

Professorial Reflections: Informal discussions and reflections

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Abstract

We open our issue with ‘Professorial Reflections’ – an informal, but nonetheless productive discussion about researching spirituality in dance and performance studies. We aim to offer this type of discussion, between different leading professors in dance and performance studies, in subsequent issues of DMAS. Our intention here is to open dialogue about spirituality in these fields, through informal discussion and academic chit-chat, with the aim of supporting new areas of research through conversation and reflecting.

Keywords

Dance, spirituality, religion, somatics, ritual, age

Discussion

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B

One of the things that emerges from some of the articles published in *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* is an attempt to define spirituality as separate from religious belief. This seems a very comfortable place to work from.

D

I met neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran at the 2002 'Towards a Science of Consciousness' conference in Tucson, Arizona, and I asked him 'from your background, you were brought up in India, aren't you aware that there is more to life than what science can deal with at the moment?'. He said 'Yes of course I am'. He was very lively and passionate, as he always is, about that as well: 'but I am scientist. As a scientist I can talk only in terms of what science can achieve at any point in time, but I am also trying to push the boundaries of science for science to be able to grasp a little bit more of what is still out there, and which I am aware of'.

Increasing acceptance

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If I look back over the last twenty years that I have been working in this area, you get a completely different response at conferences to the idea of spirituality. In the past, colleagues' responses could range from mild irritation to major concern; nowadays they take up ideas and develop them further.

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That idea of spirituality in dance seems very popular at the present moment as the discipline considers the phenomenon of perception of wholeness with self and the universe that is an integral part of a dancer's experience. For example, there is a conference that is going to take place next March called 'Law and the Curated Body'. It is going to have a significant section that includes contemplative practice as in North America there is an increased inclusion of contemplative practice in programmes/academic environments. Simon Fraser University in British Columbia has actually started a two-year M.A. in Contemplative Practice in Higher Education.

The body and somatics**B**

Spirituality is also strongly linked to somatics, which has a long history in dance, beginning with Mabel Todd's book *The Thinking Body*. The body/mind methodologies integrated with somatics include Alexander, Feldenkrais, Yoga, T'ai Chi and Pilates. Each of these has, as part of its history, a relationship to Asian physical disciplines either directly as in the case of Yoga, T'ai chi, chi gong, or indirectly in the approaches evolved by the founders of the specific somatic approach. Inherent in each of these is a form of contemplation in which the breath, imagery and the exploration of the dancer's somatic

landscape play an integral role in expanding the dancer's proprioceptive and kinaesthetic awareness. This allows them a level of self-understanding that can be incorporated into learning the technical vocabulary of a specific dance form. Also inherent in somatic training that is integrated within contemplative practice is an opportunity for stillness in which the body's neurological structures experience moments of deep calm. Anthony Damasio discusses these moments as opportunities for the dissolution of previous neurological organizations in order to allow for new neurological arrangements. Thus moments of contemplative relaxation promote the opportunity to release muscular tensions and to allow for new pathways of creativity. The experience of creative expression is another area of deep connection that is a spiritual state for dancers.

D

It is always interesting to observe how especially in dance it is necessary to talk about spirituality in terms of the body, because more than many other people, dancers are, by definition of their art and in what they are doing on a daily basis, more aware of their bodies than other people. So anything that will be related to spirituality for the dancer will have to be experienced also in the body. It is in the body anyway, but the dancer is probably most likely able to pinpoint also a spiritual experience in relation to the body: if they have a specific spiritual experience, they are able to say where it is located in their bodies.

When I think about dance and body, what I am thinking about, especially from my knowledge and experience of having seen many South Asian performances, is that I find

that I can often detect without much effort any non-South Asian dancer in a group of South Asian dancers.

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When you say ‘not South Asian’, do you mean in training or in authenticity?

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In authenticity, even if they have trained obviously in the South Asian dance form. In some ways there is a difference and that is probably not just limited to the South Asian context; I would also say that, in very broad terms, if African dance is performed by dancers from Africa it is different to when it is danced by Caucasians who have trained in that particular dance form. There is a different physicality there.

