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## Dance and Wellness Through the Art of Pilates

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*Loyola Marymount University*

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*Dance and  
Wellness  
Through the  
Art of  
Pilates*

Kristina Bemis  
Spring 2007

I dedicate my Senior Thesis to my parents, Dr. Frank and Donna Bemis for their unconditional love and support throughout the years.

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## Personal Aesthetic Statement

As a dancer of various genres over the last eighteen years, I have experienced many different aspects of a mover's life. Throughout my last four years here at Loyola Marymount University, I have come to further understand myself as a dancer, as an audience member, and have scratched the surface of experiencing being a choreographer. Who I was upon entering this University is nowhere near who I am today. There were many aspects that factored into my metamorphosis; simply being a college student and sharing new experiences with my peers both as a dancer and as a non-dancer played a huge role, but the biggest contribution to my progression as a mover has been the education of the whole person I have received here at this university. This has been realized mostly through my dance instructors who have helped me find the entrance to the long path of learning who I am as a person. This new knowledge and deeper understanding of myself has allowed me to begin to understand my personal aesthetics as a dancer, as an audience member, and now as a choreographer.

When I decided to come to college as a dance major, I already had fifteen years of dance training and was eager to learn about the artistry of dance in order to further my progression as an artist; except, I did not yet see myself as an artist, this initial hunger was realized to me at a later time. I was a full-blown "jazzarina," you know the type, the competition dancer who traveled

around the country taking dance workshops and competing in national competitions. The ones who danced in sequins and rhinestones only to the lyrics of the music, making sure to get in all the tricks of turns, leaps, and kicks before the three minute song was over. It was definitely fun to do, and the objective was for it to be fun and entertaining for the audience as well, there was just one problem; it lacked substance and artistry, the guttural rhythm that dance evolved from. And again, I was not conscious of my need for these aspects until I was introduced to the release technique of modern dance by Patrick Damon Rago my freshman year. I finally found a form of dance that made sense to me, that spoke to me from the inside.

This newfound liberation sent me into an impetuous hunt for anything and everything that would feed my hunger. I began taking class and studying with Holly Johnston who's high velocity athletic movement drew me in and held me captive until I was able to experience other movers and choreographers of high impact, physically powerful work. These new inspirations included Maria Gillespie, Regina Klenjoski, and eventually Chad Hall. Shel Wagner-Rausch also played a huge part in furthering my desire to learn, and although her movement and choreography is more controlled and spends less time in the air, Contact Improvisation requires the utmost strength. For me, the physicality of tactile movement, actually giving and taking weight of another's body was just an extension of knowing and experiencing one's own weight in the more athletic movement.

Although I have fallen away from the individual aesthetic of Holly Johnston, my soul still holds true to the physical and liberating demands of the release technique found in today's Contemporary Modern art form. I also loosely hold onto my roots of that "jazzarina" because that is what got me here today. I have definitely let go of the fake smiles, three minute song limitations, and "Stage Moms," but if it was not for the competition world, I never would have been able to achieve the level of technique and performance quality I had when I entered college, not to mention, it always feels great to put on a great song and just move!

So now that I have outlined my personal aesthetic as a mover, let us take a look at what aesthetically pleases my eye. Going back to my original dance form, competition jazz, technique and tricks were extremely important in order to please the judges and the audience, and I am still impressed with those aspects to some degree. A great technical dancer is always pleasing to watch, no matter how trained your eye is, but it is what the dancer does with that technique that makes the difference.

I have really begun focus on the physical appearance of the dancer because I have discovered that the body is a direct sign of training. A very well developed, muscular dancer often has worked very hard, training his/her body through various mediums and proper training; I like to see the muscles firing while the dancer moves. This does not mean I enjoy seeing skinny dancers on stage, quite the opposite, I like to see a healthy, fit dancer who has a body traditionally

considered "athletic" rather than the traditional "ballerina" body. With this being said, dancers' with these bodies are often very technical as well because of their training, but like I stated earlier, the technique is only the hanger, the dynamics and quality of the movement are the clothes and accessories that make the mannequin.

