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## **Defining a movement base for a contemporary dance interpretation.**

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### **1. Abstract**

Along with the abundance of information about dance available in many formats, there are growing numbers of dancers and choreographers eager to show how they are interpreting that information. This is a case study from an established dance practice documenting the first stages of a contemporary dance interpretation with the view of contributing to the resources for dance that are now available to fledgling practitioners.

### **2. Introduction**

Contemporary dance has the unique timeline of the present, the wealth of history and the expectation of the future. In whatever age contemporary dance occurs it is brave and bold because its practitioners strive to be original and individual. The contemporary choreographer will make the best use of available resources for dance and imbue his or her works with contextual relevance that is nearly impossible to duplicate. This simple singularly can be controversial and universal and the conventions of the day determine boundaries, customs and limits of practice. Contemporary dance is a sociable kind of dance and can be developed and adapted for performance in traditional and/or new age formats. Dance that is in this genre has much in its favour because of its immediacy and asks for little in return; a disparity that can result in abundance or scarcity depending on the situation. These are all ambiguous characteristics and it is the requirement of the choreographer to understand the ambiguities and define that understanding in the terminology of movement, motion and presentation to evoke the authentic presence of the dance.<sup>1</sup> The process of defining movement, motion and presentation in terminology that is descriptive and specific is lengthy and intricate even when the choreography is short and uncomplicated adding the element of contrast to the list of characteristics.

The starting point for the discussion in this paper is the description of a set of investigative exercises for contemporary dance performance. These exercises were conducted in controlled conditions and as a precursor for presenting an extended choreography in the future. It is the beginning of the lengthy and intricate process of defining movement, motion and presentation for a contemporary dance interpretation in original surroundings. It is a case study of choreology with the objective of presenting the findings as tuition for dance.

Within this discussion will be outlines of observations from practical sessions and summaries of research. The information is presented as objectively as possible with brief mention of

notions for amplification in the future. The prerequisite for the process or processes of amplification should not be in the same investigative mode as the exercises discussed here, highlighting the importance of defining a movement base now for future work. It is reasonable to expect that clearer definitions and guidelines will emerge and grow from this discussion and that this expectation will flow through to the formulation of a tangible methodology for a proposed contemporary dance interpretation.

### **3. Intention**

The immediacy of contemporary dance is its continuum. The traditions of this genre are repeatedly called upon for base work and development when there is a request for something new or out of the ordinary. Because the practice of dance in the contemporary oeuvre is not restricted by age, condition, gender or experience it is ideal for pedagogical review and independent learning. The intention of the case study was to look at a set of movements that suited the continuum and tested personal decisions rather than a known tradition. Initiatives were to be given priority with independent learning the primary protocol for problem solving. The idea was to bring about some kind of seamless progression from one exercise into another with simple cues and responses so that differences in movement could be explored with the goal of evaluating kinaesthetic quality for visual purposes. Noting links between sensation and motion was an objective though assessing the significance of these links was not part of the original concept.

All of this was to take place in single units of time, for example, one hour, one day, a week. This specific timetable was to ensure that the immediacy was retained and that results could be assessed while neuromuscular, sensory and intellectual experiences were still nascent.<sup>ii</sup> The nascency becomes the advocacy for planned and deliberate movement rather than improvisation when established engrams could take precedence over invention negating any prospect of initiative and problem solving. Engrams will inhibit unwanted movement.<sup>iii</sup> In this case, it was the unwanted movements that were being evaluated for future applications. Movements that were not usual for this choreographer were planned and deliberately performed to facilitate the investigation.

### **4. Methodology**

The investigation was conducted informally using what has now been identified as the scientific method. That is, the methodology of posing a question, constructing a hypothesis and then testing the hypothesis with controlled investigations. For the purposes of this discussion, this methodology is the preferred framework for explanation and therefore an attempt will be made to describe the sequence of events with reference to that framework.<sup>iv</sup>

#### **4.1 The question and hypothesis**

This choreographer has developed a practice for dance that is mostly autonomous. This has relied upon and encouraged innovation in some parts of the practice and left other aspects unchanged and unrelated to the performance context of a professional-level contemporary dance program. Therefore, the hypothetical question is: when an historic and traditional way

of dancing is affected by modern music written specifically for contemporary dance will the exemplar choreography have improved contextual relevance?

