Dance and Harmony

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The arts are an expression of the human spirit and are vital to our well-being; to our understanding of the human condition and the part we play in the drama that is life on earth. Every day of our lives we take part in one or other of the arts – listening to music, looking at films or graphic images, and subliminally responding to the architecture all around us. We may not be able to play a musical instrument, nor become a skilful painter or actor, but there is one arts activity that is uniquely accessible to all of us. For, despite what some may fear, we can all learn to move our bodies in harmony to music. In many cultures this is taken for granted. Yet in some, at any rate in the UK, there are those who don't believe this is so.

I have taught dance for many years and I cannot count the number of times someone has said to me, 'I don't go to see dance,' or 'I can't dance'. How many people have told me they have two left feet; that they are embarrassed to get up on the dance floor until they've been fortified with a stiff drink? Yet I have not heard this on my travels in Spain, Argentina, Morocco, or in any other country which has not lost its connection to this vital social activity.

In 2007 Sir Ken Robinson gave a TED talk on education entitled 'Do Schools Kill Creativity?'[1] It has become the most-watched of all TED talks: by September 2019 it had been viewed over 62 million times. In it he spoke about how Western educational systems set up in the 19th century were designed to meet the needs of industrialism and were hierarchically driven. Even today, he says, all over the world this situation has not changed. At the top of education's hierarchy of important subjects are maths and science; and at the bottom are the arts. As for the arts: they have their own hierarchy, and way down this hierarchy is dance.

Why, asks Robinson, Why, when we have daily maths lessons, don't we also have daily dance classes? After all, we all have bodies, we aren't just brains on sticks. Our bodies aren't simply a means of transporting our heads to meetings and conferences. This is education from the waist up, leaving the development of our physical well-being and talents way down the list of educational priorities. And without a type of education that includes both mind and body it is more difficult for us to become balanced, healthy human beings with access to all our natural talents.

Robinson recounted a lunch-time conversation with the distinguished British choreographer Gillian Lynn. Lynn, a child in the 1930s, recalled never being able to sit still and was disruptive in class. Her school decided Gillian had a learning disorder. According to Robinson,

> Gillian and I had lunch one day. I said, "How did you get to be a dancer?" It was interesting. When she was at school, she was really hopeless. And the school, in the '30s, wrote to her parents and said, "We think Gillian has a learning disorder." She couldn't concentrate; she was fidgeting. I think now they'd say she had ADHD. Wouldn't you? But this was the 1930s, and ADHD hadn't been invented at this point. It wasn't an available condition.[2]

This diagnosis of a mental problem happened to Gillian when she was just eight years old. Her mother took her along to a specialist and, after talking for a while, the doctor reached a view. Robinson picks up the story.

> In the end, the doctor went and sat next to Gillian and said, "I've listened to all these things your mother's told me. I need to speak to her privately. Wait here. We'll be back. We won't be very long," and they went and left her.
>
> But as they went out of the room, he turned on the radio that was sitting on his desk. And when they got out of the room, he said to her mother, "Just stand and watch her." And the minute they left the room, she was on her feet, moving to the music. And they watched for a few minutes, and he turned to her mother and said, "Mrs. Lynne, Gillian isn't sick. She's a dancer. Take her to a dance school."[3]

Gillian Lynn went on to become a member of the Royal Ballet and the choreographer of highly successful musical shows, including *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

In the Western world dance isn't considered a 'useful' educational subject. It is neither a health-promoting activity nor an art which is capable, like other arts, of exploring the great themes of existence, and remains a specialist activity, and it has a long history of attempted state suppression, as we shall see. In the UK dance is a component in physical education for school children aged 11-14 (so-called 'Key Stage 3'), although not for any other age group and, even then, it is completely overshadowed by sport.[4] In fact, evidence shows that education in dance in England is collapsing. The figures speak for themselves: entries to the

