Acquiring Dance Literacy: A Twelve-Step Program for Non-dancing Adult Concert-Goers
by Ivan Sygoda, Pentacle (November 10, 2010, p. 1/4. ©2010 by Ivan Sygoda. All rights reserved.)

How can we know the dancer from the dance?
--W.B. Yeats, “Among School Children”

Preamble. For all its richness, the English language is relatively impoverished when it comes to our favorite art form. Except for the term ballet and the specific idiom it denotes, everything else has to make do with the word dance, everything from what Trisha Brown does on stage to what Madonna does on tour to what we all do in a disco to what some of you do in certain exercise classes. Other art forms have word pairs that separate elevated intentions from more modest ones—painting versus illustration, literature versus “good reads,” cinema versus “flicks,” classical versus pop. Dance doesn’t have that. Two people discussing their love for dance may very well be talking about very different things. What I intend to discuss here is a rather small subset of all the things dance can be. To narrow it down, I am focusing on “concert dance,” dance that happens often but not always on a stage or other delineated performance area, that is often but not always offered to people who are not part of the dancing group but who have been convened to observe the dance and who sometimes have paid something for the access. These verbal gymnastics are meant to encompass even site work foisted on serendipitous passers-by.

Focus on choreography. To further narrow the focus, I am concentrating on choreographed concert dance, by which I mean movement and structure conceived, hatched, designed, organized, plotted and otherwise put together by an intentionality comprised of a single intelligence, sometimes a pair, and occasionally by a committee of the whole. The key work here is intentionality. (Talent is a different question entirely.) By these lights, choreographed concert dance is different, on the one hand, from the free-form improvisations to be seen on the disco floor and, on the other, from recreations or reconstructions of historically or culturally specific forms, where the intention is usually fidelity or accuracy.

To ponder the intentions of a choreographer is to open a Pandora’s box. If we delve into its contents, we’ll never get to the next paragraph. To beg the questions, suffice it to say that the choreographer intends to do for the anticipated observer one or more of: entertain, engage, move, mystify, amuse, astound, challenge, disorient, discomfit.

The choreographer, then, to paraphrase Ezra Pound’s modernist formulation, intends to “bend” movement (and the other resources of theater) into meaning and emotion. The goal of the strategy described here is to look closely at that process by examining the end product, the dance that we see, a bit like the way you might examine a Swiss watch, to see how it ticks. The biomechanics of dancing, while of prime interest to other dancers, is just one of the elements that contribute to the way the work is organized. To be fair, I wrote the last sentence too quickly. The physicality of dancing—the energy, the rhythm, the virtuosity—enters into the viewer almost unmediated. Whatever the form—tango, tap, salsa, flamenco, jazz, classical ballet en pointe, the vigor of it is immediately accessible to the viewer. In this, superb dancers are superb athletes. We “get” the rules intuitively the way we understand, with a minimum of explanation, what a basketball player is striving for. But many kinds of dance-making are not, at least not primarily, about this kind of technical virtuosity. It’s when virtuosity is subsumed into other goals, or avoided entirely, that we begin to feel lost, that we are less sure that we “get” the dance. What follows is a kind of self-help primer in parsing such dance using your own experience and wits. Affirming that principles of organization are at work affirms that intentions are at work. This strategy for getting at intentions by paying careful attention to the observed dance affirms that the work being observed is somehow completed in the mind and body and soul of the observer. That’s us, and it’s something we can do with a bit of practice. It’s a responsibility we can choose to take on. The potential reward? We can (re-)claim possession of a divinely inspired and universal means of expression.
To the audience. Chances are, if you are reading this, you are a well-educated adult who attends movies, plays, museums and music concerts with pleasure. Somewhere along the line, however, one or more negative experiences soured you on contemporary concert dance. You are not alone in this, and it really isn’t your fault. One could spill gallons of ink on the subject, but we won’t, at least not here. To summarize, here are a few salient points:

- Contemporary concert dance can be a demanding art form. It is largely non-verbal and often “abstract,” and we are not used to that.
- Why aren’t we used to that? Because we don’t get much practice looking at such work. Arts education has largely disappeared from our schools, and so we don’t get to exercise our experiencing muscles at an age when they are more flexible. And as will be repeated below, concert dance uses time and space in ways that don’t translate well to the screens through which most of us experience much contemporary culture.

On the other hand, there have surely been rare and fleeting occasions when, watching dance, you experienced thrilling moments of almost inexpressible beauty and poignancy. There has got to be more of that, and there is. But as with the savory walnut, you have to work a bit to get at the deliciousness. What follows, couched with tongue far in cheek as a twelve-step program, is a self-help training regimen designed to make the joys of dance more readily available to you. Choreographers are very smart people, and so are you. Savoring their work on stage is not rocket science. It simply takes a bit of practice to get the hang of it.

Here, then, are Ivan’s twelve steps to increasing your own dance literacy and enjoyment.

(1) First, resolve that you do indeed want to re-animate your curiosity about contemporary concert dance and experience its satisfactions for yourself. Nothing within yourself need stand in your way.

