

**Bringing Spirituality Into Modern  
Performance Dance:  
An Examination of The Silvestre Technique as a  
Space for Global Syncretism**

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**April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

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## **Bringing Spirituality Into Modern Performance Dance : An Examination of The Silvestre Technique as a Space for Global Syncretism**

Somewhere in Denver, Colorado a professional dance company gets ready for rehearsal. The dancers are stretching and warming up, still wearing their leg warmers and long sleeves. It is a chilly fall morning and they try to stay warm.

Muscles can be injured very easily.

They wait patiently for their guest choreographer to begin class. Rosangela Silvestre enters the room and smiles. She is short, petite, and unimposing. Yet there is something incredibly striking in her gaze, her posture, her demeanor. Her hair pulled tightly into a small bundle by the nape of her neck; her clothing all black and neatly arranged. Simple but obviously very specific. There is a noticeable strength. A quiet intensity, a sense of confidence; the dancers watch her cross the room.

She says nothing

The dancers rise, and wait until she turns to them and requests that they face the mirrors. *Center yourself. Focus in. You worry only about you. Establish your space. Bring your attention to the room, to your body, to your heart. If you must look at yourself in the mirror, focus on your chest, the center of your expression. Every muscle is alive.*<sup>1</sup>

She raises her hands to meet her hips. The first exercise begins.

Maybe she begins to sing. Maybe drumming softly begins to be heard from the sound system. A slow, slightly ominous, slightly soothing beat slides towards her and seems to enter her, as her arms shoot away from her body and flutter softly to her thighs.

By the second demonstration, her upper back is already glistening.

At the end of the workshop, an hour and a half later, Rosangela turned to go and several of the dancers of the Cleo Parker Robinson Company stopped her. As this story is told by Rosangela herself, many of the dancers had tears in their eyes at the end of her workshop, claiming they had never before involved themselves so personally in their dance. They were connected to their movements in a way that they had never before understood or experienced.

Sitting on a crowded bus on our way to a suburb of Salvador, Brazil, Rosangela exclaims! “Can you imagine? They were professional dancers that had never before felt connection in their dance. Sarah, you just need to see these interviews. You need to hear what they have said” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

### **Introduction: My Personal Journey**

It was a long way from my home in New Jersey to Brazil where I was able to share that bus ride with Rosangela and interview her on her life’s work. It was a journey that began with a personal experience when I took classes with Rosangela in Colorado Springs,

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<sup>1</sup> Field notes. This is a paraphrased collection of her words that I composed from the many classes I have taken with Rosangela.

Colorado. From my experience of those three weeks of classes I pursued her and her work to Salvador Brazil, where I spent two weeks in January of 2005, studying along with a group of her students from around the world. It is this personal experience that triggered this academic endeavor. In this paper, I explore the Silvestre Technique and its origins. As I investigate the experience of the dance in the classroom, I synthesize Rosangela's overall goal of her work and the effect of her work as seen through the eyes of her dancers. In doing this, I navigate between the dance form itself, its creator, the space in which it was created, and the many experiences of the Silvestre dancers, to explore the rarity of the Silvestre Technique, both as unique dancing experience and a new cultural project of integration and fusion.

What began for me simply as a powerful experience in her classroom has now turned into an intellectual and historical exploration of her technique, her life, and her vision of dance in the modern world. Her work is unique to the genre of modern dance; so much so that I felt inspired to study it in its own context in Brazil in order to gain a full understanding of the technique itself and the experience it creates. While this exploration is no longer grounded in my own experience, it is essential that the experience was my point of departure. In order to describe a phenomenon/project like the Silvestre Technique, where the experience of the dance plays such an important role, I believe the scholar must come together with the artist. In this project, I am able to combine my artistic understanding of dance with my academic understanding of Rosangela's work, combining two methods of study that are usually kept separate. As a member of both worlds, I am able to speak in a language that the dancers themselves understand and I am able to translate their messages to the scholarly community. I spent two weeks in

Salvador with Rosangela, studying her work, interviewing her dancers, documenting her form. The more I studied and the more I spoke with Rosangela and her dancers, the more questions I had about the experience of this form, the more I began to understand the rarity of her project. Subsumed within the larger context of modern dance and Brazilian dance, Rosangela offers the dancer an experience that has profoundly affected many people as was the case that day in Denver.

Why *did* those dancers in Denver cry? Why do people travel from around the world to take her classes? Why did Lisa come from Boulder and Denna from Switzerland, and Krishna from Sao Paulo and Gertrude from Denmark to take dance classes with Rosangela, to connect with other members of this dancing community, to experience this technique. What is it about the Silvestre Technique that draws people in? What is the nature of the art form that Rosangela Silvestre has created and how can we understand the world that she creates for her students? To answer these questions, I followed Rosangela home, to Brazil, to experience the technique at its source. In doing so, I began to understand the technique as a product of Salvador as profoundly as it is a product of Rosangela.

After conducting numerous field interviews and surveys, I found that most of the Silvestre dancers had similar experiences within the classroom. In what I have come to define as a *spiritual* experience, most dancers experienced, in some manifestation, an inner physical and emotional inner connection, which then translated for them into a feeling of outward expansion. Though the experiences varied greatly depending on the dancer, there *was* a common thread. In other words, I would not claim the experience was a *universal spiritual experience*, yet the *presence* of the spirituality *was* universal.

How is it possible that such a diverse group of dancers all had similar experiences? This is the primary question that is explored within this paper.

A dance form that places equal emphasis on the *experience* of the movements as the movements themselves, the Silvestre Technique offers modern and classical performance dancers a way to experience the technical movement on an emotional and spiritual level. Beyond the expectations and physical demand of an ordinary dance class, Rosangela has created a technique in which the dancer is called, through the connection to her<sup>2</sup> own physical movements, and emotional experience, to transcend the physical and individual, and to connect to a larger universal energy, what Rosangela calls the Cosmic Energy. For Rosangela personally, this inner spiritual experience comes through a connection to her own Brazilian culture. So, in an effort to bring spirituality to her dance, she has created a dance form that incorporates her own understanding of the spiritual, primarily manifested in the spiritual symbols and philosophies of Salvador.

Yet the dancers in Denver were not necessarily in any way connected to Brazil or to the Brazilian concept of spirituality. How can we understand the phenomenon that this spiritual dancing experience is accessible to dancers who do not share Rosangela's concept of spirituality? The symbols and philosophies of Brazil may not be relevant to a dancer from the United States. This is where Rosangela's project becomes truly unique. As she superimposes her cultural symbols and philosophies onto the technical aspects of modern dance, she also brings to the dance classroom her understanding of syncretism, a concept that she has experienced growing up in the syncretic community of Salvador, Brazil, where the Portuguese, African and Indigenous populations have coexisted for

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, I refer to the dancer as a she. This is purely for ease and flow. Both male and female dancers study the Silvestre Technique.

centuries. Rosangela takes from her experience within a syncretic community the potential for different cultures to come together in a shared space of integration and brings it to a global level.

Her experience of Salvador has led her to believe in the potential for global integration, a global coexistence, a philosophy that I have defined as *global syncretism*<sup>3</sup>, where individuals from various cultural backgrounds can find ways to coexist and find common ground. The Silvestre Technique embodies this *global syncretism*. This philosophy appears both in the movements of the technique as well as the community of dancers. While the technique draws mainly on the symbols of Brazilian culture, Rosangela also borrows from several other ritual and cultural backgrounds as she creates her language of movement and her philosophy of dance, in a method of integration that is wholly unique. She brings different traditions into one space and while she acknowledges the boundaries that exist between these traditions, she does not allow these boundaries to create separation. To use Rosangela's own words, "It is a dance of integration." She places eastern traditions alongside western traditions seamlessly; she invites the dancer to bring their own understanding and experience of the spiritual experience into her classroom and values this individuality. Rosangela's philosophy makes the Silvestre Technique what it is; it is her fundamental belief in the positive possibilities of syncretism as a space integration that feed the classroom experience of this dance form. Her open concept of the spiritual is what enables the diversity of dancers to universally engage in a spiritual experience.

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<sup>3</sup> From now on, the term "global syncretism" will be italicized because it is self – constructed term.

Her own experience of dance and more generally, her own understanding of her connection to the world around her, shape the experience she creates for other people. The method that she uses to go about it mirrors her eventual vision of the Silvestre Technique as a space for cross - cultural creation and spiritual transcendence.

There is unquestionably an irony in this very sort of exploration. The method of breaking apart and understanding this dance technique as a compilation of influences, of philosophies, of cultural traditions, while it is a very logical method of academic study, implicitly denies the Silvestre Experience of its essential philosophy. While Rosangela works to bring traditions together and seamlessly marry different cultural categories, in this paper, I am recreating those very categories. However, as Rosangela may see the world as a seamless flow of continuous energy between people and across the globe, the scholarly project yearns to understand and unpack this world vision, to explore the moves she makes. This paper seeks to translate Rosangela's project to those of us who do not live in a world of seamless overlap and who may not see dance as an obvious expression of spirituality. I hope not to break this dance form down into many different parts with this analysis (thereby undermining the implicit message of the form), but instead to investigate the many layers that all, in the end, come to connect and blend, creating this technique.

### **Section 1 : Rosangela Brings Brazil to the Modern Dance; Her Process, Her Vision**

So we return to the question of the dancers in Denver. What occurred during the class experience that would evoke such an emotional response? Of course the response to the Silvestre Technique is greatly varied; the dancers in Denver are only one example of

the way that the technique touches the students. However, their reaction points to the potential that this technique has to trigger something extraordinary in her students, a response that, for these dancers, seems to be unique to the Rosangela's classroom.

Rosangela is engaged in a project of breaking down barriers: barriers of race, culture, nationality. Yet the primary barrier, the barrier that subsumes her entire project is to dissolve the boundary between the spiritual and the technical aspects of dance. Her goal is to marry these two dance worlds and she does this by bringing to the dance her concept of the spiritual into the modern dance classroom, firstly by bringing her "Brazilian cultural gestures and movements" to the "vocabulary of ballet and contemporary dance"(Silvestre Mar 8 2005) and in a much more philosophical way, as she brings the Brazilian understanding of dance as a sacred art form to a secular space. In this section I explore Rosangela's personal process and I investigate her two main influences: the genre of modern and classical performance dance, and her own Brazilian culture.

### **IA : Rosangela's Experience with (And Frustrations with) Genres of Modern and Classical Performance Dance**

Rosangela was a trained modern and ballet dancer. Along with her study of Afro – Brazilian dance, orixá dance movement and Indigenous Brazilian folkloric dance, she also studied classical ballet, and the modern dance forms of the Horton Technique, the Graham technique, and The Limon Technique.<sup>4</sup> "I loved to be a performer but I was always concerned about technique. I love technique. I started to do technique when I

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<sup>4</sup> A dance technique can be understood as a new style of movement, or a new interpretation of movement. It originates from one dancer's need to create a new way to express their dance, or access the essential of physical form. Oftentimes, different modern techniques have different goals and different philosophies behind their movements.

was very little [when I studied] classical ballet”(Silvestre, Jan 15 2005). As a result, the technical aspect of dance training is extremely important to Rosangela. However, there is much about her experience in ballet and modern classrooms that she had to leave behind. The next section explores the character of the genre of performance dance as an objectified art form and highlights Rosangela’s personal frustrations with the genres of classical and modern performance dance.

### **Performance Dance as an Alienated and Objectified Art Form**

With the emergence of modern dance and concert dance as a performance art in the West, dance was taken out of the communal and ritual context, and transformed into a spectacle. In the context of stage dance, the audience does not participate; they do not know the dancer; they are not informed as to the meaning of the moment; they do not come together in worship. Quite the contrary, the audience buys a ticket to see a show; the performers are strangers; they are alienated from the audience. The two parties (the audience and the performer) are on opposing sides of the experience. Though hopefully engaged, the audience is still not a part of the dancing community. The communal energy of dancing bodies and unified spirits is not part of the concert dance context.

