

Barbara Mettler: Pioneer of Creative Dance

Rick Julliard

And what is dance if not the physical expression of a hunger for beauty, a passion for truth?

Walking down Fort Lowell Road in Tucson, Arizona, the observant pedestrian might be shocked to see, partially screened by the natural desert vegetation of the area, what looks like a large flying saucer discreetly observing events on planet earth. If our pedestrian should turn the corner onto Cherry, however, he would soon note that the flying saucer sported the sign, "Tucson Creative Dance Center," and that the materials of which it is made are beautifully earthbound. He would also see, in smaller letters, the words "Mettler Studios." And thus might begin the exciting foray into a realm of dance that, far from being extraterrestrial, is one of the most human and earthy forms of the art.

Barbara Mettler, a dance revolutionary for forty years, has pioneered the work of pure creative dance underived from any other art form. Of the many types of dance it is perhaps the simplest to do. It requires no advance choreography, no special settings or costumes, no musical accompaniment other than that which can be made with our native instruments, voice, hands, and feet. But while being the simplest and most universal, it is in some ways the most demanding: the dance must be a satisfying and well-crafted work of art the moment it is created! It is this art of creative improvisation of pure dance which Barbara Mettler has brought to our time and to which she has dedicated her life.

Since dance is the art of body movement, and since all other art is created through movement, Mettler considers dance the central art. The practice of pure creative dance enhances not only our ability for any other artistic expression, but the expressiveness of our lives as a whole. Her work is relevant to many pro-



Barbara Mettler

photo by Linda Rosenfield

fessions and ways of living beyond those of the artist and dancer.

As we grow up we become increasingly sedentary, and the forms by which we are permitted to express our emotions become increasingly restricted. We forget what it is like to let a feeling flow simply and directly into the expressive gestures of our bodies. We more than forget. Many of us fear this direct flow of feeling, this expressive aliveness. It is one of the quests of Barbara Mettler, seeing that we have abandoned the natural, creative movement of our tribal ancestors for complex artificiality, to rediscover the primal truths of creative dance and make them a part of our civilization. As she writes, "The love of movement for its own sake is innate in all human beings and perhaps all living things." Let us then dance! For it is through movement that we live and through movement that all the arts and joys of living come into being.

And what is dance if not the physical expression of a hunger for beauty, a passion for truth? These desires have

ennobled and uplifted humankind for centuries. Each age has sought them in its own way. Each person who is caught up in them treads a unique path in seeking. For Barbara Mettler, one of these seekers, the dance is both the expression of the search and of the goal itself.

How can dance be both search and goal? To say that dance is the goal means that it can be an expression of living truth and beauty, that dance can combine the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a person in a statement of inner truth. If I can persuade you to accept for a moment that our deepest inner nature is beautiful, then it follows that a dance expressing that will also be beautiful. To say that dance is the search means that the hunger for truth and beauty spurs us to dance, to try to find their source within us. Each dance is the attempt of a particular moment to tap that primal truth. It is an experiment, a search for the place within ourselves where that truth lives.

To say that something is true is to say simply that *it is*. Truth, then, has an *origin-al* quality about it. It is underived. For dance to express truth, it must also have this original quality about it. This requires a shift of focus away from the traditional, a change of vocabulary in speaking of dance.

The words *primitive*, *elementary*, and *basic* are heard constantly in Mettler's studio. It takes one a while to learn that they are not pejorative; nor do they refer to preliminary things soon to be abandoned. Mettler's focus is the primitive, the elementary, the basic — for it is precisely these things in dance which give it the original quality suggestive of truth.

A painter does not disdain red, blue, and yellow, the primary colors, upon learning how to make purple and

brown. Rather, his or her respect for them grows when he or she sees the power and variety inherent in them. In dance, however, the primary things — such as feeling for the beat, simple group-unison movement, and the making of a single, unified gesture with the whole body — are abandoned by the average dancer as quickly as possible for complex things such as syncopation or the moving of parts of the body in highly individual ways. Artistic truth is left behind for impressive technique and surface complexity.

A moment's digression into semantics can shed some light on this. Compare the entries for *primitive* in

for not having realized something elementary, the criticism is more serious than it appears. For the elementary is not something you can acquire at the drop of a hat; and yet it is a necessity since it is the foundation. It is beyond words and is at the root of human experience. There is much implied in her criticism: "You are not dancing out of your deepest self. What is the point of art if not the truth of the elemental? Why are you dancing anyway?"

