Perspectives on dance therapy:
the lived experience of children

Karen E. Bond

This paper ranges through some future perspectives on dance therapy. Firstly it illuminates children's drawings as a fresh source of dance therapy theory. Then it takes a postmodern turn, suggesting that performance can be an integral part of a dance therapy program. Finally, questions are raised about the relevance of Western models of dance therapy in a world characterized by increasing cultural pluralism, and about the impact of global information technologies on dance therapy theory and practice. The paper ends on a confident note, citing the words of a child gathered after a dance therapy session: "I hope the kids in the world will learn what I learned today."

Origins

The origins of our ancient profession — the deep histories of dance therapy — are veiled in mystery. Although intuition and logic might convince us that early dance had both sacred and healing functions, we will never know why or how the first humans danced.

Knowledge of dance therapy comes from many sources, an important one being reflection on our own lived experience as dancing human beings. Jean Randolph (1995), author of *Psychoanalysis and Synchronised Swimming*, suggests that one inalienable power of human being lies in our personal ownership of a primary process. This intrinsic authority to make our own meanings is an embodied one. As noted by Damasio (1994: xvi): "The mind had to be first about the body or it could not have been". Our bodies are the template for survival, relationship, and transcendence. This notion may soon come into its own (along with dance therapy!). As we struggle to meet postmodernity's challenge of versatile adaptability, human communication will need to rely more and more on what we have in common; namely, the body (see Maffesoli, 1996).

There is another kind of knowledge which I find highly compelling, as it emanates from the 'ground of dance'. It's what we can learn about dance therapy from children, and not only children in distress. Sue Stinson (1990) observes that children usually have greater access to exploration and transformation than do most adults, and they can tell us a lot about the nature of these human capacities. Children shift easily between different sense modalities and are natural integrators; key values in dance therapeutic terms. It is odd, therefore, that children's values in dance are on the whole not valued as a source of theory in therapy, education or the arts, including dance (Stinson *et al.*, 1990; Bond, 1994a).

Like Hanny Exiner (see Exiner *et al.*, 1994), Australian pioneer dance educator and therapist, I am interested in therapy as aesthetic experience. During the past 15 years I have been focused on how children appreciate, create and resist dance within therapeutic and other learning environments. Eve Zukowski (1995), writing in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology,* suggests that the aesthetic experience of the client can be understood through an examination of underlying metaphors that structure the meaning of that experience. Over the past five years I have collected close to 600 children's drawings and anecdotes about dance. Drawings have been made directly after sessions in a range of settings, in response to value-based questions like "What did you enjoy doing in dance today?" or simply "What happened in dance today?"

For this paper, I have selected some images and statements that point to a range of personal, interpersonal and archetypal meanings that children construct in dance. Some of these are from the North Pacific islands of Saipan and Tinian where, with Dr. Peggy Hunt from the University of Hawaii, I spent an intensive two week period working with children and teachers in several special school settings. Young Australian children are represented as well.

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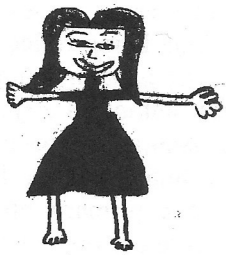
The Present

Starting close to home at the Early Learning Centre, University of Melbourne, four year old Grace points to the influence of dance on body image (Figure 1). Many young children pay careful attention to body parts in their drawings, and what is emphasised can reveal aspects of their personal style (see Bond, 1994b). Like her drawing, Grace's dancing is flexible, fluent and open-limbed. Like Grace, children often include music machines and instruments, particularly drums, in their graphic dance depictions.

Dance is often described by young people as a setting where emotions can be expressed. On Saipan, 7th grader Anita told us, "I liked the fact that everyone was happy". At Oleander Special School, 6 year old Alice showed me that direct observation is sometimes inadequate (Figure 2). In the actual dance session, Alice never smiled and hardly ever "opened". Back in Melbourne eagle dancer Andrew captioned his dance drawing "I'm angry so I'll kill it", and Michael described his dance more rhythmically as "Push, push, push, arrow." Max drew himself as a "spaceship putting fire on the dragon who is Andrew", while on the playground after dance a trio of screeching girls enacted an impassioned motif of "fly, swoop and catch the prey", a theme of which some children never seemed to tire.

