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La Meri and the World of Dance

In our current era, the beginning of the 21st century, people in urban centers have access to a rich variety of world culture. One can view Japanese Kabuki in Paris; Bolivian theater in Cádiz, Spain; Mexican art in New York City; United States contemporary dance in Beijing. Dance companies specializing in theatrical adaptations of traditional folk, social, or ritual dance from particular cultures tour extensively. Artists from an array of traditions perform and teach internationally, and many expressive genres have come to be practiced all over the world (for example, jazz, flamenco, ballet, modern dance, various forms of music and theater). Through published writings, films, television, audio recordings, and the internet —not to mention actual as opposed to virtual travel— one can choose to explore many aspects of expression from throughout the world. The result has been not only opportunities for people to become acquainted with more or less traditional forms from many cultures, but also the development of various kinds of fusion —between two or more traditions (for example, jazz and flamenco music as in the work of guitarist Paco de Lucía); between Western and non-Western forms (as in innovative director Peter Brooks' controversial 1985 production of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*); and between historical and modern perspectives (as in an English production of Shakespeare, for example, set in the 20th century). This broad range of phenomena is often referred to as interculturalism, and there is a growing body of literature on its positive and negative aspects.[1]

1. See, for example, Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, eds., *Interculturism and Performance*, New York, PAJ Publications, 1991; J. Ellen Gainor, ed., *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995.

The subject of this essay is the American dancer, teacher, and writer, La Meri (Russell Meriwether Hughes, 1898-1988), who built her career on the practice of dance from a variety of cultures before such interculturalism became rampant and began to alert the critical community to questions about appropriation, commodification, orientalism, voyeurism, etc. La Meri performed her international repertoire on stages in the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia. She also taught in the United States and Europe and published writings that set forth her conceptions, understandings, goals, and methodology. Her work represents one stage in a progression of interculturalism in Western dance that can be traced back several centuries. I begin with a brief look at the historical and cultural contexts of La Meri's work; then a survey of her life and career. The third section discusses her theory and pedagogical principles as set forth in the 1977 *Total Education in Ethnic Dance*; and the fourth looks at La Meri's activities in relation to some of the current theoretical concerns.

Contexts

In Europe, at least from the Renaissance on, and in the Western Hemisphere, at least from the early days of colonization, there has been a history of intercultural appropriation, sharing, and/or imposition. Typically, the exchange has been between more powerful and less powerful political or social entities, thus exemplifying inequality between donor (or imposer) and receiver. In dance, intercultural manifestations in Europe can be documented from early Renaissance dance treatises, written to serve an international court culture which shared social dances and entertainment forms. The pan-European social repertoire included dances such as the Italian pavan, the Spanish sarabande, and the German allemande, taught and spread by members of the increasing cadre of professional (and itinerant) dance masters. These social dances were incorporated into court ballets, masques, and other entertainments and began to develop into what eventually became the ballet tradition. A crucial event in the internationalization of performance forms was the 1533 marriage of Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), from a prominent Italian family, to the French prince who would become King Henry II in 1547. Catherine brought Italian performing and plastic arts to the French

La Meri, from Guillermo Jiménez, *Siete ensayos de danza* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), 1950.

court where they became established.[2] As the power of France increased, French culture, including the elements that had developed from borrowed or appropriated practices, influenced court cultures throughout Europe; and then pan-European cultural elements such as ballet and opera arrived in the Western Hemisphere during the colonial era.

Western interest in other cultures and in the appropriation of selected elements from them for incorporation into hegemonic art forms such as opera and ballet continued on into the Baroque era and beyond. Dance historian Deborah Jowitt mentions the decorative Orientalism of the 18th century: the nobility-in-turbans dances —as in Jean Philippe Rameau's *Les Indes galantes*— or cavorting Siamese "grotesques" or the porcelain figures come to life in Jean Georges Noverre's *Les Fêtes chinoises*.[3]

In referring to these manifestations and others from the later Romantic era, she notes that "Authenticity was never an issue," that, for the most part, the term "'The Orient' has designated a pleasure garden for the imagination —an Orient restructured to fire European longings and justify European

2. Sorell, p. 74.

3. Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988, p. 49.

conquest".[4] But the Middle East and Asia (usually conflated under the term "Orient") were not the only areas from which librettists and choreographers obtained themes or elements; and furthermore, in the Romantic ballet era —both on the stage and in social dance contexts— there was a range of borrowing, from merely decorative elements to actual dances, dance styles, and dance movements.

