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Dance and the study of modern equitation

1. Abstract

This presentation for the 40th World Congress on Dance Research takes into account that Equitation in the French Tradition was inscribed in 2011 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This form of equitation is based on principles and processes guided by non-violence and lack of constraint, blending human demands with respect for the horse's body and mood. The date of the inscription has placed it within the realms of contemporary thinking and modern practice and its reference to human demands can be viewed from the perspective of dance. This presentation will offer examples of how a dancer's knowledge of alignment and co-ordination are highly regarded by professional riders and how the intuitive thinking of a choreographer is beneficial to competitors in international freestyle dressage events. The lexicon of Equitation in the French Tradition overlaps that of the classical ballet in enough instances for it to be considered part of the vocabulary of dance and the beauty of an accomplished riding demonstration is equivalent to any duet of the world's most applauded dancers. As an ongoing research topic, dance and the study of modern equitation can combine with painting, drawing, sculpture or other forms of creative work in the visual arts and is of interest to people of all ages.

2. Introduction

Equitation in the French Tradition is practiced throughout France and elsewhere and the most widely known community of practitioners is the Cadre Noir of Saumur. Common characteristics are the desire to establish close relations with the horse, build mutual respect and work towards achieving lightness.ⁱ The author of several books and DVD's and a former member of the Cadre Noir of Saumur, Philippe Karl, founded the Ecole de Légèreté. The philosophy of the school has grown from the writings and teachings of people such as Xenophon, Antoine de Pluvinel, François Robichon de La Guérinière and Nuno Oliveira. Practitioners of this methodology have learnt to ride toward achieving lightness with theoretical and practical training almost exclusively in dressage.ⁱⁱ It is the grounding in dressage that forms the guidelines for this paper and the arena in which dance has a footing in some places and an elevated position in particular circumstances.

The Cadre Noir of Saumur and the Ecole de Légèreté offer a setting and philosophy for the beginning of this research paper about dance and the study of modern equitation. The texts that will be cited are from published and well-read books and articles about riding. The application of dance technique is the result of personal experience and acquired knowledge. This is the first paper about this line of thought and is intended to be considered as an overview rather than a detailed report.

3. Modern equitation, dressage and dance

Dressage is a process of exercising, educating and disciplining equines so that they can move freely and with self-carriage while being ridden or driven. Anyone responsible for the care and management of horses and ponies can benefit from knowing more about the process of dressage as it can influence the health and tractability of the animals in their care. People who ride horses professionally or as recreation are one half of a duet that relies on balance, communication, understanding and trust to move from one point to another safely and without discord. A horse or pony can sense how its rider is feeling from the position and tenseness of the rider's body.ⁱⁱⁱ If the rider can replicate the control of a dancer they are more able to communicate their intentions to a well-educated horse or pony making the experience safer and more enjoyable for both.

Franz Mairinger was the first trainer of an Australian Olympic Equestrian Team and when he died in 1978, dressage in Australia was just emerging as a recognized sport requiring the input of knowledge and knowhow. Franz Mairinger insisted that dressage was not a mystery and that the rider must give back to the horse its natural balance, rhythm and gait with the additional weight of the rider on its back.^{iv}

Since 1978 some aspects of dressage as a sport have changed. There are international forums for the discussion of dressage related topics and a number of high profile riders have made their thoughts known through books, articles and other media. One thing that has not changed since 1978 is the influence the rider has on how his or her horse moves and as Kyra Kyrklund explains, if the rider's weight is incorrectly placed on the horse it is the same as asking a person to carry a lopsided heavy back-pack.^v

There are aspects of dance that translate well into the art of riding. Ballet barre exercises for example provide a chance for the rider to experience shifts of weight and changes in alignment. Centre exercises can improve co-ordination and the appreciation of rhythm and tempo and the act of dancing can bring about a sense of calm and relaxation that is always beneficial.

