

Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy

THESIS

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Dancer BA

LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING
CONTEMPORARY DANCE THROUGHOUT
DIFFERENT AGE

THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with problems of understanding and performing contemporary dance. The answers on questions how we perceive, learn and perform contemporary dance I discuss by considering the thoughts of my teachers, my colleague dancers and my own thoughts and experience. Of course, our experiences are different and depend on many factors.

I have been involved in dancing from an early age, and my experience in perceiving contemporary dance has changed a lot throughout my development as a dancer. I was interested in how personal development can affect dancer's understanding and performing contemporary dance movements and his/her comprehension of contemporary dance pieces.

My formal dance education started in Ballet school Novi Sad, and continued in Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy (BCDA). The curriculums of the school and the academy are given in the Appendix. The teachers and the students that participated in the research come from the same dance institutions. The teachers are involved in teaching contemporary dance classes, repertoire classes, modern technique classes, contemporary ballet and partnering classes. The students are current students at BCDA. So, the statements given in this thesis are strongly influenced by the curriculums and the understanding of the contemporary dance that these institutions support. In both schools, students are encouraged to look at the contemporary dance as using movement to express themselves, issues and themes they are interested in.

In doing research on the topic of this thesis, I worked with literature on the basic components of personality of a contemporary dancer. Also, I have interviewed my dance teachers and my fellow dancers. The answers, opinions, views of the teachers and dancers which are based on the interviews are given and mentioned along the content. The teachers are experienced in teaching, performing and choreography-making; therefore, their experience covers a broad part of contemporary dance field. The dance students have 'fresh' experience in learning new techniques and movements, as well as in dancing.

The last part of the thesis consists of my own experience of contemporary dance world. Besides being a student of contemporary dance and experience in performing, I have had opportunities to follow and witness the development of young dance students in a dance studio.

AGE

As dancers, each of us has different ways of learning and understanding dance. However, as we grow, whether actively dancing or not, our thoughts, interests and abilities change. How deep you can go into essentials of chosen technique changes within age, maturity, body awareness, etc. Likewise, the attitude towards learning and understanding contemporary dance changes as we grow and develop our body awareness, mind and technique knowledge.

Best Age to Start

If you ask at what age people usually start learning contemporary dance, common thinking is that beginners are in their teenage years. They usually have some background and interest in performing art. It may be that they also have already participated in some type of dance classes and performances.

Considering contemporary dance classes, generally, beginner level starts at age of 15-16. Nowadays, we have no limitation of upper-age limit for beginning. If someone wants to study contemporary dance at university level, minimum age for entrance is 18. Many students start in their early twenties. However, some famous creators and well-known dancers came to contemporary dance field way later than the typical beginner's age. That indicates that beginning age doesn't have a big role in how much you can develop in your dancing and choreographing skills.

“I have never seen a contemporary dance school or class with people at age of 6-8. Now, there is no limitation for starting, and how good you are does not depend on age, but differs from person to person. There are so many examples when people start dance really, really late, even in their forties.” (TI-1)

“I think that the best to start is after 20. Freedom of contemporary dance can be destructive to teenagers. This freedom might be too much for them and they could get lost in it.” (TI-2)

It is well known that all children dance from an early age [1, 2]. Children in their first years dance intuitively. When I was watching children's classes at a dance studio, I realized that at

the age of 2-5 they can fall, roll down to the floor or stand up in more efficient and natural way than in the older years. Also, when I started to learn contemporary dance in school, we were invited to repeat the movements of children when standing up and rolling on the floor, in order to learn how to use our bodies naturally - for easier movements with more flow.

Even at that early age, children can perform improvised or given contemporary dance movements. We still cannot say is it because children move naturally and in the most efficient way which is so needed in contemporary dance; or is it the talent; or is it enabled by growing up in a dance environment.

