
WHAT IS GOING ON IN A DANCE?

Monroe C. Beardsley

I begin these rather tentative and exploratory reflections by calling upon some provocative remarks by George Beiswanger, from an essay written some years ago and later reprinted:

Muscular capacity is the physical means by which dances are made. But the means becomes available to the choreographic imagination only through the operation of a metaphor, a metaphor by which a *moving* in the muscular sense takes on the character of a *doing* or *goings-on*. . . . Strictly speaking, then, dances are not made out of but *upon* movement, movement being the poetic bearer, the persistent metaphor, by which muscular material is made available for the enhanced, meaningful, and designed *goings-on* that are dance.¹

Though this passage summarizes a view that I shall try to defend and articulate, the attempt to apply the concept of metaphor troubles me; it seems a strained extension of an otherwise reasonably clear and useful term. So instead of Beiswanger's rather mysterious "operation of a metaphor" I shall suggest we employ some concepts and principles borrowed from the philosophical theory of action. But I still like his favored expression for what we are all trying to understand better—those special "goings-on" that constitute dance.

A partial, though basic, description of what is going on would be in terms provided by Beiswanger (but I am also borrowing language from legal theorists such as John Austin and Oliver Wendell Holmes): there are willed muscular contractions that cause changes of position in human bodies or parts of bodies. Such caused changes we may agree to call "bodily motions," or simply "motions," assuming them to be—with surely few exceptions—voluntary. (For even if push comes to shove in a certain symbolic sense, I take it that no one is actually knocked off balance. But for a dancer to be lifted up or carried from one location to another is not a motion, in my sense, of that dancer—though it requires motions by other dancers.)

Bodily motions are actions; they are, in one sense, basic actions, the foundation of all other actions, at least as far as we are concerned today; for even if there are such things as purely *mental* actions, in which no muscle is disturbed, these cannot be the stuff or raw material of dance. But as Beiswanger says, bodily motions are not themselves the *goings-on* we label *Afternoon of a Faun* or *Jewels*. It is actions of another sort we witness and wonder at; how, then, are these related to those others?

An extremely fruitful discovery of philosophical action theory is that actions build upon, or grow out of, each other,

in certain definable ways. The wielding of a hammer, say, can become, in the right hands, the driving of a nail, and that in turn a step in the building of a house. One action, in a technical sense, is said to "generate" another action that is its fruition or even its aim. Thus we can analyze and come to understand certain actions by examining their *generating conditions*, that is, the conditions that are to be fulfilled in order for act A to generate act B. This is easy in some cases; clearly it is the presence of the nail and the wood, in proper relationship, that converts the swinging of a hammer into the driving of a nail, that enables the former action to generate the latter action: *in* or *by* swinging the hammer, the carpenter drove the nail. Now there is, of course, an endless variety of such sets of generating conditions; however, they fortunately fall into a limited number of classes, and these classes themselves belong to two fundamental categories. The first is *causal generation*. Since the swinging of the hammer *causes* the nail to penetrate the two-by-four studding, the swinging of the hammer *generates* the (act of) driving the nail into the wood. If the hammer misses or the nail is balked by a knot, this act-generation does not occur.

In this first category of act-generation, one action generates a second action that is numerically distinct from it: swinging the hammer is not the same action as driving the nail (or building the house). In the second category, no new action, yet a different kind of action, is generated. If a person mistakenly believes the divorce is final and legal, and so marries a second spouse, that person has (unintentionally) committed bigamy: given the generating conditions (the persisting legal bond), the act of marrying generates the act of committing bigamy. The person has not done two things, but two kinds of things: the same action was both an act of marrying and an act of bigamy. This I call *sortal generation*: the act-generation that occurs when an action of one sort becomes also (under the requisite conditions) an action of another sort—without, of course, ceasing to be an action of the first sort as well.

