Aesthetics and Dance Strand

Aesthetics and Dance registrants formed the largest stream within the XIIth International Congress of I.A.P.E.S.G.W. held in Australia in August, 1993. Eighty per cent of registrants made the journey “down under” from overseas, and within the Aesthetics and Dance stream speakers from eight countries presented papers, discussions and practical workshops. Daily themes in this stream included

- the dance making process
- dance and self image
- developing and maintaining the dancing body and
- dance as living culture.

It was important to note that a number of issues of importance in the dance context for women and girls were also addressed within the other streams of the Congress. For example, dancers’ health concerns within the Sports Science Stream (Dr. Barbara Drinkwater’s Keynote was particularly pertinent) and community perceptions of the dancers’ image within the Fitness and Recreation Stream.

The overall Congress theme was ‘Women Moving Ahead in Changing Times’ and was especially apt within the dance sessions. There was clear evidence among the presenters that aesthetics and dance considerations were gaining a focus and moving towards new academic horizons.

Australian, Anita Donaldson took the lead on Day One with a concise discourse on structural components that comprise choreological images. The depth of her study and the innovative relationships she had explored between musical composition and the choreography of Leigh Warren indicated scholarship of a high order.

German presenter, Gabrielle Klein pinpointed the characteristics of the female dancer as represented historically from a feminist perspective. In her paper entitled “The Lascivious Gaze: Images of the Female Dancer,” she exposed the fascination with the feminine in the dancer and patriarchal society’s own definition of “woman” reflected in the roles dancers have been asked to idealize.

A new Australian national curriculum for the training of studio dance teachers in issues of occupational health and safety by Rosemary Bennett, was summarized with a realization of the urgency of dealing with blatantly unsafe practises (both physical and emotional) amongst the predominantly female population of dance students. Whilst being aware of the acceptance of inherent distortions of the body within a stylistic method and the artistic/choreographic freedom for risk taking as major factors, it must still be expected that girls taking dance classes in the community should have a longevity of involvement free from
debilitating and preventable injuries which currently adversely affect a significant proportion of Australian students.

Choreography was considered by some presenters for its capacity to take the dancer on a phenomenological voyage of self-discovery, and as a healing process of emotional and spiritual significance. Others spoke of the enhancement of self-esteem and the dance process as a lived experience, a bodily form of knowing.

As the week progressed a dichotomy emerged, between the soundly researched and “cutting edge” exposés of crucial and relevant issues of aesthetics and dance, and the seemingly dated and anecdotal opinions expressed via paper and practical demonstration of an emotive and reactionary nature. The image projected to the Congress delegates as a whole was also polarized by a lack of administrative diplomacy concerning the venue preparation and on some occasions cancellation of dance performances and videos. These popular and inspiring range of international dance presentations were for some a Congress highlight.

Keynote speaker and Artistic Director of “Dance North” Cheryl Stock, picked up on the perception of dance as purely entertainment and a pleasing visual spectacle. “In our eagerness to promote dance we often present it or participate in it under inappropriate or even dangerous conditions thus further increasing its marginalization and reinforcing common public beliefs.” Stock challenged the commonly conservative and inaccurate aspects of “body based” arts forms as intellectually less rigorous or undervalued. The aspect of assertiveness amongst the largely female dance collective in defending the parameters of this physical art form is at issue, as is the disempowerment which follows a reliance on purely the emotional aesthetic of the dance experience.

It was suggested women ought be more proud of this mind-body connection displayed through dance, and celebrate the growing output of analysis, documentation, research and critical theory now being associated with the field of aesthetics and dance. If women in dance are to overcome the common characteristics found within this arts industry, there is a battle ahead against unrealistic body image, fear of failure resulting from extreme stress, a tendency to be apolitical and inarticulate and the high injury rate.

These are the common characteristics that must be addressed:

- hierarchical in nature
- imitative, repetitious and drill-type training methods
- unrealistic aspirations towards an external ideal
- excessive competition
- high levels of specialization
- low levels of broad-based educational background and
- limited “lifespan” of a dance career