'A Level' exam in dance, which students normally take at age eighteen, declined from 2,261 in 2010 to 1455 in 2017 and 1316 in 2018, which translates from a decline of 42% from 2010 to 2018, and 10% from 2017 to 18.[5] We see from this that, in Britain, rejection of dance as a valuable activity from which we can all benefit begins at school and is part of a shutting down of the senses, a rejection of a fundamental part of human creative experience. The closing of the senses that begins at school involves music as well as dance. A recent report sponsored by the Musicians' Union concluded that even though the ability to play a musical instrument is central to academic achievement and general wellbeing, 'Music education in the United Kingdom is in a perilous state', due to what appears to be the government's 'chaotic education policies'.[6]

The irony of this is that music is ubiquitous in modern life. It's all around us, in the background as we go about our daily tasks, a soundtrack to our lives. What used to be derided as 'musak' or 'wallpaper' is now unquestioned in restaurants, shopping malls and lifts, to name only some of the places that bombard us with background music. Much of the time this music is rhythmic and demands that we move our bodies to it. In restaurants up-tempo music is played to get us to eat faster and make way for fresh customers, and if it's too loud it can kill conversation. This kind of rhythmic music does nothing so much as make us want to get up and go dancing between the tables! But we can't do this. Instead we shut it out, shut down our hearing, just as we have learned to shut down our physical impulse to dance along with it.

There are some forms of dance designed to create harmony between human beings and the wider universe. An example is the *zhikr*, the dance of the whirling dervishes in which the turning of circles of men around a central group of dervishes corresponds to the spinning of the planetary spheres. That this much is commonly understood is evident from the course material in at least one American university:

> Additionally, the way in which the dervishes are arranged is symbolic of the celestial bodies which orbit circularly around the sun. The turning of the dervishes is symbolic of the way the planets and celestial bodies spin on their axes as they orbit the sun.[7]

At a recent Sufi festival in Scotland, one of the organisers stated that, 'We aim to promote the core message of Sufism, to live life on this earth with love, beauty, harmony and worship'.[8] And as one modern Sufi group, the Threshold Society states,

> In the Mevlevi *zhikr* it is important that we are in harmony and unity. The goal is to be as one and that takes subtlety, nuance, and attention. To achieve this we need to follow the lead of the person leading the *zhikr* by being conscious of their volume, speed, and tone. We also need to be aware that our own voice does not rise above that of those who are near to us or the general level of the group.[9]

In Renaissance Europe courtly dance rested on similar theoretical premises; at least according to poets such as John Davies, who saw the function of dances such as the Galliard as mirroring the harmonious movements of the cosmos:

> Behold the World how it is whirled round,
> And for it is so whirl'd, is named so;
> In whose large volume many rules are found
> Of this new Art, which it doth fairely show:
> …
> Under that spangled skye, five wandring flames
> Besides the King of Day, and Queene of Night,
> Are wheel'd around, all in their sundry frames,
> And all in sundry measures doe delight:
> Yet altogether keepe no measure right.
> For by it selfe, each doth it selfe advance,
> And by it selfe each doth a Galliard daunce.[10]

The purpose of such dance, Davies continued, was to reinforce the love and harmony essential to the perfectly ordered society:

> Loe this is Dauncings true nobilitie.
> Dauncing, the child of Musick and of Love,
> Dauncing it selfe, both love and harmony,
> Where all agree, and all in order move;
> …
> For that true Love which Dauncing did invent,
> Is he that tun'd the World's whole harmony,
> And linkt all men in sweet societie.[11]

Today we know that physical exercise releases endorphins that trigger positive feelings and lead to a higher degree of self-esteem.[12] And in our sedentary lives,

how rewarding is it to use our physical energy in a pleasurable, creative way, rather than to exercise by rote? What Barbara Ehrenreich calls in her book *Dancing in the Streets* the 'collective joy' of dance - releases people from the prison of the self and restores balance and harmony to the spirit.[13]