European interest in the actual dances of various cultures can be documented from at least the 18th century. Dance historians Lisa C. Arkin and Marian Smith note that "many ballet theoreticians of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries expressed a keen interest in the authentic, 'true' and 'natural' folk expressions of various nations,"[5] and cite as evidence treatises by Giovanni-Andrea Gallini (1772), Gennaro Magri (1779), and Carlo Blasis (1820, 1828, 1847).[6] They also write of choreographers (such as August Bournonville) and dancers (such as Fanny Elssler) actually seeking instruction in dances outside of their own ballet tradition[7] although any such material would be adapted for the ballet stage.[8] One might investigate how the process of such 19th century ballet practitioners differed (if it did) from that of Igor Moiseyev or Amalia Hernández in their stagings of Russian or Mexican folk dances, or from that of La Meri in her presentation of world dances on the concert stage.

In the early 20th century, pioneering non-balletic dance artists such as Maude Allan (1873-1956) and Loie Fuller (1862-1928) borrowed themes from the Middle East in exotic depictions of, for example, the biblical dance of Salome. They developed their choreography on popular images and conceptions of the "Orient" rather than on any kind of historical or ethnographic research. In contrast, two contemporary innovative and highly influential dance artists, Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) and Ted Shawn (1891-1972), actually engaged in some research in planning their compositions —studying art works and reading texts to understand spiritual concepts and develop

4. Ibidem, p. 50.

5. Lisa C. Arkin, and Marian Smith, "National Dance in the Romantic Ballet," in Lynn Garafola, *Rethinking the Sylph: New Perspectives on the Romantic Ballet*, Hanover, NH, Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p. 30.

6. Ibidem, pp. 30-34.

7. Ibidem, pp. 34-35.

8. Ibidem, pp. 35-45.

their dance vocabularies, choreography, costuming, stage design, etc.[9] For the most part, however, St. Denis and Shawn were also not attempting to either learn or present actual dances or dance languages from other cultures. Allan, Fuller, and St. Denis had begun their lives and careers 20 to 30 years earlier than La Meri and became established professionally during the orientalist mania of late 19th and early 20th centuries that raged on both sides of the Atlantic.[10] St. Denis and Allan sought to capture a Westernized concept of some mysterious oriental "essence" in their dancing, or as expressed by dance historian Susan Manning, they presented "Western stereotypes of the East."[11] Fuller, in her *Dance of the Seven Veils* (first performed 1895 and then hugely successful at the Paris World's Fair of 1900), simply used the Salome theme to create another work featuring her signature flowing robes and lighting effects.[12] La Meri was the first 20th-century American dancer to actually pursue the study of foreign dance languages—the movements, the choreographic forms, the styles, and the cultural components.

La Meri's life

The woman who became known as La Meri was born 13 May 1898, in Louisville, Kentucky, and named after her father, Russell Meriwether Hughes. Around 1902, the family moved to San Antonio, Texas. While growing up there, La Meri experienced a broad spectrum of the arts both as participant and observer. She writes that she began violin lessons at six; ballet in her early teens; and singing, acting, and painting in high school. By her twentieth year, she had published her first two (of a total of six) books of

9. Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1981; Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *Reformers and Visionaries: The Americanization of the Art of Dance*, New York, Dance Horizons, 1979, pp. 64-65; Ruyter, "La Meri: pionera en la globalización de la danza en el mundo pre-tecnológico," in *Zona de Danza*, septiembre-octubre de 2000, v. 3, n. 14, pp. 25-26.

10. Fuller began performing professionally in 1878; St. Denis in 1894; and Allan in 1903.

11. Susan Manning, "The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance," in Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1997, p. 161.

