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## Approach

Many people have beautiful, creative ideas for dances, but few of these are ever realized as choreographic entities. One of the main reasons for this is that it is hard to know how to get from the idea, the flash of insight or inspiration, to the fully completed presentation.

You do not learn to choreograph by reading about it, hearing about it, or by watching the major companies in concert. You learn by choreographing, by experimenting, by creating little bits and pieces and fragments of dances and dance phrases, by playing with the materials of the craft over and over again until they become second nature. You learn by getting your ideas out and into movement, onto a body (yours or someone else's), giving your dance an independent existence. But where does one begin? and how? Can choreography be taught? Every book on creativity, after paying respect to the flash of insight, discusses discipline and technique of the craft, and the craft of choreography, like a symphony, includes a wide range of parts.

### *Isolating Choreographic Elements*

In building an understanding of these parts—the concepts fundamental to choreography—it becomes necessary to focus on one at a time. While we separate in order to analyze, we

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know that any one aspect does not exist independently of another; you cannot deal with time in movement without involving space and energy as well. Yet we will analyze and deal with them separately in theoretical and practical terms for educational ends: to help identify their nature and the extent of their potential. The separation fosters an awareness of their distinctiveness. For example, curved space need not be linked with sustained flow, although almost invariably it will be dealt with in this way, especially by beginners. Some elements seem naturally to call forth or be affined to others as in Laban's Effort/Shape affinities.<sup>1</sup> By providing movement experiences and resulting discussions that isolate the one element in question (such as curved space), and approaching it via many different possibilities of time and force (percussive/sustained, fast/slow, strong/gentle), we help isolate, for example, the concept "curved" and its purely spatial nature. The reintegration of the parts occurs naturally since it is inherent in the phenomenon of dance.

#### *Combining Theory and Practice*

Choreography is often taught using the "knowledge by description" method, whereby the teacher gives instructions (which may or may not include discussion of the choreographic concept) and then makes the assignment. An example may be described or even shown. The teacher's input is cognitive, leading to a head approach rather than an organic one. Exploration in working out the problem is limited. There is a tendency to use the initial and therefore standard or most familiar response. How many times have we heard from beginning choreographers, "I spent hours in the studio, but nothing came"; worse yet, what is produced is thin or trite. So while the student may have explored, experienced, and created in completing the assignment, it is possible that the fundamental principles underlying the exercise have not been touched upon. If lucky, the dancer was inspired and the responses creative.

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To achieve a synthesis of intuitive and rational knowing, we will be using neither the knowledge-by-description nor the sink-or-swim method. Our approach will be to provide situations, in the form of improvisations, where learning results from experience. This is the way life teaches. One result of this method of teaching is that the student acquires tacit knowledge—knowing something without being able to explain what it is or how you know it, like the taste of a banana; you know it because you have experienced it. Our approach also allows for intuition to come into play (“Intuition,” says Emily Dickinson, “picks up the key that memory has dropped”). Learning by experience is strong, and primal; it precedes knowledge by description. All teaching should use both methods, so that explicit knowledge rests on tacit knowledge, and theoretical and practical knowing can augment and enrich one another. Since dance is so primal, it makes even more sense that choreography be taught in this way. The improvisations serve as a preparation, a mental-physical-emotional “seeding of the bed” out of which your choreography will grow. If, as Murray Louis says, “improvisation is the practice of creativity,” then choreography as a skill which can be taught and learned is the means and the method whereby creativity can be structured.<sup>2</sup> This approach then is organic, which is a major, perhaps the major, prerequisite needed to produce solid choreography.

The improvs (*improv* is a commonly used, short form of improvisation) are a way of putting the analyzed, theoretical material into the soma-psyche (body-spirit). Metaphorically, the improv is a river whose banks, although they define the overall shape and flow of the waters, are elastic and permeable. They are the instructions or outline of the improv as articulated in this book or by the improv leader; they define the choreographic element to be focused on. The waters are the actual movement responses that flow within and between the banks, the dancers’ exploration of the specific focus of the improv.

### *Using Improvisation*

“Dance improvisation fuses creation with execution. The dancer simultaneously originates and performs movement without preplanning. It is thus creative movement of the moment.”<sup>3</sup> Improvisation is a way of tapping the stream of the subconscious without intellectual censorship, allowing spontaneous and simultaneous exploring, creating, and performing. Improvisation emerges as an inner-directed movement response to an image, an idea, or a sensory stimulus. We do not say you have to improvise in order to choreograph. We accept the idea that movements, like ideas, can spring full-blown and fully formed from the creator. We do say that improvising is one good way to experience and learn choreographic concepts.