Richard Schechner, in his article entitled *Rasaesthetics*, writes about the difference between Eastern and Western notions of theater and how the West is characterized by an emphasis on the spectacle, the visual. We have devalued our visceral and emotional responses and instead rely on our eyes to translate the world around us. Unfortunately, with this emphasis on the visual, comes a division between the subject and object. As Schechner describes,

Where does seeing take place? Only at a distance from what is being seen. There is both a logical and a practical difference keeping what is observed separate from the observing instrument (and/or) observer. 'Objectivity can be understood as the desire to keep things at enough distance from the eyes to allow whatever it is to 'take shape' perceptually: to see things 'in perspective,' to 'focus on ' them (Schechner 30).

To take this *spectacle* theory and apply it to concert dance, we see that with the migration of dance from the participatory to the stage, comes the objectification of the dancer and the body onstage so that the viewer watches, separated and alienated from the movement, from the soul of the dancer. As a result of the construction of the stage, dance has been removed from the day – to – day life of the dancer and the audience member because it is an event. Once dance was placed onstage, it became an object, something separate; something to be judged and interpreted, not lived and experienced (Lowry 2-3). The dancer experiences the repercussions of this move as dance became a performance of skill, not of inner experience. The objectification results in an experience that values virtuosity over inner connection.

### **Rosangela's Frustrations with Performance Dance**

Rosangela echoes Schechner's analysis of western performance art. She explains how, in modern and classical dance classrooms of the other techniques that she has studied, the dancers lacked a connection to their movements, a inner spiritual connection to their dance, seeing it more as an exercise in skill, rather than an art of expression and communication. The problem, according to Rosangela, is not necessarily in the dance forms themselves, but in the way the dancers are trained in the classroom. For Rosangela, many classical and modern dancers are trained to be "repeaters of movement" Rosangela says, or "imitators," not *dancers* (Silvestre Jan 15 2005). "Sometimes – it

depends upon where you are coming from – some cultures avoid [the inner experience of dance]. They don't know it. They don't deal with it. . . . What happens in modern time now, in some areas, you only see the technology, you only see the technique – you don't see the link with the spirituality” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

The Silvestre Technique trains these sorts of dancers to move beyond their bodily talent as a means to connect to the audience. This division of audience and performer that Schechner identifies is precisely what frustrates Rosangela about her experience within the genres of modern and classical dance forms, and it is the result of the dancer's own inner alienation that occurs because she is taught to value her technical skill over her emotional and shared experience of dancing; if a dancer cannot connect to her own emotions then she will not be able to connect to the audience. Rosangela sees the performance dance as a way to cross the boundary between audience and performer, not create further alienation. “I believe that when you go on the stage and when you go to see a performance [it] is because you want to experience something, like we do in life. . . . We all want to do and look for something more to make differences”(Silvestre Jan 20 2005).

To solve the problem of performance dance training, Rosangela has created a technique that incorporated her experience of the spiritual: Brazilian culture. She brings Brazil to the modern dance in the form of both Brazilian spiritual symbolism and the more abstract elements of Brazilian philosophy. While I examine how Brazil is brought to the movements of the technique, I also investigate the elements of the Brazilian culture and the Brazilian understanding of dance that influence Rosangela and the Silvestre Technique. In this latter analysis, I am speaking both of direct influences that Rosangela

acknowledges, in addition to the elements of Brazilian culture that perhaps she does not even recognize. As an Silvestre student, but also an outsider to the culture of Salvador, I see fundamental elements of her dance form that, are a result of the space that religion and dance hold in the culture of Salvador, although she, herself, may take these things for granted.

These themes cannot be taken lightly. As Myrium Evelyse Mariani says in her article, *African Influences in Brazilian Dance*, “No work of art should be studied or evaluated in ignorance of its cultural context. . . dancing is people communicating with other people; it arises out of people’s thoughts, it is couched in the framework of human culture and society . . . It is, in the broadest sense, human behavior”(Mariani 81).

Rosangela herself acknowledges the importance of understanding the Brazilian world in order to understand the Silvestre Technique.

I tell everyone who is taking my class outside of Salvador to come to Salvador because here you have all the elements that I am talking about in class. You need these elements . . . I can tell you about the energy; I can make you understand it; I can show you pictures; I can’t talk to you. But when you’re here you’ll see these things (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

Rosangela explains that if the dancer studies the Silvestre technique in Salvador, she will understand how the Brazilian culture is manifested in the technique. It helps the dancer understand how incorporating the Brazilian culture gives Rosangela this access to her concept of the spiritual dance experience.

“You must experience the Silvestre Technique at its source,” Rosangela told me as we bumped along on the hot and crowded bus that weekday afternoon (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

To understand this statement, we must first become familiar with the elements of Brazilian culture and roll that dance has played in her life.

## **1B: Salvador, Brazil. The Source**

Salvador, a coastal city within the state of Bahía, is a blend of many different cultural traditions: that of the indigenous native of Brazil, the Portuguese colonizers, and the African slaves who were brought over during the slave trade. In this section I will explore the implications of the African presence in Salvador. The state of Bahía is the most African - influenced state of Brazil and, as a result, the state where the African culture has had its most lasting influences. I highlight this particular element of Salvador because the Silvestre Technique has profound foundations within the presence of the African culture and philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

### **History of African Influence in Salvador**

It has been estimated that the Portuguese imported 3.6 million Africans to Brazil during the slave trade that ended in the early 1800's. Africans were collected from all areas of Africa and distributed to all areas of Brazil, without regard to their origin and their original communities. Slaves were needed for different reasons in different regions of Brazil; some for plantation labor (mostly the northeast of Brazil on the sugar plantations) and some for work in the mines (mainly in the south of Brazil). Some were taken to rural areas while others were kept in the urban centers.

The large concentration of blacks in Salvador is a phenomenon that is common throughout the urban centers of Brazil. Roger Bastide, in his book entitled The African

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<sup>5</sup> In the sections that follow, I make generalizations of African culture and philosophy. However, as I will be getting into a discussion about the African notion of dance and the place that spirituality and dance have in African culture, I am referring to texts that are written about African dance as general form and philosophy. I do not feel that I am making unfair generalizations. There seem to be certain themes and attitudes about dance, art, and spirituality that pervade most if not all of African cultures and communities.

Religions of Brazil, explains that slaves in urban centers were said to be much more of a cultural presence as “the city permits a greater concentration of individuals within a more restricted space. Even if each family owned few slaves, the total number in the city would be considerable”(Bastide 51). In addition, the slaves that did live in these coastal cities were able to exercise much more personal freedom than the slaves that lived in the country. “. . . The city offers a different kind of anonymity from the country. It weakens social control, in this case, the white man’s control over the black and offers those who are not their own master a liberty they do not enjoy elsewhere . . . ” (Bastide 51). As a result, there were more opportunities for the African community to gather, either religiously or socially. The African slave population was then, in these urban centers, more able to maintain elements of their traditional African culture and civilization, simply by virtue of population and opportunity for socialization. Bastide believes that the way in which the slaves were able to maintain the essence of their homeland in this new place is a unique phenomenon.

[The civilization of their Portuguese masters] would replace clan, lineage, and village for [the slave]. On this point there is unanimous agreement: the African *society* could never be reborn in Brazil . . . But the blacks *civilization* was linked to that society . . . Was [this civilization] not in danger of disappearing, along with the society, in the equally radical overturning of the old established conditions of life? Might it not perish along with the social frameworks that had hitherto conditioned it? Yet this did not happen. Of course the civilization had to adapt to new economic and social framework, to monoculture, slavery and the sugar planter’s family, but it survived (Bastide 44).<sup>6</sup>

Of course the slaves were still forced to acculturate to a world that was opposite in many ways to the one they were used to, but elements of their homeland remained with them as

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<sup>6</sup> My own emphasis added

they fought to preserve their identity. Padre Vieira<sup>7</sup> wrote of this cultural fusion as an “opposition between a society dominated and regulated by Portuguese norms and the civilizations imported from Africa when he said that Brazil had its European body in America and its soul in Africa” (qtd. in Bastide 58). One of the ways that this soul was most successfully maintained, in the northeast regions of Brazil especially, was through the practice of their African religions.

I highlight this particular survival of the African *soul* in Brazil, more specifically in the coastal city of Salvador, in order to point out how the African philosophy and influence has found its way into Salvador’s culture. The preservation of the African religions, especially made possible in Salvador because of the large population of Africans in such a small space, was one of the primary ways this was made possible.

### **Nondualism in Salvador : The Blend of the Religious and the Day - to - Day**

On my first night in Brazil, I sat by the door of my tiny room, stretching my neck against the wood, trying desperately to hear what was going on the other side. The two - inch thick slab of wood was all that separated me from one of the most holy beings within the Candomblé Religion, a Mae de Santo – or mother of saints, a woman with whom I was to live for the next two weeks. Though I didn’t realize it when I first arrived, I was in fact renting a bed from a priestess of Candomblé.

That night, one Sunday in the middle of January, for no special occasion, Mae was giving a spiritual reading to a visitor from America. A boy, no older than 15 years old, was seated in our living room, opposite from Mae, asking questions about his spiritual future. She proceeded to tell him that he was protected by the God of Thunder and the God of the Sickness/Healing. She threw the handful of small white cowry shells into the middle of the circle of beads and sacred objects positioned in front of her on the table, and from the pattern of shells, she answered all of this young boys questions and concerns about his future.

Her answers came from the gods themselves.

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<sup>7</sup> Padre Vieira was a Brazilian priest who was a very controversial and progressive speaker on colonialism, slavery and indigenous rights. (1608-1697).

As a Mae de Santo, she has the ability to directly communicate, via these cowry shells, with the orixás, the Candomblé community of deities worshiped by the practitioners. The orixás represent the “mystical and mythical ancestors who were enchanted and metamorphosed into forces of nature”(ST website). They are the deified beings that are connected to the earth’s forces; they remain in constant contact with the mortal community of human beings. It is this exchange between gods and humans within the Candomblé religion that is highlighted most profoundly by the cowry shell reading that was occurring fifty yards from my door. The initiates of the Candomblé need not wait for the ceremonies to commune with their gods; it can be done in a living room on a random January evening, with a visitor from America peeking around the corner and cars zooming by, outside the window. While there is of course a difference between the behavior within the sacred space of a Candomblé temple and the mundane activity of the day - to - day, the spiritual is not limited to the religious space. All of life is a religious space in Candomblé if one believes in the connection that human beings have with the orixás, the connection that humans have with their environment. As the orixás represent the forces of nature, they are always present, always in communication with human beings.

Jim Wafer, an anthropologist who traveled to Salvador to conduct a study of the orixás and their intersection with the Brazilian community, gathered similar conclusions about the lack of boundary between the worlds of the sacred and the worlds of the mundane. He found that the same understanding of non-duality was so deeply ingrained in the culture and hearts of the practitioners that he had, at first, almost failed to recognize it.

As I learned from my participation in Candomblé, the boundary between different kinds of reality, whether social, epistemological, or ontological, is not a barrier to interaction (Wafer 180).

The *everyday* can be the space of transcendence and religious connection; the everyday offers the possibility of communication and interaction with another world.

Still, as this element of transcendence is possible in daily activity, the interaction of the religious and the mundane in Salvador must be understood on yet another level. The orixás are not solely a mythical, supernatural entity in Bahía. Even as they exist as gods in the supernatural realm, they are also considered on a much more concrete level. They represent not only the *spiritual*, but they exist as a *tangible* manifestation of our connection with nature and each other. Representations of the orixás can be found not only in the terreiros, but also in the public lake of Salvador where statues, each one about 10 times the size of a human being are illuminated every night for all to see; as each person is said to be the descendent of one or two main orixás, most people, whether Candomblé practitioners or not, know which specific orixás are watching over them and to which orixás are they most similar. A common question in my experience of Brazil, when meeting someone new is *who are you?* meaning which orixás do you descend from? Even people who do not practice Candomblé believe in the presence of the forces that the orixás represent.

