

Dilemmas of practice in art and healing

In her upcoming book *Hiking the Horizontal*, due out from Wesleyan Press in Spring 2011, choreographer **Liz Lerman** reflects on the many connections between art, life, and varied professional disciplines, including therapeutic practice, addressed in the essay previewed here, in response to an email from Lucia Serra Estudillo

Subject: Questions from Lucia

Dear Liz,

This is an e-mail that I have been wanting to write for two weeks, but I have been waiting until I have enough time to really express my thoughts.

Do you remember the question that I asked you? I have worked for four years using dance and movement with women suffering domestic violence, and for one year with persons in an addiction rehabilitation centre. In both experiences I have had the feeling that I am on the thin line between therapy and community-based work. Sometimes I really don't know how to react, because I do not think that everything in this process needs to operate on the level of therapy. So I have questions about how I control my role, and how can I know and strongly name my role as facilitator and not as therapist.

Or does this mean I need to study for a master's degree in therapy? My thesis advisor asked me, "How can you help people in this kind of work, if you don't have the skills of a therapist? Are you putting them in danger with activities that bring forward their emotions?"

But I don't think about it that way. I have watched the beauty in the process with those great women, really connecting the body with the soul, without the rigid requirements of 'therapeutic' progress.

With admiration, and thanks again,

Lucia Serra Estudillo

USF, exchange student from UIA Leon, Mexico

Subject: RE: Questions from Lucia

Dear Lucia,

First, thank you for your response to the *Small Dances About Big Ideas*, and for your large and important question about the relationship between therapy and community-based dance practices. Before I try to answer the question

let me say that Martha Minow, the woman who commissioned the piece you saw, also wrote a book called *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*. Interestingly enough, she too addresses issues of therapy, in this case in relation to the courts and the legal ramifications of human rights law. So you might find the book and look into the way she characterises the evolution of the law in a therapeutic sense. It perhaps suggests that we tend to categorise any healing process as therapy when in fact the therapeutic piece of it might be quite small. There are, I think, many other things going on for a person and for a community of people, who choose to confront difficult experiences. I think we do a bit of a disservice by labelling all of this as therapy. There is a lot of territory between noticing our feelings, trying to change our experiences and behaviour, reliving, celebrating, sharing our histories and even taking some kind of action.

Part One

In the beginning I used to say that all artists do art as a way to feel better. From the very start I am sure I turned to dance as a way to improve my own condition. Even as a small child I saw that twirling made me laugh, that jumping made me enthusiastic, that holding hands and swinging someone else made me feel connected. These are good things, I thought, and though I might have only stumbled into these realisations, I did everything in my power to repeat the experiences that caused the feelings.

When I actually started to take dance classes I found a few other things very quickly. First that I had efficacy in my own existence because I could see by applying myself I got 'better' at what I was doing. My ability and my capacity to achieve whatever my teachers were asking me to do actually happened if I worked at it. And once, when I was about eight years old, and just standing at the barre with the other little



Courtesy Liz Lerman (above right) Dance Exchange

girls I had this amazing thought: I sensed that I could be completely myself and alone in that moment, if I wanted to, or I could think of myself as part of a group, this line of young women. It made me happy to notice that I could control the way in which I identified myself at that moment and that the nature of belonging was in part mine to bestow upon myself.

I think you can see that I am building a case for the therapeutic underpinnings of artistic discipline. But I don't think we notice these things quite this way as we grow and build our artistic palette. I don't think that people in the field address these skills as therapeutic either. They only become therapy when we use them with populations deemed bruised or hurt by circumstance or by society.

This is a significant omission in our thinking about art and it is why you are having part of this dialogue with yourself. That is, we have failed to understand and notate the amazing skills that artistic action brings to serious practitioners. Of course we get better at making whatever our chosen art is, if we are fortunate enough to have good teachers and a healthy amount of self-drive. But we are also gaining other skills too, and our ability to see them, understand how they arise within our artistic domain and eventually harness them for their multiple uses. Well, that is a big learning curve.

