

Jennifer Wall

## Creative Dance

Probably the simplest, and the most complete, definition of dance is to be found in the writings of Rudolf Laban (1879-1958) who states that it is “understood as a total immersion in the flow of movement.”<sup>1</sup> This seems to imply that movement termed “dance” has particular characteristics that are identifiable and that one dances in order to enjoy movement sensations, which may occur at the time of moving or may be sensed during a period of reflection. When one considers the universality of movement and the integrative role it plays in our lives — the intricately interwoven network of moving and being, moving implying a state of being, being implying a state of moving, the ebbing and flowing of life, the interplay between dynamic and static states — one may begin to realize the scope of movement as an educational medium.

If Laban had produced an ontological syllogism, it might have taken the following form:

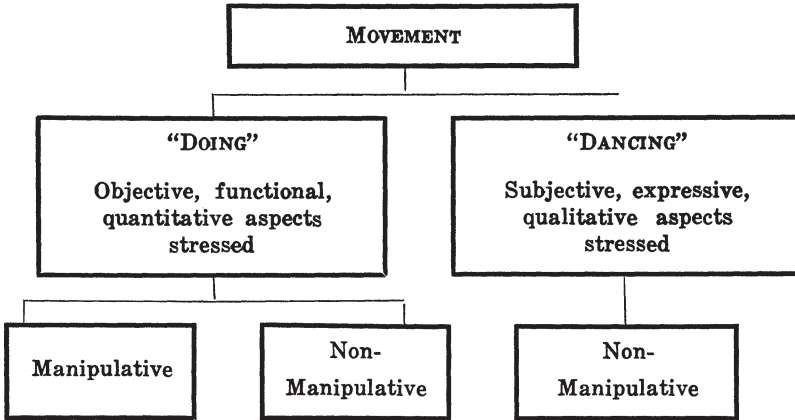
All who move are  
I move  
Therefore I am.

Alternatively:

All living things move  
I move  
Therefore I live.

Pythagoras and other philosophers over many centuries have contemplated the role of movement in the universe and now some psychologists — for example Bruner, Piaget, Cratty — stress the important role played by movement in the general development of each individual. Laban considered our lives to have two facets, one the “doing,” the other the “dancing.”

Perhaps these two ideas can be clarified by the following schema, which shows the “doing” as primarily objective, the “dancing” as primarily subjective.



Objective activities may be manipulative or non-manipulative:

**MANIPULATIVE** — all activities in which the individual’s movements are concerned with controlling an external object, e.g. bouncing a ball, holding a pen or paint-brush, cleaning one’s teeth, etc. . .

**NON-MANIPULATIVE** — all activities in which the individual is concerned with controlling the movement of his body so that it can adapt to an environment, e.g. walking, running, climbing, jumping, rolling, etc. . .

Subjective activities are only non-manipulative:

**NON-MANIPULATIVE** — All activities which result in some form of communication, e.g. shrug of the shoulders, a turning away in moments of distress, stamping of feet in rage, etc. . .

In our educational systems, the tendency has been to over-emphasize the objective domain and only comparatively infrequently have practicing educators recognized the importance of developing the child’s “subjective movement” domain. However, it is important that children should have the opportunity of exploring movement in its totality.

Creative Dance provides an outlet for the “innate urge” to move expressively. The need for such an outlet is clearly seen in young children and was recognised long ago by Plato when he wrote that:

No young creature whatsoever, as we may fairly assert, can keep its body or its voice still; all are perpetually trying to make movements

and noises. They leap and bound, they dance  
and frolic, as it were, with glee.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in more recent times, Laban wrote:

The innate urge of children to perform dance-like movements is an unconscious form of outlet and exercise introducing them to the world of the flow of movement and strengthening their spontaneous faculties of expression.<sup>3</sup>

Joan Russell, a noted dance educator from England, considers that the "inner experiences gained in the art of movement awaken vitality, creative impulses and sensitive reaction to others and encourage harmonious development."<sup>4</sup> On the Canadian scene, M. L. Van Vliet, Dean of the Faculty of Physical Education at the University of Alberta, notes:

It is extremely important that society in general and educators in particular understand the importance of human movement, not only as a mechanical action which should operate with consistent efficiency, but as a fundamental means of communication and creative expression.

