

Dance as Ecstatic Ritual/Theatre
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All performance always contains elements of both theatre and ritual. Dance as ritual focuses upon effecting transformation and maintaining order on a personal, communal and cosmological level. Nomadic, shamanic cultures emphasize rituals of transformation while priestly, "agri-cultures" utilize ritual to maintain order.¹ Theatrical dance emphasizes entertainment while ritual dance attempts to effect change in the participants and audience. However, dance as ritual has entertainment value and dance as theatre is efficacious. They differ only to the degree that creating efficacy or entertainment is emphasized.²

This article is a testament to the dominance of the written word in "western" society. Though anthropologists bemoan the loss of various nonverbal cues when recording the elements of an observed performance, they continue to give preference to the written word³. Research methods and publication conventions reduce ritual to a set of symbols that can be represented by another set of symbols: written words. The physical experience of participating in a transformative ritual is usually glossed over into a set of theoretical statements about the symbolic reenactment of myth; the action is subservient to the story.

Anthropologists are constrained by disembodied text when describing dance. Researchers who are sensitive to the limitations of the word utilize Laban Movement Analysis for a more complete documentation of the event. Even so, the sacred dance is represented as a series of dabs, pokes and slashes that are explained, not as performative actions that affect the dancer, but as symbols for the readers. Comparative religions scholar Roger Grainger suggests, "[T]o understand religion in a non-religious way, to express it in non-religious language [...] is inevitably to reduce it."⁴ Something is always lost when translating embodied actions into disembodied symbols.

Many scholars of dance, anthropology, and the history of religions assume that dance emerged in pre-historic societies as the primary form of worship. This is taken on faith; these pre-historic dances no longer exist. Dance is a time-based art that is destroyed as it is created like the death and resurrection dance of Hindu deity, Shiva.

History of religions scholar Mircea Eliade (1974) identified dance as one of the techniques, along with repetitive music, fasting and hallucinogens, utilized by shamans to create ecstatic states in communion with the gods.⁵ Examples of sacred uses of dance can be seen throughout the world: trance dances of Bali; Yoruban ancestral forms and the syncretized forms of Santería and Candomblé; Native American forms; "charismatic" Christianity - including the Shakers and certain Pentacostal sects.

The sacred dancer actively engages in the pursuit of ecstasy; "in the experience of seizure and rapture."⁶ Psychology and religions scholar Rogan Taylor (1985) explains, "[Ecstasy] describes something like an exalted state of feeling, the

original connotation of ecstasy was closer to the idea of being 'at the end of your tether', 'out of your mind', 'at your wit's end.'"⁷ Dance ethnologist Maria-Gabrielle Rosen (1974) writes, "There [are] four degrees of ecstasy, namely the warning, the whisper of inspiration, the prophecy, and finally the gift, the highest grade of inspiration."⁸ The implications are there: ecstasy is the path of a prophet; the course of a soothsayer; the technique of a shaman.

Taylor (1985) remarks on shamanism:

It is fundamentally an ecstatic form of religion, in the true sense of the word ... Ecstatic religion takes off where the normal state of mind stops and at the centre [sic] of all ecstatic religions there stand certain types of individuals who appear to have the capability to abandon not only their normal minds, but also their normal bodies. These individuals, be they men, women, or youths, we call "shamans." They are the source of shamanistic religion, wherever it is found.⁹

Taylor sees shamanism as an expression of nomadic cultures. Though certain individuals were recognized as having more spiritual power than others - the ecstatic mystical experience is essentially egalitarian - all members of the society may enter the ecstatic state. The development of agriculture created stable, non-nomadic "agri-cultures" and the disparate accumulation of wealth. Priestly religions were developed in support of the stratification of hierarchical social structures.

Ritual scholar Tom F. Driver (1991) identifies the two purposes of ritual as effecting transformation and maintaining order: Ecstatic, Dionysian ritual is primarily concerned with transformation while priestly, Apollian rite is focused mainly upon maintaining order.¹⁰ Similarly, dance historian Carl Sachs (1937) concluded that presentational forms of dance developed with the invention of priestly religious expressions as opposed to participatory shamanic practices.¹¹

Movement analyst Rudolph Laban (1971) lamented "[T]he European has lost the habit and capacity to pray through movement."¹² The origins of this loss can be traced to Greek culture. Greek philosophers introduced a dualistic approach to the perception of the self. The mind, perceived as the seat of the soul, and the body were envisioned as distinct, though connected, entities. While the Greeks celebrated the beauty of the human body, their philosophers increasingly saw the two aspects of self as separate and not equal. Plato opined, "the body is the tomb of the soul." St. Paul, as a Greek Jew, combined the Greek preeminence of the soul over the body with the Jewish ("the people of the Book") emphasis upon the Word. The "western" devaluation of the body is put into sharp relief by comparing the Judeo-Christian creation myth with the Hindu version: Yahweh creates the universe by uttering the Divine Word - Shiva creates and destroys the universe through His Dance.

