ARTS & LETTERS

Leading the Dance

THE SOURCE: "Dancers as Living Archives" by Martha Ullman West, in ***The Chronicle Review***, April 7, 2006.

In the Khmer Rouge's decimation of Cambodia's educated classes in the mid-1970s, 90 percent of classical Cambodian dancers were killed. With each death went a repository of more than 4,500 gestures and positions, the vocabulary of movements that comprise classical Cambodian dance, an offshoot of India's Bharata Natyam. "By killing off the dancers, the Khmer Rouge came within an inch of killing off the dance," writes Martha Ullman West, a Portland, Oregon, dance writer.

Dances can be preserved through film, video, various notations, the visual arts, and, sometimes, by written accounts. But there is no more satisfactory method of transmitting the intricacies of movement than from dancer to dancer. "Long after they leave the stage, in their minds and muscles they hold the memory of form, rhythm, mood, and intent, constituting an irreplaceable resource for performers, historians, and frequently the choreographers themselves," writes West. In the case of traditional dances such as Cambodia's, the only archive may be the dance performers.

Modern dances are also subject to erosion or distortion. Financial and managerial difficulties crippled Martha Graham's dance company after her death in 1991. Lacking continuity in artistic direction from dancers who personally worked with Graham, the company's performances faltered, though a recent tour shows evidence that it has righted itself somewhat. "Without Graham's dancers, works that are as much America's national treasure as Khmer dances are Cambodia's were nearly relegated to some wobbly films—and

A young dancer at the School of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, learns classical dance from a survivor of the Khmer Rouge cultural purges.

very few of those," writes West.

Even those dances that are recorded on film may not be adequately preserved. Avant-garde choreographer Yvonne Rainer complained of the camera's fixed position and its tendency to foreshorten when she assessed a film of her own performance of her piece *Trio A*. The film "reveals someone who can't straighten her legs, can't plié 'properly' and can't achieve the 'original' elongation and vigor in her jumps, arabesques. . . and shifts of weight," she wrote. Rainer's work has been notated and she has taught it to "authorized transmitters."

But some dances simply can't endure unchanged. Many of the nuances of Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine's signature 1946 ballet *The Four Temperaments* are lost, even in current performances by the company he founded, the New York City Ballet. Dance historian Nancy Reynolds has filmed various aging dancers who worked with Balanchine as they coached younger dancers on the finer points of the performance. It remains to be seen whether this project can preserve the spirit of the dance.

As for Cambodia's classical dancers, a few did survive. Many of them went to the United States and Europe, with the memory of the dance embedded in their muscles and their minds. Otherwise it would have been lost, for, as one survivor said, "the dancers were the documents."

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Rembrandt's Theatrical Realism

THE SOURCE: "The God of Realism" by Robert Hughes, in ***The New York Review of Books*** (April 6, 2006).

The works of some great artists inspire admiration and awe, but fail to connect at the gut level with the viewer. Not so the paintings of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–69), observes art critic Robert Hughes. In an age dominated by grand paintings and ennobled human subjects, Rembrandt never used "the human form as a means of escape from the disorder and episodic ugliness of the real world." He imbued his subjects with enough flaws and "ordinariness" to earn a place as "the first god of realism after Caravaggio."

Yet a misunderstanding of Rembrandt's realism has been one of the pitfalls of the effort by the Rembrandt Research Project and others to eliminate work falsely attributed to Rembrandt from his canon. One art historian discredited a putative Rembrandt called *David Playing the Harp Before Saul* (1650–55), on the grounds it was "too theatrical." Says Hughes: "Theatricality doesn't disprove Rembrandt; it is one of the things that makes him a great Baroque artist, as well as a great realist."

The task of authenticating Rembrandt's work is vastly complicated by the milieu in which he painted. Hardly a reclusive genius, Rembrandt surrounded himself with students and assistants who learned to emulate his style. Hughes lists among the characteristics of Rembrandt's work the honest, even vulgar, details of commonplace life, the ability to depict "unvarnished, unedited pain," as in his gory *The Blinding of Samson* (1636), and a skill as "the supreme depicter of inwardness, of human thought," even in allegorical figures. Touches of humanity's imperfection, to Hughes, serve to dramatize the subject matter. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668) the boy has lost a shoe

EXCERPT

Room for Improvement

Poetry writing is more humane than life. It's full of second chances. Your sentence, so to speak, can always be revised. You can fix the inappropriate, adjust every carelessness, improve what you felt. How perfect for someone like me: unabashed avoidance one afternoon, a little excess in the evening, a few corrections in the morning. The various ways I've embarrassed myself, crumpled up, in the wastebasket, never to be seen.

—**STEPHEN DUNN**, Pulitzer Prize–winning poet, in ***The Georgia Review*** (Winter 2006)