



Genres and styles

What is dance? In the 1960s, dance anthropologists attempted to arrive at a universal definition, applicable to all the forms that can be encountered worldwide. The American Adrienne Kaeppler suggested that dance might be seen as “a system of structured movements”. A system?, Here, surely, is a key notion for finding one’s way through the many genres and styles of dance that can be seen on the choreographic stage.

For behind terms such as “ballet”, “modern”, “jazz”, etc., lie distinct groups of characteristics in gesture, dynamic, music, use of space and even dress. These are “systems” that are organised according to basic principles and reinforced by values and ideals. Once familiar with the codes and conventions that govern a particular genre, the viewer is better able to recognise and appreciate all it has to offer. This Theme aims to provide just that: a few keys to understanding, so that today’s major dance genres can be clearly identified.

But between “hip-hop”, “flamenco” and “modern” dancers, there are also differences of style which have to do with personality, the performer’s feelings or each person’s creative ambitions. Some work with crossovers, drawing their inspiration from different dance vocabularies. Others set out to explore new avenues and, in so doing, contribute to the emergence of new currents. Dance remains unique - a one-off living art!

Classical first and foremost!

Sequences 1, 2 & 3

When one thinks of “classical dance”, one inevitably imagines a ballerina up *en pointe*, dressed in a frothy tutu. Yet this western vision overshadows other forms of institutionalised dance, such as those found in India. In this land where all art is sacred, there is a classical dance tradition which draws its sources from the great mythological texts. Codified in a text dating back a thousand years, the *Natya Shastra*, there are seven main styles, including *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*. In *Samanvaya*, Alarmel Valli (on the left of the picture), representing the former, and Madhavi Mudga (on the right of the picture), representing the latter, put these two styles into perspective and so bring out the distinctive features of each and their similarities. The very upright posture of the one contrasts with the undulating curves of the other, as marked by three points of flexion: head, upper body and hips. The hand gestures might be based on the same symbolism, but how different they are in practice! Angular in the one, very rounded in the other, because each style expresses the energy of the divinity to whom it is linked. Power and vigour in the case of the former, in the image of the god Shiva. Grace and sensuality for the latter, better suited to the temperament of Vishnu.



Let us return to Europe and one of the most iconic ballets in the classical repertoire: **Swan Lake**. As has already been said, tutus and *pointes* characterise the classical ballet vocabulary. But that is not all! Based on the principals of turn-out and balance, it is expressed in pure and graceful lines: the verticality of the supporting leg, the *arabesque* of the leg behind, the diagonal of the arms extended by a graceful hand. This principle of movement is to be found in the way the *corps de ballet* moves, dividing up the stage space into linear, circular or rectangular shapes. To achieve this effect demands perfect alignment and impeccable synchronisation on the part of the dancers. Each must be as one with the ensemble. This pursuit of uniformity is also one of ballet's driving forces!

This extension of the leg that draws a line in space, prolonged by the rear elongation of the opposite arm: this is a movement and a form characteristic of classical dance. And yet **Mats Ek's** choreography is closer to the "neoclassical" style. A fact confirmed by the passage on the ground, where the female dancer crawls under her partner, winds around his legs, and by the ripples at the top of her back and her walking with feet parallel and even turned in. All elements that bear little resemblance to academic codes! Using classical vocabulary while taking a few liberties with its conventions when the latter hinder artistic intent, this is what Russian choreographers such as Michael Fokine and George Balanchine did in the course of the 20th century. It must be said that modern dance had instilled a spirit of renewal. As for the term "neoclassical", it only emerged in 1949 penned by Serge Lifar. Since then, many artists have explored this path, developing a unique style. Among the most famous we can quote William Forsythe, Jiri Kylian and Mats Ek, who delivers here a contemporary reading of the famous romantic ballet **Giselle**, the action of which he has transposed to a more recent and more realistic context.

Formerly "modern", "contemporary" today

Sequences 4 & 5

At the dawn of the twentieth century, modern dance set out as the most radical opposition to academicism. Forged by the American critic John Martin in the 1930s, the term took into account a heterogeneous ensemble of approaches, each one aiming to invent its own system of movement according to specific expressive intentions.

Contemporary dance underwent an explosion in France in 1980. It was with this new term that the young generation, who had studied in the modern schools in the United States and Germany, claimed their right to exist on the dance stage. There were no similarities between the choreographic styles that came through, other sharing a firmly-instilled concept of dance as the expression in movement of one's existence in the world. In short, arthouse dance, which has as many different faces as choreographers.

Carolyn Carlson's style is quite recognisable. As here, in **Blue Lady**, the solo she



created in 1983 which became legendary: fluidity of the torso, multidirectional projection of arms and legs, thrusts turned aside, rolled up, stopped; whirling skips and studied slow-motion. The broad range of qualities in the movement renders Carolyn Carlson's dance unpredictable and shot through with imagination.

When the unorthodox **Aude Lachaise** gets up to speak on stage, she says what the danced gesture never can, to ask: where does the dancer stand in the contemporary dance market? She prefers to see a show as a place of interrogation. Calling out to the audience who are impatient to see her dance – are they getting their money's worth? – she questions not only audience expectations, but also the ambiguous relationships between choreographer-bosses and dancer-workers. Between danced lecture and one-woman show, **Marlon** follows in the wake of a movement which appeared in the 1990s: "non-dance", the expression of a disenchantment with all that contemporary dance had promised.

