

DANCERS ON BREATHING – from Interviews and Other Conversations
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Although breathing has been an essential component of voice training for centuries, it has not had the same overarching priority in dance. Nevertheless, with performers in musical theatre, physical theatre, opera, and even some dance forms now being expected to move and use voice simultaneously, phrasing, along with the body's natural ability to multi-task, would seem to suggest the possibility of a new training paradigm. While dance and voice are obviously distinct disciplines, awareness of the other, cross training, and even integrative approaches might well serve to eliminate confusion and streamline the technical process for performers.

For several years, I taught in a large theatre and dance department where acting and musical theatre majors took core classes together and faculty made real attempts to communicate. Musical theatre students frequently came to their lessons directly from dance class and occasionally said something like, "Oh, don't have to close the ribs," and off we'd go. So, an integrative approach seemed to be working.

Now free-lancing again and away from that integrated structure, I regularly encounter concerns about differences in training between dance and voice, especially in the area of breathing.

Two research projects, one in the UK (2007 – 09), the other in Australia (2010), revealed a range of answers to breath management questions traditionally posed by voice specialists, and work in that regard is ongoing. However, I also wanted to know more about dance perspectives and dance techniques, how they differ from one style to another, and how they relate to similar elements in voice training. So I began a series of conversations with dancers, choreographers and students of dance, who have been generous indeed with their time and comments.

Thanks sincerely to Jen Littlefield, Rusty Curcio, Sarah Chin, Ian Antal, Maureen Janson, and William Lett for their kind permission to publish the following excerpts from our discussions. Complete transcripts of the interviews are published separately.

JEN LITTLEFIELD, dancer/choreographer/teacher, New York City

JL: Breathing is interesting with dancing...a lot of times we forget to breathe, because we get so into the moment that we just kind of lose that. But then on the other side, there are so many dance techniques, especially modern, that are based solely on the breath. I've danced in numbers where we created a movement and then put it to the music afterwards. There were never really any counts or musical cues to follow and so you only followed the breath... And something we always tell dancers, especially beginning dancers, is, "Remember your breath." If you hold your breath, it tenses everything up.

JM: *What about phrasing? For a singer/actor, a phrase has a certain length that is directly connected to breath. Is there something comparable in dance?*

Dancing is such an aerobic activity, especially doing pieces. Doing a six-minute dance, you go, go, go, go, go, and stop. So, when you're just constantly moving, you're still breathing...

And your body's taking care of it?

Your body takes care of it, because you really don't have time to think about your breath and so it just is there. And then, if your choreographer's nice to you, you'll have spots where you can stop and have a breath and really get it back to normal before you go again. So, there's a different sort of breath management, in that you have to build up your ability to move for a longer period of time without consciously taking breath in and out.

RUSTY CURCIO, movement analyst/dancer/choreographer, Head of Dance, Wagner College, NYC

RC: Breathing is a hard one. Our initial response to difficult movement tasks is to do something we call binding the body, because we want control over the body. So an intellectual response to a difficult moment is to bind and constrict. Now that does affect breath and we're perceived as not breathing. Of course, there is

something happening, but we're restricting the full capacity of the breath, mostly out of fear or response to executing a difficult move that requires ultimate control. However, this is where the dancer that doesn't breathe, to me, is still a student and not a dancer yet. I'm not saying they're not talented, but they're still studying; they haven't figured it all out, because to fully move and be expressive, your body is constantly...*growing* and *shrinking*. And growing and shrinking are related to your breath. On inhalation you always grow, exhalation you always shrink, so even just in flexion and extension of the body, there is a breath pattern, a breath phrasing that goes along with it. Now the more articulate and in control of those two capacities you become, the more you can make intellectual changes and shifts and choices off of what is the *natural* way of doing it. You can actually go against nature, and then that becomes expressive and it's going to affect the breath and the support and all the other components of movement.

However, there is the anatomical need to compress the lower abdominal muscles when you are doing technically difficult executions such as jumping and turning, because that's what gives you a sense of center, and that's what supports your spine when you're landing your jump. At least from my experience, when I work with singers, they fight compressing the lower abdominal muscles, because they want to be able to release.

JM: *But when you say lower abdominal muscles, those are the very ones we need to use.*

I just get the impression...that students are saying that their lower abdominal muscles want to be full and released. I see them literally stand and they want to widen as much as possible and bulge here [lower abdomen], and what they've told me is, "Well, then I have the most air," and I'm thinking well, first of all, your diaphragm's here.

