

PRIMITIVE EXPRESSION: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DANCE THERAPY METHOD

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Although some people would have us believe it, the use of dance to heal does not date from the 20th century. Dance has always been included among the therapies of traditional societies on every continent, including Europe, where the Italian tarantellas are primarily therapeutic dances intended to exorcise a spider, the tarantula, mythically held responsible for certain female psychological problems. The healing function of dance is to be found in the prevention of deviance and the maintenance of balance in individuals as well as in the cure of mental or psychosomatic illnesses.

General Outline of the Therapeutic Process of Traditional Dance Therapy

Its action is nonverbal; it heals by associating rhythm, dance, and song, and bypasses speech as well as the necessity for patients to become conscious of the deficiencies that have caused their problems. Dance therapy is a therapeutic procedure that acts on a symbolic level without trying to make its sense explicit; its workings stem from a logic that remains veiled, but that is nonetheless effective, thanks to certain mechanisms able to be analyzed. It is this prior condition only that enables them to be transported into other cultural contexts, such as ours, and to be handled in a perspective free from the magical or religious connotations present in traditional societies.

This work forms the basis of both theoretical research and the practice of dance therapy in France. It

is these therapeutic mechanisms, therefore, that we are going to study. However, we would first like to state briefly what is understood by an "illness," and what a therapy consists of, so as to clarify, in the immense field of dance, that which concerns its therapeutic function.

WHO, the World Health Organization, has defined an illness as an upset in the balance between the different levels of body and mind, which, when they meet simultaneously make of the human being a physical, mental, psychical, and social organism. This definition takes account of the individual as a whole. It places it in the same perspective as that of traditional societies that look for the cause of the symptom not in the sick organ, nor even in the individual, but in a more general disorder affecting the family or the social group—for example a disturbance in the relation with certain divinities. Such a notion of illness leads, obviously, to a method of healing that deals with the cause rather than with the pathological manifestation. Regardless of whether the illness manifests itself as a stomach ulcer or as a paranoid delirium, the therapy aims above all to re-establish harmony by a series of symbolic functions aimed at repairing the disturbance at the source of the problem.

In this manner, traditional therapy maintains the idea (to which the 20th century is returning after the failures of a form of medicine that treats organs as localized and the only part affected) that the origin of all illness is not to be found primarily in the failure of the affected organ, but in an imbalance, a disturbance

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that has caused a flaw in the patient's natural defenses. This then leaves the coast clear for the aggressor, albeit endogenous like cancer, or exogenous like a virus, or even of a supernatural origin, as attributed by traditional societies, when a divinity or the effect of sorcery is acknowledged. In this global or holistic perspective, dance obviously occupies a position of privilege in so far as it is representative of an activity that encompasses the physical, mental, psychical, and social at the same time. Dance therapy consists, of course, of exploiting and systematizing the aspects of dance that facilitate the harmonization of these levels. It lies not only in the realm of "art for art's sake," but rather "art for something" . . . which is, in this case, the prevention and the cure of any imbalances leading to the development of pathological behavior.

Many doctors today acknowledge that, in the etiology of a large proportion of patients, there is a sizable psychological element. This implies that psychotherapy could cure not only psychological problems, but also many psychosomatic illnesses. Putting it another way, whatever the nature of the symptom, physical or mental, its treatment consists of each patient working on him or herself to reconcile these different levels in a harmonious integration. Inasmuch as this is precisely the task of psychoanalysis, (the psychological and verbal method that heals "the body and the soul" at the same time), it is interesting to look at its theory of pathology and the mechanism of the cure that consequently follows. Illness is defined, in a psychoanalytical theory, as a faulty symbolization:

1. of the self-image, narcissism resulting from the way in which the mother sees the child, but also from the child's self-interrogation about his or her origin and sex. This symbolization of the self-in-the-world is condensed into an "unconscious body image";
2. of one's desires, which for humans are subject to representation in the form of either images (phantasms) or words.

The flaw in symbolization can come from an insufficient link with representations, which leaves no symbolic answer to questions regarding one's origin or identity (a narcissistic problem at the basis of a psychotic disturbance) and which prevents the expression of one's desires, leaving them, therefore, with a burden of anguish resulting from their energy not being linked to their representations (a problem equally at the source of certain neuroses). The flaw in sym-

bolization can also spring from being bound to negative representations that provoke a form of pathology capable, yet again, of affecting the psychotic, narcissistic problem by a devalued self-image or, the neurotic problem, by registration of the desires in the realm of failure or destructivity.

