choreography in chapter 3, and the challenges of eclectic dance training programs in chapter 4, it will be seen that eclecticism is particularly well-suited to portraying certain stock characters of postmodern theory ("The De-centered Subject," "Thé Cyborg," "The Borderland Mestizo"), but also that it has a particular theoretical value and kinesthetic texture all of its own.
CHAPTER 2:
A SHORT HISTORY OF ECLECTICISM

Before I begin I’d like to distinguish what I call eclecticism and quoting from a few other compositional techniques for combining different ingredients in a single dance work. One manner of combination does not even involve borrowing movements, but just costumes or music, from wide-ranging provenances. Paul Taylor has choreographed to Astor Piazzolla, Bach, and the Andrews Sisters. Musicologically this is an eclectic sort of programming, but in formal choreographic terms it is not, strictly speaking, “eclectic.”

Another form of combination I will call the revue: stringing together a series of discrete, contrasting dance episodes—often with a short pause for applause and costume or cast changes—such as one might have seen in the Ziegfeld Follies or in an evening of contrasting works performed by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes.9

A third form of combining ingredients I will term fusion: blending disparate dance elements together so thoroughly that they appear to fuse together into a new, hybrid dance form. This seems to have been around for quite a while: one is reminded of Katherine Dunham’s use of Caribbean

9 Another example of a revue: my graduate performance project at The Ohio State University in February, 2001. For this concert, I performed four contrasting solos, each involving different movement techniques, costumes, choreographic strategies, and music. However, only one of these pieces—Three Bird Songs—was notably eclectic in the sense described below.
elements in her *Cuban Suite* or *Ñañigo*, or of the stylized ethnic dances used in the *divertissements* of classical nineteenth-century ballets such as *Swan Lake* or *The Sleeping Beauty*. Although its estimated value has seen a sharp rise in recent decades, I consider fusion to be a ubiquitous process in the history of European-American dance: the most typical manner by which influences are assimilated and reconciled.\(^{10}\)

Although those who write about dance have used the word “eclectic” to reference these three different techniques, my thesis depends on a stricter usage of the term. In much recent choreography, combined dance elements don’t always seem to be so clearly separated as in a *revue* or so smoothly fit together as in a fusion. A culinary analogy may be helpful. Rather than being presented with an array of platters, each filled with a different raw vegetable, or, on the other hand, with a thoroughly cooked and puréed sauce, we encounter what French cooking calls a *compôte*—a mixture of ingredients, with each maintaining some measure of its original color, texture, and flavor. It is more exactly this phenomenon—analogous to the *compôte*—which I am labeling *eclecticism*, and which I believe to be a distinguishing feature of postmodernist art production.

But how carefully must the ingredients be cut up and mixed for their flavors to mingle, and how much cooking time is liable to turn the dish into a mushy hybrid? No hard-and-fast rules exist; the results are often unpredictable. If a dish comes out just right, it’s often unclear whether we

\(^{10}\) The history of almost every Western vernacular form (like square-dancing, breakdancing, and salsa) and individual choreographic style (like those of Bournonville, Bob Fosse, and Bebe Miller) can be told in terms of the assimilation and synthesis of different influences. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* is especially rare in the world of dance, with its longstanding traditions of master-apprenticeship and of practicing “*en masse*, *ensemble*."

11
should praise the cook, the restaurant, or the ingredients themselves. With respect to eclecticism, the character of a piece of choreography may reflect the skill of the choreographer or the circumstances of its composition just as much as it may reflect the Zeitgeist of some pre- or postmodern era. Direct, unfettered historical determinism can be difficult to find in the (superstructural) history of dance. Nonetheless, as we pick our way through the annals of dance history we may note that a gradually-developing concern for movement's stylistic consistency and authenticity (often associated with Romanticism and Modernism) has provided the foundation for choreographers and performers to juggle those styles in ever more fluent ways—that is, for eclecticism to flourish.

During the last part of the reign of Louis XIV in France, the playwright and director Molière was responsible for coordinating a number of comédies-ballets. Contrasting with previous dance spectacles which presented formal group dances interspersed with poetry and song, the comédies-ballets involved a new degree of unity between these different elements, all in the service of narrative. In Les Fâcheux (1661), the hero is importuned by a series of bothersome people, “including a group of bowlers who performed a dance incorporating movements from the sport” (Au 1988:24). Surviving accounts of the production suggest that this episode was very much in the aforementioned manner of a fusion; but it is nonetheless interesting for our chronology, as an example of a dance being made to incorporate a rather undancerly movement form.

Similarly, in a famous dance from 1715—Les Caractères de la Danse—an étoile from the Paris Opéra, Françoise Prévost, portrayed a series of four different characters (Au 1988:31). While her depiction of lovers of varying age
and gender was by all accounts a tour de force, *Les Caractères de la Danse* seems to have inclined towards the style of presentation I call a *revue*.

In the great nineteenth-century classical ballets, such as *The Nutcracker* (Petipa/Ivanov, 1892), one of the principal attractions was the great number of *divertissements*: confectionery set-pieces which purported to represent the characters of exotic foreign cultures: Spanish, Arabian, Chinese, etc. These *divertissements* were connected to one another in a manner recalling the *revue*: for instance, during the Kingdom of the Sweets scene, note how the coterie of Spanish dancers finish up their spicy, ardent variation: with one last head-toss and wrist-flick, they pose for a final tableau; the music stops, the audience applauds, the dancers bow and run off-stage. Then the Chinese dancers prance their way on-stage, pointing their fingers and smiling, ready to begin their lighthearted variation. Toreador vests and flared skirts are replaced by silk jackets and pantaloons; the tight, Castilian sounds of a syncopated trumpet melody are replaced by delicate flute trills and pizzicato strings.\(^{11}\)

The sort of juxtaposition of dissimilar foreign cultures that we see in *The Nutcracker* has a certain formal safeness to it. In terms of technique and choreography, exotic peoples are represented by taking a few stereotypical gestures or characteristics and embedding them in the common medium of classical ballet style and choreographic structure (i.e., a *fusion*). In terms of the *mise-en-scène*, we see that the frames surrounding each of these dioramas

---

\(^{11}\) I refer to the 1977 video version of *The Nutcracker* performed by the American Ballet Theatre (MGM/UA Home Video). Although other versions of this classic change the order of the different *divertissements*—such as Balanchine’s (choreographed in 1954, which the author saw performed by the New York City Ballet in 2000) and Nureyev’s (choreographed in 1971, seen performed by the Ballet Estable del Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires in 1998)—the tendency to fully separate each episode remains constant.
from far-off lands are rather distinct, as in a museum gallery, where two contrasting paintings could be hung a discreet distance from one another, separated by negative space and thickly ornate wooden frames (i.e., as in a revue).

What would juxtaposition look like if it were less measured, more dissonant, less safe? Enter the Denishawn Company, whose concerts in the early part of the twentieth century endeavored to present compendiums of the world’s dances (but with noticeably fewer material or choreographic resources than the Maryinsky Theater had marshaled for their Nutcracker productions). According to Elizabeth Kendall’s second-hand account, a typical 1916 Denishawn concert proceeded as follows: “After the Nature idylls [Ted Shawn] placed the Indian, Egyptian, and Japanese, amplified by new additions of the Hawaiian and Javanese, and then the modern numbers, the Fokine and Nijinsky imitations... and the ballroom routines” (120). Observers noticed certain “‘incongruities that bewildered,’” such as the “‘inexplicable pirouettes in the middle of Egyptian friezes’” (121). One wonders which of the juxtaposing effects were intentional and which were not, but in any case it would be fair to identify this unruly menagerie as a sort of postmodern eclecticism avant la lettre.