The independent variable in this hypothesis is the contemporary music; the dependant variable is the way of dancing. The correlation of the music to the dance is the vehicle for a fair test where the only change that was made in this first trial was the style and application of the music.

#### **4.2 The form of the case study**

The investigation or trial is the case study. The dependant variable is the way of dancing of this choreographer and the investigation for interpretation is the subject. This is somewhat a fortunate circumstance enabling a more direct transcription of the findings and a reliable continuation for future case studies. As mentioned previously, the music is the independent variable and reliability was confirmed by acquiring a recording of the music through acceptable and recognized procedures for musical recordings. The composer/musician can explain those procedures in more detail.<sup>v</sup>

The choice of music was based on the recommendation in a magazine article describing several different recordings that have been made specifically for dance classes.<sup>vi</sup> This particular recording was chosen because it included the word contemporary in the title and the sample tracks that were found were stimulating for the choreographer. The stimulation was due to the fact of the variety presented in the whole recording and that data was included about the duration, the time signature and tempo of each track. These quantities are valuable numerical data for an experimental study and interesting for artistic appreciation. It is these quantities that counterbalance any ambivalence that occurs when the variables are brought together during the schedule of the case study.

The key element of this case study was an accessible synopsis of information about a nearby professional-level contemporary dance program. The contemporary dance classes described in the synopsis are 1.5 hours in duration, in one location and run to a schedule. Participants are required to have advanced knowledge of a dance technique and are occasionally requested to evaluate the class experience. This is the traditional and historic component of the case study. These classes continue to receive professional support from diverse fields of expertise indicating substantial contextual relevance for professionals.<sup>vii</sup>

In summary, the practice of the choreographer is the dependent variable; the subject is the deliberate investigation. The factor for change, the independent variable is the music. The objective is to design a class format that would have a place in a professional-level program.

### **5. Moving beyond hierarchical vagaries**

Before the conceptualisation of this case study, the primary objective of the dance practice was the choreography of short dances for public performance. This earlier objective was based on the expectations of clients and sponsors. Performance is still one of the objectives, however, the motivation is no longer shaped by the same expectations. As much as

performing for an audience is enjoyable and rewarding, preparation for requested performance can dominate a creative program leaving little time for background research and skills development. Performance development is overwhelmingly influenced by critical comments and the hierarchy of movement that evolves because of the commentary intrudes on initiatives and new ideas. The choreography becomes predictable and repetitive and technical considerations deteriorate into vague renditions of what was once a vital part of the overall presentation. Video recording 1 shows two examples of the choreography and dancing that is typical of the original practice. Both dances were well received by the audience and a request has been made for similar showings. For a professional-level dance program of any kind of dance this is encouraging news if performance is the primary objective. For the development of a contemporary dance program that includes skills development, more is required as indicated in the synopsis referred to previously.

## **6. Dancing to a different tune**

The choreography shown in video recording 1 is set to music typically played for the dance form that is demonstrated. The steps and dance phrases were choreographed to suit the phrasing and character of the music. The process was uncomplicated and expedient and was suitable for the amount of time available for the making of the dances. At the time of making the conscious decision to change the music for dancing it was also decided to impose a moratorium on public performance until something tangible emerged from the case study. The composition of the new music is very different to the traditional tunes that were previously used for choreography, and without hesitation, it was a welcome change that filled the practice with renewed energy and motivation.

## **7. Directing the motivation for confidence**

Enthusiasm for dance is easily found by anyone who enjoys moving to music. Commitment to a regular class of routine exercises is not always as easily found unless participants can tap into that same sense of enjoyment. The goal was to, somehow, through the class exercises; encourage an objective view of usual movement patterns and to find ways of making adjustments to those patterns so that practice sessions would yield new sensations and notions about preparing for performance with one of those sensations being enjoyment of the processes of preparation. The benefits that are attached to that enjoyment are the capabilities of an honest appraisal of intention and personal motivation and a reasonable knowledge of ability and temperament.<sup>viii</sup>

### **7.1 Listening**

The central motivator according to the hypothesis is the music; therefore it was important to have at least a rudimentary grasp of the composer's intention and application of musical devices. Knowledge gained from a previous study and some discussions with professional musicians helped to clarify murky areas.<sup>ix</sup> Listening to the recording of the music several times before making an attempt to plan a class session was a strategic use of time and effort and facilitated the planning process.