And later still, having accomplished some of that, we might find ourselves in situations where we are teaching art making and drawing on these other skills too. In my case I realised that holding together an ensemble of dancers, none of whom were asking or expecting therapy, nonetheless required that I use many skills that went beyond my dance training, or my choreographic curiosity. I used many tools borrowed from other aspects of my life to keep the collaboration alive and vibrant. We didn't call it therapy because these folks weren't in 'typical' troubles. But in many

ways the emotions that arise in our art making sessions resemble those that might come up in any community-based practice and I believe our ability to meet them head on makes for a better work environment, and perhaps better art, though for sure others might say otherwise.

Part Two

After about a decade of working in senior centres, prisons, schools, hospitals, I found another answer to the question you have posed.

I said that a therapist has a contract to make a person feel better. I have a contract to make art. And by the way, when you make art you do feel better. The feeling better is a by-product, not the goal. And later still I would sometimes amend this statement with a controversial notion that the more I challenged people to make better art, the better they would feel as the project came to a close. This latter idea has actually been born out in the research of Dr. Gerald Cohen, who has been studying the effects of art making on older adults. According to his metrics (all health-related, such as number of trips to the doctor, how much medication, etc.) older adults involved in art do feel better. But what really works, he says, is when they are challenged. It cannot be just some little condescending creativity session. People have to work hard.

Over the years I have come to see how my methods of art making have evolved as I have worked with folks who are new to it, or those who might be characterised as needing some kind of therapeutic help. If you go to our toolbox on line I think you can find some of these thoughts. But here is one just to give you a taste of what I mean. When we have done a process together and I want to get feedback from the group I will ask, "What did you notice, what did you experience, what did you observe." I never ask, "What did you feel?"

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Why? Because if I ask them how they feel, I often think I get what they used to know about themselves. They say what they have felt in past situations similar to this. They cannot get themselves into the current moment. And secondly, if I ask how they feel, then they think, and I agree, that I must listen to the whole story. In art-making I can cut them off. In fact in art-making, learning to cut oneself off is a tool of great importance. You begin to see that you don't need the full story, and that learning to discover the 'fragment of worth' is very powerful.

The inquiries of art making and therapy overlap. On occasion I have moved to the therapeutic solution rather than the best one for art. When this happens I usually have to check on what my own personal goal is, and on what was the invitation for me to be there. For example, in my work at a Children's Hospital I found that some of my own measurements for success had to be rethought. And in that rethinking some of the ways I taught or what I was looking for changed significantly. It turned out that trying to unlock the most interesting movement, a goal that persists for my choreographic self, was not the best approach if the child could only move one hand. In that case, simply getting participation was success in itself and I had to change my notion of what made it good. In that case, what made it excellent even was keeping the young woman engaged long enough so that her 'audience' of parents and other patients could see her hand, and thus see her, in a new way and to applaud her accomplishment for the day.

One reason I have organised my life the way I have, with one foot in the art world and one foot in the community, is my realisation that each of these shifts in my goals taught me something useful to take into the other realms of my work. And that although I might 'compromise,' I was not going to have to give up on my journey of discovery of interesting movement. It turned out that I could take that aspiration elsewhere. There would be other communities and other dancers with whom I could partner to help me find that one. And instead, while working in the hospital, I could quietly go about my business of making dances with children whose bodies were in desperate need of release from pain, frustration, and lack of ownership. When she danced with her hand to our music, a young hospital patient was liberated in ways as profound as any professional dancer at her technical best under the lights in a big theatre.

Part Three

But your question has another side. Which skills do we need to be able to handle the emotions and needs of the people we work with, and how do we get them? Some of those skills we learn on the job and some we acquire in more structured ways. You, of course, will be the ultimate synthesiser of all that you already know and that which you take from others. And I am sure, there are some very good programmes out there that could give you skills that you need.



