

Research on the Development of Dance Breath

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Abstract: This research specifically addressed how breath training exercises enhance dance performance and improve a dancer's control of their body, as well as how these exercises can function as material for choreographic inquiry. During the creation of the concert, the choreographer employed breath building exercises and applied different breath techniques with a cast of nine dancers. The choreographer and dancers worked collaboratively to develop creative material, enhance performance and help members of the audience understand why breathing in dance is so meaningful.

1. Introduction

I am interested in researching the subject of breathing and how it relates to dance and more generally, to existence. My aim with this research was to make dancers and audience members recognize and value the role of breathing in life. In particular, I wanted to examine how breathing, as it manifests itself in different living things, connects with dance pedagogy and performance, and provides material to create an original choreographic work. This research culminated in a final 30-minute live dance performance, acting as a creative realization of my research on the various dimensions of breathing.

I believe dancers, as highly sensitive human beings, should be aware that breathing in different ways or according to the ways of different cultures and dance styles will greatly influence dance pedagogy, performance, and creative practice. In terms of pedagogy, breathing connects with health and wellness, the efficiency of movement execution, and emotional expressivity. Regarding performance, it relates to vitality and enhances the dancers' movement qualities. Finally, breathing can be an exciting topic to explore choreographically to create innovative work.

1.1 Background

The following literature review considers material that I read regarding breathing in dance and how it relates to health and expression.

First, breathing is a simple and effective way to warm up the body (Schmidt). As breathing becomes fuller and deeper, the level of oxygen in the body increases. This increased level of oxygen flow is used by muscle tissue for energy production. This energy is then converted into an internal physical force produced by the relationship of muscles and bones.

Secondly, breathing matters in dance because poor breathing leads to injury (Ingraham). Poorly executed breathing techniques can cause physical pain and can often lead to problematic functional problems of the neck, shoulders, and chest. Muscles, ligaments, and tendons have an important role to play in breathing; if they are too tight to function well, this can also cause injury. The difficulty of breathing can directly result in the stiffness of the body, negatively affecting the fluidity of the dancing and the fluency of the movements (for example tension in the shoulders, body coordination). If the dancer lacks the focus of breathing, he/she is likely to miss the beat when transitioning between movements. Poor breathing habits can also lead to distorted facial expressions that are unintentional.

Third, breathing also affects dance through shaping, enhancing, and enlivening movement phrases (Robey). The sustained inhalation, a sudden exhalation, or the quick staccato bursts of a cough are all examples of natural breath phrasing. However, dancers who ignore the organic pattern of their breathing may perform the movement with a monotonous, dehumanized quality. By providing oxygen to working muscles, breath aids the body to work at an optimum level. Without this vital oxygen being supplied to their muscles and brains, dancers may not perform up to their true ability. Dancers who breathe in a shallow manner or hold their breath will deplete their body's oxygen supply and quickly weaken their physical stamina and slow down their mental processes.

- Primary stage: Breathing is with the music, and the mover is consciously in control of active breathing. For beginning dancers, breathing is “unconscious.” This primary stage breathing uses “conscious breathing.” So, learning how to transfer “unconscious breathing” to “conscious breathing” is important.

- Intermediate stage: The movement begins to be complicated; breath now is complex and variable in order to be consistent with movement. For example, a balanced, controlled dance movement, which consists of a slow rhythm and lyrical quality, requires slow and deep breathing. Jumping and running, in which the tempo is more upbeat, needs quicker and shorter breathing. Therefore, in the intermediate stage of training dancers should pay attention to the unity of breathing and movement style.

- Advanced stage: As dance movements are progressively more complex, more physically demanding, or more emotionally expressive, the movement training needs to go into more complex and comprehensive combinations. This entails the unified training of all three aspects of movement, skill, and emotion. While completing these techniques, dancers need to focus on emotional expression. Therefore, the use of breathing is more complicated and needs to be more detailed in the process of breath training.

1.2 Statement of Choreographic Intent

1)How do living things (like animals, amphibians, and plants) breathe and how might this be incorporated into creative practice?

2)Is there a universal training method I can develop to teach dancers to breathe in a way that will maximize their physical performance of movement and their emotional expressivity in any dance style or must I develop different breath training methods for each different dance style?

3)How does breathing affect a dancer's ability to perform movement both “correctly” from a physical perspective and “expressively” and with “vitality” from an emotional perspective?

4)How can research into breathing lead to the creation of original choreographic work?

Based on these questions, I developed breath training exercises to enhance dance performance. I used the breath to control myself and my own dancing body so that my piece would radiate vitality from the inside out. At the same time, I applied these techniques to my dancers. My piece was intended to assist the dancers and members of the audience to understand why breathing in dance is so meaningful. I hoped my piece would inspire people to give more attention to dance as an art form.

