

The Magic of Dance

By Terri Saunders

Dance is the union of music and movement. The rhythmic bodily motions inherent in dance are instinctive within all of us. Who hasn't felt the impulse to move when listening to a song with a compelling beat, or the exhilaration of melting into the focused meditation of a dance?

Dance has been a part of human life throughout history across the globe and likely before there was even a word for it. At its essence, dance is a form of communication that was birthed from the human desire for personal expression and social connection. Primitive cultures employed dance as a means to tell stories of events that people experienced, including passage from childhood to adulthood, the change of seasons, and to dramatize the hunt or battles that were fought. In fact, the word "history" is derived from the word "histor", the ancient Roman term for dance. Before the written word, the gestures of dance and the stories they told preserved traditions and ensured survival of the tribe.

Dance eventually evolved into two primary forms. Social dances celebrated births, commemorated deaths, and marked special events, while magical dances invoked the gods to bring rain, end famine or cure the sick. Shamans, the first choreographers, used dance to enter altered states of consciousness, drive out evil spirits and encourage healing. Shamans still do this in some cultures with results which defy conventional science.

Rhythmic sound accompaniment was originally provided by the dancers themselves, then evolved into percussion instruments such as drums and shakers. Melodies were later added through vocalization, yet the foundation of dance was the rhythmic beat which allowed dancers to keep time and regulate the pace of the movement. This still remains true today, as it is the pulsation of the beat felt in our bodies that stimulates us to move to the music.

Ancient Egypt was the first great culture to incorporate dance into daily life and to develop more sophisticated string, wind and percussion instruments. Dances were performed at festivals throughout the year to honor their gods. Priests performed ritual dances to celebrate the cosmos, and professional dance troupes provided entertainment for the public in the squares. Some of the Egyptian dance steps resembled those in modern classical ballet.

Dance was the central component of ancient Greek theater performed by the great dramatists of the era, Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. The Greeks believed that dance promoted physical health and enhanced education, and it was encouraged as a social pastime. The Greeks took dance to the level of an art form.

Greek performers brought dance to Rome which inspired the plague weary population to create their own plays. However, the Romans distorted the Greeks' balanced and harmonious dance form, replacing it with the spectacle of public games and mime, diminishing its perceived value.

In late 13th century Turkey, the Dervishes of the Mevlevi order of Sufism practiced a ritual whirling dance designed to release the ego and attain oneness with God. Their whirling movements symbolized the rotation of the cosmos and raised consciousness. Spinning or circular movements are rooted in many ancient ritual and modern

trance dances around the world. The eastern influence is also apparent in the enduring popularity of belly dancing, the erotic ancient female dance of fertility originally performed to invoke the Goddess, and now practiced for the sheer joy of it.

The Christian era utilized theater and dance in church rituals, and by the Middle Ages theater and dance moved outside to squares and marketplaces primarily to teach religious doctrine, but eventually became a form of entertainment. Folk dancing became popular as a means to preserve the identity of different cultures around the world and many are still practiced in their country of origin. Clogging, square dancing and contra dancing are folk dances that are currently enjoyed by many Americans.

Dance re-emerged as an art form in Europe in the late Middle Ages where dances were performed between acts of classical plays or operas. The first ballets combining precision dance movements with theatrical elements were created in 16th century Italy and France. Ballet's refinement and popularity grew throughout Europe, Russia and the U.S., elevating it to a highly regarded dance form requiring great skill and grace.

Social dancing as we know it today can be traced back to the courts of 16th and 17th century Europe where ballroom dancing provided a diversion for the nobility. After the political revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, dances once performed by the aristocracy became popular with the masses. By the mid-19th century, minuets, quadrilles, polkas and waltzes were enjoyed by all. The waltz in particular was the most popular, as it represented the spirit of freedom of the time. In contrast to the controlled confined movements inherent in other dances, the waltz allowed dancers to sweep across the dance floor and establish their own boundaries.

By World War 1, the Latin American influence made its way into American social dance and the tango became all the rage, inspiring new dances. Latin dances are still popular today, including salsa which is performed in many nite clubs. The Roaring 20's and Big Band era brought African and Caribbean dance rhythms and movements onto the scene, leading to the Charleston, swing, jitterbug, lindy hop, and boogie. Depression-era dance marathons enabled dancers to relieve stress and win cash. Multicultural influences later brought the twist, disco, break dancing and hip hop to the American dance scene.

Theatrical dance was revolutionized by the modern dance movement. Inspired by the women's rights movement, independent and courageous women such as Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham broke convention by performing dances of their own choosing, emphasizing freedom of movement and incorporating some of the ancient dance movements performed by priestesses and temple dancers. Jazz, tap and other dance forms have infused the performing arts through theater, film and television making dance more accessible to everyone, presenting an array of dance forms to choose from.

