



"Dance can never be the same on TV as it is to someone witnessing a performance on stage." Above, a close-up sacrifices choreography while the broader shot misses facial expression.

Videodance—It May Be A Whole New Art Form

By WALLACE WHITE

They used to come on like trained-dog acts—the ballerinas in tutus would glide on the Ed Sullivan Show, dance a Dying Swan on a concrete floor, and glide out again, probably with aching legs. If the Swan did not always meet our expectations, it was not necessarily the fault of the dancer. Until very recently, television simply did not know how to capture dance. Now, with the inauguration of the Public Broadcasting Service's "Dance in America" series, whose first hour will be seen

this Wednesday evening on Channel 13, there are signs that television is learning how to join with choreographers and dancers in creating a new and startlingly effective art form.

The series—a counterpart of Channel 13's "Theater in America" and "Music in America"—is being produced by WNET under a \$1.5 million grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Exxon. The first program in the series is being done by the City Center Jeffrey Ballet. The second, which is scheduled for February or March, will be done by choreographer Twyla Tharp and her avant-garde dance troupe. The third pro-

gram—the series is being done on a more or less monthly basis—will be turned over to Martha Graham. Succeeding programs are still being discussed, but they will probably involve most of the best-known choreographers and dancers in this country.

None of this has been easy. In fact, it has been one of the most difficult exercises in adaptation that television has ever had to face. What the creators of this ground-breaking series have had to wrestle with is the fact that dance can never be the same on the small television screen as it is to someone seated in a theater witnessing a performance on a proscenium.

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stage. To take some examples: If the entire performance area is to be included on the screen, smaller details are bound to be sacrificed. If the TV camera picks up an isolated bit of dancing or focuses on a dancer's face, a larger view of the choreography is at least momentarily lost. And if, out of a desire to be faithful to the stage, one does not make use of such possibilities of the electronic medium as cuts, fades, dissolves, superimpositions, slow motion, changes in focus, and so forth, an apparently "faithful" performance may turn out to be disappointingly two-dimensional. Compounding all this is the fact that until recently, adequate treatment of dance has been considered far too costly. Now, thanks to WNET's generous funding—and to a great many enthusiastic dancers, choreographers, and television producers, directors, and technicians—a satisfactory merger between dance and television has at last become feasible.

The producers and directors of the new series sum up their approach to the merger as a "translation"—a transference of dance from the theater to an electronic medium while retaining the original feeling and spirit of the art form. Merrill Brockway, the series producer, explains: "This required an extremely close collaboration between the choreographer and the television director. If you simply set up a camera near the back of a theater—and you have to go far back in order to get the whole stage—the dancers are going to come out looking about as big as ants. On the other hand, if you use too many electronic tricks, you are going to end up being too gimmicky. We wanted to retain the original quality of a ballet, and to do so we decided to take full—but discreet—advantage of the tools television has to offer. We

used three cameras, one of them a 25-foot crane.

"We often taped several takes of the same action in order to make use of different camera angles. Furthermore, every dancer varies within a performance, and no ballet is ever danced the same way twice. At times we stopped the dancers and asked them to do a certain portion of a dance over again. Often segments of various tapes were pieced together afterward, in the editing process, in order to get what we hoped was the effect of an uninterrupted performance. What it comes down to is that we were aiming for a definitive record of a dance — something that might be compared to a sound recording. More than once, we decided to actually change the choreography—and that's pretty risky—but our primary aim was always to preserve the original vision."

vise a scene from his 1917 "Parade," which has music by Erik Satie and sets and costumes by Pablo Picasso. The use of close-ups in this ballet—for example, the grotesque movements of Gary Chryst's painted mouth and eyebrows as he dances the role of the Chinese conjuror—enables the viewer to enjoy aspects of a dance that he might never see in the theater.

