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Authoritarian Pedagogical Practices in Dance Teaching and Choreography

Abstract

This paper examines the authoritarian pedagogical practices found in educational settings and more specifically, in Western classical and contemporary dance training and rehearsals. These practices have been a part of dance for centuries, and their legacy has had severe impacts on the ethical, psychological, and political undercurrent of students' educational and professional experiences. First, the historical roots of authoritarian teaching techniques are presented. Next, the ways in which dance teachers and choreographers employ authoritarian teaching behaviors are considered and examined. Finally, in hopes of providing a better template for the future, an overview of the ways in which some dance teachers conversely attempt to create democratic classrooms is examined. Research for this paper has been conducted using a variety of articles referencing dance history, performing arts psychology, sports psychology, anthropological studies of education, and critiques of dance training and rehearsals. Interviews with dance teachers, choreographers, and students are also included.

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Authoritarian Pedagogical Practices

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By Charlotte Carmichael

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Abstract

This paper examines the authoritarian pedagogical practices found in educational settings and more specifically, in Western classical and contemporary dance training and rehearsals. These practices have been a part of dance for centuries, and their legacy has had severe impacts on the ethical, psychological, and political undercurrent of students' educational and professional experiences. First, the historical roots of authoritarian teaching techniques are presented. Next, the ways in which dance teachers and choreographers employ authoritarian teaching behaviors are considered and examined. Finally, in hopes of providing a better template for the future, an overview of the ways in which some dance teachers conversely attempt to create democratic classrooms is examined. Research for this paper has been conducted using a variety of articles referencing dance history, performing arts psychology, sports psychology, anthropological studies of education, and critiques of dance training and rehearsals. Interviews with dance teachers, choreographers, and students are also included.

“This is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you”

-Adrienne Rich

Introduction

The first component of a Dance Major's thesis is choreographing their Senior Project. During the process for creating their piece, each senior is in charge of every aspect of their project. I had an incredibly difficult time navigating my role at the front of the room: I was unsure of how to facilitate an environment of collaboration in which I could still produce a piece that managed to meet the high standards I had for myself. It was difficult to find a balance between pushing my dancers and forcing my dancers to do things they didn't feel comfortable doing. My discomfort as a choreographer led me to begin to examine why it felt so strange for me to be in a position of power, and I realized that it was due largely to the authoritative components of most dance educations, including my own. I believe that the primary reason I was unsure of how to step into this leadership position was due to my own experiences and trauma involving authoritarian teachers, coupled with my encounters with democratic teachers.

I chose this thesis topic in an effort to understand my own approach and experience at the front of the room throughout my choreographic process. This research and writing became a way to make sense of why dance is taught the way it is and what the ideal methods should be: as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren assert, we must combine "pedagogical practices engaged in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority, and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency, power, and struggle" (Giroux and McLaren qtd. in hooks 129). This paper serves as my small contribution to their mission to create a more democratic classroom. This is something that can only be achieved if the cyclical nature of traumatic authoritarian pedagogical approaches is eliminated from the dance world.

Adrienne Rich's quote about being forced to speak with the oppressor's language in order to communicate effectively offers a reason for the continuation of this cycle of authoritarian practices. Dancers who want to impress their authoritarian teachers must adhere to the strict codes of oppression that authoritarian teachers enforce. This results in psychological and habitual ramifications that often mean dancers adhere to a culture of oppression throughout their professional careers and potentially continue to perpetuate an authoritarian culture once they become teachers themselves.

While dance education has the potential to be beneficial physically and psychologically, in my 17 years of training I have observed that it may also produce an environment that creates a climate of obedience without question, a distorted sense of self-worth, and an amalgamation of fear of and admiration for teachers. Robin Lakes writes in her article "The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals" about the embedded pedagogical messages that dance teachers employ to create a negative culture in the studio. "The lay public may be amazed at the horrors inflicted in the name of dance, an art form that many associate with freedom, expressivity, passion, and abandon...dance technique classes and rehearsals seem to remain one of the last holdouts or bastions for outmoded teaching ideologies passed on and preserved from earlier eras" (3).

