

Dougl, Dance and Inspiration

What do you do when the art or media that you enjoy stops delivering?

When this happens for me I tend to look back grateful for all that I've gotten from an artist's creative genius even as I turn the page.

In this episode, I want to share and pay tribute to some of the moments in dance that changed the way I think about art and artistic expression.

Thanks for joining me for Dougl.

I first time saw Sankai Junku was nearly 20 years ago. Sankai Junku is a Japanese butoh dance troupe founded in 1975 and when I first saw them in the 1980s they performed their pieces outdoors. Sometimes they would start with members of the company suspending themselves upside from the sides of buildings slowly being lowered to the plaza below.

On September 10, 1985, in Seattle, Washington, one of the dancers fell to his death and though they continued performing outdoors through the 1980s they've spent most of the last on stage indoors.

Working indoors gave them lights and sets that often involve watering and sand. Costumes that ranged over the years from white robes to corsets and fundoshi. These performances often seem to go to the core of what it meant to be a human being trying to survive, finding joy and pain, life and death. Basic, elemental stuff and some of their work struck me very profoundly.

When I say it's time to turn the page I don't mean that Sankai Junku isn't worth seeing anymore. On the contrary, I think if you've never seen them and have the chance you certainly should. I'll put up a video of one of their performances for you to check out on the Deep Dive website. For me, the most important thing that I derive from art of all kinds is the way it makes me feel. Emotional engagement is what I want. It doesn't have to be good or warm feeling either. And of course, it's a bonus when something resonates intellectually you know, gives you something to chew on but the feeling comes first.

I have been fortunate over the years to see such a wide variety of dance performances and as I wait for something new to come along to give me that spark I thought I'd share someone of the moments in dance that have left me feeling exhilarated and deeply inspired.

Part of the luck and fortune I mentioned is that when I was college age I worked at the John F Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. and I got to see all sorts of things. I saw everything from Wagner's entire ring cycles to For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow's not Enough before it opened on Broadway and lots and lots of dance mostly ballet.

So it came as some surprise a few years ago while watching the Mark Morris production of The Rites of Spring when I had the same feeling I did at Sankai. I felt nothing. I'm not a big Mark Morris Dance Company fan but it was the form itself that I felt done with. My interests had slowly been shifting to modern dance and now ballet just didn't do it for me anymore.

Here are a few ballet performances that have given me such pleasure and inspiration.

The first is Don Quixote. Mikhail Baryshnikov mounted this version in 1980 for American Ballet Theatre. This version has been staged by many companies around the world. Don Quixote was a staple of Russian ballet dating back to the late 1800s. Baryshnikov said it saw it first in his hometown of Riga, in Leningrad. He grew-up dancing the Don Q pas de Deux in his ballet class then starring in a full production at the Kirov Ballet.

Just imagine how amazing that all must have been for Baryshnikov. You grow-up become a ballet dancer which in itself is no small task. You travel around the world find yourself in Canada where you seize the moment and defect to the west and a few years later you are presenting to the world your version of a ballet you grew up watching.

See Clip.

On March 23, 1978, Baryshnikov's version of Don Quixote performed by the American Ballet Theater had its world premiere featuring Baryshnikov and Gelsey Kirkland in the leads.

There was so much buzz around this ballet that somehow I knew I had to be there on opening night. There was such a level of anticipation in the air that the audience started applauding when the house lights went down.

Baryshnikov's version was compact and dazzling from beginning to end. he said in that Times interview he wanted his ballet to be as tight as a Broadway musical and boy was it ever. Normally, you might be a little sniffy about someone creating a piece for themselves to dance in but you'd be a dope in this case. Baryshnikov was a very charming and athletic dancer. he leads seemed effortlessly high and he performed them at the time with a great sense of bravura, showing off and at others with barely a hint that he was doing anything special.

And then there was Gelsey Kirkland if you haven't seen much ballet you might think of women dancers as being frail lifted being carried around the stage. I heard some describe ballerinas like that which is just nuts. Baryshnikov gave Kirkland just as many stunning moments as he gave his character.

She has an entrance carrying a fan where the leaps she takes into air leave legs parallel to the floor and this gesture is completed with her looking behind her and she sails forward. When she did this the first time you would have thought you were at a rock concert or sporting event the cheers were so loud. Paired it was exquisite and the rest of the company all had something staggering to show us. What I got out of that night wasn't the beauty and fragility of love or the power of love it was more of the awareness that ballet could have an immediate and dynamic.