B

I just gave a paper at the Congress on Research in Dance core conference on Edward Said and his homage to a very famous Egyptian dancer called Tahia Carioca and though he does not use necessarily the language of Egyptian aesthetics he is trying to make an argument for an Egyptian aesthetic in relation to what they call *raqs al sharqi* in Egypt, which is what we call belly dancing. His underlying comment was that if you did not learn the dance in Egypt you did not know how to dance because you would not understand the implicit nature of the aesthetic that is embedded within the ritual

formations of Egypt. So you are right, that is true, so how is that related then to spirituality, particularly from a trans-national or cross cultural standpoint? Do you create a new kind of spirituality in relationship to the body or can you say that you really never embody the deeper levels of the original form so therefore your spirituality is defunct? It raises many questions that are often part of contemporary theorizing about performance, spirituality and the body.

D

What could be the reasons for an apparent difference between a dancer of South Asian origin and a dancer not of South Asian origin when they perform in a dance or drama form originating in South Asia? I discussed this a few months ago with my colleagues Arya Madhavan and Sreenath Nair – they had this to say:

The kinds of differences that can be observed may relate to the ways in which movements characteristic of the individual dance and drama styles are being executed by the dancers. For example, a movement may need to come across and be executed in a very gentle and flowing manner, which may be difficult for a non-South Asian performer due to the ways in which their bodies were conditioned within the culture in which they grew up. Their execution of such movements might be sharper. The same applies for martial arts.

Much depends thus on the way the bodies are cultured. In Chinese martial arts, for example, much emphasis is placed on a sitting position, and young

and old can sit in that posture with apparent ease, because they will have learnt it and practiced it from a very young age. The level of experience is important as well. A dancer with less training will be less proficient in their dance, and this will show. Although this applies to both South Asian and non-South Asian performers, there has been a tendency for non-South Asian performers to embark on their training later in life than South Asian performers.

There are clear differences in the structure of the bodies: South Asian performers have a shorter torso in relation to their legs, while non-South Asian performers, in particular Caucasians, tend to have a longer torso, which tends to be similar in length to their lower bodies. Some non-South Asian performers compensate for this by bending lower for some positions, but the difference is obvious. Despite this physical difference, on rare occasions non-Indian dancers can achieve near-Indianness. Perhaps this has to do, in individual cases, with an upbringing close to Indian philosophy, for example as members of the Hare Krishna movement.

The inner cultural context is equally important, and this is exemplified by the lighting of the lamp at the beginning of a South Indian dance performance. They begin a process of transformation that brings them closer to their tradition, leads to concentration and to submission of the ego to the higher purpose.

From my own perspective, I added that the South Asian dancers enter the energy field of their tradition and are thus supported. It stands to reason that someone to whom this tradition is new, and who is thus not part of this energy field, will not have access to it at all, or to a much lower degree.

Social dimension: Ritual

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So the question is: do religious tradition and ritual inspire some form of spiritual experience in the performative dimension of the dancer?

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Also the rituals that go with performance. My daughter Myfanwy was taught for several years in Kudiattam by Arya Madhavan, and even at the age of 8 Myfanwy said that there was a difference if she did the rituals at the beginning of the training and at the end of the training. Recently we had a conference on women in Asian performance and Arya did a brief Kudiattam performance. I noticed that she had forgotten to do the ritual at the end and I reminded her. She said 'Thank you so much' and immediately went back to the performance space and did that particular part of completing the performance. It was something that was very important to her.

B

Dance is a part of rituals to celebrate a variety of occasions from personal life cycles to community and national events. Ethnography provides an opportunity to understand how dance and the moving body are organized as a medium of expression integrated into the ritual and social ethos of the community through a particular aesthetic. As some of the most deeply held beliefs are related to a community's ritual foundations, an understanding of how dance functions within ritual and related spiritual frameworks helps us to understand the implications of dance in secular environments.

For example, traditional ritual forms taught in a dance programme provide an opportunity to understand the latter through an embodiment of the form. For example, this is a description of an African dance class at the University Oregon:

Dance and music are integral to African ceremonies and rituals that relate to many aspects of daily life – welcome, harvest, healing, initiation, possession, and more. Explore African spirituality and the way indigenous spiritual concepts are given form. Learn dances from a variety of cultural groups, while becoming familiar with the ideological and historical contexts that ground such forms of expression through readings, videos, and discussion. This class places a very heavy emphasis on student engagement with the course material. You will attend the performance of *Dance Africa* on campus, and also create and perform an original dance piece with your classmates.