These concepts, simple as they are, can help us clarify idioms sometimes used by dance theorists. Thus when George Beiswanger says that "dances are not made out of but *upon* movement" (and remember he is using the term "movement" the way I am using the term "motion"), we can interpret him, I think, as saying that a dance is not composed of, does not have as its parts or elements, bodily motions, but rather is in some way sortally generated by those motions: under certain conditions, the motion "takes on the character" (as he says) of a dance-movement. And if I may be permitted the license, I should like to take advantage of the dancer's cherished special



“Escape,” from Anna Sokolow’s *Rooms*

use of the word “moving” and use it in a nominative form to refer to *actions that have the character of a dance*: I shall call them “movings.” Thus when Beiswanger adds, “Dance does consist of *goings-on* in the act of coming to be,” I shall adopt a somewhat more cautious paraphrase: In a dance, movings are sortally generated by bodily motions. And this proposition must be supplemented at once to forestall an imminent objection: Certainly there are rests in dance as well as doings, and these, however passive, are part and parcel of what is happening (it happens for a time that nothing happens). Muscular contractions may be required to maintain a position as well as to change one—especially if it is to stand on tiptoe with arm and leg outstretched. So besides motions we shall have to include *bodily pauses* or cessations of motion; and we can add that just as motions can generate movings, so pauses can generate posings (using this term for peculiarly dance states of affairs). Thus we may now propose the following: Dancing is sortally generating movings by bodily motions and posings by bodily pauses.

Thus I find myself in disagreement—not wholly verbal, I think—with a recent valuable essay by Haig Khatchadourian.² It has been effectively criticized on several points by Julie Van Camp,³ and I shall not review her objections here, but only call attention to a few other matters. According to Khatchadourian, “dancing consists of movements and not, or not also, of actions of some kind or other.”⁴ First, although this distinction—which I hope to clarify shortly—may seem oversubtle, I believe (with Beiswanger) that dancing consists not in (what Khatchadourian calls) movements, i.e., motions, but in actions generated by them. And second, I think it is a

mistake—and there seems no warrant for this in action theory—to divide bodily motions from actions: they *are* actions of a certain kind, though in themselves generally not as interesting as the actions they generate. However, Khatchadourian’s distinction between (as I would say) bodily motions and *other* actions is important; but then the distinguishing features of these other actions need to be spelled out.

Taking off from the first of these two objections to Khatchadourian, I must now face the question why I say that movings are more than motions: that there is indeed act-generation, a transformation of motions into movings. I have two main reasons.

My first reason rests on two propositions that will probably not be challenged: (1) It seems we do not dance all of the time—not every motion is dancing—so there must be some difference between the motions that generate dancing and those that do not, however difficult it may be to get a fix on. (2) It seems there is nothing in the nature of motions themselves that marks off those that can be dance from those that cannot; *practically* any kind is available. Some insight into the puzzles here may be derived from Marcia Siegel’s discussion of Anna Sokolow’s *Rooms*. She describes the various motions of the performers, for example:

Then, drooping across the chair seats, they lower their heads to the floor, lift their arms to the side and let them drop, slapping against the floor with a dead sound. . . . Slowly they lean forward and back in their seats, staring at the audience.

None of this can be called dance movement, but neither is it merely the prosaic activity that it seems to be at

first. Sokolow gives these ordinary movements a dance-like character by exaggerating the dynamics and the timing, sometimes beyond “natural” limits. Instead of just raising or lowering a hand, someone might take a very long time to raise it, giving the gesture great importance, then drop it suddenly and heavily, as if, having made all that effort to prepare, there was nothing worth doing with the hand after all. Besides the intensified way everything is carried out, each move or repeated series of moves is a separate gesture that finishes in some way before the next series is undertaken.⁵

I am not sure I fully understand this passage, which is not as clear as Siegel’s writing usually is. When she says that “None of this can be called dance movement,” she is apparently not denying that what is going on is a dance; I think she means that these motions are not the usual stuff of dance, not conventionally used in dancing. When she adds that “Sokolow gives these ordinary movements a dancelike character,” I take this to mean that Sokolow shapes the motions so that they actually *are* dance, not merely *like* dance. Of course this kind of performance is difficult to talk about, but if I understand her, Siegel is marking an important distinction. Of two motions, abstractly classified as, say, “raising an arm,” one may be dance and the other not, depending on some distinguishing feature contributed by the choreographer—so that, more concretely described, they may be somewhat different motions, though they belong to the same shared type. One motion generates moving, the other does not. (Some would add that merely transferring an “ordinary” movement to a stage, under a bright spotlight, could give it a quality that makes it a dance.)