Once the choreographic concepts are experienced improvisationally, they begin to become internalized. With time, these experiences will be automatically incorporated into your way of working. There will be no outside set of rules to remember each time you put a dance together, no check list, no do's or don'ts; only a richer store of experience from which to draw, and possibly a few tricks of the trade to lean on in moments of despair.

Learning includes experiencing, analyzing, reflecting, integrating, and evaluating. Analyzing separates and defines, allowing attention to detail and clarity; the process of reflecting adds objectivity and develops perspective; integrating synthesizes, yields understanding, and spurs creativity; evaluating develops a critical eye and discriminating judgment. They are not separate processes but an interwoven one: separate . . . to view objectively . . . to integrate at a different level . . . to redefine again . . . to create anew. The entire process is constantly at work. So we analyze dance into its components, experience them in improv with an eye to specific detail, critique the results, but in actuality we are already experiencing them as an integrated whole—as dance.

The improvising spirit allows itself to be carried along,

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ready to indulge in (and take advantage of) whatever visions present themselves; ready too, to follow the “road less taken.” The choreographing spirit sees the fleeting images, the barely noticed motions, imprinting them internally as it continues on its way. Improvising and choreographing become one as the processes (creating movement and critically crafting and forming it) work together. As the movement is flowing out, it is being shaped and developed by intuition interlocked with skill into a finer and finer organic, aesthetic whole.

To all of this, the choreographer brings an inner attitude, a commitment to create, mold, and give form. The intimate act of choreography is an inner process, begun in a creative encounter with movement and pursued and refined with aesthetic sensibility.

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# Essentials

*Know what your intention is—then say it with clarity and simplicity.*

### ***Intention, Motivation, and Clarity***

#### *Short & to the Point*

Put your arm out. Gather something and bring it in. Try it with different intentions: evil, caring, sneaking, tenderness, teasing, hoarding, loving, destroying, saving.

Let's face it, we should know what we are trying to say with movement. Part of this responsibility lies with the dancer, but it is the choreographer who must not only choose and create the movements, but imbue them with an interpretation, an attitude, a purpose. She is the one who envisions the piece and motivates its growth.

There is no rule that says which comes first—theme, intention, motivation, or even a specific movement phrase. Choreography “is brought into the world in a number of ways: through the senses or the mind; through the heart or the gut; into the fingers or the eye or the backbone or the legs.”<sup>1</sup> The trigger varies from time to time and from person to person. Sometimes there is an inner necessity to grapple with, shape, and communicate some pressing idea, creating a passion that forces the blood to speak through the muscle. In dance, such passion can lead to an inspired work if and when the choreo-

graphic realization of the idea is fresh and creative in its own unique way.

But this is not always the case. Sometimes there isn't a clear intention; there is only an inner drive, a restless energy, vague and undirected, a need to create. And sometimes for a while that vague nudge has no clearly defined, identifiable intent or theme. Often the choreographic process itself includes discovering and defining the theme and intention. The choreographer goes to the studio and begins to work, and in the working, in the moving, something happens, something connects, something becomes important, and almost on their own, the theme and intention self-clarify.

Alwin Nikolais describes his highly intuitive approach: "I prefer to drop a simple, single idea into my brain and let it rummage around for several months, with no particular efforts toward consciousness on my part. Then, two or three weeks before I begin to choreograph, I attempt to cast up the results of the Rorschach process. Then I like to choreograph swiftly and within a short span of time. I feel that in this outpouring I keep the channels of my subject open. Even here, I do not over-question it."<sup>2</sup>

Paul Taylor says, "I don't know where the ideas come from. If I waited for inspiration, I'd never get anything done. Choreography is a craft after all. I just get busy in the studio and sometimes when I start I haven't got a clue what we're going to do. I just start. If it doesn't lead anywhere, then I start over. But once you get going it doesn't have to be the beginning or the middle or the end of a dance. I find that it takes over if you let it. There's no lack of ideas; it's harder to eliminate them and get what you want."<sup>3</sup>

Such "getting what you want" refers to clarity of intent—and the clearer you are about your intent, the more specific you are, the better chance you have to get your idea across. "With clearness of articulation there comes clearness of communication," says Murray Louis.<sup>4</sup> It is this clarity and intention that is of concern to us as creative and communicative

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artists. The point that William Strunk makes about written composition applies to dance composition as well: even if you are being intentionally obscure, do so clearly; go roundabout in a straightforward fashion.<sup>5</sup> There is a distinct difference between a dance being chaotic and a dance making a clear statement about chaos.

