

A Primer for Choreographers

By: Lois Ellfeldt

By calling this book a *Primer*, the writer and the illustrator have identified it as an elementary textbook for students who are just beginning to compose their own dances. But this exposition of the basic principles of choreography is much more than an elementary text. It is also a substantial contribution to the choreographic literature and to the growing body of literature dealing with the meaningful properties of movement in all its forms. As such, it may well be read with profit by experienced choreographers and dancers, and by anyone interested in movement as a source of meaning in human life.

Eleanor Metheny
Los Angeles, California
May, 1967

PREFACE

A choreographer is a maker of dances, and his creations exist, finally, as sequences of movement on a stage. Yet in any medium, a work of art is something more than elements of sound, design, or movement arranged in a pattern or sequence. Behind the process of craftsmanship is the personality of the creator—the living, reacting, concerned human being who makes images with the materials at his command.

Even a child can say, "I just made up a dance." Possibly he has. "Dance" is not a scientific term, with a tidy meaning. The definition of "dance" is often most unclear to those who most yearn to contribute to the art. In high schools, colleges, studios, camps, community centers, and family rooms, potential choreographers wonder: "What do you do *first* when you make up a dance?"

This book begins with a brief definition of dance, and supplies the young dancer, not with an easy explanation of the process of choreography, but with some tools for finding his own process. It is a primer, a beginner's book, which identifies, as it were, the alphabet and the rules of grammar and spelling of dance. It is not a how-to-do-it book, for no one is sure how to succeed as a choreographer—except, in the colloquial phrase, by really trying!

The neophyte may learn a great deal from seeing, analyzing, and performing the choreography of mature artists, and from study-

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ing with good teachers, but he must nonetheless find *his own way* if he is to do anything creative. Broadened horizons of discrimination and control of movement are necessary only when they are meaningful to the choreographer and functional to the particular problem at hand—not as an end in themselves.

I have simply set down some guidelines for the beginner, as he starts his venture into the highly personal and thoroughly creative business of “making up dances.”

Lois Ellfeldt
Laguna Beach, California
July, 1967

PREFACE, 1988

Since neither the basic choreographic process nor the needs of beginning students changes much over the years, it was deemed time to reissue this book. It is hoped it will once again meet with the splendid reception it first received.

To make the work totally accurate and up-to-date, a new annotated bibliography has been prepared for this edition by Dr. Araminta Little, Professor of Dance, California State University, Fullerton.

Lois Ellfeldt
Laguna Beach, California
May, 1988

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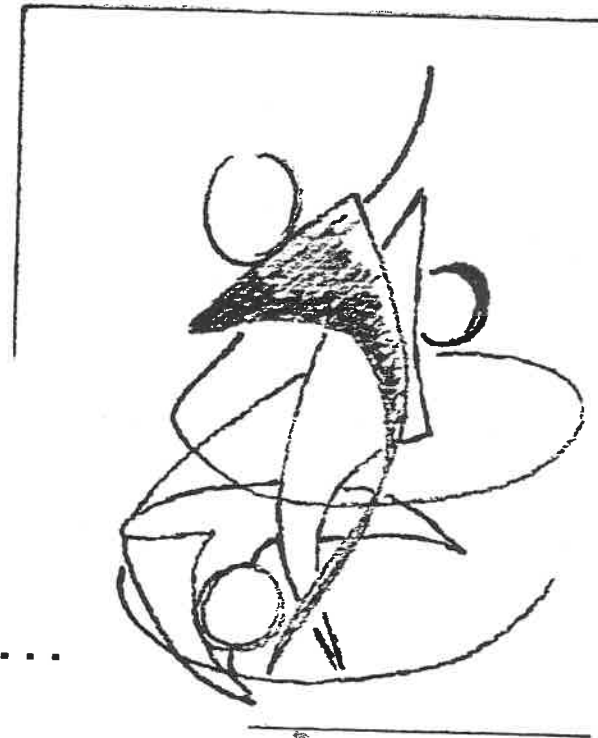
Nor can I forget Eleanor Metheny for the long hours of discussion spent untangling ideas about dance, as a human activity; Claude Chidamian for his insistent regard for simplicity and direct communication; Sue Powell for her sensitive and imaginative illustrations; Judy Bare, National Press editor, for her insight, concern, and ability to make sense of the manuscript; and Leah Ellfeldt, my mother, for her encouragement, assistance, and patient understanding through it all.