The rise of Roman Empire, which borrowed the outward forms of Greek culture while mutating the meaning to fit their materialist concerns, signaled a break between sacred and profane uses of dance, ensuring the desacralization of dance. The Church was catholic in its approach to the absorption of native religious

practices of Europe. It superseded nature religious festivals with Christian holy days (e.g., Christmas coincides with the Roman Saturnalia while Easter derives its name from Eos, goddess of the dawn). Catholic saints and martyrs appropriated the feast days and fables of ancient gods. Other gods, who celebrated the sensuous embodiment of fertility, were problematic for the ascendant religion based in the Word and thus were demonized. Pan, the great god of nature and dance, is envisioned as half man-half goat: the Christian version of Satan took on the same physical characteristics.

The Church held, at best, an ambivalent attitude towards dance. Though the Bible includes passages that exhort the believer to sing and dance in praise of the Lord, the theology of Christianity emphasizes the strength of the spirit and the weakness of the flesh. The act of dancing, which celebrates the body, is antithetical to the anti-corporeal teachings of the Church that evolved from Plato and found penultimate expression in St. Augustine's (354-430) doctrine that all humanity shares in the Original Sin transmitted through the procreative act.

Perhaps even more troubling to the Church was how the "pagan" religions utilized dance as an essential element of worship. In spite of its mystical tradition of prophets and seers, the Church had a vested interest in maintaining order in their Apostolic Procession of Saints. Ritual uses of dance provoke individual transformative ecstatic states of a shamanic type; the Church was, and is, a priestly religion based in the orderly transfer of spiritual authority.

The last recorded mass expression of sacred ecstatic dance in Europe was in the Middle Ages. This was a time of change, apocalyptic visions, superstitions, plagues, wars, reformations, and counter-reformations. This tumultuous backdrop was the breeding ground for bizarre episodes of so-called choreomanias and dance epidemics. The dance epidemics, a neglected footnote in dance history, were movements of the common folk; virtually invisible to the "official" recorders of history; dance historians typically gloss over Egypt, Greece and Rome, then jump to Catherine de Medici as the genesis of dance in Europe. These dances were interpreted as disease and satanic hysteria as well as, paradoxically, cure and saintly grace. We aver that the choreomanias were essentially shamanic pilgrimages; the participants knowingly ingested the hallucinogenic fungi ergot to facilitate the trance activities of the dance.¹³

The cosmos in shamanic perception is divided into Middle World, the plane of existence that we dwell in, Under World, the level the shaman descends during ecstatic trance to effect healing and other transformations and Upper World, where order is maintained. The dancer assumes the sacred role of shaman: the arbitrator of individual and community, and the diplomat of individual and community to the Other Worlds. Wosien (1974) writes:

Responding and attempting to encompass the phenomenal world outside, man, by dancing, is at the same time put in touch with his own inner being; for, just as creation hides the creator, the physical form of man conceals the spiritual being [...] In the dance man transcends fragmentation...and for the time of the dance he feels again at one with himself and the world around. On this profound

level, in the experience of seizure and rapture, there falls to man a universal relatedness, a sense of the totality of life.¹⁴ If we consider the dancer as shaman, as someone with the ability to transform and/or influence self and others, what then does this suggest? If through dancing or “pray[er] with movement”¹⁵ the “experience of seizure and rapture,” ecstatic technique, is achieved then is “a universal relatedness, a sense of totality of life” actually revealed? Christian Gnostics believed in the power of dance: in the Acts of John, Jesus states, “Ah, it is possible for the whole world to dance! He who dances not knows not what comes to pass.”¹⁶

The Church instituted Christ as the ultimate shaman. As Taylor states, “Both Church and showbiz were rivals for the same mystery: transformation magic.”¹⁷ The Church, by nature of its own dogma, had to outlaw shamanistic practices (e.g. dance) to prevent empowering new shamans. The shamanistic practices that remained were systematically absorbed by the priests and the sacraments they performed. Church prohibitions against the dance followed.

Centuries later in America, the United States government (self-identified as a Christian nation) outlawed ritual dance, allowing dance only as spectacle for the Native Americans in their Wild West shows. The 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota is a daunting example of government enforcement of these anti-dance measures. The Ghost Dance at Wounded Knee was a final, desperate, inter-tribal spiritual act of resistance to the criminalization and displacement of Native cultures by the Europeans. U.S. troops, monitoring the gathering of tribes reported hearing a rifle shot from the Indians, who had already surrendered their weapons, and responded by indiscriminately slaughtering men, women and children. The Ghost Dancers believed they were protected from bullets by their sacred garments and continued to dance as they were systematically slaughtered.

