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Stepping Forward While Looking Backwards: Mushin Improvisation and Creativity

John Liggins

Dance History

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When given enough time, even the most inexperienced person can reproduce something of merit. It takes a much more sophisticated understanding to fully realize an idea as it reveals itself in-the-moment. In the arts especially, extemporization is both a valid and reliable indicator of mastery. It follows that one of the most important objectives in the academic setting should be to give students the tools necessary to create genuine contributions to a wider body of knowledge rather than to merely exercise their ability to memorize and regurgitate. In dance specifically, improvisation is of the utmost importance because without it, it is impossible to understand the body *as it acts*. While there is much that can be learned from a systematic application of premeditated developments, all of it is useless if a dancer lacks the ability to make spontaneous developments of his or her own accord. This is because the creation of novel works beyond what has already been created is the product of ingenuity, not memory. Certainly genius is something that cannot be taught by imitation or by assignments that require memorized techniques; rather, it must be learned through insight, trial and error, surprise, and risk. Given the understanding that imagination is more of a *process* than a product, it should become blatantly obvious that the under-emphasis of unconscious freestyling, experimentation, and independent reflective study in dance instruction inhibits the growth of creativity among students.

In *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*, Katy Matheson defines dance improvisation as “the spontaneous exploration of human movement possibilities” (443). Although this definition captures the necessary criteria for a given dance to be considered improvisation, this understanding is too broad to serve the purposes of this paper. Rather than discussing the relationship between every manifestation of in-the-moment explorative movement and creativity, I will focus on the kind of improvisation that is both the least emphasized and arguably has the strongest link to creativity that will henceforth be referred to as “Mushin improvisation” (for lack

of a better term). Mushin improvisation differs from other types of improvisation in many ways. Unlike other forms of improvisation, Mushin improvisation requires the dancer to temporarily surrender all aspects of the self. Mushin improvisation is devoid of self-talk, personal judgments, and the exploration emotions including anger, joy, anxiety, fear, excitement, etc. It is complete and utter immersion in the activity, and only in the activity. Moreover, Mushin improvisation is free from any kind of conscious decision making processes--all actions are unconscious and natural, and the mind is always in the mental state of flow. The Mushin improvisers do not think of movements or techniques, themselves, or anyone else; like water, *they just flow*. Other forms of improvisation often include conscious choices and guidelines. A dancer might say to him or herself before moving "I'm going to explore my emotions." or "This improvisation is going to be my attempt at bringing a statue to life." Even while moving, a dancer might think to him or herself "This will be a good move to try here." or "I like the way that movement felt, I will explore it further." For the Mushin practitioner however, an empty mind is the most productive.

The term "Mushin" is a concept in martial arts and Zen that refers to a state of "no mind" or more specifically, a state of flow where an individual is highly aware of his or her surroundings and reacts to those surroundings via intuition devoid of conscious deliberation. The idea is similar to the idea of being "in-the-zone" in sport psychology and also to the idea of "mindfulness" in Buddhism. Bishop et al. describes mindfulness as follows: "Broadly conceptualized, mindfulness has been described as a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attention field is acknowledged and accepted as it is..." (232). When this concept is applied to dance, the kind of improvisation that I suggest is individual based rather than group based, unconsciously motivated and regulated, and characterized by a high level of awareness that is not

focused on any one thing in particular. It is important to operationally define improvisation in this way because I want to distinguish the idea from group based improvisational approaches (like Contact Improvisation for example) because while group based improvisation can definitely be therapeutic and foster creativity, group improvisation does not adequately solve the pedagogical problem of individual students' inability to create novel expressive personal movement vocabularies unassisted. Moreover, I am emphasizing unconscious improvisation because according to Ap Dijksterhuis and Teun Meurs unconscious thought is considered to be more conducive to creativity than conscious thought (137). Finally, it is necessary to note that this improvisation is categorized by a high level of awareness because of the misconception that pure choreography is somehow more complete, purposeful, authentic, advanced, or beautiful than Mushin improvisation.

Although there are plenty of creative dancers who have never freestyled, their existence does not discredit the idea that improvisation develops individual creativity. To draw an analogy, the presence of intelligent people who have never attended higher-level education does not refute the idea that generally, graduating from a university is a sign that one has attained a certain level of general knowledge and can evaluate concepts in a sophisticated manner. This is precisely because in order to graduate from a university one has to be able to pass exams, write papers, and participate in classes—each listed activity requires a certain level of intelligence. Likewise, in order to engage in Mushin improvisation, one has to be aware of oneself, be able to think beyond oneself, and be able to constantly create new unfiltered genuine responses to the environment—the aforementioned abilities require creative, divergent, associative thinking.