My second reason for distinguishing the concept of *motion* from that of *moving* is that this very distinction seems to be deeply embedded in a large, special or technical vocabulary for talking about dancing. Take the term “pirouette,” for example. We can explain “how you do” a pirouette, and we can say that in turning rapidly on her toe, the dancer pirouetted. A turning of a certain sort generated a pirouetting, and they were the same event; yet if we first describe the event as a rapid turning on toes we are adding something to this description when we say that it was also a pirouette, for that is to say it was dancing. So with numerous other familiar terms: *jeté*, *glissade*, *demi-plié*, *sissone fermé*, *pas de bourrée*. (And, since we must not forget to include posings as well as movings, we should add “arabesque.”) My thesis is that all these terms refer to movings as such, not to the motions that generate them. When the technical terms are supplemented by other words, borrowed from ordinary speech—“leap,” “lope,” “skip,” “run”—these take on a second sense in the context of dance description, though I do not think this is a case of metaphor.

The question that looms next is evidently this: how does it come about that—or what are the generating conditions that make—motions and pauses become the movings and poses of dance? Without pretending to offer much of an argument, I will illustrate some features of action theory by reflecting briefly on a few possible answers to this rather large question.

First, then, let us consider an answer that is not without plausibility and is in fact suggested in my quotation from Marcia Siegel. You will recall her remark that a dancer in *Rooms*

might take a very long time to raise [his or her hand], giving the gesture great importance, then drop it suddenly and heavily, as if . . . there was nothing worth doing with the hand after all.

She speaks of “the intensified way everything is carried out.” If we are wary, I think we can make do with the word “expressive” to mark her meaning—and mine. When I use the word in this context, I refer to regional qualities of a motion, or sequence of motions: it has an air of momentousness or mystery or majesty, it is abrupt, loose, heavy, decisive, or languid. To say that the motion is expressive is just to say that it has some quality to a fairly intense degree. And this is *all* I mean by “expressive.” We might then try formulating our first answer in this way:

When a motion or sequence of motions is expressive, it is dance.

Selma Jeanne Cohen, in her well-known essay,⁶ apparently holds that expressiveness is present in all true dance—though her defense of this view is, I think, marred by a tendency to confuse expressiveness with other things I shall shortly touch on, such as representation and signalling. Khatchadourian, in reply, says that expressiveness is not a necessary condition of dance but a criterion of *good* dance.⁷ An objection to making it a *sufficient* condition is, for example, that an actress in a play might appropriately make exactly the same expressive motion as Sokolow’s dancers, yet would not be bursting into dance but dramatically revealing a mental state or trait of personality. Thus to make the first answer work we would need to introduce further restrictions on the range of regional qualities that are to be taken into account. If we look about in writings on dance we find a diversity of terms but some convergence of meaning; take two examples from rather different quarters. As is well known, Susanne Langer speaks of “virtual powers” as the “primary illusion” of dance; and though I do not see the need for talking about illusions, I think “powers” conveys some general truth. Then there is a remark by Merce Cunningham, reported by Calvin Tomkins:

He has remained firmly committed to dance as dance, although he acknowledges that the concept is difficult to define. “I think it has to do with amplification, with enlargement,” he said recently. “Dancing provides something—an amplification of energy—that is not provided in any other way, and that’s what interests me.”⁸

This remark is noteworthy in part because of what it tells about Cunningham’s own taste and preferences, but I think “amplification of energy” conveys a general truth.

To put my suggestion briefly, and all too vaguely: in dance the forms and characters of voluntary motion (the generating base) are encouraged to allow the emergence of new regional qualities, which in turn are lifted to a plane of marked perceptibility; they are exhibited or featured. It is the *featuring* specifically of the qualities of volition, of willing to act, that makes movings of motions. This is most obviously true when we see power, energy, force, zest, and other positive qualities of volition; but it also applies to such qualities as droopy exhaustion and mechanical compulsion—weaknesses of the will, as well as strengths. Dances of course may be expressive in other ways, have other qualities besides these *volitional qualities*. But the first answer to our basic question might be reformulated this way:

When a motion or sequence of motions is expressive in virtue of its fairly intense volitional qualities, it is dance.