In the process of investigating my research, I reached out to my classmates and asked to hear their stories about their experiences in dance education prior to attending college. I was immediately struck by common themes of authoritarianism in the memories that my classmates shared. One of my peers named Amy* shared a story that was particularly troublesome. Amy

went to an audition with her dance teacher because her parents had to work. The teacher encouraged her not to eat for the two days leading up to the audition. The night before the audition, the dance teacher kept Amy up until 2am, telling her she was too overweight to ever have a successful career in dance. Amy was 13 years old. Two years later, the same teacher took Amy to a crowded Starbucks and asked her repeatedly how much she weighed, and reiterated that she would continue to be unsuccessful in the dance world if she did not lose weight. Amy's teacher was later diagnosed with PTSD, due to an abusive relationship with her parents and had a severe eating disorder when she was young.

Amy says that she continued to work with this teacher because the teacher would threaten to ruin her reputation with the other dance teachers in the area if Amy left her, meaning she would be unable to dance at all. Amy also mentions that because she was so young she was scared to tell her parents what was happening because she was afraid they would force her to stop dancing. Amy states that this teacher would behave completely differently towards her at times: calling her her protégé, saying she loved Amy as if she were her daughter, and saying Amy reminded her of herself.

From analysis of these events in Amy's early dance training, it is clear that the teacher wanted Amy to look to her unquestioningly for guidance in regards to what she ate, how she looked, and who else her teacher might be. The message that Amy's teacher's actions demonstrate is that the teacher needed to have absolute control over Amy's education. Amy says these experiences negatively impacted her relationship to both dance and food. When I requested that my peers tell me stories about trauma in their early dance education prior to coming to Dominican, over half of the eleven women in my class had similar anecdotes to share. A

significant contributing factor to these environments is dance's pedagogical heritage. The histories of traditional educational practices and Western concert dance training are to blame for perpetuating and enabling these authoritarian themes.

In order to gain a better understanding of what constitutes these authoritarian and democratic environments and teaching styles, the two terms are defined below. The familiar definitions of these two words - namely authoritarian and democratic - provide an accurate picture of the situations discussed, but further explanation is required. Authoritarian dance training requires an authority figure, whom students obey without question. Acts that may be considered unethical or unhealthy in other settings are viewed as commonplace, even favorable, if the teacher approves of such behaviors. Behaviors include students seeking the teacher's validation above all else, and placing their own sense of self-worth below the teacher's views of them. This is due to the student's fear of the authority figure's inflicted consequences if they do not fulfill their expectations. Therefore, autonomous behaviors are frowned upon, as the students are not given permission from the authority figure to make their own choices.

Conversely, democratic classroom settings offer students the ability to make choices. Despite the fact that even the most unstructured forms of dance training require some semblance of codification in order to be defined as training, it is possible to attempt to have a truly democratic setting. A democratic classical or contemporary dance classroom must result in some manifestation of artistic freedom. The teacher is not feared, and students feel that they have the ability to voice concerns and ask questions, should they have the desire to do so.

While both of these pedagogical approaches appear to have clearly defined parameters, the gray area between the two is part of what makes it so difficult for authoritarian approaches to

be eliminated from dancers' educations. Tenets of each approach are valuable in different ways. For example, the obvious rules and clarity found in authoritarian-leaning approaches provide dancers with the structure necessary to cultivate strong technique. Another example is the issue that if classrooms become too democratic, they are no longer a setting in which students can learn a specific, codified dance style at all. Complete omission of an authority figure might result in disrespect for the art form and other artists, create a chaotic environment, and cause the class to lose any sense of structure. Finding the balance between these two pedagogical approaches is part of what makes it difficult for dance teachers to approach dance education. Nevertheless, the difficulty of balancing these two pedagogical approaches is not an excuse for abusive behavior.