"The teaching of art is the only subject in his educational experience where a member of the future generation can be offered the chance to truly find himself as a unique person; because only here are there no ready-made answers telling him what he ought to see, feel, think or in which way he ought to find his self-alization."—BRUNO BETTELHEIM*

Source: "A Personal Vision," in *Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, produced for the National Committee on Art Education, and distributed by Random House, New York), p. 62.

1

From the Beginning . . . DANCE



The very word "dance" denotes motion. But the dictionary supplies an assortment of subsidiary definitions: "to perform a rhythmic and patterned succession of movements"; "to move nimbly and merrily"; and sometimes "to cause to dance." Since a choreographer causes others to dance, it is well to begin this primer with a working de

inition of the word. For dance, clearly, is many things! Some people "dance for joy" when the stock market rises. On a summer evening the fireflies "dance through the trees." A desert whirlwind "dances across the dusty mesa." The birds "dance," we are told, as do moonbeams, flowers, soap powders, grunions, and atoms. An infant, after a healthy yell, sets out on his "dance of life"—and our thoughts "dance" to consider it all.

However, dance has come to be associated primarily with unusual patterns of movement. Although the word retains a variety of meanings, it is commonly used to label any action that is lively or exotic. In most cases it describes a kind of planned and rhythmic motion, but practically everything that living creatures do is patterned and rhythmic! Just what kind of movement is *dance movement*? When does it cease being the movement of play, work, or random act and become the movement of dance? The movement itself does not change, of course. It is only selected and patterned to serve certain characteristic purposes. Sometimes the difference between dance and another activity is obvious; sometimes it seems slight or even nonexistent.

In all human action, what is done must occur in accordance with the mechanical principles of movement. With wide variation in efficiency, man moves his body by directing neuromuscular energy to overcome gravity and the inertia of his body weight. Therefore, the movement of dance is much like the movement of any other human activity; the principles and problems are the same. Also like other movement experiences, dance exists simultaneously in both time and space. Regardless of purpose, then, the definition

of "what effort . . . to go where . . . when" gives the movement sequence its form. Indeed, the factors of time, space, and energy operate whether they are used consciously or unconsciously.

But man is more than nerves and muscles in space and time; he moves to fulfill a purpose. It is that purpose which distinguishes one sort of dance from another, whether in one period or through history. The purposes of dance have changed as human culture has changed, for dance is created by individuals who belong to a particular milieu. The art probably began as embellished action, selected and organized not for private reasons, but as a rite of evocative magic. Primitive man danced to appease his gods. Eventually, dance served tribal rituals, rather than sacred rites. As civilization evolved, dance became part of folk culture; it expressed ethnic distinctions and nationalistic convictions. In more modern times, dance has assumed many forms, with many aims.

First of all, it can be social or recreational. The boy-and-girl fun of dance probably originated in the primitive fertility rite (the "coming of age dance") or in other tribal ceremonies that have their contemporary counterparts in the debutante's ball, the senior prom, the latest dance craze, or the polka party at the ski lodge.

