

The Dance From the Depths and the Dance From the Plains:

comparisons and reflections on dance therapy and aboriginal dance

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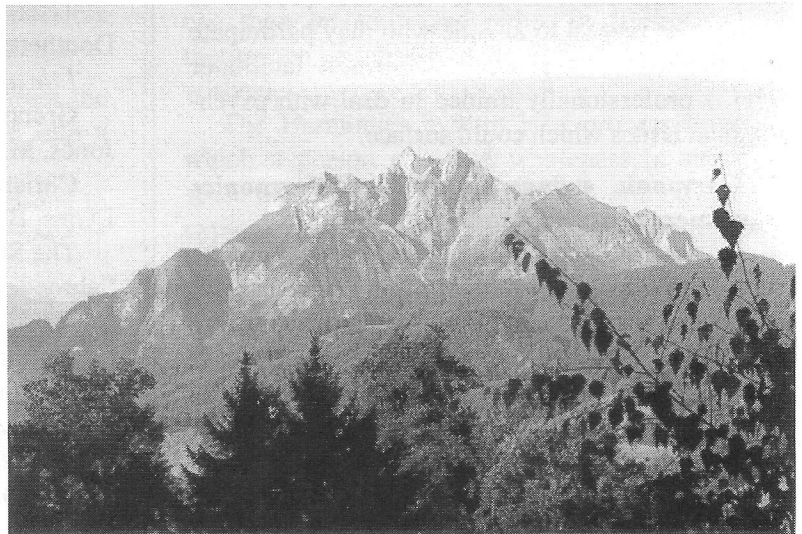
This paper explores the significance of landscape for the creation of authentic dances and how its shapes, forms and spiritual associations relate to the dancer's identity and create meaning. The vertical and the horizontal dimensions are explored both within the dance process and within a transpersonal framework. Possibilities for 'cross-fertilisation' between dance therapy and Aboriginal dance is considered, taking into account research findings, psychocultural and ecological thought, and insights by Aboriginal elders.

Introduction

This paper is about impressions and reflections of the way in which landscape influences and forms people and their dance. The process of exploring this issue started in 1994. I left Melbourne and lived in Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory for a year, researching Aboriginal dance from this area and writing my Masters thesis. It is a case study about a series of dances called 'Yanatyant'. They were performed by members of the Bunitj, Murran and Ulbu clans, at Iliwara Billabong near Cannon Hill, in the north of Kakadu National Park.

A mixed methodology that was qualitative and observational was applied. It involved elements of phenomenology, ethnography, and dance analysis. Poetry, by Big Bill Neidjie, and personal kinaesthetic responses were also used as tools for reflection. As it turned out, 'self-reflexivity' became the major challenge during and after my research: "In order to understand the other, the researcher is forced to reflect on him/herself" (Sklar, 1991: 27). Questions related to

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'belonging' emerged: Where are my roots? Where does my dance originate from? How do I fit into Australia, being born and having grown up overseas? These questions did not leave me alone, even after completing my thesis. In order to put them in a context, I will summarise my background briefly.

Growing up in a Swiss landscape

I grew up in Central Switzerland, at the edge of the Alps. When I opened the shutters in the morning to let the light in, my eyes moved up to the peak of Mt. Pilatus which was towering in front of me. I grew up taking verticality for granted because Switzerland has many high, scanty and rocky mountains. The landscape climbs and descends in rolling hills and pointy peaks. Switzerland is a small country, about the size of Tasmania. Space is reduced. This is reflected in the Swiss Folk dances, with most of

them being performed on the spot or neatly arranged with small movements. Swiss people like to climb mountains, possibly partly because lots of them have a hotel on top, but also because people like the view from the peak and feel inspired and reflective. I have more than one friend who claims that they have the greatest insights on top of a mountain. In this landscape of vertical dimensions, time is measured, and precise time-measuring instruments are a well-known Swiss industry.

Carl Gustav Jung, the father of Depth Psychology, was born into this landscape. His ideas of the unconscious, the archetypes, and other concepts have influenced modern psychology and also one strand of the dance therapy movement, the 'authentic movement' (Whitehouse, 1979; Chodorow, 1990).