Kendall’s account sketches a correlation between Denishawn’s “impossible jumble” and the era of ragtime music, when “anything was likely to be juxtaposed with anything” (122). If we cast our net of references a little wider, we would pick up on a number of other varieties of modernist art production which were beginning to develop a similar interest in mixed-up objects and styles: Picasso and Braque’s cubist painting, Joyce’s prose, T.S. Eliot’s poetry, and Stravinsky’s music. In the field of concert dance, however,
Shawn and St. Denis were rather ahead of their time. As if to confirm Sally Banes's thesis that dance modernism started and ended significantly later than modernism in other fields (1987:xv), we should note that few other dance makers during the next fifty years were quite so willing to embrace this "modernist" Ragtime style of putting dance programs and phrases together with such ragged sutures.

Instead, choreographers of this era generally seemed to be much more interested in fashioning their own personal idioms. For these modernist choreographers, "making stage work is inseparable from teaching an approach to dance" (Siegel 1979:10), and a self-consistent approach at that. Through the dual practices of inventing choreography and devising systems of technical dance training, these modernist choreographers lived out idiosyncratic and yet highly systematic visions of what modern dance should be.

To clarify this point, I'd like now to examine the role of eclecticism (or lack thereof) in a few examples of mid-century modern dance-making. In Alvin Ailey's Revelations (1960), we see quite a large variety of tableaux and styles, corresponding to the diversity of the African-American religious experiences which are represented. "Fix Me, Jesus" is a carefully-paced duet with many gestures of reaching or turning away and a number of slow supported lifts reminiscent of the adagio from a classical pas de deux. "Sinner Man"—a trio for three men—is an up-tempo jazz dance number, sparkling with fast turns, giant leaps, and bravado rolls to the floor. Another section, "Wade in the Water," depicts a joyous baptism scene, whose celebrants dive into breathtaking penché arabesque turns and deep second-position pliés, while
broad white streamers (representing baptismal waters) flitter across the stage.¹²

Is this eclectic? Despite the broad range of scenes and the varied
demands which this piece places upon those who would perform it, I'll have
to suggest that the answer is no. Each episode, safely ensconced in its frame
(the music stops, the audience applauds, a new set of dancers enters), is firmly
grounded in Alvin Ailey's distinctive (and self-consistent) blend of Horton,
Graham, jazz, and ballet techniques. The emphasis on strong, controlled
movement, articulate pelvises and spines, and highly-charged emotional
intensity persists throughout the work. To the extent that certain non-
dancerly movements are imported into the choreography (e.g., dancers
praying, embracing, cooling themselves with fans), they are filtered through
Ailey's blend of techniques and are performed in very close unison in a
consistent company style. A bit of a revue style, lots of blending and fusion,
but nothing that I would call eclecticism.

Perhaps the clearest examples of modernist stylistic consistency—the
very antithesis of eclecticism, and yet the fodder for so much subsequent
quotation—would be the work of Martha Graham and George Balanchine.
Both created dozens of ensemble dances, each one of which bears the
unmistakable imprint of their idiosyncratic style. Both also developed long-
term programs for training dancers to perform this choreographic style.
These well-known technical programs were so meticulous and ingrained that
the dancers thereby trained could be permanently branded with the badge of

¹² This description of Revelations is based on viewing the video Ailey Dances,
performed by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (ABC Video / Kultur, 1982), as
well as attending a performance of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble in Durham, N.C. in
1997.
"Graham dancer" or "Balanchine dancer." This pedigree enables them alone to perform the master's work in what we would call the most proper manner; it also seriously impedes their ability to dance with another choreographer who may work under an alternate régime.\textsuperscript{13}

Even when Balanchine or Graham \textit{try} to work in a different style, the result looks no less distinctively their own. For instance, take Balanchine's \textit{Union Jack} (1976), a tribute to the sprightly music and dances of British sailors. Dressed all in loose sailors' outfits, arms akimbo, clicking their heels together and flashing bright smiles, the New York City Ballet \textit{en travesti} looks no less like the New York City Ballet. Their high-spiritedness notwithstanding, the dancers' musicality is just as emphatic, their formations on stage as precise, and their limbs have no less of the sparkling geometric precision than we'd expect to see in a more conventionally Balanchinean piece like \textit{Agon} or \textit{Diamonds}.\textsuperscript{14}

The lesson here is that the intention to head in a very new direction—although partially successful—often seems to lead the modernist choreographer to reinscribe the boundaries of his or her personal style ever

\textsuperscript{13} Could a dancer from Graham's company, deeply molded by her technique, ever perform with Balanchine's New York City Ballet? To my knowledge, only one—Paul Taylor—was ever given the opportunity. (He felt he "was drowning at sea" and only performed one role in \textit{Episodes}, the historic concert that Balanchine shared with Graham in 1959 [Taylor 1988: 90, 95].) Could a dancer trained by Balanchine's School of American Ballet migrate over to Graham's company? Erick Hawkins was the first to make the switch. Four more were given a temporary opportunity for the \textit{Episodes} concert. One imagines that only with an extensive period of debriefing and reprogramming would a more permanent cross-over have been possible (Taylor 1988:89).

This parochialism has begun to wane. Since her death, Graham's company—like those of Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Paul Taylor—have gradually grown more receptive to the idea of ballet dancers in their companies, and of ballet companies performing their works.

\textsuperscript{14} My description of \textit{Union Jack} is based on the New York City Ballet's performance in the video \textit{The Balanchine Celebration}, directed by Matthew Diamond (Nonesuch Records, 1996), and on personal interviews with Jeffrey Edwards, a dancer with NYCB in the 1980's (August, 2001).
more deeply.\textsuperscript{15} This happens notwithstanding repeated attempts to incorporate references to the movements of others: British sailors and music hall performers in \textit{Union Jack} or glee clubs and marching bands in \textit{Stars and Stripes} (in the case of Balanchine); American pioneers in \textit{Appalachian Spring} and American Indians in \textit{El Penitente} (for Graham).

The issue here is not a question of creativity or of conducting sufficient research; nor is it a lack of the freedom (so celebrated by French existentialists) to defy all characterization and make oneself different from what one had been. Instead, I suggest, an explanation can be made in two ways. One—the strength and the immutability of the dancers' technical training—is an issue which I have already touched on, and to which I will return in the last chapter of this thesis. The common medium of a shared dance technique exerts a certain conservative force upon new developments and interpolations and—like the \textit{danse d'\'ecole} which modern dance intended to supplant—provides a "tradition... resilient enough to absorb innovation" (Banes 1987:5).

Another explanation can be found in the wider climate of artistic modernism which enveloped the dance world. I refer particularly to modernism's tendency to isolate itself by wearing the mantle of "highbrow" art—to be clearly distinguished, on the one hand, from shoddy, mass-manufactured products, and, on the other hand, from more traditional (but equally unrefined) popular, "folkloric" traditions. The commitment to the idea of theatrical dance as a \textit{high art}—meaning, in this case, that it should be held aloof from tawdry burlesques, ersatz toe dances, and vernacular dances

\textsuperscript{15} This discussion raises the important definitional issue of what exactly constitutes an authorial, personal style. See Foucault (1984), Shattuck (2000), and Foster (1986).
alike—meant that modernist choreographers couldn’t allow themselves to reproduce materials from these sources outright. They had to be purified, refined, “cooked.” In practical terms, this means that modernist choreographers generally handled quoted materials by “fusing” them into the medium of their own technique, thus enabling them to become more “enduring,” “universal,” and theatrically legible. Martha Graham’s writings imply that this process is intrinsic to being an artist: “I believe that we learn by practice.... Practice is a means of inviting the perfection desired” (1991:3-4).

