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Collecting to the Core -- Dance

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Collecting to the Core — Dance

by **Susan L. Wiesner** (Visiting Scholar, University of Virginia; ACLS Digital Innovation Fellow; Dance Subject Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <slywiesner@gmail.com>

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

Dance is a fairly new academic discipline, and by academic I mean included, nay, respected, in higher education. Historically, courses taught at the college and university level in dance were not necessarily "scholarly" courses, but rather focused on the technique learned in the dance studio. In many instances, dance courses were (and at some institutions still are) designated as physical education courses. At other institutions dance is closely linked with music or drama. Rare was the stand-alone dance department replete with an academic major. The historical bias against dance as its own discipline can be seen in the classification of dance books in both the **Library of Congress Classification (LCC)** and **Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC)** systems: **DDC** lists dance under the number class 700 (the Arts), subclassification 793 (technically Indoor Games and Amusements, although some libraries list the class heading as Performing Arts in the catalog); **LCC** classifies dance under the heading of Recreation in the general class G, subclass GV, with the specific classification Dancing found at GV1580 – GV1799.4.

The focus on studio, conservatory, and tutelage naturally reduced the amount of scholarly dance texts produced over the early and mid-twentieth century, as so few were required. What texts were published were primarily dictionaries of technical terms, books providing dramaturgical elements of dances, encyclopedias with biographical sketches, some compilations of criticism, and a few autobiographies. In the late twentieth century, however, university programs in dance began to expand, adding courses in history, aesthetics, somatics, and other theoretical constructs. Along with that scholarly expansion came an increase in published texts, mostly anthologies, which addressed the theoretical questions posed by academics, choreographers, and dancers.¹ Chapters about dance can also be found in other disciplines' anthologies (e.g., drama, sports medicine, sociology). However, this material is often essentially hidden, as library catalogs do not always include

detailed information on content at the chapter level. Further, and not to denigrate catalogers in any way, the classification of dance texts can be confusing, thus resulting in inconsistencies in call numbers. For example, books containing collections of a critic's writings can be found in call numbers relating to history, theory, a specific genre, etc. These collections are rarely shelved together within a delineated group of call numbers. My own experience had me (along with a helpful cataloging colleague) searching for an appropriate **LCC** classification, only to find that what we thought was correct — GV1600, Dance criticism, appreciation — wasn't. This classification regards books *about* criticism, not books *of* criticism. For a brief overview of the dizzying possibilities for locating dance in the library classification scheme, check out the **SUNY** at Potsdam LibGuide for dance, where you can see dance included in religion, music, circuses, pre-colombian history, Mexican history, psychology, visual arts, physiology, theatre design, and photography.²

Despite the classification and discovery challenges posed by dance publications, the silver lining in all of this is that dance is inherently interdisciplinary and is very much a leader in the increasing academic interest in multidisciplinary scholarship and instruction. As such, while dance anthologies may be necessary for the economic realities of academic publishing, they also embody the multiplicity of approaches to studying and writing about dance. One late-twentieth century anthology is an example of a text that includes the contributions of many and has remained relevant since its initial publication nearly thirty years ago: *What Is Dance?* edited by **Roger Copeland** and **Marshall Cohen**.³

This book, published in 1983, is a collection of essays written by historians, critics, dancers, theorists, philosophers, and scholars. It contains treatises categorized by the editors as being about the question of dance, the medium of dance, dance's relation to other arts, dance as language, discussion of genre and style, dance criticism, notation systems, and dance and society. The authors of these texts are not all contemporary, and are a veritable who's who of dance personages, including: **Jean Georges Noverre**, **Theophile Gautier**, **Isadora Duncan**, **Lincoln Kirstein**, **John Martin**, **Suzanne Langer**, **Roland Barthes**, **Edwin Denby**, **Deborah Jowitz**, **Joann Kalliinohomoku**, and **Selma Jean Cohen**. Yet it is not just the notable authors and the breadth of topics that make this tome so special and essential. The thought-provok-

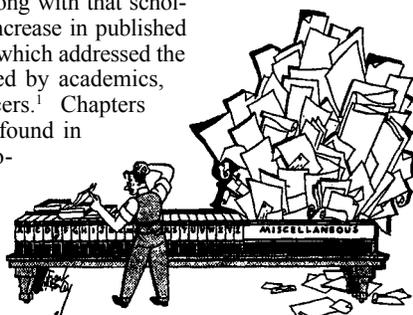
ing content keeps one coming back to it over and over, as my dog-eared, loose-paged copy can attest. So, what is in this book? Here are some excerpts from the pages I've highlighted, underlined, commented on, Post-it noted, and replaced.