In the long and complex history of attempts to suppress participatory public dancing, there is one particular type of dance that has, despite such attempts, largely escaped a general clamp-down. This is dance as therapy, which often takes the form of ecstatic social dance rituals. Ehrenreich recounts how, back in the 18th century, dance was proposed as a cure for what has been described as an epidemic of melancholy throughout Europe (an affliction that became, in England, something of a fashionable pose for the Romantic poets).[14] In Italy the tarantella, danced for hours on end on successive days, was thought to cure this melancholy state which had been brought about, it was said, by the poisonous bite of the tarantula spider.[15] Christina Pluhar, the creative director of the early music group, L'Arpeggiata, who have performed and recorded a version of Athanasius Kircher's 17th century 'Tarantella Napolitana', describes the 'healing' version of the tarantella:

> In order to overcome the poison, he must overcome the broken equilibrium in himself. On his journey the sick person identifies himself with Nature, whose harmony he perceives through sounds and colours and whose vibrations he absorbs into his body. The sick person becomes the black sun (or black spider) in the centre, surrounded by the planets, which are symbolised by the people and the musicians who accompany him in his quest for healing.[16]

Writing about the source of this kind of profound depression, Ehrenreich gives the opinion that modernization was at the root of the problem; that 'urbanization and the rise of a competitive market-based economy favour a more anxious and isolated sort of person – potentially both prone to depression and distrustful of communal pleasures'.[17] She goes on to argue that government and church, by phasing out communal dance and music festivities destroyed the traditional cure for mental problems. Europeans, she says, 'could congratulate themselves for brilliant achievements in the areas of science, exploration, and industry… But with the suppression of festivities that accompanied modern European "progress" 'they had done something perhaps far more damaging'; they had, she says, rejected one of the most ancient sources of help – the mind-preserving, lifesaving techniques of ecstasy'.[18]

In the 19th century, attempts by Christian missionaries to take charge of

indigenous cultures around the world often succeeded in repressing these dance rituals. Among the Namaquas of South Africa it was said of someone who converted to Christianity that 'he has given up dancing'.[19] By 1820 Protestant missionaries in Tahiti could claim proudly that they had 'restrained the natural levity of the natives'.[20] When even the weaving of garlands of flowers was forbidden, the Tahitians abandoned their normal dress, shaved their heads and gave up their healing music rituals. It was observed that, after this, no-one danced any longer, and that their chief social pleasure lay in drinking alcohol.

In other countries, folk rituals weren't so easily destroyed, and those involving music and dance carried on being used to heal the troubled spirit. African trance rituals continue down to this day as a form of healing for people suffering from mental and emotional problems. In North Africa sufferers are described as being 'possessed' by an evil spirit which has to be driven out. We would most likely describe such mental affliction as depression.[21]

In trance rituals which I have witnessed in Morocco, the afflicted person has a ceremony arranged for them, and musicians arrive with friends and family in a supportive role. The musicians, principal among them drummers, proceed to play successive rhythms, seeking out the particular one belonging to the troubled person. When he or she hears their own spirit rhythm, they will dance and dance in simple, repetitive movements. This may go on for many hours, until they drop, when they will be taken to lie down and will be looked after while they recover. Anyone who submits to this repetitive movement and driving rhythm may, after a while, enter a state of trance, characterised by a sense of ecstasy and transcendence. At the very least this dance experience leaves participants feeling nerve-tinglingly alive and at peace, with a deep sense of well-being.

Over the years I have taught a form of dance largely based on the solo female dance of the Middle East, which is performed by women and girls of all ages for each other at private celebrations. It is a dance both lyrical and humorous and is expressed primarily via movements of the torso and hips. I have taught dance not as therapy, but as a source of creativity and a key to tapping our hidden energies; yet many of my students have told me they have found a therapeutic benefit, both mental and physical, from simply moving their bodies to music and reawakening stiff muscles. A woman in her 50s who once came along had suffered for years from back problems, and consulted several specialists with no positive results. After coming regularly to my class she told me her back was improving daily and she was no longer in pain.

