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Dance for Non-Dancers

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An Approach for Tapping Creativity

Dance for

By ARIA EDRY

“I am trying to discover movement and body awareness from the inside out. I try to sense ‘inside’ what my body is doing outside.” The student’s entry in her dance journal neatly sums up the goal of my course Dance for Non-dancers: to match what is expressed on the outside with what is experienced on the inside.

Dance for Non-dancers, a course at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, does not teach “dance” in the traditional sense. Rather it gives students the experience of the creative process from which dance springs. The course is as much about self-awareness as about body and spatial awareness. The task is to learn about and from our own experience, our attitudes, and how we relate to others. Our premise is that the body can be a vehicle for attaining this knowledge. The body has an innate intelligence; it has something to teach us and movement can be a way of learning.¹

In our dancing, we look at three major areas: (1) self-consciousness (Do I continually consider how my movements will appear to others?);

(2) “inner listening” (How can my movements be honest and originate deep within my experience and imagination?); and (3) “group relatedness” (How do I achieve a balance between the integrity of my movement and my participation in a group dance?).

I use two methods to address these issues: *Ideokinesis*, the use of guided anatomical imagery, and *Structured Improvisation*, a choreographic approach associated with “post-modern dance.” Both methods have distinct advantages for the non-dancer. They emphasize the imagination as the inspiration for moving, and simple, economical, and natural movements as the basis for dancemaking.

Ideokinesis

Ideokinesis is a method of re-educating how we stand, walk, sit, and move. It does this through images, specifically anatomical images using lines of movement through the body. These images are based on the principle of skeletal alignment, that is, on an understanding of the effect of three factors on the body: (1) gravity and inertia; (2) cultural notions of body image and posture; and (3) individual habits, attitudes, and emotions. Because Ideokinesis requires focused concentration on how we experience ourselves, it increases

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Non-Dancers

awareness. We must imagine ourselves moving “from inside out.”

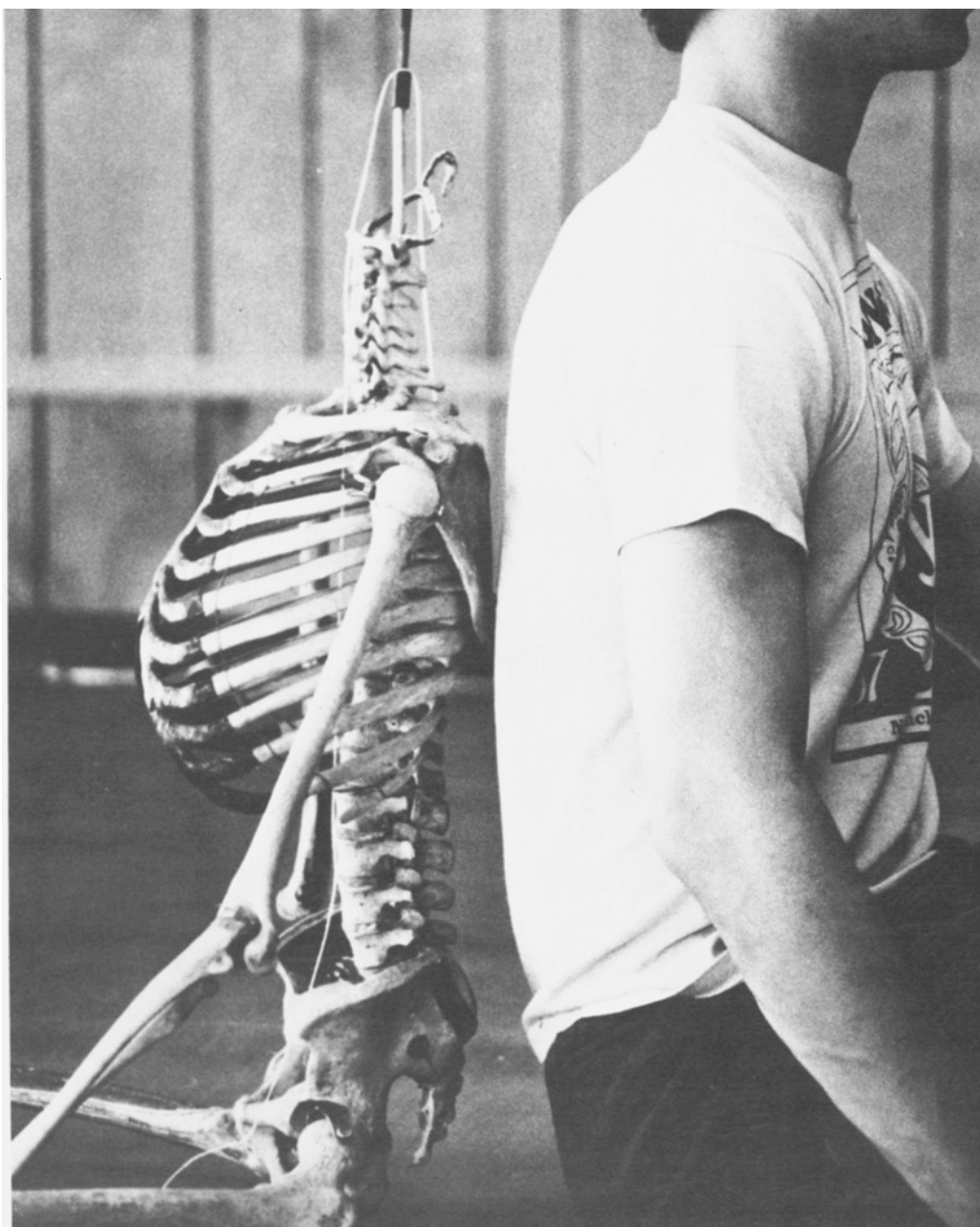
For example, each class begins with thirty minutes of alignment imagery. We may start with a simple walk or at other times with the Constructive Rest Position.² I guide my students:

“Feel the soles of your feet firmly planted on the floor; they are roots drawing down into the earth’s center. The weight of your spine falls into the sacrum like water falling into a deep pool. Your sacrum and tail (coccyx) are extending down into the floor. At the same time your skull sits on the spine like a bobbing balloon. The head is extending upwards, floating toward the sky as if attached to a string.”

I add the “Alignment Breath Pathways”: “Watch your breath as it travels through the nasal passages to the back of the roof of your mouth. This is the top of your spine. On the exhale, watch it travel down to your tail. On your next inhale, watch it cycle around to the front of your body, drawing up from the pubis to sternum and looping around to the back of your neck and head. On the next exhale, the cycle begins again. Your breath draws down across your face and travels through your nose. . . .”

When I know what my spine looks like, its length, its flexibility, its location in the body—where the top is, where the bottom is—then

An aligned skeleton is a self-supporting structure. One student attempts to sit as correctly aligned as the skeleton.



these images translate into movement which is *deeply connected* to my body structure. How deep that connection is will depend upon how accurate a picture I have of my own anatomy. To have a skeleton in the classroom is, therefore, a must. By the second session, we have examined the spine to get a sense of the shape and feel of the bones themselves. We then feel each other's spines.

Knowing where the spine is in the body, the group can then work with an image central to alignment and all dance technique, in fact to all movement: the "center line," also referred to as the "axis" or "plumb line," of the body. (The axis, an imaginary line, does not pass through the spine but in front of it, barely touching it at the atlas, the thoracic curve, and coccyx.)

My students, who were asked to keep a journal, had some interesting responses to the imagery. One compared his breath moving along his center line to a vibration moving up and down an instrument string. "It has a visual and sound image for me. As I breathe, I allow my center line to flex and flow with the breath. I continue to be aware of my breath and center line during my days lately. I like this."

Another student remarked she never realized how long the spine was. "I could go through the rest of my life without ever knowing who (sic) it is and where it lives. It is fun to think of the sections of our body as separate beings. I think I will personify my spine." I now ask my students to do just that—to personify their spines.

From Constructive Rest Position we slowly leave the floor and move out into space. The instructions are to move "from your center line" and to verbalize the image while dancing it. "I See My Center Line³... folding," I call out as I slowly bend forward at the waist. Meanwhile across the room a student's body is

swaying from head to toe in sweeping wave-like motions. "I See My Center Line waving," she calls out. Beside her another is rolling in staccato fashion. While a third finds herself jumping in place repeatedly. Suddenly an image is formed. "I See My Center Line being a jack-in-the-box," she cries. Her neighbor is now turning, accelerating his speed. "I See My Center Line spinning," he says to the group.

The images are creating movements and the experience of moving is shaping images. Verbalizing the image helps to make move-

ments more precise and less repetitive, but also to cue one movement off another. Our images and actions are no longer random and uncoordinated. They are instead the result of a group dialogue: a blend of the visual, verbal, and kinesthetic. We begin to see the dance develop, its shape and form unfolding into a "Playground."

