

Name: Emma Sinnott

Student Number: 1907889

Module: Introduction to Contemporary Techniques

Lecturer: Gwyn Emberton

In order to understand the differences in methods and approaches of different choreographers, it is important to research at least two choreographers which have been referenced in class and their techniques and compare them in relation to the technique of the practical class. An evaluation of the techniques will be carried out in reference to physical understanding and embodiment of them.

The choreographers being researched and evaluated are Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham and Akram Khan, with their similarities and dissimilarities being explored from personal experience of Gwyn Emberton's technique during practical class.

(Sherwood, 2020) explains how the depths of human emotion were exposed in Martha Graham's choreography and dancing. Her movements were jagged, sharp, angular and direct. The magnitude and scope of her dancing has been compared to ballet. Martha Graham developed her technique by experimenting with human movement beginning with contraction and release which became a foundation for her future technique. Her inspiration came from a wide range of forms including paintings, Greek mythology, and great women of history. Joan of Arc and

Emily Dickinson being two examples of great women portrayed in her work. From this it can be understood that her pieces clearly had a theme or a story.

Paying attention to your breathing is recommended, and how it changes during certain activities (Dance Spirit, 2020). Fundamental concepts of contraction and release will be better understood through observations of breath efficiency in movement. Graham technique also consists of curving and twisting of the torso along with spirals in the body, opposition and shift of weight. The technique is systematically arranged, with sets of “seated floor exercises, standing exercises and across-the-floor sequences” (Dance Spirit, 2020). Although the structure is set, some movements can be quite dramatic with students encouraged to explore and incorporate their individuality. “Martha said that dance is never a competition. You’re only in competition with the person you know you can become, so it’s important to move big and make big mistakes. Don’t be afraid, and don’t watch other people. You’re there to focus on developing yourself” (Dance Spirit, 2020). A great deal can be learned from this quote. Martha Graham encouraged dancers to explore, use their own emotion and character to create art whilst using her technique to expand their vocabulary. Focusing on yourself is extremely important as to not lose yourself and begin self doubt, compete only with yourself.

By examining videos of Martha Graham’s technique, her set, structured and repetitive technique is evident. The movement is deliberate consisting of floor work with contraction and release, body arches in a stationary

position. Centre floor work includes plies, straight lines, angular movements along with curves and twists. Short sharp contractions limit the travel and use of space. Noticeably restricted movements in particular body parts especially spine and hip areas. Pupils repeat movements until they are correct by starting on a bar to help with balance before moving to centre floor to carry out the controlled committed movement.

Music is not always used throughout classes or works, as was seen in *Primitive Mysteries*, where there are sections of the piece that contain no music at all. Martha Graham then worked with music which had been specifically created for her work (McDonagh, 1976).

Merce Cunningham's technique has been influenced by Martha Graham after training with her company for years before forming his own which is evident in videos showing his classes. Some similarities could be the controlled, angular movement with the use of twists and upper body curves. Further investigation of videos show change in direction, travel and use of space. Floor work does not seem to be used often and if so, only limited areas. Dancers do not learn to dance with the music. The music runs alongside the piece with the dancers learning rhythms from claps or clicks given through training. Due to this, music was not always used in his pieces. (Mercecunningham.org, 2020) describes the key concepts of Cunningham technique as meticulous training for the purpose of flexibility and strength of both the mind and body. Leg work and torso are used to develop strength, flexibility and coordination. Spatial

awareness is used with changes of direction and rhythmic accuracy for dynamic movement and rhythmic precision.

According to (McDonagh, 1976), Merce Cunningham had a bigger interest in the many possibilities of movement rather than any character, story or dramatic mood. The idea of chance was introduced by him, determining different outcomes, sequences of movements or variations of the dance would take part. These were ordered using various methods including tossing a coin. The possibilities are endless with this method, a dice may have also been used creating unique dances each time with the element of fun, surprise and exploration.

Akram Khan has a fascination with storytelling which he portrays by combining class Indian Kathak with contemporary dance techniques. He takes human themes and collaborates with other people, different cultures and disciplines. He enjoys taking risks and exploring the unfamiliar (Akram Khan company, 2020).