Some of my older students, I recall, were initially nervous of joining a class for all kinds of reasons: perhaps they had long harboured the desire to dance

but felt they were not the right size or the right age. Others said they hated being looked at and were nervous of being watched by others in the class (of course, everyone was so busy trying to master the movements that they had no interest in looking around at what everyone else was doing.) I used to end the class by inviting one or two volunteers to come into the middle of the floor and improvise for the pleasure of the others There were certainly some who were too shy to do this at the beginning; one who went on to become a good friend, held back from volunteering until one week when she mock-grumbled, 'Alright, I'll do it'. Then she went and did her improvisation behind a semi-transparent wicker screen standing in the corner!

Initial nervousness generally gives way to physical confidence; training the body to master technique leads to pride in what one can do. With confidence comes the desire to show off one's skills, to be seen and appreciated. I have many times known students get together and form small performance groups, then go out and present small shows for charity or community events.

Learning dance from another culture stimulates interest in that culture, whether it's the flamenco of Spain, the dances of India or the women's dance of Egypt. Students take holidays in those countries, become interested in the cuisine, the customs, and I have even known some start to learn Spanish and Arabic, in order to understand the words of the songs they find themselves dancing to. In this way, the journey into other cultures becomes one of discovery and friendship. In Sweden I learnt of a group who organised a weekly afternoon dance social in a café owned by one of them, and promoted it to their local Middle Eastern community. There was one proviso though: no man was allowed to go to this social gathering unless he brought a woman with him. In this way those Middle Eastern women were being encouraged to get out in public, meet other women and mix with the local Swedish community in a protected environment. As one Egyptian dancer once said to me, Western women learning her native dance in Europe and the USA 'are building a bridge of understanding between East and West'.

When governments wake up to the idea that, for the sake of our health, we need to exercise more, it tends to be sports that they recommend rather than dance. This is despite the fact that, for women at any rate, dance is one of the most popular leisure activities.[22] Yet the UK government, for one, has decided to throw its weight behind promoting not dance but sport.[23] Throughout the media there is an overwhelming emphasis on traditional male fighting sports like football and rugby, sports which reinforce hierarchy, learning our place in the pecking order, the giving and taking of orders and, above all, winning. And when dance does feature in the media it is with an equally biased focus.

In the UK millions of people have become interested in dance after watching the TV programme *Strictly Come Dancing*, which has now been exported around the world.[24] The high emotion aroused by all that physical exertion is manifested during the programme in tearful, huggy interviews with contestants and their families. One feature of the programme is that many of the contestants have never really danced before, and the older ones often confess rather sadly that they have always longed to. They are astonished at what they achieve by taking part in the programme, and often say they haven't realised just how long they have been working to perfect their steps; for when an activity excites our spirit, time spent doing it takes on a fresh quality: an hour can pass in a flash, and ten minutes can seem like an hour. The programme leaves contestants with a new confidence in what the body can do, and watching someone who has never in their life experienced the rigorous training required for dance as performance, it is truly impressive to see their mastery of steps and choreography. Yet the programme demonstrates complex attitudes to the female body, with female participants encouraged to pile on the make-up and wear skimpy costumes that reinforce banal ideas about glamour and beauty. And its basic message is far from the truth: the message that social and partner dancing is all about winning; that it's about set routines and competition, with the worst performers suffering the humiliation of being disqualified. In fact, this type of social dance is a conversation, not a lecture where everything that is said has been fixed beforehand, and which produces winners and losers.

Social dancing has sometimes even been suppressed by those in power, notably the Calvinists in 16th and 17th century Europe, for whom dance was associated with drunkenness, gluttony and general depravity.[25] It isn't hard to understand how celebratory behaviour involving sensual movement has been considered threatening to sexual morality down the years. Political movements keen to preserve the status quo know how dangerous is the unleashing of a powerful, unpredictable, crowd energy. Ironically, both extreme right wing as well as revolutionary left-wing movements have clamped down on popular dancing in an attempt to control the anarchic nature of public passions.