Numerous children show evidence of transformation in their reflective drawings, and eagle Andrew is a prime example (Figure 3). Here, he shifts his dance experience into an archetypal realm, declaring himself King of Eagles and situating flamboyant Georgina high up in a nest, with crown, babies and an egg. Like Andrew, many young people show affinity for animals and animal movements: wild, domestic, and constructed (a flying wolf with one horn and a tiger eagle were seen in a Melbourne duet). As in the animal dances of indigenous and postmodern tribal peoples, there is a quality of authentic identification in children's renderings of their animate world. On Saipan, 14 year old Carlotta suggested that the animal theme we explored allowed expression of her personality. Some local examples include Hestia's snake dance (Figure 4)

Figure 1



This is me opening.

Figure 2

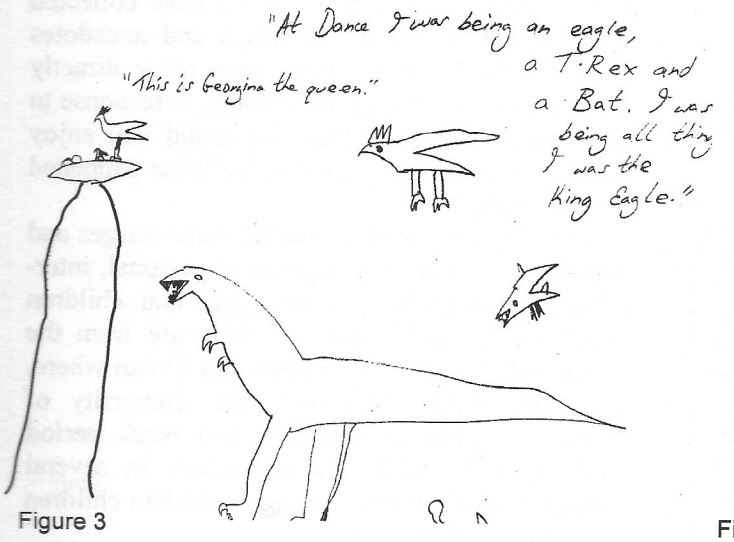


Figure 3

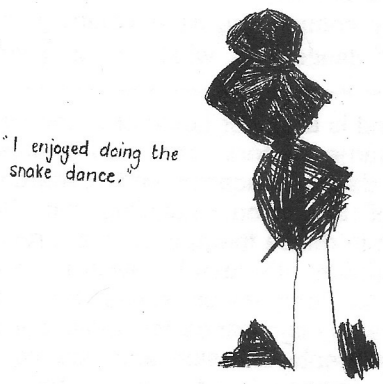


Figure 4

and Matt's bear (Figure 5). These are empathic depictions, and such examples of resonance abound in children's language as well. When asked in a group discussion to tell how he created his tortoise dance, Adam explained: "It's pretty hard to describe, but I was putting my back up to be the shell. Well, that's what tortoises do."

Identification with the lived environment is also evident. A number of children in Saipan drew tropical flowers, palm trees, and mountains after dancing, as if they were those natural forms. Charlene noted, "I like being part of the sky."

Children's ability to empathise with environmental forms and energies, converting these readily into bodily metaphors, illuminates a human capacity to privilege perception over representation. The importance of relationships in dance is a common theme.

Here is a gorgeous example of two Melbourne four year olds in duet synchrony (Figure 6). In Ida's drawing (Figure 7), Elly, an adult aide, is portrayed as a figure of protection, and indeed, until she 'broke out' (Figure 8), Ida was often observed shadowing Elly closely in dance.

