

national magazines. Today, dancers and choreographers find that even a steady income, let alone this degree of fame, is nearly impossible to attain. According to Sara Hamdan, herself a former dancer, “the dance world is crumbling, and young dancers . . . are training for a profession that grows smaller and less significant by the year.”

Dance has fallen out of favor with the public, especially younger audiences. Ballet attendance dropped by a third between 1982 and 2008 and by nearly half among those 18 to 24.

Dance demands a lot of its audience—it’s not an iPod experience. The legacies of the innovative choreographers who turned dance into “a cultural sensation” in the 20th century are now at risk. The Paul Taylor Dance Company, for example, stages about half as many shows today as it did in 2008 and earns fees that are much less than those it received not long ago. The New York City Ballet has laid off dancers, reduced staff salaries, and initiated a hiring freeze, but still has a large deficit.

The only way dance will recover is by finding a way to appeal to young people, Hamdan says. Tough customers, they hold an idea of dance that reflects what they see on videos and television—dance as competition or as a display of pure physical talent. Ballet and modern dance have traditionally concerned themselves with conveying meaningful narratives, and dance companies are reluctant to experiment. Instead, they pour money into restoring marble lobbies and proscenium arches—not a shrewd way

to attract people who are put off by the expense and formality of dance.

Trained dancers find themselves in a difficult situation as companies continue to close, leaving a large number of talented dancers competing for a shrinking number of positions. Much like journalism schools, dance schools have continued to churn out trained professionals despite the field’s decline. Even those dancers with paying work usually need to take on other jobs to pay their bills. Younger dancers find themselves vying against veterans for positions with minor companies. The traditional system of handing down knowledge from one dance generation to the next is breaking down. “Slowly but surely,” Hamdan notes, “a career path is fading away.”

ARTS & LETTERS

The Paradox of Words

THE SOURCE: “The Muse of Impossibility” by Alberto Manguel, in *The Threepenny Review*, Fall 2010.

ARGENTINE ESSAYIST ALBERTO Manguel believes that at the heart of writing lies a paradox: Writers think that they “can construct (or reconstruct) the world through words”—that language can, by expressing reality, create reality—but at the same time, capturing the world with words is impossible. Writers can never create anything more than “something that suggests an approximation to a copy of a blurry intuition of the real thing,” Manguel writes. “All our

The best that writers can achieve, says Argentine essayist Alberto Manguel, is “an approximation to a copy of a blurry intuition of the real thing.”

libraries are the glorious record of that failure.”

The conviction that language can create worlds is an ancient one. According to Jewish mystical thought, God created the 22 letters of Hebrew, and all beings came into existence through the “mere interweaving” of the alphabet: The words of God created the earth and all that lives upon it.

But, Manguel says, this story has a counterpart—the story of the Tower of Babel, where God divided the world’s unified tongue into many, and no longer could any single language encapsulate the essence of any thing. Taken together, these stories illustrate both the promise and the limitations of language.

Every time we use words to express ourselves, we implicitly declare our faith in the words’ ability to convey what we mean, but, says Manguel, “faith in language is, like all true faiths, unaltered by a practice that contradicts its claims—unaltered in spite of our knowledge that whenever we try to say something, however simple, however clear-cut, only a shadow of that something travels from our conception to its utterance, and further from its utterance to its reception and understanding.”

Manguel notes that the paradox of language is “apparent in almost every culture.” Hindu poet Tulsi Das “argued that the reality of fiction is always other than the reality of the material world, and overrides it.” For Zen Buddhists, “the instantaneous illumination or *satori* is always both within and beyond the grasp of words.”

The poet and writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986) explored this paradox throughout his life. In his poem “Ariosto and the Arabs,” he

wrote, “No one can write a book. / For a book truly to be / You require the sunset and the dawn, / Centuries, weapons, and the cleaving sea.”

Could an artist actually create reality in some of his stories? In “The Congress,” Borges’ character “dreams of compiling a complete encyclopedia of the world and in the end realizes that the encyclopedia already exists, and is the world itself.” In another, “Parable of the Palace,” a poet perfectly captures an emperor’s estate, “causing it to dis-

appear.” The only artist whose work is reality, according to Borges, is God.

The futility of attempting to create a world through words gnawed at Borges. He wrote to a friend in 1919, “Sometimes I think that it’s idiotic to have the ambition of being a more-or-less mediocre maker of phrases. But that is my destiny.” Of course, Borges’ “mediocre” phrases are cherished by readers the world over, failures though they might be.

OTHER NATIONS

Russia’s Farm Comeback

THE SOURCE: “Russia’s Food Policies and Foreign Policy” by Stephen K. Wegren, in *Demokratizatsiya*, Summer 2010.

ONLY 20 YEARS AGO, IMAGES of disgruntled Soviet citizens standing in long queues near run-down groceries were a common sight on Western television. But recently, the fruits of the Russian *zemlya* (earth) have made their way to dinner tables from Oslo to Miami. The resurgence of Russian agriculture introduces a new and intriguing dimension into relations with the often bellicose giant, writes Stephen K. Wegren, a political scientist at Southern Methodist University: food policy.

In the years leading to and following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians endured “chronic [food] shortages, poor quality, poor selection, and even food

rationing,” Wegren writes. Long-standing state subsidies for farming collapsed along with communism, bringing agricultural production to a halt and causing food prices to skyrocket—they rose a mind-boggling 2,670 percent in 1992. During these tough years, much of the food Russians managed to get their hands on came from individual garden plots the Soviet government had parceled out when the food crisis dawned in the 1980s.

Buying food from other countries became common practice, with Moscow officials estimating that large Russian cities imported more than 70 percent of their meat in the mid-1990s. In 1998, after a particularly poor harvest, Russia had to accept nearly \$1.5 billion in food aid and humanitarian assistance from the United States and the European Union.

This “political humiliation” spurred the once proud superpower to make big changes to its food policy, Wegren writes.

Over the next few years, the Kremlin plumped the coffers of the country’s agricultural producers by forgiving farm debts, simplifying tax regimes, and increasing financial support through investment, interest-rate subsidies, and credit extensions. The government pledged to shield grain producers from a devastating drop in prices during good harvests (when supply flooded the market and drove down prices) by buying up the country’s surplus grain. In the interest of becoming “food secure,” the state introduced a menu of protectionist quotas, tariffs, and bans to squeeze foreign producers out of the Russian market.

The new policies seem to have paid off: The volume and yield of food commodities produced in Russia have vastly improved, and 78 percent of the country’s farms reported breaking even or making a profit in 2007, compared with