Someone will say this sounds like sport, and the proposal does seem to extend beyond dance. Not that it is necessarily a mistake to find an affinity, but it seems we must continue our search. There are of course several familiar suggestions,

which are dogged by equally familiar objections. Some of them are rather nicely brought together in this quotation from St. Augustine:

Suppose there is no actual work in hand and no intention to make anything, but the motions of the limbs are done for pleasure, that will be dancing. Ask what delights you in dancing and number will reply, "Lo, here am I." Examine the beauty of bodily form, and you will find that everything is in its place by number. Examine the beauty of bodily motion, and you will find everything in its due time by number.⁹

Some of these ideas are worth following up, when opportunity presents itself. There is, for example, the suggestion that what transforms motions into dance is a certain *intention* that accompanies them: the intention to perform the motions for the sake of pleasure (I suppose, either of the performer or the audience). This seems too narrow a restriction, even if it applies to most dancing; other intentions can be prominent. There is also the suggestion that the relevant pleasure is one derived from mathematically ordered motion (i.e., pulse and rhythm, which together form meter). This, too, has been regarded as central to dance (as by both Khatchadourian and Cohen), but we cannot take it as a necessary or sufficient condition, even if it may be a very useful criterion of dancehood. (St. Augustine, at some stages of his thought, was a bit obsessed with number.) There is also the suggestion that it is somehow the *absence* of practical intent ("no actual work in hand," he says) that distinguishes dance from other actions. This calls for another look, after we have gained a clearer notion of what "actual work" might encompass.

To get to this topic, we may take a short detour by way of another answer to our basic question: one that tries to capture an essence of dance through the concept of representation. Consider an act-type (that is, a kind of action, having numerous actual instances): say, snow-shovelling. This involves, for effectiveness and efficiency, certain characteristic motion-types. If we select certain of these motion-types that distinguish snow-shovelling from other activities, and perform them for the benefit of someone else, we may enable the other person to recognize the action-type from which the motions have been derived. This, roughly put, is the representation (or depiction) of one action-type by an action of another type—for in representing snow-shovelling, we are not actually doing it (the actor smoking a pipe onstage does not represent a man smoking a pipe, for he is one; but he may represent a detective smoking a pipe, which he is not).

Now representation by motions clearly comes in many degrees of abstraction, of which we can perhaps distinguish three degrees in a standard way. In *playacting* (as in drama) we have the most realistic degree: the actor may wield a shovel, and the director may even call for artificial snow for him to push about. In *miming*, we dispense with props and verbal utterance, and we allow room for witty exaggeration: the mime would be rushing about the stage busily moving his arms in shovelling motions, stopping to blow on his fingers or rub his aching back. In *suggesting*, we merely allude to the original action-type, borrowing a motion or two, sketching or outlining, and mingling these motions with others, such as whirling or leaping. This might be the Snow-Shovelling Dance, to be performed, of course, after the actual job has been done, by way of celebrating the victory of humankind over one more assault of Nature. Playacting, taken quite narrowly, must be comparatively rare in dance, miming much more common, though in short stretches, I should think. Suggesting, on the other hand, is pervasive; it appears in many of the most striking and cogent movings.¹⁰

Indeed, it is this pervasiveness that prompts another answer to our question:

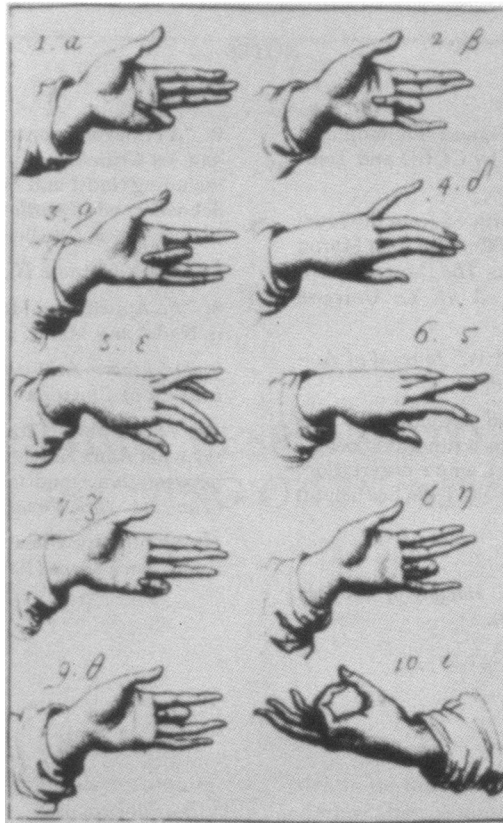
When a motion, or sequence of motions, represents actions of other types in the mode of suggestion, it is dance.

This will undoubtedly cover a lot of ground, but it will not, of course, be satisfactory to all dancers today. For beyond the third degree of abstraction in representation there lies a fourth degree, where representation disappears; we have loping-back-and-forth and panting dancers, sitting and bending dancers, who do not represent anything. Or pirouetting dancers. Now one could argue that these fragments of moving only become dance when embedded in larger sequences that do represent by suggestion. But I should think many a *pas de deux* as well as many a contemporary dance-episode is utterly nonrepresentational.

Snow-shovelling is an example of a class of action in which we effect a change in the physical world outside our skins; it is causally generated. Many of these actions have their own characteristic, and therefore imitable, forms of motion: corn-planting, baby-rocking, knitting, hammering. I should like to call such actions "workings," because they perform work in the physicist's sense—even though some of them would ordinarily be called play: kicking a field-goal or sinking a putt. It is plain that dances include many representations of working-actions, nearly always at a fairly high degree of abstraction. And this contributes to their expressiveness: seen as baby-rocking, the motions may yield a more intense quality of gentleness.

Besides workings, we may take note of two other broad classes of action that have some bearing upon the subject of this inquiry. In one of these we are concerned, not with physical states of the world, but (indirectly) with mental states of other persons. The actions I refer to, when they are performed with the help of, or by means of, verbal utterances, are called "illocutionary actions," and they are generally of familiar types: asserting, greeting, inviting, thanking, refusing, insisting. These types have subtypes: *insisting on being paid time and a half for last week's overtime* is a subtype that may have numerous instances. Many of these same types of action can also be performed without words; we can greet by gestures as well, or sometimes better. Nodding, shrugging, winking, bowing, kneeling might be called "para-illocutionary actions" when they are done with this sort of significance; so biting the thumb generates insulting, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene ii. With or without words, such actions can be called "signalings" or "sayings," in acknowledgement of the messages they carry. I choose the latter term, and the way to put it is: in waving his hand a certain way, the infant is saying good-bye. Sayings, like workings, are representable: in waving his hand, the dancer is representing someone saying good-bye. And, like working-representations, saying-representations can contribute much to the expressiveness of motions in dance. The quality of that waving, as a moving, may be intensified by its semantic aspect. The dancer summons up and draws into the texture of his moving something of the sorrow or finality of the action-type he is representing. Sayings involve a form of sortal generation, what is (very broadly) called "conventional generation." It is the existence of a social convention that enables arm-waving to generate good-byeing; the dancer does not make use of that convention to say anything, but recalls it to intensify expressiveness.

This raises an important question which there is no time to do more than glance at now: Do dances not only represent, but also constitute sayings? That is, can motions that generate movings also generate sayings? I have read an odd remark



Hand language for orators and dancers, from the Appendix to Scoperta della Chironomia ossia dell'Arte di Gestire con le Mani (Parma, 1797) by the Abate Vincenzo Requeno

attributed to John Cage: "We are not, in these dances, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words."¹¹ This is indeed simple-minded, given the extraordinary richness of bodily motions as generators of para-illocutionary actions. It might even be argued that representations of para-illocutionary actions can hardly help but being para-illocutionary actions themselves, since by selecting the suggestive elements and giving them a different context we may seem to comment on the sayings we quote. But this claim goes beyond what I am prepared to argue for at the moment.