In **100% polyester**, there is only, as the title suggests, the synthetic and no bodies. Only two Siamese dresses, linked by their sleeves and suspended in air, waltzing in the whirling breath of a bed of fans. Through the physical disappearance of the interpreter and the simplicity of the device, **Christian Rizzo's** installation queries the origin of the danced gesture. Where does this latter begin? Does it necessarily come from the dancer's body? And the choreographic show, is it supposed to be danced? These are the questions that were raised at the start of the 1990s by a movement of French contemporary dance, the "non-dance" which, rejecting virtuosity and technicity, demanded a sort of standstill of dance to privilege virtually motionless forms.

From jazz to hip-hop

Sequences 6, 7 & 8

Jazz is, first and foremost, a style of music. From that follow a whole series of dances with syncopated rhythms. Among them, tap dance is distinct in its use of the foot as a true percussion instrument. The result of crossing struck-step techniques from English clog dancing, Irish reels and the dances of African slaves deported to America, a complexity of rhythmic and sonorous combinations developed according to whether the impact on the floor takes place with the heel, the toe or the flat of the shoe. To achieve this, the dancers, like those shown here from the **Jazz Tap ensemble**, continually shift their point of support, passing from one leg to the other, often in daring fashion, in sequences of slides, jumps, chassés and cross steps. When the band falls silent, the dancers can give free reign to improvisation, competing with each other in skill, before picking up the same sequence together again.

It might not be jazz, but a similar character of suspension and pick-ups can be found in



Onqôto by **Grupo Corpo**, one of Brazil's major companies. **Rodrigo Pederneiras**, its choreographer, has created an original vocabulary that fuses elements of classical ballet with folklore and dance rooted in Afro-Brazilian culture. The swaying hips and steps typical of *samba* are married with great *battements* to the side, backward leaps and pirouettes on the toes. The flexing of the head and upper body along with pelvic thrusts add a touch of African colour to the choreography.

In **El Trilogy**, musicians and dancers share the stage equally, in a game of skilful dialogue offering them all alike moments of improvisation. A key figure of postmodern dance that emerged in the USA in the 1960s, **Trisha Brown**, who refused both academic and modern heritage, enriches this more recent work with the spirit of jazz. The qualities specific to the American choreographer's dance - looseness and fluidity - find a resonance in the isolations and hip swaying of jazz dance. In an intimate dialogue with the music, the choreography also becomes orchestral. The movement performed by the interpreter, at the head or the end of the line, is propagated, dancer after dancer, through to the other end, assuming each time a different colour. In this ripple effect, the interpreters appear not as a synchronous group but as body-instruments, which, while playing together, each express their specificity.

The dancers in **Agwa** are also Brazilian, but its choreographer is none other than **Mourad Merzouki**. A major artist on the French hip-hop scene, he is not one to confine himself to just one territory. Quite the contrary! His encounter with the **Companhia Urbana de Dança**, made up of breakdancers and capoeiristas from deprived areas of Rio, stimulated his creativity. He devised a dance on the theme of water, that precious source of life, which interweaves figures from *popping* (pointing, waving) and *breakdance* (floor acrobatics) with elements of *capoeira* (wide rotations of the leg) and *samba*. The soundtrack is also made up of diverse musical styles, not normally associated with these types of movement, and this contributes to the build up of energy by the dancers.

Social and traditional dances brought to the stage

Sequences 9, 10 & 11

Jazz, samba, hip-hop: these were originally danced at celebrations, in ballrooms, dance halls and in the street. It was only after a process of dramatization that these "social" dances appeared on the stage, adopted a show format and were choreographed. Even if this intensified during the twentieth century, this was not a new phenomenon! Let us not forget that classical ballet was also born out of popular and peasant dances re-appropriated by the nobility.

Alone on stage, **Andrés Marin** sets up a studied dialogue with the accompanying



musicians. For the show *El Cielo de tu boca*, the Sevillian dancer called upon the experimental musician Llorenç Barber and his bells – proof that flamenco, an Andalusian gypsy dance which became a theatrical art at the beginning of the twentieth century – continues to explore new avenues. Andrés Marin embodies this flamenco, which one might call “contemporary”, through his pared-down theatrical aesthetic, but also by his distinctive style. The way he stamps on the floor (*zapateado*) is delicate and subtle. His arms define a linear space. Alternating intense tension with release, the dance nonetheless remains faithful to that energy, so characteristic of flamenco, which sometimes borders on transcendence: that untranslatable state known as *duende*.

Energy, fervor, enthusiasm is also what the dancers of **Via Katlehong** communicate. We also find this percussive dimension of the dance: with foot hands or chest strikes that characterize the *gumboots*. Born in the gold mines of South Africa, this dance was developed by the black miners who, immersed in darkness, isolated, developed a code of rhythmic communication with their rubber boots. For fifteen years, gumboots is danced on the international stages by troops eager to reveal the history of the South African people. This is the case of *Katlehong Cabaret*, a show designed as a succession of paintings that evoke life in the townships. The process of dance’s theatricalization, whereby a social dance, like gumboots, becomes a stage dance, continues!

Credits :

Anne Décoret-Ahiha is an anthropologist of dance, doctor of Paris 8 University. Speaker, trainer and consultant, she develops proposals around dance as an educational resource and designs participatory processes mobilizing corporeality. She animates the "Warming up of the spectator" of la Maison de la Danse.

Excerpts selection

Olivier Chervin

Texts and bibliography selection

Anne Décoret-Ahiha

Production

Maison de la Danse

The "Genres and styles" Course was launched thanks the support of General Secretariat of Ministries and Coordination of Cultural Policies for Innovation.