

Chance in Dance and Politics

Jim Dator

Most of you know that I believe chance should be allowed to play a bigger role in making choices, "everything else being equal", in politics and life. Our old "Newtonian" governance structures and rules place far too much faith in "reason" whereas we often don't really know why we behave as we do (or why we favor one person or policy over another). Rather we have learned over the years how to make more or less culturally-acceptable excuses for our behavior and preferences.

This may have implications not only for political design but also for our envisioning and striving to attain "preferred futures".

I was reading today, on this exceptionally rainy afternoon, a review (by Joan Acocella, in *The New Yorker*, November 3, 2003, pp. 96-99) of a dance program by the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on this, his fiftieth(!) anniversary season. I have long been a fan of Cunningham (and of his collaborator, John Cage, who died over a decade ago).

Acocella explains that the order of everything in Cunningham's current program--which of two musical groups provides the music first, and the order of the music itself; the order and length of the several dance sequences (all composed without having heard any of the music that will accompany the dancing); how many dancers perform each of the sequences; the stage backdrops; the lighting--were all determined by chance, and were determined by chance again every time the piece was subsequently performed.

Some people may feel the result is bewildering chaos--to which Cunningham is quoted as saying, "Chance becomes its own order, if you choose to use it. Instead of planning a specific order, you use chance, and out of it will come a new kind of order." "It opens your imagination. Chaos is chaos only if you think it is chaos".

Acocella concludes with the paragraph that prompted me to write this:

"You can find dancing that is more poignant, or easier to watch, than Cunningham's but I don't think any choreographer in the world gives us a closer look at truth. Beauty without reasons, and without anxiety over the lack of reasons: that may be what life was like before we started making it up. Sometimes when I look at Cunningham's stage, I think I'm seeing the world on the seventh day, with everything new and just itself--before the snake, and the tears, and the explanations." (p. 99)