

## **Is There a History of Children's Dance? Who is Writing it in the 21st Century?**

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### **Abstract**

Around 15 years ago, I made an extended effort to unearth a history of childhood dance for a daCi keynote address (Canada, 2000). I was surprised by the lack of available literature and challenged the field to improve the status of children's dance as a vital area of historical research. In 2015, I am once again asking, "Is there a history of children's dance?" Can we see an increase of interest and activity in this area of scholarship within daCi and within the academic field of dance studies? Or has little changed since Marion Van Tuyl recounted the following response to her suggestion to create an issue on dance for children for the 1957 *Impulse: Annual of Contemporary Dance*: "Why do that? Art is for adults."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a major finding of the study is that tomorrow's (as well as yesterday's) history of a dancing childhood is being made on the Internet via YouTube, Facebook, image archives, historical society websites, forums, and blogs. Similar to the participatory "curatorial me" phenomenon in art production and consumption, generally, a vast resource on the dance of childhood is accumulating on and through new media; this resource has burgeoned since 2000. This paper overviews developments in children's dance historical research and writing over the past 15 years (since daCi 2000), including my own contributions toward righting the literary gap.

*Keywords:* history of children's dance, new media, curatorial me

### **Background**

Beginning with a historical value statement, some of the most memorable dancing I've witnessed has been in daCi environments. I strongly value daCi's international ethos, infused with the forms and energies of each unique conference setting; I am grateful to have attended most international conferences since 1985. I also begin with a disclaimer:

the history of children's dance has not been a primary research focus, although since 2000, I have made a number of critical assertions about the field's lack of attention to the history of childhood dance (Bond, 2000, 2010, 2013). I identify more as a dance philosopher interested in the functions and meanings of dance for human beings and increasingly for other species (Abram, 1997, 2010) and "things" (Bogost, 2012; Coole & Frost, 2010). Even searching for historical understandings of childhood dance, my radar is oriented to situated lived experiences as identified through observation, conversation, memoir, autobiography, visual art, music, and existing phenomenological writings. As a phenomenologist, I desire to make the past present to the future.

My first effort to unearth a history of childhood dance was for a daCi keynote address (Bond, 2000). I was surprised by the paucity of literature and challenged the field to improve the status of children's dance as a vital area of historical inquiry. Joan Bel Geddes (1997) suggests that history's tendency in general has been to ignore and undervalue children's knowledge and contributions to human civilization. I suggested that children's dance should be the next major revisionist historical project of the field. This paper follows up my turn-of-millennium investigation, offering perspectives on the current state of children's dance history scholarship and my own contributions toward righting the literary gap.

When I began this update project, I experienced a moment of surprise that in 2015, I still didn't know or even know *of* any dance historians who specialized in the dance of childhood. After being presented at the conference with Yoshie Kaku's (2014) *History of Tandavaha Dance Company for the Past 90 Years*, I began to wonder how many other children's dance histories are available in languages that are inaccessible to me. This information would be worth compiling for the daCi Archives at the National Research Centre for Dance, University of Surrey. It would also be beneficial for daCi to sponsor English translations of current members' publications written in languages other than English.

In 2015, there was still no Walter Sorrel or Curt Sachs of children's dance history, and perhaps a grand survey would be useful for advocacy and for generating research questions. I acknowledge this would be out of step with contemporary dance studies' emphasis on particularities and contingencies of context (race, gender, class, etc.), rather

than on generalizing or universalizing purposes and meanings of dance. Further, the humanities lens through which much current dance scholarship is filtered appears to have a staunchly adult focus. It is rare to hear a talk on children's dance history at CORD or SDHS conferences or to see a paper on the subject in "top tier" academic journals like *Dance Research Journal* and *Dance Chronicle* (Bond, 2014). As Tresa Randall (2014) notes:

Dance education for children is an important component of the dance profession, and provides the lifeblood for many dance organizations, but is rarely examined by dance historians. (Abstract)

Randall researched Hanya Holm and Alwin Nikolais' work with and for children, finding it highly influential in their later professional choreography, in particular the playfulness of their dances for children. They believed that the acts of teaching and performing dance held the potential to foster social change.

Elaborating on the problem of generalization outside of statistical analysis (being mindful that scientific generalization never equals 100% nor does it erase the value of individual difference), even as a phenomenologist, I'm reluctant to generalize let alone "universalize," including when I think it might be warranted or helpful. I'm less hesitant to cite others and often refer to the following claim from child advocate Henry F. Smith, MD, clinical instructor in psychiatry, Massachusetts Mental Health Center (1984), quoted in Bel Geddes (1997): "Few histories have been so completely ignored as that of children and childhood" (p. 7).