More generally, this concept of ever - present spirituality is a common theme of African philosophy of the sacred, not only in the context of Salvador's Candomblé - influenced community. In her article entitled "In Contest : the Dynamics of African Religious Dances," Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi defines the African view of the sacred. She highlights elements of African polytheistic religions, (those of West Africa where from Bahía acquired much of its slave population), that are held in common. Ajayi

identifies the African's concept of the universe as holistic: "The universe is a single unifying entity which embraces the human society (i.e. both culture and nature) and the transcendental powers in a continuous cycle of interaction and regeneration" (Ajayi 185). A Supreme Being, or Creator Deity is responsible for the creation of the world, both natural and supernatural. Inherent in this philosophy is that everything in existence was created by the Supreme Being, so every thing in existence "becomes a symbol of the power of creation, the life force of its being. Consequently, the cosmic powers are seen as the Creator manifesting itself in concrete and visible terms to the physical world below" (Ajayi 185). In essence, everything on earth is sacred in and of itself.

This dissolves the boundary between secular and religious and explains the sense of ever – present spirituality in Salvador. "It is a situation where the sacred permeates both the religious world of the intangible, infinite spirituality, and the more concrete, easily perceptible cultural space" (Ajayi 185).

### **Dance in Bahía: A Result of the African Influence**

As opposed to dance's role in both Schechner's and Rosangela's earlier critique of performance dance, in African culture, dance is not considered something to be judged or separated from the dancer or the community. It is, in fact, part of daily existence, daily worship. Dance is one of the ways in which the African comes to understand his world and his own spirituality. One of the most profound effects that the African culture has had on Salvador is this value placed on dance and music; these art forms are essential to the daily expression of the African people as well as crucial in their methods of worship.

Pearl Primus discusses the all – encompassing power of dance in the African context in her article entitled “African Dance.”

The subject matter of African dance is all inclusive of every activity between birth and death – the seed which trembles to be born = the first breath of life - the growth, the struggle for existence – the reaching beyond the every day into the realm of the Soul – the glimpsing of the Great Divine – the ecstasy and sorrow which is life, and then the path back to the Earth. This is the dance! People use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable emotion or event is projected. The result is a hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable (Primus 6).

Along with the *marriage between life and dance* that the African philosophy invokes, comes the *marriage of daily dance and ritual dance*. Although dance inside the ritual space is unique and different in function than secular dance, the importance of dance as a means to connect a religious practitioner to the divine is important to emphasize because it highlights the potential that dance has within the African context to be a spiritual activity.

In his article, *In Contest : The Dynamics of African Religious Dances*, Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi details the extent to which dance is essential in the African religious experience.

Through movement patterns, dance gives forms to ideas *in culture* while the sacred is a conceptual thought made manifest as *nature on earth*. There is thus, at a certain level of perception, a relatedness of form which enables dance to serve as a solid bridge; i.e. an instrument with which to cross over to the ethereal infinite, and also to function as a sign for the devotees’ conception of the sacred. The anchor point of communication is the area of liminality where the ephemeral nature of dance fuses with transcendental powers. This is the high point of workshop. It is perhaps for this reason – the ability to cross over to the beyond and establish a communication between god and man, that some cultures regard dance as a sacred art in itself. The aim of worship is in effect to achieve communion with a *powerful but intangible force*<sup>8</sup>, essentially therefore, worship is a journey from one stage, the earthly/physical, to another, the spiritual/ethereal. . .

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<sup>8</sup> My emphasis added

[dance] becomes the anchor point between a high point of human creative perception and the sacred (Ajayi 187).

Dance then, in the context of the African experience, is the means by which the practitioners transcend; dance allows them to connect to the earth, to the heavens, and to each other; in essence dance connects the dancer to this *powerful but intangible force*.

This is particularly important to discuss as yet another aspect of dance in Brazilian culture that has helped shape Rosangela's understanding of the dancing experience, hence resulting in the type of experience that she tries to create for her dancers in the space of the classroom. On her website, Rosangela refers to the community of Bahía as one where the importance and integration of dance and music are a result of the African tradition.

Emerging from a community strong in the African tradition and ripe for development of the arts – a community rich in music, dance, signs, and symbols which create an aesthetic form in the scene of Bahian life. In these surroundings one can see how the elements and phenomenon of nature are presented in the form of dance and music (ST website).

Rosangela acknowledges her technique is directly a product of her *surroundings* and how closely tied her surroundings are to the African tradition.

### **Dance as a Vehicle of Transcendence Within the Candomblé**

People file into the terreiro. The ground is bare, only to be tread upon with bare feet. Benches are centered around the open space that is reserved for the dancers. Bright colors catch the eye, streamers, flowers, signs and symbols. Candles. Lighting is dim. The ceremony begins with three long ceremonial drums whose beat continues for the rest of the evening. A chicken is brought for sacrifice by the mother of saints. Out come the dancers, dressed in white skirts and loose shirts and pants. They begin the movements of their orixá in an effort to call their gods to join them. They twirl in a clockwise circle to an increasingly sensual rhythm, singing songs in Yoruban and Portuguese. The audience sings along, clapping. At times the audience may join the circle to become a part of the ritual. Each dancer comes to the center, one at a time, calling his or her orixá with the dance. The dancer who dances for Ogun slashes his electric and fierce hand through the air; it is a sword fighting for survival. She who

dances to invoke Yemanjá is fluid, swirling embodying the movements of the ocean as she flows around the circle of dancers.

And the orixás descend. A dancer stumbles forward, her head tilted back and her eyes closed. The mother of saint sees her transformation and checks the nature of the trance.

She touches the dancer with a hot object and then checks the dancers pupils. If the dancer is in a true trance, the mother of saints escorts the dancer off to privacy, where she takes off the white loose clothing and puts on the appropriate dress for that particular orixá. The dancer returns to the ceremony, no longer the female initiate, but the god.

As it is an African -derived religion and the particular religion that Rosangela draws from in her technique, a more focused study of the religious practice of Candomblé illuminates the potential that dance has in Bahía to connect man to the divine. Dance is considered the holiest form of worship because it exists as the means through which the individual can directly commune with the orixás. Within the philosophy of Candomblé there exists two separate but interlinked worlds, aiye – the world of man, and orun – the world of the orixás, and dance is used *specifically* to bridge these two worlds, to invite the *other* into our world.

Each dance is unique. Each orixá has his or her own distinct movements. In the context of a Candomblé ceremony, the dancer must be trained to follow the specific movements of his or her orixá when attempting to invoke that particular deity. Once trance occurs, once the matter<sup>9</sup> has been transformed by the orixá, the orixá dances through the human, doing his or her particular movements, in repetition and increased intensity as the ceremony goes on. A Candomblé ceremony is centered around this dancing, practitioners awaiting the presence of the divine.

Once again, although this discussion specifically relates the experience of ritual and/or religious dances, what must be understood is the potential for dance to have this transcendent nature within African culture, Candomblé practice, and Bahían life

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<sup>9</sup> Matter is the term used to describe the human who serves as the vehicle through which the god can descend into to the mortal world and communicate with the Candomblé community

philosophy all of which deeply influence the culture of Salvador. Dance has the power to take the dancer to a higher place, a place of connection to god, nature, energy.

Yet, it must also be mentioned that while dance was a spiritual activity of transcendence, it also, within the Candomblé, is a very technical skill. Barbara Browning, in her book, *Samba: Resistance in Motion*, explains that a Candomblé dancer's ability to be successful in invoking their orixa is based upon her training, the religious study of these movements. Technique is essential.

My own mother of saints and many other of my friends who dance within the Candomblé regard themselves as highly trained. They speak often of *técnica* – *technique* – and use specific Yoruba terminology to describe different kinds of motion. The study of the orixá dance is the study of divine liturgy and is taken very seriously. It marks one not as an artist but as a religious scholar . . .” (Browning 46).

Of course, the definition of technique is different in this context because the dancer still will never be judged solely on the technical perfection. The eventual ability to dance the orixá is what is valued in this community.

The dancer in the Candomblé is not considered to be an artist. . . Individual creativity is not admired as a characteristic of the worshiper. But the community may take pleasure in the excellence of a body as a vessel for an orixá. . . Physical strength and beauty may be appreciated by the community, as they will be appreciated by the orixá. But what animates the religious dance is not personal genius (Browning 44-45).

Yet, within the context of dance in the Candomblé, the technical training is that which allows the dancer to take her dance to a higher level. I invoke the training of a Candomblé dancer in order to then draw a parallel to the technical training in the Silvestre technique being a stepping stone to a larger personal and universal connection. Clearly, the Silvestre Technique takes the dance outside of the ritual context and into the

classroom; however, the potential for a similar transcendence from a technical skill need not be limited to the ritual space, but is, in fact, the philosophy of a Silvestre classroom.

### **1C : The Silvestre Technique Brings Brazil to Modern Dance**

Rosangela grew up in a world that is colored by the religious atmosphere of the Candomblé religion, (of which she is still involved as her mother remains a priestess of one of the *terrorios*<sup>10</sup> in Salvador), and the cultural atmosphere of Salvador Bahía, a community that is heavily composed of African descendents, a community that reflects much of the West African culture. As a result, much of Rosangela's understanding of the Universe and her dance as a connection to a Cosmic Energy is a manifestation of the role that dance and spirituality hold in her daily life and in the daily lives of her community in Brazil. As Rosangela was raised within this cradle of non-dualism and transcendent dance, it can be inferred, then, that Rosangela, as a result of these influences, assumes that the potential exists for dance to create a sacred experience, an experience of transcendence. After all, before she was a modern dancer, she was a Brazilian child who experience dance for the first time inside a Candomblé temple. "My first contact with dance was inside of the temple. [] My first teachers were the people I saw in the ceremony"(Silvestre Jan 15 2005). Dancing as a spiritual experience was part of her initial understanding of dance. Her method of providing this experience inside of the dance classroom has been to incorporate the elements of her own understanding of spirituality, the symbols and gestures of the Brazilian culture.

Thus far, none of the techniques that Rosangela had studied had relevance to her culture. She felt that her culture far removed from her dance experience; perhaps this

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<sup>10</sup> A Candomblé temple

frustration can be extended to explore why other modern dancers are unable to transcend their role as *imitators* of movement: they are unable to find personal relevancy in the techniques that they study and thus are unable to find a connection to their movement.

Rosangela herself felt this alienation.

When I went to the university, I saw all those dance techniques that were [being studied in] Salvador Bahia, but I didn't see any elements of the Bahía culture of the orixá culture that is so strong here []. So that is when I decided to think about [] how I could develop a technique that [didn't leave out] those elements that are inside of our culture. You know I had classical ballet and Martha Graham, and Horton technique [], but no one technique brings in the elements of our culture. (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

Rosangela took what she knew and what she had studied, and created something new, something that was infused with her personality and her world – view. Simply bringing ballet together with ritual dance in the same classroom would not suffice. The blending had to be fluid and holistic. She discovered this during an experience she had as a dance teacher, early on in her career, when she was asked to teach a technique class of Brazilian dance. Though a long - time student of ballet and modern dance forms, in addition to being an experienced student of Brazilian ritual dance forms, she found that she had no idea what it mean to teach Brazilian dance. “When I went to the school and they asked me to teach my to African dance, Afro – Brazilian dance, I had no idea what this thing is”(Silvestre Jan 15 2005). She had no vocabulary to use in a classical dance classroom that also incorporated the essence of Brazil.

So she began the class with classical ballet and then abruptly and uncomfortably, as she describes it, switched into a class on the orixá dances of the Candomblé religion. “So what I did: I did a classical ballet warm up, and then [] I had to do the orixá movement because that is what we call African dance – afro Brazilian dance. But in a

way, there is a contradiction here. How can I warm up these people with classical ballet movements and then do orixá movement? There is something wrong here”(Silvestre Jan 15 2005). She left this experience dissatisfied, yet inspired to find a way that would allow her modern dance training and traditional ballet to meld with her passion for her own culture. “So then I started to develop. I started to see what kind of gestures and elements from the movements from the orixás I could bring to a form of exercises” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

### **The Movements of the Silvestre Technique : She Brings Brazilian Cultural Symbols into Modern and Classical Dance Vocabulary**

The elements of Brazilian spirituality that appear in the technique are mainly the incorporation of the Candomblé concepts of spirituality : the dances of the orixá deities and an awareness of the four elements of nature that the orixás represent. In this section, I will explore how Rosangela brings her concept of spirituality to her dance form technique in a logistical way within the specific movements of the Silvestre technique.