Why do we dance? Mainly because it feels good! Dancing benefits us on all levels of the body, mind, emotions and spirit. Dance is a way to leave our worries behind as we focus our attention on the music and movement of our bodies. As we relax into the dance and the joy it gives us, we release resistance to the flow of wellness through our being. Depending

on the type of dance, we can experience a great aerobic workout, a fun time with our friends, a romantic encounter, a peaceful state of meditation, or spiritual bliss. Dancing can rekindle enthusiasm in a tired soul, unlock repressed creativity, unite generations and cultures, and rejuvenate the entire being.

Dancing is a wonderful way to exercise the body and mind. It strengthens and tones muscles, prevents bone loss, increases flexibility and stamina, improves posture and balance, and helps to reduce excess weight. A 150 pound adult can burn between 200 and 400 calories doing just 30 minutes of moderate social dancing. Dancing can release endorphins in the body creating a sense of euphoria similar to the state experienced by long distance runners. A study where pedometers were attached to square dancers found that each dancer covered nearly five miles in a single evening.

Dancing provides excellent cardiovascular conditioning which can lead to a slower heart rate, balanced blood pressure and improved cholesterol levels. A recent study done in Italy of 110 cardiac patients found that waltzing was just as effective as bicycle and treadmill training for improving exercise capacity. When compared to other cardiac patients, the dancers reported more improvement in sleep, mood and the ability to do hobbies, housework and have sex. Another study by Fairleigh Dickinson University indicated that people who listen to music while exercising are more likely to stick to their workout plan and experience significantly more weight loss than those who do not listen to music while working out.

Dancing employs both hemispheres of the brain, encouraging whole brain integration and enhanced learning ability. We learn the dance steps with the cognitive left side of the brain, while experiencing the timbre and mood of the music with the right side. The focused activity of remembering dance steps and sequences boosts brain power and improves memory skills. The exercise of dancing also serves to increase the level of brain chemicals that encourage nerve cells to grow. A 2003 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that ballroom dancing at least twice a week makes people less likely to develop dementia. Another study showed that some people with Alzheimer's disease were able to recall forgotten memories when they danced to music that they used to know.

As it turns out, the brain does its own dance when we learn to dance. According to researcher and choreographer Ivar Hagendoorn, we anticipate dancers' or athletes' next moves by making connections through motor imagery. As we observe movement, we experience the kinesthetic feeling of movement without actually moving. This activates the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain which stores short term working memory. In essence, we imagine ourselves doing the movements before we actually do them. Studies have found that not only does this mental rehearsal prepare us for the real thing, but we can actually become tired from the experience. This is because observing movements activates the same muscle groups and motor circuits in the brain as it does to actually perform the movement. The energy and focus required creates a great mental workout. It follows that visual imagery of movement can be an effective healing tool for rehabilitating physical handicaps and injuries.

The element of music plays a major role in uplifting our mood during dance. Neuroscientist, Dr. Daniel Levitan observed 13 subjects who listened to classical music while in

an M.R.I. machine and found a cascade of brain-chemical activity. First the music triggered the forebrain as it analyzed the structure and meaning of the tune. Then the nucleus accumbens and ventral tegmental area were activated to release dopamine, the "feel good" neurochemical that triggers reward and which is also released during orgasm. This could explain the orgasmic feelings reported by some trance dancers.

Dance/movement therapy emerged as a distinct profession in the 1940's and has evolved over the years to include approximately 1200 certified dance therapists in the U.S. and 29 foreign countries. Dance therapy is an effective treatment for people of all ages and backgrounds with developmental, medical, social, physical and psychological impairments. A recent four year study done at Karlstad University in Stockholm Sweden showed the effects of dance therapy on six boys with ADHD ages 5 to 7 and on eleven depressed self-destructive teenage girls ages 13 to 17. All of the boys calmed down after the dance therapy. Their parents and teachers reported better schoolwork performance, and one boy who was only able to sit still in the classroom for 10 minutes prior to the dance therapy, was able to attend an entire lesson after the therapy. All six boys showed improvement in social skills after the therapy and were better able to play with other children without getting into fights.

Prior to treatment with dance therapy, the teenage girls did not respond to conversational therapy as they resisted speaking about what bothered them. The dance therapy proved to be a good way to enhance their energy level and increase their joy of living. Certain dance styles such as the flamenco helped increase the girls' sense of pride and self-esteem. Their depression was alleviated and they were happier overall.

Another study done by mental health researchers at the University of Derby in England tested the levels of depression in volunteers before and after nine weeks of salsa dancing classes. The results showed significant improvement for all class members who completed the experiment.

Social dancing has many benefits that enhance the quality of life. It provides an outlet for built up mental tension that gets left behind as we walk onto the dance floor. It builds self confidence as we learn to follow the steps and rhythm of the dance. It provides an opportunity to meet new people who share a common interest and who just want to feel good. It can spark a new romance and enhance an existing relationship. It allows men to be men and women to be women. It keeps us young and fit. (It's amazing how youthful dancers look compared to many non-dancers of the same age.) It gives us something to look forward to. It's hard not to smile while dancing. It has a magical way of bringing joy into our lives.

There is a style of dance to fit every preference, age and fitness level, and dance classes are offered in just about every city. If the spirit moves you, get out and dance!

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