As the intention and theme become clear and a purpose and plan emerge, motivation continues to provide the energy, endurance, resiliency, and sense of humor that keeps you going. *Motivation* is that inner drive or impulse that causes a person to do something. It can make you do a hundred pliés or improvise on some image for hours, throwing out endless amounts of material because they are not exactly right. It is clarity of intention at an intuitive or rational level which helps you to determine which material fits and which can be thrown away.

“What do you want your audience to take home with them?” asks choreographer Marion Scott, when teaching. That points to everything from “What is your choreographic intention?” to “Why are you doing this piece?” to “What are you trying to say?”

“If I could say it, I wouldn’t dance it,” comes the reply.

Too often, that is an easy way of avoiding the issue, for the choreographer must know (and know very specifically) what her intention is. It is not enough, for example, to want to present or elicit fear—precisely what kind of fear? Anxiety, fright, apprehension, temerity, paranoia, shyness, terror, dread, shock? Is the dancer threatened, trapped, endangered, timid, alarmed, uneasy, panic-stricken, dismayed, or frantic? The same holds true for movement that is not emotionally motivated: in doing an arm circle are you interested in its gravity and momentum, taking advantage of the suspension at the crest? Do you want the descent controlled? Is the arm weak, flaccid, loose, passive, or limp? If the motion speeds up, how and when is that accomplished? The motion and emotion of the gesture have to be made explicit, as do its cause, focus,



purpose, and relationship to the other dancers and the rest of the dance.

Fortunately, we are dancers. We do not have to verbalize all the miniscule aspects of our intention. It's fine if we can or wish to, but as Carol Scotthorn says, admonishing her students at UCLA, "Show it. We have to see it. It can't stay in your head."

What it is varies. The choreographer's intention can run the gamut from delighting the eye (or confusing it) to spurning insights, arousing memories, eliciting emotional or kinesthetic responses, raising consciousness. It can express the joy of moving, provide surprises, or exasperate.

Anna Sokolow says that in *Rooms* she "wanted to do something about people in a big city. The theme of loneliness and noncommunication evolved as I worked. . . . I have never told stories in dance, though I have always been strongly dramatic. I never plan a dance. I do it, look at it, and then say: 'Yes, I see what I am trying to do,' . . . [as in] 'Dreams,' which was my indictment of Nazi Germany. When I started, I had only the idea of dreams, but they became nightmares, and then I saw they were related to the concentration camps. Once this has happened, I intensified the theme by focusing on it."<sup>6</sup>

Choreographic intention exists on both conscious and pre-conscious levels. That is why it so often happens that a spectator will see something in a piece that the creator hadn't actually planned on. Possibly it was not the main intention, but part of a hidden or unrecognized one, latent in the labyrinth of the choreographer's subconscious. The spectator's discovery will also be due in part to what he brings to the piece from his own experiences and ideas. Remember that you, as creator, only provide the feast; you cannot control how it will be eaten, what it will taste like on different palates, when it will be digested. What you can control is the extent to which you "make the outer in harmony with the inner feelings."<sup>7</sup> Every movement in your dance must serve that dance and that

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dance only. If you are true to this principle in your choreography, all the movements will be valid and help fulfill your intention.

### ***Theme***

Intention makes use of a *theme* as its vehicle. A theme is analogous to the syllabus for a course, the plot or story line of a play; it is that which all else clusters around, your subject; or it can simply be the dance's face, its personality. Usually the more specific it is, the better your chances for clarity. There are millions of themes, though not all of them are suitable for dance. But they do tend to fall into general categories, and it is a good idea (especially for the emerging choreographer) to try a variety of them: a drama or story, personal relationships, the basic elements of movement (space, time, energy) and combinations thereof, pure movement themes, symbolic themes, characterizations, tangibles and intangibles, styles. A given theme could have any of several treatments. For instance you could deal with prejudice symbolically (squares/circles), in terms of characters (slave/master), stylistically (classical ballet/modern dance), motionally (strong, harsh movements/sweet, gentle ones), or dramatically ("Kill the Martians; they're green"). Of course, there are crossovers among these in which one or more are combined in pursuit of your specific intent.