This paper will first delve into the history of both authoritarian and democratic teaching styles in traditional academic settings throughout history. The lineage of traditional education serves as a garrison for the understanding of Western classical and contemporary dance education. Dance's pedagogical history will then be analyzed, furthering the understanding of why traumatic practices in dance pedagogy remain prevalent today. Contemporary pedagogical practices are then assessed through the lens of my own experiences in addition to interviews collected from my colleagues and professors. This is done in an effort to suggest a better way forward: a template for a future where an engaged, democratic dance education is commonplace.

Authoritarian Teaching Practices: A History

Authoritarian teaching practices have been a component of educational environments since agricultural practices evolved about 15,000-10,000 years before the present (Ordish). Education evolved in tandem with society itself. Dr. Peter Gray, evolutionary psychologist,

writes in his article “A Brief History of Education” about children's transition from free learning to authoritarian classroom settings.

Prior to the invention of agriculture, humans existed as hunters and gatherers. Anthropologists stipulate that a great deal of hunter-gatherer societies did not distinguish between work and play (Gray). Adults in this time period recognized children's innate curiosity, thus allowing them the opportunity to essentially educate themselves. In this model, children “learned what they needed to know to become effective adults through their own play and exploration” (Gray). Hunter-gatherer societies placed great emphasis on both knowledge and creativity, as these were essential skills for tracking and foraging.

As agriculture and feudalism emerged, education subsequently adapted. Work became labor-intensive and tedious. In the Middle Ages, the need for property and possessions arose, and children were forced to place the interests of their families ahead of their own desires to learn in order to achieve financial stability. The creation of agriculture also resulted in obvious differences in societal status. The vast majority of individuals during this era lived in servitude. The primary lessons children had to learn were “obedience, suppression of their own will, and the show of reverence toward lords and masters. A rebellious spirit could well result in death” (Gray). These behaviors eliminated both the time and potential for children to educate themselves through experiential play. In addition, lords and masters took no issue with beating their servants, including children, during the Middle Ages, promoting the idea that positions of authority were no longer reserved for parents only (Gray).

The emergence of industry slowly eliminated elements of feudalism, but it did not create a better society for children. Business owners could easily profit from forcing children to work in

atrocious conditions for little compensation (Whittaker 2). The primary lesson that a child had to learn was obedience in order to avoid physical or psychological punishment. The progression of industry led to the decline of child labor, thus resulting in the idea of compulsory education (Gray).

Universal public education began in Europe and evolved from the 16th century to the 19th. Its emergence resulted in a continued elimination of freedom and creativity within educational settings. Specific subjects were mandated to be taught, and teachers were perceived as both educators and disciplinarians. While school systems have evolved with the arrival of new technology and growing populations, an emphasis on specific areas of knowledge and little room for experiential learning and creative freedom prevails (Gray).

From virtually the beginning, traditional educational settings have exhibited tenets of authoritarianism. Gray summarizes: “For several thousand years after the advent of agriculture, the education of children was, to a considerable degree, a matter [of] squashing their willfulness in order to make them good laborers” (Gray). Even after the necessity for child labor subsided, educational settings initially allowed a great deal of corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment. While the US Supreme Court has not deemed corporal punishment unconstitutional, they have strongly encouraged school administrators to use caution when punishing students. In the majority opinion for the 1977 Supreme Court Case *Ingraham v. Wright*, Justice Powell writes:

In view of the low incidence of abuse, the openness of our schools, and the common law safeguards that already exist, the risk of error that may result in violation of a school child's substantive rights can only be regarded as minimal.

Imposing additional administrative safeguards as a constitutional requirement might reduce that risk marginally, but would also entail a significant intrusion into an area of primary educational responsibility. (Alexander et al 158)

Justice Powell described the safeguards of disciplinarian practices as inherent. However, the majority of schools in America have phased out corporal punishment all together, finding it wholly unethical and leading to various forms of mental distress.

