

# A FEW THINGS A CHOREOGRAPHER SHOULD'N'T DO

by Giora Manor

There are no recipes in art, as there are in cooking or science. In theory one may learn from experience — one's own or of others — but, unfortunately only post factum, after you've had it (post fucktum?) Or as the English say: "Experience is a book everybody writes, nobody reads." Nevertheless, the drawing of conclusions is perhaps the only profitable aspect of art criticism.

It is much more difficult to state positive laws than to devise maxims about what not to do. That is the reason this article is mostly about the "don'ts", without wishing to be negative in any way.

## Less is More

Paradoxically, a surfeit of imagination is no less dangerous than the paucity of inventive fantasy. A choreographer who is able to invent movement at the drop of a plié risks creating a lot of formless and meaningless steps. One move pursues another without forming a structure, with no rhyme or reason, material piling on material, with no recurrence of theme as variations or Leitmotiv. Movement material surfaces and disappears without trace, is therefore hardly noticeable and the result is an amorphous, shapeless dance. Macbeth: A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. . .

## And Now To the Left, Please

If in doubt what to do, do nothing, is another old but true saw. You just finished setting a nice, coherent enchainment. You like what you did, the dancers look good in it. Everything is fine. But what now? The dancers are looking at you, expecting the next instructions. But nothing comes to your mind. Rather than admitting that you were at a loss, you say: "Excellent, now do to the left what we just did to the right." A real good solution of genius. But a dangerous one. Because, as the Jewish-Polish poet Julian Tuwim said: "Symmetry is the aesthetics of idiots."

It is better to go home and think out how to continue, than to turn the other cheek. The choreographer isn't god and nobody expects him to hold a cornucopia of brilliant, instant ideas in his palm, (or wherever one holds that horn of plenty.)

Only a real fool is afraid of admitting he does not know something in order not to show himself as foolish. Charisma is very nice in a choreographer but can't be produced at will.

## A Group Isn't a Xeroxed Solo

To avoid the above described embarrassing situation, conscientious choreographers prepare their material at home, before a mirror. Often what they provide is a solo, which suits their own body, looks good on them. Later, when they confront the eager, expectant dancers in the studio, they transfer this home-brewed solo to the group. In fact they xerox their solo. But such a duplication does not create a group-dance, which requires a different approach, based on diversity, on opposite or contrasting elements, on creating a chord. It is the nature of a solo that the chromatic chords it might contain are played as an arpeggio, the chord being consecutive, lateral, rather than vertical, synchronic.

## The Amoeba Movement

The amoeba is a very nice protozoa. When observed under the microscope, it constantly changes form and ambles along without any apparent goal. But as a dancer it is rather boring, because its movement lacks rhyme or reason and it never stops to rest. It is the personification of movement per se. Afraid of boredom, many choreographers keep their dancers constantly on the move. They imagine that if they shift the dancers relentlessly from one point to another they generate interest. But a moveable bore is as boring as a stationary one. A bore is a bore, is a bore. In dancing, one needs the courage to stand still when no movement is

required. The peripatetic amoeba lacks form and does not create amusement nor carry symbolic meaning.

## Contagious Movement

A common variety of the amoeba-movement is contagious motion. What I mean is a movement one dancer starts which then spreads like a contagious disease to the rest of the group. For example, one gets into a beautiful arabesque or someone starts scratching his/her head, (depending whether we are dealing with ballet or post-modern. . .), slowly more dancers follow suit, till everybody arabesques or scratches. Then somebody slowly glides to the floor and soon enough all the dancers are prone. This procedure helps filling the time provided by the musical accompaniment, as it takes time for the move to permeate the whole group. Such a spreading of movement may be effective at times, but in general is as meaningless as the amoeba. Usually the method of infectious movement serves to hide a deplorable lack of meaning and is an indicator showing that the choreographer has very little to communicate.

## Mickeymousing

Music is a very potent factor. As most dancing is done to some sort of music, it often becomes the dominant partner. The sounds and rhythms make, as it were, the choreographer to follow suit, to dance to the piper's tune. The result often is the matching of each sound to a movement. (On such a 1:1 ratio of music and dance a whole theory of so-called 'music interpretation' was built, for example by Ruth St. Denis.) It's most extreme expression is to be found in Mickeymouse cartoons, where each Wham!!! is accompanied by a blow and every glissando by a slide. Hence the term Mickeymousing. When the movement becomes a servile lackey to the music, one of both is superfluous, redundant. Of course the composer may become a convenient guide to the choreographer by providing him with a ready-made structure to graft the dance on to, freeing him from the ominous task of creating in a vacuum. But only a variable relationship between the dance and the music, a certain friction between the two complementary art-forms will create a meaningful partnership of equals.

## The Dance Ends Before the Music Does

Movement is an extremely quick and expedient medium. Perhaps that is the reason dance is so full of repetitions. Often the choreographer runs out of ideas before the music comes to an end. He feels he has no choice but to go on. So

he repeats a section or goes on to create something which wasn't in the original plan at all, in order not to finish before the composer has. What is necessary is a bold decision either to change the music or to stop the dance and let the sound come to its conclusion by itself.

Such a solution is not always bad. For example, one of the most moving and impressive endings I know occurs in Jiri Kylian's "Psalm Symphony" to the music of Stravinsky, when the dancers slowly disappear in the dark void up-stage and the music goes on, soaring, giving the impression the human figures recede into space. Kylian told me he was afraid the audience would not wait with the applause till the last chord, but it always has. He left the stage empty and thus achieved a marvellous finale.

## The One-Idea Dance

Suddenly a brilliant idea strikes. A strong, lucid image fills the choreographer's heart with joy. He has had an inspiration, hallelujah! And he proceeds to create a dance from that germ. This phenomenon is most often evident in poetry. The first line or two are a revelation, but from that point on you feel the strain of continuation without inspiration. The show has to go on, (why?) If you don't have at least three ideas, you don't have material for a work of art. Two should theoretically suffice, as you may then build an A—B—A structure, but in reality that is not quite enough. It is tantamount to writing a cheque for the whole amount in your account. You may just get away with it, but it is not safe. You have to have more in the kitty than you wish to spend. Otherwise you are prone to repetition, to running out of material before the music stops, to the vice of reversing directions instead of progressing and all the other dangers listed above.

Everyone has seen a dance which starts with a striking image and ends with another brilliant idea, but between that it is a typical 2-idea dance.

I am aware that none of the pitfalls described above are unknown or discoveries. It all boils down to the two basics of art: structure and opposites. That is an old truth, but perhaps it is useful to reiterate it from time to time. □