Speaking of immediate and dynamic. I once sat in a rehearsal room watching a pair of dancers from ABT prepare for a performance of Swan Lake. The power and control of what they do were almost overwhelming. The combination of athleticism and artistry that makes it seem so easy from a seat in the theater is pretty awe-inspiring.

So as I say, by the time I was 20 or 22 I had seen lots of theater Avant-garde theatre and not a small amount of nudity on stage so I was fairly blasé about it. I remember seeing the touring company of the Peter Schaffer play Equus. In the play, a young man recounts his descent into mental illness where he hears the voices of the horses he cares for. These voices are so pervasive that they won't allow him to make love to the young woman he's in love with. To stop these

voices he blinds several of the horses. There are two or three occasions when the young man and woman are naked and one where the young man is naked riding one of the horses.

About halfway through the performance, I saw I heard a great kerfuffle on the aisle in front of me and it was a man and woman muttering stepping over feet to get out. You could hear people telling them to sit down and I remember the woman saying this play is disgusting. the nudity was disgusting but the blinding of six imaginary horses, no problem.

I chuckled at the story over the years until I was sat in a theater watching the final moments of a ballet when I experienced my own feeling of shock.

Music

The Afternoon of a Faun

The ballet, The Afternoon of a Faun was choreographed by Nijinsky for the Ballets Russes with music by Debussy. It was first performed in Paris in 1912. Both the music and the ballet were inspired by the poem. The costumes and sets were designed by the painter Léon Bakst. Jean Cocteau, helped Nijinsky who spoke little French to understand the poem which helped Nijinsky form and outline for what would become the ballet.

I think it's worth noting that though much Debussy's music is now thought by some as sickly sweet at the time he was considered at the vanguard of modern classical music. The same could be said of Nijinsky.

A few years after Faun in 1913 Nijinsky and Stravinsky created Rite of Spring and violence broke out at the opening night.

The 12-minute ballet is the story of a young faun who meets several nymphs and proceeds to flirt with and pursue them, the ballet was meant to disrupt the classical formalism that had come before.

In the inspiration for the look of the ballet was the forms on a Grecian urn. Where the figures are in relief, in the ballet dancers were presented as part of a large tableau like the figures on a Greek urn moving across the stage in profile which was a theater technique invented by the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold.

On the opening night, the ballet was met with a mixture of applause and boos. After the applause and the booing, an announcement was made that it would be performed again. After the repeated performance, the audience applauded, and the sculptor, Auguste Rodin who was in the audience, stood up cheering.

The newspaper Le Figaro condemned the ballet's vile movements of erotic bestiality and gestures of heavy shamelessness. The police were brought in for the second performance, which sold out but they didn't find any obscenity. Some of you might be thinking, how old is this guy? Was he there the night this thing premiered?

To quote Margo Channing in All About Eve, "Contrary to popular opinion, I was not in the company of Our American Cousin the night Lincoln was shot."

I can't remember the year that I saw Rodolph Nureyev in the Afternoon of a Faun but I know it was in San Francisco. In the ballet, Nureyev plays the Faun. Not to compare them but Baryshnikov. was a movie star of a dancer his movie idol good looks and his visible pleasure in performing contrasted with Nureyev's at times severe exterior. Watching him I always felt I was in the presence of unapproachable greatness and that we were being allowed to glimpse his greatness.

By the way, that's not a criticism it's just that I couldn't imagine Nureyev ever telling the Times he wanted to create a ballet that rivaled a Broadway musical.

This distance, power, and reserve made him a magnificent Faun. Half man, half-animal the angular movements of the dance created a sense of heightened desire on the part of the audience, at least from this member of the audience.

If you've never seen the ballet it is set in the clearing of a wood with a mound at the back of the set where the final moments of the ballet take place. The faun flirts with and peruses several nymphs but none of them seem particularly interested in him. As the other nymphs leave the stage one nymph remains. The faun and nymph lock arms and dance together before she exits leaving behind her veil. Smiling the faun retrieves the veil.

In the meantime, the nymphs appear again to play with him again be he seems to be caught up in a reverie of the moment passed and trophy of the veil. In the ballets last few minutes, the faun retrieves the scarf holding up to admire it then laying it down with great tenderness. and desire he climbs the upstage mound of earth spreads the scarf on the ground lowering himself on to it with his head tucked in and arms to his sides. His body tenses throwing back his head baring his teeth in climax face down on the mound as the orchestra plays the last strains as the stage fades to black.

I've seen the ballet many times after that first time but I have to say to my surprise I was a little shocked by the ending.