The authoritarian elements of traditional education have become far more subtle since *Ingraham v. Wright*, and their contemporary basis is most often found in prescribed roles surrounding race and gender. Traditional education is limited by teachers committed, knowingly or otherwise, to educating from the point of view of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. For example, while many students are educated on the topic of Christopher Columbus, “they are often not taught [about] the violent abuse of indigenous peoples, the launch of the transatlantic slave trade, and the introduction of a swath of lethal diseases to an unprepared continent” that resulted from Columbus’ actions (Shafer). This approach is slowly changing as women’s studies and studies of race become more prevalent in the academy. However, eliminating colonial, and by extension authoritative, teaching methods is more complicated than simply embracing diverse populations (Alexander 3). Education in its most radical, progressive sense must enhance both the students’ and the teacher’s capacity for freedom, thus including all demographics.

Authoritarian Teaching Practices in Dance

The evolution of dance education has striking similarities to the evolutionary path of general education in several ways. However, the ideas of ethical punishment and concern with

psychological well-being are not found at the forefront of many dance educations that my peers and I have observed and experienced (Student Interview: Amy). In order to fully understand why dance is taught the way that it is, an investigation of the pedagogical history of the art form is necessary.

Dance is an act that is as old as humans themselves. Humanity was certainly experiencing rhythmic bodily movement during the time of the Neanderthals; however, codified dance education did not emerge until far later. Ballet grew exponentially in the 17th century in the courts of King Louis XIV as a political tool meant to create hierarchical systems and psychological and bodily dependence on the monarchy. At the time of Louis XIV's reign, Versailles was filled with courtiers working to attain technical perfection in order to earn greater status in the eyes of the King (Homans). The formulation of a technique that required so much specificity meant that the courtiers submitted to the King's dance teachers and choreographers as authoritarian figures in an effort to maintain their place at Versailles.

Ballet quickly evolved from its role as a political tool to a spectacular art form. It continued to imbue a similar sense of submission throughout the course of its evolution. Ballet's appeal led it to spread rapidly throughout Europe and later America. American ballet began as a rather pathetic attempt to imitate European culture, but later progressed into its own fiercely innovative brand. With the help of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, America soon became a breeding ground for new work that featured extraordinarily talented dancers (Anderson). American audiences flocked to theaters to see Balanchine's distinctly American works, but despite the vivacity and innovation portrayed on stage, the pedagogical and choreographic culture of American ballet was relatively unchanged from that of the art form's

inception. Some dancers have reported Balanchine encouraging them to starve themselves to achieve a certain aesthetic and take cocaine in the wings before they went on stage in order to exude incredible energy (Kirkland). These claims serve as the dark foundation for New York City Ballet's current climate. Recently, former Artistic Director Peter Martins retired from his position amidst allegations of sexual misconduct, physical abuse, and verbal abuse (Pogrebin).

The oppressive nature of ballet led to the creation of new dance forms. Modern dance emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a vehicle for greater bodily freedom and expression. Pioneers of the movement desired to move further away from what they viewed as the hostile constraints placed on the body in balletic settings. This meant that they rejected the pointe shoes and corsets attributed to creating the illusion of the frail, ethereal ballerina, and began dancing barefoot in shorter skirts. The rejection of the classical ballet form was greater than a simple switch in apparel, however. Modern dance aimed to create work that delved into the socioeconomic and political climate by using the sensations of autonomy exhibited in the body in response to society. This movement was the first in dance history to bring female choreographers and teachers to its forefront, meaning that choreography from different viewpoints was premiering in America for one of the first times.