The personal dimension

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In addition to these social aspects, spirituality is eminently personal.

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One of the dance forms I have been completely fascinated with is belly dance. I have just done a second edited volume and I am using my sabbatical year to actually do a single authored book on the form. It looks at the dance form in two ways: on the one hand it looks at its inclusion as part of the second wave of the feminist movement, and on the other hand in terms of the incorporation of a whole mythic dimension of the concept of the goddess. Dancers from the 1970s write about a desire to create a new religion that celebrates a woman's body and negates the patriarchal conception. This attitude has continued to exist, but even more fundamentally, belly dance has become a real place of spiritual development for women from around the world.

Studying belly dance has caused me to contemplate the possibility that we do not respect enough the possibilities of being us, the range of levels of conscious realization that are encompassed in those possibilities: spirituality is about how you conduct your life as an individual or how you conduct your life with a group. You can look at it from many different directions and as far as I am concerned there is not a god out there being beyond

who we are as individuals. For me, spirituality is just completely devoid of religious tradition but at the same time I can see how ritual traditions actually inflect and impact your experience. My spirituality has evolved from the fact that I have been a member of various meditation groups for years and I love the combination of reducing experience to a moment of stillness.

In addition to ritual, which we discussed earlier, the whole area of somatic and spiritual studies stands out for me as a teacher and impacts even on courses not directly related to it. I am teaching two courses, an undergraduate and a graduate course in ethnography and this is where in dance studies, you really see the incorporation of spirituality either directly or indirectly. Certainly all of the studies that come out on African dance on the continent or in the diaspora, including by people that are very theoretical in their approach, people like Barbara Browning, who still actually begins in the language that she uses to discuss, incorporate an attitude of the potential spirituality or the extreme presence of the moment, which is another way I would describe spirituality.

Personal dimension: Choices

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Going back to the observation that spirituality has become an interesting topic for discussion in many contexts over the past few years, including dance, we must realize

that it has become almost an industry, with many approaches to it on offer, including for sale, in bookshops or workshops or courses. While that is exciting and interesting, it also points to a dimension of spirituality that several traditions actually emphasize: the need to be both open and ready, and to differentiate between approaches that are conducive for spiritual development, and approaches that claim to be beneficial for spiritual development but are in fact not, and decide, on the basis of such differentiation, for oneself (not for others) on which approaches to take further.

For example, I recently received a video from German dancer/philosopher Aurelia Baumgartner of her horses, Arab grey, Pegasus, and chestnut mare, Mabrouka, performing with a Butoh dancer. The dancer's movements came across as compacted, strained, a kind of hunched movement possibly deriving from Noh in terms of that form's concentration and the slowness. I am wondering whether much of the energy in Butoh is created in the solar plexus because Pegasus in particular was very interested in that region of the dancer, always having its nostrils near there and on one occasion accidentally touching the dancer's skin and shying back a little, but immediately going back. The themes of Butoh are intentionally dark, 'negative', and in my experience this is reflected in the kind of energy that Butoh generates.

B

They are trying to challenge your conceptions of beauty and I might be a little outside of my knowledge base here because it is something that I have read about and seen performances of, but not immediately practiced. One of the influences is Mary Wigman

and German expressionism, so if you think about expressionism, one of its explicit roles was trying to get you to re-see the world around you. For example, at the time expressionists sought to challenge a view of the landscape that did not see light or did not see relationships between elements. Butoh is actually also trying to have you see things differently and very definitely in terms of the social political elements, not necessarily returning to a concept of the beautiful that is related to the traditional forms of Japanese past. It's not trying to be Kabuki, because that would be how in Japan you would have defined the beautiful, but they are actually trying to get you to rethink beauty and its implication. Particularly after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki you have to ask: how do you then redefine the beautiful when you have had such historically destructive things happen within the context of your society where people's bodies are literally challenged?