And the air is in your lungs!

So I never understood that.

Hmm, there are at least two very common, and contrasting, ways of teaching breathing for singers. Sounds as if you've encountered the down and out method, where singers actually distend the lower abdominals during voicing. The other way is in and up.

Pelvic floor.

Yes. I studied with a teacher who taught down and out, and while I could certainly make vocal sounds that way, the approach doesn't seem to go along with dance at all.

I'm sitting here shocked because every other voice person... whenever I say in my dance classes (I've now taken it out of my vocabulary), "Press the lower abdominal muscles against the lower spine and resist from the lower spine," they have gone like ballistic.

What isn't good is pulling in at the waist.

Oh, well, that's higher.

Yes, that cuts everything off. But here [lower abs] is exactly where we need the action. I often say, "Lift the pelvic floor," coming from Pilates...

I was given the image, too, that they're a big ball, like a big beach ball, and you know if you squeeze it lower than the middle...

The top gets wider!

And you open up the whole upper body. You are right though. There are dancers who are still learning what that is and they'll pull in at the waist and constrict in the upper chest.

I think that is what so many singing teachers encounter. I used to see students come into my classes, and they seemed to be pulling everything to the middle: the sternum was low, they were turned out, they were tucked, and I was trying to get them to lengthen and widen and free the voice!

Well, that's the old school ballet training, tucking the pelvis under, when they didn't realize you had the six deep lateral outward rotators, which connect to the ischial tuberosities, the femur and the sacrum. They didn't know about those muscles, so they were using the quadriceps and the gluteus to do the turnout, and you're right, they were doing this [demonstrates] tucking of the pelvis.

Yes, exactly.

You've actually got to release the pelvis slightly back, then go in and up. And then you're totally free. The minute you tuck under, your legs become bound, which then will cause a binding in the hip socket restricting leg mobility and the ability to shift your weight and move through space.

A lot of it is based off of the fact that the Russians worked on a raked stage, so their training, and even in their rehearsal studios, they're all raked, so they're not on a level playing field. They're making postural compensations due to the gravitational pull that is caused by working on a raked stage. But that's not the *right* way. You're supposed to move your legs and breathe. And then, on top of that, what they tell you to do is—old school and I was trained this way—to bring the tip of the ribcage close to these bones (pubic symphysis) but like you're saying, it makes people go down and then you get this tucking of the pelvis...What you want to have the sense of, is that these [ribcage and pubic symphysis] are connected with an elastic band, so they're flexible and can expand, but they're not totally flapping in the wind. And that's all. It's not a matter of really bringing this to this, but of having tone in this area and the ability to release if needed.

This is really helpful!

SARAH CHIN, dancer/student, Marymount Manhattan College, NYC

IAN ANTAL, actor, New York

SC: For dancing, you have to hold the core and keep everything tight, but breathe inside that confined space as much as anyone else would breathe. It's just that you have to make it look effortless.

We had a teacher who talked about the difference between doing a simple step (like a tendu) holding your breath or breathing normally, and really inhaling when you go down, and when you come up, focusing the breath down and into the core.

IA: *What's the difference there?*

Channeling of the energy. It's the difference between just letting yourself kind of buzz around in a nebulous, versus putting the movement down straight through your core, and then sending it out through your legs.

Sending the energy out through your legs?

The energy and the breath...

So an integral part of that is seeing in your mind's eye where that energy is going, like in your imagination...like the intention in the eyes and the body...

You can do it without breathing and it can be beautiful, but that's the difference between watching a dancer just do the steps and watching a dancer who's really captivating you and drawing you in to the movement.

MAUREEN JANSON, dancer/choreographer, Head of Dance, Continuing Studies, University of Wisconsin, Madison

In ballet training (I started as a teenager) breathing was never mentioned in class and even as I went to college, it was very rare that anyone would say, "You know, if you exhale, you will really lengthen that arm gesture." It was just get to that arm gesture and go to the next thing. So breathing was not given much attention. In my training in modern, and I think most of what I would call classical modern techniques such as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, breathing is a part of the technique. In the idea of moving to the floor, for example, you've got to breathe with it and there is a very specific way of breathing. If you're going down, you are deflating, you are exhaling, and this just makes so much sense.