4. Lightness and weight distribution for vaulting

Equestrian Vaulting Australia describes vaulting as gymnastics on horseback and that it can improve a rider's seat, balance, rhythm, coordination and confidence.^{vi} Vaulting is an official Fédération Equestre Internationale sport and in Australia there are 200 people training for vaulting teams and events. Equestrian

instructors and coaches are aware of the advantages of vaulting and often include simple maneuvers in their lessons. (Photograph 1). Dancers also know of the similarities between gymnastic and dance training. The clearer picture of dance and the study of modern equitation will begin to appear at this junction of ideas and methodologies. However, before moving forward with this notion it is necessary to take a step back and consider the following quote made in a presentation compiled for the 23rd World Congress on Dance Research, 2009;

Grazioso Cecchetti suggest that the whole body will feel light, agile and well balanced following the performance of pliés and that these pliés can be small or large, half, three quarters or full. Cecchetti states that; breathing should be deep and regular and emphasises symmetry when raising and lowering the heels and that the weight should be evenly distributed. ^{vii}

Here for the discussion of dance and the study of modern equitation is a turning point. The consideration of creating a feeling of agility, lightness and balance with these simple exercises is well within the grasp of someone who has enough skill to participate in an equestrian sport. The challenge is for the equestrian to think like a dancer and then apply that thinking to how they train themselves.

5. Jumping into dance

Today, dance training from beginner levels to advanced is accessible in various forms. There are studio classes, lessons available online and a vast array of DVD's. There are also classes in allied disciplines such as yoga and Pilates and dance professionals listed in the CID dance directory who offer specific programs of training for equestrians. However, for the equestrian who wishes to devise their own training program, knowing where to begin might be their most difficult hurdle.

Jumping into dance from a background that has not included dance previously requires at least some faith in the processes of dance. The solution is simple. Remain calm, breath and then begin thinking about posture. Next devise simple challenges for balance and the shifting of weight, then add some movement and stretching. As if by magic, the dance will begin. Feelings of lightness, agility and balance are no longer elusive and eventually will be translated into better riding and happier horses.

6. Visibility and general principles

Unlike the dancer who is performing on stage in solo choreography, the movements of a dressage rider must become practically invisible. The use of the natural aids of legs, seat, hands and voice must be so well controlled by the rider that an observer will barely notice the communication that is happening between horse and rider on a second by second basis. Almost like a pas de deux from the most enchanting ballet, the rider and the horse dance. In the case of the performance of a dressage test, the dance happens within the space of a 20m x 40m or 20m x 60m arena. Like a scene from Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Fase*, the patterns traced by the duet within the arena are part of performance. The

intricacy of these patterns is both geometric and artistic and is an indication of how well the rider has been able to apply the natural aids. The invisible becomes visible and it is the task of the competition judges to recognize the precision and then mark and comment accordingly.

Jytte Lemkow explains that dressage belongs to the same subjective group of sports as gymnastics, ice skating and diving. The opinion of a judge is open to criticism^{viii} Lemkow makes the comment that judges of all levels of dressage tests should be familiar with Article 401 of the Fédération Equestre Internationale rules for international competition.^{ix} The article begins with a statement about harmonious education and it is within this concept that dance training has a strong footing and tenacious hold.

7. Dance training and harmonious education

Andrew McLean, has written a number of articles about horse training. Many of these articles can be read on the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre website, www.aebc.com.au. McLean constantly refers to the differences between human and animal intelligence and behavior and insists that the best training for horses is simple, that correct timing is essential and that human ego should not get in the way of creating bridges of understanding.^x

It should not be difficult for the rider to work on forming that bridge if they think like a dancer. In a handbook for the novice horse rider, Bart Hartog states the fact the human body gives away much of our inner thinking and 'that the value of the seat as an instrument of communication with the horse cannot be stressed enough'.^{xi} Dancing as a language for communication is active and volitional. In her book, *Dancing For Health*, Judith Lynne Hanna states;

The importance of dance in communication lies in the fact that there are alternatives ways of knowing and of glossing experience, and different types of communicative competencies, including bodily kinesthetic competence. ... individuals do not possess a single conscious mechanism that is privy to the sources of all their perceptions and actions.^{xii}

Mary Wanless compares learning to ride well to peeling the layers of an onion and through dedicated practice, each lesson becomes part of the thinking for riding.^{xiii} Recalling what Andrew McLean has said about keeping it simple for horses to learn, then each of our own lessons for learning to communicate with horses should be approached with the objective of forming clear and concise signals. Dance training can help with that, with the ticking of all the correct boxes so that a rider can guide their horse through the dance. It is interesting, exciting and achievable.