Dance today also can be nationalistic or ethnic. Remnants of nationalistic styles of movement are usually called folk dance. Although it has lost much of its original nationalistic intent, folk dance continues in festival displays or in arbitrary examples of the "authentic dances" of a particular folk. While social dance is also a folk form, in the sense that it is done by ordinary people, it is enjoyed as a contemporary experience. A distinguishing character-

**SOCIAL
DANCE**

**FOLK
DANCE**

istic of "folk dance" is its traditional form as an expression of nationalism. On the other hand, ethnic dance presents the distinctly cultural, sometimes racial, and often religious character of a people. Most of the "ethnic dance" today has been diluted and rearranged for theater audiences, and so it has acquired an entirely different intent. For example, at the summer display at the Indian Roundup in Gallup, New Mexico, the Osage-Pawnee Dance of Greeting, Zuni Hoop Dance, Hopi Antelope Dance, Plains War Dance, and Navajo Squaw Dance follow one another like old-time vaudeville acts. The genuine ethnic dance takes its place and time of performance from the framework of the culture of which it is a part; it is not performed as a tourist attraction.

The major image of dance, however, at least in the popular mind, is that of spectacular dance. Its purpose is primarily to dazzle the audience by augmenting a literal or musical theme, by arousing erotic feelings, or by displaying a performer's technical virtuosity. As a part of the make-believe of theater, such dance entertains, but it is a thing of the moment. It adds nothing to the viewer's store of emotional or aesthetic experience.

There are many kinds of spectacular dancers—the magnificently disciplined *corps de ballet*, the couple with straw hats and canes doing a soft-shoe routine, the precise Rockettes, the charming children's chorus in *The King and I*, and the barefoot modern dancer performing unusual feats of movement magic. And there are many things displayed—the nimble feet of the tap dancers, the exquisite skill of the *première danseuse* in the ballet, the flexible necks of Hindu-jazz dancers, the legs and panties of cancan

girls, the befeathered and bespangled skin of chorus girls, and the tricks of a devotee of brilliant technique. But dance as an art form serves a different purpose. The artistic act is a conscious expression of an artist's comment on his world.

Such dance is a language, a special kind of a language. There are no words, nor is there a literal message in the language of dance. It is not an avenue of factual information, nor is it simply entertainment. Of course, it can be these things, but only incidentally. The words that dance "speaks" are movement phrases expressive of a choreographer's design. Dance is a statement, an expression in movement, containing some comment on reality that endures after the dance is over. One might say that dance as an art creates movement images through which we may become more sensitive to reality. It is an experience to provide enrichment and growth—for both the artist and his audience.

The dancer's instrument of communication is his own body. The proficiency required of him, the technical skill demanded in manipulating that body, may vary according to the style of a particular type of dance. However, contemporary dance sets no arbitrary limits upon degree of skill or type of action. The only restriction to movement potential is that imposed by anatomical or physiological factors, and *any* movement is a possible source of dance material.

In addition to proficiency in moving his body about a fixed base, carrying it through space with turns, leaps into the air, or falls to the floor, and bringing it into complex relationships with other people and with space, a dancer must be able to control his

effort so that he can move to where he wants to be—at the time he wants to be there. Therefore, the first question a dancer asks is: how can I direct and control effort and channel my energy?

THE USE OF ENERGY

The term *energy*, as applied to dance, describes an exertion which initiates, controls, and stops movement. Such factors as *intensity*, *accent*, and *quality* of movement can be recognized only in relative terms. What, for example, is strong? What is smooth and unaccented? Only when the dynamics of movement are contrasted can we see any particular character of movement.

Energy-change arouses “feelings” within both the dancer and the audience. The exact meanings associated with the change are impossible to identify. Nonetheless, dramatic implications are always present. Aspects of the action and the people concerned in it may alter these implications. An audience, for example, is affected differently by a controlled, integrated effort than by a random and uncoordinated splash of energy.

When a dancer moves, he can exert more or less intensity, with gradations ranging from almost imperceptible tension to a violent burst of energy. A tremendous display of force provides an action full of vigor and drive. However, although a strong movement implies greater size, it need not take any more space than a weak one. Conversely, less energy subordinates excitement and affirmation, and often results in a “contained” expression.

Accent occurs when some stress of either greater or lesser force is displayed. Often it is a contrast to what has been happening, or it is an “attention-getting” device. Accent is a tool for differentiating and identifying the pattern and rhythm of a particular motion. A regular accent creates a balanced and secure feeling. Irregular accents of varying intensity create a disturbing, confusing effect.

