

Health, decolonisation and the language of dance

Dr Adesola Akinleye, Artistic Director of DancingStrong and Senior Lecturer at Middlesex University argues for the centrality of the mind-full-body



Dr Adesola Akinleye. Photo: Paul White

William takes the short walk from his hospice room to the dinner hall deliberately. His slow body slightly bent, he is getting used to his new hip replacement, his head tilted upwards as he calls out “good morning” to Pat on the front desk. Like clockwork every Thursday he starts out from his room ten minutes before dance class to give himself time to arrive. Once in the room he takes his usual chair next to me, near the CD player so he “can hear the music”.

Kim hurriedly folds the pushchair, baby Brice (eight months old) strapped across her in a sling, holding Billy (three years old) tightly by the wrist, she folds the push-chair with one hand. The three hurry into the utility room at the children centre. I hold the door for her and we are all four absorbed into the rush of voices as parents and children settle themselves ready for the weekly ‘dancing with me’ class.

Jeana slips off her office shoes and dons the low heels she wears for rehearsal as she fastens the shoes she lets the office slide off her shoulders and willingly replaces it with the complications of the community dance performance planned for next week. Shyly stepping onto the dance floor smiling over in my direction, she sees Fran and goes over to chat before the rehearsal starts.

As a community dance artist and choreographer I have been welcomed into so many lives. People who allow me and dance to be a central part of their weekly routine. But this is more than a romantic pastime, there is a vitality that people talk about when they describe the community dance projects they have been a part of. So many people I have worked with attribute that vitality to a feeling of wellbeing. In this article I am suggesting that the joy and vitality

associated with getting moving is more than a happy coincidence: it is because dance is the liberating language of the body.

Coming from the frustrations, joys and tensions of dancing in community settings for over 15 years I wanted to be able to articulate and organise in my own head what it was I believe about the power of dance in relation to a healthy world. I found I needed to have a way to understand and explain the importance of dance movement

to being a healthy balanced person / society. Dance speaks a language of experience and sensation but how do you put the impact of this into words? Explaining yourself in words is important because words are the form we are asked to use to explain and justify the nuts and bolts of funding and planning. I found the key to this in philosophy, which asks the same big questions about time and space dancers do when they dance.

I found myself in a philosophical battlefield about what the lived experience is. On the one side are dualists (dividing humans into minds and bodies) and on the other side monists (seeing things as all one). And the battleground this is fought out in is the body. There are many factions on both sides but as a dancer I find a resonance in the notion that we are embodied beings described in the work of John Dewey. He sees us as having a mind-full-body. Embodied beings communicate with each other by referencing their own embodied experiences. To see the human state as one of being embodied makes sense of my experiences leading dance. I start dance projects and on day one I see strangers who have ‘never danced’, who by day three have melted into



Taken from Thursday Afternoons film (<http://vimeo.com/51524606>). Photo: Barry Lewis

cohesive dance colleagues through the shared experience of humanity: the shared experience of having a human body and moving together.

Movement has meaning to people beyond a theoretical understanding. Our bodies (and body parts) are rich with cultural symbolism, public and private constructs of ourself, and perceptions of moral, sexual and political boundaries. Our bodily experiences are central to how we approach the world. The body tells a story and as it is empathically understood by others it is as if it is read. This is about more than the ability to tell our own stories, it is about ownership and meaning – the making of our own experiences, how we are present in our lives, how we fit with larger social stories – how we see ourselves. This is the language of liberation.

As we tentatively launch ourselves into the 21st century it is clear that there have been power shifts. We have seen the colonising model of the 19th century marginalise people by using their bodies as evidence of worth. Gender, racial and class discrimination were all justified through suggesting the bodies of people ‘gave away’ an inferiority. In the 19th century the

small size of women’s bodies gave away their fragility and along with this diseases such as ‘the vapours’ which doesn’t exist today. (1) The small size of a specimen head of an African man was used to demonstrate African people’s mental inferiority. (2) Measuring and evaluating the body left some people’s bodies as appearing to be ‘defective’ or ill. In order to support the marginalisation of these people the body was medicalised. The body became the site at which your faults gave you away and a site to develop and change in order to overcome inadequacies.