The third class of actions I shall call attention to consists of motions that are goal-directed, though not necessarily goal-attaining, that have a point or purpose even though they move neither other bodies nor other minds. Take, for example, running a race (with the aim of winning), or reaching out, or shrinking away. We might call these actions "strivings." They are generated by the presence of mental states, such as intentions (a form of "circumstantial generation"). Of course strivings too can be represented.

Workings, sayings, and strivings seem to belong together at some level of abstraction, as entering into social interactions that have a function, that end in achievement or are so aimed. If it is not too misleading, we may use the label "practical" for them all—and at least somewhat more scrupulously than is usual. With its help, as so defined, we can state St. Augustine's proposal in what seems to be its most plausible form:

When a motion, or sequence of motions, does not generate practical actions, and is intended to give pleasure through perception of rhythmic order, it is dance.

But even at its best the proposal will not serve. Perhaps if we were to add a suitable insistence on expressiveness as another source of the pleasure, we would come close to an adequate characterization of dance as an *art*. But I assume that we do not wish to limit our concept of dance in this way. Suppose the Pueblo Corn Dance, for example, is not only performed in order to aid the growth of corn but is actually effective; then it is a working, just as much as seed-planting or hoeing. Dance shades off into, and embraces some part of, ritual—which is a kind of saying. If the dance is done at a festival in competition for first prize (although that may be opposed to the true spirit of dance), I suppose it is no less a dance for being at the same time a striving.

Thus we cannot define dance in this negative way as excluding motions that generate practical actions. Yet there is something to this opposition, something about dancing that is different, even if those other actions can be, in their various ways, expressive. Perhaps we can come nearer to it in one final line of thought. If *every* motion of the Corn Dance is prescribed in detail by magical formulas or religious rules to foster germination, growth, or a fruitful harvest, we might best regard it as pure ritual, however expressive it may be as a *consequence* of its mode of working. Like soldiers on parade or priests officiating at Mass, the participants would verge on dance but they would not really be dancing. But if some part of what goes on in the ritual helps it to achieve expressiveness (of volitional qualities) that is to some degree independent of any practical function, then whatever else it may be, it is also a moving. If, in other words, there is more zest, vigor, fluency, expansiveness, or stateliness than appears necessary for its practical purposes, there is an overflow or superfluity of expressiveness to mark it as belonging to its own domain of dance.

NOTES

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1. "Chance and Design in Choreography," reprinted from the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 21 (Fall 1962): 14-17, in Myron Howard Nadel and Constance Nadel Miller, eds., *The Dance Experience: Readings in Dance Appreciation*, rev. ed. (N.Y.: Universe Books, 1978), p. 88.
2. "Movement and Action in the Performing Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 37 (Fall 1978): 25-36.
3. See "Haig Khatchadourian's 'Movement and Action in the Performing Arts,'" forthcoming. I must add that in writing this essay I have benefited much from study of Julie Van Camp's dissertation, *Philosophical Problems of Dance Criticism*, and also from her helpful comments on an earlier draft.
4. Khatchadourian, p. 25.
5. Marcia B. Siegel, *The Shapes of Change: Images of Modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 280.
6. "A Prolegomenon to an Aesthetics of Dance," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 21 (Fall 1962): 19-26, reprinted in several places, including Nadel and Miller, op. cit., and M. C. Beardsley and H. M. Schueller, eds., *Aesthetic Inquiry: Essays on Art Criticism and the Philosophy of Art* (Belmont, CA: Dickenson, 1967).
7. See his footnote 13, p. 36.
8. "An Appetite for Motion," reprinted from *The New Yorker* (1968) in Nadel and Miller, p. 273.
9. *De Libero Arbitrio*, II, xvi, 42; trans. H.S. Burleigh, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. VI (Philadelphia, 1955).
10. Where playacting or miming is prominent, we are tempted to say what Anna Kisselgoff wrote of a Jerome Robbins work: "The line between dance and nondance has been obliterated in 'Watermill'" (*The New York Times*, May 27, 1979).
11. Quoted by Erica Abeel in "The New New Dance," reprinted from *Dance Scope* (1965) in Nadel and Miller, op. cit., p. 117.