### **The Orixá Gesture**

Each orixá has its own dance movement. Within the ritual context, practitioners dance the movement of their specific orixá in order to invoke that spirit. Through the dance, the personalities of the different orixás as well as the personal mythologies are represented and embodied. For example Ogún , the god of war is an aggressive dancer, using his hand slashing through the air. Oldumaré, the god of healing and sickness, uses his hands to attack his flesh to evoke the image of disease. Yemanjá, the goddess of the ocean moves freely and with grace. Her movements are very fluid.

Rosangela takes elements of these different dance movements outside of this ritual context and uses them in her secular dance technique. However, she makes this move consciously. She explains both in her classes and on her website that she is not attempting to make the Silvestre Technique a means through which the dancer can invoke the deities. Instead, she is using these symbols as an inspiration for her art and way for dancers to connect to the elements of nature and themselves. “Students learn the dance and rhythm of each orixá, the meaning of the movements, colors, days and the relationship between human beings and the element of nature that each orixá represents”(ST website). Furthermore, on her website Rosangela delineates between : “dancing the orixá,” which describes a dancer who has become possessed by the orixá, “dancing *for* the orixá” in which a dancer is dancing within the sacred space in order to invoke the deity, and “dancing the movement of the orixá” which Rosangela defines as the “practice of these movements outside the sacred space and without having to follow religious concepts, rituals, and rules” (ST website). This last category is the space that the Silvestre technique works within; the movements are for her, (as they are for many Brazilian artists), a source of “inspiration” and a link to the mythology and spirituality of her Brazilian culture (ST website).

These orixá movements show up both in the exercises as different hand positions, for example, reflect the different orixá gestures, but also in the choreography for performance. Melissa, an experienced Silvestre dancer from Argentina has performed in many of the pieces that Rosangela has choreographed for the stage. For these performances, the choreography is a mix of both the more traditional modern dance movement and the orixá movement. During the performance that she did for the

community of Colorado Springs, for example, Melissa was assigned the role of one specific orixá; all of her movements reflected that specific god. Paula who has studied the Silvestre technique for three years in Salvador told me that she also studies orixá movements, and that she sees the gods' movement in all the Silvestre choreography.

### **Four Elements of the Earth**

She exhales with an explosive breath and her hands release forward from their position on her hips and flutter to the ground; from fire to water they go.

Her hands form fists with the thumbs pointing to the sky and then back down to the ground.

She is “always working with relating to the elements, earth and sky, pointing up and then down” (Passos Jan 12 2005).

The orixás are represented within the Silvestre technique on another level of symbolic gesture as well as they are manifestations of the four natural elements. The dances of the orixás, as defined by the Silvestre Technique website, are the “Dances that symbolize the forces and elements of nature.” The orixás “represent the AIR, FIRE, WATER, EARTH. These elements are celebrated throughout Brazil – when they visit us and they privilege us with their presence. – possession, or symbolically thru ancestral songs, rhythms dances”(ST website). Reference to the four elements shows up firstly, in Rosangela's philosophy that the dancer must always be consciously aware of the presence of nature in her dance. Secondly, the dancer's physical movements often embody the four elements. This invokes the idea of the African sacred experience as described by Pearl Primus.

The African dancer uses the earth as if it were an extension of the dancer's own feet, as if it were a stage of rubber form which he can bounce to the skies, as if it were a soft bed upon which he could roll and be protected. This love and respect for the earth is one of the main factors of African dance. It gives it a certain vitality and dynamic strength, for it draws up into the dancer the unlimited force and ecstasy of the earth”(Primus 6).

Primus here refers to dance as a direct way for humans to connect to the earth, and this connection is made manifest in the Silvestre movements.

At times, however, the elements will only appear in essence. The transition from an explosive movement to a fluid one, for example, represents for her the connection between the elements of fire and water. Another exercise series includes the hand position of fire to be assumed as the dancer changes direction. Rosangela asks the dancer to explode into this new position, the whole body tense and alert, with passion. Rosangela demonstrates. She moves from one movement in the sequence to the next, until the posture of fire when she snaps to the front of the room, eyes wide, body surging and she stops, slowly lowering herself to the ground in a plié.<sup>11</sup> Rosangela will describe this movement to the dancers, not necessarily by invoking a full explanation of nature's elements, but certainly by expressing her desire to see *fire in the eyes*. Explode into it! She demands. With passion! And so, an experience in a Silvestre classroom involves exercises where the plié comes together with the hand formations of the warrior god Ogún, where a batmah is infused with the element of fire. She brings it all together.

### **Along With the Movements Comes the Philosophy**

It is important to note here that as Rosangela brings Brazilian movements into modern technique, she is simultaneously bringing along her own concept and experience of spirituality. All of the symbols from her culture that find their way into the movements of the Silvestre Technique are deeply rooted in the spiritual life of the citizens of Salvador. To Rosangela, her culture *is* the spiritual and so when she says she brings her cultural gestures to the classical dance forms, she brings to classical dance her

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<sup>11</sup> Basic ballet movement

understanding of spirituality. “I have inside the technique the symbols of my culture. And as I put the symbols of my culture inside of the technique I also brought the spirituality inside of the technique” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005). So along with the symbols, comes Rosangela’s experience of the spiritual. In this way, she was able to make a modern technique that was relevant to her.

Rosangela has found a very specific and personal way to express herself and tap into the spiritual. And in doing so, remains true to her passion for technical and physical skill. The Silvestre Technique is still a modern dance in that it works with the dancer’s technical ability to be a stage performer. The technical is still essential. Rosangela emphasizes that without the technical, a dancer cannot truly dance the movements. Without the skill, you cannot find your own expression or communicate to an audience. Through technique, comes freedom. The dancer needs technique and the skills in order to enter the transcendent world during dance. She needs to be confident and capable physically. Stated more plainly, as the dancer becomes more skilled, she can delve more deeply the moment, losing the self - consciousness, allowing herself to just create and communicate. It is through technique that the performer is able to communicate onstage.

But the dancer must move beyond that understanding of technique for Rosangela. And this is where the *Brazil* enters her classroom. “Everything we do technically has a link with the spirituality. Its not only to give you power, but inside of that, inside of you, you have to connect it with your emotion. With your expression. Who you are. And that is why we talk about Cosmic energy all the time” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005). Rosangela offers dancers both the technique that she considers essential for successful communication in performance, and a space to experience the *unknown*, a space to

express the dance, a space to connect to an inner spiritual world. And because her understanding of the spiritual is connected to her culture, she does this by incorporating the symbols of the Brazilian culture into her dance form.

Luanda, a trained teacher of the Silvestre Technique, when describing the nature of the creation of a dance technique, spoke about the cultural influences and personal interpretation that is inherent in this creation.

The technique comes from that person's world. They believe in something very strongly. Rosangela really believes in the *foundation* of the Silvestre technique which is really just another way to access the energy of the world . . . For Rosangela, her spiritual and human development expressed itself in her body and the dance world. Even if another person had Candomblé – no one could have created this but her (Mori Jan 13 2005).

Because this dance form is so much a product of Rosangela herself, it offers a taste of Rosangela's personal spiritual experience, which is found within the experience of the orixá movements and mythologies and a connection to nature.

## **Section 2 : A Theory of Syncretism as a Space for Cultural Fusion**

Yet Rosangela is not simply creating a spiritual dancing experience by bringing her cultural symbols and philosophies to the classical dance technique. This does not take into consideration the dancers in Denver. These dancers are not familiar with Brazilian culture and spirituality as orixá movement does not have the same relevance to dancers outside of Rosangela's community. The spiritual dancing experience extended far beyond the Brazilian concept of the spiritual.

I have found that, in order to extend the spiritual dancing experience to those who may not connect to the Brazilian symbolism, Rosangela brings in yet another aspect of her Brazilian culture, the concept of syncretism. In this section, I explore the elements of

the syncretism of Bahía that serve as the foundation upon which Rosangela's philosophy of integration and cultural fusion is based. I argue that from this foundation, Rosangela expands her understanding of syncretism as a means of integration to a global scale so that her classroom works as a meeting space of different cultural symbols and traditions; Rosangela seeks to welcome these individual differences as a means to transcend them.

Rosangela's ability to bring different elements of various dance traditions and dance philosophies to the same dance form and to the same dancing community represents her vision of an integrated world, where these different traditions bring people together, instead of drawing them apart. This is where the Silvestre Technique becomes a cultural and social project of *global syncretism* where dance has the ability to cross cultural boundaries, where inside the dance classroom, students from around the world can come together and communicate through their movements where, with Rosangela, as their teacher, dancers can come to understand that their differences are only a function of interpretation. How one chooses to explain the universe and our place within it varies, but the universe itself is the same for all people and the global community can join together and understand that all traditions are in fact of the same origin. This is the voice of a woman who has been raised in a syncretic world. Again, we see here that her philosophies have been shaped by her environment.

It is important to understand that the term *global syncretism* is not hers. It is my understanding of her world – view, my interpretation of her project and her philosophy. I argue that this concept of *global syncretism* is the philosophy behind the Silvestre Technique and the primary reason why such a diverse community of dancers is able to

have a spiritual dancing experience, even though they may be unfamiliar with the Brazilian symbols of Rosangela's culture.

## **2A: Syncretism in Salvador, Bahía**

The hot sun pierces my scalp as I walk through the streets of Salvador. Women in white flowing dresses dance, adorned in the color of the Yoruba God Oxalá "who is syncretized with Senhor do Bonfim." Both of these gods are being celebrated today. I cannot tell who in the crowd is Catholic or who is Candomblé. Everyone celebrates together. In the center of the streets the drum orchestras sound the procession. Thousands of people are dancing, wearing white, drinking beer, taking pictures. At first, I had trouble remembering that this was indeed a religious ceremony.

But then, we arrived at the church.

On the second Thursday of January every year, the Lavagem do Bonfim is celebrated, a holiday that marks a communal spiritual cleansing where the whole community of Salvador gathers at the Church of Conceicao de Praía to take the 10km march to the church of Bonfim where a ritual washing occurs as the Catholic Baianas "dressed in all white with multicolored sacred beads" (LB) pour water on the outside of the church. At this point, all sing the anthem of Senhor do Bonfim. Next the party disperses . . . people go to the booths by the Church of Bonfim to eat and drink. There's dancing on the streets, among the traditional booths of Baianas selling acaraje (West African food made of black eyes peas fried in palm oil)" (LB). What is essentially a Catholic holiday, has become a celebration for the whole community. This holiday is a manifestation of the syncretism that is such an essential part of Bahía's culture. On this holiday, citizens of Salvador celebrate both the Saint Bonfim and the Yoruba god Oxalá. Both Catholic and Candomblé citizens march together to take part in this celebration and ritual cleansing.

The Lavagem do Bonfim is just an example of a large group of syncretic holidays that are celebrated in Bahía. I mention it specifically because it was the only one that I

had the honor to witness first hand. The Party of Yemanjá for example, which occurs on two days of the year, December 31<sup>st</sup>, and February 2<sup>nd</sup>, is the offering given to the mother of the orixás where members of Candomblé come together to offer her gifts, thank her for the past year, and make new wishes and hopes for the coming one. This festival, described by Juso Salles in an article entitled *Iemanjá 02 de Fevereiro*, is also celebrated by Candomblé practitioners and Catholics alike. It is a “manifestation of faith and hope that congregates thousands of people, blacks and whites, rich and poor, local and foreigners in one same place where all are bending over in respect of the mother of orixás, seeking the same purpose: [] growth and spiritual protection”(LB). These festivals of syncretism are characteristic of Bahía, specifically in Salvador where the blending of communities are an essential part of the city’s character.

## **2B : Foundations of Global Syncretism in the Community of Salvador**

Before we identify how the Silvestre Technique embodies the concept of *global syncretism*, we must understand the definition of syncretism as a means of fusion that Rosangela brings to her work. In doing this, I engage Robert Bastide, one of the primary scholars of Brazilian religions who offers a reading of syncretism that allows for the possibility of syncretism to unite separate communities in one space. It must be acknowledged that there are, of course, positive and negative aspects to the syncretic experience. It is true that syncretism is almost always the result of force on the part of one group against the other, (in this case on the part of the Portuguese colonizers against the African slaves) and that the syncretism in Salvador was historically used as a survival technique of the African religions; however, this paper will focus on syncretism as a

means of integration, as a way to find commonality between traditions, where individuals of different religions, cultures, traditions can come together in the same space and communicate.

