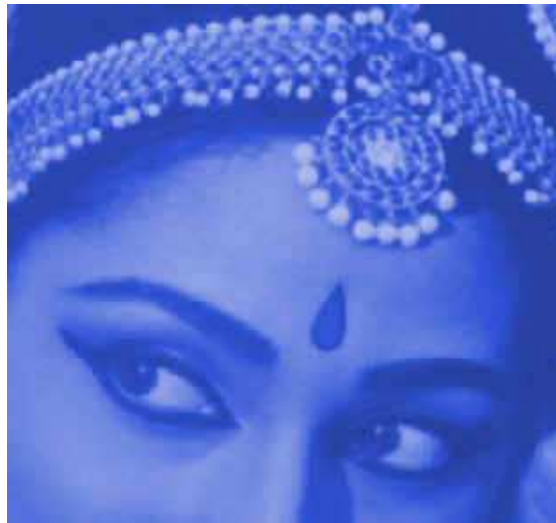


**A Glance at Differences between Traditional Asian dances
and Modern dance**

-- A Review of International Ramayana Dance Festival



Hongfei Guo guo@cs.wisc.edu

A Glance at Differences between Traditional Asian dances and Modern dance

-- A Review of International Ramayana Dance Festival

Hongfei Guo guo@cs.wisc.edu

October 20th, I went to the international Ramayana dance festival. There I enjoyed those beautiful and graceful Asian traditional drama dances, which are quite different from modern dances. If we say those drama dances are like strict sonnets, then modern dances are more like casual essays. Each of them brings different experiences to the audience.

This drama was about a story of the Ramayana, an epic of India and Southeast Asia retold in episodes performed by dancers from Bali, India, Thailand and Laos. Several pieces of dances deeply impressed me, which also shed a light on the differences from modern dances.

First of all, the solo dance about the young and beautiful princess that saw the prince and fell in love with him. This was a piece of India dance. Compared with modern dance, India dance is quite different in two ways: 1) It emphasizes much more the use of dancers face expressions. The dancer used her eyes, her vivid face expressions to show her happiness, her surprise, her hesitation, and her admire to the prince. 2) It emphasizes the movements of hands and fingers. Such emphases make the dance very decorative. While modern dance pay more attention to the movements of the body as a whole and the harmony of the body, which make the dance more close to the nature. To me, India dance is more famine while modern dance intentionally blurs the difference of genders.

Second, the Thailand dance of the sister demon and the prince. Their customs were striking: brilliant golden and well formed. Such customs isolate the dancer's body. Thus, this kind of dance is slower and more ritual like. Movements are not the purpose; instead,

they are just a necessity used to go from one static pose to the next one. Disguised under such costumes, dancers are like sculptures rather than real individual persons. On the opposite, in modern dance, movements are the main building block. Customs need to serve this purpose as well; they facilitate the movements being better perceived, connecting dancers with their movements. Dancers are totally free in making movements in their costumes.

Third, the solo dance about the queen and her old maid. This piece was impressive in that a single dancer played two roles. By using different sets of characteristic movements, the dancer showed clearly those two distinct roles – One was an aggressive hunchback old maid, the other was the irresolute and influenceable queen. This is another interest contrast to modern dance in that there is no obvious role in modern dance. In other words, the movements are not used to indicate what role the dancer plays, on the opposite, they are more abstract. Different audience can have different understandings towards the same dance piece according to their different individual life experiences.

Finally, the Bali dance about the prince fighting against the demons. Similar with Thai dance, Bali dance is also very decorative and ritual like, except it is characterized by the special head movements and eye movements.

Above I emphasized that in general modern dance is more natural, underlining freely express individual experience in an abstract way instead of being limited to a fixed traditional movement frame. As a complement, I would like to point out that culture background can be reflected in modern dance as well, which enrich the expressing methods of modern dance. For example, from Yu Yin-Wen's works, one can notice the implicit influence of Chinese culture and philosophy, which gives his choreography a special taste.