

May 18, 1971

Tuesday

Modern Dance



Orchesis, MSU's modern dance group, was once primarily an honor society for dancers. Seven years ago it was reorganized into basically a performing dance group. Since then, it has held yearly performances. Its latest appearance last April was met with much acclaim.

As an art form, modern dance, as the name itself implies, is relatively new. Its emergence, consequently, has received little notoriety compared to such competing mediums as theater and ballet. However, its popularity is increasing in proportion to the current trend toward more individualized forms of expression.

Tuesday, this week, has devoted its pages to an examination of modern dance. On the front and back pages David Kirkpatrick presents an artist's impressions of modern dance in a photographic essay of Debra White, a member of Orchesis.

There is considerable ambiguity and controversy over what precisely modern dance is. On page 2 Herther Sisto explains some of the history and concepts of modern dance. Also on the page Roger Hill has captured a glimpse of Heather's dance style in photographs.

Since its inception, modern dance has undergone numerous changes and is currently being adopted to other art forms. On May 2, the opening day of the undergraduate exhibition at Kresge Art Center, Vic Stornant "staged" an organic sculpture titled "Living Sculpture as Human Art." The materials he used were limited to several dancers from Orchesis. On page 3 he comments on this innovation in modern dance and remarks on its outcome.

— Robert Sickels

Modern dance is a medium through which a growing number of people today feel they can best express themselves as individual human beings. I use the term "human being" because this form of dance enables the artist to use his total being, both physical and mental.

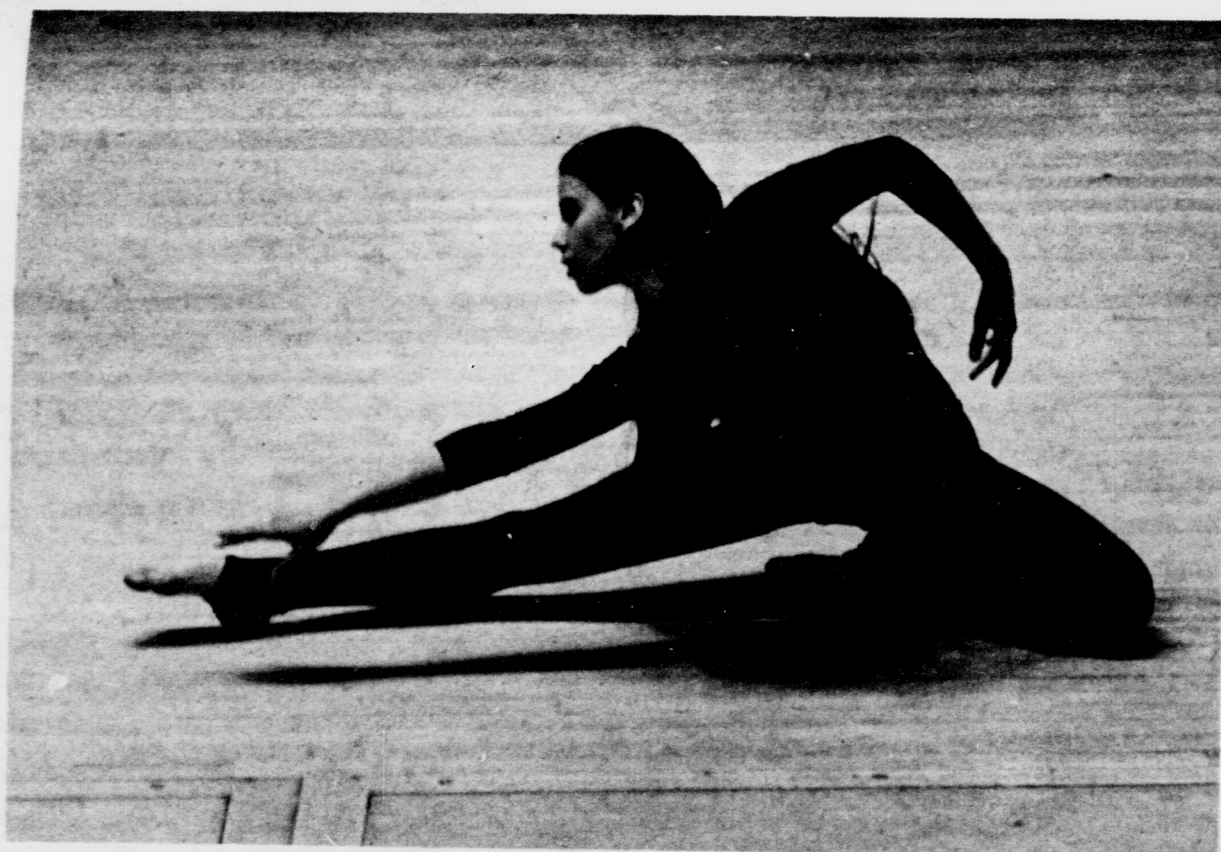
Modern dance is somewhat addicting — once one indulges to any degree he is hooked. If you leave it for a while, your body quickly feels lax and put to waste and craves the refreshing exhaustion of a good workout. As a choreographer, your senses refuse to let you ignore your feelings and perceptions of the world around you. Your mind longs to express itself through the "sensitive communication" — dance.