Gerald Arpino, associate director of the Joffrey, supervised the taping of excerpts from his 1966 "Olympics," as well as a complete version of

his 1970 "Trinity," whose rock score is by Alan Raph and Lee Holdridge. "Trinity" employs 14 dancers, whose interactions and frequent entrances and exits would ordinarily make use of an entire proscenium stage. On television, the effect of vitality and rapid change is achieved by a series of fleeting superimpositions, combined with movements made on a diagonal to the camera, all of which seem to expand the limits of the TV screen until the "translation" that the producers speak of is complete.

One such alteration occurs in the videotaped version of Kurt Jooss' 1932 anti-war ballet, "The Green Table," whose music is by Frederic Cohen. At a point in the original ballet, 10 male dancers form a horizontal line along the front of the stage and fire pistols into the air. Then there is a blackout. After a quick change of sets, a figure of Death appears alone in center stage. In the television version, however, the dancers form two parallel lines stretching away from the camera before they fire their pistols. The camera then dollies smoothly between the two lines of dancers and continues its forward motion with a zoom lens, until Death fills the screen.

Balletomanes may wail, "It's not the same!" But in making decisions such as these, the producers of this first program have had recourse to the best of all possible authorities: the choreographers themselves. Kurt Jooss was brought from Germany for "The Green Table." Léonide Massine was brought from Italy in order to super-

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Balletomanes may wail, "It's not the same!" Below, Gary Chryst in "Parade"



In an excerpt from one of Robert Joffrey's own ballets, the 1973 "Remembrances," slow motion is used at the beginning and ending—a device that comes close to gimmickry but that blends so well into the rest of the dancing that it might almost not be perceived for what it is. "As the choreographer, I felt that I had license to do this sort of thing," Joffrey says. "But I would never attempt to change someone else's ballet. That's why it was so important that we have all the choreographers with us in the studio."

Apart from these few minutes of slow motion, however, "Remembrances" involves simpler, more straightforward camera work than the other dances on the program. Joffrey and the director, Jerome Schnur, chose to use one camera for most of this excerpt, believing that one continuous shot—the excerpt is mostly a pas de deux danced by Francesca Corkle and Paul Sutherland—came closer to the feeling of the ballet and the music (Wagner's *Wesendonk Lieder*). The dancing is nearly impeccable, but to this viewer, at least, the result at times recalled the earlier, boxed-in effect that has characterized televised dance in the past—a personal objection, but one that illustrates very well the dilemma faced by anyone trying to adapt one medium to another.

A host of other physical, technical and even atmospheric problems had to be solved by the producers of the TV series. Emile Artolino, the co-ordinating producer, emphasizes the importance of providing the dancers with a proper floor. A really good dance floor—a rarity even in most theaters—has a certain spring to it. For too many years, televised dancers have been required to do their jetés and arabesques on concrete or some other hard surface, often ending up with shin splints. For "Dance in America," WNET spent some \$20,000 on

the construction of a multi-layered floor of plywood and foam rubber that can be taken apart for transportation.

Good cameramen were at a premium, too. Most TV cameramen have been trained to follow the action—reacting with their camera as an actor walks across a room, for example. For this series, the cameramen had to be familiar with the movement ahead of time, so that they could anticipate the action. If they were not able to do so, dancers might leap right out of the top of the picture.

An absolutely vital area of concern—and one that has been almost totally neglected in the past—was the treatment of the dancers themselves. There are probably no more highly disciplined people in any performing art. Furthermore, dancers are accustomed to working in a theater setting, where they have markings on the floor for orientation, wings into which they can retreat when not onstage, and an audience out front to which they can respond. In a television setting, most of these familiar features are missing. And, as if to make things worse for the dancers, TV studios are usually kept annoyingly chilly, for technical reasons. One of the first things the producers did was to warm up the studio.

The outcome of all the planning and work—for the first program, at any rate—is an hour that is dazzling at its best and instructive even when one might wish for something slightly different. The series could not have come at a better time. Dance is America's fastest growing performance art. (Some 11 million people saw live dance performances in this country in 1975—an astonishing increase of about 10 million over the previous decade.) WNET estimates that between four and five million viewers will see the first hour of "Dance in America." That, in itself, is reason for applause. ■