So now that I am looking at the ideal body, now comes the movement. I am drawn to the dancer who has more of a masculine physique but moves with a sense of grace, ease, elegance, presence, and control. A dancer that fits this mold of excellent technique and astounding smoothness will catch my eye and captivate me forever, regardless of the movement. For me, if the movement is executed and performed well by the dancer, the movement itself is not the issue; not that the movement loses importance; it is just not the main focal point. Dance is a performing art, and although dancers dance for themselves, they also dance for every single person in that audience, and it is not just about the steps, it is about the entire package, whether on the stage or in front of the camera. As an audience member, I want to see that whole package, not just a dancer with a good body doing steps, but a true *mover*, a person who is able to reach out and affect you, just by dancing.

As a new choreographer, I have not even begun the journey to figuring out and understanding my own aesthetic. I know that I am interested in choreographing to the person, to the individual rather than to the masses, that does not mean I do not want to choreograph for a large group or for a large



audience, but that the individual dancer and audience member matters most. I chose Loyola Marymount University for many reasons, one being that I was a person to this school, not just a number, and I want everyone who ever experiences my work, as a performer or audience member, to feel like a person, not just a nothing in a big group of something.

Dance is supposed to be fun, yes it is hard, brutal work, yes we have all wanted to walk out at some point, yes it hurts, but we love it. There is something that talks to our souls, something that we cannot get anywhere else, and that is important to remember. I feel sometimes choreographers, as a whole, get too bogged down with making a deep philosophical statement or connection with the artistry and forget that dance is supposed to be *fun*. That is not to say that everything has to be one or the other, but it is important to remember why we stayed in dance as children, not because it hurt or because it was hard, but because we had fun and we loved to do it. I think it is an important factor to remember and consider when choreographing, and it does not have to take away from the artistry or meaning, but allow it to add a new element to it.

So although I do not have a personal choreographic aesthetic yet, there are many ideas floating around in my head; perhaps a few brave ones will attempt to plant themselves soon. Until that happens, I will continue to work with and learn from choreographers, playing around with my own thoughts and ideas on my own, figuring out what I like and do not like, and why. I really think

the question of "why" is the most important question when attempting to dig deeper and go more in depth.

Needless to say if I had to define my aesthetic four years ago, one would not be able to tell that the same person wrote them both. LMU has shown me a lot about myself as a dancer, as a friend, as a daughter, as a woman, and most importantly, as a person. As I begin on my new found path revealed to me mostly by the amazing faculty of the dance department, I am excited to see how my aesthetic as a performer, audience member, and especially as a choreographer alter and morph throughout my journey of life.

# Reflection of Dance Studies

October 10, 2006

## Kinesiology

- I learned the structural anatomy of the body including muscles, bones, soft tissue and organs on both the cellular and global level
- By learning through clay modeling and our own bodies it was possible to integrate knowledge into all dance classes
- I learned that the body is an "empty vessel" and it will produce what it can with the materials it receives
- I not only learned the facts and scientific terms for everything but I was also taught different forms of imagery and metaphors that not only aided in my understanding of the content, but will also help me in my future Pilates training

## Dance History

- I learned the history of dance evolution beginning with ballet and extending through all genres of today's society
- I learned how to view, discuss, and critic dance on a more intelligent, in depth way
- I am now aware of many of the influences on dance throughout the years, especially the issues related to politics, society, and gender

## Dance as Social Action

- I really began paying attention to social and political issues worldwide and noticing the movement vocabulary that was associated with the issue because we were exposed to that as an assignment and it really engaged my mind and body
- I realized that dance and movement can be an effective way to get a point across, and just because it is an issue pertaining to social action, it does not have to be the traditional idea of imitating a tree being cut down or something of that nature
- I found a different place within my creativeness that I had never experienced before and it allowed me to play with my art form and forced me to have a more open mind about movement
- I was forced to not only know what was happening in the world but I had to be educated enough to have an opinion and be able to intelligently discuss it vocally as well as physically

## Dance Styles and Forms

- I was exposed to historic dances which I had to incorporate into my own choreography which was challenging but fun