Many years after the onset of the African/Catholic syncretism in Brazil, a historically oppressive meeting of two cultures, Rosangela has come to believe in the possibility of syncretism as a positive cultural meeting. And so I focus this section on the positive elements to a syncretic culture because it is the positive side of syncretism I find brings Rosangela's work to life. She focuses on the integrative elements of her culture's history as opposed to the history of oppression that are the essential cause of the integration itself. She sees the possibility in her culture to have different groups of people coexist and complement each other, a possibility that she extends to a possibility of global fusion not simply between two religious groups but instead amongst the greater global community where diversity of religion, culture, ethnicity have historically kept people apart.

I highlight three characteristics in particular of Bastide's discussion of syncretism in Bahía's history that I find within Rosangela's work with the *global syncretism* of the Silvestre Technique: Firstly, Bastide examines how the two religious communities of Bahía have been able to link their religions by the equating of different symbols and beliefs from what seem to be disparate traditions, where practitioners have come to find spaces of commonality. However, this space of inter-group connection does not require that either community lose its individuality or its own character; groups can find ways to come together while still maintaining their separate characters. And so this is the second aspect of Bahia's syncretism : the fact that similarities can be found and parallels can be

made, while individual communities still remain intact. Finally, I investigate the way that individuals within these two groups coexist and move seamlessly in and around these two worlds. What seems like a challenging and contradictory cultural meeting, in fact is now easy and obvious for the citizens of Salvador, it is simply a of life.

### **The Equating of Symbols**

Bastide, who more generally studies the nature of syncretism in the Afro – Brazilian religions, has come to identify two distinct possibilities of a syncretic space: “Hence when two religions come into contact, the result will be either religious stratification, [] or an attempt to *establish equivalences between the gods and place them on a common value level*”<sup>12</sup>( Bastide 278). To some extent, both theories can occur in the same place as different groups within the same community may respond to the contact differently. However, in Bahía, as Catholicism and Candomblé came together the practitioners began to equate the two traditions to find common spaces where the two could meet. As the slaves learned to navigate between their African religions and the religions of their Catholic slave masters, they began to find similarities between the two religions, places where their belief systems overlapped. One tangible way this manifested itself was in the equating of gods that Bastide indicates.

The African slaves, both in urban centers and on the plantations, were forced to, at least on the surface, convert to the Catholicism of their masters. While the white master was unconcerned with the salvation of his slave population, the Catholic church could not so easily disregard this community of people who were being subject to

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<sup>12</sup> My emphasis added

horrible treatment and torture. So, the church attempted to offer the slaves the hope of salvation, the space to transcend. “While the church accepted the enslavement of the African, it did so on certain conditions. In taking his body, it gave him in return a soul” (Bastide 52). However, while many slaves underwent baptism, learned the church doctrine, and appeared at weekly mass, (appearing on the surface to be good practicing Catholics), they were, in fact, using this façade as a means through which their own African religions could survive. Behind the backs of the masters, or perhaps to use a better metaphor, beneath the masks of Catholicism, the slaves were in fact, worshiping their African gods as they danced and worshiped at their own community’s ceremonies.

However, in the creation of this masked worship, they began to equate the two traditions. As Bastide says, “Naturally they chose the saints who were closest to the divinities actually worshipped by their sect” (Bastide 163). And so, a result of this act of pretense resulted in the linking of the orixás with the corresponding Catholic saints. Bastide provides an explanation of how exactly this equating was done: Yansan is identified with Saint Barbara because she ate the “magic of her husband Shango and therefore spits lightning, while Saint Barbara is the patron of artillerymen and offers protection against thunder and fire”(Bastide 263). This sort of identification occurs on a grand level to the extent that almost every orixá has its corresponding catholic Saint.

Consequently syncretism, which was originally merely a mask, a means of distracting the white man’s attention and evading his watchful eye, is transformed into the system of equivalences, of correspondences between saints and orixás. . . (Bastide 283)

This system of equivalences extends to other religious symbols within the African religions, even to specific ritual practices. The African came to see Catholicism as yet another way to access the same universal energy of his ancestors. “The [African]

visualized the saints . . . exactly as he visualized his gods or his ancestors. . . He asked them, as he would have asked his orixá, for a good spouse, the return of a lover . . . A lighted candle of an ex voto like those of the whites simply replaced the sacrifice of a cock or a goat. The principle remained the same” (Bastide 141).

### **Separate but Linked Communities**

Today, in Salvador, there are many people who are both members of the Candomblé and the church. This is possible because, historically while the Catholic Church did ask the slaves to convert to Catholicism, it also gave the slaves room to conduct this conversion in their own way. The Catholic Church did not replace the African’s religion, nor did it truly attempt to. This would have been a much more challenging project. Instead, it allowed the Africans to practice in their own way, as long as they appeared to be accepting the Catholic value systems and deities. The Church allowed the slaves to hold their own private celebrations after mass and gave them the freedom to worship on their own, as long as they danced around a Catholic altar and sang to the Catholic gods. The Catholic Church was not asking the Africans to forget everything they knew. “Catholicism superimposed itself on the African religion rather than replacing it” (Bastide 127).

Because the slaves were not forced to abandon what they knew, they were able to maintain their own religion while also practicing Catholicism. Parallels were made between these two traditions, but while their gods, their rituals, their ceremonies were linked, they were not combined. As they exist in the same space, both Catholicism and Candomblé continued on as separate communities. “They are linked, as the blacks are

linked with the whites without completely merging with them” (Bastide 283). Africans simply juxtaposed the saints and their own deities, considering them to belong to the same category though completely separate.

### **Seamless dual existence**

As the third element of positive syncretism defines, the movement back and forth between these two traditions is seamless for many of the inhabitants of Salvador. As Salles says “Bahía is plural in its diversity of religions and singular in the tolerance of the coexistence of the same ones respecting the option of the individuals that practice them. It’s very common to be Catholic and [Candomblé] at the same time in Bahía, independent of color or social group”(Salles). As Catholicism and Candomblé came together in the same space, they found ways to peacefully coexist, and most individuals seem to have no problem with the dual nature of their community. The respect for the individual practitioner creates a space where syncretism can mean diversity, not tension. Bastide comments on this as he assess the phenomena of western scholars coming into a community like Salvador and expecting to find a community of inner psyches that are inwardly tortured by this dualism.

I found that so far as the Negro was concerned [this inner torture] was nonexistent; it was a pseudo problem. I had been reasoning according to the logic of Western thought, which is based on the principle of identity and noncontradiction. I had imaged that all outward syncretism must have its psychic counterpart, whereas the black did not see the contradictions that I saw, the psychic syncretism, if it exists, takes quite different forms from the outward syncretism with which I had assumed it to be linked. It is true that the endless questions I put to African cult members forced some of my informants to rationalize their faith, but on the whole I felt that they replies were largely dictated by the form in which I stated my questions and that I had forced my black friends to step outside their own mentality for a moment and assume mine. A spiritist who attended Candomblés saw the orixás purely as effluents of the astral

world . . . Hence the names by which they are called, whether African or Catholic, are of no importance since these are purely spiritual forces (Bastide 271).

Bastide's self reflection here is important because it refers to the ways the communities can come together, share tradition, and refuse to see this sharing as either a threat to either group or a personal challenge.

Still, there is another element of the global syncretism that is rooted in the culture of Salvador : a philosophy of universality and inclusion that, from my experience, was characteristic of the Candomblé religion.

### **Philosophy of Inclusion in Candomblé**

I sat on the stoop my apartment in Fazenda Garcia, the suburb of Salvador where I was renting a room from Rosangela's mother. This woman, (Mae as she is called by her community – meaning mother) a priestess of the Candomblé spoke only Portuguese. I speak English.

Yet we sat on the stoop of our apartment for hours, nodding to this and that, mumbling, fumbling through sentences in what I know of Spanish, hoping that she would be able to decipher some of my words. Finally, I got around to the question that I had been aching to ask for days. I took a deep breath in preparation and blurted it out, without grace or seeming coherency; (I was already having trouble communicating. My nerves only made it worse.) She was looking at me strangely as I searched for words and gasped for air.

“*Can I attend a Candomblé ceremony?*” I asked in English/Spanish/Portuguese.

It took her no time to understand. Her eyes got wide and full of joy.

“*Claro!*” She cried. “Of course! I will take you,” she said in Portuguese

My face lit up, but still I wanted to make sure she understood me

“*No es privado?*” “Isn't it private?” I asked timidly.

She looked at me as if she didn't understand.

“Is it ok that I go? I am not Candomblé”

Still slightly confused, she just chuckled.

“*No problema*”

“It's no problem,” she said.

“Candomblé es para todos!”

Candomblé is for everyone! (Silvestre, M Jan 9 2005)

I was terrified to even suggest that I be witness to a religious ceremony if I was an outsider to the community. Yet Mae was bewildered by my question. This bewilderment

speaks to the particularly inclusive character of the Candomblé tradition. I cannot speak to whether this is true of other religions in the area, or whether this is primarily a Candomblé phenomena, but it was remarkable how welcoming this religious community is to outsiders. This is not only manifest in the way they invited outsiders like myself into the terreiro's to witness ceremonies; in the same way that the orixás are a part of the every day life of the citizens of Salvador, they extend the ability to worship and respect these gods to all people, regardless of whether they are a part of their religious community or not. You do not have to be Candomblé in order to believe in the orixás and you do not have to worship them in order to be protected by them. Though I was an outsider in the fullest sense of the word, having absolutely no connection to the Candomblé culture, either in background or appearance, I was welcomed; Mae gave me a spiritual reading where she told me that the gods that were protecting me, she led me to the back of her terreiro so that I could make an offering to my mother's god, Ogún, to ensure my mother's health. My mother, who has never even heard of this religion, is protected by one of their gods, whether she knows it or not.

The Candomblé community is a community of diverse individuals, many of whom invite others, regardless of race, class, culture, into their space of worship and into their interpretation of the universe. It can be argued that its history of syncretism is the reason that it is able welcome such a diverse community.<sup>13</sup> Bastide comments on the varied community of Candomblé practitioners and how remarkable it is that such a diverse group of people are able to come together in worship. But this is the nature of Candomblé. "The life of the African religious sects resides in this interweaving of

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to the African/Catholic syncretism of Bahía, during slavery, the Africans had to unite despite the disparity amongst their different homeland religions of Africa. In order to preserve the African Religion, they engaged in the act of syncretism of the many different African religions.

existences, this mingling of individual life stories, this multiplicity of personal histories whose threads finally come together to produce a sociological novel depicting an efficiently functioning human milieu” (Bastide 225). The syncretic history of Candomblé created a religion of inclusion made up of a diverse community, where individuals from the outside are welcomed; where everyone is under the protection of the orixás and has access to their system of beliefs, because, essentially we are all of the same global community. It doesn’t matter where you come from or what you believe, we all exist as interpretations of the Cosmic Energy.

In the last two sections, I have elaborated on syncretism as a system of inclusion both in Candomblé specifically and also in the Bahían culture as a whole. The categories and positive themes just highlighted as characteristic of the syncretism between the Catholic and African populations of Salvador are then extended beyond the community of Salvador in the concept of Global Syncretism. It is Rosangela who has internalized these themes as she brings them to a global level in her technique.

## **2C : The Silvestre Technique as Global Syncretism**

Rosangela takes the integration that she has experienced in Brazil and brings it to the world of her technique in a universal way, where syncretism becomes a universal concept of integration, not simply a fusion of two religious communities. She herself acknowledges that her culture is the source of her philosophy. “My own Brazilian culture is defined by the integration of other cultures – Portuguese, African and indigenous. So the idea of integration already exists in my own culture”(Silvestre Mar 3 2005). She takes the possibility of fusion that she has witnessed in Salvador and extends it into a

global theory. Inherent in this definition of *global syncretism* as a means of integration is the understanding that this fusion extends to all cultures, all symbols, all communities, all philosophies. She suggests that these things are all one in the same, multiple ways to understanding the same universe.

