

Earth is Our Root

An Interview with Patricia Beatty

Born in Toronto, Patricia Beatty majored in dance at Bennington College in Vermont. After five years of intensive training at the Martha Graham School in New York, she returned to Canada in 1966 and founded the New Dance Group of Canada. In 1968, she co-founded the Toronto Dance Theatre, and along with her roles there as teacher, choreographer, administrator, she has been active in the Canadian arts scene. Ms Beatty's choreographic work continues to explore human feelings and relationships, and in particular, our collective needs for the future.

This interview was conducted for CWS/cf by Karen Lavut, a Toronto writer, and Frances Beer, a member of the CWS/cf editorial board.

CWS/cf: It seems that your company has been very successful in staying together — for 22 years. Since you started the Toronto Dance Theatre, modern dance has flourished in Toronto. Your group was the first...

Beatty: There were some pioneers before us, but nobody built an entire technique and started a company. But it was the right time, and Canada's a country that wants its own art desperately.

Now we're the mainstream dance company; very formal — maybe too formal. But, you see, I think you need formality... like Bach. If you have a lot of passion it's more difficult to accept unless it's formalized. If it's too raw, it offends people or it embarrasses them. So we are the most "conventional" company. Some are upset by this, but you can't please everybody.

CWS/cf: Can you tell us something about the differences between classical and modern dance?

Beatty: Ballet has lasted into this century because of its sophisticated technique and it took about 400 years to produce that technique. Modern dance is only a hundred years old and it still needs a few more techniques. Martha Graham's technique doesn't completely divorce itself from the past. She took the five positions of the legs, and the turn-out. The biggest difference, I think, is that with Graham there is weight in the body that's celebrated

and used. It's not built on the illusion of lightness at all. So women aren't ideal — they're real, rich and real. They have weight and substance. That means — significance. They are capable of carrying archetypal knowledge on the stage.

CWS/cf: In classical ballet there is a very narrow idea of body type; women are not supposed to have round bodies; they're supposed to be airborne, not earthborne.

Beatty: Yes, and earth is our root. A lot of ballet people are hysterical. If they are told they don't have the right bodies for ballet they think their life is over. There's no breath, there's no real sensuality. And dancing should be sensual all the time. A tree or a squirrel can't help but be sensual.

CWS/cf: Still there is something seductive about the ballet... nostalgic.

Beatty: But are you going to make somebody's life seem better because they get a night off with this beautiful distraction, or are you going to empower them? And it's the second one we're interested in. If anyone applauded for me for more than three bows I thought they'd lost their minds! It's not me the night is about, it's about them. We're doing it for them. We're trying to shoot juice into them.

CWS/cf: Whereas in ballet you get taken away from your own problems into a fairyland world.

Beatty: Oh, yes, the theatre values are enormously high; it's very polished, and rehearsed, wonderfully lit and costumed. And it's a big dream.

CWS/cf: Did you have classical training?

Beatty: Yes. Royal Academy. But I wasn't brought up to be creative. I was brought up to find my place... my place! What on earth was that? To me, life was like an open field that you could run and roll in — without any barriers. And when I found out about modern dance, that it didn't rely on tradition, that it relied

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on creation — I would lack courage if I didn't try that one! I first made contact with Graham at Bennington. Well, I didn't realize it was Graham, just sort of second hand, the whole feel of improvisation and composition.

CWS/cf: Did you have good teachers?

Beatty: Very good. Bennington teaches you the creative process. In whatever field you want. Which means you become empowered as a person; empowerment is a very good word. And then you do something with your life and you can make a contribution to society. I never had the experience that so many intelligent, thoughtful, hardworking, beautiful women have had — they had to earn their way to being accepted. I took it for granted. Now, there is something I have to work on emotionally and spiritually and physically in myself as a result, and that is a kind of defiance, a kind of rigidity. Like, I'm too strong for most men. And I didn't like the idea that I would have to change to please anyone. It was too close to, "Now you be a good girl and sit there," and "Children are seen and not heard." Av Isaacs said, "Women have to be bigger than life to be successful." I feel like that, a little... and I've had to struggle with it... and I got sick from it... and I'm alone from it... but I didn't like the alternative.

CWS/cf: Most of us don't have the courage. Is it possible, in words, to describe what you're working on now?

Beatty: Well, the timelessness is the most important point, to me. To make perspective bigger you need more freedom, you need peace. I think people need their minds expanded to feel peaceful and to know what's possible. I want to inspire. That's the only reason I like to teach. I want to inspire: "It can be better, don't give up, don't give in. You don't have to be a number any more."

If I did a piece for women it would be — not the emergence of one, but a combining of all of us, of what it is we share. It's a real equality that I sense. There's no competitiveness, we're not looking after each other's egos all the time when we're working on a project. I collaborate with women very easily. But you need both your male and your female sides. You need the strong ego to believe that life is an open field. Not to believe that your place is over there behind something. The main thing we're doing is redefining what women are. We are not an accommodation to men. We're not what the men have defined us as. We're discovering what we are. I just jumped in, I used mostly my masculine side because that's what is rewarded in this society, that's how you got places. And I am called successful. I didn't want success. I just resented the fact that it would be harder for me. Success wasn't expected of me — that's for sure. "Why do you always want to change everything, dear?" I was put down with damning sarcasm. Because my family was always so critical, I'm too critical of myself, and this inhibits me. I really have

to work to make a dance. But the feminine principle is, of course the one that's missing...

CWS/cf: In Western society?

Beatty: In everybody's. I don't think we know what the feminine principle is. It's a vision we have. It's not something we've lost, we've never had it. Well, let's make it. Let's find out what it is, each one of us.

CWS/cf: You've got to find the right balance, you've got to be able to access yourself, support yourself, otherwise...

Beatty: Otherwise you become paralyzed. I never liked any of the female models I saw around me. I had to stumble around all by myself — what I tended to do was make it up. They all seemed so weak... until Martha Graham. Holy snakes! And feminine! But in such a deep way. She was the one who was bigger than life! She was out there stirring up trouble! Nobody could stand being with her!

CWS/cf: You couldn't stand being with her either?

Beatty: No, I wanted to try and make her real. I kept saying, "She goes to the bathroom and she gets horny and she talks on the phone." She was a genius, but she wasn't a queen or a priest — she was a real person. That's what mattered. If you're going to make someone else a goddess, that means you have to be a lesser, and I like sharing and being equal.

CWS/cf: Classical dance is hierarchical.

Beatty: Well, that's the whole thing, hierarchy, that's not a female instinct. That's what I'm saying.

CWS/cf: What you're talking about is a nineteenth-century phenomenon. There was so much else going on then that had to do with repressing female sexuality; classical ballet is another aspect of that same strategy — to repress. Even though the women are focused on and presented in a very beautiful way.

Beatty: It's the male idea of them, though, and it's idealized, it's not real.

CWS/cf: It's very controlling, too. You do what the director tells you to do. You do what the choreographer tells you to do. It's the doll's house. You're not allowed to live, you're shown off.

Beatty: That's the male thing. They're afraid that women are going to have power over them. Why would I want power over anybody? Their fear is something to do with themselves. Don't dump it on me. All Graham was trying to do was to make up for what wasn't there before.

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