- Learned how to choreograph with specific guidelines and unfamiliar music using Laban terminology
- Learned how to choreograph with others
- Began to explore my own aesthetic

### **Fundamentals of Dance Composition**

- I was forced to break out of my "studio shell" and explore new ways to move
- I was introduced to improvisation and composition of movement outside the walls of any genre or technique I had ever experienced
- I learned how to see dance rather than just watch it and how to intelligently communicate what I saw and felt
- I really got to know the other freshman dance majors as dancers and as humans and the friendships made have been lasting and some will be lifelong
- It really helped me in my other classes, such as modern, because I often felt silly or borderline embarrassed in Comp, so I had already gotten past that by time I arrived in Damon's class

### **Laban**

- I learned the language of dance
- I was able to record and accurately notate movement
- I learned the developmental patterns of people from the embryonic stage of life all the way throughout adulthood
- I was able to adapt my own movement signature because I learned my natural movement patterns and by labeling them it was easier to know what to change qualitatively in order to move differently

### **To Dance is Human**

- I experienced many forms of dance and the different need for dance around the world
- I learned that everyone dances in his/her own way and that it is essential as a *human*
- I was exposed to many different people and many different cultures which really opened my eyes to just how sheltered I really am
- I was exposed to many aspects of life that I never would have been exposed to and was forced to dig deep within myself and uncover the reasoning behind who I am, what I believe in, and why I am the way I am

### **Music for Dance/Drumming**

- I am experiencing the love of the drum, the heartbeat of the African peoples!
- I am learning rhythm, syncopation, and harmony through music rather than through dancing, i.e. tap

- I have been exposed to using unnoticed objects and surfaces to make noises and from there compile them into a musical score
- Hopefully I will be learning how to effectively communicate with accompanists

### Principles of Teaching

- I am learning how to teach and choreograph according to California standards
- I am working on developing a lesson plan for high school age students who have only had 1 year of dance training
- I am learning the different teaching and corrective styles and techniques
- I am learning how to communicate and work with people naturally possessing light, quick movement qualities with fast-twitch muscle movement, which is completely opposite of how my mind and body operate

### Spanish Classical Dance

- I am learning the traditional Spanish classical dances and movements such as paseo's and pasada's which exist in every classical Spanish dance
- I am learning the traditions of Spanish classical dance

### Pilates/Dance Conditioning

- I have learned an exuberant amount about the body and how it works while I have been working with Jan
- I have improved my core stability
- I have improved overall strength and control of both local and global muscles
- I am much more aware of my body in space in all of my dance classes
- I am very in tune to what my body tells me and I am not as confused about the messages it sends me

### Ballet

- I have definitely learned musicality and how to play within the meter to make the movement more interesting
- I have increased my strength while in outward rotation
- I am much more aware of my body as a whole unit
- My alignment and body awareness has much improved over four years
- I have learned how to take a more professional ballet class with live accompaniment and disciplined training

### Modern

- I have become extremely educated in the head-tail relationship and the effect it has on the spine

- I have learned how to weight shift within my own body and with other dancers
- How to athletically and gracefully move into and out of the floor
- I have learned how to swing and roll down by articulating the spine
- I have learned inversions and how to feel comfortable upside down without looking at my hands
- I have gained much strength in my upper body and deep pli 
- Overall I have grown leaps and bounds from the competition dancer I was as a freshman and the contemporary, well-rounded dancer I am today

### Jazz

- I have learned different styles of jazz and am much more aware of my own signature movement style and have been working on not incorporating that into everything I do, but to mimic the movement of the choreographer as closely as possible
- I have learned to pick up choreography at a much faster pace
- I have increased my technical ability
- I have learned how to better control my movements at a fast pace through increased articulation and coordination

## Career Research

A look at requirements for Pilates certifications, various published work on Pilates, internationally recognized organizations dedicated to Pilates, and listings of Pilates studios nationwide.