12. Rhonda K. Garelick, "Electric Salome: Loie Fuller at the Exposition Universelle of 1900," in J. Ellen Gainor, ed., *Imperialism and Theatre*…, op. cit., pp. 85-103.

poetry; played the violin with the local symphony orchestra; sung, danced, and acted in amateur productions; written plays; composed songs; and exhibited her paintings.[13] During her formative years, she saw performances of a number of the great dancers and companies of the era, including Loie Fuller (1910?), Anna Pavlova,[14] La Argentina (perhaps 1916), Denishawn,[15] and Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (probably 1916).[16] These international dance artists introduced the teenager to a range of dance genres and to a variety of ways that different kinds of images can be developed and represented on stage. After a few months of dance training, La Meri was performing with her teacher's student group in a variety of genres: ballet pieces, historical dances such as the minuet, Spanish dances, a Russian dance, and some Denishawn inspired "oriental" dances. She also appeared as the leading "male" dancer in her teacher's ballet *Zingara*.[17] These early experiences undoubtedly had some influence on her dance eclecticism in later life —and perhaps on her occasional choices to perform male dances (such as the Japanese *Echigo-Jishi* and the Argentine *El Gato*) from some of the cultures she had visited.[18]

La Meri's professional career began in the 1920's and from that decade through 1939, she toured many parts of the world. Her first foreign engagement was a three-month visit to Mexico City where she performed and also took lessons in Spanish dance, Mexican regional dance, and movements of the *torero*. In her autobiography, she writes that she learned the *jarabe tapatío* from Pedro Valdez and performed it with him. She identifies Valdez as "Mexico's finest native dancer, who had taught Pavlova and helped her with the staging of her well-known *Mexican Dances* ballet".[19] At this early stage of

13. Russell Meriwether Hughes (La Meri), *Dance Out the Answer: An Autobiography*, New York, Dekker, 1977, p. 2.

14. La Meri writes that she had begun ballet training at age 12 (which would be 1910) and seems to imply that what led her to pursue ballet was seeing Pavlova in San Antonio in the winter of 1912 (*Dance Out the Answer…, op. cit.*, p. 2). It's possible that she saw Pavlova in 1910, but more likely in 1913 (see Money, pp. 116 and 124).

15. La Meri gives April 1, 1915, as the date when she saw Denishawn. There is no record of a performance on that date in San Antonio. The company was there at the Opera House, November 18-19, 1914, and at the Majestic Theater, February 17-23, 1918 (Schlundt, pp. 22 and 30).

16. Hughes, *Dance Out the Answer…*, op. cit., pp. 2, 6 and 10.

17. Ibidem, pp. 6-9.

18. Ibidem, illustration section between pp. 150 and 151.

19. Ibidem, p. 30.

her career and development, she did not know enough to distinguish between traditional folk or social dances and their theatricalized versions. Such understanding would only come later. In addition to beginning in Mexico what would become a habitual quest for learning new dance vocabularies and choreographies in the countries she visited, she also acquired her professional name —thanks to a journalist who dubbed her "La Meri".[20]

In the early years of her concert work, La Meri performed ballet, Spanish dance, a kind of proto-modern or "interpretive" dance, and increasingly more of the dances she learned as she traveled. Her tours included the Caribbean (1927); South America (1928-1929); Europe (1929-1931); Asia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific (1936-1937), and later, again Latin America, Europe, and the United States.[21] In each country she visited, La Meri sought out teachers who could add to her growing knowledge of world dance. In the early 1930's, she gave her first all international dance concert in Vienna, and in 1938, in New York. From the 1930's on, her focus was on what she termed "ethnic dance." Her concerts included material from Spain, India, China, Japan, Indonesia, Mexico, Argentina, Peru, the Caribbean, and other places. At the commencement of World War II, La Meri's base became New York City where she performed and taught until the late 1950's. She offered training in ethnic dance at various locations including her own school, the Ethnologic Dance Center (EDC) in New York City (mid-1940's to 1956), and Ted Shawn's prestigious summer school of dance in Massachusetts, Jacob's Pillow (1942-1953 and 1959-1967). The two dance cultures that La Meri studied, taught, and wrote about in most depth were those of Spain and India. She closed the EDC in 1956 and later moved to Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where she continued teaching, producing concerts with students, and writing. In the mid-1980's she returned to San Antonio where she spent the remainder of her life.

