

# FROM MICHAELANGELO TO MARTHA GRAHAM

by Giora Manor

Several years ago — nine in fact — I met *Moshe Kedem* (called Moussa — which is the Arabic form of Moses — by everyone) walking on the lawns of Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, to where the American Dance Festival had just moved from Bennington. He was talking to Ethel Winter about Martha Graham. Later, at lunch he explained to me, that he was researching the connection between the Mannerist painters and sculptors of the 16th century in Italy and modern dance. I found the idea very original, if not to say *outrée*.

Several years passed until one day I met him in Tel Aviv. Under his arm he was carrying a heavy tome in a black binding: his doctoral thesis, the result of his research.

Being involved in both research and journalism makes one wary of doctoral theses. The sheer bulk of most of these works by would-be doctors of philosophy is suspicious. How could anyone have so much to say? No one, of course, but there is an endless supply of books and learned articles to quote from, on the rather tenuous premise, that once something has been printed, it becomes proven truth. So go forth, dance-historian, and quote! Or as the Viennese comedian Roda Roda once put it so succinctly: copying from one book is plagiarism; copying from two books a student's essay; from three books, a doctoral thesis and quotations from four books constitutes the work of a fifth sage... (After all, Albert Einstein's epoch-making thesis were 4 meager pages.)

So, when Moshe Kedem (by now) a lecturer in the dance department at Flinders University of South Australia produced his thesis, I was rather apprehensive.

Dance has often been explained in terms of pictures, lines and composition of colour. The affinity is obvious. Choreography is best defined as moving sculpture.

But Kedem, a former dancer of "Inbal Dance Theatre" in Israel and later studying and running his own dance company first in Mexico and later in Australia, discovered a striking phenomenon, linking modern dance to the Renaissance, a link which isn't only an academic curiosity and

intellectual exercise, but one which provides a new analytical tool as well as a novel insight into the stylistic and aesthetical appreciation of modern dance.

Usually the relationship between choreography and the visual arts is described on a contemporary basis, as the influence of designers on production, such as the collaboration of Benois, Bakst and later Picasso, with Diaghilev, or Martha Graham and Noguchi. Or when designers and visual artists themselves turn to choreography, as in the case of Oskar Schlemmer and his Bauhaus dances.

Kedem is analysing movement, not stage-sets or costumes and thus is concerned with dance and the dancer's body itself, an aspect which makes his research as relevant as possible.

His treatise is intitled "*Manerism and Dance*" and it deals with the late-Renaissance period in Italy and juxtaposes the visual devices used by the Mannerist artists to those found in the work of modern dance choreographers. The term "Mannerism" itself requires definition, as it carries several meanings. It is often used as a derogatory description of artificial behaviour or "mannered" style, which leads to a certain 'kitchy,' 'overdone' feeling.

But Mannerism in its historical meaning is an entirely different matter.

According to the "Encyclopedia Britanica" ("Mannerism", vol. VI. p. 572) it is "a term describing the deliberate tenseness, subjectivity, and insistence on clever artifice that pervaded much of European art for the greater part of the 16th century in the wake of High Renaissance rational objectivity... Mannerism demanded a continuous refinement of form and thought, pushing the possibilities for exaggeration and conflict to their furthest limit."

One may perhaps discern the stirrings of Mannerist approach already in the work of Michelangelo (1475–1564). The artistic means he and later artists developed may be broken down to several devices, such as the *Figura Serpentinata*, *Contraposto* or *Sprezzatura*. Exactly those means and

devices which Kedem found in the work of modern choreographers.

Looking for means to express ideals opposed to the classical notions of harmony, repose and tranquility, the Mannerist artists arrived at distortion, expressed in the elongation of the human body and of depicting it in undulating, serpentine forms — the serpentine figure — which when examined closely brings to mind the *contraction* of the abdomen, which became (rightly or wrongly) the hall-mark of the school of Martha Graham and her disciples. The *contraposto*, twisting the body into a screw-like position, with limbs (as well as the head) turned in opposing directions, is another Mannerist device typical of modern dance.

As Kedem puts it:

...in *contraposto* the parts of the body were arranged asymmetrically, so that the turn of the head opposed that of the hips, one leg was weight-bearing while the other was free and flexed, all asymmetries being reconciled in a final balance.

The *contraposto* lends the human figure a certain ambiguity, apart from creating torque, tension and excitement. This again is a phenomenon frequently found in modern dance.

(Of course the spiral and the twisted column became prominent features of Baroque art and architecture in the era following the time of Mannerism.)

To seek harmony on a higher level through the use of disharmony, the stretching of reality beyond naturalism, which the Mannerist artists of the 16th century achieved by the use of nonrealistic colouring, is surely the most basic tenet of most of modern art, of Expressionism in all its manifestations.

Perhaps one should regard Michaelangelo and the Mannerists as the forerunners of Expressionism. Modern dance as part of the development of Western culture is to be best understood in its relation to Expressionism in all its manifestations, an aspect often ignored by dance-historians, who tend to present dance history as an isolated phenomenon existing in limbo, in a peculiar sort of “splendid isolation”. Moshe Kedem’s research links modern dance to other art disciplines as well as to developments which took place centuries ago, thus illuminating until now unexplored avenues.

Kedem does not deal with the early stages of the modern dance movement, when the free-flowing movement, liberated from the rigid rules of ballet was the cardinal aim of such

creators as Duncan, her contemporaries and followers, but rather examines the later ‘classic’ period, that of Graham or Humphrey, when a new emphasis on virtuosity led to re-establishment of systematical technique.