“My son does some movements for which I needed two years to learn. And he does it while improvising in the living room, without even seeing them before. I don’t know if it is because children can do everything, or if it is the specific talent.” (TI-2)

Dance teachers say they see that their children have predisposition for dancing and can be involved in dancing easily, either by looking at dancing from an early age, or doing small exercises with their parents. A child who is surrounded by dancers and is attending rehearsals can learn movements and choreography:

“Child of Crystal Pite, who was then 3 years old, was on all rehearsals when we were making that piece, and it was unbelievable how he could do exactly the same movements, even better than we did! What she asked from us, he could repeat. All choreography; the whole piece without any mistakes.” (TI-1)

There are standards and typical structures in learning dance, based on age and psychological development of children, which propose what kind of technique and movement is best to learn according to the mental level of a person.

“In classes with the group of the average age of 2-3, children learn how to use the space and relate to the music. Regarding to their future dance life and studies, it is important for them to get used to the music from a very early age. In this period of their lives, you could start to teach them how to act by asking them to make simple face gestures.” (TI-3)

“In early age, around 3-4, it cannot be expected from children to be technically correct, which changes within the following years. Dance students aged 6-7 are

still using games for developing skills, but now they are expected to realize the importance of being correct musically and to remember exercises. Of course, in every case, it depends from person to person and, of course, on talent.” (IT-3)

Students start to make difference between needed postures and alignments within learned dance types during middle school, at the age of 12-15. At this age, most commonly learned techniques are modern techniques such as Limon, Horton and ballet [3].

“In high school I had started contemporary dance with Graham and Limon and I loved it. Pure technique, pure movements, motivation.” (TI-2)

During high school, as they start to understand dance history and cultural contexts within, as well as they start to pay attention on aesthetics, students could be introduced to improvisation which gives them the opportunity to emerge their own personal artistic voice [3].

The language is also different, according to age. Teaching a child to “lengthen the muscle” or “tensing the muscle” will not make a big difference, because children do not know how muscles work. Children are first taught to lift the leg, using metaphors or imaginations thus they can achieve the proposed feeling of the movement. When the teacher thinks they are ready for new information, he/she can introduce new terms and metaphors to students, as “lengthen the muscle”.

At the end, you accept: „Dance is bigger than the physical body. Think bigger than that. When you extend your arm, it doesn’t stop at your fingers, because you’re dancing bigger than that. You are dancing spirit.“ (Judith Jamison) [3].

Mental and Physical Skills

Contemporary dance art world is very delicate and wide. It includes philosophical approaches and self-body-awareness. That is why it requires both mental and physical maturity of a dancer to completely understand it.

All dance beginners come with some “support” from their past. perhaps it is dance experience, perhaps physical training, or just any type of life experience. Dancers apply all their theoretical and physical knowledge to their learning process, even when if not consciously.

As one is more connected and involved in contemporary dance art world, his/her cognisance increases. Understanding of this world, also of contemporary dance itself, grows with dancer’s personal development. How fast and productive this process is, depends on many aspects and it is certainly individual.

Dance is often used as a tool for teaching movement-awareness, discipline, social skills, building personal characters, coordination, creativity and many other skills [2]. With dance, children can learn the perception and relation between their bodies and space, as well as they improve social skills, cognitive and metacognitive skills (by recognizing and identifying dance movements, or reflecting on their work and the work of the others) [3].

Contemporary dance, like any other dance, requires both mental-maturity (ability) and physical skills. While in learning process, each skill is developing on its own rhythm and path. Different styles require different skills, however in every dance style improving psychological understanding of the dance means somehow improving the physical part of the dancing.

My 12-year experience in different dance institutions tells that understanding particular dance technique and technical skills’ improvement do not always improve equally. Body sometimes cannot accept the movement in the way our brain would like to. Having that fact in mind, physical preparedness can be an advantage for applying understanding of specific technique or movement.

Depending on the mental age of students, different level of contemporary dance can be reached. Expectations and levels of understanding and applying certain forms and instructions differ

according to amateur - professional and age differences. Learning contemporary dance while growing up and learning as adult makes differences in teacher's approach regarding process of understanding dance and performance improvement.