Theory

In addition to performing the dances that she had learned from various cultures, La Meri thought about what she had seen and learned; developed the

20. Ibidem.
21. NYPL Archive.

concept of "ethnic dance" and an approach to teaching it; and wrote a book on her theory and pedagogy as well as others on choreography, Spanish dance, and the gesture language of *bharata natyam.* This section examines La Meri's conceptions, principles, and practices as put forth in her 1977 publication, *Total Education in Ethnic Dance*. I'm particularly interested in her theory and practice in relation to questions regarding 1) what can be considered a part of one's own culture in contrast to what is "foreign" and thus "appropriated" when practiced by someone outside the culture; 2) the concept of authenticity and its ambiguities; and 3) La Meri's approach to understanding and teaching the dance arts of various cultures outside of their traditional contexts.

The first question could include discussion of such varied phenomena as a 20th-century European learning reconstructed dances from his or her European past; Mexican-Americans in the United States performing a *ballet folklórico* repertoire or ritual dances from the Conchero tradition; Spanish flamenco dance and music or the Argentine tango being taught and performed all over the world from South Africa to Japan —as well as a United States artist such as La Meri, performing throughout the world her renditions of dances from many countries. The question of ownership or exclusive right to a tradition is problematic and as relevant to the reconstruction of historical material from the past of one's own heritage as to genres from other cultures. In her article on intercultural performance, theater historian Julie Stone Peters asks:

> Who owns a culture? Who inherits it,…? Nobody, of course. For when one inherits, one inherits a global collective web, a web not concentric or symmetrical, but connected in all its parts (even if no one is privileged with seeing all parts of it at once), a web which one is meant, indeed bound, to reweave… [C]ultural representations… can be borrowed without anyone missing them or attempting to retrieve them at gunpoint; they have the grace (like human beings) to be fruitful and multiply…, and they have the good sense (also like human beings) to transform themselves in the process.[22]

22. Julie Stone Peters, "Intercultural performance, theatre anthropology, and the imperialist critique: identities, inheritances, and neo-orthodoxies," in J. Ellen Gainor, ed., *Imperialism and Theatre*…, op. cit., pp. 210-211.

This is an unusual position to take in our current era in contrast to the rather widespread critical suspicion and often dismissal of various manifestations of intercultural activity as resulting from political inequities, the imposition of power, appropriation by the powerful from the weak, etc. I would agree with Peters, however, and not dismiss all intercultural borrowings or appropriations as inherently suspect.

Another important consideration is what one does with cultural material from one's own or another's traditions. One could postulate that it is acceptable to step into someone else's cultural practice as long as the insider does not object and the "intruder" treats the material with respect and honors its traditions. But what does that mean? Trying to perform a dance or piece of music exactly like the original? And what is an exact reproduction —especially if the work is from a tradition that includes improvisation? There is no evidence that La Meri ever questioned her right to learn and perform dances from different cultures and even to create original works using aspects of those traditions. She did, however, insist upon knowledge of the cultural contexts of the dance arts and upon awareness of how she and her students were using them.

As popularly used, the term "ethnic dance" refers to dances from all over the world, excluding western theater and urban social forms. La Meri claimed to have introduced this term prior to the 1940's and she defined it as "all those indigenous dance arts that have grown from popular or typical dance expressions of a particular race." She wished to give ethnic dance as a theater art an identity and status comparable to that of ballet and modern dance.[23] The term obviously has many problems —which she herself recognized— and has been more or less discarded in the United States today in favor of designations such as "world dance" or "cultural forms" (which are also problematic). One objection to any of these terms is the ethno-centric equating of the myriad dance arts of the world with single genres stemming from Euro-American traditions. While by now, ballet and modern dance have spread throughout the world and developed national variations, they still represent single genres, comparable not to everything else in the world taken together, but only to other single genres such as the Indian *bharata natyam*, Spanish flamenco, or Irish step dancing. Another problem is the

23. Russell Meriwether Hughes (La Meri), *Total Education in Ethnic Dance*, New York, Dekker, 1977, p. 1.

assumption that such terms by definition exclude the western theatrical genres. This is an issue admirably addressed by dance anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku in her still relevant 1970 article "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance." However, when La Meri was developing her professional career from the 1920's, and, from the 1940's, her pedagogical approach and its theoretical foundations, she was pioneering an area of dance study that had not yet been defined or theorized among dance practitioners nor in the academic world. Dance ethnology and dance history as scholarly pursuits were just beginning to become important in the 1970's, and La Meri's writings, even the most recent of 1977, show no awareness of questions arising in these disciplines that might have been relevant to her work.