I guess up to the final moments I had been lude into a comfortable distance appreciating the strangeness of the movements and the overall beauty of the piece only to be confronted with something unambiguously erotic and alive.

It was startling and it certainly changed the way I thought about Nureyev.

The last performance I'll share gave me the greatest charge eliciting the biggest reaction from the audience.

Dougl

The Dance Theater of Harlem was created largely out of a desire to prove folks wrong. long after slavery ended black people in the United States were considered to have a natural talent for a sort of primitive artistic expression. one that relied on emotion minus any sort of discipline or western refinement. Anything that required rigor was considered far beyond the ability of black bodies and voices to embody due to a perceived lack of intellect. The higher up the art food chain you travel the more staunchly held these views were. Lasting well into the early part of the 20th century and beyond. In 1969, dancer Arthur Mitchell and ballet master and choreographer Karel Shook founded the Dance Theater of Harlem as a place where African American dancers

could be showcased performing everything from the classical ballet canon to folk and modern dance pieces.

I have seen them do many fine things breathing new life into old standbys. They mounted a lavish production of Stravinsky's firebird suite with sets and costumes by Geoffrey Holder.

Geoffrey Holder was a force of nature he was a painter, an actor, a dancer, a choreographer, and director. He directed musical The Wiz as well as designing the costumes and sets.

In 1984, He was asked by Arthur Mitchell to create a piece for the DTH and boy did he ever. I went to the Washington DC premiere. the program consisted of Suites for Mahler a Michael Smuin tribute to Mahler using music from two of his song cycles.

When you think of Mahler if you do at all you might think of somber music unfurled slowly and you wouldn't be wrong but Michael Smuin put together songs with different feelings and tempo combined with choreography full of delicacy and athleticism. The end of this piece is what I recall the most vividly. A very formal pas de Deux performed achingly slow, it was very exposing for the dancers as their every move seemed to be held just long enough to see every flaw, but there didn't seem to be any. A friend of mine said it was so formal that it almost felt we were viewing it under glass. What I felt was that the company was saying to the mostly white audience. A lack of rigor? Take that.

As the intermission ended and before the lights went up you knew something special was about to happen when out of the orchestra pit you heard this. Music To underline the point the male lead walks on stage throws off his beautiful red robe plants his feet and the staff he's carrying on the stage and with that the feast for the eyes and ears called Dougla began.

The word Dougla is a derivation from a Caribbean Hindustani word that means "many", "much" or "a mix". It is also used negatively referring to a mixed-race child as illegitimate. Holder used it as a point of pride in his birthplace and the Afro-Indo mixed of races. The percussive drumming was written by the composer Tania Leon in collaboration with Holder. As was his custom in addition to choreographing the piece Holder designed the set and costumes.

Dougla depicts the ritual and pageantry of a wedding procession set to the beat of those throbbing drums you heard.

What I recall most about Dougla is its world of high priestess and noblemen with no reference to the west. It is regal and refined driven by a persistent and deliberate beat. It's joyous without pandering. It is declarative. It says here we are steeped in our tradition and you're welcome to witness the sumptuousness.

The high point of the piece for me is an endless stream of dazzling colors and patterns worn by the 20 or so dancers as they dance, stride and glide their way across the stage.

When the piece started you could feel a little tension from the ballet subscriber folks not quite sure what to expect but by the end, as the drums played and the stage went dark there was thunderous applause accompanied by shouting bravos, people leaping to their feet and about 5-6 curtain calls.

Not long after these performances, I got to meet Geoffrey Holder and I recounted this night and the tension I felt at the start. I remember him asking me, "Were pearls clutched?" I laughed and said at the start I think so, but not by the end. he said, "Good as long as pearls were clutched." So, those are just a few of the performances that have inspired and thrilled me over the years. I can't leave this topic without mentioning the most influential work of dance for me across all genres and that's Martha Graham.

Graham's work and the performances I've shared with you in this episode changed my idea of what was possible. So while turning the page on some of those forms of dance art is a little bittersweet I take the inspiration with me and more than a little spark of inspiration as I wait for the next awesome thing to come over the horizon.

And for that I for that I guess I should thank Sankai Junku even as I lovingly turn the page.

Music

For a deeper dive please check-out the Deep Dive website at reggiedeepdive.com where you can film clips of each piece of dance including a clip of Nijinsky himself performing Afternoon of a Faun and clips from Dougl.

Please subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening to it now. Dougl, Dance, and Inspiration was researched, written and presented by me, Reggie.

Thanks see you next time.