When this form of balance is maintained between routine activities and artistic and creative movement, individuals experience a greater feeling of wholeness. They are able to participate more fully in the totality of life: its functional everyday purpose of "doing" and its creative, expressive, communicative purpose of "being" and "feeling."<sup>5</sup>

All these writers would agree that dance, in its broadest sense, "means responding to the urge to express oneself in dance movement in a spontaneous manner."<sup>6</sup> It is the use of bodily movement to express ideas and feelings. As a writer uses words to communicate with his readers, a composer uses sounds, a sculptor uses marble, so a dancer uses movement. It is a language and has a vocabulary.

In a formal educational setting, some of the aims of a Creative Dance program are:

1. To foster and concentrate the inner urge mentioned above, helping children to become aware of the potential of the medium of movement and some of the principles involved;
2. To preserve the spontaneity of movement and develop the uniqueness of the individual's movement characteristics;
3. To foster artistic expression through the medium of movement, and the production of dances appropriate to each particular stage of development;
4. To develop powers of observation, sensitivity and perceptual awareness of oneself and one's total environment.

In music the instrument being used may be a violin, piano, flute, guitar or drums but in each case the medium of communication is sound. Similarly in dance, the instrument involved is the body and the medium is movement. Many dance movements develop naturally as children play; indeed, because of the mainly subjective nature of the movements, much of a young child's play *is* dance. In an educational setting, where one hopes the concern is with the integration of the child's doing, thinking and feeling domains together with the development of abilities to relate cognitive experiences, dance vocabulary may be considered in terms of giving the child psychomotor, affective and cognitive experiences. At no time can any one of these experiences be given in isolation. In a psychomotor experience, for example, the feeling and thinking aspects of the child's being will also be involved. An emphasis, however, can be placed on the psychomotor aspect of movement. Here the focus is on body awareness, one of Laban's movement themes. To develop body awareness, the teacher guides the child in becoming conscious of what he is doing — whether he is travelling or being still; whether his body is stretched or curled; whether one part is moving and the rest is stationary; whether both sides are doing the same thing. In other words, the child develops an awareness of his body structure, its ever-changing shape and size, and the numerous actions that it is capable of producing.

The cognitive aspect of the dance experience includes an understanding of the spatial elements of movement, for example, where is the movement going in relation to the body, away from or towards it? What is the pattern being made on the floor? Does the movement begin low and finish high or vice versa? The child also begins to create dance phrases with an awareness of their components and the relationship of one phrase to another. One might call this the development of a movement memory where the child can recall his movement sequence, both in action and in words. He is also able to select appropriate dynamic content for his movement and can discriminate, for example, between sudden and sustained actions, between the very strong and the more delicate.

Good dance experience focusing particularly on the affective domain depends on psychomotor and cognitive foundations. This does not mean that the affective is explored last of all, merely that it is not the starting point of a child's dance life. The child's awareness of his feelings, his sensitivity to moods and the creation of them, his observation and appre-

ciation of other people's creations, his sensitivity to external stimuli and his resulting perceptions, all these depend on his first having opportunities to move effectively himself. In brief, the concept "self" can be developed through the exploration of movement. The ability to work with other people, to recognize and respond to the needs of others, depends on this knowledge of self and can be fostered through group experiences in the psychomotor and cognitive domains and their integration with the affective. A simple example of an initial experience in group work might be for children to work in three's, to run, jump and crouch, arriving one after another, and then spin away from each other.

Dance has great potential as an educational tool, provided that, where it is fostered, "it is not artistic perfection or the creation and performance of sensational dances which is aimed at, but the beneficial effect of the creative activity of dancing upon the personality of the pupil."

## references

1. R. Laban, *Modern Educational Dance*, London: Macdonald and Evans, 1948, p. 95.
2. Quoted by Helen M. Simpson in the Mary Hankinson Memorial Lecture of the Physical Education Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Easter Meeting, 1967. See, H. Simpson, "Physical Education and the Arts," *Physical Education*, Vol. 59, No. 7 (July 1967), p. 57.
3. Laban, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
4. Joan Russell, *Modern Dance in Education*, London: Macdonald and Evans, 1958, p. 17.
5. J. Boorman, *Creative Dance in the First Three Grades*, Toronto: Longmans Canada, 1969, p. xi.
6. S. Stanley, *Physical Education: A Movement Orientation*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill of Canada, 1969, p. 136.
7. Laban, *op. cit.*, p. 11.