The bulwark of concert dance’s respectability and putative universality lasted from at least the 1930’s to the 1960’s, but it was finally breached by the members of the so-called Judson Church movement. The first dance-makers to be called “post-modern” (because they “saw as their task the purging and melioration of historical modern dance” [Banes 1987:xv]), the Judsonites made little use at first of quoting and bricolage. Nonetheless, they play an important part in the history of eclecticism.

As an illustration of this idea, I will describe Yvonne Rainer’s Trio A, or, The Mind Is a Muscle, Part I (1966), probably the most famous and widely-performed of the Judson-era dances. Recalling the ballerina’s toe-touch in Push Comes to Shove, Trio A is replete with quotidian gestures and activities. Abstractly geometric movements (the foot taps a semicircle on the floor, the arms and legs extend in straight lines in a variety of directions) alternate with activities more recognizably taken from daily life (walking, running, touching one’s face). The dancer’s apparent nonchalance notwithstanding (or, rather, abetting), this was revolutionary material in 1966, which “drastically” violated many of the “canons of classical theatrical training” (Banes 1987:48). Rainer and her colleagues should be credited with championing the idea that a dance
could be made out of any movement (or lack thereof), without any a priori limits, thus "making a historical shift in the subject of dance to pure movement" (54). 16 This was a powerful blow to the modern dance "technocracy," and it opened the gates to a much broader understanding of what dance could encompass. 17

Still, Trio A is hardly eclectic. Despite Sally Banes' statement that "the achievement of Trio A is the resolute denial of style and expression" (54), there is in fact an exceedingly consistent and studied style to the piece. In Laban analysis Effort terminology, Trio A contains a preponderance of neutral Effort: moderately Sustained movement, diminished Flow changes, with neither Strong nor Light Weight qualities. 18 It is the very soul of uninflected blandness and homogeneity. When Sally Banes remarks that "the homogeneity of the execution masks the utter disjunctiveness of the style," she indicates precisely how Rainer's combination of common/pedestrian with abstract/non-referential dance movements is the very model of "dance fusion" which I described earlier in this chapter.

To varying degrees, the employment of a veneer of stylistic smoothness to cover over the least trace of any quoted movement is

16 An analogous example from the field of music composition—one which preceded and directly influenced the Judsonites—was the work of John Cage, who endeavored to consider virtually any arrangement of any sounds a viable musical text, worthy of attentive listening. Cage's long-time collaborator, the choreographer Merce Cunningham, could not be said to have the same distinguished place in the history of eclecticism, for throughout his career (indeed, more so year by year), he remained committed to a Balanchinean or Grahamian standard of technical proficiency and refinement, which placed a rather homogenizing (or "fusion-izing") effect on all of his investigations and aleatory experiments.

17 My description of Trio A is based on Sally Banes' written account (1987:41-54), as well as viewing reconstructions of the piece performed in a graduate student concert at the Ohio State University in February, 2000.

18 For clarification of this vocabulary, see the introduction to Effort/Shape analysis in Bartenieff and Lewis (1980).
common to other Judson-era choreographers. This is especially true of those whom Banes (xx) places under the rubric of “analytic post-modern” dancers-
makers (such as Lucinda Childs, Trisha Brown, and Laura Dean), who emulated Rainer’s “resolute denial of style and expression.” This is not, however, true of all of the Judson-era choreographers, with the most obvious exception being the Grand Union improvisation group.

Yvonne Rainer was actually a member of the Grand Union for the entirety of its existence (1970-76), as were Steve Paxton, Douglas Dunn, Trisha Brown (who joined a few months into the group’s existence), and others. However analytically austere were the dances of these participants when they were working as independent choreographers, when they began to collaborate in real time the invention and variety of their dancing knew no bounds. Following (or disobeying) the slightest of plans for the evening’s show, the Grand Union performers would perform set choreography, improvise skits, quote stock characters and movement idioms, extemporaneously devise new characters and idioms, and comment meta-
theatrically on many of these activities as they were happening. According to Banes, “a social as was well as an aesthetic world invaded the stage,” as the Grand Union

stretched the material and formal limits of their art by incorporating objects (and gestures) from everyday life, using imagery (including sounds) from popular culture, and making long, rambling words in a

---

19 Some examples of quoted idioms from a single performance: “They jog around like football players between plays; they make boxing movements, kick backwards... People are doing gymnasts’ flying angels, or using each other’s weight to lean, stand, and sit” (Banes 1987:205-6).
flexible format with a constantly changing stream of images and meanings. [209]

Few other choreographic experiments seem to have adhered so fully to the letter of architect Robert Venturi’s prescription for postmodern vitality: “I like elements which are hybrid rather than ‘pure,’... redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity” (1996:326).

Considering their eager engagement with all of the ramshackle techniques of bricolage, I would have liked for the work of the Grand Union to have played a larger role in my thesis. Unfortunately, video and film recordings of their work are scarce, and of course none of their improvised antics have been saved in a reproducible choreographic record.\textsuperscript{20} In the interest of focusing my analysis on more popularly-accessible dances, I will continue my analysis of eclecticism in the next chapter by discussing certain works of Twyla Tharp and Bill T. Jones. In rather different ways, both are heirs to the experiments of the Judson Church choreographers.

\textsuperscript{20} A Labanotation score does exist for “Chair-Pillow,” one of the episodes in Rainer’s malleable \textit{Continuous Project} — \textit{Altered Daily} (1970), which was the seed out of which the Grand Union grew. But it merely instructs the performers to “improvise,” giving little hint of the form or style that their improvisations may take.
CHAPTER 3
ECLECTICISM OBSERVED

Twyla Tharp

"Avant-garde," with its connotations of elitism, is, I think, a miserably inadequate term of description for Twyla Tharp’s special atmosphere of novelty. I should prefer to call this atmosphere baroque, bearing in mind that the original meaning of “baroque” was “bizarre.” Her love of paradox, of radical possibility and permutation, is a challenge to any lively audience. It makes the bond of communication one of a mutual respect for form. [Croce 1977:394-95]

It would be overdoing things to say that Twyla Tharp stands out as “the most postmodern of choreographers”; still, her work certainly is exemplary in demonstrating certain postmodern tendencies, and (historically speaking) her work was instrumental in disseminating those tendencies into the New York dance scene. Particularly influential were her combinations of wide-ranging movement vocabularies, her use of “double-coding,”\(^\text{21}\) and her negotiation between “high” and “low” art, “popularity” and “seriousness.” In the wake of her cross-over, modern-ballet successes—Deuce Coupe (1973),

\(^{21}\) The term is Charles Jencks’; double-coding refers to “the combination of Modern techniques with something else” (usually traditional or vernacular) “in order for the product to communicate with the public and with a concerned minority” (Jencks 1996:472).
As Time Goes By (1973), and Push Comes to Shove (1976)—uncounted droves of modern dancers began or returned to study ballet, and to reconsider the role that classical finesse could play in their dancing.\textsuperscript{22}

Tharp surfed the waves on the seachange called postmodernism, enticing some of the avant-garde dance world past its safe harbor among the "puritanical" Judsonites, and out into the dangerous open seas of unstable ironies, high production values, and mass-market appeal. The enticement that Tharp offered was partly a surprising brew of materials from supposedly antagonistic sources—classical ballet, modern dance, Broadway shows, social dance and popular music—and partly a way of working that was ceaselessly experimental, indefatigably innovative.