### **AFPA Advanced Pilates Instructor Certification**

[http://www.afpafitness.com/store/fitness-trainer-nutrition-certifications-pilates-fitness-instructor-certification-br-mat-level-ii-props-c-1\\_57.html](http://www.afpafitness.com/store/fitness-trainer-nutrition-certifications-pilates-fitness-instructor-certification-br-mat-level-ii-props-c-1_57.html)

### **Body Control Pilates: Standards**

<http://www.bodycontrol.co.uk/standards.html>

### **Google Directory**

[http://www.google.com/Top/Health/Fitness/Pilates\\_Method/Teacher\\_Certification\\_Centers/](http://www.google.com/Top/Health/Fitness/Pilates_Method/Teacher_Certification_Centers/)

### **IADMS: International Association of Dance Medicine and Science**

<http://www.iadms.org/>

### **Issues of Pilates Instructor Certification**

<http://pilates.about.com/od/becomingandinstructor/a/certification.htm>

### **MindBody Connection**

<http://www.mindbodyconnection.net/>

### **NETA National Exercise Trainers Association**

<http://www.netafit.org/faqs.htm>

### **NIFS: The National Institute for Fitness and Sport**

<http://www.nifs.org/employment/index.asp>

### **Open Directory**

[http://dmoz.org/Health/Fitness/Pilates\\_Method/Teacher\\_Certification\\_Centers/](http://dmoz.org/Health/Fitness/Pilates_Method/Teacher_Certification_Centers/)

### **Pilates Certification – The Basics of Pilates Certification**

<http://pilates.about.com/od/becomingandinstructor/a/BasicCert.htm>

### **Pilates Certification requirements**

<http://www.pilatesworkoutzone.com/pilates-certification.php>

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### **Pilates Certification – The Basics of Pilates Certification**

<http://pilates.about.com/od/becomingandinstructor/a/BasicCert.htm>

### **Pilates Certification requirements**

<http://www.pilatesworkoutzone.com/pilates-certification.php>

**Pilates Certification for Pilates Professionals**

<http://www.basipilates.com/>

**Pilates Method Alliance – Learning to Teach**

<http://www.pilatesmethodalliance.com/pilatatraining.html>

**Pilates Style Magazine**

<http://www.pilatesstyle.com/html/conferences.htm>

**Pilates Teacher Training**

<http://bbu.pilates.com/instructor-training/pilates-teacher-training.html>

**PMA Pilates Certified – Eligibility Requirements**

<http://www.pmapilatescertified.com/eligibility.html>

**RetroFit Pilates Rx**

<http://www.retrofitpilates.com/training.html>

**Requirements for Pilates Certification**

[http://www.pilates-sa.co.za/pilates\\_certification.htm](http://www.pilates-sa.co.za/pilates_certification.htm)

**United States Pilates Association**

<http://www.unitedstatespilatesassociation.com/application.asp>

## What is Dance?

### A Look at the Connection Between Humans and Animals Through Movement

January 9, 2007

At one time our ancestors were one with the earth, one with nature. They did not meticulously break apart and analyze every aspect of every detail of their lives to know who they were because they simply were. In today's fast paced society we have lost touch with that peacefulness within nature, which has also turned our own inner peace from the internal to the external. Louise Steinman (1995) discusses this idea in detail in her book *The Knowing Body* and she uses studies of animals to explain and solidify her point of view (p. 4). She presents the fact that Native Americans and many other peoples hunted animals for food while acknowledging the spirit of the sacrificed animal and sending it into the afterlife. Now, I am not suggesting that butchers begin performing rituals every time they do their job, but I am simply bringing attention to the fact that we have lost touch with the natural order and respect for life. Steinman offers many dancers/choreographers who have re-connected to the original, organic form of living through the understanding of animals by studying their movement and truly seeing them as beings, not simply as live objects. To

relate to the natural ways animals move, we must first understand the natural human development of movement.

When a child is first born, how does she know how to breathe? How to cry? How to nurse from her mother? According to BJ Palmer, founder of chiropractic and Palmer College of Chiropractic, these actions are a result of Innate Intelligence. Innate Intelligence can be understood as part of a universal intelligence, a wanting for the body to be "right," a wanting for the body to be healthy, to operate at optimal performance. It is "in-born" and cannot be studied or dissected. This Innate Intelligence gives humans the ability to "tap into" or access their own inner voice, their own resources all human beings were born with that tell us what is good and what is bad for our own bodies (Frank C. Bemis, D.C. personal communication Dec. 20, 2006).