To return from semantics, the primitive in dance consists of what is particular to dance, of what is basic to all dance. The most primitive element of dance is movement for its own sake,

exists in them. Next to movement for its own sake, force and its media (time and space) are the most primitive elements in dance. The movements of a dancer may emphasize either time or space in the expression of a force — or neither. For instance, the emphasis can be solely on the strength or weakness of a given motion (on the force element). But also, the attention can be more on visual design (the space element) or on the regularity or irregularity of the motion (the time element). In fact, there are a host of ways of emphasizing force, time or space with the human body — not to mention the numerous possibilities for combining them.

These primitive characteristics of pure creative dance — movement for its own sake and the expression with the body of a rhythmic force in time and space — are what give it its purity and power.

All of this may seem too abstract to the reader. But these ideas were created out of the work itself, because it first existed in concrete form. Let me give a few examples. One of Mettler's best known studies is a duet between two persons or between a person and a group. One person is told to express force through his or her body and to direct that force toward the other person. The other person is told to express forcelessness and to be passive or receptive to the force of the first person. The dance begins and the forceful person moves the other person around the room without physical contact, exploring the movement possibilities inherent in the theme. It is the forceful person's responsibility to see that the passive person is not hurt and to make movements that are clear, unambiguous, and easy to follow. It is the passive person's responsibility to be sensitive and easily moved. After the dance comes to a close, the partners switch roles. This dance is primitive in concept. And because it is primitive it evokes all the possible relationships in our lives involving activity and passivity, from love relationships to business relationships.

Mettler's most primitive study involves, of course, only the kinesthetic sense. The dancer lies on the floor, passive to gravity, relaxed, and waits for the body to want to move. To some, it is a profound experience when, quite independent of intellect and conscious mind, the body simply wants to move. The dancer makes the



drawing by Patricia Ethridge

the Oxford English Dictionary, put into its present form around the turn of the century, and the more recent Webster's seventh. In the former, the word *primitive* is descriptive of a thing in its original, pure, underived form. It is used more often to compliment than to criticize. In the latter, the word is characterized by terms such as "naïve," "little evolved," "archaic," and "rudimentary" — terms having a negative connotation. It is important to remember that the word *primitive* may refer to something of great purity and power, something profound.

Elementary also has suffered at the hands of time — perhaps through its connection with "elementary school." In art as in chemistry, the elements (elementary means "of the elements") are not abandoned in advanced work. One comes to realize that they are the foundation of all things and cannot ever be completely known or mastered — much less cast aside for more interesting and complex things. *Elementary* dance is therefore a lifetime's work and study!

When Mettler criticizes a dancer

moving because of the pleasure, meaning, and wonder inherent in motion. This most primitive element springs from the kinesthetic sense, the sense that is the basis for the perception of all movement. The ways in which we perceive the motion of our bodies and of other objects in the world are *all* derived first and foremost from the kinesthetic sense. In its movement is the memory of every motion we have made, every thought and feeling we have expressed with our bodies. The kinesthetic sense is thus a deep well of meaning, and out of this depth dance is born — out of our bodies' deep urge to express themselves, to relate to the cosmos in a meaningful way.

Dance that comes out of the kinesthetic sense is rhythmic — it is the expression of a force pulsating in time and space. In life, we use and express force in many ways. Dance is distinct from most of these in that it is not utilitarian. It is expression for the sake of expression, for the pleasure that a well made aesthetic form gives.

Force implies time and space; it

An abstract motion of the body can somehow evoke all the things in human history people have experienced with their bodies — from war to religious ecstasy.

movement, carrying it through to its close, and then waits for the next movement impulse. This is the foundation of all Mettler's work — the natural desire of the body to move. It is necessary in all her other dance studies that the dancers move out of their kinesthetic senses first, and only then out of intellect, emotion, sense of visual design, or awareness of sound pattern and quality.

When one begins to dance with the awareness of these four elements — the kinesthetic sense, force, time, and space — in their primitive form, to experience their nobility of spirit, their grace and power, their rootedness in the fundamentals of human experience, one wonders how dance could have dallied so long in art forms that are planned, artificial, theatrical, or commercial. And one feels deeply grateful to Barbara Mettler for having given her life to develop these elements in their clarity.

After knowing her for a while, one hungers to know her lineage. Just where did this being so wise in her art come from? Born and reared in rural Illinois, she was not trained in dance from childhood. In fact, she didn't decide to enter dance professionally until her twenties, after being told it was much too late. Travelling in Europe for journalistic reasons, she chanced upon the Mary Wigman school in Dresden and knew that was where she belonged. The influence of that great artist of German Expressionism is discernible in Mettler's interest in the expression through dance of deep individual and group feeling. But perhaps even more influential was the social-intellectual-artistic climate of Central Europe in the late '20s and early '30s, when she was there.