Arlene Croce sets the stage for the analysis which follows in a New Yorker review dated February 27, 1984:

Tharp seems to have arrived at a point of virtuosity in which outdoing herself—ever the main objective—means confounding herself, with every work becoming a criticism of every other. Her four new pieces this year present stark contradictions in choreographic content, as if defying us to believe that the same person made them all. Nine Sinatra Songs is ballroom pop, Fait Accompli is postminimal minimalism, Bad Smells is orgiastic postminimal minimalism.... The fourth new piece, Telemann, is a classical ballet. I marvel at this aesthetic range, I applaud it, and yet I wonder: is it enough that the subject of a piece be its maker's ambition? [1987:175]

\textsuperscript{22} Personal interview with Susan Hadley (OSU Professor) in May, 2000. See also Banes and Cowell (1994) and Copeland (1986).
It may be of interest to mention some further elements of the great “aesthetic range” which can bring even the dour doyenne of New York dance criticism to “marvel” and “applaud.” Particularly susceptible to the Olympic ideology of Cittius, altius, fortius (swifter, higher, stronger), Tharp has choreographed opera scenes in the movie Amadeus; ice dancing routines for skater John Curry to perform at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics; Broadway shows chock full of jazz dancing, tap dancing, mime, and dancing ghouls; and choreography for a hundred dancers—not to mention all of the varied choreography made for Tharp’s own companies of dancers.

To make these dances, Tharp draws her materials from an even wider gamut of sources. Often, many ingredients will be blended into a single movement, and one can only guess at what the original constituent parts were. Still, a knowledgeable observer of a Tharp ballet is liable to make out tableaux and from Romantic, Classical, and Neoclassical ballet; movements from boxing, magic shows, tap dancing, baton twirling, disco dancing, pantomime, Rockettes shows, and dance marathons; and steps from the Tango, the Charleston, the Jitterbug, the Two-Step, the Bunny-Hop, the Lindy, square dancing, and Luigi-style jazz dance.

Push Comes to Shove (1976) is a complex piece, one that sets out alternately to please and provoke its different audiences. As an illustration of eclecticism, the second section is highly noteworthy. Hadyn’s Symphony No. 82 in C strikes up and Mikhail Baryshnikov soon appears on stage, adorned with derby hat, legwarmers, and velvet breeches. Baryshnikov performs an exuberant, mercurial solo which veers erratically between different movement styles. We see what looks like a mesmerist’s hypnotic gestures; a sudden glare at the audience, as if to say, “Hey! You lookin’ at me?!”; a few
hand gestures resembling a baseball pitcher's coded signals and a New Yorker's obscene "up yours!" insult; classroom ballet exercises gone awry, like a *pirouette* which flings the dancer wildly off-kilter, or an *entrechat huit* jump which is "marked" without ever leaving the ground. Interspersed with this jumble of references and impulses are the occasional virtuoso steps, done "correctly" for a change: *cabrioles, grands jetés en attitude*, and a final six-turn *pirouette* ending in an astonishingly prolonged *relevé*. (This last movement is so fiendishly difficult that it quotes nothing so much as Baryshnikov-the-World-Famous-Ballet-Dancer.)

It seems as if Attention Deficit Disorder were the underlying aesthetic of this solo. Baryshnikov's character samples rather aimlessly from numerous movement idioms, only to be interrupted by fits of boredom or hyperactive energy; no dance better illustrates Sally Banes's thesis that "the key postmodern choreographic device is radical juxtaposition" (1987:xxiii), or Fredric Jameson's that "schizophrenic disjunction... becomes generalized as a cultural style" (1991:29). The audience laughs at some of the more outrageous juxtapositions and travesties of ballet traditions, but otherwise Jameson's description of pastiche (as distinct from parody) holds true—these quotations and send-ups of older materials do not point to "any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue [or movement style] you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic [or choreographic] normality still exists" (Jameson 1991: 17). A real-life person might not switch between ways of moving quite so quickly—or so the choreography would suggest—but his or her movements would still end up as a tissue of various imitations, influences,

---

23 My account of this ballet is based on the 1984 video recording, *Baryshnikov Dances Tharp*, which includes a revised version of *Push Comes to Shove* (originally choreographed in 1976).
and ever-changing impulses. At the same time, however, that we see the jumbled detritus of past experience, we see an enactment of the practice of "making it new." Tharp casts her lead dancer as a movement investigator, a perspicacious innovator forever casting about for different ways of moving.

If we shift our focus slightly, and attend to the choreographic flow which binds together these different ways of moving, we notice Tharp’s masterful skills of phrase-construction. Tharp has linked together her inimitable collection of bric-a-brac together into a stream of movement as smooth as blown glass. (Quite an accomplishment when we consider the heterogeneity of her materials.) And, notably, hers is a stream which never seems to pass by the same point twice. “Every move is absolutely clear, and disappears without a trace,” lamented the long-time Tharp apologist, Marcia Siegel (1993:15). Where other choreographers will make use of extensive repetition, or accumulation, or theme-and-variations, Tharp relies heavily on endless “through-development” to fashion her material.\textsuperscript{24} This is an ecumenical sort of dance-making, one more concerned with inclusion than with consistency or even communication. Siegel describes it well: “She is much more interested in having her work encompass many things that touch on each other, however glancingly, than in obliging the audience by being more consistent. The raffish, ragpicker jumble of ideas that carries us through a Tharp dance eventually comes to be one element of a new style that is Tharp’s alone” (1979:352).

\textsuperscript{24} Heavily, but not exclusively. In the third section of Push Comes to Shove, there is a catty “bickering” phrase which is passed from soloist to corps (who perform it in fugue) and then back to soloist. This seems the very model of “correct” manipulation of phrase material. But the exception proves the rule: this sort of academic development happens just once, and is just one ingredient of many.
In classic works such as *The Bix Pieces* (1971), *Sue's Leg* (1975), *Push Comes to Shove* (1976), and *The Catherine Wheel* (1981), Tharp’s dancers don’t move with the unified, direct energy that Graham or Ailey dancers have; her choreography is more like Trisha Brown’s in its use of complex sequences of energy spurts coming from all direction (in Tharp’s case, “as if the music were inside them—tickling, teasing, jabbing to be let out” [Croce 1977:343]). But whereas Brown’s dancers look like each body part has a little rocket in it which is liable to go off at any moment, making the whole body react along with it, Tharp’s dancers have less obvious motivations: if anything, they look as if their instructions were being beamed down by a malfunctioning satellite television hookup, where the shimmering cultural debris of the past century on a thousand different cable stations are jumbled together, confusing the tasks that these poor dancers have been asked to do as they skitter across the stage. Sometimes the dancers act like lovers do in children’s films: they become inexplicably goofy, suddenly and inexplicably subject to accidents, wobbles, and debilitating falls. Marcia Siegel says it well: “Few [other] choreographers have been more able to reconcile the ordinariness of life with the extraordinariness of dance style” (1979:312).

Twyla Tharp’s double-coded choreography—simultaneously messy and sleek, hard-to-get and easy-to-enjoy—is not without its critics. The most vocal of these is perhaps Susan Foster, whose 1985 article on “Reaction and Resistance in Postmodern Dance” is intensely critical of the popular appeal and muzzled social critique typical of Tharp’s dances made since the early seventies.

With her first compositions for the ballet companies, beginning with *Deuce Coupe* [for the Joffrey Ballet] in 1973, Twyla Tharp’s work
seems to shift from the experimental to the conventional, from thoughtful investigation to exhilarating entertainment.... [Although] Tharp’s self-referential statements—the eclectic vocabulary, ingenious parody, and disaffected style—... highlight the conventions by which dance is made, and thus present the fictionality of dance in general, they fail to sustain a self-reflexive inquiry.... Even as they celebrate diversity and satirize their own origins, Tharp’s dances deny the viewer any access to their own workings. They present the choreographic process for consumption rather than for collaboration.