Speaking of Bel Geddes' (1997) 688-page history of childhood, references to dance appear in only one percent of its pages. Nevertheless, she identifies a range of children's dance meanings that many daCi members would likely find familiar: connection to music, cultural representation, fun, joy, performance, physical stamina and skill, play, religious/spiritual expression, rhythm, and social bonding.

**2000-2015**

About a month before my daCi keynote in Canada (Bond, 2000), the Dancing in the Millennium Conference took place in Washington, D.C., a collaboration of 20 dance organizations. Ninety-seven papers were published in the proceedings (Willis & LaPointe-Crump, 2000), but children's dance didn't fare much better than in Bel Geddes' (1997) general compendium. Only eight percent of papers relate to children, with two that can be categorized as historical: Amy Bowring's brief report on Canadian Children's Dance Theatre's historical reenactments based on Canadian dance history, and Elsa Posey's short personal narrative recounting the beginning of her New York school in 1953. Both papers include nuggets of wisdom that remain salient in 2015. Bowring asserts:

It is a fundamental flaw of dance training that children are not encouraged to read, write and think about their dance heritage and where they fit in their dance ancestry. (p. 52)

Posey observes that, "children are honest performers" and should be taken seriously (p. 342). Further, "children should be encouraged to participate in creating dances in which they perform, rather than just memorizing steps" (p. 343), a view that aligns with daCi's foundational commitment to the child as creator.

A third historical piece by Tom Hagood relates to higher education dance, but his citation of a 1965 article by Walter Terry in the *New York Herald Tribune* is relevant to the present inquiry:

Dance history is not always made by glittering performers and choreographic innovators on the great stages of the world. Sometimes it is made behind ivied walls ... in gymnasiums, in assembly halls on college campuses. (p. 226)

Substituting sites where children's dance occurs for "college campuses" opens up a whole new domain of possibility for recording and anticipating dance history. It is clear, for example, that daCi conferences are places where dance history is being

generated and documented. The dance history and knowledge being made in daCi environments, however, seldom seems to reach scholarly literature, even though a large archive is available to academic researchers. Scholarly literature as a whole continues to be perplexingly silent on the subject of children's dance history relative to adult dance.

Similar to the 2000 daCi keynote study, I cast a wide net for historical materials. A perhaps unsurprising find is that tomorrow's (as well as yesterday's) history of dancing childhood is being made on the Internet via YouTube, Facebook, image archives, historical society websites, forums, and blogs. Similar to the participatory "curatorial me" phenomenon in art production and consumption (Ivey & Tupper, 2006), a vast resource on the dance of childhood is accumulating on and through new media; this resource has burgeoned since 2000. Much of my interactive Copenhagen presentation involved sharing selections from a growing collection-in-progress of children's dance historical evidence loosely categorized by time (e.g., 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century European visual art), content themes (e.g., solo dance), and sources of historical information on the dance of childhood.

Beyond the earlier confession that I personally don't know any scholars who identify as historians of childhood dance, returning to history as an explicit focus for daCi Copenhagen afforded a further realization: without conscious intent, my 2000 challenge to the field may have awakened my own inner historian. Over the past 15 years, I've engaged in a number of historically aware studies. These include documentation of daCi USA's Second Intergenerational Gathering at Temple University (Bond et al., 2006; Bond, Frichtel, & Park, 2007); analysis of graduate dance education in the United States, 1985-2010 (Bond, 2010); commentary on children's dance as portrayed in the 1957 "Dance for Children" issue of *Impulse: annual of contemporary dance* (Bond, 2013); biographical research highlighting the career of dance education scholar Susan W. Stinson (Bond, 2014); and a study of university general education dance students' childhood memories of gender in dance (Bond, in press). I will comment briefly on the two most recent studies highlighting children's dance history (Bond, 2013; Bond, in press).

In order to contextualize the 1957 issue of *Impulse* devoted to "dance for children," I began by examining the full series (1949-1970) for content related to

children's dance (Bond, 2013). This allowed an expanded glimpse of a slice of children's dance history of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, including a preliminary chronological perspective of themes spanning arts/aesthetics/spirit, body, creativity, critiques of traditional teaching methods, development, education, emotions, expression, freedom, group, music, purpose statements, rhythm, self, teacher/teaching, technique, and thinking/imagination.

In the chapter I noted, "From a 2012 standpoint the *Impulse* series presents little in the way of young people voicing their own experiences, perceptions and knowledge of dance" (Bond, 2013, p. 163). An exception was the following brief interchange with a 6-year-old girl, "which makes me wish that as a field we'd been collecting dance conversations with children since the beginnings of ethnographic inquiry" (p. 163).