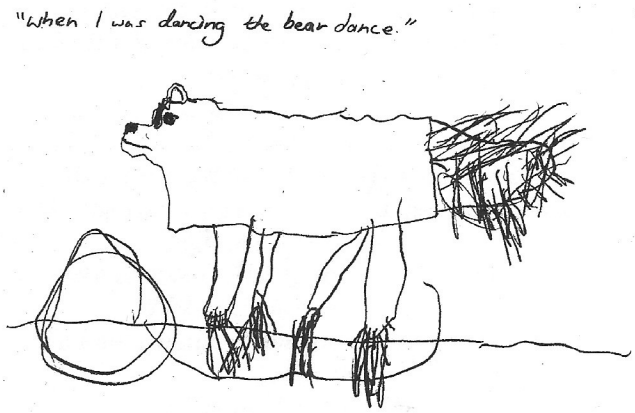


Figure 5

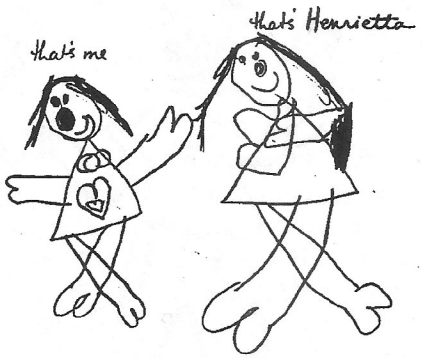


Figure 6

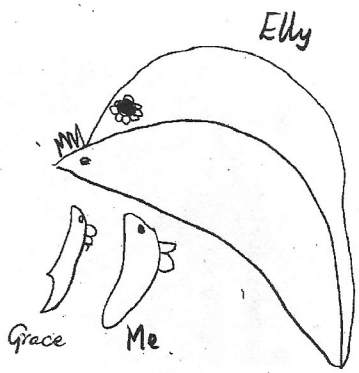


Figure 7

Figure 8

In Figure 9, Paul, a so-called 'normal' peer to a 6th grader with intellectual disabilities, draws himself dancing with a delicate ribbon, and shares his feelings, "I will miss you". This nostalgic image speaks to a kind of immediacy of affective relationship that may be intrinsic to the kind of group dance where community is a value.

The largest category of children's reflections on dance lends credence to an aesthetic theory of dance therapy, providing amplification for earlier study with nonverbal children with dual sensory impairments (Bond, 1994b). Over half of the collected drawings (including some presented above) show children involved in the intrinsic pleasure of dancing. Many drawings confirm a traditional assumption of dance therapy practice, relating to the power of the circle (Chaiklin, 1975): a 6th grader on Saipan (Figure 10) — "I like doing movements in the circle"; some 4 year olds in Melbourne (Figure 11) — "And we are going running around in the circle"

Here's a solo perspective. Demonstrating clear self-definition, Hestia declares (Figure 12), "My part of dancing is doing the twirl".

Figure 9

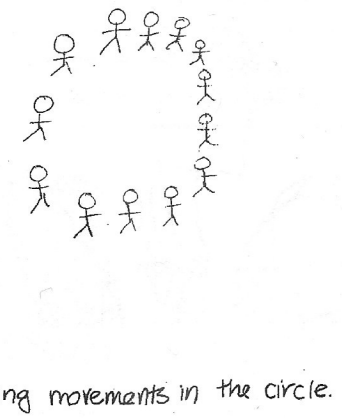


Figure 10

Figure 11

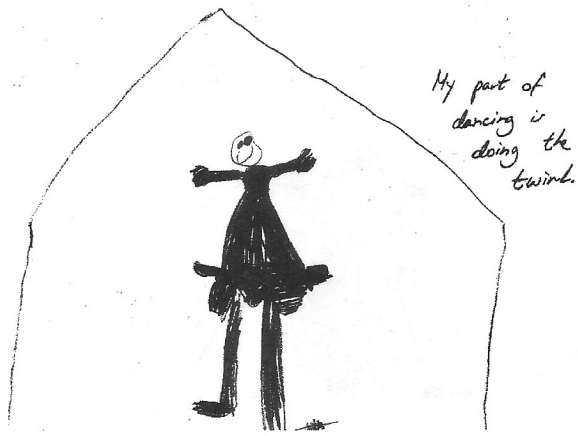


Figure 12

Canadian philosopher Francis Sparshott (1988: 404) has concluded that dance is more profoundly connected to questions of self-knowledge than other arts, noting: "In a world in which we do not know what we are, there is one thing we can thereby ever more certainly know. We can know that we are dancing."