Kedem writes:

In our time the bending of the knees is in use in many ethnic or folk dances. In modern dance it is most pronounced in the Graham method. [...] Of all movements and positions seen in dances of great motor variation the ‘stretta’ lends itself to discussion here for its conceptual and practical similarity to the Mannerists’ notion of the ‘sprezzatura’.

It could be said that these qualities have probably rested with man since time immemorial. It is not only part of his cultivated evolution, as in the Cortegiano, but also part of his natural behaviour, since man has always striven to achieve the impossible.

These displays of egotisms and narcissism in virtuosity are constituents of all harmonious dances, in the same manner that the concept of ‘sprezzatura’ is applied in Mannerism as a whole. Thus the mannerist artist shares a common approach with the dancers.

The variety of movements in the ‘stretta’ is great but, “...there are two principal types of movement which stand out with impressive clarity and which separate... sexes, peoples, races and personalities. These are... the “expanded movement” and the “close movement.”

The ‘stretta’ is “the intoxicating development of speed in the course of the dance, the increase of gesture from quiet and reserve at the beginning to the most reckless abandon”.

[The quote is from Curt Sachs: “World History of the Dance”; pp. 25–26.]

‘Sprezzatura’ is a word invented by Castiglione in the ‘Cortegiano’ (1528): “...for the courtly grace revealed in the effortless resolution of all difficulties – Sprezzatura... is that kind of well-bred negligence born of complete self-possession that Van Dyck and Gainsborough not accidentally divined in the English gentlemen – this term was used with enthusiasm by Dolce for works of art. As with ‘facility’ the opposite vice is the visible application of too much effort or any sense of strain in the performance. [quote from: John Shearman: “Mannerism” (1967) p. 21–22.

Similarities between the ‘Stretta’ and the ‘Sprezzatura’ are seen in the fact that to be able to execute the ‘stretta’ (display ‘sprezzatura’) the artist-dancer must be well in control of his body and his craft. Hence the element of ‘facility’ or ‘negligence’ in the sense that Castiglione, Van Dyck, Gainsborough and Sachs understood and described

with admiration, appears as the principle shared in both forms of art. It is thus tempting to coin a new name, 'strezzatura', for the combination of these two conceptual terms.

Surprisingly enough, Kedem finds Mannerist aspects even in Laura Dean's "Stamping Dance".

In relating these characteristics of Mannerism to Dean's dance, it seems that her use of them is unconscious. It is unlikely she knew of these Mannerist notions or used them as such. At the same time it is apparent that the concepts of complexity and difficulty for their own sake, started in the visual arts in Mannerist and inherited not only by Modern dance and Modern art, are in use in all the visual and performing arts today.

Dean's 'Stamping Dance' corresponds also to a notion mentioned previously in his study in the comparison between Primal and 'Disco' dancing. The statement suggests that although our dancing movements and those of primal man may look similar, they differ in approach and intent. The 'primal' Disco dancer has divorced himself and his dance from the content with which primal man endowed his, especially those with religious connotations. Yet modern man used some of the same forms and movements in socializing, and for the sheer capricious play with rhythms. This type of caprice is seen also in Dean's other choreographic inventions. These are: 'Circle Dance', 1972; 'Changing Pattern Steady Pulse', 1973; 'Jumping Dance,' 1973; 'Spinning Dance', 1973: Correspondingly it was common for Mannerist artists to adapt artistic forms of compositional devices, originally invented with expressive functions, and to use them in a non-functional way, capriciously. [quote from Shearman, op. cit.] In conclusion, the 'Stamping Dance', supposedly an expression of post-modern dance and representative of the second or third 'revolutions' in twentieth century dance, is fundamentally a return to Primalism besides being an unconscious display of the Mannerist's outlook in concept, form and design.

This seems to me to stretch a point too far, as is often the case, when a researcher discovers a parallel or similarity in far apart epochs. He feels compelled to pursue the affinity beyond the actual evidence to some quasi logical extreme, to prove the universal applicability of his newly found analogy to the point of distortion of historical truth.

It is, of course, equally erroneous to expect that the re-occurrence of style-elements constitutes a causal chain because of historical parallels. While Mannerism in the later Renaissance led to Baroque, which may be seen as a further linear development of the means discovered and perfected by the Mannerists, post modern dance was in fact a result of reaction and opposition to the mainstream modern dance movement, leading to the rejection of *sprezzatura*, to

simplicity and the use of everyday, naturalistic movement. But that does not make Kedem's analysis less valid, it only restricts its findings, which shed a new light on modern dance, to a chronologically defined area.

Kedem expands his analysis to include not only modern artistic dance, but also dance in primitive societies, perhaps driven to such extremes of comparison by the academic custom endeavoring to prove the total application of a newly discovered insight, diluting the gained truth by the misleading quest for universality.

He follows Curt Sachs' division of dance into categories, such as Convulsive or Expanded dances, finding common elements of Mannerism and modern dance in the dance culture of the Far East, Africa and other areas, which to me seems an unnecessary extension of his well-documented comparison between Mannerism and modern dance. The discovery of parallels in Renaissance Mannerism and modern dance by Kedem forges a new analytical tool and shows modern dance in a fascinating new light — which I find a sufficient reason for research.

It is to be hoped, that his work will soon be published in book form in order to reach a wider audience. There is a surfeit of dance history books which are long strings of unimportant facts, hung, so to say, on a cloth-line to dry in the wind. Kedem's research is of another, much needed sort: It is thought-provoking and reveals a hitherto undefined important aspect of modern dance by juxtaposing it with the methods of another art discipline and a historical period which though distant in time nevertheless possessed characteristics reminiscent of our own era. After all, the true purpose of historical research and aesthetic analysis is the deepening of our understanding of our own time, art and of ourselves. ■