

21st World Congress on Dance Research

"Dancers without frontiers

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Reflective choreography

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1. Abstract

Since the 20th World Congress on Dance Research in 2006, I have been investigating the presentation of dance in multi-media. I have accessed many websites, viewed numerous video recordings and DVD's, watched dance on film and television and participated in on-line discussion groups. From all of this research I have become more familiar with the presentation of choreography for contemporary dance. This familiarity prompted me to look at my own choreography and its presentation in more detail. I realized that I needed to update my approach to dance and how I perform and present choreography to eliminate the ambivalence that sometimes restricts the appreciation of the universality of dance. I began streamlining and adding to the glossary of the terminology that I preferred for my practice that I had begun prior to the congress last year. I then progressed to the compilation of a new website in which I could include the glossary, visual examples and a public journal. In this report I write about why and how I began and continue the process of updating my dance practice with particular attention to choreography, the art of dance. I consider this a thoughtful process for the art of dance; it is reflective choreography.

2. Introduction

While researching references for this report I found the set of video recordings from Katerina Pavlaki's dance practice that were included in the proceedings of the 18th World Congress on Dance Research. [1] The standard of performance and presentation in these recordings is of a high quality and shows the diversity of dance in an interesting way. Katerina reports about her original research to achieve the result she has presented and this is what I have been working toward as well.

With the introduction of new styles for dance and technology based systems for communication about dance I could see that I needed to look at how I dance and choreograph in more detail. Years of teaching had made me critical of the dancing of students while avoiding the issue of being critical about how I actually dance, choreograph and perform myself. I had forgotten that being a teacher meant that I was the main example for the studies of my students and I was not giving my own dancing technique and research for choreography the attention it

required. I was not setting a good example with consistent practice and that needed to change. After considerable discussion with my family, I subscribed to a website service that I could maintain myself and was compatible with the basic systems of my computer. [2]. By setting the goal of only publishing to the website work that from research I have learnt is appropriate for an international audience and general exhibition, I established a preliminary set of new guidelines for my dance practice. These guidelines coincide with the CID guidelines for Dance Day perhaps by coincidence, although more likely because of interest and experience in past events for Dance Day.

Before discussing the guidelines for my website presentations I will briefly describe how I have participated in Dance Day events in the past. From that participation I have learnt new ways of discussing and presenting dance. Some of that knowledge I can outline in this report and the remainder is and will continue to be evident in my day-to-day dance practice. As the new guidelines for choreography have evolved over more years than I have participated in events for Dance Day I will include a list of key influences. This list will be illustrated with examples from the website I have compiled and in actual fact, the website is a summary of the list.

By presenting this report in this manner I hope to show at least an overview of a more personal and international dance practice that continues to evolve. My practice is an elementary approach to choreography. This approach is based on the reflective processes of concentration on technics, the science of art. It is enough to keep me very busy and active in the dance community in my hometown where I continue to learn and grow in the field of dance.

3. Dance Day participation

As I begin writing this description of how I have participated in Dance Day since 2003 I realise that there are a number of photographs and some video presentations that I have not added to the website. In fact, I could easily devote several pages to Dance Day on the website with some organization. I will include some examples with this report and I would like to suggest to readers to check the website regularly for updates.

It was not until I applied for CID registration that I knew about Dance Day, which is why my participation begins with class activities in 2003. The descriptions that follow link to the official Dance Day messages listed at www.cid-unesco.org and key phrases from those messages are included in the text and footnotes of this report.

3.1 Dance Day 2003

During the first quarter of 2003, I was actively preparing students of dance for community performances in collaboration with a local band. One scheduled

performance was for International Women's Day (IWD) in March of that year. As the date was reasonably close to Dance Day, there was always the thought of Dance Day participation in the overall planning and in some way, I consider the eventual performance of the show we prepared for IWD part of Dance Day activities. Photograph 1 is from the finale of a concert that was a precursor to the day. For the dance class that was scheduled for 29 April 2003, students were invited to bring a friend to the class. The friends who attended joined in the class routine on the day and were given a certificate of participation for their efforts. Reflecting on that day now, it would have been reasonable to give everyone who participated in the dance classes on that day a certificate and that could be a thought for Dance Day in the future.

