

Full body potential

ARTISTIC ESSAY

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INTRODUCTION

Whilst composing a choreography at the Nova College in Haarlem, I created a piece for a first year class. This incorporated many extreme poses, including deep lunges, wide arm positions and cambrés. The initial result was mediocre; it didn't have the powerful effect I had expected, like warriors engaged on a battlefield. With this in mind I asked the dancers individually to show me their deepest lunge. When doing this they had to imagine their head and neck being stretched up into the air like a swan, their back heel being pushed into the floor like a spade through soil and their front knee being pulled forward by an imaginary rope in a tug-of-war. Every one of them improved significantly. This proves that dancers should always be on the look out for, and incorporate, extravagant, inventive and dynamic ways to achieve their full body potential. Approaching dance in this way will enable them to improve performance, so they are ninjas in attack as opposed to cowards in retreat. In my opinion this can be achieved by making full use of a variety of theories and techniques that will be discussed later in this essay. Firstly, they should avoid simple and easy paths and go for gold. Secondly, they should bear in mind dynamic alignment to take them to the next level. Finally, they should apply specific techniques, such as bridging and matching, that challenge a dancer to explore the extremities of his or her body to extract maximum potential.

SIMPLE AND EASY PATHS

To start with it is necessary to evolve from simple, natural paths to more complex and creative ones to enrich performance. Everyone can dance but not everyone dances well, just as many people know how to use a computer but not everyone knows how computers work. According to Irmgard Bartenieff, the German-born dance theorist: *"It is natural for all living organisms to use the simplest and easiest paths in space when fighting..."*¹ As human beings we use simple and easy paths because this is our natural way of moving. But in dance we must always strive to enrich performance. To do this we must force ourselves to analyse and evaluate every aspect of the dance and move on from the simple and easy paths in the search for new, extravagant and inventive ways to use our body. That is what happened with the dancers in Haarlem. In their first attempt at the choreography they took the simplest and easiest paths. Later, after intensely practicing very deep lunges, the dancers started to buzz because they could clearly see the marked improvement in each other. When they did the choreography again, with the whole group, something spectacular happened, as though someone had waved a magic wand. The dancers rose to a higher level, bringing out their full body potential. They went higher, deeper and wider than ever before, ninjas jumping and ducking in action. I was blown away with the result. The dynamism and power of the 'ninjas' captivated me and sucked me into their performance. There was no escape. The dancers were powerful because they danced in all their extremities and I told them they should always dance like this, extracting the maximum from every position. A few weeks later the artistic director contacted me to say this particular class was improving so rapidly they had almost overtaken the second year class.

DYNAMIC ALIGNMENT

Significantly, the dancers in Haarlem had also moved on from alignment to dynamic alignment. Being aware of dynamic alignment improves body awareness, the key to good dancing. *"Alignment is a continuum between two extremities... it is called dynamic alignment, constantly modified by, and interacting with, the environment."*² Here Ciane Fernandes, an associate researcher at the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies in New York, expresses two things, alignment as imaginary lines between body parts and dynamic alignment representing the lines between extremities and their relation to the space around them.

A good example is the head/tail connection. Alignment is the line between the head and the tail

¹ Bartenieff 2002: 23

² Fernandes 2015: 92

whereas dynamic alignment is the action of the head and tail being extended in opposite directions. The head is pulled upwards from our crown, as if a puppeteer is pulling on a string, while the tail drops down towards the floor, pulled by gravity. This dynamic alignment proves that the body is always using forces, even if it might not be movement where you need muscular force. The first time the dancers danced the choreography, they simply tried to duplicate the moves I had shown them. When they became aware of their own body and the space around their body, they felt the dynamic alignment and their performance improved dramatically.

The alignments do not always have to be long lines; there can also be shorter alignments between our shoulder blades or our fingers, for example, or the extension between our toes and heel. There are innumerable ways to move and we must never forget that every movement influences the rest of our body. Although it may not always be visible, there is always an energy, an alignment, that races through our veins. When a dancer becomes aware of the dynamic alignment within the body, performance inevitably improves. This awareness is key to creating a three-dimensional force that makes maximum use of all the possibilities of the body, not only the limbs, but the space between our limbs, the muscles within our skin and the whole space available.

The dancers saw this for themselves when we went to a performance of *'Sluier'* by Danstheater AYA. When we analysed the production, the dancers were of one voice; it was dynamic, explosive, literally as they put it, "in your face". The professional dancers extracted their full body potential by embodying dynamic alignment, allowing them to reach for the stars. I likened this to the performance of my dancers. They could see clearly how professional dancers took dance moves and positions, that the Haarlem dancers themselves practise daily in the dance studio, to a new level. The deep lunge for example.

BRIDGING AND MATCHING

The awareness of dynamic alignment in Haarlem was a conscious result of specific instructions. At the same time there was an unconscious improvement in the lines they created; the lines of their arms lengthened and the paths from position to position became clearer, as suggested by William Forsythe, a noted American choreographer. In his DVD, he suggests tools that help with improvisation. I believe these can also be applied to make us more aware of the versatility and range of our bodies. He explains how you can draw an imaginary line, straight or curved, using different parts of the body, similar to Mondrian's use of lines and curves in his painting *'Arbre'*. You can draw a figure of eight using only your elbow, draw circles with your feet or create straight lines by using your fingers. Where these examples are widely used, there are less common ones too.

Forsythe uses the terms *'bridging'* and *'matching'* to establish lines with our body. Bridging is where we link two points of our body with another body part, for example using the lower arm to link both knees. Matching is where we join lengths of limbs together. In dance you can create matching lines then follow up by using bridges to create new lines. By engaging the whole three-dimensional body in the on-going process of creating lines, we make use of our full body potential, as a contortionist does in a circus.

The challenge is to think of lines that are not always obvious or predictable. In my example of bridging I used the lower arm to link the knees. That is fairly predictable. The use of a head to create the bridge would be more original. Thus, the key to engaging our whole body is that we also have to think of alternative ways to bridge certain points. In the previous paragraphs I spoke about being aware of the versatility of our body. Bridging and matching are techniques to enhance this versatility. By combining the two you enhance creativity, extravagance and inventiveness.

Forsythe's technique can stimulate this, because he encourages dancers to look for new and exciting ways to use their bodies to create lines. This again proves that being aware of your body and your paths, is key to creating outstanding dance.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal for me, as a choreographer, is to incorporate extravagant, inventive and dynamic ways to extract full body potential from every individual dancer and use it creatively. As we have seen, there are various ways to achieve this. Firstly, by setting the goal beyond the simplest and easiest paths defined by Irmgard Bartenieff. Secondly, by emphasising the importance of dynamic alignment as expressed by Ciane Fernandes. And finally, by thinking of alternative ways to bridge points and match lines, according to William Forsythe. When you apply these tools and techniques you can maximise full body potential and create great performances.

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William Forsythe: Improvisation Technologies. By William Forsythe, Nik Haffner, Volker Kuchelmeister, Yvonne Mohr, Astrid Sommer, Christian Zeigler. Performed by: William Forsythe, Christine Bürkle, Noah D. Gelber, Thomas McManus, Crystal Pite. ZKM | Center for Art and Media & Karlsruhe, Insitute for Visual Media, 1999.