Videos of his work show examples of his fluid movements throughout the whole body by making use of the entire space. His technique consists of exaggerated circular movement with intended pauses, contrasting changes of direction, speed, and levels. The observer is kept entertained with this constant change and is unable to predict what might come next. His work comes from experimenting and is not set. The use of facial expressions are often used within the work to assist the storytelling with speech occasionally being used in addition to music.

“Incorporating the rhythmic precision of Kathak with the free flowing forms of contemporary dance, Khan produces intimately physical works that are reflections on memory, identity, history and myth” (Chang, 2020).

Technique classes with Gwyn Emberton consist of inspirations from many choreographers, with the three aforementioned being apparent within them. In comparison to the technique of Martha Graham, the similarities to Gwyn Emberton’s technique in practical class are the use of upper body curves and arches, twists and the encouragement to incorporate individuality. However, the differences outweigh the similarities. The technique used in practical class does not include the attention to breath with contract and release. Neither has there been a controlled set structure with minimal travel. Gwyn Emberton uses music within his technique classes as opposed to Martha Graham who does not always. The similarities between Merce Cunningham’s technique and that of Gwyn Embertons are more obvious. These also include upper back curves in addition to changes in direction and the use of travel. The use of music is alike as Gwyn’s is not set to the piece of work and has been known to change. Neither of these techniques involve storytelling and are both unset and can be experimental in some areas, the use of chance has not been used in practical class. Gwyn Emberton’s technique includes a great

amount of floor work which does not seem to be evident in Merce Cunningham's.

The most similar and technique to the one experienced in practical class is that of Akram Khan. They both contain the same fluidity and energy, with contrasting changes of speed, direction and levels. Both structures are loose and not set, with experimentation used to express shape with the use of the whole body in circular movements. These contain a good deal of floor work, travel and use of the entire space. The profound similarities, feel of the movement, style and technique are clearly visible at first glance. The two differ in the story telling aspect. Gwyn Emberton's technique, in my experience thus far, has not involved a story, facial expressions or acting to tell any sort of story. The two choreographers have used the use of speech along with music in their work. Both can be adapted to the capabilities of the dancer which has been the case previously by Gwyn Emberton.

In conclusion, within my research into the three choreographers and their approaches and methods, it has been possible to see many differences and similarities between them and the technical approaches by Gwyn Emberton in practical class. Some of which are not obviously evident initially. Finding inspiration is an extremely important part of the learning and creative process in order to develop a greater range of style and movement. Gwyn Emberton has clearly been inspired by many experiences, along with knowledge of various methods and styles, which

he uses in his own technique. Having a mixture of varying approaches creates a unique style with a wider range of movement vocabulary which creates a more knowledgeable and experienced dancer.

References

- Akram Khan Company. (2020). *About us - Akram Khan Company*. [online] Available at: <https://www.akramkhancompany.net/about-us/> [Accessed 21 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/KVKGN9xZXHc> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/ZPuKywL3Qg4> [Accessed 21 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: https://youtu.be/kfqua_NNe5M [Accessed 19 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: https://youtu.be/ciBqm_XtYVE [Accessed 21 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/LwnWICuTftk> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2020].
- Anon, (2020). [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/juRffNv0JUg> [Accessed 20 Feb. 2020].
- BBC. (2020). *BBC Arts - BBC Arts - Martha Graham | Step-by-step*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1zh8PN4HdKZq6Tw4PsGdjyG/martha-graham-step-by-step> [Accessed 17 Feb. 2020].

Chang, S. (2020). *Akram Khan: Crafting a Narrative of Dance*. [online] Culture Trip. Available at:
<https://theculturetrip.com/asia/bangladesh/articles/akram-khan-crafting-a-narrative-of-dance/> [Accessed 22 Feb. 2020].

Dance Spirit. (2020). *Graham Technique*. [online] Available at:
https://www.dancespirit.com/graham_technique-2326036529.html [Accessed 16 Feb. 2020].

McDonagh, D. (1976). *The complete guide to modern dance*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday.

Mercecunningham.org. (2020). *Cunningham Technique - Merce Cunningham Trust*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mercecunningham.org/the-work/cunningham-technique/> [Accessed 19 Feb. 2020].

Sherwood, M. (2020). *History*. [online] Martha Graham Dance Company. Available at:
<https://marthagraham.org/history/> [Accessed 22 Feb. 2020].

Theatre, S. (2020). [online] Available at: <https://youtu.be/TvWXdvr6YQo> [Accessed 20 Feb. 2020].