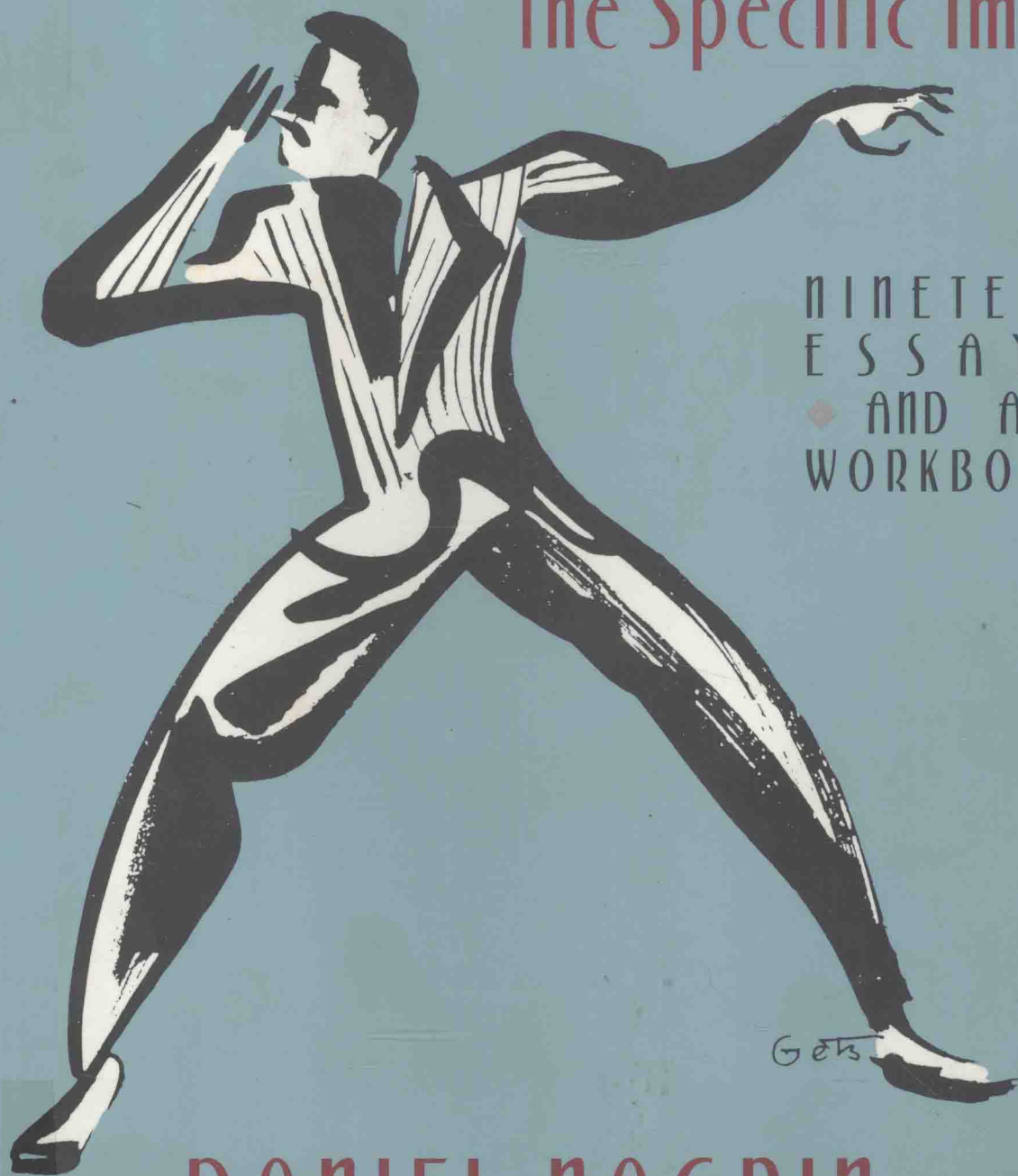


CHOREOGRAPHY and the Specific Image



NINETEEN
ESSAYS
AND A
WORKBOOK

Get

DANIEL NAGRIN

Choreography and the Specific Image

NINETEEN ESSAYS AND A WORKBOOK

Daniel Nagrin

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Introduction



A book justifies its existence when it throws light upon what has been ignored or received scant attention. There are a number of good books on choreography. The major thrust of their analysis and exposition is structural, examining the trinity of Space, Time and Dynamics. Viewing the added factors of music, costume, lighting and content through the prism of these three elements supports a formal approach to choreography. The title of this book, *Choreography and the Specific Image*, points to a different perspective, one that is generally slighted. It seizes upon one of the factors that enters into the making of dances, *content*, and looks at all the others through that lens. Here, the idea and use of content in the creative act are contained in the key concept of “the specific image.”

This is the third book in a series which revolves around this creative tool: “the specific image.” Each book focuses on a different aspect of dance: improvisation, acting/performance technique and choreography.