The International Women's Day performance could be directly related to the international reference in the official Dance Day message for 2003:

'In more than half of the 200 countries in the world, dance does not appear in legal texts (for better or for worse!). There are no funds allocated in the state budget to support this art form. There is no such thing as dance education, private or public.' [3]

The class that was held on Dance Day most definitely was done so with this part of the message in mind:

'And for the rest of the day, we can look around us and do something to bring dance to those who do not benefit from its charms during the other days of the year.' [4]

3.2 Dance Day 2004

The official objective of Dance Day 2004 was to increase the awareness of the role that universities can play in educating dancers, choreographers and dance teachers. [5] As an individual and personal response to this objective, I sent correspondence to several members of staff at various university campuses regarding this and received some encouraging replies. This was the same year that I received a Graduate Diploma in Dance Instruction from a university in Australia that was given to me under seal 13 April 2004.

3.3 Dance Day 2005

During the close of 2004 and the first few months of 2005 I was invited by the director of dance at a nearby primary school to coach a dance team for a regional dance festival appearance. This coaching was voluntary and a donation to the school's dance programme. The invitation included choreography for a dance routine for the festival that was suitable for girls who had limited experience with dance. The experience was enjoyable and all of the students who participated appreciated the opportunity. Some of the coaching sessions for

this team coincided with Dance Day. As the focus of the Dance Day for 2005 was on primary education, I felt that my contribution to the school's programme was a contribution to the broader scope of worldwide education for dance as well. Photograph 2 is a picture of the 2004 dance team and the school's director of dance, Ms Sue Gaske. I received a certificate of participation from the festival committee and a gift of appreciation from the school.

Another activity was to write a long essay about choreography. This essay had an historic base and included the actual notes for a dance I had choreographed for students. I contacted several professional artists and informed them about this essay. Some of these artists requested copies to be sent to them personally and I was pleased to be able to do that.

3.4 Dance Day 2006

The focus of Dance Day for 2006 was to encourage a more united effort from dancers in general. [6] The most accessible and effective way in 2006 for me to be involved with that focus was to participate in on-line discussion groups for dance and associated arts. This was an interesting time, though somewhat overwhelming, as the guidelines for Dance Day were not widely known in the on-line groups I chose to join. Most of the preparation time was devoted to informing the groups about Dance Day and the available CID guidelines leaving little time for the preparation of an actual event. I made use of public web based resources to help with the dissemination of information regarding Dance Day and sent personal messages when appropriate.

For an event that included actual dancing, I invited family and close friends to attend a social occasion that I held in my studio. Each person was invited to give a short talk or demonstration about his or her experiences with dance and this proved to be both entertaining and informative. The guests were taught a folk dance and photograph 3 shows some of the invited guests performing that dance.

3.5 Dance Day 2007

I am the mother of a teenage son who has an interest in gymnastic based movement and running. For Dance Day 2007 I made the decision to stay home with my family and my decision is adequately supported by the Dance Day message for 2007. [7] During the day I made use of Internet resources to research aspects of dance that would interest teenagers and young adults and had the opportunity to discuss dance with visiting university students. The research from that day continues to be a topic of conversation in our family. Photograph 4 is my son practicing a gymnastic based movement and photograph 5 is of the university students who visited us during the day while they were photographing local scenery.

4. The benefits of Dance Day participation

From my experience as a director of dance the benefits of Dance Day are best appreciated after documentation such as this. It is not until all the facts are reviewed and there is some personal reflection that the significance of the day is understood. Each year the event I have organized has been different and each year there has been a different result. In summary, as an individual, I enjoy the company associated with group events such as coaching the dance team. As a parent, the time with my family was well used and continues to be beneficial. As a director of dance the event that was the most fruitful was writing the long essay. It was because of that essay that I met and corresponded with professionals who were trying innovative programmes for artistic works and I have learnt from their experiences.

