



Women's Voices, Women's Work

Edited by

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Reflections on Teaching Dance at Princeton for the Past 20 Years

Ze'eva Cohen (1969–present)

I came to Princeton in 1969 when Princeton officially opened its gates to women. According to former Associate Dean Halcyone Bohen, dance was one of the special needs anticipated by the administration for the incoming women, along with short beds, kitchen facilities, and secure locks. I was first hired as staff, paid at an hourly rate, and was granted a contract for one semester only.

Students' response to the experimental modern dance course was surprisingly enthusiastic. Fifty of the 60 students who joined up were men. Even more surprising, to me, to the administration, and to the students themselves, was their hunger for physical expression in an artistic context and for developing self-awareness through movement.

I remember returning to Princeton on a night flight after a solo concert at Santa Barbara, California, to direct a first annual out-of-doors demonstration: "To Dance is to Live, #1." The event took place on Poe Field one glorious Sunday in late April; the long-haired, bare-chested, body-painted men, and a few women students, performed before a large crowd to the accompaniment of conga drums and a rock and roll band. They presented a 20-minute assemblage of work prepared in class throughout the year. Their bold proud performance gave expression to both their youthful exuberance and to their feelings of anger, fear, and conflict over the Vietnam War. (One of these painted warriors is now a professor of dance at Oberlin).

Balancing my life as a professional dancer and choreographer, as wife and mother, commuting from New York City while directing the dance component of the Program in Theater and Dance has been an ongoing challenge throughout the 20 years that I have been at Princeton. The space allowed here does not permit many anecdotes illustrating the acrobatic maneuvers it took to fit in to the Princeton calendar a career, first as a dancer, later as a choreographer. I always feared losing my job when conflicts arose. I remember the dean of the faculty called me on the carpet when he found I had to extend a stay in Israel for two weeks teaching my choreography "Wilderness, Swamps, and Forest" to the Batsheva Dance Company. The company could

not adhere to the original schedule, and there was no way I would drop the project. The piece later won Israel's Kinor David Award for best choreography, and has since been performed throughout the world.

"So what is an accomplished dancer/choreographer doing at Princeton?" is a question I have often heard directly and indirectly throughout the 20 years.

Answers:

1. Economic security for an artist choosing to be self-produced, operating on a freelance basis (not going commercial, not part of a large, artistic institution, maintaining an individual voice).

2. Proximity to New York City, the center of professional activity in the performing arts.

3. Students who are intelligent, responsive, and stimulating.

4. Working for an institution that hears you, even if sometimes unbearably slow to take action.

5. The opportunity to build a program that is unique in American higher education. Although not intended to prepare professional dancers, many works choreographed by students would be deemed outstanding in any professional conservatory.

What most satisfies me at Princeton is the responsiveness of my students. Their exhilaration at being allowed to experience, learn, and grow through the discipline of modern dance, their faith in its creative possibilities, and the rich and meaningful ways they integrate their studies in dance with the rest of their academic and personal lives is most rewarding to me as a teacher.

I am as gratified watching a genuine creative work choreographed by a beginning student as that of an advanced student with many years of training. Of course I am proud that some students have pursued professional careers in the field, as dancers, choreographers, artistic directors, teachers, dance therapists, and art administrators. Sonia Dumas '85 writes from Trinidad:

"You taught me that one did not need to be a certain height, weight or anything else to achieve excellence in dance, only that one needed to take each problem of movement and solve it independently, without a prescribed set of rules."

And I know she in on the right track.

It is no less satisfying to hear from students who became priests, military officers, or scientists, who are still dancing. Ken Davis '87, now a graduate student in astrophysics at Colorado, wrote me:

"Thank you for showing me passion in my work. I judge career goals by how I enjoyed performing in Richardson. It's a tough standard, but I might as well shoot high."

Another student has written:

"It is not my aspiration to be a dancer in any other dance than the dance of life itself, in which I, as everyone else, am at times actor, magician, stagehand, prophet, set designer, spectator and spectacle (leaving the role of critic to those who will not join the dance)."

Students come to us with a part of their awareness blocked, perhaps because they have been taught to evaluate themselves primarily in a narrow range of verbal and mathematical skills. Students who have taken even one semester of dance know better. They learn to make intelligent connections between mind and body. As one student wrote:

"... The body is more than a mere puppet of the mind, the traditional separation is based on endless sophistries whose effect has been to remove art from life, experience from understanding. Rather the mind and the body are one, the body uses the mind to regulate itself, and we go about flesh and spirit communicating with others in flesh and spirit, neither the container or the master of the other, but both existing indissolubly linked in a corporeal-spiritual being."

To allow, listen to, and trust the flow of stimuli and information traveling between mind and body, and to be able to shape it in order to produce work whose meanings can be shared with others—this seems to me one of the worthiest gifts a young person can gain from a liberal arts education.