Although the time signatures and tempo indicators were helpful, actually listening to the music and visualizing possible movement combinations was the most efficient means of orientation. By letting go of habitual practices and thinking of new responses to the cues of the music, contextual relevance began to improve even at this early stage.<sup>x</sup> The unproductive stress of designing and remembering dances for numerous single public performances only was replaced by optimism about the whole process of dancing and its relevance to cultural context, personal response and social consequence. The contemporary dance continuum was realised and a clear link to the normal, day-to-day practice of choreography established.

## **7.2 Catching up with recent advancements**

The bibliography for this case study does not include all of the pages of information that were accessed before, during and after the study. It does however contain what is considered the most relevant and useful references for this exposition. It was helpful to research articles about sports as well as dance, music and other visual arts and weekly sessions of martial arts, specifically karate; continue to provide a bridge between athleticism and artistry.<sup>xi</sup>

Technical knowledge about dance is supplemented frequently, an appreciation of psychology with regard to impetus, demystifies difficulties and the opportunity to watch a number of professional performances all contribute to the catching up process. There is no time for idleness and plenty of space for ideas. To apply all of this and more to a case study for dance has become a full time occupation bringing more values to the equation, however, for now, defining the movement base in the light of the hypothesis is the main objective.

## **7.3 The rough guide**

The plan was to test the hypothesis in a studio setting as close to the model class setting as possible. The venue was a nearby hall with a wooden floor and the idea was to record sample findings in one session. This plan was later modified and two sessions of 1.5 hours duration were needed to complete the full set of recordings. The equipment used to record each session was a small digital camera on a tripod set in one place. Some additional lighting was used and the time of day was a consideration to allow for as much natural light as possible.<sup>xii</sup> Each track of the music recording presented a different set of values to consider in movement. The following section of this presentation describes the session as an actual class for dance.

## **8. The dance class**

The running time of the movement section is one hour. Additional time would be required for an introduction, explanation and discussion. Ideally, the total running time of the class would be 1.5 hours. Each exercise is 3 – 6 minutes duration. There is the option to repeat any exercises, however, this will make the class longer. It is not advisable to miss any of the exercises though; this is possible in some situations. Injury prevention has high priority in this class. Research continues for improvements for injury prevention and the information presented here relating to safe dance practice is a guide only. References should be checked for updates. The ambient temperature and nature of the dance space and floor or ground

should all be considered in advance and allowances made to enable a safe dance situation.<sup>xiii</sup>

Acceptable practice for a dance class is to raise core body temperature at the beginning of the class and allow for a cool down at the end of the class.<sup>xiv</sup> This class includes both warm-up and cool down times as well as time to stretch.

It is advisable to wear comfortable clothing that will allow for a variety of dance movements. Flexible flat shoes designed for dance will protect the feet and give some stability in some of the exercises. A towel and mat will help aid concentration for careful stretching and staying hydrated with water is sensible risk management.<sup>xv</sup> Dancers might also wish to write notes and/or draw diagrams for discussion and/or reference, therefore simple writing and drawing materials should be accessible.

### **8.1 Warm-up first stage**

This first exercise is for orientation and preparation for the more vigorous exercises later in the class. Walk around the dance space concentrating on maintaining an even tempo and building up a constant rhythm of relaxed breathing. Listen to the music and think about your body moving around the dance space. Include changes of; direction, body carriage, arm positions and step type as you walk. The music is best in common time, 4/4.

### **8.2 Warm-up second stage**

The idea for this part of the session is to increase the pulse rate and core body temperature. This helps with alertness and movement range and facilitates stretching. The music chosen is a brisk 3/4 contemporary piece that requires attention for rhythmic nuance. There is no reason why a class warm-up should not have the same poetry as a dance and it is suggested that the participant keeps this idea in mind.

