

An Australian Experience Dance/Movement Therapy: New Currents, New Bridges

The 42nd Annual Conference, of the American Dance Therapy
Association

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Fran and partner involved in the dance

From the moment I read Marcia's email informing the members of the IDTIA that she had been invited to deliver the Marian Chase Foundation of the ADTA Lecture at the 42nd Annual Conference in New York, I knew I wanted to be there. For months I struggled with the idea of going, the main considerations being the cost and the tyranny of distance.

Two weeks prior to the conference, I threw caution to the wind and decided to go. Marcia was thrilled and informed me there were to be representatives from Roehampton, Greece and Japan, places where Marcia had made her mark. It dawned on me that there needed to be a representative from Australia, particularly from the International Dance Therapy Institute of Australia, which she founded.

Once the decision was made I swung into action. I contacted a friend in New York and she generously agreed to put me up for the week. My 20 hour flight was reasonably pleasurable as I settled back, read and watched at least 5 movies. I spent the first couple of days in New York reorientating myself as I had not been there for 10 years. I walked for hours in the hot autumn sun soaking up the rhythms of the city, strolling through Central Park, taking in the current Rembrandt exhibition at the Met and wandering slowly through MoMA, savouring the cultural richness and beauty of the artworks.

Very early Thursday morning, the 27th of September, I took the subway express train from 96th Street to Borough Hall station in Brooklyn and walked to the Hotel Marriott at Brooklyn Bridge where the conference was to take place. My heart was beating but I was able to contain my anxiety, reminding myself that I usually enjoy the sweet agony of moving out of my comfort zone. Standing behind the registration desk was Patrizia Pallaro author and editor of two books on Authentic Movement and she asked me if I knew Heather Hill and Jane Guthrie. I immediately felt located and comfortable.

Thursday was devoted to Pre-Conference Intensive Seminars. There were several choices available. In fact these were a prelude to the smorgasbord of delights in the days to come. I chose to participate in the seminar titled “Blanche Evan’s Dance/Movement/Word Therapy Methods in Today’s World”. It was facilitated by no less than four accomplished DMT’s, amongst them Iris Rifkin-Gainer, a life-time student of Blanche Evan. This pioneer’s message, according to these presenters, was, in essence, Honesty, Concentration and Work.

My second choice that day was a workshop called “Going Public about Private Practice”. In the U.S many DMT’s (called ADTR) see clients in private practice. Nevertheless they face similar challenges to ours; for example, how to get started, how and where to obtain referrals, conquering fear and isolation, remuneration, and marketing. Sound familiar? We are not alone!

The day concluded with “A Dance Grows in Brooklyn”, a site-specific community-based dance ending in a Movement Choir and bringing the Hall alive! The official opening of the conference took place in the evening accompanied by the New York Chapter Film – “Moving Stories: Portraits of Dance/Movement Therapy” and then a live performance. Unfortunately I was unable to attend both these events as I had arranged to have dinner with my host, which I enjoyed enormously.

I caught up with Marcia on Friday morning and she was in excellent spirits, surrounded by colleagues, past students, dear friends and her very supportive sister Sheila. Friday morning seminars held a strong interest for me. I attended sessions on “Mind- in- the- Body Concepts of Neuroscience in Dance/Movement Therapy” facilitated by Kalila B. Homann. Kalila writes that “affective and developmental neuroscience is greatly increasing our understanding of the interrelationships between emotion, memory, sensation and perception. This presentation introduces recent developments in interpersonal and affective neurobiology that explore the interrelationship between somatic experience and brain functioning. This information base is important to understand the impact and value of dance movement therapy in working with many client populations.” The second part of her presentation was experiential focusing on clinical interventions that included relaxation, focusing, sensing, mirroring and beyond.



Dr Marcia Leventhal

There was still one seminar to go before Marcia’s lecture on “Embodying Research”. This was facilitated by 5 DMTs and we were invited to join them in the dance of research by responding physically and cognitively to a single research

question. “What cardio-pulmonary data are you aware of while forming a therapeutic relationship?” We collected and analysed the data and presented the findings through an embodied approach. We danced it!

