

Resonance in Dance: A feel-based approach to performing arts education

By Chantale Lussier-Ley, PhD (c)

While studying for my Master's degree, I was attending a class at the University of Ottawa where Dr. Doug Newburg was invited to speak to both undergraduate and graduate sport psychology students about his book, *The Most Important Lesson No One Ever Taught Me*, and his life experiences. This was not my first exposure to his work, his ideas, and his public speaking. It was however, the first time in a long time that words so clearly and profoundly hit me, like a big pat on the back from a good friend, waking me instantly out of my mental slumber. "Does how you feel affect how you perform?" he asked. All the students responded, "Yes". His next question took most of us by surprise: "Has anyone ever asked you, 'How can I help you feel the way you want to feel?'" At that point, students began to shift and squirm, seeming almost uncomfortable with their own answer: "No". The answer did not seem to sit well with most. Dr. Newburg challenged us further, "What does that tell you? That it is ultimately your responsibility". Therein lay our power, our freedom, and our responsibility; own it and use it, he warmly advised us.

I am a dancer and teacher, like many of you. I have been dancing since a young age, though was always considered a late starter for ballet. I always felt that I had much to prove. I was not blessed with the traditional slight body of a ballet dancer, but rather like a swimmer with a wide powerful torso, broad shoulders, and powerhouse legs. I was a technician, striving for perfection, containing as best as I could the fury of emotions that fuelled



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my passion for dance. I had dreams of being accepted into my favourite ballet school, and company, hoping eventually to perform all the great leads in classical repertoire; Swan Lake, Romeo & Juliet, Giselle, Sleeping Beauty, Don Quixote, the Merry Widow. I wanted to dance them all! But I struggled and felt frustrated. Everyday felt like a never-ending, exhausting war. Ultimately, I achieved many goals but came short of living my dream as I used to define it. I did not feel the way I wanted to most everyday, and as such, came to realize that I was not living my dream.

In retrospect, I wondered whether my struggles had more to do with the technical difficulties inherent to classical dance, or my learned powerlessness within this learning domain and its subsequent negative impact on my self-esteem, self-awareness, and sense of identity. I fought everyday to prove myself to the world when I was simply trying to prove myself

to me. I was ashamed of my body and how ugly and unacceptable it was both to the ballet world and to me, or so I thought at the time. More importantly, I had yet to feel comfortable being metaphorically naked, truthfully exposed as a person and as an artist. I could not view myself in the mirror authentically; neither did I dare look beyond my reflection. It would take me years to be willing to take the first step in this Pas de Deux, this dance of reuniting my body and spirit, rediscovering my self as an artist and as a whole living, breathing, feeling, human being.

Interestingly, in the world of dance, like in society generally, we are encouraged to leave our "baggage" and ourselves outside of the studio, or the learning environment, all in the name of professionalism. This has potentially serious implications for our overall well-being, self-esteem, sense of life satisfaction as people, and even our fundamental capacity to learn in

The Resonance Performance Model (RPM)

(adapted from Newburg et al., 2002)

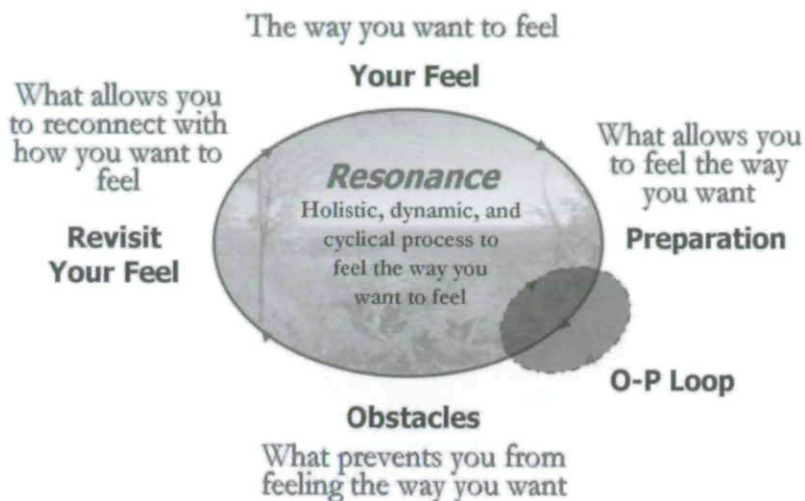


Figure 1. The Resonance Performance Model (adapted from Newburg et al., 2002)

and through dance. Ignorance of our “felt” energy, an important part of our experience as humans, can be plainly destructive to our creative self as dancers, teachers, and choreographers, numbing our creativity by making how we feel an unacceptable, inaccessible, or uninvited part of the dance classroom. This attitude tends to devalue our feelings, which represent a complex, rich, and often misunderstood aspect of ourselves that are essential materials for the dancer, as are clay or marble to the sculptor. As such, we encourage a dissonance between the artist and the performer, between the body and the student.

A key lesson to remember from Newburg’s work and research with athletes and professionals is the importance of paying attention to how we want to feel. In this sense, “feel” becomes an important source of data to be used in response to our external world, and to our own internal reactions, thus contributing to the life we wish to experience. This is what Newburg’s resonance performance model (RPM) is all about [see figure 1]. The model involves paying attention to how you want to feel everyday, discovering how you can prepare to create this feeling in your life, developing awareness of

obstacles that get in the way, and identifying what works for you to revisit and reconnect with this dream feeling (Newburg, Kimiecik, Durand-Bush, & Doell, 2002). The model is therefore made up of four components but it is the dynamic nature of this process, the fluid movement between its components, that is most important to creating a life by design, rather than by accident (Newburg, 2006).

