

Gender and Individuality in the “Gold Section” of Twyla Tharp’s *The Catherine Wheel*

In an interview with the Academy of Achievement, Twyla Tharp reveals that at the start of her career, she believed she could make an impact on dancing, the future of dancing, and what can be accomplished through dancing. She believed that there were unexplored possibilities, “in terms of physical movement, in terms of community, and in terms of what dance could address in our society (Tharp, 1993).” This vision has served as Tharp’s motivation throughout her career, and her works have successfully brought dance to the next level by being the first to focus on various controversial issues. In the “gold section” of *The Catherine Wheel*, Tharp abolishes preexisting perceptions of gender and individuality.

The current culture is defined by myths of established gender differences, called “masculine” and “feminine” (Daly 1987). These beliefs are especially strong in the dance world, where dancers are distinguished based on gender, with each sex embodying a predetermined role and set of movements. Across various cultures and dance styles, a woman’s movement is smooth and graceful, while a man’s is vigorous and athletic (Jonas 1992). Partnering consists of one male and one female, with the male supporting the woman. *He* and *she* are not equals and do not “participate equally in their choreographic coming together (Foster 1995:1).” In response to this issue, Twyla Tharp choreographed *The Catherine Wheel*, in which she creates a society where everyone is equal and there is no concept of gender. She abolishes the stereotypes of “femininity” and “masculinity”

through her use of movement and interaction between dancers. She accomplishes this so well that it is difficult to determine the gender of each dancer.

In this dance, the women and men dance the same movements; there is no distinction between female and male actions. For instance, ten minutes into this section, there is a group consisting of three males and one female dancing together in unison. All three dancers swing their right arm forward in a half circle parallel to the group, followed by two skips forward. They lead the skips with their right leg and use these movements to curve around in an arc, ending with their backs facing the audience. They jump once and as they land, they swing their right arm up to the side and then across their body. They skip backwards towards stage right, with their arms straight out in front of them, with only the forearms, wrists, and hands moving up and down. The hands point in the opposite direction as the movement, and the movement as a whole is quick. After two skips, they finish in a lunge with their right leg forward, facing stage left. Their arms stretch upwards until they are straight up over their heads. Similarly, approximately two minutes later, two men and a woman dance in unison as they move from downstage to upstage. They begin with one leg bent and the other straight, with all of their weight on the bent leg. The straight leg quickly swings around in a half circle behind the dancer. Meanwhile, the opposite arm to the standing leg is bent at the elbow, wrapped across the front of the body. The other arm is also bent at the elbow, but behind the dancer's body. They repeat this leg swing twice, alternating sides per swing, and beginning with the right leg bent. After the second time, the straight leg taps the ground once, and the entire segment is repeated again, this time with the left leg bent first. These are examples of

movements which are neither “feminine” nor “masculine,” and are danced by both men and women.

In addition, Tharp’s use of partnering is especially powerful in removing the idea of gender. Two minutes into the “gold section,” a male dancer stands next to the upstage left entrance, with his knees bent and legs apart. His hands are placed on top of his left knee, with one palm on top of the other. Another man, the runner, sprints onstage and quickly steps on the first dancer’s awaiting hands. Instantaneously, the first man pushes the runner to the right, and this momentum propels the runner into the air. He lingers for a moment, pulling his right foot up to his knee, forming a triangle with his right leg. He throws his arms into the air, straight up over his head, and he appears as if he is flying. He lands just as quickly as he took off, continuing to run towards stage right with full speed. He loops around and begins running towards another male dancer, the base, who is spinning in the center of the stage. The runner throws himself in the air, with his arms in a “V” over his head. His straight legs quickly come together and then apart, beating only once in midair. The base stops spinning as soon as the runner jumps, and catches the runner under the armpits, helping him land. The runner then lifts his right leg behind him in a 90 degree angle, perpendicular to the ground. This leg is bent at the knee, such that it forms a 90 degree angle parallel to the ground. His supporting leg is also bent, and his arms are stretched to the sides. The base holds the runner by the waist, and spins him in a circle one and a half times. Suddenly, a third male who has been dancing independently onstage joins them just as the runner puts his right leg down. The base and new male surround the runner on each side, with the base on the right and the new male on the left. The runner places one arm on each of the other two dancers, and kicks his

legs upward until his legs are perpendicular to the ground. By having male dancers support each other, Tharp destroys the common idea that partnering involves one male and one female, with the man supporting the woman. The move where the base spins the runner in a circle is often done in ballet, with the danseur holding and spinning the ballerina. Tharp erases the idea of gender by showing two males dancing this same move.