Whatever the theme, the important thing is that it can be expressed in movement. Metaphysical issues, theories of political systems, socioeconomic paradigms—these are simply not suitable dance material. Leave them to the academicians and philosophers, where such analysis and intellectual pursuits rightly belong. This does not, of course, preclude the creation of dances that make social commentary or take stands on moral or political issues. However, all-encompassing themes, such as "all the possible relationships between two

men," are unrealistic choreographically because of their tremendous breadth or their too general nature.

Over the years, choreographers have drawn their themes mainly from dance movement itself (all the aspects of the human body moving in time and space molded by a sense of form and style), or from man (his passions and his relationships).<sup>8</sup> According to Merce Cunningham, "the ideas of the dance come both from the movement and are in the movement."<sup>9</sup> José Limón said, "It was Doris Humphrey who first taught me that man is the fittest subject for choreography. And Martha Graham continues triumphantly to prove that his passions, grandeurs, and vices are the ingredients of great dance, great theatre, and great art."<sup>10</sup>

### ***Simplicity***

Dealing as we are in the larger-than-life arena that the stage is, tackling the complexities of the human condition, of the boundless possibilities for body movement, of theme and anti-theme, the overriding criterion is simplicity. Simplicity does not preclude complexities, subtleties, and nuances, but it does demand that they be presented in a perceivable and more or less accessible fashion. Accessibility to the viewer depends in turn on the artistic or philosophic goal: should dance be pure entertainment, served up for easy consumption, appreciation, comprehension? or should it be a challenge to the spectators' perceptions and ideas? In either case, each detail of the dance must work toward that identified goal. To paraphrase William Strunk, Jr.: A dance should have no unnecessary parts; this requires not that the choreographer make all his dances short nor that he avoid all detail, but that every movement tell.<sup>11</sup>

Strive for a lean, elegant statement. Such a clear statement emerges when all component parts are coherently channelled to make one instantly perceived and acknowledged artistic

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truth. It is from such simplicity that one can build a complexity that has integrity, clarity, and purpose. And it is only as we clarify the specifics that we create universals reflecting our collective experiences. Walter Terry, in discussing Martha Graham's work, states: "When in her dances she is concerned with a specific character, situation or plot, she is actually using it as a starting point or perhaps a frame for the revelation of human behavior . . . in order that 'Frontier' may not be just one frontier, but all frontiers—physical, mental, emotional."<sup>12</sup>

### *Artistic Impact*

Know what your intention is—then say it with clarity, and simplicity. As big an order as that is, and as well as you may appreciate and heed its message, there is more. For it is not enough merely to make dances that abide by this guiding and seemingly obvious principle. Limón says, "The artist's function is perpetually to be the voice and conscience of his time."<sup>13</sup> And Pauline Koner's words expand this same idea: "The person who only mirrors his period is not doing what an artist should do: act as a catalyst in society. If he sees only what is, he is not transcending the immediate. The artist should ask: 'How does one challenge this? How does one make life meaningful?' The artist must comment. . . . The work must have a viewpoint."<sup>14</sup> Yet there are artistic works that are intentionally created sans meaning, sans social commentary. Here the artist-choreographer serves a very different, but nonetheless powerful, function, effecting changes in the perceptual world or in the very meaning and range of art itself. Cunningham does this, and so too, in a different but related way, does Murray Louis, who believes the communicative medium of art can lead an audience to new insights, stimulating their senses and "evoking images and sensations that will serve as a link between the outer physical world and the spiritual realm within."<sup>15</sup> Every artist-choreographer knowingly or unwittingly takes a stand and makes a statement

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beyond the content of the dance itself. Each work reveals his attitudes toward the state of the art, his viewpoint about the function of art.

As a work of art, the dance is as specific as it is universal; it points from the known to the unknown or deepens that which is already understood. As artist, the choreographer's restlessness and sense of urgency about sentience takes him beyond craft, ideally to create a unique statement that will involve the perceiver in some meaningful way: a moment of perspective, of recognition, or skittishness or serenity.