"Dancers under 16 cannot understand the philosophical approach to movement." (TI-2)

This indicates that not the age, however, the development of the personality is the main reason why students at that age cannot think of movement in a philosophical sense.

Teachers are proposing the material and movement quality and philosophy; however, each student should take what he/she needs and what he/she want to get from the class. Every teacher has his/her own approach.

"I give and you take what is useful for you. It's that way - my way, but you can make you own way. Take what you want..." (TI-2)

"My approach is the same - personal needs. I tend to understand personal needs of each student. Personal interest, wishes and the goal of the class. I am also learning from it." (TI-1)

"When there is a group of different people, not the same age and level, I need to be more sensitive, more open. I adapt to the group more than the group to me. I don't look for the perfect forms; I just want them to understand the idea and the concept. Or, for example, with professional company dancers, you should never confront them, just challenge." (TI-2)

Dance classes are usually organized regarding to students' age and technical skills. Nevertheless, the best way could be to form the group of students in relation to what they can accept and learn which depends more on their personal mental development.

Looking at different levels of education everybody goes through, knowledge about specific subject widen with the level of learning. For example, learning history in primary school considers significantly less information than learning the same topic in high school. Due to

students' previous knowledge teachers choose the amount of information students can absorb, accept and work with. The same applies to dance studies. With previous knowledge, a dancer can use, see and implement more details and accept more information than without it. It does not mean that dance is taught only by dancing. Previous knowledge can also mean that one knows how body works, how muscles should be used and how mind works while dancing.

I have also felt how my psychological development changed my approach to dance movements. When I started to learn contemporary dance professionally in high school, after few somatic-oriented classes, I started to realize that my body talks by itself. In order to cooperate and not go against it, I need to pay attention to its needs. Forcing my body to perform a particular movement changed to applying it to the body. That made a difference in completely understanding the logic, thinking and approach to nowadays contemporary dance. In that moment, after four years of studying contemporary dance, I realized that one of the most important skills in using contemporary dance in the right way for your body is - knowing your body. This approach to dancing made me understand how my body works and how I should use it.

“At the age of 28-29, while doing Alexander technique, I made a revolutionary step – I made connections between everything that I know, that I have learned.”
(TI-2)

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

Different Paths to Contemporary Dance

Wide aspects of contemporary dance field deliver a variety of contemporary dance beginners. Today there are many approaches and practices of contemporary dance which open many doors for entering the contemporary dance world. Many dancers start doing contemporary dance after studying in different fields, whether their subjects are connected or are not with dancing at all. Their studies differ according to their background, interests and possibilities.

Due to wideness of this whole contemporary world, dancers use many philosophical and social themes, practices of sports and any kind of art as themes for contemporary performances. People from all domains can be influenced, touched or interested in such dance approach to a concrete topic. This can be the trigger to start using contemporary dance as a way of approaching the topics you are interested in. That way, you can use innovative, creative and performing ways to get the topic closer to people, or just to raise people's awareness of the particular issue.

Some dancers choose contemporary dance as the next level of dancing. Sometimes it is the only way to continue dancing at all for some of the dance lovers.

“In my country, there are two dance majors: ballet or contemporary. If you want real education in dance, you need to choose from these two, and I can't be a ballerina”. (SI-1)

“I firstly went to the ballet school. It was a misunderstanding. I wanted to dance, I didn't want to do ballet. I joined a neoclassical company in France, which led me to contemporary dance. It was an opportunity for me to do what I know, not what I hate.” (TI-1)

Most of young people around us are dancing just for fun or as a hobby. Love for dance nourished in an early age can grow till the point where it outgrows “hobbies” and personal needs for body corrections (this is why parents usually take their children to dance classes).

Sometimes, wanting to make a full-time dancing career, a dancer can devote him/herself to dance only, while giving up previous studies.

“I was studying art history for two years and had some evening dance classes. Then I realized I want to be a full-time dancer, so I quit my studies and searched for a real dance school.” (SI-2)

Dance as main education, primary job and life style is chosen mainly because of the love for dancing. From wherever a future dancer comes from, there is one thing connecting all students/professional dancers – the desire for dance. Differences in the background can be various, but they all share that wish, which is used as a force to go further, learn and dance.