It is important to document the Dance Day event in some way if for no other reason than to have a personal record of the day. Photographs, video recordings, letters of appreciation, testimonials, are all useful for this documentation. It is in the true spirit of Dance Day to link with other Dance Day events as well, and that can be easier retrospectively than on the actual day. Photographs of the day can be sent to other groups as a gesture of friendship and/or a more official document can be published for public review. If a Dance Day event is recorded on a website then a simple search will find the links and contacts. So far I have not found a national organization that keeps a database of such events, however, there are other organizations that do.

5. Dance Day events and presentations

CID guidelines for Dance Day preparations clearly state that the content of the Dance Day event can be determined by the organizers.[8] Some suggestions are given for the content so that the programme is diverse and comprehensive. Dance Day is an opportunity to present new work and trial different teaching methodologies. Dance Day is a time to celebrate the art of dance in all its variations and that single celebration brings unity to the extensive and diverse practices of dance worldwide. All that is required is the simple recognition of celebration and that can be a theme for events and presentations. Any readers of this report who would like to collaborate for choreography for Dance Day are welcome to send a message regarding that.

6. Celebrating the art of dance

Any new dance could be considered a celebration of the art of dance. Choreographers worldwide make dances regularly for festivals, performances and other occasions for celebration. Most of the choreography produced by me is for a celebration of some kind and because of that, I have thought carefully about how celebration is represented in dance. To celebrate is to perform with appropriate customs and ceremonies. [9] Each choreographer and dancer has

their own set of customs and ceremonies that are the result of personal and community influences and acceptances. As a choreographer of traditional dance, I am no different in that regard. As a choreographer of contemporary dance I am interested in the customs and ceremonies of colleagues as well as my own, and that is why I enjoy participating in the World Dance Congress each year. It is a way for me to describe my celebrations of dance and to learn more about the customs and ceremonies of dance in different situations.

I see contemporary dance as a worldwide phenomenon. This form of dance exists in many countries and it has a number of universal qualities. One of those qualities is its adaptability to allow for video recording and projection sometimes in simulcast. For the remainder of this report I will write about my impressions of dance in video recordings from the perspective of a dancer and choreographer who is actively working with that medium. This activity has prompted me to redefine how I dance and choreograph and it is only now, as I write this report, that I understand the full benefits of that.

7. Essentials

I record dance with knowledge of the intricacies of choreography and the effort of dance. What is seen in reality can be altered when it is transposed to a video recording. Without elaborate equipment and special effects, the recorded image is close to the original. Because of this, I have considered the customs and ceremonies of my usual dance practice and now only maintain those that compliment the recording of dance for video projection. This does not prevent me from live performance and in fact, live performances are enhanced because of the attention to detail that is included in all aspects of dance preparation and performance.

Although I have been learning and practicing dance for many years, photographing and recording my own dances is very new to me. It takes time and patience and I am fortunate that I have a private studio to use at any time. The studio space, although small and with limits, is adequate for this stage of learning and I have found suitable outside venues in public areas as well. The crucial factor is preparation time and I am still in the process of simplifying schedules and activities to accommodate this preparation time.

With regard to the form of the dance that I record, the style that is evolving is a combination of several different styles. What is common to these styles and important to the quality of the image that is recorded is correct body alignment and purposeful placement. Yoga, Pilates, martial arts and ballet have all contributed to my dance training in the past. Now, I rely on what I see in the recordings of my practice sessions to make corrections to my own dance form and style. This method of training or more accurately, re-training my self to dance is very recent and I am a long way from the visual image I am planning to show in complete dances. The processes I have adopted are personally rewarding and

I have learnt much more about dance and associated arts than I ever imagined. As this is all closely linked to the guidelines I have devised for the content of my website it is time now in this report to focus on those guidelines and the key influences.