Furthermore, approximately one minute after this segment, two women support a male dancer. There is one woman on each side of the man, and the man has his arms stretched to the sides. Each woman holds one of his arms with both of her hands. Together, they run forward, and the man kicks his right foot up, propelling himself into the air just as his left foot comes off the ground. He is momentarily suspended in a split, with the two women still holding his arms and supporting him. He lands gracefully on his right foot and quickly steps out and begins to turn. Similarly, approximately two minutes later, a man is standing on his right leg with his left leg out straight behind him in a 45 degree angle. A woman runs to him and holds him by the waist, supporting him as he spins to his left. In these movements, the role reversal abolishes the idea that men always support the women. Tharp uses this to demonstrate that men and women are equal, and that people must support one another regardless of gender.

In today's society, the issues of gender and individuality are coupled together, with the common belief that men are superior to women and thus are entitled to possess and manipulate them. According to Ann Daly, women are viewed not as individuals, but as objects that belong to men. These ideas have been carried over into the dance world, partly due to Balanchine's ballets. In his pieces, the women are often completely

submissive to the males, who gladly dominate them. Balanchine himself believed that a woman's role is to fascinate men (Daly 1987). Also, Susan Foster describes how two bodies "dance out a specific kind of relationship between masculine and feminine (Foster 1995: 1)" as a result of their distinctly gendered behavior. The woman represents attraction itself, and is presented by the man for everyone to see (Foster 1995). Twyla Tharp opposes these ideas in the "gold section" by emphasizing the independence of the female dancers.

When the women and men partner in this piece, they act as equals. The women decide their own movements, and are never submissive or dominated by the men. Within the first minute of the dance, a man is standing with his knees bent at stage right. A woman runs towards him and leaps, with her legs in a split in the air. She throws herself at him, with complete trust, and the man catches her around her waist mid-leap. He holds her in the split and throws her up. The woman quickly turns around, landing in his arms on her stomach with her hands straight out behind her. The man puts her down, and the dancers run in opposite directions, the woman towards stage right and the man towards stage left. The man leaps twice, and stops at stage left. He turns to the right, with his right knee bent, leaning towards stage right. A woman runs in towards him, and just as she reaches him, she jumps and turns in midair, kicking her left leg behind her and pulling her right leg up to meet her left knee. Her right leg forms a triangle and her left leg is extended behind her, in a 135 degree angle from the ground. The man catches her by her left leg and her waist, and dips her upper body forward, causing her left leg to extend higher. He spins her quickly to the right multiple times, and they spin so fast that they become a blur. The image of these two women throwing themselves at the man

demonstrates that they are in control of their movement, and are free and independent. Simultaneously, the man is there to support them, but is not controlling them.

Societal norms have become powerful in today's world, influencing an individual's decisions and actions. People have a tendency to "go with the flow," and those that differ are often rejected by society. Tharp demonstrates in the "gold section" that individuality is a positive force, and can coexist with a strong community. Although the dancers are united by the pure energy that is created on stage, each dancer acts as an individual.