The quality of a dance movement is determined by the way energy is used. For instance, a *swinging movement* falls with gravity, gains momentum, and moves in an opposing arc until gravity once again causes a fall. The length of the body part that is falling and the nature of the joint and the supporting tissue all combine to determine the speed and rhythm of the action. That is, the swing of an arm or leg is more facile than the swing of an entire torso. There is a repetitive character to such a swing, which may recur as regularly as the motion of the pendulum in a Grandfather’s clock.

Another quality is provided by *percussive movement*, which has very obvious starts and stops, with no continuity. It repeats jabs of energy with marked accents. It easily provokes emotional overtones of excitement and nervousness.

Sustained movement appears to flow, with no obvious beginning or ending. It has only unaccented continuity, with nothing to break the smooth progression of directed energy.

Vibratory movement is really a continuum of percussive movements, a repetition of individual start-and-stop patterns. There is an hypnotic effect in such movement, as in a persistent jitter.

ENERGY
ACCENTENERGY
QUALITYENERGY:
INTENSITY

Suspension occurs at that point of resistance to gravity where, for an instant—as at the height of a leap or just before a fall—the dancer seems to be suspended in space. The emotional excitement is generated by the sense of unreality inherent in such defiance of gravity. Probably no more dramatic or potentially powerful quality is to be found in movement.



Seldom is any one of these movement qualities found in a pure form in dance. Usually, there is a combination of several identifiable qualities, each with its own dramatic overtones.

IN SPACE

Movement exists in space, which, to a dancer, means a potential of position and dimension. Position includes the dancer's level in regard to the floor surface and the direction in which he is mov-

ing. Dimension refers to the size of the dancer's movement. *Direction*, *level*, and *size* are clearly relative terms. Where, for example, is forward? How high is up? Only when some standard is established can we recognize differences.

To illustrate, size is related to the dancer's range of movement both in space and on the floor surface. An increase in size, which often has dramatic implications of breadth and scope, is relative to the movement that has gone before, and it is limited by the total stage space available.

Direction, level, and size relate to the perspective of the audience as well as to the space of the stage. If the performer is on a traditional stage, there is a characteristic set of spatial problems which are predetermined by the stage. Any given performing area contains its own assets and liabilities of perspective and dimension. It is obvious that a choreographer must be keenly aware of the prospective performance area as he designs a dance movement. If the stage is not available, then its size and shape should be marked off in the studio.

A choreographer should explore the power and weakness of moving and stationary figures on every part of the stage area. Exits and entrances should be examined from all possible places, the dancers' focus of force should be determined, and varying numbers of dancers should be observed in different relationships, both to each other and to the peculiarities of stage perspective. It is not enough to design a dance movement; it is imperative that it be designed for the area where it will be performed. Of course, the magic is created by *what* is done in space. Nonetheless, any movement,

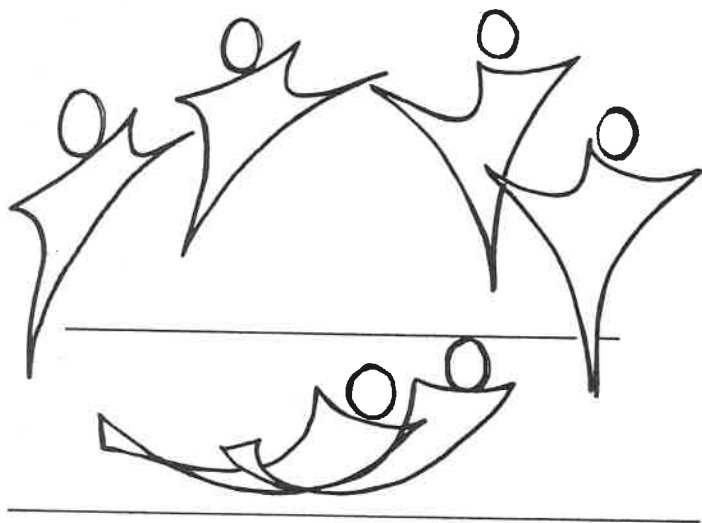
SPACE:
AUDIENCE
PERSPECTI

however potentially powerful it may be, cannot create its full impact when it is done in an unsuitable space.