Living in an Australian landscape

The greatest contrast to depth and verticality can be found in Australia. Australia is a slab, inviting a nomadic lifestyle. Kakadu is mainly flat with vast woodlands, vast wetlands and some rocky sandstone country. The expansive space invites expansive movement. The view is as far as the eye can see. There is a sense of timelessness in this most ancient part of the world.

At the 1992 *Jung and the Australian Psyche* Conference in Melbourne, the question emerged in a plenary session of how the shape of the landscape affects the shape of the Australian psyche. David Tacey replied that the Australian temperament was considered to be flat, the way people spoke was flat, with lips hardly moving. He felt Australians had a 'levelling' effect on

people who were greatly enthusiastic, and it was difficult for Australians to feel the sublime and the depths. He considered it was hard for Australians to feel a sense of the spirit because the spirit was a vertical concept ('soaring'). He thought that, because there was no verticality in the landscape, living in big cities with vertical architecture and Gothic cathedrals was preferred by most Europeans who are used to these shapes. He also believed that, because there is no verticality in the landscape, the mythical life has to do with the soul, the earth, and that therefore Australia was a natural site for soul in the world.

Landscape and the psyche

Similarly, Freya Mathews (1996) claims that the world provides templates for the organisation of the psyche, that the psyche will mirror the world (and vice-versa). In her view, the psyche is an internalisation of the world and the world a reflection of the psyche.

Freya also noted that the Western experience of space is the circle with the social life centrally organised, whereas the Aboriginal experience of space is along linear patterns with pathways streaming through space. Bruce Chatwin's 1987 book *The Songlines* describes how traditional Aborigines in each area know the songs and dances pertaining to their area, and how they were

performed over thousands of years, to remember the travels of the ancestors, such as the Rainbow Serpent or the Giant Kangaroo.

Jung himself wrote in 1943: "I am deeply convinced of the - unfortunately - still very mysterious relation between man and the landscape" (in Adler, 1989: 338). With these thoughts in mind, I now want to turn to the dance and how the landscape, the space and its shapes are reflected in the dance.

Landscape and the dance

Aboriginal dance developed in this flat and vast landscape, in horizontal dimensions, where relationships to the land, rocks, animals, and plants are explored. I will refer to Aboriginal dance as the dance from the plains, or the

'horizontal dance' where dance is often organised along lines.

Dance therapy developed in the big cities where the spirit can soar in vertical dimensions, where depths, peaks and valleys of one's own psyche can be explored. This dance will be called the dance from the depth, from within, the dance claiming self, or the 'vertical dance'.

Both of these dances will now briefly be explored, beginning with observations and reflections on Aboriginal dances.

The horizontal dance from the plains

Australian Aboriginal dance is inspired by the 'out there'. In Kakadu, people seem to breathe with, feel with, and dance what is out there: the seagull, the tree, the Mimi spirits. Their roots, their spirituality, their soul is the land itself, and so they dance where they feel most at home.

The dancers' eyes are open, there is a near-far focus outwards towards the trees, rocks, or towards the people. The dancers are aware of natural phenomena, of nature, rocks and animals. The environment inspires the dance. However, inspiration can also be drawn from a totem animal, ancestors of the Dreaming, spirits, and/or the Law.

For example, these sources are reflected in the movement themes, animal dances, stamping, paperbark and twigs, and song and dance as a communication with the spirits. Body paint from natural materials such as clay, ochre and charcoal ashes are used, possibly indicating that the body belongs to the earth rather than to the individual. Dreamed and learned dances are transmitted by the elders and/or owners of the dance. The group acts as both mover and witness, although it is often the women who seem to 'hold the space' at the side of the dance ground, providing the beat and rhythm, if not performing their own dances. The dance is connected to the land, which is traditionally owned and is usually performed on this land. Dance is used as an art and a tool to claim the land, to reconfirm one's connection to it and its life. The dance and the dancers are 'being rooted in the land'.

From the dances studied, I have found that Aborigines in Kakadu dance their place in the group, for example elders have leading roles. The value of their knowledge and wisdom may be reflected in their central roles. The dancer may have his identity defined by his place, role and position in the dance.