This medicalisation of the body treats the body as a kind of alien thing, which you must fight in order to control, as if your ‘self’ was trapped in a shell that needed to be watched and improved constantly or be at the risk of illness or immoral behaviour. The mind and body are separate in this colonialist model – the mind working to ‘fix’ and re-create the body, the body a docile shell. This is how the dualist model has been used in the rhetoric of colonisation. Of course the dancing body threatens all this because when dancing we associate ourselves as our bodies. Dancing melts the colonialist divide between mind and body; when

dancing we are embodied.

Part of the power of the colonialist is the ability to instil fear. We fear our bodies will run away with us, give us away by displaying some secret about our personality, will break, become diseased; dance challenges all these because when one dances one is stepping into one’s body and allowing it to be a representation of ‘self’. The dancing body has always been a threat to the colonialist. Under colonialist rule dancing was often outlawed. (3) Dance has a long history of being a site of resistance, a form of protest: protesting the isolation of the dualist body by joining with others to move joyfully.

But this is not a cultural issue; I am not suggesting that some cultures oppress the body and the dance, while others fight back against that oppression. Although I think there is a lot to be learnt from cultures that resisted the dualism that colonialists tried to impose on them. I am suggesting that this is a philosophical issue; a clash between dualism, which divides the mind and body placing the ‘self’ in the mind, and embodiment, which replaces the mind and body with the mind-full-body. Starting from the philosophical approach of embodiment the mind-full-body is the place where >

sensation becomes meaning-full. The sensation of the body is how we engage with and give meaning to the world around us. If we believe we are embodied beings then there is an unease, a dis-ease, created by separating the body from a sense of 'self'. This separation is a separation from the sensing world and our reflective selves.

Dance starts the communication back between sensing body and the world around it. As we start to dance we start to 'live' in the world around us. Tufnell and Crickmay describe starting to dance as "certain details in what is around me or in my sensing body begin to call out to my attention... These are moments when our sensing comes into connection with the wider field of who and where we are...we begin to imaginatively participate in the world around us." (4)

Dewey describes an experience as containing not just what is experienced but also how it is experienced: the 'body' – organs, muscles – feel what is happening but also the consciousness of a narrative or recognition of feelings of the experience itself informs how it is experienced. In dance the mind is the action of the body. Dewey explains; "It (dualism) has treated mind as an independent entity which attends, purposes, cares, notices, and remembers. This...is unfortunate, because it removes mind from necessary connection with the objects and events, past, present and future, of the environment with which responsive activities are inherently connected... In making mind purely immaterial (isolated from the organ of doing and undergoing), the body ceases to be living and becomes a dead lump." (5)

As a dancer I find Dewey's writing captures the dialogue of feeling that I am aware of while I move – what I call dance. That is the vitality of dance, the connection to the sensing world. Looking up the word 'health', popular culture defines it as "a level of function and metabolic efficiency of a living being, the general condition of a



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Opposite: Images taken from Thursday Afternoons film (<http://vimeo.com/51524606>) Photos: Barry Lewis. Below: Dance Theatre of Harlem, Detroit summer school. Photo: Dr Adesola Akinleye



person's mind and body". (6)

So as part of our experience of what it means to be healthy, to heal or welcome changes in the general condition of our mind-full-bodies, how can we ignore the importance of reflective engagement in the process? Dance gives everyone a language for that reflective engagement. So William in his hospice room, Kim in her kitchen, Jeana behind her desk have dance as a language into the sensing world. And each of their lives is fully complicated and sensual and deserves a language to organise and communicate it. If we see dance as a language that bridges the gap between sensation and

meaning then it is not surprising that it creates a sense of wellbeing.

Every language has aspects of experience it cannot communicate but dance is clearly a language of the mind-full-body; a voice for the embodied being. The 20th century saw the decolonisation of countries but while dance remains on the sidelines of the 'health conversation', we cannot claim to have decolonised our bodies yet. The language of the mind-full-body has to be part of the discussion of wellbeing.

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- (4) Tufnell, M. and Crickmay, C. L. (2004) *A widening field : journeys in body and imagination*, Alton: Dance. p.32
- (5) Dewey, J. (2005) *Art as Experience*, paperback edition ed., Perigee. p.275
- (6) Wikipedia, 2013. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/>