The Church’s pogroms against heresies forced dance to evolve forms that emphasized entertainment and art over the ritual uses of dance. Folk dances maintained their traditional forms but buried their sacred intent. Ballet appropriated and recast folk dances, tales and myths to emerge as the dominant expression of European theatrical dance. The balletic conventions that grew out of its history mitigate against ballet’s effectiveness in presenting transformative rituals. Though ancient myths and fairie tales are prevalent in the repertory, the intention of early ballet was to re-enforce the nobility’s power on the earthly plane, not to invoke the power of the gods. The “Sun King” Louis XIV (1638-1715) portrayed Apollo in order to appropriate the pagan idol’s power; allowing himself to be possessed by the god would have created the opposite effect. Ballet’s unearthly defiance of gravity is more suited to creating ethereal wisps floating in the heavens. The shaman’s dealings with daemons in his descent to the Under World requires movement that is not within the classical ballet idiom.

The Apollonian intent of ballet often led to a folk dance, tale or myth being superficially imitated without incorporating any of the substance or context. Arts philosopher Suzanne Langer’s (1895-1985) assertion, that dance is virtual gesture with virtual power, gains credence when viewing attempts of ballet

choreographers to recreate primal, Dionysian forms. Often the original dances are reduced to a few semi-authentic gestures grafted on top of the turned out leg, aristocratic posturing and colorful "native" costumes.

One of the few notable exceptions is the Joffrey Ballet's 1983 re-creation of Nijinsky's choreography for "Le Sacre du Printemps" (1913).¹⁸ This ballet avoids the non-naturalistic denial of gravity that typifies ballet technique. Instead, it embraces the weighted and turned in steps found in early Russian folk forms. Joffrey's re-creation succeeds at capturing a semblance of primal ritual because it is ballet in name only; the movement vocabulary is appropriate to its subject matter.

In the art of dance the performer is the art. The performer is the subject who creates the object which is, in turn, the performer. The dance is the dancer - there is no separation - subject and object become one. Existentialist Georges Bataille saw this as the primary purpose of sacred ritual, to transcend the split of subject and object so man could become like "water moving in water" and attain intimacy with all existence.¹⁹

Langer sees the function of dance as communicative and symbolic: "The spontaneously gestic character of dance motions is illusory, and the vital force they express is illusory; the 'powers' (i.e. centers of vital force) in dance are created beings-created by the semblance of gesture."²⁰

Is the "vital force" indeed illusory, the gesture enhanced only to create a metaphor of power? Or does the gesture act as a corporeal catalyst bridging the mind/body split which provide access to that "vital force" that resides in all of mankind?

Without the intent to engage the "vital force," virtual gestures become trite and frivolous; easily dismissible and non-communicable; or, if communicable, devoid of truth. But through the catalyst of gestic illusion, the "vital force" is nurtured; transcending fragmentation of the individual as well as the collective audience. Change becomes apparent and the impact of a sense of the "totality of life" imminent.

Taylor claims that the shamanic impulse, once supported as the primary religious expression of nomadic cultures, was suppressed with the introduction of sedentary communities through agrarian culture (as Taylor coins it, "agriculture") and is now expressed through theatrical culture. Taylor's connection between shamans and showmen is not unfounded:

Because of their many-sided talents, shamans were invited by hosts at potlatches to entertain their guests. Two, three, or even more shamans would perform 'Kamlanies' (séances) merely for the purpose of displaying their powers. They vied with one another in their singing, dancing, play and wit and eloquence. They recited long poetic narrations of their supernatural adventures in the company of their 'ashutas' (spirits) and performed shamanistic tricks. They walked with bare feet in the fire, ate glowing embers,

drove knives into their bodies. In this case the shamans served as prestidigitators, jugglers, and acrobats, their performances being nothing more than stage play.²¹

Driver (1991) states, "In rituals, for the most part, there is no question of illusion. Gestures are actually performed, and these gestures have social, personal and religious consequences."²² Wosien (1974) comments, "Ritual strengthens the growth of consciousness by providing it with a frame of reference. Dance ritual throughout the ages is a self-delineation of developing man[...]"²³

In ritual forms, dance is a technique of ecstasy; possessing real, not virtual, power. Theatrical forms facilitate transformation through the techniques of ecstasy and are integral to the structure of ritual. Performance theorist Richard Schechner (1988) suggests, "The basic polarity is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theater. Whether one calls a specific performance 'ritual' or 'theater' depends mostly on context and function."²⁴ Theater has aspects of ritual inherent in its structure, therefore all theater engages in techniques of ecstasy.

