

"IT'S ALL A QUESTION OF IDENTITY" (GERTRUDE STEIN)

by
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What is the recipe for a great dance company — or even a very good one? With at least five Israeli dance companies of sufficient stature to tour abroad (not counting our many folklore groups!), this question is worth considering.

Instead of engaging in laborious theories and justifications, I would like to take a pragmatic approach — that is, pick a bunch of dance companies that are all generally acknowledged to be first rate, and see what, if anything, they have in common. Here is a list of 18 companies, all of which have generated much interested critical comment and good box office sales during this century. (Israel has been deliberately omitted in making up this list.)

1. The Martha Graham Company
2. The Merce Cunningham Company
3. The Alwin Nikolais Company
4. The New York City Ballet of George Balanchine
5. The Joffrey Ballet with chief choreographer Gerald Arpino
6. John Cranko's Stuttgart Ballet
7. Jiri Kylian's Netherlands Dans Theater
8. Twyla Tharp's Company
9. The José Limon Company
10. Robert Cohan's London Contemporary Dance Company
11. Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the 20th Century
12. The Royal Danish Ballet
13. The Bolshoi Ballet
14. The Kirov Ballet
15. The British Royal Ballet
16. The American Ballet Theater
17. The Rambert Ballet
18. Diaghilev's Ballets Russes

Now, 11 of the 18 companies have the word "ballet" in the title. But only in five cases (12, 13, 14, 15 and 16), does this mean that traditional classics are performed, and only the two Russian companies exclusively do works in this genre. As a matter of fact, while today's dance audiences find interest in 19th century ballets like "Giselle" and "Swan Lake", they also enjoy psychological revelations like those in Martha Graham's "Clytemnestra", design and light shows by Alwin Nikolais, and experiments in motion,

structure and video by Twyla Tharp and Merce Cunningham, among other forms.

Therefore the common element that they (and we) seek in a good dance company is not a familiar repertory or a single style. Nor is there any less variety in these companies' approach to production. For example, the New York City Ballet stages "Agon" (Balanchine — Stravinsky) on a bare stage, and costumes the dancers in tights and leotards; while the Joffrey Ballet assembles lavish sets and costumes for a revival of "Petrouchka" (Fokine — Stravinsky). Therefore the answer does not lie in elaborate, expensive show pieces.

Well, what about performers? Maybe the key to a good company is virtuoso compelling soloists backed up by fine ensembles. And certainly all these companies present well-rehearsed, capable professional dancers — brilliant stars among them. But if this were the main attraction, you should be familiar with the featured dancers of most famous companies. While you can probably name a number of them, go through the list of 18 again and see just how often dazzling stars leap into memory. Not so many, right? But wait a minute — each company does call to mind one or more famous names. However, while many of them were dancers at one time — or still are — that is not the main reason for their fame. Rather they are known for creating choreography either personally or through their artistic policy by encouraging others to do so. It is in this way that they mold the character of their dance company — and are the key to its greatness.

This then is the common element we have been seeking. Every outstanding dance company is identified with one or more good resident choreographers. Because as surely as an individual dancer awakens interest by projecting a specific image — stemming from body shape and facial expressions, level of technical ability in a given school and interpretive sensitivity — so a company achieves validity by expressing a unique personality. A dance company starts out as an assemblage of more or less skilled individual artists. Gradually the group is turned into something more than the sum of its parts by a strong choreographic guide. A great company always reveals a distinctive character, an overall style

shaped to a large extent by its repertory, which in turn reflects the artistic vision of a choreographer.

The point is obvious, and the key name is mentioned in numbers 1 through 11. But it is equally true of the others in an early, less venerable stage of their existence. Their history, in fact, is what led me to the conclusion which I contrived to reach with you through the above paragraphs. In tracing the growth and development of ballet and western theatre dance in general, I was struck by the way great companies reached their peak through a chief choreographer who imprinted his style on the company.

The Royal Danish Ballet had its court beginnings in the 16th century. But it was not until 300 years later that it became the great company it is now, through the repertory that August Bournonville fashioned for it in the mid-19th century.

The great Russian companies, Kirov and Bolshoi, had both been in existence for over 100 years before their rise to world prominence, largely through Marius Petipa's choreography from 1860 on. (In the case of the Bolshoi, the choreographer Gorsky was important, but he is not well-known outside of the Soviet Union.)

Frederick Ashton's repertory was responsible for the present character of the English Royal Ballet, with the secondary influence of director Ninette de Valois's dramatic output.

The theatrical style of the American Ballet Theater was launched jointly by choreographers Anthony Tudor, Jerome Robbins and Agnes de Mille.

No works were created directly by either Marie Rambert or Sergei Diaghilev, but they both had a hand in shaping the choreographer they chose and sponsored. Fokine's choreography marked the Ballets Russes through its most exciting early years, and Rambert's company was imprinted first with Tudor's mark and more recently, Christopher Bruce's.

Of course, once these companies became established and secure in their identities, they could branch out and mount productions in a variety of styles. Note however that this

is always a risk, when an artistic director ventures into styles that are not "natural" to his company.

Which brings us finally to Israel, where we are faced with an embarrassment of riches — a lot of unfocussed talent residing in many companies which are unfortunately difficult

to distinguish from one another. Even the ballet company shares a common pool of performing talent with the modern groups, with the same dancer turning up within a few seasons in several different companies. More serious is the fact that artistic policies are almost interchangeable, with all the repertories representing a *mélange* of contemporary styles — dramatic, abstract, and representational choreography in modern, classic and point, jazz and folklore techniques.

Inbal, the Israeli company that started out in 1950 with a clear identity based on Sara Levi-Tanai's Yemenite works, became steadily weaker as it lost its central line. Batsheva also started out (in 1963) with a strong character — a dramatic energy stamped with Martha Graham's emotional repertory. The more it wandered along other paths, the less satisfactory were the results. The new artistic advisor Robert Cohan says that he intends to "shape the identity of the company" and this is undoubtedly the right approach. Although Bat-Dor, the Kibbutz Company, the Israeli Ballet, and others have presented occasional excellent performances, they would all be greatly improved if they adopted a clear artistic policy with the help of a good resident choreographer.

In conclusion, I call your attention to Eugene Ormandy's remarks on handing over his 44-year post as music director of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra to a conductor who will divide his time between Philadelphia and other posts in London and Florence. "These jet-set conductors," he said, "they jump from one place to another. At the end they don't have their own children, their musical children. I belong to the school where you are married to only one orchestra and you live with it 24 hours a day."

Insofar as a dance company is an orchestra of human instruments, these words should be taken very seriously by the leaders of the Israeli dance world. □