This is shown from the start of the dance, with multiple performers dancing unique sequences at the same time. Within the first minute of the piece, four dancers perform different sequences simultaneously. Two of the four dancers are moving together as a pair, as described in the previous paragraph. The female dancer has just thrown herself into the arms of the male dancer, and after they spin together, the male reaches his right arm towards the female as he slides down to the floor, ending up on his back. Meanwhile, the female kicks her right leg over him, drawing an arc with her pointed toe. She then grabs the male's arms and helps him up. They continue holding hands as they skip twice and then spin three times, leaning back with their arms outstretched. Both the male and female lift their left legs up in a 45 degree angle and exit stage right by hopping on their standing leg. While this pair is dancing at the front of the stage, the remaining man and woman dance their own sequences. The man runs across the stage, entering from stage left, and kicks his left foot up in the air in a 45 degree angle. His right leg follows and meets his left foot in the air. His arms are stretched in a "V" over his head. He lands quickly and immediately begins spinning in place with his

arms pulled in close to his body. He takes a step in preparation and propels himself in the air, kicking his right leg behind him in a 90 degree angle as he jumps. He repeats this on the other side and steps as he lands. He jumps and kicks his left leg out to the side, allowing the momentum of the kick to carry his body, turning him around to face the back. Simultaneously, his arms swing above his head as he kicks, and lower as his left leg descends. Upon landing, the man spins quickly again and exits the stage. Separate from his movement, the woman runs onstage from the opposite side, stage right, and leaps twice, kicking her left leg forward up to a 90 degree angle, followed by her right leg behind her. She reaches forward with her arms, and opens to the side, alluding to the arm movements of the breaststroke. During each leap, she momentarily holds the split midair, and continues running as soon as she lands. Once she reaches stage left, she turns and repeats the leaps across the stage, this time leading with her right leg. After two leaps, she runs off of the stage. Clearly, each of these dancers is independent; two dancers partner in the front of the stage, one man kicks and spins in the back, and a woman leaps on and off the stage in a semicircle. Their distinct movements emphasize their individuality, and this theme is continued throughout the piece.

Furthermore, even when the dancers are doing the same choreography, they complete the movement on their own time. Approximately two minutes into the piece, four female dancers run on the stage, completing the same sequence of movements, but in a canon. Each dancer is delayed from the previous dancer by approximately four counts, illustrating that they are moving to their own beat. The sequence begins with a small leap, with each leg out to the side at a 45 degree angle. The right leg leads, and the dancer lands with her weight on her right leg. Her left foot is pointed and lands behind

her right foot. Both knees are bent and her arms form a circle in front of her, perpendicular to the ground. This is repeated to the other side, this time leading with and landing on the left leg. The dancer then quickly spins three times to the right with her arms in a circle parallel to the ground. She steps out of the turn onto her right leg, with her left leg straight and extended to the side, the pointed toe touching the ground. Her arms open such that her right arm is straight up over her head and her left arm is in front of her, parallel to the ground. This pose is held for only one second, and the dancer immediately steps on her left leg and kicks her right leg up in front of her, forming a 90 degree angle to the ground. The momentum of this kick propels her in the air, and she quickly turns her torso and kicks her left leg behind her, forming a 135 degree angle to the ground. She lands in a lunge with her right foot forward, and the momentum of the previous move causes her torso to turn towards her back leg. Her arms follow, swinging and wrapping around her body with the right arm in front and left in back. This entire sequence is danced with a domino effect, which helps convey the independence of each dancer.

Twyla Tharp's choreography as a whole is also a form of individuality. She is among the "newest generation of experimenters [who] recognize no boundaries – geographical or otherwise – in its search for dance that speaks to contemporary audiences (Jonas 1992: 235)." Tharp has taken dance to a new level, not only because she addresses controversial issues, but also because she incorporates characteristics of a variety of cultures and dance styles. She utilizes what is called "crossover" dance, in which she "rules out nothing, from ballet to boogaloo, from Bach to rock. Her own label

for what she does is simply: dance (Jonas 1992: 235).” Tharp has created a new unique style that is based on the interchange of cultures and traditions on a global scale.

References

Academy of Achievement. Interview with Twyla Tharp. Washington D.C., June 25, 1993. <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/tha0int-1> (Viewed May 11, 2008)

Daly, Ann. "The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers" in TDR Vol 31 NO. 1, 1987.

Foster, Susan. "The ballerina's phallic pointe" in Corporealities: Bodies Knowledge, Culture, and Power. Susan Foster, ed., London & New York: Routledge, 1995.

Jonas, Gerald. Dancing. New York: Harry Abrams, 1992.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21M.670 / WGS.591J Traditions in American Concert Dance: Gender and Autobiography
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.