[1985:49, 52]

In Foster’s social-activist view of concert dance after Yvonne Rainer, choreography is either reactionary or resistant, Part-of-the-Problem or Part-of-the-Solution. Tharp is a “reactionary postmodern choreographer,” a fallen angel who has sold her credentials as an authentic Judson-era experimentalist in exchange for glitz, fabulous technique, adoring crowds, and membership in the hegemony of the status quo.25

There are numerous signs of Tharp’s Faustian bargain—her flight from high Judsonite moral values—and they relate to many of the formal elements of Tharp’s work which have already been enumerated. For Foster, the ephemeral, throw-it-away quality of Tharp’s work represents the lack of a fully-developed “system of ongoing inquiry.” Her moments of irony or self-mockery are so fleeting that one can’t tell if Tharp “really mean[s] it” or

25 Tharp makes no secret of her apostasy. In her autobiography she recounts: “Now we rehearsed at the Judson Church gym. Our presence represented a challenge to the established avant-garde on their home turf.... We were younger than they and had issued no manifestos—members of the Judson crowd loved making overriding statements on the nature and purpose of art. Most importantly, we had the gall to dance. This was definitely not chic” (1992:86).
not (1985:47). The quotations of other dance traditions are to be seen as “min[ing] the forms of the past for their nostalgic and novel impact” (ibid.); the result “homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface” (1997:255). The prowess of her dancers in classical and contemporary dance techniques is too obvious—one can readily see that she works with trained dancers who “enjoy the challenge, the juice of moving” (Tharp 1992:88)—thus forestalling the “possibility for a moral or ethical statement regarding the relationship between thought and action” (Foster 1985:48). Too much entertainment, not enough thematic development, too much pop culture, not enough meta-theatrical self-criticism, too many isolations, not enough inter disciplinary dabbling, too many satin leg-warmers, not enough grunge. In short, Twyla Tharp is taken to task for not being Meredith Monk or the Grand Union, the “good guys” in Foster’s didactic tale of postmodernism gone astray.

I’m partially sympathetic to the ambivalence that Susan Foster shows towards Tharp’s methods and goals, and would agree that much of Tharp’s choreography doesn’t reach the extreme “radical promise” of postmodern dance that Foster describes. It can surely be disappointing to see the disproportionate attention and success that Tharp has had relative to other choreographers who make a more central concern out of “challenging” their viewers. “That piece was beautiful, really touching—let’s go get some burger and fries,” the choreographer Tere O’Connor is wont to say in conversation, indicating the way that a choreographer’s inchoate intention to make a political intervention can dissipate in an audience member’s mind just moments after the stage curtain comes down. This Burgers-and-Fries Syndrome is, I think, especially likely after a Tharp performance.
Foster argues that Tharp is always taking things back, always saying "I didn’t really mean it." For Foster that’s a fault, but I find it admirable: I see it as one of the virtues of Tharp’s work. In the works already mentioned, we are treated to images of characters who are uncertain of themselves, who don’t seem to want to get themselves involved with heavy relationships and messy entanglements; characters who are alternately self-involved, solicitous, and in need of help; characters wandering about without their own through-line, trying out different motivations ("am I rehearsing? performing? trying to stay awake? trying to seduce this person?").

Susan Foster sees a lack of what Woody Allen once called “seriousity”; she sees a sell-out or a cop-out. I see a valuable emphasis on pragmatism and wit. Tharp’s creations are not hedgehogs, but foxes. In the intricacy and synthetic character of Tharp’s choreography we find a new interpretation of realism.

Bill T. Jones

A few more words about Tharp. In Push Comes to Shove (1976), as we have seen, the practice of including wide-ranging quotations in the development of movement phrases has a certain newness to it. Instead of referring to the materials which are themselves quoted (many of which are common enough—like the soft-shoe steps or the male soloist’s stifled yawn), I wish now to draw attention to the then-innovative act of quotation itself. As is often the case, I think, with many novelties in the dance world—and here I’m speaking in quite general terms—the effect of an innovation (such as these
surprising quotations) is, initially, just to indicate and draw attention to itself. I’ll call this the Wow! Effect. The innovation thus comes to remind us of strangeness, surprise, and mystery in the world; the innovation thus represents the inexhaustible diversity of the choreography, the performer, and the world which they inhabit.

Only later, I suggest (continuing this very general train of thought), when it grows older and more established, does the innovation start to lose this almost narcissistic tendency to refer to itself and those who created it; only later does it start to point with greater ease away from itself, towards exterior meanings and ideas. The question posed in the first chapter—what to do with eclecticism and quoting once we have become accustomed to them—can now be answered in a general way. We watch more closely. We read more of what eclecticism and quoting have to tell us.

Some authors, who address wider fields of experience beyond the narrow space of dance stages, suggest that cable TV (and MTV in particular) may have been the principle agent in many people’s acculturation to rapid-fire, wide-ranging bricolage and juxtaposition. That, however, is the subject for a separate thesis. If there is any choreographer whose oeuvre provides us with repeated opportunities to encounter and negotiate the practice of quotation and eclectic juxtaposition, it would be Bill T. Jones. From his earliest solos at the American Dance Asylum and his first duets with Arnie Zane, through to the evening-length dances he choreographed in the 1980’s and 1990’s, Jones has been an inveterate bricoleur. Eclecticism and quoting are rampant in his work. So, too, are other, related practices: juxtaposing text, movement, music, and visual technologies in unexpected ways; juxtaposing different movement activities performed by multiple dancers at the same
time; fragmenting and recombining movement; employing nonlinear
narrative, irony, and parody.

Speaking about one recent work, Jones describes these tendencies in
his work. Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin / The Promised Land functions via a
“complex matrix of meanings between the real world and the world of
theater, through ... nonlinear juxtaposition of iconographic events.... The
truth of the piece was in its disorientation” (Jones 1995: 208-9). “Where my
work differs” from that of Graham, Limón, and Ailey “is in its dissonance. I
rely a great deal on fragmentation, the broken line: dramatically,
emotionally, even physically.”

As my central exhibit in this section, I'd like to examine Jones' recent,
two-hour, two-act show, You Walk? Commissioned by the city of Bologna,
Italy, for its reign as the European Cultural Capital for the year 2000, You
Walk? was intended as a “work that ruminated” on the “influence,” or
“radiance,” of the “Latin-Mediterranean cultures” in the New World (Jones
2000).

The emphasis in this piece is on ensemble choreography, not solos.
Still, the ensemble rarely performs in tight unison; instead, by different
degrees of difference from one another, they create a remarkably diverse
range of theatrical textures. Sometimes all of the dancers will be engaged in
approximately similar movement, as in the first scene (“We Wore Time
Shamelessly”) when—like a flock of husky parakeets—they intermittently
hop up and down in place, faces to the sky, hooting loudly with each jump. In

27 My description is based on attending the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's
April, 2001 performance of You Walk? at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio.
the second act, the ensemble clusters in a corner of stage, making a vocal and kinesthetic hullabaloo directed towards each of the dancers who, in turn, are unlucky enough to occupy center stage, having fallen out of the raucous group to perform a twitchy, self-conscious solo which functions in counterpoint to the group's concentrated energy.

The sort of scene where an austere and formal medieval Spanish dance is juxtaposed with the loose, lively dance steps of West Africa—previously described on the first page of this thesis—is repeated at other times, in other ways. Episodes and incidents often overlap, with dancers on one part of stage often performing in striking dynamic contrast to their colleagues on another part of the stage. The most extreme version of this situation occurs near the end of the first act. The episode is titled "San Ignacio"; I would have renamed it "The Babylonian Discothèque," to describe the dystopic chaos resulting from ten performers calling out the Lord's Prayer in as many different languages while furiously dancing in at least as many distinct, unrelated, idiosyncratic movement styles. Such situations flow into one another, and others, in a never-ending sequence of not-entirely related events, like a computer screen-saver slowly cross-fading between all manner of images.

