

Dance Criticism*

SUNIL KOTHARI

In the Indian context dance criticism is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the old days the newspapers simply provided a column for dance reviews; besides this, no other space was provided in the press for dance. Most of the newspapers followed the British journalistic tradition, and in the pre-independence era as well as the early post-independence years the job of reviewing dance was assigned to a music critic. This was the practice, early on, in the British newspapers, where a music critic also wrote on ballet. Till some 20 or 25 years ago, it was also the practice in India. It is only in recent years that the dance critic in India has come into his own.

Edwin Denby, the American poet and dance critic, observes in his seminal article on dance criticism that the reviews of dance which appear in the newspapers are casually glanced through by lay readers mainly to see if their opinions tally with the reviewer's. On the other hand, a dancer often reads the same review with x-ray eyes—reading into it more than it contains—so that often a review becomes a dialogue between the reviewer and the dancer.

The scenario in the Indian context has to be seen keeping in view the nature of various dance forms, the aesthetic principles governing them, and the existing styles and schools. Dr Kapila Vatsyayan writes in her *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*:

The aesthetic enjoyment of the classical Indian dance is considerably hampered today by the wide gap between the dancer and the spectator. Even the accomplished dancer, in spite of his mastery of the classical technique, may sometimes only be partially initiated in the essential qualities of the dance form and its aesthetic significance. But, in the case of the audience, only the exceptional spectator is acquainted with the language of symbols through which the artist achieves the transformation into the realm of art. The majority are somewhat baffled by a presentation which is obviously contextual and allusive but which derives from the traditions to which they have no access. Although they are aware that the dance is an invitation, through its musical rhythms, to the world in time and, through its sculptural poses, to the world in space, in which the character portrayed is living, they are unable to identify themselves with him. Far less are they able to attain such identity with the dancer in his portrayal of the particular role.

This being the state of affairs—which has partially changed on account of several strategies employed by dancers and with dance-appreciation courses, lec-dems,

* This paper was presented at the symposium 'Dance: Plural Vocabularies of Movement' held in Delhi 11–14 December 1990. The symposium was organized on the occasion of the India International Dance Festival sponsored by Sangeet Natak Akademi and Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

etc.—readers of reviews who have not seen the performance at best get only an impression of the event.

Reviewing dance, on the other hand, makes several demands on the critic. He is expected to be well-versed in the technique of dance and music, the aesthetic theories governing dance, as well as the poetry, theme and content of a particular performance. This is a tall order, but only one who has some knowledge of these matters is really qualified to review dance. Since the thematic content of our classical dance derives from the epics—the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—and other mythological lore, knowledge of this genre of literature is a must. So far as the older generation of critics is concerned, their acquaintance with this literature is fairly sound. There are several versions of mythological stories in different parts of India and the interpretations by dancers are likely to differ. In this situation familiarity with mythological literature helps a great deal.

Knowledge of Sanskrit is necessary for the dance critic in India. The manuals dealing with the technique of Indian classical dance are in Sanskrit and so are the commentaries on these manuals and rhetorical works. The *Natyashastra*—dealing with dance, drama, and music—is among the important texts in the field. The study of these texts helps one acquire a sound knowledge of the aesthetic principles of Indian dance as well as its technique. However, one cannot understand dance technique only by reading these manuals. What helps a dance critic most is practical knowledge of dance; this technical knowledge gives his writing a sharper focus and insight.

There is another difficulty ahead for the critic. Although, in the Indian context, a critic is expected to review different dance forms—Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Manipuri, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Odissi, Mohiniattam, etc.—it is almost impossible for him to know all the languages in which the songs in these dances—to which the *abhinaya* is done—are rendered. However, there is at times almost a one-to-one correspondence between the word sung and danced through *angikabhinaya*—including the *mukhjabhinaya* and the *hastas*. With a knowledge of the *hastas* used to tell a story, it is possible for a critic to understand the import of the songs.

Whereas a dancer can learn dance at various institutions, a dance critic in India has to be an autodidact. The only way he can learn his trade is to watch dance continuously. There are no facilities or evolved methodologies of learning dance criticism. Even at the few Indian universities where dance departments exist, I do not know of any course for dance criticism introduced so far. It would help if such courses were introduced in the dance curricula. The discipline of dance criticism could then develop in this country and could play an important major role in the development of dance.