Courtesy Liz Lerman (front left) Dance Exchange

Sometimes I have gained entry into difficult situations by partnering with folks who do have those skills already. Thus, while at Children's Hospital I always had with me a person the hospital called a 'child life worker.' People in this job always had a lot of expertise in medical areas, but were not medical workers. They made sure I did nothing dangerous or anything that might have brought harm to one of the children. Over the years this has become a very important part of my understanding of this work. Know how to partner. This means that I don't have to have the same knowledge of other experts in the room, in the field, in the world. I do have to know how to work with them and together we have to make up a way of working so that we can serve these people in front of us. This has proved true whether we are talking science, religion, health, almost any field.

I think you already have a lot of those skills. I think of them as listening, watching, knowing when to act and when to step back, how to check in with someone and what to ask when checking in. A big one for me is also making sure to check in on what my partner's imagination is doing. Sometimes we are each making up stuff in our head that is affecting what we are doing and if we don't realise it that is what gets us into trouble.

Part Four

When I first started all of this I did have a few therapeutic skills under my belt. They grew out of a several years of



group wants to stop and comfort them, which leads to two things: It makes the person stop crying, and makes the group stop working. I hated both of these outcomes.

So I just developed a way of explaining the moment: something like this: “Crying and having feelings is a natural partner to making art. It is going to happen. This is a good thing. Human beings need to do this. But let’s just keep working now. You can keep crying, but also keep dancing.” The response is a little miracle every time. The group realises that I have noticed. The person is taken care of. And we can continue. Usually at some point I might check in with the person who was crying, or I might ask someone else in the group to do see if they need anything. This too is an outcome from my experiences with RC where the idea of peer counselling is very strong. It doesn’t have to be the person in charge who handles the moment. Someone else from the group can do it.

Part Five

At the beginning of every workshop at the Dance Exchange, we will say, “You are in charge of your body.” I really mean it. And I think if you say it enough, and continue to treat people as if they are in charge of their bodies, and give them the skills they need to actually experience that, well then I don’t have to be therapist. I know that not everyone agrees with me. And that sometimes folks are so damaged that even if they want to be in charge of themselves they can’t be. But this is my goal.

And if I find that this idea is too far away for success, then before I turn to therapy I turn to bringing in more artists. Sometimes I find that if I have enough dancers with me, and we can pair everyone up, then we can accomplish so much more. And of course, the learning does not move in only one direction. What finally makes this work, and makes it not therapy, is that everyone is doing the learning; everyone is having a change to grow and change. It is a two-way street.

Before I finish I want to say that some situations require the presence of trained therapists. Some situations place art-making in a secondary role to the needs of the group. And in some settings it would be dangerous to everyone present to not have the right partners in the room. I don’t know the particulars of your situation. This may be one of those times. If so, perhaps before embarking on another degree programme it makes sense to partner with someone who has the skills you are looking for and see if that changes things, or if that liberates you to do more of what you envision.

I hope this helps. Keep in touch. I am eager to know how your own work evolves and how your understanding of these ideas changes over time.

Liz Lerman is Founding Artistic Director of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, an internationally partnering contemporary dance company based near Washington, DC.

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practice in something called Reevaluation Counselling, or RC. I had found this quite by chance in my early twenties and kept up the formal practice for almost 10 years.

I raise it here because it, like many systems, has within it some basic ideas that have served me well in my various capacities as teacher, leader, facilitator, choreographer, and mother. I don’t know if it is better than others, but I do know that by doing it I have had the awareness of what emotions can do to a group, and I have felt that I have some skills in decoding various moments that might otherwise sabotage a teacher.

What are these? One idea in this form of counselling, is that crying, laughing, shaking, sweating are good. And that by doing these things we are actually paving the way to changing our patterns. (This is not the time to go into the whole deal with RC, you can find that elsewhere. But I do want to take a little time explaining how I managed to ‘borrow’ from it and show you at least one way we can take trainings from one place into another).

Within RC you do a lot of practicing of being around people who are crying. In fact, you try to make it happen. This turned out to be of great use to me in workshops, because very often people cry about some of the subject matter we attend to, or because of the connections they are making, or for a variety of reasons I couldn’t begin to fathom. But I didn’t have to worry about the tears. In fact, what I worried more about is that when someone cries the whole