Despite the fact that the dancing itself offered ostensible freedom and its creators were of a more inclusive demographic, authoritarian teaching methods permeated the culture of modern dance. Robin Lakes writes: "The striking irony exists that authoritarian teaching methods are often utilized as a means toward the end of anti-authoritarian concert dances. Why is it that the onstage visions of anti-authoritarianism and social justice do not translate into reforming educational practices in the dance studio?" (3). First-hand accounts of modern dance luminaries

throwing chairs across the room and hurling insults at dancers permeate several dance articles about the time period. Modern dance pioneer Martha Graham is quoted stating: “Paul [Taylor], what are you doing? I said get off [the stage]!...Oh no, sweetie pie, you are a big boy now. I am not your mother!” (Graham qtd. in Lakes). Graham’s behavior is problematic for several reasons. Her statement leads to the infantilization of Taylor because of the several patronizing phrases she uses, including “sweetie pie.” Graham’s inappropriate behavior becomes even more apparent when one considers how out of place her comments would be outside of a dance setting. Her behavior would be considered incredibly strange in a business meeting or courtroom. Lakes’ article documents several other instances in which choreographers besides Graham infantilize, patronize, or abuse their dancers.

A Portrait of Contemporary Dance Education

Most dancers I know began their dance education in classes referred to as “creative movement,” “free dance,” or “pre-ballet.” These classes are about 45 minutes to an hour long and allow the individual a chance to learn a few basic technical skills, such as turnout and pointing one’s toes. The rest of the time in class is spent creating movement with props, such as scarves or hula hoops, and acting or dancing out stories.

Similarly to how traditional education evolved from practices of experiential play to approaches that required obedience and discipline, most dancers’ educations begin with freedom in their creative movement classes and morph into a more authoritarian approach as they grow older. After a child has been a part of a creative movement class for about a year, she or he will then be moved into a “serious” ballet class. This environment is drastically different from their

first experiences in a dance classroom. The most obvious difference is that the teacher is now no longer a facilitator, but an authoritative figure.

From this point on, most dancers train for years. Some will continue with ballet, while others will focus on careers in other genres of dance. While in my experience dictatorial atmospheres are often most prevalent in balletic settings, other dance forms are not exempt. Conversely, not all ballet training is oppressive. However, many dancers I have spoken to regarding their career paths state that the reason they stopped trying to achieve a career in classical ballet was due to a traumatic experience surrounding the art form. For example, Amy mentioned that following her second interaction with her teacher regarding her weight, she decided it might be more prudent for her to stop trying to achieve a career in classical ballet and start attempting one in contemporary or modern dance (Student Interview: Amy).

Eventually, a dancer may be reintroduced to the democratic approach that was first present in the creative movement classes. When I was first allowed to make autonomous choices within my dancing, I felt as though I was unlearning years of absurd, obedient behavior. The feeling was akin to learning how to drive on the other side of the road in a foreign country. It was as if everything was incredibly close to how I knew it should be, but just different enough that it was deeply troubling. The more freedom I was given, the more I understood how my own educational traumas had effected my artistic voice (or lack thereof).

From the Teacher's Point of View: Interviews With Teachers/Choreographers

Authoritarian and democratic approaches to Western classical and contemporary dance training require an understanding of the intricacies of any relationship between student and

teacher. In an effort to better grasp what informs teachers' and choreographers' approaches, I interviewed two of my professors: Gregory Dawson and Maurya Kerr. Both Dawson and Kerr have been teaching and choreographing for over 11 years. I asked each a series of questions about their teaching philosophies, in hopes of gaining a better understanding of their approaches to interacting with and imparting information to students.

Both professors agree that most dance technique classes are taught with an authoritative approach. Dawson states that "in order to be able to really be taught technique there is a certain amount of authoritarianism" (Professor Interview: Gregory Dawson). Kerr states: "I would definitely say most ballet education is authoritative" (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr). Both also equate dance teaching to parenting. While these two professors have drastically different approaches to educating students, they both agree that the effect dance educators have on their students' development, and the level of intimacy throughout the training process, is akin to raising a child.