All people can dance. But not all can achieve the same amount of knowledge and skills in contemporary dance art. A contemporary dance beginner is not necessarily a total beginner in dance. He/she can be a well-trained ballerina or Latin dancer, or somebody who is involved in dance history research field. Correspondingly, he/she can be a person with no prior connection to dance. While learning contemporary dance, one's background affects the approach to dance, way of receiving information and body knowledge.

Attending dance school where individuality and diversity is appreciated and desirable, one can meet a variety of people with totally different backgrounds; from ballet to art studies to mathematics and informatics. Watching all these people in one group as contemporary dance beginners, you can see their behavior, interests and ability to use their knowledge and abilities themselves. You could monitor improvement happening in and through totally different stages throughout years. Depending on age and maturity, amount of experience in any kind of art and physical strength, all of the dance beginners have to pass certain phases and overcome shortcomings or problems which differ due to mentioned differences between them. These phases depend on personal capabilities and needs.

No Artistic Background

Being a total beginner with no dance experience or knowledge on dancing is sometimes an advantage and sometimes a disadvantage. At the beginning it takes longer time for a future dancer to understand what is asked from him/her. He/she needs to be explained what kind of skills he/she will need to have and what contemporary dance is. Joining contemporary class without knowing any of the frequently used terminology could cause trouble in understanding the task and the exercise itself, which could be his/her first drop behind from the experienced dancers in the class.

Assuming that this type of a beginner had never seen contemporary dance, he/she can have his/her own imagination how should the movement look like. In improvisation he/she could have inspiring and innovative movements, which would be a great advantage compared to, for example, a ballet dancer who is stuck with learned shapes and frames, limitations learned in classical ballet.

Lack of physical strength causes trouble with expressing the imagination and movements one has imagined doing, or just causes inability of doing certain combinations and movements in the class.

Every person has a posture, muscles and alignment according to what and how much he/she has done in life. Sitting by the computer or constant standing can leave a mark on body structure. The older a person is, harder it is to change bad posture.

Beside free and non-formed movement in a technical way, one of the advantages can be receiving the right information in the body and forming the body for contemporary dance instead of correcting old habits and postures made by using the body in a wrong way. In that way, it is easier to form the right base and explain the reasons, usage and purpose of body alignments and movements. Once a dancer has a good base, with a bit of practice he can easily improve and understand the function and principles of a dance.

“Contemporary is wide. Depends what a person wants from a class, what are his/her goals. To prepare – you should be open minded and know why you are here.”
(TI-1)

Physical Background Skills

Even if no one in a beginner class has been doing contemporary dance, most of them will already have some physical strength or some kind of dance experience. Strength of the body, endurance of the muscle and physical competence are important [4] for enduring the physical part of the class and exercises. Having more physical strength gives space for gaining other skills instead of catching the breath in the class or focusing to endure the exercise rather than improving dance skills.

“The best preparation for contemporary dance is any kind of sport, just not dance.” (TI-2)

Physical strength is very important and without it, one cannot be a dancer. Contemporary dancers are also called performing or aesthetic athletes [5] and are required to have two types of physical strength: for explosive jumps, kicks and elevations; and muscle endurance where usage of particular muscles is long-lasting. Except for the importance of physical strength for sake of performing, it is also beneficial for preventing injuries. Strength of joint holder muscles is important for a dancer because flexibility is highly desired, and that causes overextensions of the joints when dislocations can happen. Not being prepared for stress and tension in certain areas of muscles during a performance means that weak muscles cannot support the movement. A dancer is required to have specific physical strengths including flexibility, endurance, muscles strength and power [6]. Researches [6, 7] show the advantages of the physical preparedness. Physical training increases dancer’s technique as they get physically stronger.