In *Total Education in Ethnic Dance*, La Meri set forth her definitions, rationales, and approaches to something that by 1977 was already passé —a professional specialization in dance from a variety of cultures. Today, we would not take very seriously a person trying to attain proficiency in the dance, music, theater, or other arts of an array of cultures. We might even question a person from one culture specializing in one art of one other culture, wondering about the possibility of successfully acquiring not only the physical techniques of the art, but also the cultural, spiritual, intellectual, and social baggage that is inextricably incorporated into any art form and its context. At the same time, in many parts of the world, and for a variety of purposes, the dances of various cultures are taught at private studios, in public schools, within recreational dance groups, and in university programs.

In any cases where one is recreating art forms from the past or presenting forms from cultures outside one's own, questions and criticisms may arise over the issue of authenticity —a conception fraught with ambiguity and conflicting interpretations. Sarah Rubidge, choreographer and dance scholar at the Laban Centre, London, discusses the concept of authenticity in relation to the presentation of historical material in the performing arts. She writes:

> The notion of authenticity harbours two problematic concepts, that of authenticity itself and that of the 'work.' The description 'authentic' tends to be applied (or not) to revivals of previously performed works of music, theater or dance. Designating a performance as 'authentic' is the outcome of a kind of judgment, one which constitutes a 'just recognition' of the work that perfor-

> mance purports to represent. Authenticity is therefore not a property *of* but something we ascribe *to* a performance.[24]

The beauty of this statement is that it recognizes that authenticity is not an absolute, but rather a conception that may be understood and used in different ways. In relation to the reconstruction of early music she notes both the technical and contextual challenges of mastering and performing an art work. On one hand, an accurate rendition of an historical work requires mastery of "the grammar and syntax of the stylistic language."[25] On the other hand, there is a whole world of knowledge and experience that figures in any performance. Rubidge cites musicologist Robert Morgan's belief that ancient music can be played to some extent, but not really recreated because it is not possible "to re-establish that fundamental inimitable psychological and physiological relationship of the [original] performer to a language that he has not learned, but absorbed unconsciously."[26] Thinking of a performance genre as a language is useful. And in learning a verbal or nonverbal language from outside a culture, one, of course, lacks the experience of absorbing it unconsciously with all that that implies. Nonetheless, many people in the world do take on the learning of verbal languages as cultural outsiders, and some become fluent in one or more. One may ask if it is equally possible to become fluent in a foreign dance or musical language. La Meri certainly thought so and devoted her life to investigating ways to do that. As her knowledge of world dance arts broadened and deepened, she became more and more interested in questions of authenticity and the pedagogical methods that could be used effectively to teach dance languages.

In her theoretical construct, La Meri divided ethnic dance into two related categories. The first, what she terms folk or communal dance, is that done by non-professionals in traditional community contexts. The second, which she sometimes referred to as "ethnologic" dance, comprises dance presented by trained professionals in performance contexts such as temples or theater. It is this second category upon which she built her career. In *Total*

24. Sarah Rubidge, "Does authenticity matter? The case for and against authenticity in the performing arts," in Patrick Campbell, ed., *Analyzing Performance: A Critical Reader*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1996, p. 219.

25. Ibidem, p. 224, quoting William Crutchfield.

26. Quoted in Rubidge, *op. cit.*, p. 225.

Education in Ethnic Dance,[27] she identifies five ways of presenting such material:

1. "The Traditional" is presentation of the exact dance movement, choreography, music, and costumes of the original.

2. "The Authentic" presents "the traditional costumes, music, and techniques, but takes certain liberties with the form." Examples would include shortening a dance for stage presentation or setting a repeatable choreography for a dance that would normally be improvised.