Philosopher **Suzanne Langer's** two essays, "Virtual Powers" and "Magic Circle," discuss dance's "primary illusion" and dance as symbolic expression and gesture. She considers gesture a basic tenet of dance across genres and styles, as sign/signal and symbol. Expression is examined as imagined feeling versus emotional expression, and **Langer** notes that emotion is considered by some to be the soul of dance, especially modern dance. She refers to ancient dance, **Russian Ballet**, **Pavlova**, and **German modern** dance doyenne **Mary Wigman**. In addressing the overarching question posed by the book's title, **Langer** concludes that "its space is plastic, its time is musical, its themes are fantasy, its actions symbolic. This accounts, I think, for the many different notions which dancers and aestheticians have held as to what is the essence of dance" (ibid., p. 44). As a counterpoint, in "Why Philosophy Neglects the Dance," **Francis Sparshott** argues that "there has not yet been any available basis for a philosophy of dance" and, therefore, the question cannot be answered by philosophers, who can "only explain it" (p. 102).

In a diachronic study of the "Idea of the Dance," **André Levinson** also considers emotion as a theme when he notes **Noverre's** belief that "ballet becomes a 'living tableau of the emotions, customs, and manners of all the peoples of the world'" (p. 51). But he also notes that **Noverre**, the father of *ballet d'action*, refuted himself in later years when he stated that dance "is no more than the art of forming patterns with grace, precision, and facility, to the rhythm and beat of the music" (p. 51). While some authors in *What Is Dance?* may agree with **Noverre's** and **Sparshott's** more cynical views, many embrace the ideas of emotion and gesture.

In the section on "Language, Notation, and Identity," British philosopher **Robin G. Collingwood** delves into a discussion of dance as the physical manifestation of an "original" language. He argues that "every kind or order of language (speech, gesture, and so forth) was an offshoot from an original language of total bodily gesture," and furthermore, "this 'original' language of total bodily gesture is thus the one and only real language, which everybody who is in any way expressing himself is using all the time" (p. 375). In his article "Art as Language," **Joseph Margolis** disagrees, noting that there are "indisputable features of a genuine language" and that the individuality of art works conflicts with the necessity of language to have a stable vocabulary (p. 377). Interestingly, **Margolis**

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often refers to the work of other authors included in the book, which offers a nice full-circle reading and the opportunity to synthesize the individual texts within the work as a whole. The essays in the "Dance and Other Arts" section also present a wide-ranging scope, from **Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk**, in which all of the arts have equal value and together create a "whole," to the works of **Martha Graham**, who created a full theatrical experience including sculpture, music, dance, and costume. It also covers the pitfalls of using the music of great composers like **Beethoven** and **Mozart** and the ballet scenes portrayed famously in the art works of **Edgar Degas**.

Although some might complain that some of the essays, specifically those of the aestheticians/philosophers, are not easily read by undergraduates, *What Is Dance?* offers a bit of something for everyone, no matter their level of study. General populations such as students taking introductory courses in dance appreciation can glean knowledge of the dances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by reading the criticism of **Gautier**, **Denby**, **Croce**, and **Jowitz**. Upper-level students can delve into the anthropological and historical treatises. And graduate students can delight in the texts by philosophers **Langer**, **Barthes**, **Margolis**, and **Sparshott**. With such a variety of topics and with such a diversity of voices and opinions, **Copeland** and **Cohen's** *What Is Dance?* remains a standard for academic libraries. 🍷

Endnotes

1. Even with the rise in theoretical courses, due to the small number of dance scholars and seemingly publishers' profit motives, anthologies were more likely to be published than scholarly monographs. The monographs that have been published focus more on interdisciplinary, theoretical approaches (e.g., queer theory, cultural theory, history, literary theory, ethnography, etc.) and monographs on one dance are very rare, though one example of note is **Janet Lansdale's** *The Struggle with the Angel*, published by Dance Books, Inc. in 2007.
2. **SUNY Potsdam LibGuide**. Online at: <http://potsdam.libguides.com/dance>. Accessed Jan. 21, 2012.
3. **Copeland, Roger** and **Marshall Cohen**, eds. *What is Dance?* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983.*

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Rumors from page 47

Remaining in the Brit area for a few more minutes, was talking to one of my favorites **Liz Chapman** about **miniature books**. Did you know that **Liz** collects them? She says that she began collecting them as a child and continues to this day.

And this is a bigger book! **Donna Jacobs** tells me that her Arcadia book on **Charleston's West Ashley neighborhood** is coming out at the end of April!



Pictured here are photos of **Audrey Powers'** granddaughter, **Erika**. Isn't she a cutie?

I am planning to attend the launch party! Running out of room. See y'all online or in June! **Yr. Ed.** 🍷