Germany, a poor and humbled nation after World War I, was disillusioned with kaisers, militarists, and industrialists, and therefore with the art they patronized. People were taking to the country, seeking to live closer to the earth. And they wanted the same freshness and freedom in art. The Bauhaus in architecture and design, musicians such as Paul Hindemith, Mary Wigman in dance,

and many others in all the arts were attempting to make their art a more direct expression of human life. They were not interested in outdated, upper class-oriented ideals of the beautiful (such as those found in ballet and Baroque architecture, for example). An art was growing organically out of the people. In Dresden, Mettler participated enthusiastically in this movement.

After studying in Dresden three years, Mettler, as an American, was required to leave. The Nazis had become confident of their power. The same power soon killed this beautiful flowering of popular art. But the seed had been planted in those who left, and, fortunately for us, it has flourished through them in places such as Tucson, Arizona, where Mettler has her studio.

She came to Tucson in 1960, to break new ground after what would have been for most a complete lifetime of experimentation and work, establishing reputations primarily in New York City, New Hampshire, and Boston and creating virtually from nothing the practice and theory of pure creative dance. In Tucson, she somehow scraped together enough capital to commission John H. Howe of Taliesin Associated Architects to design a studio.

The building itself of the Tucson Creative Dance Center exemplifies the ideal of directness Mettler rediscovered in Germany. Its form is simple. But like all simple things in the realm of art, it belies an astounding complexity of thought. The studio does not embody the function — it elicits it.

The studio is round. There is no proscenium arch. Spectators sit on cushions on the high steps that ring it, which otherwise may be used for dancing. Thus, those who watch are not separated from the dancers. Rather, they surround them, close enough to sense the dancers' movements with their own bodies, not just with their eyes. Close enough to feel the dance physically. Close enough even to hear it.

The dance is to be experienced from all sides. Not only in the physical

round, but mentally, emotionally, philosophically, and spiritually. For an abstract motion of the body can somehow evoke all the things in human history people have experienced with their bodies — from war to religious ecstasy.

Even more important is that the dance be experienced from *the inside*. There are few preplanned dances in Mettler's studio. No dance is done for the sake of those in attendance at a performance. It is done for its own sake, because it must be done. Thus the dancer must experience the dance as a profound internal experience as he or she gives it an outward shape.

This all sounds as though Mettler doesn't care about the spectators, when she cares about them infinitely: she would rather they dance than watch! All people can coordinate their bodies to a certain degree — to the extent a person can do that, he or she can dance. The more a person works to free the body of learned movement patterns and grow in movement craftsmanship, the more spontaneously feeling can flow into movement, the more a dance can be a perfectly satisfying experience *in the moment it is conceived*. Dancing is not for the future. It is for here and now! Foremost it is for itself, and secondarily for the spectator. Since the spectator and the dancer have much in common — the things we share are much more numerous than our differences — the spectator is likely to have some understanding of a genuine, honest dance. But you can't please everyone no matter what you do. The dance must be danced as an expression of inner truth and beauty, let the world judge as it will.

Who is to say what truth and beauty are? Moreover, who is to say, "This is true, this is beautiful"? Mettler does not pretend to be a goddess in constant communion with absolute truth. But neither does she see truth and beauty as being utterly beyond our grasp. To her, the inner nature of each human being is unique and beautiful. In so far as we are true to that inner nature — expressing the truth of our beings in a form whose skill of execu-

tion is as high as the feeling behind it is deep — thus far do we enter into the realms of truth and beauty. The individuals involved in a dance will know how successful it is in these terms, there is little need for them or others to judge it. Those who chose to observe are not there to judge. Rather, they have a responsibility to unite themselves with the creative act. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder (isn't it everywhere if we choose to see it?), then it is the beholder's responsibility to couple vision with understanding and sympathy.