3. "The Creative Neoclassic or Renaissance" retains the movement, techniques, and style, but may alter the costuming, music, and choreography. Examples of artists who worked in this way include the Indian dancer Uday Shankar (1900-1977) and the Spanish dancer La Argentina (Antonia Mercé y Luque, 1890-1936).

4. In "Creative Departures," the choreographer takes more liberties with all aspects of the presentation than in the previous category.

5. "Applied Techniques" refers to using any of the aspects of the dance source in the creation of original works. Examples of this would include La Meri's 1944 staging of *Swan Lake* using the gesture language, movement vocabulary, and costumes of East Indian Dance, and her 1946 *Bach-Bharata Suite* in which she set abstract *bharata natyam* technique to Bach's music.

La Meri thus had developed a precise way of recognizing how cultural resources might be used and avoided the questionable practice of presenting something modified as something original.

La Meri developed a precise pedagogy for teaching what she had learned of Spanish, East Indian, and other dance traditions. Recognizing that someone outside the culture requires a kind of training different from that received by students within the culture, she wrote, "The teaching of ethnic dance forms by routines, as is often done in the land of origin, is entirely impractical when dealing with aliens. Exercises for body techniques are essential…"[28] She developed such exercises (which might be compared to components of ballet or modern dance technique) for Spanish and East Indian dance. In her understanding, posture was the primary element of any dance practice and the particular movements and steps secondary. As she explains, "Of first importance is the placement and control of the spine and

27. Hughes, *Total Education*…, op. cit., pp. 4-6.
28. Ibidem, p. 65.

its adjuncts —the neck, the shoulders, and the pelvis… In many cases the dance techniques of two different peoples will differ more in the spine carriage than in any other part of the anatomy."[29] La Meri devoted an entire chapter to the postures of various cultures' dance arts (Chapter 7).

La Meri (as the musicologist quoted above) realized that posture and movement styles do not evolve in a vacuum, but she did not take this as an insurmountable obstacle to learning and performing dance from another culture —she simply stressed it as part of what needed to be learned and taken into consideration. She notes the importance of understanding key elements that contribute to the nature of a dance language. These include the dancers' clothing and footwear; the traditional location of the dance —its physical characteristics as well as its function (as temple, palace, theater, etc.); social customs of the culture; its religious beliefs; the historical context of the dance form; and the physical characteristics of the people.[30]

La Meri also used the theoretical system of the French teacher and theorist of acting, singing, and aesthetics Françoise Delsarte (1811-1871) in developing her approach. Delsarte's theories had become popular in the United States in the late 19th century. American practitioners adapted them for use in physical culture and expression, and out of this expanded "American Delsartism" and other influences developed the modern dance of the 20th century. One of Delsarte's fundamental concepts was what he termed the "Law of Trinity" which states that everything in the universe exists in threes or multiples of three.[31] La Meri was particularly interested in this aspect of Delsarte's theory as a tool to analyze dance languages in terms of the "three psychological levels —the intellectual or spiritual, the emotive, and the vital" and the relation of those levels to parts of the body. She explains how this theory can be applied to the genres of flamenco and *bharata natyam*.[32]

While La Meri had no formal training in ethnographic research, movement analysis, cultural studies, or pedagogy, she developed her own ways to research and learn foreign dance languages, to analyze them, to study them in their historical and cultural contexts, and to teach them responsibly and

29. Ibidem.

30. Ibidem, pp. 75-79.

31. Nancy Lee Chalfa Ruyter, *The Cultivation of Body and Mind in Nineteenth-Century American Delsartism*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1999, pp. 77-78.

32. Ibidem, pp. 80-83.

effectively. Students at her Ethnologic Dance Center were required to take a broad curriculum that included technique classes in Spanish and Indian dance (and sometimes short courses in other cultural forms); choreography; the history and culture of the dance genres being studied; technical theater work; and written and oral expression —the latter because she believed that a person specializing in foreign dance arts would have to be able to write and speak about them— as she was often called upon to do. La Meri had developed her range of skills and knowledge through her own travels through life; she then put all that she considered important into the curriculum of her school.

