

Dance For Mothers and Toddlers

Elizabeth Loughlin

The dance is an opening of the Mother's imagination. While she is dancing with her child there comes a more imaginative response to the child and to their relationship. The universal elements of the music used in the class, for example the Bach oboe concerto or the Mozart Flute Andante, place so much of the overwhelming humdrumness of child rearing and house-wifely duties into perspective. It seems to open up the emotional availability of the mother and to help her experience the possibilities of relationship, a vision within her family rather than life as a series of hurdles. At the Toy Library for handicapped children such music allows the positive and joyous part of the child to emerge for his mother rather than all the failure.

For the toddler, the dance is an artistic expression of their beginning awareness of what it is to be alive and separate at two years. It means that their discovery of space, of moving legs, running, of feeling the ground, of holding something very still can become transformed and really exist.



The spring ready to burst.....

The two year old so wants to make an imprint on the space. The bubble around the mother and child is like a spring that bursts and separates into space, then must reform for the child to return and recharge, so he can go out again. The opportunity to use space is complemented by an opportunity to return to the warmth and intimacy and security of the mother. The classes use music which gives the inspiration and permission to dance into the

distance, and music whose form and tone suggest closeness and renewal.

Form makes meaning of the boundlessness of space. It creates a central point of energy and provides direction into infinity. The external form on the floor such as a circle of cushions bounds the space for the child in a secure manner. The children are mesmerized by direction; each form essentially has direction into the horizon, into the centre, into the curve. Simplicity and clarity in the forms, musical and spatial, allow the child to make sense of his world and the breadth of the adult space in which he is just entering from the orbit of mother's arms. In the beginning of the class the form exists to centre the mothers and children. It may be a pattern on the floor, a circle of entwining ribbons or it may be an object, a large grey stone or a floating white feather, whose own nature just exists itself and helps to unravel the overlay of routine activities that whirl on one another before the child arrives at the class.

Music is often used as an inspiration to form the space. The Baroque period reordered the cosmos. Bach bounds the space clearly linking the dancer with their own centre and infinity. Mozart's music allows for a closer connection between the dancers suggesting reconciliation and intimacy, while the vitality and optimism of Renaissance music gives impetus to the newly discovered aliveness of the two year old. Later periods suggest more diffuse boundaries and shift their focus to more personal expression which may be danced when there is trust and confidence within the class.

The two year old has direct experience with his world, unfiltered by reasoning, symbolism or style. Music light in tone, with a pure melodic line, often a lyrical quality, played on single instruments or in a small group enhance this direct experience. On the other hand the dissonance and the irregularity of some of Satie and Ravel piano music catches the children's tumbling and turbulent orientation in space while still being essentially light not strident in tone. The children are beginning to look at their world so we bring the natural materials to their dance. Shells,

thistledown, shadows, a path of smelling herbs,
leaves held on a little cotton, each one is rich in
qualities which inspire without words of
instruction.

Sounds come before the words are formed.
Sounds made on the breath framed by consonants
merge with the dance movement as a swishsh
along the diagonal or an hahh outstretched the



breadth of the room. Real poems, perhaps just
one line suggesting a yoga posture:

“Warm and furry,
Caterpillar in a hurry”

(Christina Rossetti)

aim for the mother to make the imaginative leap
towards a poetic way of looking at the world.

It is the mother’s prerogative, not solely the
teacher’s, to see the spirit of the child and to share
his effervescence.

Note:

Dance for Mothers and Toddlers
is from an unpublished book: *Dance Teaching for
Children*, by Teachers of Mangala Studios of Yoga and
Creative Dance, Carlton, 1979.

Photo credits:

p.12 Elizabeth and 2 year old dancer, Lieto Studio
(Clifton Hill), 1997. Photo: Anna Golemo

p.13 Making sounds, Lieto Studio (Clifton Hill).
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