It follows that therapeutic procedure consists of undoing the liaison of the pathological articulation so as to create a new liaison allowing for the reorientation of these impulses in a positive manner. This is obtained by the transfer of sentiments onto the therapist, followed by a positive rearticulation that represents a veritable symbolic reorganization. This therapeutic mechanism is found at work in an analytical cure as well as in traditional therapies that use the dances of trance and possession (Schott-Billmann, 1985). However, dance therapy through Primitive Expression also proposes a positive restructuring of the psychical organization. Like the traditional therapies, it operates on several levels and allows for their harmonious integration. Its therapeutic function is characterized by the following:

1. Verbal discourse is not used, yet there is a corporal symbolization of one's desires and body image.
2. The dancers re-establish contact with their origins and genealogy through the articulation of the rhythm.
3. The impulses are re-channelled and given an outlet through a positive codification that allows for their catharsis.
4. At the heart of its structuring cadre is a space of creative liberty that allows each participant to express his or her individuality, that is, to take individually a collective and archetypal story through which he or she articulates the self.
5. "Symbolic efficiency" is used through suggested actions that awaken and mobilize the dancer's phantasms, all the while acting as agents that modify positively the psychical organization.

The Tools of Traditional Therapy as Applied to a Modern Form of Dance Therapy

This form of dance therapy brings together in one technique, called Primitive Expression, a certain number of elements efficient on the therapeutic level as we have defined it.

Rhythm

Primitive Expression sessions are accompanied by a drum. Its rhythm evokes the heartbeat and induces in the body the sensation of rocking that recalls the cradle. It favors, therefore, a regression to the state of fusion that exists between the foetus/new-born and the mother. However, at the same time, it is dynamic. The rhythm of the percussion summons the body to stir and, primarily, to displace itself. Often, without further urging, human beings "get up and walk" on hearing the drum. This accomplished, it establishes an alternance of right-foot-left-foot, which, as such, represents an experience of returning to one's source where there is an interplay of binary oppositions that structure man physically, mentally, and psychologically. The rhythmic walk is already a dance and, according to Nietzsche, "the language of our very past" is heard there. Rhythm is indeed a language and a multiple one at that. We shall keep in mind here two aspects useful for our purpose and that are, more precisely, linked to binality:

1. a reminder of our genealogy; we have two feet, as we have two parents, each of whom comes from two parents, and so on;
2. a recapitulation of the successive dualities experienced by the child since birth until his or her access to autonomy and to language: the love/hate pair of the mother as related primarily to the categories of "good/bad" breast; then in the presence/absence and, finally, in the bipolarity mother/father that leads to fusion/separation.

The rhythm of the pulsation of the feet, awakened by the external rhythm of the tam-tam with which it aligns itself, releases the "psychological dance" of these binary oppositions seen, by the human sciences, in every human activity, and which constitutes, therefore, an anthropological structure. Dance recollects this, sets it going, and re-balances it, re-establishing the game of interaction between the two opposing limits, going perhaps as far as the dual impulse of life and death. This could give great hope for the treatment of serious illnesses, such as cancer, if it is true, as certain people believe (Zorn, 1977) that the cause is a psychosomatic transposition of despair, the death impulse gaining ground on the life impulse.

Rhythm would, therefore, have, in the incarnation of the pulsation of walking, not only the power to

make us "understand the essence of life," as Nietzsche wrote, but to maintain it.

Binary Oppositions

Although rhythm creates the effect of a regression to the state of maternal fusion, it also fulfills the paternal function of autonomy by offering the chance to play with the binary oppositions that Freud showed, after observing the children's game "fort/da," to be the basis of the process leading both to separation from the mother and to the acquisition of language. Psychoanalysis attributes the function of separation (called castration) to the father. Primitive Expression tries to stimulate this to allow for the de-fusion of psychotics (whose etiology consists of remaining psychologically attached to the mother). To this effect, it builds, on the beat of the feet, corporal movements based on binary oppositions (high/low, open/closed, take/give, etc.) accompanied by contrasting phonemes. These binary movements allow for the articulation of the game of absence/presence (which Freud called "fort/da") at the heart of the elaboration of the maternal absence by the child who becomes, thereby, capable of symbolizing it and, consequently, of separation from the mother. The rhythm serves to reactualize the fort/da, or passage from fusion to separation, going beyond the "mirror stage." This is always relevant not only for psychotics, but for each and everyone, for no one is ever absolutely and definitively autonomous.

Repetitive Action

This task of separation, inescapable in any therapy, is the lot of man (the only animal to symbolize). He must console himself for the absence of the mother by inventing substitutes. Autonomy is laborious for humans, without a doubt because of congenital prematuration, which makes them dependent on and, therefore, nostalgic for the mother. The biologist, Bolk, in his theory outlines this characteristic of man, which means he is born "prematurely" and, therefore, neurologically immature compared to other animals. However, it is by symbolizing the mother that he finds himself, creating himself from his acquisition of language. Actually, words are discovered first for their substitutive function, which allows separation to be accepted. Children begin to understand that words can also be representative of themselves and that they can, therefore, use them to express themselves. However, access to symbolization, which adopts a conso-

latory nature as a result of the game with binary oppositions representative of the maternal absence/presence (fort/da game), does not come easily. Children are helped by the transitional process and in particular by the transitional object (e.g., a blanket, the corner of which they suck), which acts as both mother (represented by the softness and warmth) and self. Such an object progressively leads them, because of the dual quality half-mother/half-self, to differentiate themselves from her.