As was the case in much of Tharp's work, the use of traditional materials is coupled with ceaseless, prodigious choreographic invention. From what I could make out, Jones uses ballet, capoeira, tango and other partnered dances, brusquely semaphoric hand gestures, gymnastics, contact improvisation, West African dance, sports fan behaviors, disco dancing, "voguing" and "presenting," and the movements of certain furry animals. I also saw references to other dance-makers: not just the modernist "greats," but Jones' postmodernist colleagues as well. There were evocations of Mark
Morris' nouvelle folk dances for office workers (e.g., *The Office*, 1994), Twyla Tharp's explorations of dysfunctional relationships via ballroom dancing (*Nine Sinatra Songs*, 1982), Ralph Lemon's concern with representing and juxtaposing the very traditional with the very modern (in *Geography*, 1997), and even David Parson's essay in colorguard flag-waving (*Anthem*, 1998).

And, of course, there were many moments that looked like Jones' choreography and nothing else. Jones does not confine himself to manipulating the movements of his dancers and his predecessors. He has his own inimitable brand of tightly wound-up arm gestures; of straight-up jumps, which suddenly contort in mid-flight; and (a relatively new phenomenon for him in the past ten years), a distinctive inflection of the neoclassical vocabulary (perhaps Ailey’s vocabulary, as well), which emphasizes very straight limbs arcing quickly through space, drawing the rest of the body off balance, and then sometimes collapsing into a turned-in crouch or slouch before just as suddenly extending back to an extended linear position. Also—in striking contrast to the *gravitas* of his interview persona—Jones sometimes has his dancers revert to a particularly loony sort of movement (a jiggle or an undignified pose) which may shock anyone who still guards Graham’s or Anna Sokolow’s air of modern dance seriousness and solemnity close to their heart.

The movement phrases which Jones has choreographed (with "generous contributions" from the dancers [Jones 2001]) are rather twitchy; they tend to skitter from one effort quality and spatial arrangement to another; they seem reluctant to dwell in a particular place for too long. Showy *entrechats* and *grands battements* are inserted into otherwise introverted movement phrases at the unlikeliest moments; leggy traveling
phrases pause suddenly, without apparent cause. The audience is not encouraged to look too hard for subterranean patterns or recurrent motifs; rather, they have a sense of expectation, of watching for whatever wild new thing might come next. One is reminded of the one-upmanship of the improvisational games played by the Grand Union: at any moment someone can launch into new and seemingly unrelated material; the others can choose to respond to that new material, or not. Even if a choreographer does not take his ideas from cable TV and music television—as was hypothesized earlier—he may still choose to accommodate the desire for rapid-fire changes which these technologies have socialized into their viewers. In You Walk?, Jones doesn’t really allow the audience enough time to get bored, (as Pina Bausch might) or to deal with extensive repetition and sameness: he keeps his dance moving along at a brisk pace.

Props wander in and out of the piece: hoods, scarves for blindfolding, a giant red flag. The topic of Bologna’s commission—the “radiance of the Latin-Mediterranean culture in the world”—suggested to Jones musical selections from traditional Zambian and Brazilian musicians, medieval Spanish dance music, Portuguese Fado, Mozart, and John Cage in one of his farthest-out moments. So many lighting specials; so many costume changes; so many movement idioms and theatrical situations... so many texts...

Perhaps at this point I should pause to distinguish Twyla Tharp’s “raffish, ragpicker jumble of ideas” from Bill T. Jones’, which is starting to sound a bit similar. In Tharp’s work, the diversity of movement and theatrical ideas typically comes to seem like the weather on a particularly unpredictable and fickle day: it’s the stuff to which a person is subject, the varying conditions which in the course of a day or a year one has to live through. A
dancer is subject to all these different impulses; a dancer ends up bumping into other dancers; freedom interrupts order; order interrupts freedom; all are subject to vicissitudes of music, company, and time; but despite all of this, the dancer survives, gets through, gets by, and thus so do we (identifying ourselves with the dancers). Retold in different ways, this typical Tharp story is essentially optimistic.28

Not so with Bill T. Jones, for whom the danger of things gone awry can be palpably more threatening. I’d like to return now to the so-called “Babylonian Discothèque” episode in You Walk?, for it contains a key moment of crisis, one which is replayed on different registers—throughout You Walk?, and in many other of Jones’ works as well. After some complicated, layered group activity, the dancer Toshiko Oiwa is left alone in a down-stage-center light special. She slowly undresses and begins to repeat the Lord’s Prayer in Japanese. After a minute, the other dancers start to filter in; they take their own places on stage, facing forward, and speak as well, each repeating the Lord’s Prayer in a different language. There’s a pause, and then—wham!—the whole company begins to speak again, more loudly, while moving frantically and idiosyncratically. Each in his or her own spot, no one relating to anyone else, all clamoring for our attention—total dissonance.

It’s cacophonous! All of these people speaking simultaneously, moving frantically, wildly: noise and chaos: a moment of crisis recalling the aftermath of the sundering of the Tower of Babel. Out of this crisis, some baroque music starts, the noise quiets down a bit, and the company proceeds onward

28 Exceptions to this Tharpian archetypal optimism are rare; I know only of Bad Smells (1982) and the first act of The Catherine Wheel (1981).
through the narrative line of the dance. The crisis is not so bad: it wasn't the end of the world, it was just a noisy moment.

Moral: it takes work to get along. There's a struggle when each of our personal songs causes some interference with everyone else's song, but eventually things work out. Painful dissonance happens, but so does more peaceable coexistence.

You Walk? is in some ways a study in excess. We can hardly keep track of so many movements or theatrical elements which clamor for our attention. What one is left with, when faced with Jones' immense collage, is an overriding sense of multiplicity and diversity. The program notes posit that

when cultures come in contact with each other, inevitably something dies and something is born.... As in a chemical reaction, this meeting of cultures produces—among many things—a by-product, ephemeral, barely detectable save through the agency of poetry and art. [Jones 2000]

Part of Jones' accomplishment in this piece, I think, is to recognize that the "by-product" in question here is not one thing but many things. Instead of describing a unitary, Hegelian synthesis to finish off his tale of New World Meets Old World, Jones presents us with a giant litter of hybrid offspring.

---

29 Unless, that is, one furiously scribbles notes in one's program throughout the performance, as this critic was forced to do.
CHAPTER 4: ECLECTIC TRAINING

The technical aim is not to do a few or many things spectacularly, but to do whatever is done, well.

—Merce Cunningham
“The Function of a Technique for Dance”

Degrees of authenticity... Fusion vs. eclecticism... Upon reflection, I should say that my interest in these perhaps arcane topics stems from my activities as a dance performer, which is to say as a perpetual student of dance technique. Issues regarding the form, style, provenance, and balance of technical dance training can be of inordinate interest to someone who, to prepare for his roles and maintain his faculties, takes an average of five or six technique classes a week, fifty weeks per year.

The sorts of eclectic choreography which have been described in earlier chapters place very specific demands on the dance performer. In one sense, the imperative to be not just conversant but highly skilled in different dance techniques means that the aspiring performer must learn to negotiate physical imperatives which often seem mutually exclusive. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. Susan Foster notes that even in more traditional training situations, each day presents dance students with “endless new variations on right and wrong. The demands of both the perceived and the
ideal bodies are thus redefined by each teacher with each group of students" (1997:238). Still, these persistent difficulties can intensify for someone following an eclectic training régime.