Choose one or two basic movements from dance that are familiar to you and can be repeated for the duration of this segment. Move to the beat of the music without stopping. Vary the emphasis, attitude and direction and stay in tune with how your body is responding to the increase in activity. Note changes for future reference and do not push yourself beyond a feeling of well-being.

### **8.3 A chance to stretch**

Now that muscles are warmed and the mind is alert, it is time to stretch and prepare for the remainder of the session. These stretches can be your well-established favourites or based on new research. Use the floor, a wall, matt and/or towel, balance ball, resistance bands, ballet barre, a partner... whatever is usual for you. Have diagrams and notes handy if you are trying something new. Repeat this section if more time for stretching is required. If this part of the class is repeated, then make adjustments to the remainder of the class depending on the emphasis of the session.

#### **8.4 Swish, swing and swirl**

This exercise is about exploring movement and finding the differences in articulation that can be developed in future choreography. This part of the class concentrates on swish, swing and swirl movements. Begin with improvisation and then quickly choose one movement phrase for more detailed study. Feel the flow of the movement before considering how it looks in a mirror or on a video monitor. Try variations and make some kind of recording of the movement. The recording can be a series of sketches, written notes, a video recording or dance notation. Work quickly and deliberately with the view to adding this movement to your personal dance vocabulary.

#### **8.5 Balance**

Following the somewhat free flow of the previous exercise with time for balance is preparation for the intricate second half of the class. It is time to collect thoughts and fortify intention and focus. Because a dancer must rely automatically on his/her sense of balance, time for practice is valuable. Balance enables the dancer to acquire a subtle feel for the nuances of timing, movement and the influence of weight and gravity. This is time for the dancer to test his or her balance and recall knowledge of alignment and placement.

#### **8.6 Arms**

Five minutes is most definitely not enough time to explore all the possibilities of expressive arm movements, however, it is enough time for this introduction. Very quickly it will become evident that this part of the class is fun and rewarding and the results add to the richness of the movement vocabulary. These movements can follow a pattern or be random. Tested favourites can be developed further and new variations attempted. Remember as much as you can of this part of the lesson for the future. Video recordings help as do notes, drawing and photographs.

#### **8.7 Tension and release**

The objective of this exercise is to provide an opportunity to demonstrate an interest in understanding kinetic variations. A tensile movement followed by a relaxed movement is a good exercise for this. Each dancer will have an individual preference for showing tension and release and to begin this exercise with preferences is reasonable. By thinking of variations and trying them to see how much of a difference there is, the dancer can begin to gain a feel for tonal qualities that can be applied to choreography. In a group situation there will be many differences. One dancer might consider a controlled extension an example of tension while another would use that same movement to show release. This can be a point of discussion later in this class and the subject of future sessions.

#### **8.8 Bounce**

Bounces are; hops, springs, jumps, arm movements, floor work. Whatever the dancer thinks is a bounce. These movements should be deliberate and can be smooth, jerky, fast or slow. When moving around the space be aware of the position of other dancers and do not intrude on their space unless you are working together for this part of the class, for example, one dancer might lift another or the arm of one dancer might bounce off the leg of the other dancers. There are many possibilities.

### **8.9 Flow**

Maintaining an even tempo and relying on a sense of the rhythm of the music, move in a flowing and calm manner. This is time for exploring sensual dance movements and that will vary from dancer to dancer. With flow being the key element, this is not a time to be provocative. Consider all aspects of the movements and try to remember what you are thinking about at the time so that you can call on this imagery in future sessions.

### **8.10 Turning**

Turns in dance can be; powerful or subtle, clockwise or anticlockwise, with the whole body or part of the body, fast or slow. Explore as many types of turns as possible in the short time of this exercise. Try to avoid repetition and do not rely on your favourite or best moves. Be aware of body alignment and shifts of weight.

### **8.11 Cool down**

Time to relax and stretch out the muscles that were working hard during the class. The cool down is as important as any other part of the class and deserves as much concentration. Do not begin discussions until the cool down has finished.