In Primitive Expression, this process is achieved, from the repetitive action.

1. It is given by the dance therapist who offers, at a favorable moment (as does the mother for the child by giving the breast, for example), an object—the action. This naturally represents the “mother” who is in this case the therapist. The therapist chooses the action because it is a movement that is at the same time simple, pleasant, and open to selection by the participants who will cling to it inasmuch as they realize that it is also capable of self-representation.
2. The “given-received” action is repeated at length with the rhythm. Progressively, beginning with this common ground of therapist-participant (presented in the shape of a collective enunciation), each dancer will extract his or her individual interpretation. This discovery undergoes moments of resistance and phases when the action is destroyed (we do not like it or do not try to make it beautiful). However, by dint of its repetitive nature, the action offers the same indestructible nature as the transitional object, which the mother patiently restores to order after the child has damaged, dirtied, or torn it.
3. The object “found” in the enunciation given by the therapist will become the object “created” by the enunciation, which then represents, in body language, the body image and the personal desires of each dancer. We also see emerge as many different styles as there are participants, each one bringing about a re-creation of the original action, which corresponds to a re-creation of self as well.

The Opening to the Unconscious

The dancers are advised to use the repetition not to indefinitely reproduce the identical, but to go beyond

the limits with each return of the rhythm, always going “a bit further.” Consequently, the corporal discourse does not enclose the subject in narcissism, but opens outward to something that surpasses it. Such a perspective makes Primitive Expression clearly different in spirit from most Western dance forms, so often centered on the ego (Soupault, 1986), and draws it closer to traditional dances. It reinforces this desire for the decentralization of the self by the use of the voice, which accompanies the execution of the actions and which, inasmuch as it escapes the eye, extracts the dance from narcissism by appealing to something invisible. The association of the three characteristics of repetition, surpassing oneself, and vocal accompaniment are favorable for the appearance of a “modified state of consciousness,” a mild hypnosis, a kind of trance leading to a diminution of “censorship,” a “letting go”; in proportion to the repetition of the action, it “escapes” the person executing it and begins to “possess” him or her and to speak in his or her place.

Primitive Expression uses the body to articulate the phantasms in dance, but without the knowledge of the subject. This takes place with “letting go” rather than in effort and in focusing on the self. On the contrary, it is in the forgetting of self, induced by the repetition of actions, that the very thing the subject has forgotten, and which constitutes his or her unconscious, can become real. This unspoken repression is liberated by an action, which is linked to the unspoken, to be articulated in a danced discourse.

The Shamanistic Cure

The ceremonial character of Primitive Expression is induced by what precedes it. It appears like a rite, but without an underlying myth. Therefore, everyone can personally attach his or her own myth to the ordered, rhythmic, repetitive archetypal actions proposed. There is a question, in fact, of a veritable “injection of the symbolic” (of the shamanistic type) where so many new therapies aim, if we are not assured a minimum of security (Winnicott’s “comfortable space”), which is procured by the certitude of being authorized not only by the therapist, but also by the self. It is on this condition alone that the therapy can proceed, as it does in Primitive Expression, in the pleasure of dance, the warmth of the group, and the authorized liberation of impulses. These are, of course, satisfied in a symbolic manner (basis of the

therapeutic efficiency), but which are nonetheless "enjoyed bodily," making dance therapy an activity filled with efficiency and pleasure.

Summary

Dance therapy, through the anthropological approach called Primitive Expression, ties in with tradition and transposes it in our Western society by freeing it of its magical or religious connotations and by endowing it with a theoretical, anthropological, and psychoanalytical base. As with traditional therapeutic ritual techniques, Primitive Expression lies within a global perspective, is holistic, and is much reinferred (reactualizing the link with the traditional functions of dance—ritual, feast, and therapy) by the very nature of dance: an activity that is at the same time physical, psychic, and social.

The harmony of these aspects is favored by dance therapy, by exploiting and rendering systematic those

qualities of dance. Their integration defines the individual's well-being or lack of it, his or her health or illness. Beginning with a psychoanalytical definition of pathology resulting from a poor symbolic representation, Primitive Expression tries to untie the pathogenic expression to create a new link, permitting a positive reorientation of the impulses. Primitive Expression proposes a true symbolic reorganization through rhythmic language, voice, and movement.

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