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Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia In Performance



Synopsis

"This is an urgently needed book as the question of choreographing behavior enters into realms outside of the aesthetic domains of theatrical dance, Susan Foster writes a thoroughly compelling argument." Andr  f Lepecki, New York University "May well prove to be one of Susan Foster's most important works." Ramsay Burt, De Montford University, UK What do we feel when we watch dancing? Do we "dance along" inwardly? Do we sense what the dancer's body is feeling? Do we imagine what it might feel like to perform those same moves? If we do, how do these responses influence how we experience dancing and how we derive significance from it? Choreographing Empathy challenges the idea of a direct psychophysical connection between the body of a dancer and that of their observer. In this groundbreaking investigation, Susan Foster argues that the connection is in fact highly mediated and influenced by ever-changing sociocultural mores. Foster examines the relationships between three central components in the experience of watching a dance the choreography, the kinesthetic sensations it puts forward, and the empathetic connection that it proposes to viewers. Tracing the changing definitions of choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy from the 1700s to the present day, she shows how the observation, study, and discussion of dance have changed over time. Understanding this development is key to understanding corporeality and its involvement in the body politic.

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Customer Reviews

"May well prove to be one of Susan Foster's most important works." - Ramsay Burt, De

Montford University, UK "This extremely well-documented book is a marvelous addition to the literature on choreographic thought. Highly recommended." - L. K. Rosenberg, Miami University, USA

Susan Leigh Foster is professor of choreography, history and theories of the body at UCLA. Her work has been supported by grants from the National Endowment of the Arts, the National Endowment of Humanities, and the Rockefeller and Jerome Foundations. Ph.D., History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz; M.A., Dance, University of California, Los Angeles; B.A. Anthropology, Swarthmore College. She has created several solo concerts which have toured the United States, Canada and Europe.

Jessica DiMauro
Choreographing Empathy In *Choreographing Empathy* by Susan Leigh Foster (2011) the reader is guided through a detailed dissection of three terms, each with a section devoted to it: Choreography, Kinesthesia and Empathy. This terminology is placed within a historical context, revealing significant developments that act as chronological landmarks for which the reader is guided to rely on in the final section of the book: *Choreographing Empathy*. Not only does Foster track the origin of these terms, but she reveals insight into the evolution of each, the interrelatedness becoming more apparent as the book progresses. Approaching each term with a fervency for detail, the author unearths issues of sexuality, gender and social, cultural and political impact on the physical experience. Each section begins with rooted definitions of the term, continuing with numerous examples of innovators who provided significant developments in the category being discussed. The amount of material presented is extensive, requiring the reader to use these exemplary figures as guides to lead to a greater understanding. The terminology's chronological evolution is highlighted within historical context to reveal the resulting influence on the use and awareness of the body as a source of expression. Evolution of choreography within historical context, kinesthesia as an evolved practice and influence and empathy as an embodied experience are revealed through careful consideration of physicality. Whether embodied, adorned or viscerally experienced, Foster reveals body politics as mapped throughout historical and cultural conditions. Whether in dance genres, both traditional and cultural, educational, medical or fitness arenas, the material presented systematically travels through historical and cultural climates to reveal notions of empathetic physicality, while excavating the roots of these realizations. In the final section of the book, the author uses specific choreographic works, indicative of a particular body politic and weaves in previously discussed terminology; revealing

influences and resulting material, while continuing to develop the meaning of the phrase "choreographing empathy." If the reader conquers the first three clinically delivered sections, this final section proves to be full of clever insight that can potentially be tracked back to the previously administered information. By exploring performances concerned with body politics, Foster tackles choreographic works ranging in subject matter from technological preoccupation to works that enliven cross cultural conversations; tying these selected together by reinforcing the empathetic. Each work varies in application, however the point is clear; the revelation of terminology within a specific cultural or political context, provides a platform for discovery of empathetic importance within performative works. Foster states: "Choreography, whatever its meaning, can provide clues to this specific experience of the physical in the ways that it records or documents movement, and also in the ways that it sets forth principles upon which movement is to be learned and crafted. The notion of empathy then theorizes the potential of one body's kinesthetic organization to infer the experience of another." (2011, p. 175). This regard for empathetic response is developed throughout the book and resonates heavily with my choreographic self. Although the extensive detail is intended to enlighten the reader, I found myself craving a more thorough exploration of actual transference of intention or phenomenological reasoning behind empathetic experience. Instead we are presented a detached portrayal of historical markers for which we are supposed to rely on when presented with choreographic examples in the fourth section of the book. The writing, although sticking diligently to the termed headings, jumps from discipline to discipline-dancers, artists, physical educators, environmentalists, scientists, politicians- are mentioned in an effort to portrait historical significance and development of terminology. While extremely informative, the first three sections proved to be exorbitant in nature. The description of this book bills it as an exploration in expressivity and receptivity. I would have preferred 218 pages of analysis as in the final section. This book is appropriate for graduate level study and could potentially act as a reference for historical developments of the kinesthetic experience. Work Cited: Foster, Susan Leigh, 2011. *Choreographing Empathy*. London and New York: Routledge.

After interesting and thorough (a little too thorough) historical surveys of the terms choreography, kinesthesia, and empathy Foster runs out of steam and fails to adequately apply these concepts to the performances she otherwise describes well. Experiments and direct research would have made a more useful book. Hard to tell who this is aimed at. Heed the faint praise on the back.

It was a gift for my daughter---a student of hers 25 years ago. She is thrilled to have it---contact the ship to for an actual review.

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