The points regarding the 'horizontal dance' are summarised below:

- the dance from the plains, on the land (wetlands, woodlands), 'out there';
- eyes open, near-far focus;
- awareness of natural phenomena, animals, rocks, trees;
- environment inspires dance (totem animal, trees, rocks, also ancestors and spirits of the Dreaming and the Law), reflected in movement/dance themes and body paint;
- dreamed and learned dances transmitted by the elders and/or owners of the dance;
- group as mover and witness (women often holding space on the side of the dance ground);
- the dance of the land which is traditionally owned;
- the dance to claim the land, to reconfirm one's connection to it and its life;
- the dance to confirm 'being rooted in the land'.

The vertical dance from the depth

In contrast, the dance therapy process seems to be a vertical process. It allows for the emergence of a dance ascending from the depth of imagination, psyche, or the unconscious, from the 'in here'.

It is a dance with an inward focus (eyes are often closed), and the dancer is aware of inner sensations, memories, feelings, and thoughts. Inner 'dreamings', or 'soulscapes', inspire the dance. They can be personal, private or collective images. It is an individual dance, a dance from the individual's 'inner land'. It allows for authentic gestures to emerge, express and develop.

There is usually a mover-witness dyad, or a mover group with a witness. The dance is about clarifying and affirming personal spaces, or about one's stance and position in life. The dance is an art and a tool for claiming self, affirming roots, and being 'rooted in oneself', in one's own earth - the body.

A summary of the 'vertical dance' follows:

- the dance ascending from the depth of a person, his/her imagination, the unconscious, 'in here';
- focus inwards, eyes often closed;
- awareness of inner sensations, memories, feelings, thoughts, heightened;
- inner 'dreamings' and 'soulscapes', personal and/or collective images;
- the individual dance, the dance from the individual's inner land;

- authentic gestures are allowed to emerge and express themselves;
- mover-witness dyad, or mover group and witness;
- clarifying and affirming personal spaces, personal stance, and position in life;
- affirming inner roots, being 'rooted in oneself' and in the body.

Influencing - Sharing - Benefiting

We will now explore how the two dance processes could cross-fertilise each other, how we as white Australians could learn from the 'horizontal dimension' and what we could offer to Aboriginal Australians through the dance therapy process.

Tacey argues that "Euro-Australians cannot simply graft onto their own souls a fifty-thousand-year-old Dreaming borrowed or stolen from another tradition" (1995: 133), because an archaic animism and a belief in ancestor spirits could not take root in the white soul. Although he sees a need for us to remythologise and "develop spiritual kinship with the land", we should be *inspired* by Aboriginal cosmology to create our own, rather than considering it as a "template or foundation upon which to build our own" (ibid).

It seems that developing a relationship with our environment can happen in various ways: we can open ourselves to the world around us and gain a more horizontal view in political and ecological terms, and adopting values of sharing. At the *Psyche in the World Conference* (1994) Peter Bishop suggested that "we need to communicate to things in order to 'make soul' with everyday objects". We need to look up and out to take in nature and also our city environments. We need to be confronted with the world around us. Bishop encouraged us to learn "alchemical walking which is about gathering insights and sparks of the world's soul". We need to become what Tacey, at the same conference, called "geopsychologists" and "rock-philosophers", in the literal sense and in the sense of seeking alchemical gold.

We can dance our connectedness with our body, but also with our land, our country, our reality and our fellow people. Tacey quoted Jung: "We have lost a world pulsed with our blood and breathed with our breath". We can reverse this loss and claim the world as a collective and shared place.

Furthermore, if we allow ourselves, we can experience time as nature's rhythm rather than a measured clockwork. Clare Dunne mentioned an example of a nature's rhythm at the *Transper-*

sonal Psychology Conference in Sydney, 1996: "River people cannot hurry the river". She suggested that we can be Ab-original to ourselves by developing the qualities of emotional sensitivity, psychic awareness, and earth-relatedness. Uncle Earnie, an Aboriginal elder from the Tully area in Far North Queensland, said recently: "Nothing is important enough that it couldn't wait. The sun, the moon and the stars only need to come up every day and night." (Grant, 1997).

We might also have to connect with our own ancestry and explore the stories of our country of origin. The Irish learn about the Leprechauns. I learned about the numerous stories of the little Earthmen in Switzerland. They are mythical beings inhabiting certain parts of the alive and spirited land. They had similar functions as the Mimi spirits in Kakadu and acted as mediators between man and the land.