From Salvador's history of cultural and religion syncretism evolves a community of integration, where people can be a part of multiple religions without compromising their spirituality, where people of different faiths can celebrate together. Rosangela's personal philosophy of global syncretism as seen within the Silvestre Technique, seamlessly links the symbols, gestures, and philosophies of different cultural traditions and different genres of dance without melding them into one wholly separate vision or tradition. She maintains the integrity and authenticity of each community, tradition, genre, while also drawing connections between the individual parts.

She offers her dance form as a space where the *equivalences* can be made, equivalences between gods and nature, equivalences between Eastern and Western philosophies, between Brazilian ritual, modern and classical dance genres, by an understanding of the "relative homogeneity of magical symbols all over the world and throughout the ages"(Bastide 280).

### **The Equating of Symbols From Traditions Around the World**

This *homogeneity of magical symbols* is the most accurate description of what Rosangela pursues in her work and it is, for her and many of her culture, an obvious way of interpreting the personal and cultural differences that exist between people. The boundaries that exist between the symbols of the Brazilian culture and spirituality of the Brazilian community, between the classroom space and the sacred space, between

performance dance and ritual dance, between an orixá and a Catholic saint, between the chakra energy work and the work with the body's natural elements, are dissolvable.

It's all together – all the elements of this technique come together. I don't separate. Because all these elements are in the Cosmos. So why are we going to separate? For me, it's a language of integration . . . That's why I sing in my class. If I *can* sing, I will do it. What I have here inside of the technique is all of the elements that I can find in the Universe. . . If I was open to only one culture, the technique would not be this way (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

She draws on whatever speaks to her, whatever she feels connected to because for her, all of these different interpretations, these different interpretations and traditions are simply ways of seeing and connecting to the same thing. The individual must draw on what works for her.

This aspect of her philosophy is manifest in the movements of the Silvestre Technique.

### **The Equating of Symbols is Embodied in Silvestre Movements**

As we have already identified the elements of the technique that are Brazilian in origin, now let us examine the symbols and movements that Rosangela incorporates into her technique which are *not* of Brazilian origin. Although the Brazilian concept of the spiritual is her main source of inspiration, her movement language is not limited to Brazil. In addition to the orixa gesture and earth's four elements, Rosangela identifies two other *foundations* to her technique : an understanding of the body as a system of triangles and the eastern concept of the body as a system of seven chakras. As she researches and studies traditions across the globe, she has integrated movements from other traditions as well the Brazilian gesture and symbology.

[The Silvestre] intends to explore a language of movement that uses Brazilian cultural symbols as its primary source and structural foundation (principally orixá dance gestures); and does not attempt to confine one to or predefine any particular

style but rather that challenges the body as a universal symbol of expression (ST Website).

It is this openness to cultures that appears in her movements as she incorporates symbols and philosophies from around the globe, simply drawing on what has worked for her.

### **The Triangles**

Rosangela stands in front of the room.

Dancers are facing the mirror in a silent focus. Focusing their attention inwards,  
connecting to their center

Rosangela is in the front of the room; she begins to speak. She speaks about connection. She gestures to her head, intuition. She brings her arms to her heart; expression. She lowers her hands to her hips; balance.

*Connect all three triangles of your body before you begin to dance*

Rosangela sees the body as a system of three triangles that work together. She identifies the head, which represents human perception and intuition, the torso which represents the center of expression and emotion, and the legs which represent the balance, the strength. Rosangela will compare the body to a tree, with roots that dig into the soil, a trunk that is the source of extension, expression, projection, and the limbs which represent the visualization. The goal of any dancer is to attain a level of inward connection so that these three different aspects of the body are working together as a complete organism. Once this is achieved the dancer will truly be able to dance. This theory plays an integral role in understanding Rosangela's vision of dance: the unification of the intellect, emotional expression, and physical technique, all in one living organism.

Rosangela explained that she noticed these three triangles while watching a dancer's body in movement. When Rosangela researched the 'triangle' after her initial observation, she found that it is a sacred symbol in the Tantric and Yogic traditions of Eastern Asia. The triangle represents the yogi's third eye, found in the center of his

forehead. It also is the shape that encapsulates each of the seven energy centers in the body, the yogic chakras.

## **Chakras**

Rosangela then integrated the chakras into her technique. The first movement series of the classroom for example is an exercise geared at tapping into the body's energy system via an awakening of the chakras. In this exercise, the hands from below the navel to up above the head, the dancer is, one by one, tracing along each individual chakra to open it, to balance the bodily energies, to prepare for the dance. There are seven chakras in the body from the pelvic area to the top of the head, and each center reflects a specific part of the body and the spirit. They all work together as cohesive unit. Each chakra is observed in the Silvestre Technique: "The fourth chakra, for example, is the heart chakra. Physically related to the circulatory and respiratory systems, it is also the center of the primary emotions: love and sorrow. The heart chakra mediates the 'lower' and 'higher' functions of the personality, the physical with the psychic, the body with the head" (Gupta 67). The heart chakra comes up in Rosangela's teaching more often than others because it is the center of expression. Rosangela warns dancers not to watch their body in totality as they look into the mirror during class and not to judge their own movements, but instead to look into the mirror directly to the center of the chest, directly into the heart chakra. By drawing attention to the heart chakra, the body is more able to express, and less likely to be self-conscious. Like the three triangles, these seven chakras work as a complete system and when energy is flowing freely through the body, all of the chakras are alive and open. The function of the first exercise is to access

and unite all of the dancer's chakras so she can express more freely; essentially, to open her up.

In this way, within the technical movements of the Silvestre Technique, Rosangela has invoked the philosophies and symbols of the Eastern traditions, creating a dialogue between the different bodily symbols and philosophies. As a result of her global view, there is an ease of cultural mixing and equating for Rosangela. For example, she responded with confusion and an element of nonchalance when I asked her to break down her technique into her different cultural influences.

### **Seamless Dual Existence Taken to a Global Level**

She incredulously asked me why I even suggested that she discuss individually the aspects of her technique. This parallels the same nonchalance of the Bahian community members who find it easy to exist in this dual yet fully integrated cultural community. She feels no need to identify the different elements of her technique because she feels no need to separate the global amongst community of human beings. She shrugged when I asked her again to explain how she brings together these different worlds.

The elements are different only by conceptions but they came from the same idea; an understanding of energy. From one [understanding] came the mystery of the popular name GOD. I don't bring Candomblé and chakras together, I bring to the Silvestre Technique symbols from the Candomblé (gestures of the dances), and the energy that connects the human being with the Universe: the 7 points in the body that called Chakras. The gestures of the orixás [are] one form of the interpretation and manifestation of the Universe and the connection with the elements that are inside of each of us: water, air, fire and earth. The chakras also, [are] a connection with the Universe. The human being, [has] created all this [] and today we have tradition, religion, science etc, because the Universe keep giving us things to think about. What is different between religions, is the conception of what tradition the religion represents. But they all do the same

thing: I don't think that I can see the chakras, but I can feel. What I see is the point they are located in the body and the link they have with other tradition, but I can't see [them]. I can't see the orixás. What I see is a representation of this energy through the dances, the costume, sound, music etc. I don't see energy, I can feel and I can investigate. I research and that is why Silvestre Technique is what it is. (Silvestre Jan 26 2005).

Religions are simply tapping into the energy that already exists in the universe and expressing it in a new way.

She does not come to her beliefs intellectually, she instead senses the energy, notices something in the body that she cares to investigate. In fact, the points in the body where the orixá movement is found correspond to specific chakras. Luanda speaks about her process of education and research in a similar way. “She has an intuition knowledge and then she studies . . . There is nothing new in the universe,” Luanda said to me (Mori Jan 13 2005). What is new is the interpretation, Rosangela’s ability to bring it all together and create a technique that appeals to dancers of all cultures is new, but the elements that she brings to this technique are not new. “Everything is in the cosmos, yet she can see it more easily than others can”(Mori Jan 13 2005). This does not mean that Rosangela’s concept of spirituality is right; it only means that she was able to create a space for other people to find the experience for themselves in way that is relevant to them.

### **Separate but Linked Global Communities**

However, in her global philosophy where all traditions are only a function of interpretation, she is not suggesting that all the traditions should be melted into one. Similarly to the syncretic nature of Bahía where many cultures can coexist without losing their identity, the traditions that Rosangela brings together are not compromised. It is in

this space of integration that the relationship between different cultures must be clarified. Rosangela does not equate various traditions simply as different ways of interpreting the same thing. However, the connection between cultures for her is an act of equivalence; she does not ignore the fact that there are differences between people, yet there are no value judgments placed on these differences; these differences should not keep people apart because we are all part of and interpreting the same world. Rosangela deeply respects the individuality of each tradition. She has simply drawn from the ones that she personally experienced and the ones that have helped her personally connect to the Cosmic Energy. Yet all the traditions can coexist in the same space.

Yet again, this philosophy shows up in the movements of the technique. Many of the Silvestre movements are a result of Rosangela's seamless blending of movement traditions as she often incorporates all of the four elements of the technique (orixá gesture, four elements of nature, chakras, triangles) into one movement. One of the first movements series that a dancer will learn for example, is an arm sequence where the arms move through four different positions; the navel as they cradle the lower belly, to the chest where their hands are facing inwards towards the heart, then shift as they flatten against the breast, and finally explode to the sky, interlaced and energetically poised above their head. These four positions, respectively refer to the elements of earth, water, air, and fire. In addition while also referring to the gods that embody these specific elements. In addition, these movements invoke the different bodily energies that are stimulated by placing physical awareness of these areas of the body. When I asked Rosangela how she created this arm series, she answered that she basically brought everything together into one exercise.

The four gestures that represent the four elements in the Silvestre Technique are my creation after I studied the link between the elements that each orixá represents and the location of the chakras in the human body : [The] First chakra represent[s] the roots. . . and Obaluaie, [the orixá that represents] the element earth. And the hands travel in the areas [indicative of] the chakras energy. The gestures of the element fire brings the cross of the hands that represent the symbol of Xango and the bird of Oxala, the orixá that represents serenity (Silvestre Mar 3 2005).

Essentially, as the hands move between these four positions, they bring together the different orixá mythologies, the elements of nature that correspond to these mythologies and the chakra energies that correspond to these specific parts of the body. For example: The interlaced hand gesture above the head represents the element of fire as it is the symbol for Xangó (the god of fire); it invokes the head chakra which is the chakra that corresponds to spiritual energy and the supernatural world; it refers to the highest triangle of intuition, and finally it represents Oxalá, the orixá of serenity and peace. Blending all of these different ideas into one, Rosangela has created a movement that invokes power and peace while physically linking the human body to the Cosmic Energy. Yet in this blending she is not forgoing the individual origins of each element. She can acknowledge the different components to this arm series, while still allowing the exercise to exist as a fusion of these very components. This movement is, in itself, an act of syncretism.

### **Section Three : Universality of Silvestre Technique**

After a thorough discussion of the Silvestre technique as a space of *global syncretism*, I return to the dancer's experience of the technique. In this section, I look specifically at the dancer's own words on their experience of the technique which leads me to a general definition the experience of the Silvestre Technique as a spiritual dancing

experience, an experience that is made possible for so many people entirely as a result of Rosangela's philosophy of *global syncretism*. Dancers come to this technique from so many backgrounds because it creates a space where their diversity and individuality are welcomed and encouraged. While Rosangela asks dancers to move beyond the physical act of dancing and engage in their own sense of the spiritual, her definition of this *spiritual* experience is such an open that each dancer is able to make the dancing experience personally relevant. The universal accessibility and openness of Rosangela's philosophy allows all of her dancers the space to access the spiritual dancing experience, regardless of where they come from or what they believe.

### **The Definition of Spirituality: Inward Connection to Outward Expression**

Of course it is the case that not everyone dances in a Silvestre classroom comes away changed or deeply moved. There were students, according to Donna, who are not able to connect to the technique because the intensity of the classroom atmosphere simply does not fit with their understanding of spirituality. This possibility must be acknowledged; however, in this paper I emphasize the fact that so many dancers *did* have this spiritual experience. It is this positive correlation amongst such a diverse community that is most fascinating.