To clarify this point, I’ll cite a few examples from personal experience. Although the student of capoeira must develop a measure of strength and a sense of solidity in his upper body, while maintaining a constant (almost instinctive) low, crouching stance, these habits play almost no part in—and directly contradict—the lightness, verticality, and length which he endeavors to maintain in his ballet studies. This is not just a theoretical problem; specific instances of interference can and do occur. Practicing capoeira’s multi-unit spinning technique (picture the whole upper body acting like the crank on a wind-up toy) has had only a pernicious effect on my ballet pirouettes; my capoeira kicks and spins have an inappropriate (but indelible) lightness to them, and a recurrent classical tendency to elongate my spine while playing capoeira has earned me the depreciative capoeira nickname “Girafa” (Giraffe).³⁰

During the course of a week’s training, other difficulties appear. The practitioner of contact improvisation learns how to improvise a dance in dialogue with his partner, as in capoeira, but he cultivates an instinctive tendency to lean into his partner and to rely on his sense of touch much more than his eyes—tendencies which can prove disastrously inappropriate in the context of high-speed capoeira play. Going to a Cunningham-style technique

³⁰ Besides these different interferences, harmonies can also develop. I spent the summer of 2000 studying capoeira at a historic academy in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Although it does have a stable technical base, capoeira is an evolving, syncretic form, and after I was observed furtively practicing some ballet-style barre stretches between classes, I noticed that the teacher had incorporated them into his capoeira class the next day. They were, I thought, a good complement to the gung-ho, push-and-pull stretches which the class usually practiced.
class the next day, he works to shape his limbs with a precisely bound flow into forms and motions of geometric clarity, thereby tightening up some of the release he had found in his contact activities the night before. And the Cunningham class can cause some interference with the earlier-mentioned ballet studies, for despite a common technical base for many of the standard movements, ballet's sense of lightness and sequentiality in the upper body does not mesh entirely well with Cunningham's unified, simultaneous attack.

These examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Besides the subjects already mentioned, OSU offers technical training in different release techniques, Limón-based technique, Bharata Natyam, North and South American social dances, yoga, tap and jazz dancing, step dancing, and a few different styles of West African dance. Resources permitting, the curricula of many other dance conservatories and university dance programs around the US are similar in breadth. Learning how to negotiate conflicting technical demands is an inevitable component of formalized dance training in the year 2001.

*   *   *   *   *   *

A key term in the discussion above of different techniques' incompatibility is the word "instinctive." Considering the number of muscles, joints, dynamics, rhythms, and outside events that dancers will need to coordinate, it is often a blessing to be able to bypass deliberative decision-making and rely on one's "instincts": one's "natural propensit[ies] to act, without conscious intention" (OED). Perhaps to the extent that a dancer's technical training is about making choices, about developing versatility—in
Cunningham's words, "to do whatever is done, well"—a diversity of training techniques is a boon. But to the extent that technical training is about instilling *instincts*—patterns of movement so firmly imprinted that the body can respond correctly in an instant—having too many training techniques can be quite problematic.

Twyla Tharp (whose formative training was in an extreme variety of forms) makes this point eloquently in her autobiography, *Push Comes to Shove*. Arriving in New York City and taking ballet classes with Robert Thomas, the young Tharp can't help but compare herself to classmates who have had only strictly classical training. "The movement I struggled to make sense of... Toni [Lander] performed effortlessly. My movements were rational decisions, choices made among thousands; hers were so natural that they seemed like instincts" (1992:48). Referring to her studies in tap, baton, jazz, violin, piano, Graham, Cunningham, Horton, and ballet, Tharp realized at Thomas' studio that "I was suffering from my eclectic training.... I had been given too many options.... To fly straight into an arabesque with no hesitation or to hold the body serenely in balance for eight pirouettes demands a solid, unquestioned technique" (48-49).31

Are these difficulties insurmountable? Only partly. Of course, Tharp never reached the level of integrated, seamless classical dancing that she was ambitiously aiming for. But she found something equally valuable.

I was coming to understand that each of these demands could work together to combine, ultimately, into something more than a patois of isolated techniques, become a new language, capable of saying new

---

31 The phrase "I had been given too many options" is also a useful gloss on Tharp's choreography; as we saw in the last chapter, her work tends to thematicize this very situation of a body with too many choices.
things—or old things in new ways. I was beginning to imagine a special niche for myself, a place in this swirling kaleidoscope of choices. [54]

This “new language” coalescing amidst a “kaleidoscope of choices” became the province of what Tharp describes as the “crossover dancer,” supposed to be “capable of any technique” (54). Susan Foster, developing the same theme, describes the “hired dancer”—“competent at many styles”—as the dancer of choice for many independent, postmodern choreographers.

The new multitalented body resulting from this training melds together features from all of the techniques discussed above: it possesses the strength and flexibility found in ballet necessary to lift the leg high in all directions; it can perform any movement neutrally and pragmatically, as in Cunningham’s technique; it has mastered the athleticism of contact improvisation…it articulates the torso as a Graham dancer does.… [1997:254-55]

The appearance on stage and screen of a multitude of “hired bodies” in the eighties was a hotly debated topic among dance critics. Watching with eagle eye from her perch atop the masthead of The New Yorker, Arlene Croce bemoaned the gradual fading of “those technical and stylistic distinctions among companies which used to be the glory of American modern dance” (1982:366). On the other hand, other dance critics were pleased to note the progressive features of the “hired body.” Elizabeth Dempster, for instance, celebrated the anti-ideological, “deconstructive” features of the “hired body” as follows:

The development of what might be termed the postmodern body is in some senses a deconstructive process, involving a period of detraining
of the dancer's habitual structures and patterns of movement.... The postmodern body is not a fixed, immutable entity, but a living structure which continually adapts and transforms itself. It is a body available to the play of many discourses. Postmodern dance directs attention away from any specific image of the body and towards the process of constructing all bodies. [Dempster 1988:48]

But perhaps Dempster's celebratory account of the "postmodern body" is premature. Although it may "continually adapt and transform itself," its eclectic training may also send it heading towards a homogenized, least-common-denominator manner of dancing. Susan Foster describes the distinct visual impression made by many "postmodern"/"hired" dancers: instead of displaying "its skills as a collage of discreet styles," the hired body often "homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface... a rubbery flexibility coated with impervious glossiness" (255). This isn't entirely as bad as it seems: sleekness and glossiness may actually be required by certain choreographers (one thinks of Donald Byrd and Stephen Petronio). In distinctly eclectic choreography, however, a "collage of discreet styles" is what is called for, and achieving this can be highly challenging.

Again, I will provide an example from my own experience, from Three Bird Songs, a piece which I composed and performed in my graduate concert in February of 2001. I choreographed a sequence which required me (a) to spring from a crouched, hands-on-the-floor capoeira-style rolê turn, immediately into (b) a sudden and brilliant classical pirouette en attitude, which would just as suddenly collapse with an extra turn to leave me (c) standing knock-kneed, facing the audience, already beginning a flowing sequence of

---

32 For a related analysis, see also Janet Wolff (1997).
gentle hand gestures. The technical challenge—not uncommon in an age of eclecticism, but a challenge nonetheless—was to make the transitions into and out of (a), (b), and (c) as abrupt and distinct as possible.

I used a video camera to coach myself. I noticed that during the rôle I would straighten my posture and prepare for the attitude turn too soon, thus making the previous rôle less distinctive than it needed to be. And it was hard to stay in the attitude position for the full amount of time necessary: my back leg would drift down, preemptively preparing for the knock-kneed turn which was to follow. After working to correct these problems, others would appear. Perhaps it would be harder to release my head from its extended line in the attitude pose in time for the gestural material that followed; perhaps, too, the low, bent standing leg of the rôle turn would linger and compromise the attitude turn. The phrase improved with practice, of course, although I suspect that each of the three elements was still missing a bit of its flavor by virtue of being so very close to the others.