(2) Acknowledge that while everyone is a dancer, including yourself if you only let yourself, not everyone is a choreographer—a creative artist capable of bending movement into meaning and emotion, and committed to perfecting the art and the craft of it.

(3) Realize that just like the writer or painter facing a blank page or canvas, the choreographer has assigned her-/himself, from the moment s/he enters the studio, the awesome task of making choices.

(4) Marvel at the myriad areas in which choices in dance are made—movement, pacing, rhythm, shape, grouping, spacing, not to mention casting, costumes, sound, lights, sets, props, titles, program notes, etc.

(5) Understand that not electing to make use of any of the above elements is as much a choice as using them. It’s also a choice to modify any choice mid-piece. Each work establishes its own rules.

(6) Remember that dance happens in four dimensions, that it occupies all the vectors of space and time that life does, and that none of these vectors fit into the technological bandwidths that shape so much of contemporary culture. This does not make concert dance old-fashioned or irrelevant any more than it makes life itself superfluous.

(7) Think of yourself as the concert-going equivalent of Virginia Woolf’s “common reader,” an intelligent person with experience of the world capable of bringing that intelligence and experience into the performance space and empowered to call on these personal resources in your encounters with the work.
(8) Practice watching the dance actively, energetically. Meet the dance halfway across the footlights.

(9) Pay attention in any way that strikes your fancy to the choices made by the dance-maker and to the ways they evolve and (possibly) resolve in the course of the piece. Given all the variables potentially in play simultaneously, the choreographer has to be a juggler of sorts. She may be known to drop a ball or three. He may not prove to be very adept at the task. Similarly, as the proactive viewer, you have a lot of variables to follow. Begin by focusing on just one or two that catch your attention—partnering patterns, energy levels, use of rhythm or repetition, the relationship of the movement to any music used, the role of (virtuosic) technique. Try to observe non-judgmentally (“technique” is not necessarily “better” than whatever the opposite might be called) and see if you can discern patterns, organizing principles, anything that might make the total add up for you to more than the sum of the parts. The dance may well be abstract, but what you are doing is constructing your own “narrative”—not a story line that you read into the dance, but the personal narrative of your own viewing experience, your own process of discovery.

(10) Empower yourself with both the right and the responsibility to question the dance pro-actively. Once the dance crosses the metaphoric footlights, it is yours. Even if you got in for free, you “invested” your own precious time and attention. What you “purchased” is your own experience of the work. Here’s a lovely paradox: it is the effort you bring to the viewing enterprise more than the efforts contributed by the choreographer and performers that gives the thing enduring value for you. You yourself are the sole judge and jury. An acknowledged masterpiece may be well-danced yet leave you cold. An imperfect work can prove involving, even transformative.

(11) Respect the hard work of the collaborating artists and performers, even if the result does not prove to your liking. But judge the work on the terms the work itself declares are relevant, not the values introduced by extraneous models and examples, by tendentious critics, fashion-conscious friends, media hype or your own pepperoni-challenged digestive tract. A good work will often tell you how to watch it. Take a deep breath, square your shoulders, and stay with it to the end.

(12) See it again. You won’t always feel you “got it” to your satisfaction the first time. And it won’t always (or even often) be your own fault. Not all choreographers are masters, and not all works succeed, even on their own terms. Some works prove to have “private” organizing structures—movement principles rooted in mind-body practices accessible only to acolytes, private psychodramas articulated only (if at all) to therapists, dance idioms indigenous to academies you didn’t attend. We re-read books and re-screen movies, but almost never have the opportunity to see a dance twice so that it can reveal more of itself to us. If you can, see the dance again the next night. It will be different, not so much because the dance has changed, but because you have. And then see something else the following week. As they say on the bottle: Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

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1A note on patterns and organizing principles. Here is a little mental exercise that illustrates the opportunities and challenges inherent in this approach to dance-going.

We invite you to take the moment needed, without looking ahead, to fill in the blanks that follow.

(Pattern A) Supply the most likely next letter in the series ABAB CDC__;
(Solution A) Most people would perceive the rhyme-scheme pattern and suggest “D.” We are adept at perceiving patterns; indeed, we enjoy the exercise. To the degree choreographic choices are not arbitrary but are organized in some fashion, any viewer willing to pay attention can be encouraged to enjoy the
exercise in perception and identify patterns in the exploitation of, say, “craft of choreography” elements—spacing, rhythm, technical virtuosity. The list of possibilities is lengthy, and will surprise no dance aficionado.

(Solution B) Most people would suggest “33,” noting the interval of 5 separating most of the numbers, or more elaborately, “32,” which would make the sequence of intervals symmetric: 4-5-5-4. Actually, the answer is “34.” It’s the sequence of subway stops on the IRT No. 1 train going north from 14th Street towards New York’s Penn Station. Simply paying attention would not have provided the answer. You have to be told. Many dance works can also have such a “private” organizing principle. Yet viewers often berate themselves for not figuring it out on their own.

Merely distinguishing the two cases can avoid confusion and help demystify contemporary dance for many viewers. Encouraging viewers to “just let the dance happen to you” is an invitation to frustration if an essential “key” organizing principle is essentially privileged information.