In order to fully comprehend Innate Intelligence, we must also understand Universal Intelligence, which, according to Terry A. Rondberg, D.C., "is in all matter and continually gives to it all its properties and actions, thus maintaining it in existence." Basically, this is the belief that all things, both living and nonliving are made of matter, and that the matter itself has its own intelligence, which is what gives the object its identity. This may seem a bit obscure or questionable, but it actually has validity. Another look at this Innate Intelligence as something every being is born with, comes from Rudolf Laban, movement philosopher and founder of Labanotation. He looks at young children who are beginning to move more and try new things, and he uses the term *antrieb*, a German word

that loosely translates to "drive onwards." He claims that the reason infants perform these actions, such as firmly grasping someone's finger, or trying to lift their head, comes from the being's wanting to "make itself known" (p. 2).

I have grown up hearing this term "Innate Intelligence," but I had never experienced it until this idea of "organic movement" was presented to me when I entered college. I came from the "competition" world of dance and had danced with feeling and emotion but had never experienced what it was like to move from the internal rather than the external, to actually feel the guttural movement emerging from my viscera. I had never felt what it was like to simply be in the moment and allow my body to just move without directing it or making conscious choices of what to do next with my mind. My first modern professor in college, Patrick Damon Rago, really guided me in finding the internal connection within each movement rather than attempting to find it externally or at the distal ends of the movement. He urged and pushed us to go to that uncomfortable place where we were off of our "center" because it forced our bodies to move instinctively rather than as a result of placing the body into shape and space.

The introduction to this new approach of moving has led me to a place where I am now able to understand "moving from within," or "moving like an animal" as Steinman discusses in her book. Because I am in tune with my own body, it enables me to understand the physiology and psychology of these analogies. It is not just a matter of mimicking or replicating something to look a

certain way, but to actually understand where the shapes and lines originate from to become these forms within one's body is a physical, emotional, and intellectual connection that facilitates movers to comprehend thoughts, ideas, dreams, and even other "beings" that we might otherwise have never understood.

While Rago's teachings assisted me in connecting with my body, I still had to figure out how to access that connection on my own. Steinman brings to the table Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, owner of the School for Body/Mind Centering where "provocative and visionary work" of the body is carried out, offering insight to achieving this inner-connectivity and realizes their philosophies of the body align with each other.

Generally, when anatomy is taught as I learned it and as I see it taught elsewhere, you're given visual pictures of it. We have an image of it, but we don't have the kinesthesia of it within ourselves. Maybe we'll even say, "oh, I have this bone or this muscle in me," but it's an intellectual concept, rather than the information coming through viscerally from the proprioceptors of that thing itself. The information is *always* coming in viscerally, but each person is selective in terms of what they choose to acknowledge. At the school [which I founded] we go from one system to the other – now were going to acknowledge the information from the muscles, now from the organs, from the glands, from the brain, from the blood, etc... (p. 16)

With this concept of understanding the body from the inside out, she is not suggesting that we constantly think about every aspect of our body, but by bringing attention to different areas we can connect with our autonomic nervous system, which aids in the development of the body-mind connection.

This approach to moving, training, or simply connecting with one's self is taught by many "body workers," and I have had a great success with it under the instruction of Jan Dunn. She has an incredible wealth of knowledge and is very well trained in helping the dancer understand his/her own body anatomically in order to understand the messages the body is constantly sending and receiving. She gives images and cues that allow dancers to access sensations in their bodies that they might have never felt before. For instance, she uses an image from Erik Franklin's *Dance Images for Technique and Performance* of a geyser shooting up from a pool of water in the pelvis through the entire upper body and escaping at the top of the head to lengthen and free the spine. This analogy suddenly enabled me to find the co-contraction of my lower and upper body, I felt as if I had more room between each joint in my body, and my stabilization was better. This reveals that we are often our own worst enemies by not allowing our bodies to move in the way they were designed, often the most efficient and optimal as well.

