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# The process is the purpose

ANNA HALPRIN

*In this interview with Vera Maletic, dancer Anna Halprin tells us that the key to her method of teaching dance is her conviction that personal growth is part and parcel of artistic growth. We are all dancers, she says. The process of growth as a dancer is identical with the purpose of learning and teaching. To find one's center, and one's own rhythm (of breathing, of moving, of being alone, and of being together with others) is the purpose, and the purpose is found in the process. This means the dropping of defenses, of body armor, of character armor, to become soft and pliant in one's own inner being.*

**Maletic:** It seems to me that your personal approach to movement has evolved from some specific needs of our contemporary life, particularly in the U.S.A. and [on] the West Coast. What do you aim for with your educational and performance activities in relation to the trainees and in relation to the audience?

**HALPRIN:** Of course, this is not the easiest question to answer. It's like asking what your whole life is about. But I think I can start with the first notion that comes into my head, and that is I have developed an enormous concern and interest in movement as it relates to a more natural outgrowth of expression. In other words, I am disinterested in movement so highly stylized that we must say this is a Dancer. Anybody's a dancer to me at any time when I am involved in communicating with that person through his movement. This has led me to a way of working with students that does not rely so much on traditional or conventional means, which tend to make the kind of dancer image that I'm really interested in for myself.

More and more I have begun to stress breathing as a base, because I find that the deeper the student can get into the breathing center, the more open

he becomes to releasing areas in his body which become alive and accessible to him for his work. So this is a very important base of our work. You know, my training has been with Margaret H'Doubler from Wisconsin University. Of course she was always interested in movement as an expressive medium for communication and was never interested in style and patterns of movement. In a very convincing way she grounded me in a more biological approach to movement—movement that is more natural to the nervous system, to the bone structure, to the muscle action. I found that in my training with her, the stress in movement was on understanding your body as action and, at the same time, being able to appreciate feedback, so that the relationship of the feeling to the movement was complete. Now when you learn patterned movement, you're so involved in learning the pattern that the tendency is simply to cut off the feeling aspect. And by feeling, I'm not referring to a kind of free-style self-expression. I mean just the feeling that's inherent when you clench your fist in anger, or stamp your feet, or jump in exhilaration. These are all natural and the most expressive movements we do. And when you become aware of the movement and the feeling it's evoking, you begin to have the freedom to use it consciously and excitingly, and that's when you begin to become an artist in your material.

It's that approach to movement that I'm talking about. I've never taught classes in which I teach a style, or a pattern, or set progression. First of all, I keep changing from year to year. I keep finding new things that I keep incorporating. Recently I've gotten very involved in developing a new use of body training through principles that have to do with getting the body into positions of stress. And then—it's almost like isometric exercises—from the stress position it goes into a trembling that gets you into a kind of forced breathing. It must change the chemistry in the body, because it's as if your whole circulatory system just comes alive. This is something very new to me, because I've never been able to get at the circulatory system before. I'll show you some of the movements afterwards, if you'd like to see them. The efficiency is just incredible. By placing your body in a position, you get all the strength and a fantastic sense of your body as a totality. So we've been experimenting, as we constantly do, with new methods to get deeper and deeper into the body itself.

**Maletic:** I think you have answered my second question already. It was: how would you define your approach to education, art, and theatre, apart from traditional concepts?

**HALPRIN:** Well, I think this goes back to the way I have always related myself to dance and life. That is, I try not to separate the experiences of life, because

we are in confrontation with our experiences, constantly, in art. And this brings me to an appreciation of, or an emphasis on, the relationship between personal growth and artistic growth. For the two must go hand in hand; otherwise there is no maturity that ever takes place. Since I've been working simultaneously in education and theatre all my life, it's hard for me to know the source for an idea. But I do know that in the theatre experiences, I want very much to deal with people on that stage who are identifying with very real experiences in life, in such a way that the audiences can identify themselves with the so-called performers. Rather than just looking at somebody doing something very unusual, I want the audience to be able to identify and realize that this is a person more than he is a dancer, a person who identifies with very real things.

We don't even accept the theatre as a conventional place where the audience is here and you're there, but it is a place, and whatever you do in that place is valid because it's the place. You don't have to be on the stage separating here from there. This desire to merge a very life-like situation into the concept of the dance is very true also in my training. Everything we do in dance somehow or other usually relates to who you are as a person, and this affects how you see things and feel things and relate to people. Again, it's this nonseparation of life and art, so that somehow or other it becomes a heightening process.

**Maletic:** Do you feel there is a difference between self-exploration or self-expression as individual therapeutic experience and as an artistic expression?

**HALPRIN:** This is a hard question to answer right now, because the word therapy is being used by so many different people in so many different ways. So is the word creativity. At one time, you could use the word creativity and feel fairly safe, but now there's creative merchandise. Everything's creative—you can get a creative ice cream cone. The word therapy is beginning to become like a tea party. You know, let's get together and have a little therapy session. So it gets a little difficult. But I would say that if you use the word therapy in terms of personal growth, any art experience that is valid to a person and that is based on personal experience certainly, automatically, must have therapeutic value. But if your attention as an artist is only on what you are getting therapeutically, you are not paying attention to the fact that essentially you're a craftsman, that essentially your job is to be a vehicle for other people.