The existing body of dance criticism in India is meagre. As mentioned earlier, the subject has received attention only in the past two decades. No systematic study of the history of dance criticism in India has been undertaken so far. In the early '50s the role played by Dr Charles Fabri in Delhi to enthuse people to watch dance was very significant. With the formation of Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi and its counterparts in the States in the '50s—as well as other government and private

agencies promoting dance—public interest in dance and reporting of dance events in the press received a fillip. But it is only during the last decade—and particularly with the recent boom in magazines and newspapers with art pages, offering more space than was earlier available for dance reviews—that the role of a dance critic has assumed some significance.

There is little critical writing on dance that the critic can fall back upon. The available books on dance are of diverse nature—ranging from scholarly works to popular writings. There are few research journals publishing papers on dance. There is no periodical devoted exclusively to dance such as *Dance Magazine* in the United States and similar publications elsewhere in the West. The only Indian periodical comparable to *Dance Magazine* is *Sruti* published from Madras which covers both classical music and dance (with an emphasis on Carnatic music and the dance traditions of South India). Here classical dance is discussed in detail and the criticism is both informed and technical.

No organization for dance criticism has yet been formed in India. There is no forum where critics can offer their opinions for debate and counter-criticism and work towards a definition of their discipline, creating standards and exchanging ideas. In the United States, organizations like the American Dance Festival Critics Conference, the Texas Institute of Dance Criticism, and the Dance Critics Association have focussed the necessary attention on dance criticism. Such forums would certainly have an impact on the development of dance criticism in India. They would go a long way in educating the dance community about the role and practice of dance criticism.

Publication of collections of critical writings is essential for the scholarly study of dance. Another important requirement is archival material and access to it. The Dance Collection of the New York Public Library at the Lincoln Center, New York, and the Dance Museum in Stockholm (besides similar museums elsewhere in Europe) may be cited as examples. I have visited these institutions and the material available there is staggering. Such archives and museums would help the development of dance criticism. Access to archival material is essential for serious study of dance.

In recent times we have seen a proliferation of newspapers and magazines where dance is given a good deal of space. There are regular dance reviews in the newspapers, weekly columns in the magazines, curtain-raisers on the eve of major dance events, as well as frequent interviews with dancers. Since the available columns have to be filled, knowledgeable dance critics today are in much demand! The supply is naturally limited in relation to the demand. Well-equipped critics have an important role in this situation—critics who possess a sophisticated and technical understanding of dance; who can anticipate significant changes in dance induced by dancers and choreographers; who can recognize how these changes are related, and the influence they have, on the other arts; who can develop a language and critical terminology to record, analyze and share their insights. Such critics can indeed contribute to the development of dance in India.

It is time dance criticism in India receives due attention from both practitioners and lay readers. The newspapers have a great responsibility in this sphere, and

should ensure that space available for dance is used meaningfully.

There are no shortcuts to becoming a critic. A critic has to constantly grow and sharpen his tools and broaden the scope of dance criticism. A bigger challenge faces dance critics today than their predecessors faced two decades ago. Dance criticism cannot remain limited to reviewing pure and simple; it must act as a vehicle of change and mould public taste accordingly. □

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- New Directions In Dance*: Collected writings from the seventh Dance in Canada Conference held at the University of Waterloo, Canada, June 1979. Perfamon Press, Toronto, Canada. Edited by Diana T. Taplin. See in particular the article 'On Critics and Criticism of Dance'.
- Writings on Dance (1938-68)* by A. V. Cotton, edited by Katharine Sorely Walker and Lilian Haddakin. Dance Books, London, 1975. See in particular the article 'The Critic's Function'.
- Looking at the Dance* by Edwin Denby. Curtis Books, New York, 1968.
- In his True Centre*, by Arnold Haskell. Adam and Charles Black, London, 1951.
- Dancers Under my Lens* by Cyril Beaumont. Cyril Beaumont Publications, London, 1950.
- 'Ballet Criticism and The Historian's View' by Ivor Guest. *Ballet Annual* 16, 1962.
- 'The Philosophy of Dance' by Paul Valery. *Collected Works of Paul Valery*, Vol. 13, Pantheon Books, New York, 1964.
- 'The Spirit of Dance' by André Levison in *Dance as a Theatre Art* edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen. Dodd, Mead and Company, New York, 1974.
- Watching the Dance* by Marcia Siegal. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1977.
- 'Critics and Criticism' by Peter Brinson in *The Dancing Times*, August 1963, London.
- 'The Critic's Responsibility' in *Visions* edited by Michael Crabb, 1978, London.
- 'The Functions of a Critic' by Clive Barnes in *Visions*.
- Classical Dance in Literature and the Arts* by Kapila Vatsyayan, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Delhi, 1968.