

Dance Making

Different points and alternative ideas for choreography

By

Monja Boonzaier

Index

Introduction

Presentation of developed movement explorations

Internal exploration

Internal inspiration

Theme and Variation

Introduction

A workshop designed to demonstrate some of the many approaches to movement creation available to the choreographer that do not rely upon formal dance technique.

Coming from a dance background where so much emphasis is placed on the learning, memorising and exact reproduction of any given movement. I find it easy to visually perceive and understand a physical activity. Such emphasis on external shape focuses on the more superficial qualities of movement.

My dance training began in South Africa, with my roots planted firmly in the world of Classical ballet. But my dance took me overseas, and the experiences gained there were revolutionary. When I first arrived in Britain to study at the London School of Contemporary Dance, I was shocked by the inadequacy of my own choreographic, expressive and improvisational skills.

Undoubtedly it was the solid technical background obtained in South Africa that allowed me to study abroad, but my personal creativity was stunted by my own ability to see beyond technique the constant desire to produce aesthetic beauty through line and shape. Gradually, after watching and working with some of the best dancers and choreographers from around the world, I was able to move beyond the purely technical and begin to explore different approaches to the creation of expressive movement.

Such belief that dance can transcend mere technique is perhaps best expressed by contemporary German choreographer Pina Bausch, for whom “movement is not about technique or virtuosity, nor even primarily about rhythm and shape...movement for her is, above all, a process of discovery of human beings who, as they move, discover each other and themselves.”

From a technical perspective my dance training allowed me to focus on a goal to increase flexibility, strength, co-ordination and ease of movement. This created a sense of discipline, which made me strive for precision and perfection in order to be the best technical dancer I can possibly be.

From a choreographic point of view, in my opinion this is a learnt skill. Dance technique did not necessarily teach me how to develop my own movement style or rather how to interpret someone else's movement style (whether learning a piece of choreography or learning a dance phrase in technique class or in auditions). I could also not break away from my habitual movement patterns (preferred movements/movements you like to do or find easy to do). When creating my own work I always question where and how to start, does the movement look good? Does the movement suit the music or visa versa? How does one address the above issues?

My technical training combined with an understanding of other learning methods allowed me to successfully make that transition from the purely external aspects of movement to the deeper internal kinaesthetic understanding of the body to enhance creative movement potential.

This is not to suggest that one should abandon traditional dance training (let us remember that all the greatest contemporary choreographers invariably use dancers with very solid technical backgrounds), or to cast a blanket criticism over the state of dance in this country.

I attended dance performances at the FNB Dance Umbrella 2004, a choreographic platform for all forms of new South African choreography and would like to use this event as an example.

We have developed a unique style of movement through the fusion of traditional ballet techniques, African dance, Jazz and elements of western contemporary dance, which not only works well but also is specific to South Africa. However, both choreographically and from a movement perspective all the work that I have observed during the Dance Umbrella did not differ substantially.

Dance critic Adrienne Sichel addressed the discerning questions of viewers when she wrote: "Are SA's dance makers treading the bored? Why does it all look so similar?" (The Star, March 2004)

In her article Sichel addresses the issue of the desperate need for South African dance to develop a choreographic centre, diverse training strategies and sustained funding.

"Another insight provided by Dance Umbrella performances, from community to professional level, is that the achievements of the past democratic decade are beginning to erode badly. Why? Training methods in various institutions have stagnated or are too one tracked."

Sichel also talks about SA dance institutions and how they nurture highly talented dancers who are hitting a conceptual and technical ceiling. In short, Sichel believes that something needs to happen in Choreographic training.

Perhaps it is time to cast our inspirational net wider still, and by doing so, equip a new generation of dancers with skills from the wider world of contemporary dance?

My intensive dance training both from a technical and choreographic level has led me to discover a more internal understanding of movement. I have learned how to develop my own movement style (which of course is an ongoing process) and how to respond to and articulate movement within my own body. In order to achieve this I had to learn how to become aware of certain influences, for example, developing an interest in fine art and then exploring my emotional and intellectual responses to it in physical form. Also, by engaging in Body/Mind activities (Such as Pilates and Feldenkreis), and Martial Art forms (Aikido, Thai Chi etc.), I learned how to open myself up to more options of expression, communicate more fully with others and expand my potential to create new movement ideas.

I returned to this country with a hope of sharing some of the choreographic methods and dance experiences I found so inspiring whilst living and working abroad. Whilst never forgetting the dance

traditions of our country, they should be seen as launch-pads from which to begin creative journeys, rather than barriers to artistic expression, which they can so easily become.

