

## **Of Possibilities and Potential — Dancing Adolescence Composing a Present Identity**

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### **Abstract**

Between 1984 and 1992, I worked for the Clwyd Dance Project in North Wales as the Dance Animateur — a term shared by the Welsh Arts Council and the Arts Council England to describe dance workers in the community. This small sector of the dance industry aimed their skills and talents at a breadth of populations and institutions within a given community. Their intention was literally to animate, to stimulate life through a variety of dance practices, programs, and initiatives in their particular community. The discoveries made, both personal and generic, were more often of a type and purpose that lay outside of the statistical ledger sheets of funding bodies and commercial enterprise. Though not in any particular defiance of these, the work was more often influential in terms of felt responses and lifelong dedications to these feelings about embodiment, art creation, and performance than to particular budgetary fulfillments. A colleague once remarked that in the years to come, one is to be more likely to remember and be remembered for one's art, writing, and research than for last year's balanced budget sheet and accompanying financial statement. Of course in extreme cases, the opposite is also true.

*Keywords:* community dance, youth dance, personal development, memories

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We are in a time and a culture which insists upon the triviality of dance and its irrelevance to social and community life. Dance suffers from this rigid delimitation of its “proper” purpose. Its effect upon the social is short-circuited, its power of influence denied. I’m impatient with that oft-repeated notion that dance cannot be about philosophical or political issues, that it’s ill-suited to this kind of inquiry, that its proper province is the emotional and sensuous. The political is not confined to a realm of disembodied rhetorical argument and it seems to me that dance as an art form centred upon the body is in many ways an ideal arena in which to investigate and articulate the political — its actions, impact and effect upon sentient beings. (Gardner, 1990, 47)

The focus of this writing is to look back to a time frame shared with this observation made by Sally Gardner in 1990. During this time as the Dance Animateur for Clwyd in North Wales, one of the community dance programs that I led was a generationally changing group of teenagers who spent two, three, sometimes four sessions a week dancing as members of Clwyd Youth Dance (aka CYDs). While we were collectively aware of the cultural disregard for the social relevance of dance and movement in our culture, we remained convinced that we should be different. What I embark upon here is a sharing and a review of some snippets of what was an engulfing experience, where we, the young dancers and I, found the opportunity to articulate the political, social, and ethical views of our collective understanding of what it is to be sentient beings and to hear the views of younger generations as they tussled and mulled over their dancing, their circumstances, and their points of view while embedding dance into their embodiment.

In the Welsh national magazine *Window on Wales*, Noel Lacey, in his 1986 review of the work of the Clwyd Dance Project, quoted William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, saying,

Energy is eternal delight!

He went on to say that,

This is still the case, particularly when watching the Clwyd Youth Dancers in action at Theatr Clwyd. Such is this energy, that it is exuded in a form almost tangible by all the performers. The bond between them is so obvious that you could be forgiven for believing that should you scratch one of them the whole company would bleed.

The teen students arrived from homes across the county, traveling through hills and valleys inhabited primarily by sheep for an hour or so to dance, and through the years together, many found what Ken Robinson has called, “the element” (2010). His use of the term references the manner in which people can be drawn to environments, practices, behaviors, and identities in which they will thrive. Looking back, we see an affective ethics of existence, one of possibility and potential (Agamben, 1993) where we found out about being moved with others, appreciating uncertainty, and practicing “becoming human.” These complex relationships, — between what is embodied, felt, thought, and shared, — could arguably be said to identify dance as a self-actualizing discipline and identified with what we practiced as community dance.

The CYDs are now mature women and men with families, careers, and complex lives. Inside and beyond their years of dancing, they are now spread around the country and the world. Some continue their work in dance with careers as performers, community arts activists, and teachers in the arts sector or in public education institutions, both schools and higher educational institutions. For those who remain in each other’s lives through social media and occasional gatherings, they seem to retain the experience of CYDs as a significant aspect of their self-identities, of dancing a shared past in their present time, a testament to the powerful experiences of dancing together.

Community dance in our terms is associated with the drive through the late 1970s and 1980s to develop community-based initiatives where work focused on establishing a range of dance projects and various forms of advocacy in terms of support for community identity, narratives of selves, and a flourishing of the art form. A considerable amount of our work was based on offering opportunities to become engaged with dance for people who did not necessarily see dance as a professional vocation but as a personal interest that they wanted to explore for whatever personal reasons. While some of this work was supported through gaining targeted government funding to work with disenfranchised

groups, other aspects of the work were offered as routes to dance education and performance opportunities as well as the on-going opportunities to gather and enjoy each other's sociability.

As Chris Thomson (1989) argued at the time, and I am sure he continues to espouse, these practitioners believed in “offering dance to everyone in a given community, on the premise that dance is the birth right and the potential of all human beings” (p. 89). Similarly, Peter Brinson, in many ways the initiator of the Dance Animateur movement in the UK, after his work with Ballet for All, spoke of the activity as being “innovative” and where they each needed to incorporate choreographic and creative work within their schedule and also in these projects to address the socio-cultural impact while engaging and developing representation in terms of youth “voice,” education, and broader community provision — advocacy for the art form alongside community stimulation through the art form.

When prompted by a member of the Arts Council's dance panel (a peer of the realm) to create a star system in CYDs, the dancers and I made a work titled *Flaunting Equality in the Face of Class*. When another generation was working through their personal issues with gender, we created *Going Places Like a Woman Possessed* (in wedding dresses).