Ritual dance scholar Jamake Highwater (1984) proposes that all of the modern arts in the "western" tradition are in imitation of sacred art found in primal cultures.²⁵ The origin and development of modern dance reveals many examples of choreographers seeking inspiration from early, primal, ritualistic forms of dance:

- Isadora Duncan (1877-1972) found her muse in the archeological remnants of ancient Greek dance.
- Ruth St. Denis (1878-1968) was inspired by representations of Egypt and the Far East to discover her artistic voice.
- Ted Shawn (1891-1972) added Native American derived dance to the Ted Shawn and his Male Dancer Group and Denishawn repertoires.
- Mary Wigman (1886-1973) delved into the Germanic nature religions for inspiration.
- Katherine Dunham's (b. 1910) exploration of Afro-Haitian dance led to her initiation into the Vodou religion.
- Martha Graham (1894-1991) found creative "juice" from the classical Greek mythology as well as the Indians of the southwest and Meso-America.
- Even Merce Cunningham (b. 1919), whose work is most often portrayed as the machinations of pure intellect, was influenced by composer John Cage (1912-1992) to incorporate the teachings of Zen philosophy and the ritualistic use of the *I Ching* to find his way of working.

Choreographer Bill T. Jones' (b. 1952) "Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land" (1991) exemplifies the synergesis of theatre and ritual. Few Americans have actually read Uncle Tom's Cabin but Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1849 novel and its title character have become iconic in American culture. Likewise, the phrase "the promised land" has Old Testament, New Testament, and New World connotations that are part of the Judeo-Christian, American colonizing, and slave-holding myths. Though there is disagreement among scholars whether

myth begets ritual (the myth is ritually manifested through iconic reenactment) or ritual begets myth (the symbols created through ritual are then codified and explained through the creation of myth), there is consensus that myth and ritual are interdependent within a system of belief. By choosing subject material that is mythic to the community that he would be performing to, Jones could be assured that his iconic manipulation of these myths would have resonance for his audience that went beyond spectacle and entertainment.

This dance is equally theatre and ritual; serving as entertainment, maintaining order and effecting transformation. Jones blurred the distinction between spectator and participant by including members of the local community in the final, cathartic scene of "The Promised Land." Jones performed a role that was an abstraction of his deeply felt issues as an HIV-positive, gay African-American who was mourning the loss of his dance and life partner, Arnie Zane (1948-1988). The scene that featured Jones' mother singing while he danced naked on stage merged dance as theatre and ritual to create an undeniable power for spectator and participant alike.

¹ Taylor, R. (1985) The Death and Resurrection Show: From Shaman to Superstar. West Sussex, U.K.: Anthony Blond.

² Schechner, R. (1988) Performance Theory. Rev. ed. New York: Routledge

³ Rothenberg, J. (1986) Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas. New York: van der Marck, (p xv-xxiii)

⁴ Grainger, R. (1974) The Language of the Rite. London: Darton, Longman & Todd,. (p 15)

⁵ Eliade, M. (1974) Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. Rev. ed. New York: Princeton.

⁶ Wosien, M. (1974) Sacred Dance: Encounter with the Gods. New York: Avon Books (p 211)

⁷ Taylor, R. (p 13)

⁸ Wosien, M. (p 211)

⁹ Taylor, R (p 13)

¹⁰ Driver, T (1991) The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Our Communities. New York: Harper.

¹¹ Sachs, Curt. (1937) World History of the Dance.. New York: W. W. Norton,.

¹² Laban, Rudolf. (1971) The Mastery of Movement, Boston: Plays

¹³ Zmolek, J. (1996) The St. Vitus Dance: A Review of Literature and Its Creative Offspring: Mystical Bedlam, unpublished manuscript

¹⁴ Wosien, M. (p 9)

¹⁵ Laban, Rudolf. (1971) The Mastery of Movement, Boston: Plays

¹⁶ qtd. in Miller, J. (1986) Measures of Wisdom. The Cosmic Dance of Classical and Christian Antiquity. Toronto: U of Toronto (p 82)

¹⁷ Taylor, R (p 69)

¹⁸ Kinberg, J. & Grim, T. (1989) The Search for Nijinsky's Rite of Spring [Video] WNET/New York

¹⁹ Bataille, G.(1973), trans. Hurley, R. (1989) Theory of Religion. Cambridge, MA: MIT

²⁰ Langer, S. (1953) Feeling and Form, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (p 175)

²¹ Ivan Lopatin, (qtd. in Taylor p 48)

²² Driver, T. (p 98)

²³ Wosien M.(p14).

²⁴ Schechner, R. (p 120).

²⁵ Highwater, J. (1984) The Primal Mind. New York: Alfred van der Marck,