Structures for Improvisation

Choreographer and dancer Simone Forti noted in her *Handbook in Motion* (see Sources and

Guidelines for Teaching Improvisation

I like to think improvisation is taught by "teaching improvisationally." Often I decide not to cover certain material because my students' explorations are taking them elsewhere. However, while flexibility is important to teaching style, there are some general guidelines for working with dance and improvisation.

1. *Doing comes first.* Learning comes through experience. Verbal instructions should be clear, direct, and brief without lengthy explanations; these interpret students' experience prior to their own discovery.
2. *Talk comes after doing.* Why something happened is not important; what happened is. What were my choices? Were there other choices I could have made? What motivated me to move the way I did? How did I relate to the group, the space itself? What was the dance about? What felt good; what didn't?
3. *Observing is part of dancing.* A student can go to the "edge of the space" without leaving the dance. Watching is as important as moving. As an observer, the student is still an active participant. In fact, to reinforce understanding of this principle, you can create a group structure based on two spatial ideas, "the center" and "the periphery."
4. *Teaching is participation as well as observing.* Improvisational skills are developed only within a nonjudgmental and supportive environment. I am neither judge nor evaluator of my students' actions. The openness and freedom can be, on the other hand, frightening and threatening to students in their late teens and early twenties (or for that matter, any age). By being an equal participant I can demonstrate my personal approach to the artistic process. As observer, I watch a dance unfold in silence. I present my observations only after everyone has commented on his or her experience.
5. *Images come and go.* I call it "image cycling." Change is the hallmark of improvisation. Nothing can be held onto, including the guiding images. These should never be fixed in the mind, but allowed to transform as they activate the neuro-muscular system. The visual images of, for example, emptying and filling, opening and closing, or lines of moving air within the

Resources) that we are all dancers, that we possess a common store of movements which lie in our shared experiences: the rock concert, kindergarten games, our friends' parties, the playground. Dance improvisation draws upon these common experiences. In contrast to more traditional styles of dance, post-modern dance improvisation looks at movement for its own sake. Natural movement—simple undistorted actions such as walking, running, falling, jumping—become the basis for dance; virtuosic technique is no longer re-

quired for its execution. In this way, the non-dancer can become involved in the artistic and creative process of dancemaking.

In Structured Improvisation, dancers agree to rules which use one or more of the following "dance elements": space, time, weight, effort qualities (bound or flowing, for example), and story line. A specific "movement vocabulary" (that is, a range of any number of actions) is agreed to. The dance itself emerges out of choices made by the dancers as they relate to each other, the given structure

(or set of rules or game), and the nature of the space in which they dance.

Let's look at two structures. *Meeting and Leaving* asks dancers how they encounter the space and others in it. The dance begins with the group scattered, dancers walking in random directions. At first, eye contact seems to be a "meeting." The leavings bring awareness of the spaces between people. Meetings then become energy exchanges, multi-sensory communications. The pace of our simple walk quickens. We become more aware of our shifting relationships, of surprise meetings and surprise leavings, of the space expanding and contracting. Our floor patterns are circular and begin to take a spiral course, bodies bank around bodies. We are a gigantic amusement ride careening in the air.

At this point, I instruct the group to add to this structure "Contact": "Touch, bump, rebound off each other as you meet." The pace quickens. We are running, bumping, spinning off each other, propelled by the force of our collective motion. One yelps; another responds. The energy peaks and begins to subside. Two of us meet and touch more deliberately. The others migrate toward us. Our bodies form a web, arms reaching up, hands touching as if to make a monument. The dance winds down like a fast-spinning top coming to stillness. We have found an ending, one of the harder things to do in improvisation—without coaching, without any verbal cues. *Landscapes* is based on two opposing images: to fill up and to empty out.⁴ The rules are to enter the space and assume a posture, filling every body part equally with energy. Once fullness has been reached, the body shape or "landscape" is allowed to dissolve slowly. *Landscape* is performed in shifting solos, duos, and trios. Each

body, or currents of energy within the space, will be experienced physically as *something else*. When an image has integrated with the sensory, the kinesthetic experience becomes the ground out of which springs a new visual/mental image. And the cycle continues.

6. *Imagery works best when simple*. It must be understood to be effective, and the understanding must be effortless. The sophistication of your students and depth of their movement experience will determine the complexity of the imagery to be used.

7. *Breaking rules is as important as making them*. Under what circumstances can I break the rules? When does a break in rules lead to a breakdown of the structure? If, for example, the structure asks me to move across the floor in a grid pattern—in lines parallel to the walls—when can I veer off in a circular path? Will that action destroy the dance's integrity?