Particularly for children with special needs, the pleasure of dancing appears to be at the foreground of their aesthetic sensibilities. Following is a poetic depiction I created from a synthesis of Oleander Special School children's drawing captions. The range of personal styles expressed reflects these children's commitment to aesthetic perception as a channel for meaning-making.

This is me opening.
Very big, very fast!
I like up, I like marching. I like close and low.
I like doing movements in the circle.
I like it when we wiggle ... I like when we open & wiggle.
I like the noodle twist.
It's about walking.
I like up and down. I like when we march.
I like the way we gallop around the room. I like high is all around.
I like chicken...I like pecking. I like snake.
I like tapping on my feet.
We hop around...I am good! That's me...I go run.
I like my legs crossed.
I was opening wide like I was dancing.
Then we get small and get high.
I was twisting around.
I like to play here. I love this dancing!

Seven year old Helena, a wheelchair dancer without verbal speech, draws after dance in vibrant repetitious red arcs with the help of a carer (Figure 13); and I know you're all wanting to see the 'noodle twist' (Figure 14).

There are also the reflections that pull us up short. Fourteen year old cool dude Scott reported, "I got sick from too much jumping". Wallace told us he'd rather have stayed at home. Michael got tired. Some children are ambivalent. Natalie wrote, "I felt weird doing all the movements, but I guess it was okay". Carlotta told us, "I really enjoyed the group today. It was more feminine. But I wish we wouldn't spend so much time mirroring."

It is clear from the 600 drawings I have collected so far, and I feel this work is only beginning, that young people experience dance as a powerful structure for meaning-making; a space for authentic self-choice. In terms of therapeutic relationship, perhaps more than in any other art, through dance we can know that "the other is structurally present in the self" (Maffesoli, 1996: 61).

The late James B. MacDonald (1995: 96) described the successful practitioner as one who probably "observes, listens, and reveals their own centredness, who helps a client gather their own inner resources for centring by being and revealing, by observing and responding, by offering and receiving".

What impresses me is the breadth of perception and kinesthetic empathy, the aesthetic integrity that children exhibit in dance, including those who resist its socialising rhythms. But it's so logical, I remind myself (unlike the economic rationalism

