

In Dialogue With The Body

by Paula Thomson

L'auteure médite sur la nature de la danse et sur sa capacité de révéler des sentiments de vie et d'appartenance.

Both the dancer and the athlete are engaged in exploring, training, and listening to the body. When the dancer or athlete works in dialogue with the body, a rare gift is received—the incredible feeling of being fully alive and connected to the deeper part of the self. For both men and women, this insight reaffirms the miracle of our humanness; it is transcendental.

Dance is one of our earliest and most powerful forms of communication, both within ourselves and with others. By its very nature, it necessitates a dialogue between the body and the mind, inviting the creative centre/self to participate. This communication within the individual is a microcosmic replication of the communication levels within a social community. Dance has always been a

communal activity, whether it occurs in solo performances, in small groups, or in large populations. Communal activities such as a dance class, a free improvisational dance session, or a performance provide the dancer with feelings of communion with self and with others. Feelings of 'aliveness' occur when the dancer listens and responds to the rhythms of the inner self. The constant call to the individual to pay attention to the outside, to the myriad demands and details of everyday life, can silence the inner rhythms, sensations, and feelings of our being. Dance offers an opportunity to listen and respond to both the outer and inner stimuli.

The process of engaging in dance or sport provides a unique opportunity to "rediscover our embodied self" (Freud, Vol. 11, 364). Dance, like sport, demands that movement is executed to extremes. Excessive activity inevitably leads to sweating—a concrete dialogue with the body is clearly begun. Muscles strain to overcome inertia and this releases the endorphins that offer euphoria. Once again a dialogue with the body is engaged but now the feeling of 'aliveness' is heightened. Images of sporting triumphs or dancing successes enter the experience. For the dancer, the imagination yields images which transform and enrich the physical expressions. The power of the image begins to affect the timing and the performance quality of the dancer.

Once the imaginative world is engaged our creative being is drawn into the process. Whether these images are fulfilled and released or hindered by limitations, we gain deeper insight into our being. Imagination, even if it is not satisfied, affirms our creative 'aliveness' This process inevitably occurs for the dancer if he or she surrenders and listens to the inner dialogue within the body.

However, the need to surrender the body freely and spontaneously is

seldom honoured. Even for dancers, this opportunity to listen to the body and move as it wishes rarely occurs. In the effort to train and strengthen the body as an instrument for dance (or sport), we inadvertently stop listening to the natural energy, feelings, and movement of the body. The body becomes a 'thing', a 'machine' that must be controlled and manipulated. The mind and the will subjugate the body by objectifying it.

For centuries we have separated the body (traditionally viewed as the feminine) from the mind/spirit (viewed as the masculine); the rational mind dominating and inevitably silencing the messages offered by the body. We have submitted the body only to expressions of prowess. The body was either used in the battlefields or it was viewed as the battleground between the secular and the spiritual. Religion often introduced or reinforced this belief and historically many religious groups banned dance, believing it to be the work of the devil and an invitation to base physical ecstasies (Wosien 30). Despite this persecution, dance has prevailed. As Carl Jung states:

Sport puts an exceptional valuation on the body, and this tendency is emphasized still further in modern dancing... The fascination of the psyche brings about a new self-appraisal, a reassessment of our fundamental human nature. We can hardly be surprised if this leads to a rediscovery of the body after its long subjugation to the spirit—we are even tempted to speak of the body's revenge upon the spirit. (qtd. in Blackmer 7)

Jung believed the psyche was comprised of archetypal energies that influence our personal unconscious. He speaks of the archetypal Anima (the feminine principle) within the



Nancy Reid

male and Animus (the masculine principle) within the female. Jung felt that the masculine dominated western world was responsible for the male not listening to the Anima within his inner self, and for the female's over-expression of her Animus. He believed that spiritual awareness and transcendence can only occur if the balance of psychic opposites is achieved. Freud held a slightly different view. He felt that the psyche is inherently bisexual. According to Freud, the masculine (active) or feminine (passive) energies are within every individual in differing mixtures and "that pure masculinity or femininity is not to be found either in a psychological or a biological sense" (Vol. 7, 142). Both Jung and Freud illustrated the need to listen to the wonderful interplay of masculine and feminine psychic energies within the body. This interplay is at the heart of dance.