I also, in this section, do not attempt to define a single *Silvestre Experience* amongst the dancers who *were* deeply affected by Rosangela's technique. Each individual experience was unique. However, in conducting numerous field interviews, I have found that there *is* a common thread between all of the dancers' experiences. Though they all describe their dance experience in different ways, they are all having

what I have come to define as the spiritual dancing experience, where an inner personal experience connects the dancer to a something larger than themselves. This definition of the spiritual experience is one that Rosangela is hoping to invoke as she asks her dancers to access their inner emotional expression. I base the analysis within this section purely on the dancer's accounts of their experience because once the technique is lived within a student, it is no longer under Rosangela's control. She, of course has created this technique with an intention, but it is the dancer who individually experiences the movements and the classroom.

These dancers' experiences recounted the consistent experience of a heightened access to her own body and her own emotions within the Silvestre classroom. As the dancer focuses her attention on the inner experience of her movement, she is then more able to express and connect with the larger world. It is a moment of inward reflection and outward expression. Susan Horton Fraleigh a modern dance theorist talks about this experience of inward focus as it then allows for extension; this inner connection is the way that the spiritual can be accessed during dance.

Dancing is a spiritual endeavor in the sense that it is a quest for self – unification. The dancer seeks to become one with her acts, which are none other than her own. Her concentration becomes the process of its own erasure, allowing her the possibility of becoming perfectly centered in her dance, or of being unified in a vibrant presentness. As she attains her purpose in dance, the vibrant life of her dance appears. In mystical thought and art, present centeredness is valued as participation in the essence of God” (Fraleigh 42).

Fraleigh emphasizes the importance of the dancer's self - unification, and inner experience in order to participate in the outward connection, what Fraleigh loosely labels the *essence of God*. Rosangela, too, is deeply concerned with the dancer's experience in

this way, and as a result, the dancers' inner concentration that can account for the ritual experience of transcendence. Donna speaks of the Silvestre experience in these terms.

It is *somewhat religious*, somewhat ritual. [Rosangela] is sincerely and genuinely focused on the dancers experience. That is her forte, introducing people to the creative force within themselves. She is a priestess this that way; she embodies every quality expertly to a new quality of awakening (Mejia Feb 4 2005).

Donna's description of this technique in terms of the ritual connects to what Maya Deren<sup>14</sup> describes in her study of Haitian Vodoun ritual dance. In her description of ritual dance, Maya Deren states that as opposed to forms of concert dance or *secular dance* as she calls it, ritual dance is more focused on the dancer's personal transformation than on the audience's approval. "The Miracle is, in a sense, interior" (Deren 230). While clearly the Silvestre Technique is a form of *secular* dance in that the movements are often used for choreography intended for performance and not for communal ceremony, the dancer's personal experience of the choreography still remains in focus. In addition, a performer is only successful at her art if the inner experience is also there. Rosangela trains dancers for performance while placing great value on their *interior miracle*. According to Donna, "This is her true work, her life work; she introduces people to their authentic self, she helps them digress from shallow motives and helps them see what is truly beautiful in themselves. [This technique] calls upon dancers in a different way than any other dance. They are called to bring the spirit to surface and engage that as they dance"(Mejia Feb 4 2005).

This spiritual dancing experience is superimposed on the technical side of modern dance while maintaining the structure of a modern dance class and still working within the modern and classical dance vocabulary. Rosangela does not attempt to replace what

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<sup>14</sup> Maya Deren is an anthropologist who studied the ritual dances of Haitian Voodoo that she accounted for in her book [Divine Horseman](#).

modern dancers already know; she does not ask them to abandon their previous training or enter an entirely foreign space. In fact, much of the Silvestre Technique *does* consist of classical movements; it still speaks the classical dancers' language, yet it then superimposes on top of the classical and modern dance technical experience, a new value system. It introduces the modern dancer to the spiritual and personal potential of dance. As Donna says, “[Rosangela] relies heavily on dancers coming from other systems of movement and having her layer the Silvestre Technique on top of that” (Mejia Feb 4 2005).

In this sense, Rosangela changes the dancer's practice and opens up a space within them that they are not accustomed to accessing through their dance, while still allowing them to bring to the table that which is relevant to them.

I have ballet dancers in my class and sometimes they cry, because they are dealing with some part of them that they don't express. They have a spiritual experience. . . We train you to do [batmahs]<sup>15</sup> but I deal with the other side so that when they come from classical ballet, [and take my class] they are shaking, because they don't use this side of themselves. . . in classical ballet, many teachers only work in this way. A plié can only be a technical plié. They cannot express the plie because they think its not worth it (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

For Rosangela, it *is* worth it. She asks her students to fight this tendency to separate. She demands the inner expression and spiritual connection and during every arm raise. A Silvestre dancer must bring it all together. In what follows I recall the words of several Silvestre dancers to show the different ways that this spiritual experience manifests itself in her classroom.

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<sup>15</sup> A basic ballet leg movement

### **3B : The Dancers' Diversity of Spiritual Experiences**

Virtually all of the dancers with whom I spoke accounted their experiences in a language that echoes the inner/outward connection that we have previously defined. Luanda speaks about the technique as a tool that any dance student may use for a variety of purposes. “ST is a language that you can use how you like. You can use it as a warm up, for choreography, as energy work”(Mori Jan 13 2005). For Luanda, some of the movements are like mudras<sup>16</sup>, as they are focused on opening up the energy centers so that you may more easily have access to the universal energy. During our interview, Luanda spoke specifically about one of the arm sequences as a movement structure that enabled the inner experience and outer expansion. By doing this specific series of movements and engaging in her bodily experience and physical understanding of these movements, she was able to transcend the bodily experience. She describes the hand sequence where Oxumaré is represented through the different arm positions. Each side of the body works separately in this sequence and in the end they both move together in unison as the arms float over head and down through the chest, where each arm shoots across the body to the opposite shoulder to make contact.

The specificities of this sequence are not important however; what is most important is the way Luanda found a universal truth within the practice of these specific and personal bodily movements. “After a while doing the movement of Oxumaré, he has a different energy for me. The symbology is that we have both sides, left and right –we want to divide our two sides, but all the time we are one, you always go back to the

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<sup>16</sup> “A hand gesture used in classical East Indian dance. In Hindu mythology, gods and goddesses are portrayed with many arms: each hand is held in a different mudra, which represents a spiritual power, or siddhi. In this tradition, each of these mudras represent the transmission of a specific empowerment to you, which activates that principle within you” (TOO).

center and feel the energy”(Mori Jan 13 2005). As Luanda focuses inwards on her body and her arm movements, she is suddenly, after years of practice, awakened to how these movements represent this universal human lesson. Luanda claims that it is the fact that she came to this understanding on her own, that made it so personally powerful for her. “When you discover it, it is more clear than when someone tells you the purpose of your movements” (Mori Jan 13 2005). The fact that Luanda engaged in her own experience of her movement to gain a universal understanding of them made her experience more individual and more profound. Here we see the inward focus to gain outward expansion.

Paula has been studying the Silvestre Technique for three years in Salvador and she spoke of this internal/external dichotomy quite differently than Luanda. For Paula, the Silvestre Technique is spiritual because it consciously takes into account the bodily energy as it reflects and interacts with the energy of the Cosmos. It is through her own awareness of her energies and the energies that moves in and around her body, that Paula is able to connect to the larger body of energy that Rosangela refers to as Cosmic.

The Silvestre Technique works with the energy around a person. All religions think and work with this, but the movements connect right to the energy centre. Even if you don’t know it, you are going to get goose bumps. But it is a spiritual dance because it has its foundations in the energy centers. Its not just human energy – it is the energy of the universe (Paula Jan 12 2005).

This element of the conscious awareness of bodily energy systems, and more generally bodily awareness seems to set the Silvestre Technique apart from other dance technique for many of her students. Crystal echoed Paula’s sentiment. “Awareness of elements, chakras, energies, orixás, breath, intention, centered focus, and more make this technique more than just dance” (Crystal Jan 14 2005). *More than just dance*. This phrase came up frequently in interviews and I interpret it to be the verbalization of the Silvestre

syncretism. *Just dance* is the physical act of moving, while for Rosangela, dancing “came from belief in the Cosmic Energy”(Silvestre Jan 15 2005). It takes the physical and brings it to an outer connection. In this way, it is more than *just dance*.

Finally, students spoke about accessing the transcendent experience of this dance form via the symbology of the orixá gesture. Krishna, who is religiously initiated into Santeria, (the Cuban version of Candomblé), spoke of her ability use individual movement to access universal energy through the symbology of these different movements. As Rosangela brings the orixá movements into her technique, she also brings in the legends, the personalities, the mythic histories of these movements and these deities. Though many of her students do not have any background in Candomblé and therefore experience the technique differently, those that *do* or those that study the tradition, feel connected to the experience of Silvestre as it relates to the orixá movements. As Krishna says, “The first thing that drew me to the dance was the orixá gesture, . . .the movement language embraces all the elements of my ancestral memory” (Castro Jan 14 2005).

In this way, students who are familiar with the language of the orixá movements can use their individual movements and individual experience to access a larger body of mythology and ancestral significance. Again, the spiritual experience of looking inward creates the ability to transcend. The symbology of the orixás dance movements has the potential to connect the dancer to the larger spiritual community of ancestors and the elements of nature. The way in which these specific movements live in the body, the ways that they embody the different personalities allow the dancer to connect to the larger energy of the orixás.

The Silvestre Technique even has room for students who aren't going through what *they* would consider a spiritual experience in the Silvestre classroom. There are dancers whom I interviewed who were not aware of "spiritual" element of the Silvestre technique and who used the technique simply to train for performance. Yet I argue that Rosangela makes room for these dancers in her language of personal expression as a means to be a more affective stage performer. I argue that, in fact, these dancers are, whether they would define it as such or not, experiencing what I have come to define a spiritual experience. Even if they are not aware of the Cosmic Energy, even if they are not thinking of the elements of nature and the connection to the greater universe while they dance, they are still being trained to connect to their own emotional experience and to be able to embody that emotion in their movement, an inward experience that results in outward expression and connection.

The Silvestre Technique, on its most basic level, is training dancers to be able to communicate on stage. And this space of communication is a spiritual space as it asks the dancer to connect to her personal movements in order to be able to share her experience with an audience member. Accessing the audience via the performer's personal experience is the same concept as accessing a cosmic energy via the dancer's individual meditation of movement. Zinha, a Silvestre student of one year who studies in Salvador, never spoke of a spiritual experience within the classroom, but she did say she "learned a lot through Silvestre Technique [on how] to express [herself] better"(Zinha Jan 14 2005). Sondra Horton Fraleigh speaks to this potential in dance to connect to others through expression, while leaving out the spiritual language.

The expressive body lives toward the world and others. Although it may be introspective, it does not withdraw. To express is to manifest one's self toward the world and others (Fraleigh 56).

The body is an expressive medium; as such, it is always . . . an inside moving out. Furthermore, its interior is continuous with its exterior; The universal and bodily lived) capacity to express, to extend our boundaries through expression, to move out of ourselves and be received by others, is the human capacity upon which dancing is founded . . . And since the dancers expresses [her] dance, not [her] self, dance is not personalized but universalized expression (Fraleigh 68).

Rosangela herself probably would never make the distinction between dancing in order to express to other people and dancing in order to connect to the Cosmic Universe (as they are, for her, one and the same), but for those of us who do not seamlessly blend the worlds of the mundane and worlds of the supernatural, it is important to understand that the Silvestre Technique offers Fraleigh's kind of transcendence, (what still can be defined as a spiritual experience), for any dancer willing to commit to the intensity of the Silvestre classroom.

### **3C : Spirituality as an Open Concept: A Result of Rosangela's Philosophy of Global Syncretism**

Rosangela creates the space where all of these variations on the spiritual are possible. As she places such an overwhelming emphasis on the personal dancer's experience, she even demands that the individual bring their own understanding of the universe to their dance. This philosophy of personal accountability amongst a world of blending traditions is present in the Silvestre Technique and the Silvestre Classroom. Just as Rosangela does not identify one way of seeing the world, she does not identify one specific type of dancer, or one way of doing the movement that she teaches.