The other direction in the process of remythologising and developing a spiritual kinship with the land is, according to Tacey, "downward, into our own depths, to see what could be happening there, rather than to remain the same and move sideways by appropriating another culture's dreaming" (1995: 134). The process of the 'downward' direction, I believe, is precisely what we are following through with the dance therapy process.

I now wish to discuss what the dance therapy process could offer Aboriginal people. I am thinking primarily of Aboriginal people in urban areas who are living 'in exile', separated from their land, in similar ways as Europeans do who have migrated, and might no longer remember the stories of their country of origin.

We can all re-dream our origins and connectedness through the "unfolding process" (Leventhal, 1991) and other dance therapy methods. We can create roots that reach inwards through dance imagination and dance symbols. These symbols might be inspired by own traditions or own dreamings. We can revitalise and re-spiritualise dead city spaces and dead inner spaces. The post-modern era has provided us with some shining examples of dance events and happenings initiated by artists such as Anna Halprin (Burns et al., 1977).

We can allow for new forms of dance that are not necessarily audience-oriented (as many Aboriginal dances in urban areas are nowadays), but participatory. This could be seen at the Aboriginal Dance Festival in Laura in 1995 for instance, when the Aurukun community brought a 'big mob' to support their dancers. Arguments

and discussions about the dance and its form were part of the actual performance process and it invited social interaction, ownership, and a sense of community. Traditional Aboriginal dance resembled post-modern dance on that occasion.

We have now reflected on observations on Aboriginal dance and on dance therapy as we have learnt it in our institutions. The question emerges now what the implications are for an Australian dance therapy approach. Is there such an idea as (or a need for) an Australian dance therapy approach?

An Australian dance therapy approach?

We might find some insights within a transpersonal framework (transpersonal being defined as ‘beyond the individual’). From what we have explored so far, we can assume that both Aboriginal dance and dance therapy are reaching beyond an individual dimension.

Warwick Fox, an Eco-Philosopher from Tasmania, presented a model on dimensions of the transpersonal at the *Transpersonal Psychology Conference*. The model he presented will now be introduced for speculating on how Aboriginal dance and dance therapy could possibly be synthesised. What is the potential power of an Australian dance therapy approach that would encompass both the vertical and the horizontal dimensions?

Fox considered the Transpersonal as a huge umbrella and wondered into what sort of inquiry transpersonal topics fit into. He speculated in what sort of ways we can move beyond the personal, and he identified ‘vertical’, ‘horizontal’

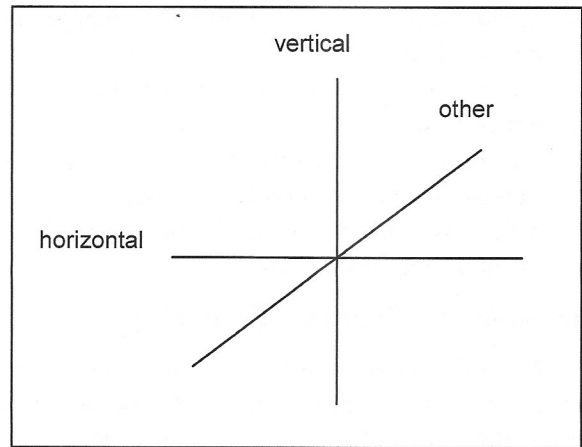


Figure 1

and ‘other’ dimensions, as represented in Figures 1 and 2.

On the vertical dimension, which explores ‘depth’, he placed the “trans-egoic” in which depth is experienced as a “stairway to heaven”. Depth is achieved through meditation and higher states of consciousness.

On the vertical dimension, he also placed the “trans-cognitive” in which “gifts from the gods” are received. The realm of the “trans-cognitive” goes beyond ordinary ways of knowing and includes creativity.

Finally, we find the realm of the “trans-mundane” in the vertical dimension, which is about “stillness” and the experience of “being”. In the “trans-mundane” there is non-dual awareness.