I think ballet technique is virtually unchanged over hundreds of years, but a dancer who is trying to become well rounded studying a range of techniques (the professional who is required to perform in a range of techniques and styles) may automatically start to adapt the modern concepts to the ballet work. When I land from a jump I'm actually coming down so I'm going to exhale. Same thing going up, I'm going to inhale and take that up. If the quality needs to be free, I'm going to exhale, if tense, I'm going to breathe it in. Or I'm going to arrest the breath altogether. But that's more of a modern concept, and I think...before that was just whatever happened naturally. Or people didn't talk about it as part of technical training.

How many times have I thought in my head, "I wish that my early ballet teachers had mentioned breathing"? If ballet dancers do not use their breath... they can [still] physicalize things and they're strong and able; yet the next step of the emotional expression is limited, and I think the same with actors. You can go so far in your voice with the emotion, but it's deeper when physicalized. There

are also opera singers who are into movement, and when you see them and hear them it is just a much more rich experience.

WILLIAM F. (BILL) LETT, Master Teacher, Tap Specialist, Musical Theatre Program, California State University, Fullerton

JM: *Do you say anything about breath?*

WL: I try to remind them to breathe. Young dancers tend to hold their breath. They have not discovered the concept that breath can *help* you in dance. Use the breath in pirouettes, leaps, lifts, jumps. It [forms] a conjunction within the body...breath gives you energy.

It's the same in tap. You have to find that sense of breath or it becomes stale, rigid; it doesn't have any sense of flow or cyclical nature to it. Without breath the body is just present...not really *living* per se...and it's held tight. It becomes what I often see in competition dance...I have [a competition dancer] in the class that you saw, a brilliant, gifted tapper, but there's no breath there. And as a result, she looks angry, and I told her "You need to engage a sense of breath, and there's going to be a re-nutrient, so to speak, of oxygen in your brain, and you're going to have to find that place to take that breath and it's going to look like you enjoy what you are doing." When they're not breathing, it looks like they're not enjoying it.

It crosses all genres. Find that breath, use the body's momentum to inhale and exhale every time you move...when you fight it, you're fighting the movement.

This is what I'm hearing, even from people who teach ballet.

Breath and release, absolutely.... I have observed some pedagogy classes where the use of breath becomes a good tool but it also becomes a crutch, being used as a cue. In a dance we may arrive at a section where there is no music and we're dancing in the silence and it's [demonstrates noisy inhalation], so now we're using that inhalation as a cue. We can still accomplish the same breath at that same exact moment, but it's the quality in which it's approached that makes the difference.

Yes, the noisy inhalation is inefficient, as well as ungraceful.

I think every university dance program should have a voice component, not so much for the world of ballet, but I think in modern it's absolutely imperative. It doesn't have to be spoken word; it can just be sound. Dancers don't understand how to use their voice and how to connect to sound. Adding a vocal component challenges and intimidates most concert dancers, [yet] most are going to work for companies that go into schools and theatres: they bring in kids and they teach them a combination or they do a demonstration; they lecture about the style of dance or the company namesake. They have to *project*, they have to engage the audience, and young children have a very short attention span...so connected sound should be very important to a dancer.

When I was in grad school we had a pedagogy class, and it was my only opportunity to teach anything related to musical theatre, so I taught "Once a Year Day," from *Pajama Game*, and made them sing it, and I made them do a polka. In a matter of 10 minutes they were dying. They didn't know how I was able to have the stamina to sing and dance. How do you do this? When your body is your instrument, anything is possible with practice.

Thank you so much, Bill. I'm looking for a tap class!

Even in these brief excerpts, a common theme emerges: although student dancers frequently hold their breath or fail to *use* the breath, the opposite is—and may always have been—true with experienced dancers. Maureen Janson says:

You look at old footage of somebody like Nijinsky. This guy was a powerhouse, a powerhouse dancer, but he had such an amazing sense of detail and quality—by quality I mean the difference between a tension and a release. I'm sure he had already those modern ideas [of using the breath] happening in his body....

How, specifically, dance and voice relate in performance across a range of styles and genres is beyond the scope of this article. However, the next logical step is to look at complementary and contradictory techniques, what is integrative and what requires changing gears? And regardless of style, there will always be individual performers who put it all together in their own unique way.

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