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Module: Introduction to contemporary techniques

This essay will explore the similarities and differences of the approaches and methods used by Gwyn Emberton and Merce Cunningham, during their contemporary dance technique classes. Furthermore, an evaluation will be made with reference to my own physical understanding and embodiment of the movement.

According to the Merce Cunningham Trust, the Cunningham technique focuses on not only the body but also the mind. It is designed to strengthen and improve flexibility of both the physical and mental aspects of the human body.

There are three main concepts of the Cunningham technique; Torso and Legwork, Spatial Awareness and Rhythmic Accuracy. With Torso and Legwork Cunningham technique involves “unexpected changes of weight or direction, (Roy, 2008)” as well as legs and arms often having a lack of correlation to each other. This technique also focuses on developing the spine creating a stronger, more flexible appearance with an improved sense of clarity. Spatial Awareness describes the act of having a multitude of changes in direction within a phrase, meaning that anywhere in the space can be the dancers’ front. This was also developed so that different parts of the body would move together in several directions. Thirdly, Rhythmic Accuracy involves a range of different tempos throughout the class, this is in order to build and improve rhythmic precision and a stronger sense of different dynamics. The use of

the spine in this technique, (aiming to improve flexibility and strength) is similar to that of Gwyn Emberton, during his technique classes there is a focus on using the spine during such movements as back curves and rolling down through the spine. The use of different tempos throughout the class is also a similarity between both choreographers as during Gwyn's class different exercises often vary in tempos for example certain barre work may be slow while jump work is often faster. Centre work during Gwyn's class often relates to Cunningham's Spatial Awareness as the exercises often involve a multitude of direction changes throughout the phrase. A difference between technique classes such as Cunningham and Gwyn's is that Cunningham has a set criteria that the class must follow while Gwyn's class is a contemporary class that is based on the teacher and their personal experiences and ideas.

The key principles within the Graham Technique include contraction and release, spiralling and shift of weight. Contraction and release is the fundamental aspect of Graham Technique, it is created by the contraction of a muscle which is then relaxed releasing a flow of energy which is used to begin the next movement. Graham based her technique on basic human movement, for instance, the use of contraction and release was used to symbolise an exaggerated version of breathing. Graham focused on the contraction of certain muscles including the pelvic muscles and abdominal muscles contracting towards the spine, the aim of this was to create a curve in the spine particularly an upper back curve. Alongside the contractions the curve also often requires the pelvis to be tucked under and the neck to be curved down towards the chest. This is similar to Gwyn's technique classes as there is a

strong focus on curving the back, especially using the contraction of the abdominal muscles to support the spine. The contraction of the pelvic floor is also a key aspect of the technique classes. The contraction correlates to the exhale and the release to the inhale, this use of breath is used within Gwyn's classes for instance when rolling down through the spine we exhale on the way down and inhale on the way up.

Another key principle in Graham's Technique includes spirals, this involves different parts of the body articulating and rotating particularly the torso, hip bone and spine. When spiralling the spine it is a rotation that results in the shoulders facing a different direction than the dancer, this is similar to a hip spiral where the opposing shoulder to hip are pulling away from each other.

The use of weight, gravity and falls are also key aspects of Graham Technique. While traditionally dancers would pull away from gravity Graham uses gravity to give energy to the dancer to fall to the floor. The use of weight and changing the bodies centre of gravity for floor work was a unique idea before Graham. She used the bodies centre of gravity to give the dancer more control while they fell. Gwyn uses a low centre of gravity to keep movements more grounded and therefore controlled. This is useful for floor work that consists of falling to the floor as without the use of weight and centre of gravity it would be hard to fall with control and as the bodies centre of gravity is already low it is easier to be on the floor for floorwork.

Doris Humphrey created the theory of Fall and Recovery, this was the fundamental point of her movements. It revolved around the change in the centre of gravity as

well as balance and recovery. Humphrey's theory was based on the idea of moving away from the centre of gravity then sequentially adjusting with the same force in order to return to the original centre. This is similar to Gwyn's classes as such movements as swings are used which alter the centre of gravity but then use the same force to return upright. Humphrey also used breath during fall and recovery with the fall relating to the exhale and the recovery correlating to the inhale. This is a similarity to Gywn's class as breath is used to emphasise different movements and give them a better full body quality.

The technique of flying low was created by David Zambrano, it concentrates on floorwork, particularly the dancers' relationship to the floor. It revolves around the focus of breathing and creating a sense of being able to move on and off the ground more easily by releasing energy throughout the body. A sense of presence in the room is also a key aspect of this technique, bringing your entire focus to the there and now, the floor, the air and the people around you. There is also a focus that every joint and muscle of your body should be active and present. The body is constantly moving in many different ways, including the fundamental movement of spirals. These spirals help the dancer to be constantly aware of their surroundings, it also helps them to get onto and off the floor with more ease. These spirals are believed to naturally exist within us and to find them the dancer must locate their centre, the centre is seen as the main part of the dancer the limbs and other body parts are all just extensions of the centre, each body part must move from the centre. The flying low technique is similar to Gywn's technique classes as they both involve

floorwork and a sense of feeling the floor and the air around you- being present in the space.

In conclusion each choreographer mentioned throughout the essay has aspects of similarities to Gwyn Emberton technique classes whether that be the use of breath, a low centre of gravity or the use of floor work. However there are also differences between them, such as, the other choreographers using a lack of sequencing through the body or a lack of expansive movements and some choreographers having a set criteria for the technique classes while others base their classes on the teacher.

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