To develop the sort of skills mentioned above would inevitably be a long process, and they would ideally be taught side by side with traditional techniques, but in this way we could truly revolutionise the teaching of dance in South Africa.

This workshop aims to look outside the field of recognised dance technique, and to demonstrate how choreographic inspiration and improvisational skills can be produced from unusual and unlikely stimuli. To achieve this we will explore improvisational skills using props, activities, touch voice and music. These movement explorations will be written out and handed to participants at the start of the workshop.

Props and activities: Which by their nature can facilitate expression

Touch: How contact can facilitate more choices to movement, allowing one to focus consciously or unconsciously on different body parts. It allows quality of movement to be embodied from within which leads to a different pathway of expression.

Voice and sound: Used to produce different qualities to movement. Either starting with a sound stimulus to see what movement and mind states arises, or beginning with a movement to investigate what sound quality emerges. Also, movement to music that suggests certain expressive qualities, for example, drumming.

The overall aim of the workshop is to approach the above with creativity, openness and curiosity.

Presentation of developed movement explorations

Internal exploration

Aim & Objective: Stimulating the senses by looking at what mind states arises when listening to a piece of music. In other words what feelings and emotions does a particular musical piece evoke inside you whilst the music is played. Music can stimulate the senses and bring initiation, attention and intension to the body and mind in order create movement. We will be exploring this idea in two parts.

Activity: Lying comfortably on your back with your eyes closed, letting go of everything. Allow your feet to fall apart at a comfortable distance from each other, arms along sides and head resting on the floor. As you are lying down be attentive to the contact your body has with the floor, noticing what body parts are touching and which ones are not

Once feel everybody has surrendered themselves enough to the floor, I will play a piece of music of choice to the students for approximately 1 min.

Whilst listening to the music, students should allow themselves to be open for any image, smell, colour, emotions and feelings to arise.

After +/- 1min the practitioner stop the music and hand a piece of paper and pen to each of the students.

The paper is only handed out afterwards because if handed out before it may provoke suspicion of having to write something, it could affect their creative ability. Without giving students too much time ask them to write down key components of whatever thought or feeling arose whilst listening to the music.

Example A

The music could make one think of a certain activity like swimming/floating on water, jumping, flying if this is the case write down the activity, if it evoked a stimulating feeling write it down for example sensuous, sexy, pulsating, rhythmic etc. If it created an image you can write it or even draw a picture, it does not necessarily have to be a work of art. If for example you visualised a happy face could you perhaps draw an expressive line or image to support the thought.

You can write as many things down as you want. When you are finished fold the paper in half so that practitioner can see when everyone has completed the task.

Students will be asked to pass the paper to the person next to them, everyone will get a chance to read out what has been written. This is to show that everybody thinks and feels differently. The person who reads what you wrote might be completely stumped, question or even find it funny by what you wrote, it does not matter because everyone is unique, what gives meaning to you does not necessarily mean the same to the next. There is no right or wrong. Just by listening to music it can suggest certain expressive qualities and that could be a starting point to the creation of a movement idea.

Give the piece of paper back to your partner, look again at what you wrote and without spending too much time, create movements from the words you wrote down.

Example B

If the music made you think of flying/floating, you could create a 'hovering' movement (Balancing on one leg with arms extended out in space)

If the music evoked a rhythmic feeling inside you, could you mimic the rhythm with body parts.

If the music reminded you of a specific smell what is it? Does it remind you of a particular place? Are you wearing something specific? What about colour? This idea has the potential to develop into something more theatrical.

Your movements can be expressed literally or in an abstract way, movement ideas can be linked or on their own, they don't have to be in a specific order.

Divide the class into two groups and allow them to show their movement ideas to one another.

Return to partner who read your words to the class, read each other's thoughts again and teach one another your phrases or movement ideas. Split into the same groups again and show to the rest of the class. This is to show how movement can change when mimicking/copying/interpreting someone else's movement idea. This is a very important aspect to consider when learning a piece of choreography.

Return to partner and combine each other's phrases, you do not have to use all the movements, you don't necessarily need to be in unison, explore!

The phrases are then shown to the class first, without the music and then with.

Open discussion about the creative process.

Internal inspiration

Aim & Objective: Looking at daily activities of a human being through a picture to allow a deeper awareness of the body structure. Different poses and shapes can create dimension of physicality and can encourage a vocabulary of movement ideas. We will follow a similar process as Internal Exploration. This exercise will rely more on visual stimuli.