It is important to remember that moving figures create designs in space, and—beyond this visual effect—relationships between movement and space evoke shades of meaning. When the dancer appears to control space, clearly the meaning evoked by his action itself is augmented by that fact that his action affects the space. Both the visual and connotational effects must be recognized.

For instance, as a dancer *elevates* his body he is limited only by his own power and leverage. He reaches his greatest height in

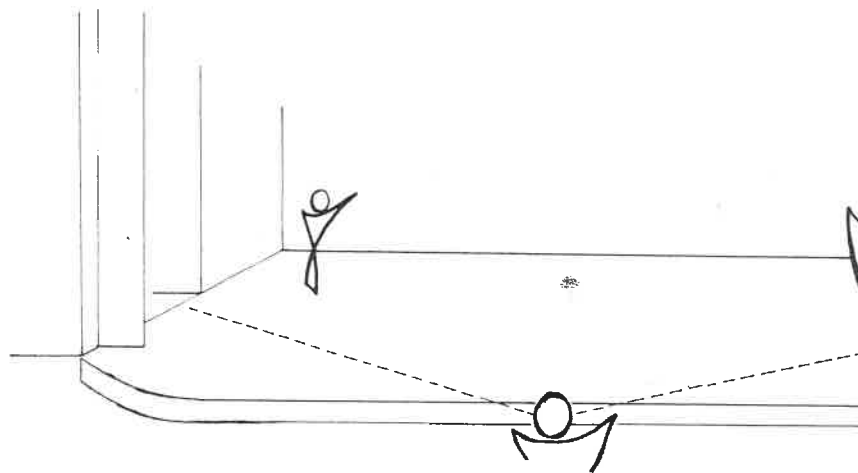
SPACE:
LEVEL



a jump or leap, and his lowest level in a fall onto the floor. Dramatic implications abound in the exhilaration of soaring into the heights, contrasted with the sure fall to earth.

The four corners of the rectangular box stage form a frame of reference for the position and action of the dancers. To the audience, upstage appears remote and deep in the distance; downstage, as it fans out broadly, is closer, and therefore more intimate.

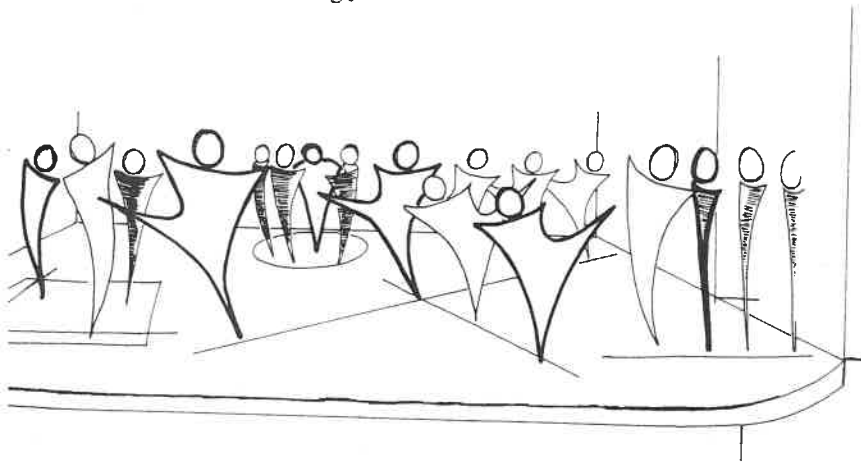
If interconnecting lines were drawn from the vertical corners of the stage box, one could see the diagonal lines of force as well as the many angles they form. A dancer moving on any one of these diagonals, aware of the powerful bisecting points of other diagonals, cannot help but acquire some of the strength inherent in such



a perspective. Certainly an awareness of its existence may be used as a potential source of dramatic tension.