Individuality is crucial in a Silvestre classroom, “I want my dancers to bring what they have,” she says, not to simply repeat (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

Each individual dancer, must find his or her own way, both in the world of the spiritual and the world of the dance to connect. Just as Selles speaks of the community of Bahía being “respectful of the individual’s choice,”(Selles) Rosangela, also emphasizes this importance of individuality. She does not care who you are or where you came from as you practice this technique. What she cares about is ability to access the individual. “What I try to make you understand is that training is important, but expression is also important. You are important. Emotion is important. In the Silvestre technique you are important. It doesn’t matter your level. It doesn’t matter your background. You are important” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005). Every dancer brings something different into the classroom, and Rosangela, unlike many teachers of dance technique, encourages the dancer to bring herself into her dance. Their individuality is critical. This technique offers dancers a space to be an individual and reconnect with that which is uniquely their own.

I encourage students to get in touch with these emotions and to use them as a way to strongly express who they are inside of the technique. I am giving the space for people to not just be a body machine, but a body with emotion to express and that expression is used as a quality on the stage (Silvestre Jan 15 2005)

It is this emphasis on individual experience that then translates into the diversity of spiritual experiences. As each dancer brings herself to the dance form, she implicitly brings with her, her own understanding of the spiritual. In this way, the experience the Silvestre Technique creates an open experience. Rosangela does not ask the dancer to abandon her own understanding of spirituality when entering a Silvestre classroom; in fact, Rosangela welcomes this diversity and when she speaks to the class about

connection to the Cosmic Energy, she always qualifies by telling her classroom to connect to whatever it is that they individually believe in; nature, god, etc. The dancer never has to abandon what she already knows. She is not forced to adapt to Rosangela's concept or experience of the spiritual.

As she drove me to the airport on my final day in Brazil, she assured me that she is not trying to convert anyone to any sort of religion or tradition. "This is not a religion!" (Silvestre Jan 16 2005) she says. Rosangela does not consider herself a member of any particular religion because she does not feel that obligation and faith should ever be mixed. As a result, she does not want to give off the impression that she is creating the space for this sort of obligation to one faith. She is not a priest, nor is she a guru of any kind. She is just a dancer who sees her dance as a spiritual endeavor. She wants performance dancers to open up to the expressive, emotional, spiritual side of dance, the aspects of dance that enable the dancer to feel something, to communicate something, to create something powerful. This is not religious for her, because it has no tie to any religion or religious experience. The dancer is under no obligation or commitment to the community of the Silvestre Technique. Rosangela only offers a space for dancers to find themselves in their dance, to open themselves, to live in their movement.

She brings her own culture to the technique, but encourages others to bring their own. "Orixás are only representative of the energy of the world," she said to me.

Candomblé offers a way to tap into that energy that is all around us. Everyone must find it for themselves. The orixás are nature. They are dance. They are energy. You must find yourself - not have some religion find it for you. I don't talk about religion! I talk about the essence of life that you have that you may not use. . . . Everybody has it. What I show you in the Silvestre technique - I didn't create it. It's there in you (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

The orixás are the way *she* identifies the spiritual, but this is not the case for all of her dancers, for example her students in Denver. And so, the result of Rosangela's philosophy of global syncretism is a dance technique where each individual's experience of the sacred is valued. The space that is created makes the inner spiritual experience possible for dancers from around the world. This is how Rosangela distinguishes her technique from a religion, in its internal diversity of culture, tradition, belief, and most importantly: spiritual experience.

No matter who you are, you can dance with Rosangela, and no matter where you come from, you can experience this transcendence within the dance. It is this universal nature of the Silvestre Technique that echoes the language of *global syncretism*, and it is, in fact, a result of this philosophy of universality that so many people from around the world are able to share the Silvestre Experience. In a room of different people from different backgrounds, Rosangela has created a space and dance form where each individual can find a means of connection, a way in.

If she were to prescribe one sort of experience, and only offer one style of movement, only one group of people would be able to access her message and connect to the classroom experience. If she asked modern dancers to abandon their knowledge of classical vocabulary, they would not be able to comfortably enter into the movement. If she demanded that everyone connect to the elements of nature in their dance, perhaps a student who had lived in the city her whole life would not know how. But because Rosangela does not make any demands upon the type of experience the dancer has, as long as the dancer is committed to the concentration, the intensity, and the desire to express through her movement, Rosangela can offer this open space of transcendence. It

is this syncretic nature of this technique that makes it possible for such a diverse community of dancers to be so deeply affected and transformed by the Silvestre Dance experience.

“Why all the people so comfortable inside of my work? Because there is space for everything there. I don’t care where you came from” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

### **CONCLUSION : The Philosophy of the Silvestre Technique that Extends Beyond the Dance Classroom**

Rosangela asks students to connect to their emotion, to engage in inward experience as they dance, whatever that may mean for each dancer. And while this open concept of spirituality makes it possible for students of all backgrounds to dance together, it also gets at a much deeper potential of the spiritual experience as a means to unite people of difference. As one’s experience becomes more personal, in essence one is also becoming more universal. The experience of the Silvestre classroom suggests that perhaps when people are estranged because of their color, religion, background, class, the possibility for connection can still exist on the levels of basic humanity that lie beneath the surface. And for Rosangela, this basic humanity can be accessed by dance. This interplay between what is personal and what is universal is something that Susan Horton – Fraleigh finds essential to her dance.

In dance, the self is created in two opposition but reconcilable ways. As a dancer, I am both universalized (like dancers in every culture and time), and personalized (I am my own unrepeatable body; I am my own dance) . . . I move beyond the confines of persona (meaning mask or that which *appears* as evidently personal about me) to union with the larger aesthetic purpose of the dance and in communion with others. The magic here is that self surpassed toward the dance and toward others. This is the aesthetically constituted, universalized, impersonalized self. The self the dancer comes to know and express emerges from a synthesis of the personal and the universal . . . Thus her individuality is

engaged in surpassing self and is affirmed not as it sets her apart from others but as it becomes a binding element . . . The body is experienced as all of self and more than self” (Fraleigh 29).

And so while the dancer exists as an individual, in truth, the inner experience allows the dancer to move beyond the individual and become a part of a much larger community of individuals engaging in this inner experience. The commonly held cliché seems applicable : we are more alike on the inside than we are on the outside.

Dance, for Rosangela, is the space that can create the inner experience that connects human beings on this basic level.

For me, dance and music, [are] sound and movement that provide universal communication. I have researched other cultures that integrate dance and music as my own Brazilian culture does. These cultures are based on the same elements – to communicate. And the stage is a vehicle for this communication. Yes, I am also doing cultural/social action (Silvestre Mar 18 2005).

In this way, dance ceases to be *just a dance* and becomes a concept, a tool, a language that many cultures have tapped into. This philosophy came to life as Silvestre students from around the world gathered in Salvador during the month of January to study with Rosangela. I found myself amongst a group of dancers who spoke no common language, were at completely different skill levels, and had entirely different backgrounds. We all danced together, in the words of Rosangela herself, without judgment. “When you are inside - inside the Silvestre Technique, there is no space for judgment” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

This was, in fact, my own experience of the Silvestre classroom, as I found myself communicating with Brazilians despite the language barrier. There was a connection between the dancers, an acceptance and a celebration of difference that was completely foreign to my experience in a dance classroom. Dancers from all skill levels,

and different dance backgrounds came together from all different countries in the world to dance in a classroom that in my experience transcended the competitive nature of what I have experienced as the traditional modern dance class. Just as anyone can worship the orixás, anyone can take part in the Silvestre classroom. “I don’t close the door to anyone who wants to learn” (Silvestre Mar 18 2005), Rosangela says.

Rosangela is working to break down barriers. While she initially hopes to dissolve the imagined distinction between spirituality and dance that she witnesses in so many of the modern and classical technique dancers, she also hopes to break down the barriers of culture, ethnicity, race, tradition that exists between communities of people who, outside of the classroom might never overlap. She hopes to create a dance classroom where the presence and appreciation of diversity allows for the transcendence of this diversity. In valuing the inner experience of dance, she creates a space where dancers are in fact more connected to each other, despite the superficial barriers that would perhaps keep them from connecting in their worlds outside of the classroom. In this way, the classroom of the Silvestre Technique becomes a space of cultural integration. The website touches upon this power of dance. “Throughout the world, dance and music can be found to have amazing similarities and we are enriched by their differences, creating opportunities from the exchange of information to develop new expressions through the unification of diverse ideas” (ST website). Diversity brings enrichment, not division.

As this dance becomes a supportive meeting space of such a diverse community of dancers, it becomes a project of social activism, a project that extends beyond the diversity of the classroom, hopefully bringing the global philosophy behind the Silvestre Technique to the larger world community. Rosangela hopes that the space of

communication and integration created amongst the Silvestre dancers remains with the students as they move beyond the classroom. Here we take a step backwards from this dance form and acknowledge that there is more to the Silvestre Technique than simply the *technique*. Students commonly refer to what is has been called the Silvestre *idea* or the Silvestre *philosophy*. There is a concept that Rosangela is working with, a concept of the power of dance to transfer, extend and integrate. This concept is brought to life within a community of dancers called the Silvestre Link, in essence, a group of people, dancers and others, from around the world who, in a sense, are students of the technique that wish to spread the philosophy, who wish to do something special with the technique, who wish to maintain contact with the other Silvestre dancers either professionally or personally. As defined on the website:

The Link has become a vast company of dance research, with its members appearing throughout the world, led by their interest in integrating with an being involved with the work of Rosangela Silvestre. This kind of determination is what supports the development, the growth and the continuity of each and everyone in the process and work of the Link. This is evident in the efforts led by the Link to contribute to the social development of their communities through the arts (ST website).

Luanda talks about the Link as one of the most important parts of the technique for her. She describes it as a group of “students who embrace Silvestre Technique and who want to do something with it: [either with] books, performance, workshops, research. [It] is a group of] people who are connected all over the world. [We] will develop something with this technique” (Mori Jan 13 2005). Developing something with this technique can mean any number of things. Luanda actually spoke about the link as “human work, with Silvestre Technique information” (Mori Jan 13 2005). I interpret this to understand the Link as a group of people who are committed to extending the technique and its

philosophies beyond the classroom, using it as a philosophy that connects human beings all over the world. They are a group of people who are committed to the Silvestre *idea*, the Silvestre *philosophy*. The website identifies what exactly defines the Silvestre *idea*.

With a base rooted in the Brazilian culture, the Silvestre idea is to integrate other cultures, using dance and music as its vehicle. Though the world, dance and music can be found to have amazing similarities and we are enriched by their differences, creating opportunities from the exchange of information to develop new expressions through the unification of new ideas (ST website).

This powerful quazi – mission statement provides a way of seeing dance as a form of expression that is similarly expressed and valued throughout the world, and in this way, the similarities of different dance forms can create the ability to unite a community of diverse people.

The Silvestre Link is a community of dancers who embody the *globally syncretic* nature of the Silvestre technique. Not only is the community of dancers in the classroom unique when Rosangela hosts her yearly, month – long training session in Salvador, but these dancers maintain this community outside of the classroom as the year goes on. Rosangela herself makes it very clear that the experience in the dance classroom of diversity and intercultural communication, *must* extend beyond the classroom space. In other words, she encourages her students to *live* the Silvestre philosophy. According to Rosangela, one of the values of taking classes in Salvador as opposed to other places, is that you are dancing with people who live what they do, who truly embody the message of Silvestre and allow it to extend into the rest of their lives. “You take class every day with people who live these things. Otherwise you’re taking class with people who may understand - but they don’t live this way. For me, teachers [especially] should live what they do” (Silvestre Jan 15 2005).

Although the Silvestre dancing community it is a community with diverse backgrounds, it must be noted that, at least according to Rosangela, all the serious Silvestre dancers, especially those in the Silvestre Link do have one thing in common: they see the potential of dance to extend, to communicate, to enrich communities, to enable connection. Dance and music have the potential to cross cultural boundaries and create a language of universal communication. Those dancers who commit to this technique in such a way that it “compelled them to drop their lives and devote themselves to their technique” (Mejia Feb 4 2005), *do* see the potential of the Silvestre technique to be more than just a dance. Luanda summed it up as she left our interview,

“To be only a dancer, you can be other kind of dancer (other techniques) but if you think dance can go further than that, you are in the ST spirit” (Mori Jan 13 2005).

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