Why do we use the term "modern dance?" A simple, concise definition would certainly seem appropriate to help clear up the vague and mysterious rumors that often float around on this subject. However, the rigidity inherent in any definition is exactly what modern dance has fought to rid itself of. Perhaps it could be termed "individual expression through movement." But that by no means encompasses the scope and variety of modern dance. Hopefully, there are as many philosophies about purposes, possibilities and reasons for modern dance as there are participants in it. That is its beauty.

The first modern dancers were rebels who objected to the rigid formality and artificiality of the classic ballet. They



photographs/Roger Hill



looked for natural movement, incorporating the whole body rather than just using arms and legs. They used the natural cycle of breathing and returned to the dancer's own foot, unhampered by toe shoes. They wanted a realistic balance of both men and women in dance. Americans no longer wanted forms borrowed from European aristocrats. They wanted to feel their own ground.

The school of modern dance realizes that the discipline of technique is still necessary to allow the dancer total freedom and range in movement. But it wants the movement to be significant and creative and relevant to the contemporary world. Martha Graham, a pioneer of modern dance, wrote: "I do not want to be a tree, a flower or a wave. In a dancer's body, we as the audience must see ourselves; not the imitated behavior of everyday actions, not the phenomena of nature, not exotic creatures from another planet, but something of the miracle that is a human being, motivated, disciplined, concentrated."

Even modern dance nears the pitfall of establishing criteria every now and then. One school of thought will try to prove why they are the only true form. But for the most part, modern, ballet, jazz and every aspect of the numerous styles of movement, have matured enough to add to, share with and benefit from each other.

Then what is the difference between ballet and modern dance? The answer lies in why ballet, even modernized ballet, is an accepted art form, while modern dance has never really been "popular." At least not yet.



Theoretically, the ballet is opposed to modern dance because it uses accepted symbols to depict established ideas. The modern dance is the art of iconoclasts. It is an attitude that advocates change from accepted symbols, because they have lost their power to startle us into awareness. Nonconformity is essential for keeping the freshness and vitality in the modern dance. The proof lies in the many changes, both subtle and dramatic, that have occurred in modern dance since its birth in the 1900s with Isadora Duncan.

The huge variety of opinions that exist simultaneously today are mixtures of old and new and yet to come. Some feel that movement should come from within the body, some view the body in relation to space. Themes include the use of primitive ritual, classical myths and social commentary. There has been a large movement toward "pure" dance, discarding dramatic plot or theme and creating a mood or effect through rhythmic and spatial designs. The first rebels had to free the dance from its puritanical inhibitions. Therefore, it needed to be Freudian, earthy and heavily dramatic. They succeeded, and left their followers the greater freedom of being able to draw from any sources they desired. Even musical accompaniments range from silence to spoken words, from classical to jazz to electronic scores. Various media are often juxtaposed, creating a "total theater" effect.

Modern dance is the beauty of freedom from definition.

— Heather Sisto

Living Sculpture Human Art

by Vic Stornant

Dance, as in any form of art, presents a visual experience for the viewer. In Living Sculpture as Human Art I was interested in dance as it relates to problems of form, line, texture and movement. Since the dancers from Orchestis have been trained to respond to these problems, my job as the artist was to set the situation for them to work with.

"Textures" was a very subtle problem. The challenge of becoming a soft texture was met with some rather good results. Body awareness is important and muscle tension determines the quality of movement. Having control of those muscles determines the dancers vocabulary of movement. Soft delicate lines and textures call for the control of relaxed muscles.



In "Construction" my idea was to have the dancers build a structure across the gallery. Instead of beams and supports they used arms and legs. It takes an awareness of the other individual to work on a project like this and personal inter-reactions of parts (dancers) were well coordinated.



With the problem of "Lines" the dancers were to move through space using either straight or curved lines, or both. Because of the media (humans), the movement is not restricted to mechanical repetition. A dancer can take a curved line through the room and outdoors in a different variation each time, as many times as the dancer wants to. And because we're human, dancers can pause for a rest, causing another variation.

If I had to make a comparison with an art media, I think dancing is more like drawing or painting, where the space through which the dancer moves becomes the canvas on which you create. I used the word "sculpture" in the title because of the dimensional aspect of the art form as opposed to painting which implies a flat surface.

photographs/Roger Hill