Practice

This section examines some of the implications of the images La Meri embodied in relation to recent theoretical concerns. Much of the recent theoretical discussion of dance focuses on ballet, modern dance, or popular theatrical or social forms in the "Western" tradition.[33] While there are articles with such perspectives on a few dance traditions of other cultures —either in their own setting or in diaspora— there is practically nothing on individuals from one culture learning, performing, or adopting dance languages from another. What might be considered obvious exceptions to this general trend would be writings on the "Orientalist" presentations of Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, and Ruth St. Denis.[34] But, as discussed above, these dancers were not attempting to either learn or present actual dances from other cultures in contrast to La Meri with her increasing commitment to study of different

33. See, for example, Christy Adair, *Women and Dance: Sylphs and Sirens*, New York, New York University Press, 1992; Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1997; Amy Koritz, 1995; and Helen Thomas, ed., *Dance, Gender and Culture*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1993.

34. See, for example, Garelick, op. cit.; Desmond, op. cit.; Amy Koritz, "Dancing the Orient for England: Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salome*," in *Theatre Journal*, March 1994, v. 46, n. 1, pp. 63-78 (reprinted in Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*, op. cit., pp. 132-152); Koritz, 1995, op. cit.; and Susan Manning, "The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze: Feminist Critiques of Early Modern Dance," in Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*, op. cit., pp. 153-166.

dance cultures in all their facets. None of the general theoretical or specifically feminist writings of recent years addresses the particular case of La Meri (perhaps because of its uniqueness), but some of them do raise questions that can contribute to an understanding of her work.

An obvious place to start is with discussion of images and the ways they can function. Dance historian and theorist Alexandra Carter notes that an important issue is "what kinds of images of femininity are represented in and by dance, and how these images reflect the beliefs and values of specific cultural situations."[35] Exploring such questions in regard to La Meri is complex since she was both taking feminine (and sometimes masculine) images and dance styles from various cultures and presenting them, for the most part, in other cultures —both Western and Eastern. A complete analysis, then, would have to examine the images in terms of both their sources and their adaptation for and presentation in other contexts. In considering La Meri's repertoire and photographic renditions of it, one might conclude that her work could be productively analyzed in terms of the "gaze theory" (see, for example, Manning), but again, this orientation is also complicated both by the mix of cultures she worked with and in and by the change of her focus over time. While her early work —up to perhaps the early or mid-1930's— might be seen as colonialist appropriation of exotic images of femininity for the "voyeuristic gaze," her more mature choreography, performance, and approach to teaching were certainly not purposefully feeding such a gaze. Whether the results still functioned in that way or not is another question.

In *Meaning in Motion*, cultural historian and dancer Jane Desmond writes of "dance as a performance of cultural identity and the shifting meanings involved in the transmission of dance styles from one group to another".[36] She devotes one section of her essay to "Appropriation-Transmission-Migration of Dance Styles"[37] which is relevant to La Meri's work. Desmond points out that it is important to study the "pathway" a cultural element travels on to a new setting, "but also the form's reinscription in a new community/social context and resultant changes in its signification".[38] La Meri

35. Alexandra Carter, "Bodies of Knowledge: Dance and Feminist Analysis," in Patrick Campbell, ed., *Analyzing Performance*…, op. cit., p. 4.

36. Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*, op. cit., p. 31.

37. Ibidem, pp. 33-35.

38. Ibidem, p. 35.

acquired her knowledge of various dance languages not as a member of the communities in which they had developed, but as an outsider hiring teachers to impart to her little or much of their traditions. In that primary transaction, there was certainly a transfer, and perhaps one could say, a reinscription of the dance form into a new social context (that of a native dealing with a foreigner for a price). La Meri then created other reinscriptions: the performance of the forms on international concert stages and their further migration when she began teaching them to students in Europe and the United States. Of course, they had to change along the way. The native teachers undoubtedly chose certain aspects of their art to teach this outsider (who, on a concert tour always had limited time for study), and La Meri adapted the material for the concert stage and for teaching students from outside the culture. Major changes that she made (discussed above) included shortening long dances for concert presentation, setting choreography for originally improvised dancing, and breaking down the technique for her students rather than teaching only through routines as the traditional native teachers did.