### **8.12 Discussion time**

Quickly write some notes about sensation you felt during the exercises. Muscles tightness, elation, tiredness, dizziness, frustration, joy. Try to remember as much as you can from each exercise. Discuss these sensations and consequences and anything else related to the music and exercises. The discussion can be lead by the teacher or a member of the class. Encourage questions and request clear and concise explanations. The discussion can be carried over to another session with a change of leader and/or emphasis if necessary. This part of the class should be relaxed and informal with everyone being encouraged to participate.

### **8.13. Class assessment**

Each exercise was designed according to sensible dance practices and the suggestions of the tempo and rhythms of the music. There was not a preconceived notion of style or impression. It is a class designed for dancers who have a reasonable knowledge of safe dance practices and who would like to experience movement for dance in a lyrical way. The only



performance standard or requirement is that dancers appreciate the intention of the class and keep that in mind through all of the exercises and discussions.

## 9. Case study findings

Warm-up, stretching, cool-down and how the discussion is managed can be generic therefore these parts of the class would act as the control elements for the experience. There is not enough time to include a comprehensive stretching routine and that should be noted from the beginning as there could be dancers who will be expecting this.<sup>xvi</sup> The intention of the class corresponds to the original hypothesis and this review acknowledges that. The level of improvement in contextual relevance is directly related to the attitude and findings of the participants. If the intention of the class was understood and efforts were made to participate at all levels, then some degree of self-assessment is possible. This assessment might be that more classes of this type would be a valuable experience or that one was enough and it was time to try something new. From this choreographer's point of view, the class was an entrée into a slightly different way of working with dance and that fact on its own was an improvement in contextual relevance.

Video 2 shows highlights from the two recording sessions in the hall. There was little difference in the environmental factors for each recording session and therefore it was reasonable enough to combine the two sessions in one video presentation. When comparing the movements in video 2 to the dance sequences in video 1, similarities and differences are both evident and that makes the investigation even more successful. There are remnants of the original dance practice that will continue and there is a new set of elements that will be joining that continuation. The knowledge of experience is not lost and the experience of investigation is rewarded.

## 10. Conclusion

The foremost value of dance is not so much in that it is a form of exercise for fitness, though this is an area of research that is producing interesting results; dance is instead the catalyst for research in many diverse fields.<sup>xvii</sup> Dance is wonderful on its own and has the unique advantage of facilitating functional strength.<sup>xviii</sup> A professional dancer would attend more than one class in a week. If one of those classes from time to time were geared toward facilitating functional strength, then that class would be invaluable to the dancer. If a complete contemporary dance interpretation was formed from a base that facilitated functional strength, then that interpretation should have the contextual relevance of functionality. The sample class described here will at least form a base for similar exercises. Finding contextual relevance is worth the effort and interpreting that relevance is directly related to functionality. The type and quality of movement is part of the interpretation, therefore the movement base will greatly influence functionality. Functionality will be less ambivalent if the movement base is clearly defined. If a choreographer concisely and eloquently articulates a movement base for any kind of dance work, then that work should emulate those same qualities. This would be particularly helpful for theatre works or video recording, when timing is essential and all the professionals involved are relying on efficiency.

From a personal stand point, the opportunity to have a direct input in a dance class that has the potential to influence professional functionally has many responsibilities. Decisions can have far reaching ramifications and require careful consideration. Sound pedagogical practice development is vital and it is hoped that this case study has contributed to that vitality.

Functional strength is the coping mechanism of human responsiveness to social and environmental events. There is space in this notion to consider dance a functional strength, and anyone who is passionate about dance will most likely agree with that. An interpretation of functional strength has a place in the contemporary dance continuum.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> J. Chestnut, 'Evocation and ambiguity in the arts', p. 43.

The finding of this project was that evocation becomes a function of ambiguity because it is part of the solution in the analysis of the implications of ambiguity. Evocation influences the interpretation of original intention in presentation and the amplitude of ambiguity.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Howse, *Dance technique and injury prevention*, pp.19-20.

Howse describes the process of engram formation and the value of assessing proprioceptive feedback for the development of accurate technique.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. 20

<sup>iv</sup> 'Steps of the scientific method', Science Buddies,

This webpage provides an uncomplicated description of the scientific method to assist students and teachers with science fair submissions.

<sup>v</sup> The Control Room.