Physical strength does not necessary mean good posture and right way of using muscles. It can be a difficulty to understand the momentum and the importance of using the weight rather than pure physical effort. Example could be seen in a group of people with strong “gym” muscles and people with not such a strong body. To perform the movement, a strong person will easily use its muscles to do a particular movement, but a weak body needs to find other solutions, such as using its weight and momentum. As dancers, we are taught to prefer the use of momentum than pure muscle strength as it saves energy and looks “dancy”¹.

¹ Expression "dancy" is frequently used by teachers and students in Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy referring to the fusion of two words : dance and fancy.

“Ice skating gave me a lot of technique. I have high jumps and can do pirouettes really well, but my spine was really stiff. That I needed to change fast.” (SI-3)

Besides pure strength, knowing other styles of dance can either be an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the aspect of dance. Being able to listen and connect the movements to the music can be a great plus for a beginner. Whatever dance style is danced before contemporary, as the field of this kind of dance is almost boundless, the dancer can always go back to his/her beginnings and use the things he/she knows. This can help in improvisation classes and in bringing creativity and ideas, but can also make trouble with breaking the bad habits. Usually, ballet dancers have problems with releasing the body tensions.

“As one of classical ballet trained dancers, I had troubles recognizing the right amount of tension in the body that needs to follow and support the movement. As contemporary dance is more free and natural, one needs to find the balance between too stressed and tensioned movement, and movement without any form and usage of muscles.” (SI-4)

As ballet dancers are used to have strict, limited movements and precise path and trajectory of movements with very little freedom, they can find themselves in confusing situations where they have all the freedom and they do not know how to use it. From my own experience I found that accepting improvisation as a tool is one of the hardest things in my development in contemporary dance field.

A big advantage is flexibility and coordination of the movement gained during classical ballet training. No need for additional strengthening of the body and learning how it functions. Jazz, modern or Latin dancers can easily recognize the shapes and movements, have no problems with terminology as there is little difference in naming movement in classical ballet and, for example, in modern and jazz ballet.

“I did modern and jazz for a long time before transferring to contemporary dance and I think technical and experience knowledge is beneficial for starting contemporary dance training. Comparing to others in my class, I felt more experienced and advanced in a technical way” (SI-1).

Experienced dancers have developed certain habits during learning dance and it can be a disadvantage when transferring to contemporary dance. “The psychological theories explain that habits are acquired dispositions. According to these theories, any learning process or experience gained by an individual is retained. When this learning experience is repeated it is firmly retained. This ability to retain helps us to get it strengthened and becomes a habit.“ [8] ‘Habits’ are defined as actions that are triggered automatically in response to contextual cues that have been associated with their performance [9]. Using their abilities and skills acquired in other dance styles, dancers can as well have difficulties in giving-up all the previous knowledge and accepting the contemporary philosophy. In most cases, transferring to contemporary dance looks like relearning everything a dancer thought he/she knew: how to use muscles and energy, how to behave, his/her attitude to dance, his/her learning strategies... Some habits and body knowledge can be difficult to change because the dancer has done it for a long period of time.

“Teachers didn’t approve my previous education. They wanted me to forget what I have learned and to relearn everything. I had high legs, high jumps and highest energy and was giving 100 percent. But they said it’s the wrong way, my attitude to dance is wrong. I needed to be more free, no need for perfect hair. I should dance more, I should allow myself not to be conservative, to talk more, to be open and to give my opinion. That was something new for me.”(SI-1)

Habits are usually performed when people are distracted. In case of a dancer, that usually means when there are new instructions added to the movement he/she already knows. For example, if a dancer’s habit is to lift the leg in /grande battement/ using quadriceps, and he/she tries to change that habit by lifting the leg using the inner thigh muscle, once the teacher adds arm movements, or a different approach to lifting the leg when circumstances are not the same as they are in doing /grande battement/ exercise in ballet, that can trigger the repeating of the old habit and the dancer usually does it the „easier“ way, a.k.a. habitual movement- lifting the leg from quadriceps. Changing habits can be difficult for a dancer, as it involves more thinking and controlling the movement. Therefore, previously thought dancer sometimes needs to relearn and change previous habits with new ones. A habit can be changed when the cue that triggers particular behaviour or movement changes. One needs time to accept new knowledge and rewrite the previous habits with the new ones [10] .