I remember the Butoh performance of Kazuo Ohno. I saw him perform at the age of 85. It was in a theatre that held about 2,500 people – so it was a pretty good-sized space. I was mid-way back in the theatre. With minimal gestures you could literally feel the man performing. It was almost like he would move a hand this way and the energy of that movement would reverberate out to the audience. This is one of the things Zeami, the founder of Noh, talks about: you come onstage and learn to breathe with your audience and by breathing with the audience and integrating your breath with that of the audience, you transform the space.

D

When Baumgartner took Pegasus and Mabrouka out of the arena into the paddock, the horses galloped at full speed for a very long time, back and forth, until they were breathing and sweating very heavily, as if they wanted to get rid of the energy they may have picked up from the dancer. Taking several aspects of this encounter with Butoh into account, the dark nature of the energy, the focus of energy on the solar plexus (which as one of the chakras, in the context of Indian philosophy, is a highly sensitive area of the mind/body), and the response of the horses to the Butoh dancer, I come to the conclusion, for myself, that I would rather not encounter more performances, live or recorded, of Butoh, because I'd rather have different kinds of energies circulating in my body that I experience as more conducive to spiritual development. Such a personal choice, which is part of the development of spirituality for everyone, can of course come across as controversial in wider discussion.

Age

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You mentioned already another point that I find very interesting and worth discussing further and that is age in relation to dance, the body, expectations and possibly then taking it further to wisdom and experience and in that sense, spirituality. I remember that in 1993 in Toronto I saw a performance of Chandralekha (1928–2006) who was then 65 years old; her age did not matter in the performance. I also then remembered that I had been at the last performance of the Düsseldorf Prima Ballerina, Tilly Söffing, in the late 1970s. Because my mother is an actress and other actors were there as well, and some of

them knew this dancer, we went backstage afterwards and Söffing, who was in her early 30s at that point, said that her whole body had been in excruciating pain throughout the performance, and that she would now look forward to a long time recuperating in a sanatorium. In the second half of that performance we saw her successor as Prima Ballerina; I think Tilly Söffing had done the fire bird and the new one was the dying swan. She was younger, though not quite young as she had already been in a number of other places for a few years, so there was talk among these acting colleagues of my mother's about how long she would have until her body wouldn't make it anymore, five or six years, and that would be it, and they also talked about what those dancers would be doing when their active careers ended: would they go into a sanatorium for a year and when they got out of there what would they do then, would they become choreographers and artistic directors of ballet companies? When I saw Chandralekha dancing at the age of 65, I realized that there were quite a number of Indian performers who were way beyond that age of western classical ballet dancers and still active and performing well.

Some years ago I attended the performance of a Cardiff-based Bharata Natyam company in Aberystwyth, in the company of Mohiniattam performer Kalamandalam Radhika. She commented that the leading dancer and artistic director of the company was a very good teacher, explaining that judgment with reference to the observation that this dancer's students were better than she was herself, but she and they were appearing onstage together. I asked her whether she could give me examples because I can't see the difference because I am not trained. She said the hands should be bent backwards to a certain level of flexibility and her hands were just not that flexible anymore so she could

not normally bend them to the extent her students could. The students learnt from her and she taught them properly and allowed them to show the better technique, as it were, or execution of the technique onstage next to her.

B

I do think that age is pivotal, particularly in ballet and to a certain extent modern dance, as both are about the body conquering the space.

Some forms I think are more comfortable with the body as they are working with gravity and the earth rather than trying to conquer the earth. In Japan, I attended a celebration of older dancers; nobody was below the age of 70. They were making a real point that you can age and dance in Japan and not have the same kinds of issues that you find in the West in general. What is the relationship between the wisdom/spirituality that the body would have because of its practice for years and years that they are then passing on something spiritual or something aesthetic?

You and I have both had a range of experiences in terms of performance and a range of experiences globally. As you were talking about India I was thinking about my experience of being at a performance in southern Sudan and age is just not an issue. You participate according to your age and there is a real acceptance that it will be different if you are 20 or if you are 70 and everywhere in between, or if you are pregnant or not

pregnant, or if you are male or female, but the group is all moving together in a generalized pattern in relationship to the instrumentations in the centre.