We all have bodies and as dancers it is important to look and feel it inside and out. To have an innate interest in the human body can be another tool to explore dynamic movement. The moving image could demonstrate an activity, a dynamic line or shape which could lead to an action or demonstrate the rate of a movement for example, speed. Looking at a limb can demonstrate a sense of dynamism (balance/strength/weighted) and can be a starting point of movement initiation. Anatomy is included in most dance institutions from a more theoretical perspective, which imposes learning and memorising of muscles, tendons, bones and ligaments but what does it teach the dancer functionally? Are you able to implement various planes, rates and directions of movement and have an understanding of where it is all coming from?

After studying picture visual awareness will be transformed into movement using props and creating sounds to support the movements. Entering inside the picture we are exploring another possibility of stimulating the senses by engaging in what we see. Visual imaging can be another model/journey to self expression and stimulate physical and sensory awareness to enhance creative movement potential.

Activity: Making yourself comfortable, finding your own space in the room. Dance practitioner will hand out a copy of a life drawing of the human body in action. (All students will look at the same picture, to support the idea different interpretation to a specific idea or activity, in this case a picture) Students will examine the picture and address the following questions..

- What does the picture provoke? (shape/size/dimension/activity/feelings/sensations)
- What details catches your attention?
- Do you like the picture?

When looking at a picture try to engage in what the picture conveys, also look at what dynamic actions might be happening before and after in the picture

Practitioner hand out a new sheet of paper.

Students will be asked to analyse the picture and write down or draw characteristic qualities from the picture using the following words as a guideline (see attached picture of foot ball player).

Example



Activity: For example looking at a picture of a football player

Prop: The picture might show two players tackling each other

Movement: Tackle, Twist for example are movement actions one can see in the picture (a particular movement can also be drawn)

Sound/voice: Imaginative sounds, for example: breathing and shouting.

Students can write as many words as they want, but at least one example to each of the above. Remember, the more things you write or draw the bigger the toolbox to create with.

Practitioner will read the following list of words out to the students and ask them to write it on the same sheet of paper

- Pull
- Push
- Rotate
- Flex
- Extend
- Squat
- Lunge

Students will now be asked to create movement from the characteristic qualities of the picture and incorporate the words on the list above. Some movements can be repeated but with a different functional activity,

Looking at the activity of the football player (tackling action) one can take the body position as a starting point.

It looks as if the player is going down to the floor so there we have the squatting aspect of the movement, with the body bent forward showing flexion. The prop in this case is a ball, one could use the same prop if available or replace it with something completely different, a piece of clothing for example. One can explore some of the above movement actions using the prop, for example pulling of your shirt. Analysing the movement action one could interpret tackling as a fall, when falling to the floor in order to get up pulling, pushing and lunging is involved. When standing up the body is extended. I have included all of the above, one can now create a short phrase either repeating the same phrase over or add repetitions to some of the movements to make the phrase longer.

Divide the class into 3 groups, giving each of the students a chance to perform their solo phrase. If one has more time one can ask students to perform the phrase one at a time.

Open discussion about the creative process.

Theme and Variation

Aim and Objective: How to facilitate more choices in a learnt movement phrase and how to embody one's own movement style when learning a choreographed movement phrase.

Often dancers get so occupied with perfection when learning a phrase that it prevents them from bringing their own movement style and personality to the movement. By bringing yourself to the movement instead of the movement to you oneself, it is possible to create a unique presence which shows individuality. When creating choreographic work I feel the more one works with the individual the more one is able to bring out the best in that person and the more successful the process of putting something unique together.

Activity: Practitioner will be teaching a movement phrase to the class to a piece of music, spending very little time on the learning, memorising and exact reproduction of the phrase. Practitioner will expect students to learn quickly. The class will repeat the phrase a couple of times together and will then be asked to work on their own.

Students have to take whatever they can remember of the phrase and choose a different starting point

Example

Facing away from the audience or starting the phrase lying on their backs, sitting on a chair, using only the right hand and right leg or doing the phrase back to front.

If the student only remembers one movement they can repeat that movement until the music stops or if they suddenly remember more they can continue the phrase.

The class is divided into 4 groups and each group has a chance to show.

When observing the individual groups performing the phrase, look at individual performance as well as the group as a whole. Who knows, this might be a choreographic piece that can stand on its own!

Open discussion about the creative process.