
When the act of dancing becomes the research

Dancer and choreographer **Monica Gillette** investigates the larger role dance and choreographic practice can play in the development of research in other fields outside the dance community



Monica Gillette (right) and Hildegard Richter share the research process with the public during *Störung/Hafra'ah*, Theater Freiburg. Photo: Maurice Korb.

In 2013, as a dancer and choreographer working at Theater Freiburg in Germany, I was invited to collaborate on a research project between the theatre and University Freiburg's Excellence Cluster BrainLinks-BrainTools. The topic was movement and movement disorder. Inspired by the already established work in the dance and Parkinson's field, we decided to make the relationship between dancing and living with Parkinson's our focus and to also bring into the collaboration multiple approaches to artistic and scientific research.

What followed were two research projects, *BrainDance* (2014) and *Störung/Hafra'ah* (2015-16), the latter of which included the Yasmeen Godder Company and six additional scientific institutions in Israel. A unique component from the start was the involvement of dancers in designing the projects, which allowed for the act of dancing to become the engine for discussion, reflection and research. This meant that, in addition to developing and offering dance classes for people living with Parkinson's, dance was also engaged with as

a method of research, a pathway for understanding and a source for generating new knowledge.

Having spent decades in dance studios, both for training and creation processes, I was eager to question where else our dancer's knowledge and the dance studio could imbed and perhaps provide a new platform for discovery. Since much of our dance knowledge exists on a 'silent' or implicit level, it was important for me to shine a light on aspects familiar to our dance field, such as embodiment, the role of touch, topics of identity, the mind body >>



Monica Gillette, Mechthild Stubbe and choreographer Nicola Mascia sharing the research process with the public during *Störung/Hafra'ah*, Theater Freiburg. Photo: Rainer Muranyi.

dialog and forms of physical thinking and to see them anew through the lens of people with Parkinson's and the participating scientists.

The very nature of the collaboration being composed of different disciplines, ages and life backgrounds provided an opportunity to understand movement research and choreographic thinking not as a means to create a performance, but rather as a pathway for analyzing the situation of a movement disorder (from the physical to the emotional to the mental).

The second of our two projects, *Störung/Hafra'ah*, involved 12 dancers and choreographers, 16 young researchers from backgrounds such as microtechnology, motor control, neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, medicine and mathematics, as well as around 30 people living with Parkinson's in both Germany and Israel. In Germany, the dancers and choreographers led the scientists in their own dance workshops, where they could physicalise the topics and themes we were researching. In Israel, the dancers and scientists partnered to co-create dance workshops on a monthly basis.

The words *Störung* in German and *Hafra'ah* in Hebrew hold multiple meanings that can be translated from both languages as disorder, disruption or disturbance. They can be used to describe a disorder or disruption in one's body due to an ailment or disease, as well as a

societal disturbance, political act or protest – a disruption in daily life. In addition to these multiple meanings, we used the words as a reminder that we were gathering from our various backgrounds to shake up our ways of knowing, beliefs and perceptions. We were all moving out of our artistic, scientific or social bubbles to challenge our ways of seeing, thinking and feeling and to discover the stamina to be comfortable in unknown and unstable situations.

New approaches require new conditions for effective interdisciplinary and inter-population collaboration. It was important for us to be non-hierarchical and to view all participants as collaborators with equal levels of expertise. For this reason, the word 'patient' was banned. It allowed us to put scientific knowledge, a dancer's knowledge and the knowledge gained from the lived experience of Parkinson's all on an equal playing field. We asked everyone to share their knowledge generously, to let themselves be confronted by each other's topics and to actively search for what each could take back into their daily lives and research. This helped break the tendency of one-way giving or an idea of helping that can tend more towards charity, and allowed for a different type of participatory environment.

Taking away the familiar doctor/patient roles and asking everyone to be dancers with their own bodies as their research instruments and orienting

the studio as our laboratories, was an invaluable game changer. Towards the end of the project, one researcher in the field of neuroscience realized that where he used to see data, he now sees people.

After a few months of working with people who have Parkinson's, I realised I was most busy with a singular question: How do you bring someone into movement? Dealing with this question began from the very specific situation of trying to bypass two of the Parkinson's symptoms: freezing and slowness. For these symptoms, Parkinson's has so deeply interrupted the communication between the thought to move and the movement itself, that the body completely stops or becomes very slowed down. My task was to create movement proposals that would hopefully 'jump' the participants over their blockages.

Over the course of the project, I and the other choreographers in Germany noticed that we were giving very similar movement proposals in both the dance classes for the Parkinson's group and the scientists' movement workshops. We saw similarities on the topic of blockages between the groups and the lines blurred between dealing with physical blockages due to Parkinson's and the notion of unblocking the mind, or a preconceived way of thinking. The question of how to bring one into movement became metaphorical for a movement of thought. Our dancer's tools and choreographic methods became the vehicles. Above all, I witnessed the conversations change once the body was involved.

Among the many impacts these projects have had on me, a key outcome has been my transformation into becoming a self-described dance activist. For me, this means not only our usual fight to claim more spaces for dance, but also to forge new territories for how dance can be utilised and engaged with. The act of dancing, artistic practices, choreographic thinking and understanding diversity through projects with dance at their core has larger potential than opportunity – our work has only just begun.

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