However, their approach differs in terms of what students are meant to be gaining from taking technique class. Dawson states in his interview that "ballet is ballet" and "technique is technique." He goes on to say: "You have to allow for students to think for themselves, but in order to do that they have to have correct guidance, so that's kind of dictating" (Professor Interview: Gregory Dawson). Dawson's words here allow us to see teaching as a delicate balancing act between maintaining structure and allowing freedom. Teachers must relay information in order for students to learn. The problem lies in when the environment becomes so dictatorial that it is physically and psychologically traumatic. Dawson is not alone in his

difficulty defining the line between democratic and authoritarian dance education; this is something that has troubled the dance community for decades.

Dawson states: “When you’re in class, you’re in class, it is what it is. It trains the mind, it trains the body, it trains the discipline... technique is technique” (Professor Interview: Gregory Dawson). There is an expectation in some dance classrooms that the teacher will instruct the student what to think and what to do. For some, there is an idea that, as the individual in charge, it is the teacher’s job to control and mold the students in the room. Others view the teacher as a facilitator whose job is to offer students the tools to employ critical thinking. This brings us to the idea of “engaged pedagogy,” presented in bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*: every student in the classroom has the valuable capability to educate one another with equal importance (4). This translates to a democratic learning environment in which all parties are committed to a holistic educational experience. Dawson’s approach is a departure from hooks’ philosophy because he sees his role as an instructor, rather than a facilitator. Dawson’s quote means that there are a set of expectations and rules in his class. For him, class is not the time to push against the structure of classical training. Technique class requires a necessary rigor, one that fulfills a clear purpose within a hierarchy that places Dawson above the students. Dawson says:

When you’re educating you have to kind of dictate what the program is going to mean... I’m really not into having to be the power figure in the room, that’s not how I work, you know? But I am interested in when my students know the difference [between me being a power figure or not]. And I guess that would be my challenge in knowing the difference.

Again, it is difficult to discern between an authoritarian and a democratic approach. Dawson states that it is a challenge for him to know the difference between these two approaches. This means that a dance educator must have an incredible awareness of their own pedagogical approach in order to achieve whatever their intentions within that approach may be.

Conversely, Kerr's approach to class offers students the autonomy to use the specificity of technique to push the boundaries of the art form:

With any sort of, I'm going to say, enclosure, or codification, I feel like the point of that is to get free. It's not just to exist as if you're penned in. Like we give children boundaries to let them feel safe and to let them grow up to be free people with free agency. And I feel like that's what those codified rules should be, as like the means to get free or the lens through which to see things. And you have to know where the boundaries are in order to get outside the boundaries.

This approach puts a huge responsibility on the teacher *and* the student. The teacher must provide an environment that sets up the "enclosure," but in such a way that lets the student know they are allowed to act upon their own thoughts, and that they are capable of doing so. This approach is especially difficult to come by in the world of classical ballet for several reasons that Kerr outlines:

It [authoritarian approaches] is mainly getting weeded out in dance forms where dancers have already been given some agency. I think in ballet it's going to be hard to weed out. Because the whole point of ballet is to restrict women, from what I can tell. In terms of pointe shoes, and in terms of starving yourself, and

looking like everyone else. So I feel like change is going to be very slow to come to those other forms because they're built on repression.

Kerr goes on to mention that this sense of anonymity and repression permeates aspects of dancers' lives outside of the studio. While Kerr says she "got out" of the repressive world of classical ballet, she had careers with multiple classical ballet companies prior to her time in the contemporary ballet world at Alonzo King LINES Ballet. She speaks of her observations of her colleagues in these classical ballet settings, stating: "A lot of them don't know something's wrong because they've just been raised that way. And especially in ballet companies all you do is follow a schedule and there's no opportunity to think for yourself" (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr). The sense of depending on an authority figure for every decision, in every facet of one's life, is something that begins in most dancers' first technique class and continues throughout their career. "If you're in an art form that forces you to change your body or not live in healthy way that's going to permeate every aspect of your life" (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr).