To me, a performer is simply a vehicle, a submergence of the ego. Otherwise, you may as well stay in your studio. But when you take the responsi-

bility for performing for an audience, you are then accepting the fact that you must go through some sort of distilling process in which the personal experience has become so zeroed and so heightened by a clarity that you know exactly what you're dealing with, in terms of an element. You have so much skill that you can get right down to the essence of that element. Then you find the movement—spatial, dynamic—essence of that idea inherent not only in how your body moves, but in an awareness of where you are in space, an awareness of the total thing. That has therapeutic value—that's OK—but that shouldn't be your concern.

**Maletic:** What is your criterion for determining whether a performance is true or genuine in involvement and feeling, or whether it is a phony? Also, what is your criterion for determining the choice of events for a public theatre performance?

**HALPRIN:** This is very difficult to answer, because we're in such a violent, explosive period of experimentation. At least I am, and certainly all the young artists I work with are. Yet I know that before I ever present a work in public, I've gone through two years' research, two years of going through many, many sketches. And I work very hard to have a score which externalizes the elements so I can get further and further detached from the source, so I can be detached from it and still be very much involved. Other than that, I don't know how to make any judgment about other people's work. First of all, being here on the West Coast, I don't see an awful lot, and what I have seen coming on tour is working in such a different direction from mine. It's hard to know. But because I've spent so many years in movement, I can, just intuitively, tell when a performance is lacking in what I call the audience dimension. And I usually can tell on the basis that the experience just hasn't been structured at all, that the individual is behaving, not moving. There's a difference.

**Maletic:** What are the concepts of your kinetic theatre?

**HALPRIN:** The theatre is based on the human expression which comes primarily from movement, from motion. But it goes into the other areas of human expression, which include the visual and the speaking and all of the things that represent a total kind of experience. And this is what I am most interested in developing, a theatre which uses the total resources of the human being. So, rather than call it dance, which seems always to be limited, I'd rather find a new word right now. Although it's basically what dance was in its more primitive time.

**Maletic:** Of the main streams in psychology, Jungian, Gestalt, Existential, etc., which do you feel the closest affinity with?

**HALPRIN:** I feel most closely aligned with the Gestalt therapy, but that may be because of my contact with Fritz Perls. When I read his book, *Gestalt Therapy*, or when I work with him, I'm continually reminded of similarities. It's the coming together of all the parts. That is important to me, and it seems this is what is stressed in the Gestalt. I feel very identified with it.

**Maletic:** Have you had any psychedelic experiences and, if so, have they influenced your creativity?

**HALPRIN:** Yes, I have had a psychedelic experience, only once, and it did get me in touch with a very deep breathing experience in which I was able to sense what the Chinese call the red spot. I was able to start the radiation all through my body, and this relaxation that set in was so profound, it completely changed my body structure. This happened at the University of California. Somebody was filming it.\* Afterwards, I felt very different in posture and alignment, and when I started to move I felt very different. But when I saw the film, I didn't even recognize myself. My body went into a very effortless type of alignment, and my movements had no effort. Without getting out of breath I was able to move with so much more strength and richness. I felt so much more alive. Because I was able to direct it towards the discovery of relaxation through breathing, the experience had very illuminating effects.

**Maletic:** Could you tell me something about your professional background and the persons who influenced you?

**HALPRIN:** I have been dancing ever since I was a little girl, in a very free and natural way. When I went to college, I studied with Margaret H'Doubler. I would say that she was my great teacher. The more I work on my own, the more I keep coming back and saying oh, this is what she meant, of course. Even though I have gone into a slightly different emphasis, I still feel I'm her student and I'm still learning. She's such a wealth of ideas, it's taken me years to accumulate the information that substantiates what she was saying. My husband has been very much a teacher for me because of his work in landscape architecture. He's made me enormously aware of the choreography of

space. A very important teacher in my life was Rabbi Kadushin, who made me very aware of philosophical concepts in Judaism which reinforced my belief in creativity as a means of strengthening a sense of self-affirmation, not only to oneself, but to the many layers penetrating from oneself to others. This certainly developed a desire for, and a belief in, human encounter on a creative level.

**Maletic:** Since I come from Europe, I wonder if you can tell me if there are particular needs in this part of America which create your kind of work. Is this kind of activity specific to the West Coast?

**HALPRIN:** I suppose I again may sound a little biological, but I think that the word is ecology and I think that there is something so vital about our natural surroundings that we have become, perhaps unconsciously. . . . How can you live in this kind of landscape, with the ocean, with the cliffs, with the vital forces of nature at your feet all the time, and not be affected by the so-called nature-oriented point of view? You become vitally concerned with the materials, the sensual materials of our lives, and with the almost primitive naiveness of being an extension of your environment. This begins to free you to appreciate the very characteristics of what a human being is, and from there you start coming out again. And when you start coming out and relaxing, you are working in a sort of nonintellectual way.

I'll speak for myself. I have a tremendous faith in the process of a human mechanism, and in creativity as an essential attribute of all human beings. This creativity is stimulated only when the sense organs are brought to life. This faith in the process is the only goal or purpose I need. What happens as a result creates and generates its own purpose. So I don't question the purpose beforehand; I've already accepted the process as the purpose. In this sense it's nonintellectual. I don't get all sorts of intellectual theories that this dance work or this new piece in this blah blah blah, but this is where we are in our growth, this is where we are in our educational commitment. The process is the purpose; let it be, let it keep growing, and something will happen. And what happens generates its own purpose. I'm being very repetitive, but in this sense it's nonintellectual and very nature-oriented.

\*This happened in the course of research at the University of California at Berkeley--in fact, it was our senior editor, unremembered by name, who conducted the psychedelic session, and the "somebody" who filmed it was the San Francisco poet Michael McClure. (Eds.)