On the subject of gender, Carter asks: "How can the movement vocabularies of non-Western dance forms be read out of their cultural contexts where different notions of gender may exist?"[39] One could, of course, ask the same thing about dance in traditional societies in the West. Notions of gender held by Andalusian Gypsies, Romanian peasants, or American Mormons are also going to differ significantly from those of a La Meri —a professional woman traveling the world as a performing artist, or of her audiences, or her students. Each of the images La Meri presented on stage and in her photographs would have different sets of meanings in various cultural contexts.

Let us look at the case of La Meri's work in East Indian dance, one of her major areas of study. La Meri was introduced to Indian dance in the 1930's at a concert in Paris given by Uday Shankar (1900-1977), who presented fusions of traditional Indian dance genres and modernist concepts. She began to pick up some knowledge of Indian dance from this non-traditional artist, although he would not formally train her. In the late 1930's she toured India and was able to actually study some aspects of the dance and this started her

39. Alexandra Carter, "Feminist Strategies for the Study of Dance," in Lizbeth Goodman, with Jane de Gray, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 249.

toward a deeper knowledge, especially of the genre of *bharata natyam*. But it is interesting to look at the social and historical context of the India she visited. As noted by the Indian dancer and scholar Mandakranta Bose, traditionally, classical Indian dance had been "created and controlled by men but performed by women,"[40] and the status of female performers had gone through various changes over the centuries until they and the dance had lost all respect under British colonial rule.[41] In the 1930's, as related by dance anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna, the tradition began to be revived by "intellectual leaders at the forefront of Indian nationalism [who] began to re-evaluate Indian cultural traditions and seek symbols of Indian identity".[42] This revival was in process when La Meri arrived. Her study, therefore, took place in a particular context in relation to Indian social, political, cultural, and dance history —a context in which the respectability of the dance as a woman's activity was being re-established. What if she had arrived ten years earlier? Would her quest have been scorned? As it was, she sought instruction at the very time it was becoming respectable for high class Indian women to do the same. Even so, her gender situation and expectations were very different from those of the Indian girls being encouraged by their fathers to study this heritage.

The analysis of La Meri's stage images as well as of her life's work as a whole is difficult because both were complex and traversed many cultures. I believe that La Meri's presentation of herself in the dances of cultures not her own differed significantly from the superficial adoption of orientalist "signs" found in some of the Western theatrical dance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In the beginning she was following that path, but as she became more deeply interested in the cultures that she studied and in the whole process of understanding and acquiring new dance languages, her work demonstrated an attempt to render the dances in a more seriously "authentic" way and not to simply exploit them for glamour and exoticism.

It is clear that La Meri's entire life work was based on what today some might criticize as a questionable appropriation of dance material from cul-

40. Mandakranta Bose, "Gender and Performance: Classical Indian Dancing," in Goodman, with De Gray, eds., *The Routledge Reader*…, op. cit., p. 252.

41. Ibidem, pp. 252-253.

42. Judith Lynne Hanna, "Classical Indian Dance and Women's Status," in Thomas, ed., *Dance, Gender and Culture*, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

tures not her own. During most of her career, however, the theoretical and ethical questions that are now being asked about such practice were not even considered. Reviews and articles praised her for the beauty of her performances and for giving visibility and recognition to treasures from unfamiliar cultures. Although she lacked sophisticated academic education, she was concerned with investigating and developing both an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of the material she worked with and also theoretical principles for the performance and teaching of foreign dance languages. And while she did not anguish over the concept of "authenticity," she carefully defined ways of presenting the foreign material in terms of how close or far such presentation would be from the source. To what extent she managed to master, perform, and teach any of the arts she worked with is still to be investigated. In my personal experience as her student (in the 1950's), I have not found discrepancies between what I learned from her and what I was later taught by native Spanish or East Indian teachers. My conclusion is that she was unusual in having the ability to become fluent in a number of dance languages with sometimes much, sometimes little, intensive training in them. I believe she served an important function for her time —to introduce dances of the world to the world, thus broadening cultural experiences and understanding for all.♣

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