Through revisiting our work, I spent time considering transitions in terms of identity formulated through reflexive narrations and traced through embodied memory, which exhibited a bit of nostalgia related to time spent in classes, rehearsals, workshops, summer schools, performances, and tours, not to mention administration, publicity, board meetings, and rounds of funding applications. Now I am drawn back through social media platforms, which were only imagined at the point when these memories were formed, to reconnect with some of these now adult people. As sociologist Steph Lawler reminds us, “identities are produced through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day” (2014, p. 26).

The stories we tell about our lives, about others, and that others tell about us all serve to construct the variations of our identities that are never concrete and that are more usefully recognized as something fluid. Catherine Bateson (2001) writes of the ways in which we might be seen to compose our lives:

...we need ways to tell stories that are interwoven and recursive, that escape from the linearity of print to incite new metaphors. I believe that the choices we face today are so complex that they must be rehearsed and woven together in narrative. (p. 247)

It is important that we maintain interactions between our sensory experiences, the environments in which we live and work, and our critical abilities, as these are ever more relevant. If we cannot give attention to the complex patterns of our interactions, then we might expect only a narrowing of experience and aspiration. What is also pertinent to consider is the value inherent in asking, in any collaborative venture, how we might accommodate another person into our creative practice and into our unique worlds while also preserving or respecting each person's own relations within their own world.

In our work, we increasingly frame experience by the manner in which it is drawn from an everyday aesthetic of life in the world, with a desire to draw together evaluations that are stimulated and realized through bodily-sense (as in the sense of the body in its sensible structures and sensible processes) and senses (as in the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch plus the gathering of the many felt or otherwise perceived aspects of proprioception). What we have come to prize is what we understand to be the values inherent in engaging with an enriching palate of experience during the formative parts of one's life, where one's self-identity can, in part, be characterized as a moving, thinking being. Arguably, there may be issues if one's life-world remains framed only as a nostalgic view of a past. What we offer here in terms of the possibilities of living well is the idea that in flourishing, one's life-world can continuously blend, expand, and accommodate variation and change.

It was Edmund Husserl who introduced the metaphor "life-world," although what is perhaps more important to retain from this "revisioning" of the concept is that it attempts to account for the fullness of experience, where there is a purposeful attention to "lived" experiences. The prize is to remember, recognize, and revalue the potential richness that experiences offer throughout an interconnected life journey. To live well is to be aware of the many facets of one's own being and that this exists in continuous and fluid negotiation. Segal (1999) captures these sentiments effectively as she argues that there are benefits in recognizing that growing older accommodates determined self-study that we should not

evade:

...our own most cherished conceits, stubborn evasions or persistent illusions are all fashioned by a growing stock of cultural narratives, as we try to make sense of the past and its connections to our lives in the present. (p. 118)

With CYDs, we were party to the ecstatic heights of teenage exuberance and growing stock of first-time, individual, distinctive narratives that fed into the narratives of the self identities and group identities of these developing citizens. The thing about community dance was and is that we had time as part of the fabric of the place to contribute to and see change happen. We engaged with a realization of self, where the work of performance is not separated from the experience of making meaning of one's life (Kaprow & Kelly, 2003). Our interests that reflect the earlier words from Chris Thomson were to embrace living life more fully through enhanced personal knowledge, where "being-embodied" can facilitate acknowledging the multiple narratives that produce one's identity, including the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories other people tell about us.

As Foucault reminds us, our "modernity" was not driven by any straightforward liberation of people to be their own being. Instead, "modernity" introduced the notion that each of us faces a continuous task of producing and reproducing ourselves in as much as we have to learn to negotiate our ever-changing context. Life, with all its wanderings, differences, and lines of flight positions us as "beings" constructed (and "under construction") of many pieces (Rabinow, 1991) and none more so than during one's teenage years when all appears to lie before us in a straight and narrow path.

A thread we have decided to follow for this paper is of engagement with mutuality, complementarity, and ethical sensibilities that seem to occupy an increasingly significant place in the changing attitudes of creating dance work through individual and shared improvisational practice.

Arguably, this shift can be traced through a direction of theorizing by Giorgio Agamben (1993), in which he addresses ethics in terms of our individual potential to determine our futures.

Agamben (1993) argues that, "... the only ethical experience ... is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility" (p. 43). What we might

appreciate from this stance in terms of human “becomings,” as opposed to simply human beings, is an awareness of the benefits found by investing in joint activity, wherein we might come to recognize the wealth of opportunity to be revealed in social coexistence. Effectively, this leads us to an extended notion of what it is to be an individual whose ongoing interconnectivity with the environment, or more fully of the environmental “totality,” is emphasized. This is something Genevieve Lloyd (1996) refers to as “nested embeddings of individuals” (p. 12).

In terms of experiments in performance, there has been a clear move toward such deliberate exhibitions of social scores as performance — *These Associations* by Tino Seghal (2012); *Schreibstuck* (2002) and *Functionen* (2004) by Thomas Lehmen; and the documentary film *Vera Mantero: Let’s Talk about it Now* (2011). Here lie the signals that move away from a materialist drive to exhibit form, and toward recognition of the richness of singularities that accumulate as shared possibilities in group performance. While this may have taken some time to reach the professional theatre stage, arguably, these contents were being discussed in performances across the UK throughout the 1980s and beyond, in places where people danced.

In terms of improvisation-based practice and the communities of movers involved, we might do well to follow the idea of apprenticeships favoured by philosopher Gemma Fiumara (1990), where she argues for the importance of the role that our emotions play in our reasoning processes and structures of mind. She says,

If we were apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species. (p. 57)

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