Dance and the Specific Image: Improvisation (1993) describes 138 improvisation exercises, games and structures. Their development is traced through the life of a dance company called the Workgroup which I directed from 1971 to 1974. The text is directed primarily to teachers and choreographers of group or solo works. The exercises, games and structures delineate paths to individualized motion vocabulary, greater freedom in dance and seeds for choreographic works. The book in the hands of students and performers will draw in a collaborative energy that will facilitate exploration of the unexpected.

The Six Questions: Acting Technique for Dance Performance (1997) explores the ways by which dancers can perform with power, authority and the uninhibited outpouring of the total self. The technique allows for the physical dynamic and skill to serve the expression

of the dancer's inner life. This volume presents an array of tools to elicit honest and rich expression in dance performance. It is designed for use and study by teachers, choreographers and particularly for dance performers and students. The approach asks for a new look at the act of dance.

Together, the three books offer a comprehensive map for creating and performing dance. Is the approach offered here better than others? Is this to be the one and true way? Answers: No and no. It is not better and it is not the only way. It is *a* way. I learned the bones of it from years of working with Helen Tamiris. The dances in my repertoire all blossomed out of "specific images." I have taught "Choreography and the Specific Image" since 1957 to a generation of dancers. For some that teaching proved useless to their temperaments, aesthetics and philosophies. For others, the doors opened and they rushed in to new found spaces that gave them the freedom to reach their deepest impulses. They did not *make* dances, they *found* dances and they emerged with individual profiles and personal identities as artists.

Another question: What is the point of *studying* choreography? When you are overflowing with an impulse, you don't need a method, you just do it. True, but the art of any artist who has produced a body of work is backed up by a method, an approach and a philosophy that were hammered out in study, apprenticeship with a master or in the lonely hours in the studio. The most inspired work of art has its bleak and barren moments. It is then, when the artist is clogged, blocked, uncertain, or when the impulse loses steam that he/she reaches into the bag of tools, trying this and that until something clicks within, until something says, "OK, this is it. We're back on the rails, back to the impulse or to a new impulse."

This book has a double concentration: the two sides of the creative process. One aspect aims to release the inner forces that fuel a dance. The other intellectually sharpens the conceptualizing tools that shape the dynamics and the direction of the work. Any choreographer who can keep his/her balance astride these contradictory and complementary forces will have the power to organically link the specifics of phrasing, counterpoint and relation to music that go into making the chains of movement, the use of space and the use of dancers.

More legitimate questions: Can one talk or write of choreography when the field of dance is afloat with dozens of styles, attitudes and philosophies? Will this book restrict itself to the problems of one style or does it try or pretend to embrace all of dance? The author is a modern dancer. Does what is said here preclude the interests and needs of ballet choreographers? Answers: If the heat of your ambition and aesthetic revolves about the tradition of Petipa and Balanchine, this may be alien territory. I myself have always been interested in and learned from observing alien territory. If you want to know how the other side thinks, come read and you may find something useful. If you consider yourself

coming out of the Noverre-Tudor line of thinking and feeling about dance, you should feel at home.

Of what use can this book be for the abstractionists, the non-objective ones, those for whom movement and design are at the heart of their work? Again, most of these pages may appear as alien territory. Still, I suspect that some of the best choreographers who operate in this mode have at the heart of their movement invention and group orchestration specific images. Consider a classic formal concept for a dance: a chain of motions is derived from a single phrase. That too is indeed a specific image. To make a fine piece of choreography, all that is needed is a passion for exploring in depth that single phrase. If passion isn't the driving force, there's no point in making art at all and *the center of this book is locating the sources of passion.*

Choreography and the Specific Image comes with a hope that it will reach, among others, a generation of dancers who were schooled in the primacy of the structural concepts of choreography that supported the making of abstract and formal dance. So many of them are now turning to, for the lack of a better word, "content," as their focus. Why? The world outside has burst into the studio. It is unacceptable for the young to die, but the unacceptable is here. It is unacceptable for anyone to accept a lesser place because of not being a male, or not being white or not being straight. With courage and passion, many choreographers are confronting these concerns. Some achieve a degree of success, many are floundering. Their formalistic training never prepared them for what they now need to say. The hope is that one or more of these pages will help their work.

What about choreography for the entertainment industry? Musical comedy? Broadway? I spent the first years of my professional life working there, though I always yearned for the concert stage. I learned a great deal, much of it of significant value for the "art" stage and specifically from working with Helen Tamiris who never lost her integrity choreographing in that arena. She did recognize the pervasive demand for reaching a hyperbolic level in almost every piece of choreography for Broadway and/or films. She had the talent to succeed at that without transgressing the bounds of good taste.

In the end, that very pressure to make everything "boffo," "socko," turned me away from that way. The frustration was compounded by an oscillating creative process pushed about by producers, agents, authors, composers and stars. I opted to take the full responsibility for everything I did on stage. I decided never again to design my creative output to ensure the delight of any public. Rather I would pursue the mysteries and delights of the world as I experienced them, probe them and find a shape for them as my gift to whoever chose to see my work. Nothing here will be a guide to "knocking them dead," only to finding movement and dances that are important to you.