Dancer who attended dance classes has developed and acquired certain behaviour which is needed when learning certain dance styles. Knowing how to learn in a way of having a goal, which is a given example how you should look like and do, may cause you to learn in a way that you copy the teacher, but have no personal wishes and goals coming from yourself.

„I was thought to see and do, to copy. There was a goal how I intended to look or be like, like a role model. So, I was expected to reach it.“ (TI-1)

Coming to contemporary dance world with strong dance technique and physically prepared, brings benefits and weaknesses. Dancers can use their physical strength in many ways, but usually lack improvisation skills, openness and freedom.

Other Fields Background

Some people shift from other art studies to dance during or after their primary studies. Having background in any kind of performing art is recommended and desirable. Having experience on the stage, as actors and actresses have, is a very important point while learning dance. Knowing how to behave in the lights, managing to think and act fast if anything goes wrong on the stage are positive skills in any kind of art. This can also be one of the psychological preparations for being on stage. Having knowledge in art, knowing art movements and art pieces globally, can affect our approach to dance as an art piece.

“When I am making a piece, I see pictures, just like paintings, which I transfer to dance to make them alive. Also, I get a lot of inspiration from fine arts, from my previous studies.” (SI-2)

Dancers coming from non-dance world may have less trouble with theory classes in contemporary dance schools.

“And about theory classes - I could also follow them with less trouble and I needed less time to understand and learn, because I have previous knowledge in art history.” (SI-5)

People who already have some experience in communication skills will know better how to work in a group. Dance is a communication between the dancer and the audience, world, theme, problem or another dancer. Social behavior and problems can be excellent sources of topics for making contemporary pieces. Being mature and experienced in these fields can be an advantage for a contemporary dancer. NDEO standards [11] state that dance should increase our social awareness and bring skills for working in groups, and working on social and global problems. One can learn how to be a part of a unity, part of a group as a result of being part of an unison choreography, or cooperating and being partner in dance with other people.

“When I moved to another country, in another company, I realized that they actually more talked than they have danced. It took time to accept that their approach to contemporary dance is more thinking and sharing than dancing.” (TI-1)

Self-awareness and self-knowledge can affect our dancing globally. Not having stable and strong personality can affect other dancers too. Maturity and self-acceptance give dancer courage to express and to feel while dancing. Feeling and expressing is supposed to create movement. Being emotionally intelligent and mature makes a difference in the approach to dance. We accept emotions, relate to them, perceive them and express them through dance [12].

Despite of the importance of the maturity in the dance, there is a danger that dance could stay on the level of mimic and gestures and non-articulated moves affected by absence of body knowledge, body awareness, dancing, musical and performing skills.

Sometimes maturity and seeing dance as a philosophy can lead so far that the dancer will not perform the exact movement, but will often over-perform and overreact. Coming from a psychological background is good for creating dance, as well as for communication, behavior and cooperation in a group. When dance is seen as a philosophy of movement and emotions rather than movement itself, it can cause a problem in training the body to do the exact movement that is needed.

DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TIME WHILE LEARNING

Learning and developing are constant processes in life. Beside learning dance and taking classes, they can be affected by everyday life situations and actions. One can see the development of his/her dancing skills caused by personal and emotional growth, meanwhile not dancing at all. Following thoughts are based on the development that happen learning dance in dance institutions.

Body Knows

Bishop [13] introduced the term “somatic intelligence” which points to facts that our bodies have their own intelligence and knowledge which are not necessarily located in our brains but in the whole organism.

Practicing piano, dancing, singing, speaking, reading, playing any sport means using body knowledge and intelligence for developing skills. Once learned and practiced, information how to use the body stays in the mind and the body uses it when needed. The metaphor “body knows” is for all our habits and for learned ways of doing an act: experience within the learning process, professor’s approaches and language, or self-experiencing.