Q. What is dancing, Suzy?

A. Exercise and strong movements that make you feel your muscles.

Q. What do you do in dancing?

A. We gallop and skip, run and leap and jump. We stretch and our hands goes blump, our elbows goes blump, our head goes blump, our shoulders goes blump, our back goes blump, and then we bounce bounce bounce turn around. Sometimes we pretend to take a trip and go anywhere we want like San Diego. ... Sometimes we draw. Next time I want to draw muscles [*sic*]. (*Impulse dance magazine*, 1949, p. 29)

Children's perceptions of dance are being documented at daCi conferences and in national settings. Jamaica, for example, has been contributing children's perceptions to the international newsletter for some years, including the latest edition (Russell-Smith, 2015, p. 14):

Q: If you could tell anyone from any part of the world, anything about dancing, what would you say?

A: I think you should dance because it makes you express your feelings and it helps you to exercise and it is very good to exercise and that's why I like dancing. (Leah, 8 years old)

Over a half-century apart, Suzy and Leah highlight their value of physicality in dance and life.

*Impulse* editor Marian Van Tuyl (1957) recounted a mixed response to publishing a focus edition on dance for children in an annual of contemporary dance:

Why do that? Art is for adults.

That's a fine choice. It has wide appeal and utmost importance to the future of dance. (Preface)

I can imagine a similar response to the suggestion that a dance academic journal create a focus issue on children's dance history:

Why do that? Dance history is about adults (and race, gender, class, ability...).

It's about time. It has wide appeal and utmost importance to the future of dance.

California photographer Lars Speyers' (1957) images of Anna Halprin's child dancers are a highlight of the 1957 focus issue. His cover photo of children dancing on a wild ocean beach projects qualities of exuberant physicality and aesthetic attunement to the environment. Dance scholars have suggested that such qualities may be paradigmatic to childhood dance (Bond, 2008; Dissanayake, 1995; Fraleigh, 2004; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009).

My most recent phenomenological study with a historical aspect examines childhood memories of university general education dance students (Bond, in press). I analyzed 363 Blackboard discussion papers (2008-2014) to illuminate students' memories of gender experiences in childhood with an emphasis on gender in/and dance. The title of the book chapter gives a sense of study findings: " 'Boys are morons'...

‘Girls are gross’: Let’s dance!’ In addition to what seemed like countless iterations of the gender binary in dance and life, student memoirs illuminate the continuing feminization of dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here are two examples, from a female and a male, respectively (Bond, in press):

I was taught to use feminine movements, never the harsh, violent or joking movements associated with boys.

“Dancing is for girls!” “If you dance you are gay.” Males in my life never appreciated my love for dance. I received strict messages about the difference between males and females.

Possibly representing a historical meta-narrative of dance, some male students wrote that engagement in dancing was facilitated through military role play (Bond, 2014):

Not until I found out I would get to dress up like a soldier and hold a rifle did I get excited! During rehearsals I got in trouble for playing war with the other boys, but we were much more willing to dance.

Theorists have also suggested the opposite — that dance’s origins may lie in its usefulness as a preparation for battle (e.g., the unified rhythmic stepping of a military drill) (McNeill, 1995).

In historical and contemporary documentation of children’s dance in 2015, I was able to find that the Internet overwhelmingly projects dance as a “girl thing.” Where boys are included in dance depictions, they are often accompanists or sitting on the sidelines. With the exception of social partner dance where affective harmony between girls and boys may be observed in visual representations, boys and adult males often seem to have a wild, inebriated, or to my eye, “unhappy” look in historical dance depictions (other possible interpretations might include worried, fearful, aggressive ...). These are preliminary impressions only and require systematic research.





Figure 1: Child soldier dance

**Back to the future.** In the study for daCi 2000 that launched my shift to more intentional historical inquiry, I featured war correspondent Emmanuil Evzerikhin's (1942) well-known photograph of Romuold Iodko's (1939) outdoor fountain depicting Soviet youth dancing around a crocodile with burning buildings in the background (Figure 2). The photo became a symbol for the Battle of Stalingrad, which historian William Craig (2015) calls, "the greatest military blood bath in recorded history" (Prologue). Amidst massive destruction, the fountain survived the longest German siege of World War II. I offered a metaphoric reflection on the image — that in the midst of war's devastation, children may continue to dance and play (Bond, 2000).



Figure 2: *Detskiy Khorovod* (Children's Round Dance)  
Battle of Stalingrad, World War II  
Photo: Emmanuil Evzerikhin (1942)

Fifteen years later, this dance phenomenon (the fountain, the event, and the photograph) has spun a circuitous history. At one point while researching this paper, I jumped down a rabbit hole<sup>1</sup> to see if I might chart the journey of *Children's Khorovod*. The rabbit hole was too deep and complicated for me to complete the journey in time for this proceedings paper. And so I conclude with the familiar academic segue (at least for this phenomenologist): to be continued.

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<sup>1</sup> I credit PhD Fellow Molly Shanahan, Department of Dance, Temple University, for this evocative metaphor of embodied research practice.

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