For Robespierre after the French Revolution, and Lenin after the Russian Revolution, the central social ritual was, in Ehrenreich's words

> the meeting - experienced in a sitting position, requiring no form of participation other than an occasional speech and conducted according to strict rules of procedure. Dancing, singing, trances, these could only be a distraction from the weighty business in hand.[26]

Under Argentina's military junta from 1976 to 1983 the tango was suppressed.[27] And in Iran dance and music were outlawed, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution'.[28] All of which bear witness to the fact that when extreme political and religious movements seize power, the first thing they do is ban those aspects of culture that are to do with human joy and creativity.

In past times, social dancing in private and in public was a principal way in which people met to enjoy themselves, refresh their spirits and regain their equilibrium. In ballrooms, dancehalls and, in the open air, people met to let off steam. There, the classes mingled and people came to know each other in a visceral way, through the body, through touch and rhythm, moving together in harmony. Certain social dances, such as the cancan and the waltz, were considered wild, revolutionary even, and were condemned from the pulpit and in the press. In general, it was the dances of the masses that caused most controversy. Ironically, it was also these which were taken up most eagerly in the ballrooms of the wealthy: but only after they had been tamed and fitted for 'polite' society. The waltz, with its continual spinning and turning, was initially considered scandalous.[29] It allowed men and women who barely knew each other to indulge in unheard-of physical intimacy as they set off across the floor, locked together in a close embrace. This hold, which prevented them losing their balance as they spun, gave them the chance to press their bodies even closer and they were soon lost in their own private world. The waltz was considered so likely to cause dancers to lose their moral compass that it attracted opprobrium from all directions. A number of books of 19th century etiquette pointed the finger at the questionable nature of this dance, including *The Gentleman and Lady's Book* by Mme Celnart. In her opinion this dance was: 'of quite too loose a character, and unmarried ladies should refrain from it altogether'.[30] The waltz went on, though, to become the most popular social dance in Europe during the 19th century, and today it comes as a surprise to people to understand the furore it once caused. It was denounced for causing illness and being a source of bodily and mental weakness, especially in women, and it wasn't the only social dance that was discouraged.

During the 1920s' ballroom dance craze an anti-dance movement sprang up in the USA. Social commentators thundered about the sinful, sexual nature of popular dances emerging from newly liberated Black Americans; dances which imitated animal behaviour and led inevitably to hell. In Judeo-Christian culture, where mind and body have been separated for thousands of years, the first considered superior, the second something to be denied, the reminder of our 'lower' animal selves in dances such as The Bunny Hug and The Turkey Trot were disturbing to some. Yet certain 1920s commentators maintained a

sense of proportion. One doctor contributed to the debate, saying, ten thousand people injure themselves by the abuse of eating, for one who does so by dancing. Meanwhile the well-known, highly respected ballroom dancer Irene Castle commented that, if dancing were a sin, then half the population of American cities was in danger.[31]

Dance lovers know that dancing is a source of pleasure and an expression of creative energy for its own sake, and in hard times it's one of life's least expensive ways of keeping up one's spirits. After Argentina's financial crash in 2002 tango became more popular than ever in its birthplace, Buenos Aires.[32] Schools offering courses in the dance sprang up all over the city to cater for visiting Europeans and Americans intent on honing their skills in a dance that had become hugely popular outside the land of its birth. Improvised partner dancing depends on mutual give and take between couples, and nowhere more so than in the complex partner dance that is the Argentinean tango. Among all partner dances with which I'm familiar, tango is the one that most requires couples to move together in harmony. It reflects a complex male-female relationship and is the best example of an improvised dance which depends on co-operation between partners. Traditionally it is the man who leads, or 'proposes' a movement and the woman who 'responds' (though this rule is not so rigid now as it once was, and women are freer to initiate the shape of the dance than they once were). The tango is a conversation, with all the hesitations, interruptions and negotiations of any verbal exchange. Sometimes the conversation turns into an argument, even a battle, and unfortunately, when two partners are not in harmony it may become a monologue! But when it flows, a tango can be mesmerising to watch and sublime to perform, and at such a moment there can occur one of those magical instances of total connection between people that I have seen happen most strikingly on the dance floor.