<sup>vi</sup> Dowdell, L., The sound of music: new CDs for dance class.

<sup>vii</sup> Constitution of Ausdance NSW

For expediency, the sample classes and workshops supported by the New South Wales based Australian Dance Council (Ausdance NSW) office have proven to be a suitable model in the past and continue to provide appropriate summaries and overviews for dance professionals working in New South Wales.

It has come to our attention that out of date versions of the constitution are still in the possession of some members of the Association. This version of the constitution is the most current. It includes all amendments agreed by the membership since the incorporation of the Association in 1986 and as made on 19 December 2002 at the special general meeting convened by Notice of meeting dated 8 November 2002.

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<sup>viii</sup> E. Franklin, *Dance imagery for technique and performance*, p. 70.

In the midst of our technical struggles, we must always remember that the most important technique in dance is the love of dance. If you are ‘in love’ with moving, your technique greatly improves and you are capable of expressing beautiful things.

<sup>ix</sup> J. Chestnut, ‘Sewing. The sensuality of natural growth in dance.’

<sup>x</sup> E. Franklin, *Dance imagery for technique and performance*, p. 196.

The ability to be instantly identified with a new state of mind requires a new image of your mental process, which can be acquired through consistent practice.

<sup>xi</sup> Suzuki-Ha Shito-Ryu Seiko-Kai Karate-Do New South Wales.

<sup>xii</sup> K. McPherson, *Making video dance*, p. 143

The sun can still be your most important source of light when you are filming indoors.

<sup>xiii</sup> J. Howse, *Dance technique and injury prevention*, pp.75 - 76.

<sup>xiv</sup> The Australian Ballet, *Bodywise: discover a deeper connection with your body*, p. 28

Of course the most basic injury prevention rule is warming up and cooling down before and after exercise. Always begin an exercise session by raising your core body temperature and mobilizing the joints. Complete a session with general all-body stretches or, at the very least, stretch out those areas that have been worked.

<sup>xv</sup> J. Howse, *Dance technique and injury prevention*, p. 101.

If dancers become dehydrated, fatigue of both the muscles and the body as a whole will set in much earlier and they will become very much more liable to sustain injury.

<sup>xvi</sup> G. Arnold, and J. Kokkonen, *Stretching anatomy*, p. vii

The general recommendations for any stretching program is that it should include all of the major muscle groups and that there should be at least two different stretches for each joint movement. The duration of a stretching program should be 15 to 20 minutes building to 50 – 60 minutes in twenty weeks.

<sup>xvii</sup> R. D. Chmelar, and S. S. Fitt, *Diet for dancers*, p. 13

Unlike athletes who have specific seasons for which they must be in peak condition, dancers have to maintain performance levels of conditioning all year round. This makes it particularly difficult both physiologically and psychologically because there is rarely the feeling that one can “let-up” within the dance regimen.

<sup>xviii</sup> King, M., *Corepilates*, p. 26

Functional strength is the strength that we draw on in our everyday life. At home or in the workplace, driving in the rush hour or setting off on holidays, struggling through a crowded supermarket or strolling along the beach – every single activity makes demands on your body, and your level of functional strength determines how efficiently you cope and how much you achieve.

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### **Attachments**

Video 1: Two demonstrations of Celtic dance choreographed for public performance

Video 2: Excerpts from the case study: Defining a movement base for a contemporary dance interpretation.

### **About the author**

Ms Judith Chestnut has a Bachelor of Arts with Honours and a Graduate Diploma in Dance Instruction. She is a teacher, choreographer and performer with an established practice for dance in the Gosford-Wyong area of New South Wales, Australia. Her admission as a member of the International Dance Council CID was confirmed in a letter from Professor Alkis Raftis dated 22 August 2003. Her number in the official register of CID members is 7277.

Judith gratefully acknowledges the support of the University of Newcastle's online facilities and the Gosford-Wyong dance theatre networks. Email: [Judith.Chestnut@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:Judith.Chestnut@newcastle.edu.au).

Judith's regular practice for dance and choreography was one of the featured activities of Dance Week in 2007. Email: [administration@dance.net.au](mailto:administration@dance.net.au).