Conclusion

Riding masters agree on one thing and that is, the importance of balance for both rider and horse. Dancers play with balance and choreographers manipulate it. It is a malleable element of movement and can be improved with exercises.

However, balance only remains stable if breathing is undisturbed^{xiv} and riders as dancers or dancers as riders are responsible for the control of their own breath. Essential oils and aromatherapy can influence both breathing and movement and classic and modern dance techniques can improve muscle tone and skeletal alignment for a centered seat in a riding position. The conclusion for this presentation is actually a beginning for the next when there will be more to discuss about dance and the study of modern equitation.

Endnotes

ⁱ 'Equitation in the French Tradition', UNESCO, [website], (November 2011) <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00440>> Culture, Intangible Heritage, List and register, accessed 3 June 2015.

ⁱⁱ 'Practical training in France', Ecole de Légèreté, [website], (2015) <<http://www.philippe-karl.com/432/school-of-legerete-english/practical-training>> Practical training, accessed 3 June 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ Franz Mairinger, *Horses are made to be horses* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1983), 52.

^{iv} Franz Mairinger, *Horses are made to be horses* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1983), 16.

^v Kyra Kyrklund and Jytte Lemkow, *Dressage with Kyra: The Kyra Kyrklund Training Method* (Shrewsbury: Kenilworth Press, 2009), 22.

^{vi} 'What we do', Equestrian Vaulting Australia, [website], (2015) <<http://www.equestrianvaultingaustralia.com.au/#!/what-we-do/c1p55>> accessed 4 June 2015.

^{vii} Judith Chestnut, 'Bending, stretching and much more in contemporary dance', paper given at the 23rd World Congress on Dance Research, Malaga, Spain, 15 - 19 July, 2009, 7.

^{viii} Kyra Kyrklund and Jytte Lemkow, *Dressage with Kyra: The Kyra Kyrklund Training Method* (Shrewsbury: Kenilworth Press, 2009), 142.

^{ix} 'Dressage Rules 2015', Fédération Equestre Internationale, [website], (2015) <<http://www.fei.org/fei/regulations/dressage>> accessed 5 June 2015.

The object of Dressage is the development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete.

^x Andrew McLean, 'Mentality Principle', Australian Equine Behaviour Centre, [website], (2015) <http://www.aebc.com.au/articles/23/> accessed 5 June 2015.

- ^{xi} Bert Hartog, *The art of training: a handbook for the novice rider* (Brisbane: CopyRight Publishing, 2014), 141.
- ^{xii} Judith Lynne Hanna, *Dancing for health*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 35.
- ^{xiii} Mary Wanless, *Ride with your mind clinic: rider biomechanics – basics to brilliance*, (Vermont: Trafalgar Square Books, 2008), 25 - 26.
- ^{xiv} Carola Speads, *Ways to better breathing*, (Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 1992), 115.

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Photographs

Photograph 1

Equestrian Australia coach, Irene Gavenlock instructing a student in the art of riding on the lunge with one of her trained school horses at Blue Gums Equestrian, Ourimbah, NSW, Australia.

Author's note

Since 2003 I have been a registered member of the International Dance Council CID, a non-governmental organization founded in 1973 within the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Because I had expressed an interest in the relationship of riding to dance, I was encouraged by the executive director of CID, Ms. Adamantia Angeli to send a presentation for the World Congress on Dance Research. Previous presentations to the congress that I have made have been based on practical experiences and readings in dance movement foundations such as classical ballet technique and contemporary choreography. My rider education and experience has been varied from trail riding, pony club events, dressage competitions and discussions with equestrian specialists and there have been many occasions when, based on my own knowledge and understanding, I have observed correlations between dancing and riding; the most obvious to me being rhythm, tempo and what is now commonly referred to as rider biomechanics. There is much about sitting on a horse and riding it with regard to sound techniques in equestrian arts that relates to the

artistry of dance and I am continuing along those lines in consistent practise sessions of both riding and dance.