My answer is no. If rulebreaking results from the movements' own "organic" development or sequence, then it represents an act of honesty. It is a manifestation of the fluidity of the improvisational process. Most often, it leads the group into either a new structure or another level of complexity within the existing structure. On the other hand, rulebreaking for its own sake will often destroy a structure *without* replacing it with something new. You can work with this principle by having a specific individual insert an "unexpected event" within a dance structure. Of course, now the rule-breaking has become a rule!

8. *Opposing images are compositional devices*. Meeting and leaving; being far and being close; empty and full; "the body is round" and "the body has a center line"; entering and leaving. These polarities within a dance structure provide contrast and change in dynamic.

9. *Movement vocabulary can be kept simple*. Walking, running, jumping, squatting, rolling are all actions that can be performed by those without formal dance training. They are also actions performed on different spatial levels, so they provide the dance with movement contrast, sequencing, and phrasing. Often I have found untrained dancers to be more adept at improvisation because they don't carry around (in their heads as well as their bodies) preconceived notions of how particular movements ought to look.

landscape says, "Here I am; this is the picture I have of myself. I am presenting myself to me and to you."

The Lesson Learned: The Creative Process

How does improvisation serve self-understanding? How does it expand creativity? What can be said about it as a way of learning? I asked my students to examine these issues in a dance journal, to study the nature of their own self-consciousness and "inner listening." Their writings and our discussions answer these questions.

- *In learning to improvise, I learn to play.* Barbara writes: "I realize why we think of our dancing as childlike or playful is because children are the only ones in this society who are allowed to act that way—to be creative and uninhibited."

- *I learn to be fully in the present moment.* Students found that freedom also brought fear, forcing them to confront their self-doubt. Students had similar definitions of

this self-consciousness: "Awareness of the environment around you to the point it controls you."

"To be self-conscious is to be painfully aware of oneself as an object viewed by others."

"An awareness ego."

Students developed strategies for responding to their own self-conscious states. "The playful contact and self-conscious uncertainty rise side-by-side. I can choose, however, to pay attention to one or the other—to respond and move to playful dance and to gently reassure my cautious self."

"I try to see out of myself rather than outside-in. I may physically stop and be still. I may change my breathing to be slower and deeper."

- *I learn to trust my experience absolutely.* Choreographer Nancy Topf calls it "the logic of listening to oneself." "Inner listening" is a letting go of ego. One student explained it eloquently: "In order for my dancing to 'happen' I had to turn off my mind and be pure sensation. I had to let the dance hap-

pen through me. I am the vehicle; the dance is not mine, not something I own."

- *I learn there is no "right" or "wrong" way.* There are only choices. Choices are neutral; one is as "good" as another.

- *I learn to silence my internal judge. I learn to act spontaneously.* "I could blow it by leaning on someone that doesn't expect it or want it and end up on the floor," says one student. "But when I can ignore the 'looking good' part, and just move without thinking, it (the movement) becomes more natural."

I have been continually excited by what my students teach me. They are dancers though none have dance training or technical ability. Yet their ability to improvise is impressive. In reality, we do not teach creativity; it is already there. Rather we nurture it as we would a tender seedling, fertilizing, watering, providing rich soil, adequate light—and above all, love and gratitude. The rest is their own growth. One student's journal entry summed up beautifully the purpose of this course.

"Through opening up my body through movement, I open doors to a being kept locked in the prison confines of my mind, a being whom even I didn't know, a being who is me." □

NOTES

1. The more technical term for this type of learning is kinesthesia. The word comes from the Greek words *kinein*, to move, and *aesthesis*, to perceive.

2. In Constructive Rest Position (CRP), lie on the floor, on your back with knees drawn and bent, feet comfortably placed in line with the hip sockets. Your arms can be either to the sides slightly below shoulder level with palms facing up or resting on your abdomen.

3. Inspiration for this structure comes from Nancy Topf, dancer/choreographer based in New York City.

4. This exercise, which the class developed and elaborated into a formal dance structure, originated with Barbara Dilley of Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

Books, Manuals, and Magazines

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On improvisation:

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Contact Quarterly Magazine: *A Vehicle for Moving Ideas*, especially Fall 1979 and 1980 issues. Subscribe to Box 603, Northampton, MA 01060.

The Drama Review, "Dance/Movement Issue," December 1980.

Forti, Simone, *Handbook in Motion*, New York: New York University Press, 1974.

Schools and Workshops

School for Movement Research, Inc., 119 West 25th Street, New York, NY 10001. Wendell Beavers, Program Director.

Vermont Movement Workshop, held annually in July in Putney, VT. Write Nancy Topf, 17 Thompson Street, New York, NY 10013.