Based on the history of improvisation, it seems that its current under-emphasis in the educational setting can in part be attributed to current Western dance culture rather than the

nature of improvisation itself. Matheson writes in *The International Encyclopedia of Dance* that in the Renaissance many kinds of improvisation were valued, including dance. It is noted that improvisation had a direct influence on both the careers and philosophies of many influential people at this time, including but not limited to: the Russian ballerina Olga Preobrajenska, the choreographer Carlo Blasis, and even in the debut of Marie Camargo (444). Because improvisation was a talent exhibited by many artists who were considered genius including the musicians Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven, it was seen as not only a valid indicator of proficiency but also a sign of genius. Additionally, many non-Western dance forms as well as other dance forms that are less emphasized in the educational setting including but not limited to: Argentine Tango, Belly Dance, Breaking, Flamenco, and Indian Dance regard different forms of improvisation as essential.

So why then, is improvisation today often regarded in institutional settings as less meritable than choreography? One possible reason could be because improvisation is not privileged in all dance forms and in ballet especially improvisation has been scarcely explored. Matheson speculates, “It is probable that interest in improvisation diminished as interest in the development of set choreography increased.” Intuitively, it makes sense that set choreography increased; many artists want something concrete to show for all of their hard labor and set choreography is to the dancer as the novel is to the writer and the score is to the proficient musician. Hetland and Winner note that the arts have often been required to justify their presence in education more so than other academic domains, noting that the arts are “the only school subjects that have been challenged to demonstrate transfer as a justification for their usefulness” (5). Transfer is the idea that learning the arts somehow transfers over to learning in other academic domains like science and mathematics. Regardless of whether or not art proficiency

bleeds into other disciplines, it is not reasonable to impose transfer as a necessary justification for the arts. Transfer is not required in any other academic domain--we do not expect English skills to assist running skills, nor do we expect mathematical skills to influence history knowledge--each of these domains offers a unique perspective. Certainly the arts also contribute a valuable perspective.

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences suggests that rather than domains bleeding into one another, there are different kinds of intelligences that determine our ability to succeed in a given domain. In "Reflections On Multiple Intelligences," he states that "any domain can be realized through the use of several intelligences; thus the domain of musical performance involves bodily-kinesthetic and personal as well as musical intelligences." In light of this understanding it is reasonable to assume that the improvisational and choreographic domains of dance could be accessed via different combinations of intelligences. While choreography may be realized through a combination of the bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, spatial, and musical intelligences, perhaps improvisation is instead realized via a combination of intrapersonal, existential, musical, spatial, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences thus giving it its own unique flavor. The aforementioned improvisational combination could be especially important because it taps into intelligences that are less frequent in other domains including: intrapersonal and existential intelligence. Improvisation taps into these forms of intelligence because, paradoxically, in Mushin improvisation "product" is process. Dance process requires intrapersonal intelligence in that the dancer must understand what he or she knows and is capable of in order to then surprise and overcome oneself. Moreover, said process can foster existential intelligence because it taps into the unconscious which is often regarded as the impetus for transcendental symbolic representation.

Regarding the embrace of Mushin improvisation, perhaps the educational dance environment is simply slow to catch up. Curtis L. Carter notes, “in the twentieth century, the dance, together with other arts, has undergone major changes reflecting increased democratization and open form” (181). Rather than using a categorical system where the choreographer provides a dance for the dancers that is then watched by an audience, in postmodern dance the distinct lines between the aforementioned entities have been deconstructed. In Mushin-esque improvisation, the dancer is her own choreographer and her own audience; she must constantly overcome her own habits, judgments, predispositions, fears, and inclinations: her own self. In this regard, rather than being less complex, in many cases improvisation can be more complex—Carter reinforces this idea:

...Improvisation as a form of performance runs the risk of falling into habitual repetitive patterns that may become stale for both performers and viewers. In improvisational dance the performer must generate a constant flow of ideas and models, and constantly surprise himself or herself, as well as the viewers. Richness and variety are brought to the improvisation process through the aid of immediate feedback, which could completely change the direction of events. Thus improvisation is much more demanding than following a prescribed set of instructions. The improviser must create the artistic product as he or she performs it. (182)

In other words, excellent improvisation is the near-perfect synthesis of the mind, body, and soul: the soul engages the mind as the mind engages the body, and the body moves from the soul as the soul makes its presence known to the mind. Whereas a skilled dancer through simply following a given paradigm can sometimes reproduce choreography excellently, excellent



improvisation can never be produced in this manner; it is authentic subjectivity. Additionally, it is the unconscious and flowing nature of it that necessitates said authenticity.