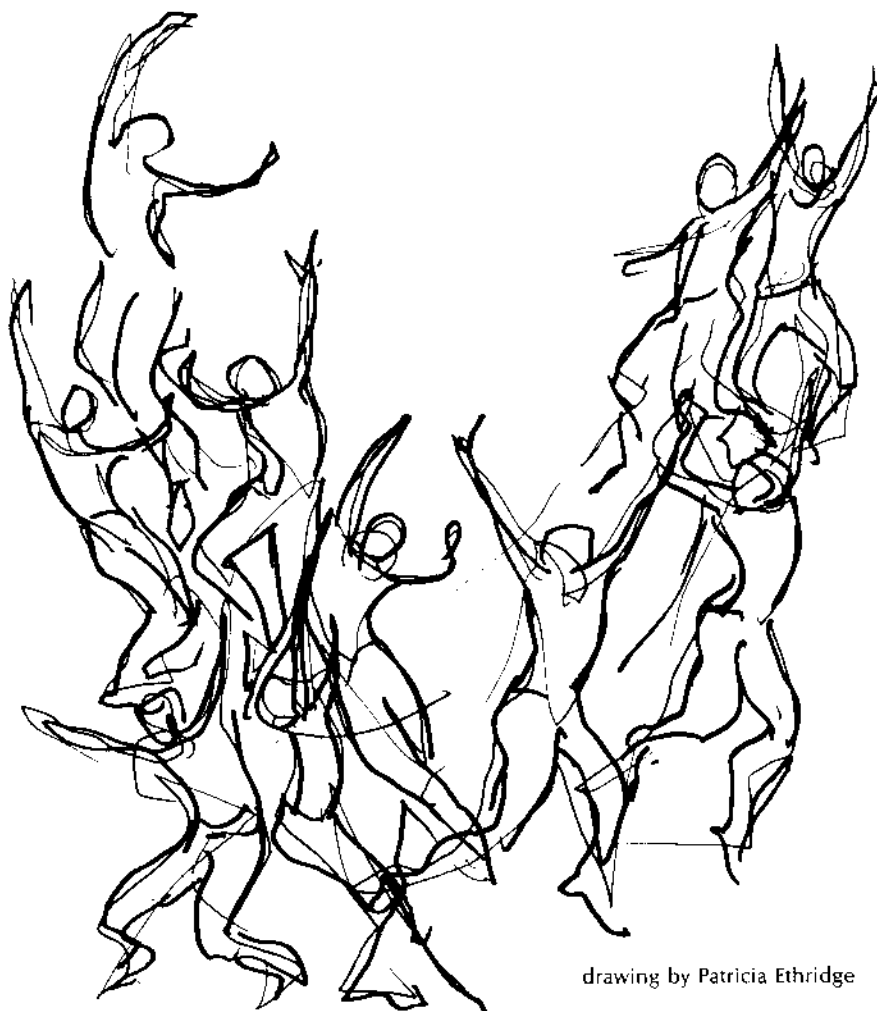
To bring dance to everyone as a creative, integral part of their lives has been Mettler's constant goal and desire. Her work has flowered — training teachers, teaching the blind and handicapped (as well as the physically normal) to dance. But she

desires to see the prime focus of her work, group improvisation, brought to ripeness as only a group of highly skilled dancers can. And thus, after many years of bringing dance to amateurs (those who dance for the love of it rather than for remuneration), she has organized a professional company of twenty-five men and women. For many years she felt that she would never see her work come to full ripeness, that the work she did with amateurs would be "fertilizer" for the dance world of future generations. But her sense of history is keen. The ever-increasing complexity of our civilization and the renewed interest in ballet have caused her to reconsider. Who knows? The people of the future may be even farther from integral, spontaneous, and liberating dance than we are. If you want something done, you

had better do it yourself, right now!

It is easy to see why she is excited enough about dance to spend a sizable chunk of her own money on a company. To see twenty-five persons bending their whole beings toward the spontaneous creation of well-crafted beauty is an exhilarating experience. To feel a group motion sensitively organized in all its parts, moving in a way that could only be described as inevitable, exploring a movement motif with depth and thoroughness until, with the amazing rhythm of all life, the motif is transformed into its complement — what could be grander and more inspiring?

And yet this way of dance work is not widespread. Mettler has pulled against the stream of fad and fashion for many years, and her work is finally becoming known among dancers. But it is still much misunderstood. Her work is virtually unknown outside of dance circles, though it is relevant not only to all art but to physical and psychological therapies. Perhaps it is because her studio is outside the fashionable media centers on the east and west coasts. Perhaps it is because she is interested too much in getting everyone to dance and so does not have the prestige that elitist isolation seems to confer. Whatever the reason, it is disquieting that this way of work in dance that could meet some of the direst needs in modern life, that can transform the core of our lives, our movement, is still so far from general acceptance. And ballet, the enemy of natural movement, of spontaneity, of egalitarianism, of essential, integral dance, is again gaining popularity! Must we always seek things that make matters worse? ■



drawing by Patricia Ethridge

Dance can combine the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects of a person in a statement of inner truth.

To obtain a list of available courses, films, books, and articles by Barbara Mettler, write the Tucson Creative Dance Center, 3131 North Cherry Ave., Tucson, AZ 85719.

Rick Julliard is a composer, choir director, flutist, pianist, and a member of Barbara Mettler's winter dance company.