Research into this performance approach is still in its infancy as it pertains to dance education, but it has already extensively addressed research into self-confidence (Newburg, et al., 2002; Durand-Bush, Faubert, & Newburg, 2004; Soulard, 2003), self-acceptance (Arcand, Durand-Bush, & Miall, 2004), decision-making (Doell, Durand-Bush, & Newburg, 2006), well-being (Callary & Durand-Bush, 2004; Doell, et al., 2006; Durand-Bush, et al., 2004; Short, 2004; Soulard, 2003), adolescent and adult athletes (Callary & Durand-Bush, 2004; Newburg, et al., 2002; Durand-Bush, et al., 2004; Soulard, 2003), and high school students (Short, 2004). In recent years, research encompassed the RPM as a basic framework for a performance-enhancement workshop program at The Royal Winnipeg Ballet School (RWB). In this study, students from two different levels of RWB’s Professional Division participated in an eight-week, education-based workshop series aimed at improving students’ overall coping skills and at observing the effects of the program on dancers’ self-esteem and self-efficacy, a performance-specific type of confidence. While the data is preliminary, the results suggested that such programs may significantly increase dancers’ self-esteem. The data also demonstrated positive



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trends for use of both coping skills and dance-specific confidence (Lussier, 2004).

In these workshops, dancers were encouraged to explore themes such as identity, motivation, support, stress and recovery, management of emotions, performance preparation, and perspective. Exchange with other dancers allowed for an expanding model and known repertoire of how to cope and address different areas of the self. Guided journaling was also used as a reflective tool through the use of open-ended questions, thus allowing for the individualization of this group process. Dancers were relatively quick to identify, rediscover, or reconnect with why they dance and how they ultimately wish to

feel in the process. One dancer commented, "I want to feel complete when I am dancing. Sometimes when you have the right kind of class, you just feel so whole. I also want to feel that everyday..."

Another added, "I want to... not be afraid to falter."

Another dancer suggested the following, emphasizing the importance of re-visiting strategies:

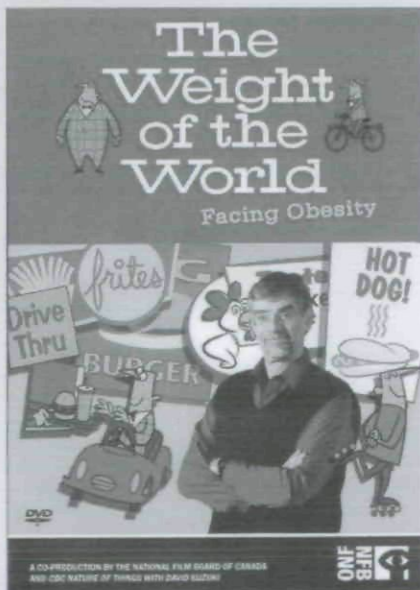
I would love to feel inspired everyday. I really realized this when we had [teacher's name] for ballet. Everything he said just completely inspired me to push that little bit more and helped me re-find my love for ballet.

Still another dancer described a vivid memory of a "felt" experience and her desire to create this feeling regularly:

When I think of why I dance, I try to emanate a completely elevated feeling. I remove myself from the present and become one with the music and the movement. Every time I get on stage I try to achieve this feeling. It is very hard! The first time I achieved this feeling was at a competition when I was 14. I was on stage during a solo, when suddenly the audience disappeared and all definition was gone. All that was left was me, the music and this indescribable feeling of pure exhilaration and freedom. I felt a resonance, an elevation from the reality of being on stage.

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It is also important to create this holistic learning experience in the daily dance class. This process of creating both the dancer and the dance everyday is a delicate one, requiring our attention as performers, teachers, choreographers, and researchers. This process of resonance, creating the right “feel” for each person, should therefore be part of our educational philosophies, particularly in dance education, where the artist is himself or herself the art. As such, the RPM can become a useful tool for dance educators to tap into resonance in dance and to thereby help dance students learn to use how they feel, and want to feel, as important and valuable information worthy of attention.

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet School's Professional Division, having witnessed first hand the potential benefits inherent in supporting and valuing the way dancers feel, continues to offer performance enhancement workshops to their ballet dancers five years on. In addition, results from that study (Lussier, 2004) gave birth to further research on the role of feel in the creative experience of contemporary dancers in the Professional Contemporary Dance program of The School of Dance (Lussier-Ley, 2006; Lussier-Ley & Durand-Bush, 2009). To this day, three years after the study ended, The School of Dance continues to make performance enhancement workshops an integral part of their post-secondary

three-year program, which is a testament in part to the importance of feel-based practices in dance education. The RPM model is thus emerging as a powerful educational tool in the creative development of an ever-increasing number of dancers in Canada.

Perhaps the time has come for me to pass along “the most important lesson no one ever taught me” to other dancers and dance teachers. As educators, we can teach for “emergings”, nurturing the possibility of discovery, and hence creativity, by encouraging reflective, open questions. The RPM model can serve as a springboard towards meaningful reflection, discussion, and discovery in the dance studio. Though dance education continues to be principally influenced by the long-standing, traditional mastery model of education, I encourage you to discover the unique design, and dancer, that is you. Discover what only you – as dancer and educator – can bring to the stage and/or to the dance classroom studio. Do not hide behind costumes, sets, and beautiful, pure, aesthetic lines. Do not hide behind the comforts of syllabus, curriculum, and tradition. Bring you to your dance. And so I ask you now to ponder and reflect, away from the magic of the stage, how do you want your dance, and dance class, to *feel*? ■

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