Finally the real reason for coming to the conference had arrived. I was honoured and deeply moved to be present for the Marion Chase Lecture titled “Transformation and Healing through Dance Therapy: the Challenge and Imperative of Holding the Vision.”

Marcia's dear friend and colleague Iris Rifkin-Gainer introduced her giving us a full and fascinating picture of her life, her achievements and her contributions personally and professionally. Marcia began by honouring her husband Dr. Merle Attwood who is no longer with us physically, but Marcia felt his spirit was in the room. Poetically and artistically through word, visuals and dance, Marcia traced her journey and that of influential pioneers, her peers and students through the history of this unique profession highlighting the successes and challenges along the way and the development of her work on the quantum experience in DMT. This is a field we her students have come to know well and have embodied in every cell of our beings for the 20 years she has been coming to Australia. The lecture was punctuated by two short dances. Her colleagues and some of her former students, from England, Greece, Japan and Australia danced the "Shiva, Diva, Believer" dance which Marcia choreographed and we hastily rehearsed (roaring with laughter) in her hotel room. The entire experience left us emotional and grateful, while we reflected on the past and looked to the future. I was so glad to have come! I wouldn't have missed it for the world! That night Greece, England and Australia dined with Marcia and her family. Humour and goodwill were abundant to overflowing. At midnight I took the subway home.

I slept in the next morning and subsequently missed the 8am panel "Profiles of Dance/Movement Therapists." Five DMTs including Marcia shared their many contributions to the profession. I arrived in time for the 13th International Panel on "Dance Therapy with Children throughout the World". Many countries were represented; Canada, Germany, Spain, Israel, Japan, Korea to name a few. Where was Australia, I mused?

By now quite close to saturation point, I attended two more presentations. The first was titled "The Gift of Self: What do dance /movement therapists bring to the elderly with dementia?" This year I have volunteered to facilitate a group for the frail elderly with dementia in my community and I am always curious to learn more about this population. Donna Newman-Bluestein's enthusiasm and affection for this population reinforced that the greatest gift we bring is who we truly are. And what do the elderly offer us? They demand that we be in the moment with them. They give us the gift of time.

Finally I attended a fascinating workshop on "The Supervision Process in DMT Training" run by Patrizia Pallaro. "Movement, words, imagination, creativity, self reflection and analysis" contribute to "awareness of the rich psychological interplay between therapist and supervisor as well as the parallel processes occurring between patient and therapist or therapist and supervisor."

I staggered out of the seminar room filled to the brim with unprocessed information and experience, grabbed a hot chocolate to counter the effects of the relentless freeze of the air conditioning and made my way up to Gerry Harrison's room (England). It was time to relax and make ready for the final evening's celebration, a dinner and dance in the Grand Ballroom. There's nothing like hundreds of dance therapists hitting the dance floor and improvising to live music by the Pie Boys Flat. This time I stayed in the hotel overnight. Although there were more seminars on Sunday morning I decided to give them a miss and I felt I'd given it my best shot.

Late morning, participants gathered together to bring the conference to a close. Two talented presenters choreographed and led a Movement Choir that seamlessly wove the events of the conference together. As I gazed at others across this vast space, I felt satisfied and complete. What a lovely way to finish. Lots of hugs and smiles chatter and laughter, exchange of emails and cards preceded the final partings of long time and newly made friends. As Marcia had said in her address if only we could take this "dance" to the United Nations.

Prior to my visit, Jane Guthrie asked me to write about my experience. When I arrived home, I wondered how I would ever make sense of it. So much information, so much stimulation, so thought provoking, a beautiful harmony between work and play. I wondered about my capacity to integrate all of it. Well, thank you Jane for the opportunity to sit down quietly and systematically relive the experience chronologically, physically and emotionally. I am noting my cardio-pulmonary reactions.

Finally, thank you Marcia for being the catalyst that propelled me from one Monday to the next to be with you and others in this field, who live and breathe “the dance”. I came there for you but it was I who returned home enriched.

To the readers, and particularly Australian dance therapists, there is a substantial world wide community of professionals just like us. We are not alone. Let’s be courageous to challenge our fears and avoid isolation. The field of dance therapy will be so much richer for your participation.