8. An international approach

I have described how the official Dance Day messages support how I participate in Dance Day each year. For the rest of the year I am guided by the overview of international dance that is presented through the various permanent programmes of the International Dance Council at www.cid-unesco.org. This overview through circulars and programme details, gives me an impression of world trends in dance and I choose from that impression the direction that is most suitable for my practice as I see it. Folk dance has in the past been a primary influence and continues to inform the current practice as it evolves. Folk dances are cultural footprints and are an endless source of ideas for choreography when you know where and how to look. Because I am very familiar with folk dance from various regions I can easily recognise the idiosyncrasies of cultural style and human condition that are shown in these dances. It is not difficult to translate chosen qualities from these dances into new dance phrases for contemporary dance and that is exactly how I work. I know that the qualities I choose have passed the rigours of cultural and social scrutiny in the original form of the folk dances that were choreographed for public performance. I can confidently transpose these qualities into contemporary dances through a series of dance phrases and transitions and that is my focus now.

I have learnt and continue to learn folk dances from different countries by attending classes, watching groups and individuals perform both live and through video recordings and television, by reading books and browsing the content of websites. Folk dance is a rich field of ideas for dance at any time and offers artistic relief from the sometimes confusing analysis associated with the oeuvre of contemporary and modern dance. Folk dance is dance that has survived cultural, social, artistic and scientific review and stabilizes the volatile and/or controversial nature of the contemporary modalities for choreography that are accepted without questions being asked about the reasons for these modalities.

I have learnt with experience that the acceptance of dance form varies from one community to another. What is considered entertaining dance in one place might not translate the same message to another. However, some of the modalities for teaching dance are universal. Safety and respect should be expected qualities in any situation for dance. The rigorous nature of folk dance is as good a platform as any for safety and respect and that is why folk dance always has priority in my list of activities for dance. I have already gained considerable knowledge from this dance form and there is no reason why that learning should not continue. The basic movements of folk dance are the basic movements of life. Walking, sitting, skipping, twirling, standing still, jumping and hopping are all movements

associated with folk dance of some kind and the performance of any one of these movements can be considered a precursor to dance. It is the choreographer who sets these movements in the context of dance and original choreography is an internationally recognized modality.

9. Originality as a guideline for website content

There are thousands of websites for dance and the International Who's Who in Dance [10] is a comprehensive resource that includes contacts of dance that might not be found on any other website. It is my responsibility to report on my own approach to dance as clearly and concisely as possible and that is what I am attempting to do. The glossary acts as I kind of anchor for page content. It provides at least one source for definition and readers are welcome to email a request if more information is required. I enjoy writing about my activities for dance in my hometown and that is one of the reasons for maintaining an on-line journal.

The studio practice page contains a list of projects and works in progress and the pages linked to those lists include photographs and video recordings. The video recordings I see as valuable to my personal dance practice because they show a record of progress. Each new recording I see as an improvement on the one previously shown and that is encouraging me to endeavour to be as original and authentic as possible. For now, that originality and authenticity is achieved by documenting a collection of short dance phrases that can later be used in the choreography of longer dance works. To conclude this report, I will briefly explain some of the methodologies for making those dance phrases.

10. Groundsteps dance phrases

For most of my dancing career I have performed dances that are made from intricate steps and specific arm movements. These dances were traditional and from a culture not of my own. Now that I choreograph my own dances I realise the value of having a recognised collection of steps from which to at least find beginnings for dances and some kind of connecting style. Now, as an experienced performer of dance I have the task of equalling the standard set by the original choreographers of those dances and applying that standard to a practice for dance that reflects my own culture. I begin with one or two small movements that show an understanding of the theme of the dance and the musical composition and then I build sets of short dance phrases from that simple beginning. With very basic transitions I connect the dance phrases until I have formed a dance that is of the required duration. For now, I have set a limit of two to four minutes.

Video 1 is a recording of one of the dance phrases I recently choreographed. The phrase is in its first stages of development and at the time of making the recording I had not begun to work on improving technique and composition. The

music is popular music played by a baroque style band and has a lively tempo. Here is a step-by-step description of how the phrase was choreographed:

1. I choose the tempo of the dance phrase and then find music to suit that tempo.
2. I listen to the music many times to understand the rhythm and intonation.
3. With improvisation, I begin to feel the connection of the music to the ideas for the look and feel of the dance.
4. From that improvisation I choose one key movement that I can remember easily and is comfortable to dance. That movement becomes the core of the dance phrase.
5. I practice the core movement several times with and without the music until I can perform that movement freely and with little effort.
6. The core movement is recorded and viewed immediately.
7. If changes are to be made they are made now and I repeat the practice and recording stages until I am satisfied that a reasonable phrase can now grow from that movement.
8. Steps and movements are gradually added to this core movement until a dance phrase is made.
9. The objective is to make a phrase that is at least eight counts in length
10. Recordings are made and checked as the phrase grows until there is a satisfactory recording of the whole phrase.
11. This recording is studied over at least a week before a new recording of the phrase is made.
12. During several weeks, the process is repeated and each time the original dance phrase is added to with a new phrase choreographed in the manner described for that original phrase.

The collection of phrases could be seen as a dance. The addition of a costume, make-up, lighting and other elements to make a dance performance are added over time as well. This is how I practice choreography, the art of dance.

11. Performance

Sometimes there are scheduled community concerts or gatherings. When I am invited to perform at any of these events I choose one of the dances from the Groundsteps repertoire. For now, these dances are those documented as projects on the website. A new set of dances is now scheduled for production.

Summary

My methodology for choreography is a meticulous application of accumulated knowledge regarding dance as a cultural activity. I have adopted a multidisciplinary approach and concentrate on choreography that looks the best within the frame of the camera lens and can be performed live to an audience if

required. I have learnt that this can be different to choreography solely for performance on stage and I am still researching ways for make interesting dances suitable for recording and public viewing. It is a full time study requiring many hours of effort and I am pleased when I can show any of the results to an appreciative audience. I base my approach on thoughtful reflection and consistent practice; it is reflective choreography for an international forum.

Footnotes

1. Katerina Pavlaki, Dance techniques and dance styles. Relations an differences in the proceedings of 18th World Congress on Dance Research, 3-7 November 2004.

‘I have tried with my experience to analyze this difficult matter because especially the last years with the continuous introduction of new dance styles we have lost the bases of it all.’

2. The URL for the website is: <http://web.mac.com/judithchestnut/>

3. Alkis Raftis, World Dance Day message 29 April 2003.Available at: http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/dance_day.html [Accessed 27 July 2007]

4. Alkis Raftis, World Dance Day message 29 April 2003.Available at: http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/dance_day.html [Accessed 27 July 2007]

5. Alkis Raftis, World Dance Day message 29 April 2004.Available at: http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/dance_day.html [Accessed 27 July 2007]
‘ One of the lines of action of the International Dance Council CID is to persuade governments to create high level dance departments in universities. It is to this objective that this year's World Dance Day is dedicated.’

6. Alkis Raftis, World Dance Day message 29 April 2004.Available at: http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/dance_day.html [Accessed 28 July 2007]
‘Let us combine our actions, let us orchestrate our music by escaping the cacophony of isolated sounds.

Dancers of the world, unite!’

7. Alkis Raftis, World Dance Day message 29 April 2004.Available at: http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/dance_day.html [Accessed 28 July 2007]
We believe that caring for children is the cornerstone of human progress

8. Extract from an email message "International Dance Council CID (ME702155)" president@cid-unesco.org received 3 February 2007:
‘Organizers have full freedom to define the content of the event.
Make sure that you include general information on the art of dance, its history,

its importance to society, its universal character. This can be done in a short speech, a note in the program, a text distributed to those present. By adding this dimension you make the event different from dance activities taking place any other day.

Read a message from a prominent personality, a poem, a passage from a text by a famous author.'

9. From the glossary at the website of Judith Chestnut Choreography.
<http://web.mac.com/judithchestnut/>

10. The International Who's Who in Dance. Available at: <http://www.cid-unesco.org/html/directory.html> [Accessed 30 July 2007]

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Attachments

Photograph 1: The finale of the Celtic Brass concert.

Photograph 2: School dance team, Dance Day 2005

Photograph 3: Invited guests dancing, Dance Day 2006

Photograph 4: Rowan Chestnut, June 2007

Photograph 5: University students, Dance Day 2007

Video 1: A demonstration of a choreographed dance phrase in production

About the author

Ms Judith Chestnut is a teacher, choreographer and performer of dance. 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.