**SPACE:
RECTION
AND
SIZE** The position of the audience determines the relative directions of forward, backward, sideward, and diagonal. As the dancer moves *forward*, toward the audience, his figure becomes larger, more direct, and obvious, simply as a result of perspective. As he moves *backward*, away from the audience, he appears smaller, impersonal, and usually less important.

As he moves to the *side*, across the performance area, he presents a changing view of his figure. The design seems two dimensional and flat, and only the dancer's body has the potential for sculptured roundness. After his figure crosses center stage, it becomes less important, unless it is strengthened by the bold frame verticals of a box stage.



As he moves *diagonally* forward across the performing area, he gains the combined strength of the powerful diagonal plus the increasing apparent size of his figure, with its more rounded aspect. This creates the appearance of "becoming" and evokes a sense of affirmation. It is decorative as well, in the appearance of the vertical body line and the diagonal as they bisect.

When diagonals are combined into zigzags, the audience sees lines that seem to jab at space and then repeat themselves at another angle. These appear broken, changeable, and indecisive.

When lines of equal length repeat at right angles, the resulting *square* appears to enclose a space, to set up a controlled routine of repetition.

There is a wide potential of straight-line combinations—from geometric figures to countless irregular variations on a straight line. The combinations of side, forward, backward, and oblique all acquire some of the characteristics of each element involved. Because of the performance area, any straight line described by the dancer's body necessarily ends somewhere within the stage space before a new straight line begins.

In addition to straight-line paths, there are equally versatile curving lines. Undoubtedly the most complete curved line is a *circle*, with its projection of smooth ongoingness. Here the dancer could continue indefinitely on this path and still remain within the performance area.

A circle doubled in the opposite direction results in a *figure-eight*, which adds contrast and design interest to the structure of dance movement.

Scallops, or partial circles, are lyrical in form; they exaggerate points of beginning and ending.

The dramatic implications of the *spiral*, with its encircling or ever-widening form, depend on the point of beginning and the scope and direction of its path.

There are many combinations that can be developed by simply extending a curved line, each new element yielding its particular character to the over-all pattern. There is an even wider potential for spatial design in combinations of straight and curved lines. In fact, everything that moves will follow either one, the other, or both!

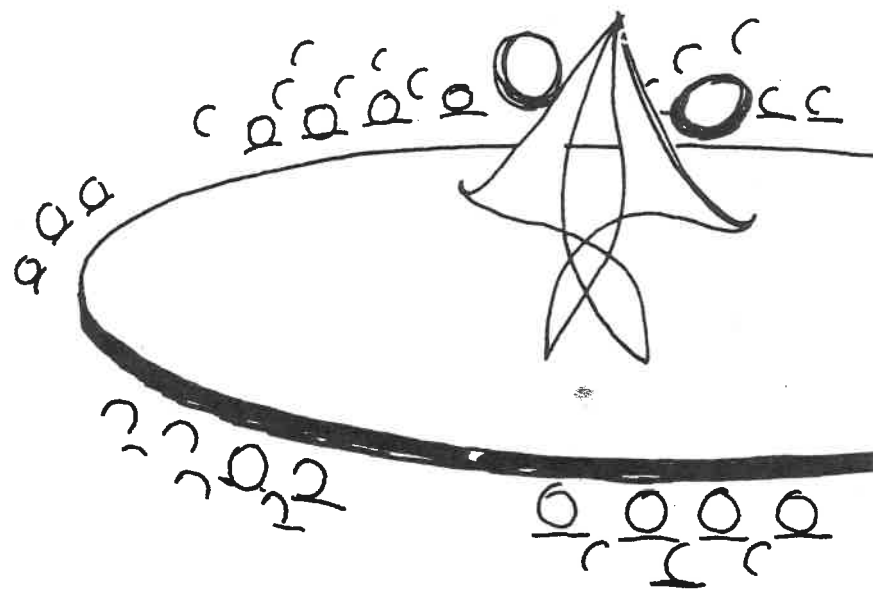
The choreographer who must deal with a circular stage must adapt movement patterns, such as those described above, to a much more problematic space. Most choreographers and critics do not consider dance equally interesting from all angles. They insist it should be viewed like a painting, from one direction and only one. There is no doubt that projection of dramatic intensity and linear design varies for different sections of the audience at a performance "in the round."