I have set out earlier my belief that the dance therapy process has a vertical dimension, and with that, the potential of providing transcendent

Vertical	Horizontal	‘Other’
<i>trans-egoic</i> “stairway to heaven” meditation, higher states of consciousness		
<i>trans-cognitive</i> “gifts from the gods” beyond ordinary ways of knowing, creativity	<i>trans-local/temporal</i> “reception of information from outside”	
<i>trans-mundane</i> stillness, experience of “being”, non- dual awareness	<i>trans-atomistic</i> “move beyond narrow sense of self”, “world around” outward, deep ecology, identification with the world	<i>trans-consensual</i> “through the looking glass”, shamanism, drugs, trance, a new dance therapy (?)

Figure 2. Realms of the Transpersonal (adapted from Warwick Fox, 1996)

experiences in the above realms. I have personally experienced depth in my dance many times. I have accessed ways of knowing not otherwise encountered, both through delving into dreams and other emerging images and into sensations from the body. I have also encountered stillness, or a feeling of being 'one', during or after many dance therapy sessions.

On the horizontal dimension which explores expansiveness, Fox placed two realms: the "trans-local/temporal", and the "trans-atomistic". In the "trans-local/temporal", information from outside is received, through telepathy for example. Such information could include information from rocks, trees, or other people. Healing at a distance is possible, past experiences and extra-sensory perceptions can be accessed in this realm.

In the "trans-atomistic", we "move beyond a narrow sense of self, outward, into the world around". Fox considers experiences in deep ecology and identification with the world, which may be induced by falling in love, as examples for this realm.

It can be argued that telepathy, healing and identification with the land are natural to traditional Aborigines. I heard of an old man in Kakadu who, without any previous notification of a visit, predicted that 'his folk' were half a day away. His brother and family from Arnhemland indeed visited a few hours later. An Aboriginal woman friend also told me that her people were reading signs, like a bird flying in the house, as messages from outside (Jose, 1997). Such messages are reflected in some Aboriginal dances as mentioned earlier.

Bill Neidjie, the Kakadu Man, says in one of his publications: "Tree ... he watching you. You look at tree, he listen to you" (1986: 52).

Identification with the world has been observed by anthropologists who noted that Aboriginal people have a profound cosmology of place, a living mythology, which binds them organically to the land. In Bill Neidjie's words:

*I feel it with my body,
with my blood.
Feeling all these trees,
all this country.
When this wind blow you can feel it.
Same for country....
You feel it.
You can look,
but feeling....
that make you.*
(Neidjie et al., 1986: 51)

The question is now whether a synthesis of Aboriginal dance and dance therapy could provide experiences in the "other" dimension, which Fox describes as "trans-consensual". In this realm, Fox claims, experiences "off the range", or "through the looking glass", are made, either through shamanism, drugs, near death experiences, altered states of consciousness, and trance states. I argue that such trance states can be induced through dance.

Reconciliation through dance

In the 1990s, a dialogue between indigenous and Euro-Australians is essential and this needs to be achieved through a revived Reconciliation Process. David Mowaljarlai is a Ngarinyin lawman from the Kimberley region of Northern Western Australia. At the Transpersonal Psychology Conference in 1996, he said that white Australians have their identity in Europe and that their spirituality was not derived from this continent. He talked about "wurnan" which expresses a belonging to Australia and in which "nothing exists alone".

We have a gift we have been trying to give you. Our gift will give you meaning, your belonging. We don't want to hurt you, because you were born here in Australia, so you belong in Australia. But you have to learn about the culture of Australia so you know your belonging, your naming, your identity. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, Aboriginal religious culture is having an impact on what is forming Australian consciousness. I suggest that our deepest wounding is in our separation from the land, that we need to enter the sacred place where we can enter into the mystery and thus into ourselves.

(Mowaljarlai, 1996)

I suggest that in order to make Australian dance therapy our own we have to enter into a communication process with the Aboriginal psyche and the Aboriginal dance. As Bill Neidjie said: "This time White-European must come to Aborigine, listen Aborigine and understand it. Understand that culture" (1989, p.78).

This may mean that we take time to appreciate their dances in their various contexts: through being in their land with a mindful attitude; through activating our own indigenous archetype; through finding our own dance with our ancestors in mind. We can also explore an 'other' dimension of belonging - not only to

ourselves, to our families and peer group, but also to our physical/ecological and spiritual environment, and to participate through our dance in a 'universal Gaia dreaming', or a creation process which honours 'belonging' as a unique as well as a common experience.

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