In western culture, dance appears to remain devalued. Dance is either regarded as a low-paying or non-paying art form (sadly true) and hence not considered a viable career option nor hobby for most males. Sexist and gender phobias abound. The mistaken belief prevails that dance is effeminate (sport is masculine) and an activity in which only homosexuals and women participate. In fact, females are the major participants of dance, in both dance classes and in most dance companies. These and other social stigmas imply that the devaluation of dance, as an effective form of physical expression, can be linked to its feminine aspect.

The devaluation of dance can also be seen as linked to a fear of listening to our inner self. A dialogue with the dancer's inner kinetic and imaginative impulses is essential for true communication with the outer world. Dance is fostered by the dialogue with the inner self and it is this dialogue that is often feared. To alleviate the fear it is easier to devalue dance as the celebration of the embodied self and develop it into a marketable consumer product that can be controlled.

With the evolution of dance into a consumer product, the female dancer slowly began to contort herself into a distorted view of the feminine in order to be marketable. In most western professional dance styles, the thin, young, elongated female body is the norm. Curvaceous bodies, voluptuous movement, and soft rhythmic phrases are seldom evident. The female has tried to emulate the "masculine" values and images of the western ideal. This has provoked a massive alienation from the inner rhythms and shape of the female body. Sadly, this continues to hold sway over much dance today despite many rebellious female dancers, such as Isadora Duncan, who challenged these beliefs (Van Der Marck; Jowitt). If the body is denied the freedom to be, if we lose our capacity to listen and dialogue with the body, we lose our capacity to communicate fully and dynamically with each other.

We must reappraise the dancer's training. We must encourage the ability to fully listen to the wisdom of the body at play. It is the dancer's responsibility to rediscover, to listen, to explore, and to celebrate the miracle of life with all its perpetual rhythmic repetitions. The daily exercises of a dancer's life can affirm this process.

Technique is the means by which you rekindle vitality. For this reason, the dancer must never allow herself/himself to make a meaningless movement—one that lacks concentration... A technique for dancing should not solely be concerned with developing bodily skills. But dancing should be a source of commanding a deep, inner energy. The dancer has a responsibility to be vivid. (qtd. in Horosko 83)

If we learn to be receptive to the immediate moment and listen to our own sensations, feelings, dreams, and ideas we can begin a process of discovery that differs from the established narratives of our culture. This receptive listening requires improvisational play: the creative process is in

fact improvisational in nature. This interplay draws us towards our creative self which stimulates our feeling of 'aliveness' and allows us to gain access to the creative voice within us.

Dance is an innate part of human expression; a way to listen to the dialogue between our inner and outer worlds. When we are in dialogue with our body, we have the opportunity to hear our creative voice and to connect with our inner self.

Paula Thomson's choreographic credits span dance, theatre and opera. She is currently a faculty member at York University's Department of Theatre and Physical Education.

References

- Blackmer, Joan Dexter. *Acrobats of the Gods*. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1989.
- Freud, Sigmund. *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. New York: Doubleday Press, 1935.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and other Works. The Pelican Freud Library*. Vol. 7. Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada, 1977.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, The Ego and the Id and other Works. The Pelican Freud Library*. Vol. 11. Markham, ON: Penguin Books Canada, 1984.
- Jowitt, Deborah. *Time and the Dancing Image*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988.
- Jung, C.G. *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit Trickster*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.
- Horosko, Marian, Ed. *Martha Graham: The Evolution of Her Dance Theory and Training, 1926-1991*. Chicago: A Cappella Books, 1991.