This idea of the geyser allows the breath to fill and encompass the entire body, which encourages that feeling of length and release. Obviously breath can literally only fill the lungs, but you can imagine and "send" breath to other

areas of the body, such as the hips or the legs, and the results are amazing. If someone has extremely tight hip flexors, place one hand on each hip, allowing the other person to feel the weight of the hands and ask him/her to breathe into your hands, after about three to five cycles of deep breaths, you will feel their hip flexors relax under your hand. Imagery, along with breath, is a very powerful and useful tool, although a lot of it is simply helping the body to restore to its natural and original state, it is very beneficial.

Breath determines our beginning and end of our existence on this earth, so it would make sense that it would also dictate our quality of life while on earth. Breathing is one of our body's many autonomic functions, but it plays a large role in the quality of life. The example used earlier of raised shoulders in ballet class restricts movement and greatly inhibits movement quality, however, the shoulders are raised because the breath is held. This is a very effective, simple experiment: hold your arms out in front of you and hold your breath. What happened? I can tell you, your shoulders rose! The raising of your shoulders was not due to your muscles raising your arms, but was a result of your breath. If breath is able to create tension, it is also able to release it, just as in the hip flexor example earlier.

Breath can be used to find inner calmness, that place of meditation and contemplation, but you must first know and embody calmness. Finding a calm state does not mean lying down, or sleeping, but allowing your body's functions to slow down to its own tempo. When trying to settle into that peaceful place



within ourselves maybe we should bring front our ancestors and their oneness with nature.

The notion of needing to calm ourselves, of not being so tense, of needing to allow ourselves to relax in order for our bodies to operate efficiently has been reserved solely for our species. That is not to say that animals do not have adrenaline rushes, or get tired after a run, but no other animal, except maybe your dog or cat who you have so unkindly passed your negative tension onto, gets "stressed out" or has anxiety attacks. Granted, we are the supreme species and have responsibilities that no other animal has, but we could take a lesson from our fellow mammals.

Watch a cat walk, watch how the shoulder blades move, see the skin and the heaviness of the muscles. How they seem to slink across the floor, almost with a sense of laziness, a low, guttural energy. Now watch them run. Every muscle fires instantly and they are gone before you realized what was happening. Animals are able to call their bodies into action when needed, but not when it is unnecessary. We live in a world of high stress, high tension, and our bodies take the brut of it. I am not suggesting becoming an inadament object when you are not moving, but allowing your body to release when it does not need to be "on." Just as you would not leave your boat on idle all the time, you turn it off, and only have it in idle when you are only stopped for a short time. Our bodies are always in "idle," we never allow our muscles to "shut off" and take a break because we allow our tension and stress to build up in our

bodies. Imagine tensing your entire body and trying to jump, it does not work. The same notion applies here in our everyday lives, we seem to never be able to completely relax or completely charge up, we are stuck in idle.

In today's world obsessed with how something appears on the outside, and how much can be accomplished in the shortest amount of time, it can be difficult to find this inner peaceful centeredness, that calm, meditative, complacent place that allows the body to be at peace. Perhaps thinking about animals, and their ability to move without hesitation or tension, the way a panther glides on the earth with ease and weight, enabling him to actually feel the earth under his paws. Gravity is a constant force, and if you allow yourself to be heavy and actually feel your weight in your feet on the ground, you might have a glimpse at how animals move, how we are designed to move.

Animals allow themselves to be heavy, giving a moment's recognition to acknowledge where they came from and where they are going, because one cannot know where he/she is going unless he/she knows where he/she came from. Animals have such a rich connection between body-mind-spirit, and hopefully one day we, too, the *human* animal, can know and understand our own inner selves, acknowledging our inner sensations and inner potentiality to lead more efficient, stress free lives.

## Bibliography

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My Senior Thesis is undergoing completion at this time. I am currently working towards receiving my teaching certificate in *Advances in Pilates Technique* through Marie-José Blom-Lawerence at Long Beach Dance Conditioning. After completion of the course, Marie-José will submit my work directly to Judy Scalin, director of the Dance Department at Loyola Marymount University, at which time my thesis will be in its entirety and ready for review.