Like tango, flamenco is a social dance that has moved away from its early days at parties, in bars and in the streets, and become a performance art. When the French critic Theophile Gautier first saw flamenco dancers in Andalusia in the late 19th century he fell in love with them and – despite his passion for a French ballerina – declared them preferable to the gaslit dolls of the Paris Opera.[33] The word 'duende' is often used to describe a memorable flamenco performer. One dancer described it as a state in which the spirit moves through you, a power 'that climbs up inside you from the soles of the feet': a description, if ever there was one, of harmony in body and spirit.

Reviewing a flamenco company performing at London's pantheon of professional dance, Sadler's Wells Theatre, the critic Nicholas Dromgoole

dismissed them with the comment that the dancers were 'past their prime and God's gift to the corset industry. Middle aged spread, or too willing an addiction to paella, is much in evidence'.[34] In his opinion the allure of flamenco lies in a slim body and a figure-hugging costume. The truth is, however, that audiences who turn out in their thousands to watch flamenco don't care if a dancer is past her youth and displays an ample waistline. They go to watch flamenco for its passion, its power of expression and defiant energy. However, in the rarified world of performance the glorious diversity of the body is regarded as an irrelevance. In the hierarchy of Western dance classical ballet remains dominant, with the confident underlying assertion that no other dance form is so beautiful, a view confirmed by the authority of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

> Ballet has been the dominant genre in Western theatre dance since its development as an independent form in the 17th century, and its characteristic style of movement is still based on the positions and steps developed in the court dances of the 16th and 17th centuries.[35]

Yet classical ballet has codified the movements of courtly dance into rigid and damaging postures. And perhaps it is fitting that an art which rejoices in the artificial and celebrates human triumph over the body has come to represent a Western ideal based on a thousand-year-old distrust, both religious and philosophical, of the human body. How many women have been discouraged from learning any kind of dance because of the assumption that they have to be as young and as thin as ballerinas in order to look good on the dance floor? Yet ballerinas starve themselves sometimes to the point of anorexia in order to fulfil the demands of their ballet masters; and (unlike their male counterparts) wear crippling pointe shoes that cause pain and bunions and can make the feet bleed in the normal course of performance?[36] The obsession with youth and a particular kind of body is a rod which the dance profession has made to beat its own back. Its result is rejection of those who cannot conform to a narrow aesthetic.

At a festival where I was once performing in Spain I met a flamenco dancer in her seventies. She smoked like a chimney and was a woman who clearly enjoyed her food. But she was a demon onstage! In the dressing room after the show I told her I thought it was amazing that she was still performing at her age. Her eyes glinted dangerously as she looked at me. 'Let me tell you a secret, my dear' she said, leaning across the table. 'When you dance, there is no such thing as old age'.

NOTES

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11. Davies, 'Orchestra', lines 666-9, 712-4.

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14. Ehrenreich, *Dancing,* p.131.

15. Ehrenreich, *Dancing*,p.151.

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32. For a good introduction see Ana C. Cara, 'Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues', *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 122, no. 486, 2009, pp. 438–465.
33. Cited in Walter Sorell, *Dance In Its Time* (New York, Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981), p.280.
34. Cited in Buonaventura *Spell,* p.287.
35. 'Theatre Dance: Dance', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/dance/Theatre-dance [Accessed 6 September 2019].
36. Emma John, 'I was doing a solo and I heard my foot crack', *The Guardian*, 5 September 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/sep/05/dance [Accessed 16 April 2019]; Jennifer Dunning, 'Eating Disorders Haunt Ballerinas', *New York Times*, 16 July 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/16/arts/eating-disorders-haunt-ballerinas.html [Accessed 16 April 2019].