

Reviews

Jay Rogoff

an excerpt of

*Like Tap-Dancing about Architecture**

Elvis Costello's alleged quip that "writing about music is like tap-dancing about architecture" appears to dismiss music criticism (if not the whole endeavor of aesthetic evaluation) as absurd and self-defeating; Costello implicitly urges us to experience works of art directly to understand what they express, without resorting to pundits. But what if Costello's witticism is taken as wisdom, not sarcasm? What if it challenges critics to write about the arts so imaginatively that their work itself stands as an aesthetic object fit for study and delight—prose with the musical invention and structural excitement of a Fred Astaire number, or the sly attack and rhythmic elegance of a Bill "Bojangles" Robinson routine?

Dance writers in particular may aspire to imaginative flight and yearn to set words in motion, but like dancers they struggle to overcome gravity, constantly restrained by the nonfiction writer's obligation to remain grounded. Dancers learn to use gravity in order to appear to defy it. Can criticism soar while still upholding its main obligation—to make its prose a transparent window on the thing itself? Edwin Denby, one of the twentieth century's great dance writers, identified the basic task in his 1949 essay "Dance Criticism": "a writer is interesting if he can tell what the dancers did, what they communicated, and how remarkable that was." This deceptively simple summary actually hints that to do its job properly, dance writing must develop its own

*An essay-review of

READING DANCE: A GATHERING OF MEMOIRS, REPORTAGE, CRITICISM, PROFILES, INTERVIEWS, AND SOME UNCATEGORIZABLE EXTRAS. Edited and with an introduction by Robert Gottlieb. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008. 1,330 pp. \$45.00.

BALANCHINE VARIATIONS. By Nancy Goldner. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. 133 pp. \$24.95, paper.

BALLET'S MAGIC KINGDOM: SELECTED WRITINGS ON DANCE IN RUSSIA, 1911–1925. By Akim Volynsky. Translated, edited, and with an introduction and notes by Stanley J. Rabinowitz. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. 288 pp. \$35.00.

SHOOT ME WHILE I'M HAPPY: MEMORIES FROM THE TAP GODDESS OF THE LOWER EAST SIDE. By Jane Goldberg. New York: Woodshed Productions, 2008. 307 pp. \$40.00. \$25.00, paper.

artistry: description, interpretation, and evaluation lead the critic to turn transparent prose into stained glass, tinting and coloring the performance in different lights, fragmenting its flow by isolating key steps and performances, and magnifying moments and their meanings like a convex lens while simultaneously framing the dance to anchor the reader's understanding of the history of a dancer, a choreographer, a company, or even the art itself. Denby proceeds to reveal that even description, seemingly the most basic of these tasks, challenges the critic to begin shaping dance writing into literary art because

to give in words the illusion of watching dancers as they create a ballet in action requires a literary gift. . . . A dance critic's education includes dance experience, musical and pictorial experience, a sense of what art in general is about and what people are really like. But all these advantages are not enough unless they meet with an unusual literary gift and discipline.

Now and then in reading dance criticism one comes across a phrase that suggests such an ideal possibility.

Robert Gottlieb's mammoth anthology *Reading Dance*, despite all the faults inherent in such a sweeping project, presents that "ideal possibility" of dance writing with impressive frequency. Newly published collections of ballet criticism by the contemporary writer Nancy Goldner and the early twentieth-century Russian critic Akim Volynsky also succeed, at their best, in creating "in words the illusion of watching dancers"; Jane Goldberg's lively memoir of the tap-dancing world takes on some of the jazzy, improvised pleasures of the art itself.