Dancers who experience these kinds of environments may find that they later have a need to dominate the classroom when they become teachers by controlling their students. Kerr states: "I think that there's a lingering need to take back power from a lot of people who are at the front of the room because they were stripped of power" (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr). Just as people who have been abused often abuse, teachers who were taught using authoritarian methods often teach their students this way. For example, the introductory anecdote featuring Amy's teacher mentions that the teacher had abusive parents. The teacher may not have even realized that she was perpetuating the cycle of abuse when she interacted with Amy.

Kerr speaks about this when questioned about how she defines an authoritarian approach. “I think generally people that are not self aware can tend toward authoritative processes because it’s really easy as the leader to kind of run rampant. And I know I have to keep myself in check all the time with just not letting my moods or dislikes kind of overpower the process, and really trying to be humble within the process” (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr).

Kerr says that a lot of her own approach came from her experience with bad teachers and learning that their behavior was something she never wanted to imitate. She mentions that the majority of teachers maintain a great deal of insecurity about their teaching and want their students to either like them or fear them. She found that for herself “the ideal goal I think is to be generous, lead by example, and thus earn respect” (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr). This means that the teacher must care for their students, but not care about what they think of her. In divorcing oneself from any investment in the student’s opinion, the teacher can focus on the student’s work, rather than the student.

Kerr also mentions that a sense of humility is hugely important to creating a democratic process. She says that a significant aspect of this democratic approach is “respecting that you’re going to learn as much from the people that you’re engaging with as they’re going to learn from you (although in different pathways)” (Professor Interview: Maurya Kerr). Kerr is taking into account her student’s abilities to learn from her and the potential that they have to teach her in turn. This valuing of their voices gives them agency and worth in her classroom. hooks supports this step towards democracy with her observations of the democratic classroom: “Any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone’s presence is acknowledged... There must be ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes” (8).

A democratic approach in dance does not mean that every single person in the room is doing whatever they please. That would be a different practice entirely. Some sort of final say has to be present in dance training or choreographic processes. An entirely communal setting would yield very little in teaching. hooks writes: “the weight is on me to establish that our purpose is to be, for however brief a time, a community of learners together. It positions me as a learner. But I’m also not suggesting that I don’t have more power...I’m trying to say that we are equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context” (153). The democratic classroom is not some sort of manifestation of group-think. Democracy looks the way both Kerr and hooks mention: everyone has a valuable lesson to learn *and* teach.

Conclusion

The idea of approaching dance training with a sense of generosity and humility is something that translates from the culture of the art form into the real world. When students are taught to value the voice of everyone in the room, they begin to see the unique contribution each individual has to the state of the world. Democratic dance training is life training. This authenticity and freedom then translates to the stage, where audiences experience the wonders of democratic training and rehearsal processes and are inspired to live with bravery and compassion in turn. The audience can sense when a piece has been created in a way that gives the dancers’ an authentic voice. The dancers’ ability to commit to the choreographer’s ideas serve as a kind of reciprocity for the choreographer valuing the dancers’ points of view. The pieces that are danced with the most dedication are often done so because the dancers feel a responsibility to uphold the choreographer’s vision (and the dancers’ own contributions within that choreographer’s artistic framework).

While almost the entirety of this paper outlines the shortcomings of traditional Western classical and contemporary dance training, I would be remiss if I did not mention that not all dance training is traumatic. The fact that I am still dancing, despite the pedagogical practices of several authoritarian teachers, is a testament to the fact that the few teachers with democratic elements to their approach have changed my life. Authoritarian and democratic approaches are often combined in some of the best teachers I have had. Some element of valuing the individual, authentic voice, even within strict structure or hierarchy, is of absolute necessity for me. I have worked with several choreographers and teachers that engineer environments that are conducive to claiming personal agency while still creating technically articulate dancers. Their ability to engage my generosity, bravery, and curiosity gave me the tools to continue dancing. Dance education has the incredible potential to be good; nevertheless, the approach of most teachers today needs to become far more democratic. I am lucky enough to have experienced more democratic approaches than authoritarian ones, and it is my hope that the art of dance will continue to evolve into a far more thoroughly democratic form.

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