The moral of this story was anticipated in Foster’s cautionary words about the “hired body”: “It does not display its skills as a collage of discrete styles but, rather, homogenizes all styles and vocabularies” (1997:255). Another way to say this (switching to a new but equally fitting metaphor) is that dancers struggle mightily to present the sort of sharp juxtapositions which filmmakers can achieve with the simplest of splices or cross-fades, or computer graphics designers with a few cut-and-paste keystrokes. These technologies of reproduction have no real equivalent in the field of dance, however much choreographers may try to mimic them.33 When a dancer sets

---

33 Choreographer Tere O’Connor can be quite deliberate about this mimicry, often asking his dancers to generate certain cinematographic effects. As an example, I’ll paraphrase some of the instructions O’Connor gave during an audition in New York in June, 2001. “This movement should look like when a film projector stutters, and an inch of film
out to accurately reproduce a style, one is reminded of the elaborate
technique of Jorge Luis Borges’ fictional, twentieth-century Frenchman,
Pierre Menard, who chose to copy Cervantes’ Don Quixote with this
inordinately rigorous and impractical method: “to know Spanish well, to re-
embrace the Catholic faith, to fight against Moors and Turks, to forget
European history between 1602 and 1918, and to be Miguel de Cervantes”
(Borges 1962:49).

Learning another dance technique well often requires the same sort of
imaginative labors that a Belle Époque French writer would need to recreate a
seventeenth-century Spanish text without actually looking at it. Imitating
movements and shapes is usually just the first step; it must be accompanied
by studying and internalizing elaborate anatomical, functional, and
expressive metaphorical systems which color and give meaning to that
movement.  

gets played again and again.” “You start to fall in this direction, and then suddenly your
arms pull you in another direction and you’re twisted like this—just like a badly-edited
film, where there’s no continuity between cuts.” See also Jones (1995).

34 An intricate and interesting question, worth exploring at length, would be the
extent to which different techniques’ “metaphorical systems” are compatible or not. Earlier
in this chapter I cited certain consonances and dissonances between capoeira, ballet, contact
improvisation, and Cunningham technique. This was, however, just a beginning.

What about the properties of other techniques when combined in a dancer’s
body?—say Horton, Nikolais, Hawkins, Dunham, Taylor, Fosse, Skinner releasing,
Duncan, Wigman, Bartenieff, authentic movement, Action Theater, Body-Mind Centering,
tango, Butoh, Irish step dancing, breakdancing, Chinese Opera, and so very many others?
What bugs develop when these different programs are downloaded into a dancer’s body and
mind? This question would have to be answered on a case-by-case (and year-by-year) basis.
Moreover, as Melanie Bales argues (in a forthcoming book), the answer depends very much
on a dancer’s agency, the way in which they choose to process these downloads.

Certain choreographer-teachers take the matter of eclectic training and
compatibility quite personally. Witness George Balanchine’s wrath at his protégée, Gelsey
Kirkland, for taking classes with another teacher. “Regardless of my improvement, Mr. B
would never forgive me not returning to his class, for allowing someone else to have a hand
in my career and my education” (Kirkland and Lawrence 1986:71). Witness, too, Merce
Cunningham’s experiences when he was dancing with Graham’s company: “I always had
the sense when I was with Graham that it was very confined... It changed later, I’m sure,
but at this time, it was closed, as were the other modern dance groups, like Doris
Again, Foster’s work is quite informative, and I ask the reader’s indulgence for quoting her at length.

With repetition, the images used to describe the body and its action become the body. Metaphors that are inapplicable or incomprehensible when first presented take on a concrete reality over time, through their persistent association with a given movement....

... Each dance technique constructs a specialized and specific body, one that represents a given choreographer’s or tradition’s aesthetic vision of dance.... Training not only constructs a body but also helps to fashion an expressive self that, in its relation with the body, performs the dance....

... The modernist approach to dancemaking, even as it promoted the body’s movement as material substance to be worked into art, assumed an irrevocable connection to a self... [1997:239, 241, 256]

When described this way, dance training can be understood as more than just establishing the strength, flexibility and coordination necessary for the body to perform a set vocabulary of movements. Any given technique will also carry with it a subtext, an epistemology, an ideology, an operating system, a philosophy, a somatic paradigm, what have you.

Let’s recall a famous modernist statement. The inner “law” which governs the “outer aspects” of the dancer’s life is, according to Martha Graham’s puritanically austere—but truer-than-she-realized—words:

Humphrey’s. It was simply assumed that you had nothing to do with anything else” (1985:45).
“Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul’s weather to all who can read it” (1991:4).

I admit that when I first read Foster’s “Dancing Bodies,” a few years after I had started dancing, the experience was revelatory, a thrilling evocation of the unstated content implicit in so many half-familiar dance practices. The sensation of unveiling that it produced was an echo of what certain other favorite texts of poststructuralist cultural criticism had produced—Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

The distant echo with Foucault is worth following, I think. Foster cites his model as an inspiration for her work (1997:236). Indeed, Foster’s description of the “self” created through a student’s articulation to a dance technique (and the “soul” which is revealed to Graham via movement) is highly evocative of Foucault’s descriptions of the “subject” which is created through so many workings of sundry disciplinary techniques.

Many of the dozens of disciplinary strategies and practices that Foucault delineates in *Discipline and Punish* are applicable to the principles of dance training. (A point-by-point comparison would be quite involved, and lies outside of the scope of this essay.) Classical ballet training almost seems the example *par excellence* of a consistent body of disciplinary techniques: developed concurrently to many of the historical developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that Foucault describes, the question in each case is “not of treating the body, en masse, ‘wholesale,’ as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it ‘retail,’ individually” (Foucault 1979:137). Not all of classical ballet training’s many hybrid offspring and relatives (read: all of the dance techniques mentioned in this chapter) work in exactly the
same ways, but all inevitably seem to share the axiomatic feature that, "although they involved obedience to others, [they have] as their principle aim an increase of the mastery of each individual over his own body" (ibid.).

If we return our attention to the phenomenon of eclectic dance training, we may speculate as to what new inflections it may have wrought on disciplinary practices and effects. In some—perhaps most—cases, we will see an intensification of disciplinary effects. The traditional American triumvirate of "ballet, tap, and jazz" classes teach youngsters to be highly attentive to the spatial, rhythmic, and presentational/performative character, respectively, of all of their movements.

A possibility that sparks my interest, however, is the extent to which disciplinary techniques can be lessened (or short-circuited) when they are juxtaposed in a single body and mind. Recall Twyla Tharp's complaint that her training left her with "too many choices." Engaging in a regime of dance training is for most people a relatively voluntary choice, which often places one against the grain of many (but not all) social and especially economic imperatives. In this situation, one generally want this "voluntary" sort of discipline to work, and one gets frustrated when one encounters difficulties: obstacles in one's body and mind, interference, mute forms of resistance. In the context of Foucault's terrifying book, on the other hand, these rare appearances of obstacles to the constant encroachment of disciplinary subjection are highly desirable.

The question we're left with after all of this—and this is an issue which will be inflected on each dancer's mind and body in different ways—is whether experiencing the challenges and confusion of eclectic training may
provide us with any recyclable tools suitable for resisting Foucauldian discipline in other realms of our lives.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Jones, Bill T. 2000. Program Notes for You Walk? Performed at the Wexner Center, Ohio State University, Columbus Ohio. 21 Apr.


Schwedener, Peter. 2001. “We Are All Bohemians Now.” The American Scholar 70.2 (Spring): 103-110.