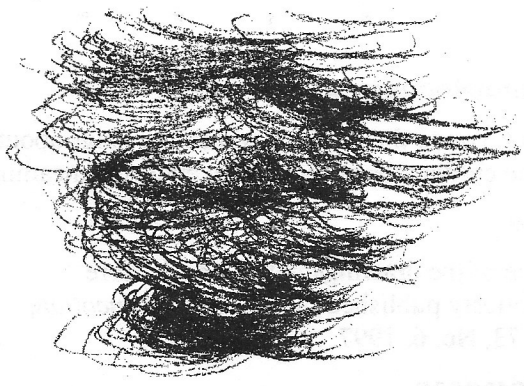


Figure 13

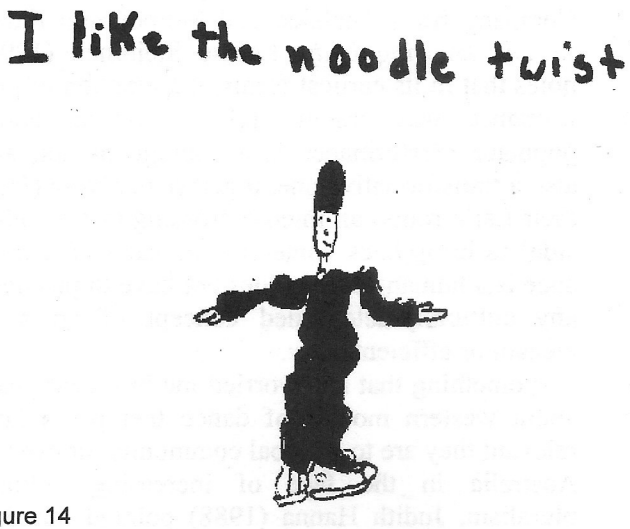


Figure 14

that is closing down dance therapy programs world-wide). As noted by arts theorist Paul Crowther (1993: 2): "Our body's hold upon the world is of enormous complexity, of which our art is a direct extension". And many young dancers I have known confirm Damasio (1994: xvi) who acknowledges the body as the measure of "our most refined thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows". At an individual level, the drive for transformative knowledge is a highly personal journey which Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1995: 328) asserts must of necessity bring the living, vital body to the surface: "Our bodies are, in fact ... the primal form on which we model our thinking".

Future Directions

In terms of future directions, postmodernism is blurring the boundaries between art and life, body and society, high and low culture, performance and therapy. I am becoming more interested in performance *as* therapy. Clearly there is a lingering modernist disdain for the notion, one which considers only 'serious choreography' as a subject for the theatre. In Bill T. Jones work *Still/Here*, performers were people with life-threatening illnesses. *New Yorker* dance critic Aileen Croce refused to review *Still/Here* on the grounds that, "I can't review someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about" (Martin, 1996: 321). Croce asserts that all kinds of illness should be avoided in performance, along with overweight dancers, old dancers, dancers with sickle feet or physical deformities. Also problematic are abused women and disenfranchised homosexuals, all of whom, according to Croce, make "victim art".

However, many disagree (see Halprin, 1995; Cooper-Albright, 1997), and a lively performance culture is arising in Australia which supports dancers of mixed abilities (eg. Reckless Dance Company from Adelaide and Melbourne's Flux). In *The knowing body,* Louise Steinmen (1995) notes that in its earliest forms, the function of performance was ecstatic release for an entire populace. Performance is a courageous act, and also a transformative one, together implying (from their Latin roots) an intense crossing to 'the other side' to bring back something of value. Performance is a human act that does not have to privilege any culturally-determined concept of an able, elegant or efficient body.

Something that has worried me in recent years about western models of dance therapy is how relevant they are to a global community, or even to Australia in the face of increasing cultural pluralism. Judith Hanna (1988) pointed out that when cultural norms are violated in dance therapy, stress may be induced rather than alleviated. An entrenched feminisation in the field is a further concern, as is the relative lack of rigorous research to illuminate and substantiate dance therapy. I am extremely curious about how the information age will affect dance therapy theory and practice, including the development of multimedia and virtual reality technologies that can fragment, expand, and democratise our current conceptions of dance and dance therapy (Bond and Morrish, 1995).

Some believe the corporeal arts will be strengthened as antidotes to hypertech; for example Sparshott (1988: 137), who suggests that in a "computerized age, in which social relations are felt no longer to be an arena for the courtesy of a graceful mutuality, an art of dance in which that mutuality is isolated, emphasized and celebrated, might be felt to be supremely important". I will conclude this paper with an image of promise rather than problem. From Saipan, 6th grader Jedda gives me confidence in the global future of dance therapy and other person-centred forms of dance practice (Figure 15): "I hope the kids in the world will learn what I learn today."

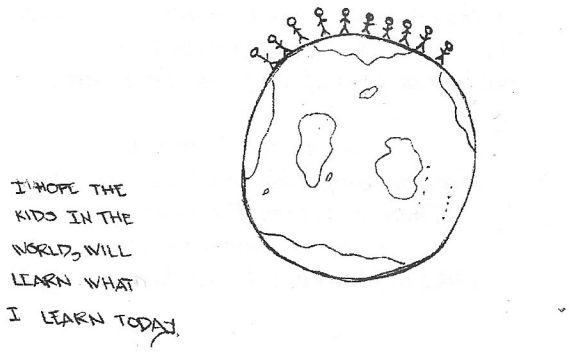


Figure 15

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Acknowledgement

Thank you to the children whose drawings about dance enliven these pages with enduring meaning.

Note

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