2. Method, Procedures, Process

2.1 Preparation

All of my dancers were undergraduate students at Arizona State University, and they all had different experiences of dance breathing. My dancers exhibited great reliability, dedication and maturity when working on my piece. Not all of them had training in Chinese classical dance before, so I worked with them to develop a movement vocabulary for my piece that combined elements of Eastern and Western dance forms. When selecting my dancers, I looked for people who were hardworking, quick learners, and willing to contribute their creative spirits and life experiences into the work.

2.2 Movement Approach

To approach creating the movement, I divided the dance into seven different parts according to the sections of the music that I chose for the piece. In each section, I used different methods and focused on different creative techniques. When I finished the seven-part choreography, I reviewed the composition of the sections to ensure that the movements and transitions were smooth and meaningful.

When I initially began choreographing to highlight my intention, I used a model of lungs as my prop, and I also used a lot of movements emphasizing lung breathing in the first part of the dance.

3. The Final Product

The first section is two dancers that start in a black out. One dancer runs on a fixed spot at the upstairs balcony until the end of the first section. The other dancer comes slowly out from the darkness, with the soundscape of breathing sounds, and shows focus and self-expression. The performer uses improvised movement to show how the lungs contract and expand while breathing. The audience can hear the real, live breathing sounds from the performer and subconsciously feel their own breathing rhythm.

This leads into the second section, which is a duet with two dancers who show that the frequency and rhythm of breathing can be influenced by others. One of the dancers walks slowly from the back of the stage to the front. The other dancer steps backward and slowly walks until the two meet, adjusting their breathing rates to each other's. Next, the two dancers move in unison using a lot head-tail and upper-lower body patterns. Suddenly, one dancer increases the amplitude and frequency of the movements, and the other dancer, under her influence and guidance, increases the breathing rate. The two dancers' breathing changes constantly, and finally returns to the same frequency.

The third section is an ensemble of seven dancers. They enter the space one after another and slowly walk on with the palms of their hands held low in front of them, as if they are bobbing up and down,

which is a visual representation of the breathing. In this part, the dancers change their formation eight times.

This group section uses a lot of choreography that is based on the creative process. For example, there is a part where one dancer comes out after another from the right corner of the stage. Based on the creative process, the dance movements use both improvisation and set choreography. Each dancer's movements not only show the similar movement style, but also show the unique movement characteristics of each person.

4. Analysis

After an in-depth understanding of other dance theorists' insights into breathing, I have found a phenomenon that few theorists have studied, namely the breathing patterns of many types of dance. Therefore, it is important to understand the breathing inherent in different dance styles. My study focuses on Chinese classical dance and urban dance, as well as modern dance breathing patterns. The following are several breath training exercises in dance that I discovered through my research which can be used across those three dance styles. Some were my ideas, and some were built on patterns I learned about in my study.

a) Individual Exercise: Using Breath in Movement

Spread the dancers and play soft music. Then, ask them to improvise movements while coordinating audible breathing. Encourage the dancers to experiment with the way they breathe, such as varying the speed of inhalation and exhalation, pushing air out in contrast with pulling air in, and changing the pitch of their breath sounds.

b) Partner Exercise: Using Breath to Communicate

Split the dancers in groups of two people. Again, play soft music. Then, ask the dancers to improvise movements while incorporating audible breathing in a conversation, or call and response, with a partner.

c) Encourage Experimentation

While the structure described in the rehearsal example above provides a great starting point for dancers to explore the connection of breath and movement, it is important to not always apply such a rigid arrangement for breathing. Everybody is different, and every dancer will find that a different, specific breathing pattern assists his or her technique and performance. Once a dancer understands the basic principles of using breath with movement, they can master this on their own body through discovery and experimentation. Ultimately, this process will lead to a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the dance.

d) Somatic Breath Therapy

Dancers can strengthen respiratory muscles and increase breathing awareness with a simple exercise. Lying on their back in bed or on a floor mat, have dancers rest their palms on the lower abdomen. Relax and feel the body sink into the mattress or mat. Inhale slowly through the nose for a count of two, letting the abdomen gradually expand. Watch hands rise. Hold briefly and then slowly exhale through the nose for a count of four. Try constricting the throat slightly to slow down the release of air. If one prefers to breathe out through the mouth, try to make a soft hissing noise as the air passes between the lips. As one exhales, work on consciously flattening the abdomen, but don't forcibly expel air at the end; doing so denies the body the oxygen it needs.

5. Conclusion

I discovered a set of methods to teach breathing that supports dancers with certain physical and emotional aspects of their performance. As a dancer, I believe breathing in different ways has different effects on dance movements. When I started to learn dance styles other than Chinese classical dance, I found that their breathing styles were so unique. So, I decided to find out if there is a universal training method to learn to breathe or if it is always dependent on a specific style and pedagogical approach. Throughout a year of research and ten months of rehearsal, I learned to collaborate with non-Eastern dancers and to publicize works. I also established a systematic methodology of breath that also supports personal interpretation.

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