At such a performance, however, there is a greater emphasis upon the three-dimensional quality of the dancers. Perhaps the many objections to "dance in the round" are not so much that it should not be, but rather that it cannot exist without altering our concept of projection and design. Nonetheless, the formation of the early Greek chorus and the action circle of the primitives used dancers in the round. Despite such historical precedent, considerable readjustment seems to be required of choreographer, dancer,

SPACE:
THE
CIRCULAR
STAGE

and audience. Many aspects of dance have resisted change—especially if they have long been accepted—until someone with courage creates something new. Recognizing the problems of circular staging is not enough; we must also recognize its potential for a fresh look at dance.

It is important for a choreographer to keep in mind that designs in space are created not only by the dancer's body, but also by the position of his arms, legs, head, shoulders, hips, and other



jointed parts. When more than one dancer is used, there are increasingly complex dynamic images produced by action and interaction between the dancers and the space of the performing area. Indeed, as one or many dancers move, they describe designs both on the floor and in space, even as if they were little black characters sweeping across a great expanse of white space. Dance, after all, is a language and an art form, and the choreographer, like the poet, uses his language to make a communication that is attractive as well as meaningful.

AND TIME

Dance uses energy to fill space, but it must do so within time. The elements of time include the factors of *tempo* and *rhythm*, which are of special concern to dancers. What is fast? What is slow? Only when some tempo is established can we identify one that is either faster or slower. Rhythm is a term that identifies a patterned relationship—sometimes a simple repetition and sometimes a complex development.

TIME:
TEMPO

The tempo, or speed, of a dance is determined by the time span in which a given series of movements is completed, the period in which the dancer's body must accomplish a sequence of actions. Fast movement is usually more active and exciting; slow movement reduces the stimulation.

TIME:
RHYTHM

Rhythm requires a structuring of movement patterns. There are a series of beginnings, developments, and endings leading to a rise, a bringing together, and a resolution. This structure may be

compared to the rhythmic organization of music. The rhythm pattern comes into focus, is stressed, and is moved away from, in a clearly defined, planned sequence. Each transition, from beginning to middle and from middle to end, must be predetermined. Simple repetitions of stress and action evoke a feeling of regularity and balance; complex and obscure repetitions give rise to disturbance and excitement. Even random movement as dance requires planning to create the appearance of randomness.

How do energy, space, and time relate to the choreographer's purpose? We are concerned here with dance as an art form, in contemporary acceptance. "Contemporary" is, of course, a general term, but it may be taken to mean an approach to dance limited only by the movement capability and sensitivity of the performer, and the imagination, courage, and craft of the choreographer. Preformed movement patterns such as "steps," "routines," or "combinations" are not used. Rather, significant movement sequences are drawn out of human experience and the very act of moving. Form develops from the manipulation of these movements according to the dictates of the choreographer. While basic content may come from ancient as well as current sources, it is expressed primarily by the movement selected—colored by the character of the choreographer and performer, and unhampered by conventional ways of moving.

"Modern dance," historically, has been a breaker of rules. Classical ballet limited its choreographers to a movement code, but "dance" in contemporary terms means movement selected on the basis of its relevance to the human condition, movement which

will serve the purpose of an idea rather than merely act out a libretto or accompany a musical score. The choreographer in contemporary dance has freedom of choice and freedom of action. It is through understanding and control of the factors of energy, space, and time that this freedom is realized.

2

The End . . . CHOREOGRAPHY



Choreography is choice and action. It is the process of selecting movement into a dance. It is derived from the Greek: *choreia*, a *graphia*, writing. Literally, the word *choreography* implies the writing but actually means designing the action, whether or not the design is a