D

So it is considered as something 'normal', and probably in that context nobody would be surprised to see an older person dance and would possibly also not admire an older person because they are dancing because it is something that an older person otherwise does not do?

B

Older people dance, there is no expectation, no critique of it actually fulfilling a certain kind of specific aesthetic.

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I am saying this because there is a television series in the UK called *Britain's Got Talent* (2014) where otherwise unknown people will perform and are selected by the panel and audience; the winner will receive £100,000 and they perform at the Royal Variety Show in front of the Queen. During the 2014 series they had a 79-year-old woman in one of the preliminaries who danced some Latin dance with her dance teacher and everybody was amazed that she could move in that way at her age. There was surprise, praise, astonishment and appreciation because she is so old and so I wonder whether in Sudan there would not be this wonder and this combination of wonderment that she is so old and can still dance like that?

B

No I don't think it operates in the same way. I think it has to do with the function of the form. Everything I saw that takes place in Sudan was really in original format, and rituals serve a different purpose in society and so in a ritual format it was the position of yourself and the community and being with that community in the performance. One ritual in particular is called a Pumbo, in and around the family coming to the point where they can actually cover the graves with cement and the family can take off the white clothes of mourning and go back to normal life. It was a primary ritual that was taking place. There were some things that took place at other points of time but this was the big one that united the community. The dance itself is part of a celebration of being alive and the difference between their lives and our lives is great. They get up with the light and go to bed with the light, they have one set of food to eat in the dry season and another set of food in the wet season, so their relationship to each other and the land is fundamental. There is not this other layer that gets built upon, they operate on a fundamentally different level.

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Maybe the link might be that with increasing age, performers become more at home, familiar, confident with, feel independent in relation to their own tradition and that will have an impact directly, not mediated, on their ability to express any spiritual content that the form has or that the contents they are presenting has. They might be independent even

of their own intellectual knowledge of it: they might not be able to tell you about it, they might not be able to give you a lecture about it, but because it has become embodied to such an extent without the intellectual interference of thinking about it – especially in academic terms – their connection with the spiritual is stronger. That might then explain, or could be related to, this experience that you talked about earlier with this 85-year-old in the large auditorium where every movement, and especially in the Butoh form, reverberates in the whole auditorium and you felt it sitting a good way back.

B

I think that is a good possibility. As you were talking I couldn't help but contemplate my own ageing. There is a deeper realization of the preciousness of being able to move and its impact on others, whether it is playing with my grandchildren or doing T'ai chi in the morning. There is an impact that is constantly on-going, this recognition that as you get older you think a lot about how long you are going to live. All of those factors come together with the way you age, and for me the spiritual component of it is that it is not about me, there is a generosity that I think comes through you in some cases. In terms of what people would tell you about acting, it's the way that you approach the subtext of your character that actually creates the characteristics: it's not the words, it's the subtext that is important, and as you get older your personal subtext changes. In that changing, particularly if you follow any kind of spiritual path in life, I meditate daily and I think it actually transforms how I experience things: only now I am realizing things that my T'ai chi teacher said to me ten to fifteen years ago because you get deeper into a place within your body that is not about how big the gesture or how strong or dynamic it is, it is really

about how subtle and integrated it is within the framework of your entire being and your sense of relationship to the world. I feel like I actually sink into the world's energy and for me that is the most profound spiritual component that ageing has given. I had a kind of energy when I was younger and using up all that energy I felt I couldn't have that deeper love or focus but ageing has given me that.

Reference

Britain's Got Talent (2014, United Kingdom: ITV)

Contributor details

Barbara Sellers-Young is a professor in the Dance Department at York University. Her research on transcultural body has been supported by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies, Davis Humanities Center and the Center for RISK at Charles Sturt University. She is the past president of the Congress on Research in Dance and has taught at institutions in the United States, Australia, China and England. Her books include two single authored books: *Teaching Personality with Gracefulness* and *Breathing, Movement, Exploration* and three edited volumes *Embodied Consciousness: Technologies of Performance*, *Belly Dance: Orientalism, Transnationalism and Harem Fantasy* and *Belly Dance Around the World*.

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