Nothing in this book can tell anyone how to phrase and shape a dance movement. Nothing can explicate the deftness and artistry by which the major masters of choreogra-

phy spin out reams of movement which never lose our interest and which so often impact as a profound experiences.

The teaching of choreography as an art form is in its infancy compared to the teaching of the creative process in the other arts. Thus, it is not surprising that those who have been teaching and writing about choreography have often taken their lead from the highly structured syllabi of the more established arts, particularly music and painting. In both of these, there are at their very core a few inescapable “hard” elements. Music has harmony, melody, rhythm and dynamics. The scales contain between five and twelve notes. Painting has form, line and color. The latter, color, has at its heart but three colors, yellow, blue and red plus black and white. All the other colors come from blends of these five. The complexity of human movement is awesome. Some dance vocabularies make great efforts to reduce that complexity to an entity more easily grasped. Ballet, flamenco, the techniques of Martha Graham and of José Limon, tap dance, any ballroom dance are examples in which simplification becomes a condition of defining a style. Boundaries are set between what is considered dance and what is not. Obviously, there is a profound gap between a particular style of dance and the infinitely complex potential of human motion. The tendency is to generalize from a style to a universal philosophy about dance, which is a fallacy if there ever was one. The field of modern dance with its multiple choreographers and styles should have weakened any attempt to lay down rules. And yet, there are individual choreographers who do lay down rules for all and who judge all dance from their vantage points. Too bad. They might be able to learn from the others if they were not so sure they held the only truth.

The only truth I have ever been able to ascertain is the validity of a few telephone numbers. If I try to reach Jack by tapping out 123 1234 and I get an answering machine that says, “This is Jack’s phone. Please leave a message,” I have reached the pinnacle of certainty that is granted to me in this uncertain world. Beyond this, I am, and everyone else on this earth is, a squinty-eyed myopic babe stumbling around on a minuscule speck in an unfathomable universe. This book is offered with all of its guesses and hunches. It may help some choreographers, some of the time.

One final note: some of the text of this book will reflect my personal experience and beliefs. Can anyone write a book on choreography or on astronomy without placing upon it his/her personal stamp and prejudices? I admit mine. Most writers on dance theory and aesthetics make an implicit claim of authority by concealing their *opinions* behind the appearance of objectivity. Here, there will be no pretense at being objective.

I believe the best book that has ever been written on the history of dance is *Dance: A Short History of Classical Theatrical Dancing* by Lincoln Kirstein. Was there ever a more violently prejudicial work? The last chapter, “Postscript: Dancing in North America, 1519–1942” is a violent attack on the aesthetics and practitioners of modern dance (except

for Martha Graham). For Kirstein, classical ballet is the ultimate and perfect expression of the dance art. For me, it is one form among many that has afforded me some great moments in the theatre and quite a few dreary ones. And yet, I have learned more from his writing about our dance history than any other source. I take what I need from the reading and distance myself from what I personally find unacceptable. Dear Reader, be you a publisher, a professional reviewer or just that, a reader, please grant this book the same intellectual courtesy. Is it asserted here that the approach to choreography given in this book is useful *or even necessary* for all choreographers, regardless of their style and philosophy? I think anyone involved in the work of creating dances may find something in here of value. Those whose creative concerns revolve about humans and things interacting and interweaving will find that the problems of their work are being directly addressed by this book. For those of a formalist bent, I believe they can find much herein that will either help or provoke useful thought, but then, am I being a snake oil salesman of dance?



In evocation after evocation, Ellington proves that he knew in his cells what William Carlos Williams meant when he observed in his classic *In the American Grain* that by truly exploring the specific, an artist will achieve the universal.

Stanley Crouch, "The Duke's Blues", *The New Yorker*, 6 May 1996, 164.



THE ESSAYS



I Helen Tamiris and Her Teaching of Choreography

In the summer of my first year dancing, 1936, I saw Tamiris and her group perform *Salut Au Monde*, a suite of dances to the poetry of Walt Whitman. There is a hazy memory of dancers on boxes. Mostly, I recall waiting at the stage door when a friend pointed out Tamiris who was in conversation with someone. I was shocked to see this tall, slightly stooped and weary figure that just a little while before appeared as a towering, glorious, triumphant celebrant of Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric". A year later, I was up out of my seat, clapping in rhythm with the rest of the audience at the Nora Bayes Theatre as Tamiris's dancers came charging across the stage to *Let's Go to the Buryin'*, the climax of her great work, *How Long Brethren?* This Works Progress Administration production which shared the evening with a delightful *Candide* by Charles Weidman may have been the most successful dance evening ever to appear on Broadway. Including a return engagement, it ran a total of thirteen weeks.

Two years later, I saw her *Adelante*, a full evening work of an hour and fifteen minutes, which gave a panoramic view of Spain, its people and its history as it drifted past the mind of a dying loyalist soldier cut down by an executioner's squad. Again, I was awed, impressed