Mary Whitehouse first put forth the idea of authentic movement as something generated by the unconscious in the 1960s (240). Building off the observations of Carl Jung, who noted that “he was able to understand and communicate with a schizophrenic woman by imitating and reflecting her gestures,” (qtd. in Wyman-McGinty 239) Whitehouse was careful not to influence the movements of her patients--she allowed the patients’ gestures to manifest on their own accord, as a product of what she referred to as “the inner impulse” (Wyman-McGinty 240). These authentic movements rely on the self, rather than outside influences as the source of creation. Given these ideas, it should become clear that the problem with conscious planned movement is that it is too easy for it to be warped by the ego, or in the case of choreography that is not self-made, other individuals. But even if unconsciously driven movements are authentic, it begs the question of whether or not they are a worthy impetus of creativity for a student.

Indeed, research suggests that unconscious thought is more favorable for the creative process than conscious thought. As previously stated, Dijksterhuis & Meurs conducted three experiments that support their hypothesis that unconscious thought is more associative and divergent and therefore more creative in nature (137). When individuals were asked to list items that fit in a particular category they found that conscious thinkers provided more predictable responses, and unconscious thinkers gave novel, but still suitable responses (138). Moreover, the studies suggest that the opportunity cost of conscious thought is unconscious thought, and vice versa. In other words, it is not possible to do both at once. Additionally the studies reinforce the notion that unconscious thought is an active, rather than a passive process. In five other separate experiments by Dijksterhuis, the hypothesis that unconscious thought could be more beneficial in

decision making than conscious thought because of its high processing capacity was supported (597). In the first three experiments by Dijksterhuis, participants were presented with complicated problems and in one condition were asked to solve them immediately, in another condition were given a few minutes to consider what to do, or in a third condition were distracted for a few minutes and then asked immediately what to do. Those who were distracted gave significantly better decisions than those who were given time to consciously think the situation over. Although the aforementioned studies promote several benefits of unconscious thought, this neither suggests that conscious thought is useless nor does it suggest that everyone should try and become unconscious thinkers (Dijksterhuis 597). It does however, suggest that perhaps with regard to the development of creativity among students, the overemphasis of deliberate consciously made and followed choreography may come with the opportunity cost of less divergent thinking.

The current paradigm in dance education does not pay enough tribute to the manifestations of the collective unconscious. While I suggest that Mushin improvisation is solo rather than group based, that does not imply that its benefits cannot extend beyond the subject. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, argues that “the archetype” also known as a “motif” or “symbol,” is a manifestation of a collective aspect of the unconscious mind that is independent of personal history (99). Simply put, archetypes are an image of our unconscious instincts, instincts that are a part of human nature. When we forget about the unconscious as the source of symbolic archetypes, we deny our very human nature. It is in this way that Mushin dance improvisation requires existential intelligence; it is a confirmation of human nature, and an exploration through the instincts that we all share. Moreover, when one has the introspection to understand his or her own instincts then he or she becomes universally connected to everyone

else. Certainly in this regard unconscious creativity is a form of gnosis, a kind of spiritual knowledge that does not come from you, but *flows through you* as you move and react to an ever flowing, ever changing environment. The kind of gnosis I am referring to is beautifully described by Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, baulked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until, at last, rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity (221).”

In conclusion, the under-emphasis of Mushin dance improvisation, also known as mindful unconscious free flowing reflective experimentation, inhibits the growth of creativity among students. This is not only because the opportunity cost of conscious thinking is unconscious creative thinking but also because Mushin dance improvisation is one of few authentically subjective expressions. Due to its inherent authenticity, the consequence of failing to promote it is that the already deemphasized intrapersonal intelligence lacks yet another domain where it could possibly emerge. This raises the question: where do we go from here? A direct approach would be to encourage dance students to engage in Mushin dance improvisation and perhaps journal about it after the fact. An indirect approach would be to incorporate more improvised performances in the dance community. Ultimately, stressing the importance of the value of artistic expression as both process *and* product and furthermore as something that is intrinsically valuable rather than valuable by way of transfer is the first ideal that art educators must realize.

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