

David Muir, writer and director, *Road to the Stamping Ground*. Coproduced by Polygon Pictures and RM Arts. An Arts International Presentation, 1984. Color film, 55 minutes.

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This film documents the genesis of the modern ballet "Stamping Ground" by world-renowned choreographer Jiri Kylian, who was inspired while witnessing a gathering of Aboriginal dancers on Groote Eylandt off Australia's northern coast. Sponsored by the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, the event brought together five hundred tribespeople from twenty different localities in Australia to perform traditional dances for each other. Few outsiders were invited, but Kylian was one of them. Struck by the sophistication of the dancers, the choreographer recognized in their movements elements of dance he himself had been struggling to perfect for some time. The first part of the film records some of the Aboriginal dances in all their vitality, along with Kylian's commentary on their choreographic and cultural import. The remainder of the film is devoted primarily to the rehearsals and, finally, a performance of "The Stamping Ground."

The ballet's title comes from Kylian's fascination with the Aborigines' stamping techniques that, though ubiquitous in their dances, are nonetheless variable and quite expressive. Kylian enumerates several other characteristic elements of Aboriginal dance that he sought to incorporate into the repertoire of his dance company, the Nederlands Dans Theater. One such element was countermovement, in which different parts of the body move in opposite directions simultaneously. Another is the fact that Aborigines always dance in groups. The group members draw enthusiasm and stamina from each other, and show a marked absence of competitiveness that, according to Kylian, is quite unlike the West where dancers attempt to outperform each other.

Still another element of Aboriginal dance is each performer's sense of his own abdominal area as the center from which the whole energy of the dance emanates. Each uses the bulk of the stomach to enhance the expressive use of the limbs. Other elements mentioned by Kylian include the Aborigines' phenomenal jumping ability, hand motions that remain expressive despite difficult leg and body movements, and the use of cycles of brief, separate dances to express Aboriginal themes, very often using uncanny imitations of animals.

The film illustrates each of these elements with excellent footage from the Groote Eylandt gathering. The Aborigines move with a dexterity, precision, and energy that are nothing short of elegant. The body decorations are striking, and the music of sharp percussion and droning didgiridoo hypnotic. As the film explains, Aboriginal dance is not art for art's sake, but instead contributes in at least three ways to the cohesion of the tribe and the spiritual well-being of the individual members. First, everyone performs, young and old, thus contributing to the persistence of the group. It is encouraging, in fact, to see many young performers in the film whose presence somewhat mitigates reports of the impending loss of traditional Aboriginal culture. Second, dance serves an educational value for the group, often as a symbolic enactment of tribal laws for younger group members. Third, most Aboriginal art, including dance, is religious and recounts sacred legends of ancestral heroes who lived in the "dreamtime" when the earth was created. As such, dances carry the structural meanings of the tribe. They also mark an individual's progress through stages of religious knowledge.

From this concentrated but compelling bit of instruction, the film moves to Kylian's ballet, allowing the viewer to compare the modern product to its Aboriginal roots. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the ballet is somewhat disappointing in comparison, its innovations no more engrossing and fresh than many other experiments in the dynamic world of modern dance and movement. And although Aboriginal elements are evident, there is an obviously vast difference between the Aboriginal performers and Kylian's company. Such movements take many years to perfect, even for trained dancers, and the expertise of the Aborigines in these techniques is clearly superior.

One is reminded by the film of modern painting and the influence of African masks in the work of Picasso and other visual artists at the beginning of this century. Taken out of context, these forms were often misunderstood by artists, critics, and audiences. According to Maquet, "The first European admirers of 'primitive art' . . . knew little, if anything, of the meaning of these objects in the societies they came from,

and they were not interested. They were interested in the formal qualities of these objects, in the solutions given by their authors to the technical problems of the interrelations of masses and volumes, or in what they believed to be a primeval spirit of strength and freedom" (1971:3).

Ethnocentric interpretations aside, however, the influence of so-called primitive art on Western aesthetics eventually yielded a new awareness for tribal expression that has culminated in an appreciation of these forms as culturally laden productions that can significantly increase our understanding of the societies that produced them. This film makes that same statement with respect to dance. Because of its finely captured images of Aboriginal dance, one hears in this film the admonitions of Kurath, Kaeppler, Merriam, Royce, and others that anthropologists have paid too little attention to dance as a cultural system. A decade ago, Kaeppler chided, "Anthropologists have been slow to recognize that a study and understanding of dance--which is sometimes a very conspicuous part of culture--may actually assist in an understanding of the deep structure of a society and bring new insights into understanding other parts of culture" (1978:32).

The film, then, has several values in addition to that of simply tracing the sources of a modern ballet. The first is its excellent selective documentation of and introduction to Aboriginal dance. Furthermore, it provokes discussion on such varied topics as the cross-cultural applicability of the concepts "art" and "aesthetics," the role of art in society, and the effect of culture contact on style.

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