I usually experience the skill of a body to adapt in needed movement in learning new “complicated” jumps and acrobatics in classes. Not knowing how to exactly perform a movement throws me in an unknown situation where I need to trust that my body will find the best way to save itself and finish the movement without me consciously guiding the movement.

“I have always trusted my body. I have had injuries few times, but none of them happened in the studio.” (TI-2)

Body is acting how the mind wishes. Our mind remembers how we reacted to the movement - ours or someone else’s, or to the particular instruction. It follows the same path as it is taught to do from its own experience. As we learn from our past, and create “answers” for the same “questions” and instructions, body repeats past movement as a learned answer to certain “questions” [14].

Body remembers past actions, however, it is also able to adjust it for the needs of the situation and change it for the best response to the action [14]. This adjustment-making is just a proof that body is intelligent enough to use already learned movement for its own benefit for saving the body from injuries, or finding the smoothest way to roll on the ground or stand up.

Like David Zambrano said [15] about choreographies, our body also uses all of the learned information and adjusts it for the needs of the moment: "...You can repeat it over and over, you can teach it, you can express it at the moment. Then once you know these `words` very well, you can repeat them and use them forever. Then in your life, which is an improvisation, you can use them according to the needs of specific moments."

Accepting the Essentials of a Technique

Body knows. To form a habit body needs some time. To understand the needed "habit" in a particular contemporary dance technique depends on the body and psychological state, growth and development. When we do not know our body or our mind, skills and biomechanics well enough, we cannot truly accept the essentials of the given movement.

Every technique has its own base. It has rules and thoughts that lead through the movement. Fall and recovery, off balance, contraction, usage of the weight, movements that come from releasing, momentum... Following these bases without completely understanding where they come from, why and how they work can give a wrong idea, or just superficial aesthetic of the technique but not the essentials.

Accepting the specific needs of a technique requires time. Teachers explain with words and movement, on the other hand, how we perceive the information depends not only of them, but also on our view of the world, prior knowledge and current thoughts. Remembering one class at the beginning of my studies where teacher many times proposed a way of thinking and doing a certain exercise, when the group could not accept the feedback and apply it on the bodies, teacher let the group do the exercise without persistence in his intention with a sentence "*Maybe it is too early for this.*".

When talking to dancers, most common answer to the question when they could really say they know the chosen technique was - after two or three years being more or less constantly in contact with the technique.

“I think after two or two and a half years of working and learning from Joe Alegado, I could say that I really know it. I could say “bring it on, propose any movement” and I can do it after few tries.” (SI-6)

Some dancing styles suit the dancer better than others. Being a freelance dancer may often mean changing from technique to technique due to the needs of a performance. It is expected from a professional dancer to be able to adapt to those needs. Dancers may be asked to change dancing styles and techniques within very little time.

“You need a week or two to understand what they want, to adjust. That is if you can control your body well.” (TI-2)

“Some movements are natural to you, you can get them immediately, but some you cannot get in two years, or even never. It’s about what suits you, not about the time. If it has familiar shapes or if it is similar to what you have done before, you get it before, if not – you do not get it.” (TI-1)

Ability to Improvise

Improvisation is a tool for a dancer. A teacher uses it to teach students how to create movements and find their own movement language. As I have heard many times from Marco Torrice: “We use improvisation as a tool to enrich our movement vocabulary and body awareness.”

Depending on dancer’s needs, wishes and interests, as well as personality and openness, some of them start improvising on their own using all knowledge and movement vocabulary they have for creating dances they enjoy.

Having strict classical ballet classes may cause the need to play with the known movement as a runaway path when the knowledge of ballet movements is wide enough to give opportunities for that.

“I started improvising when my vocabulary was wide enough so I could play with it. It was when I was in the ballet school; I felt I needed to find a way to get fun out of ballet.” (TI-1)

Group improvisation using partnering movements is taught when students have enough knowledge and awareness of the happenings inside the working space. During practicing fixed phrases and exercises, teacher can see if they are competent to start group improvisation with the particular sequences. After all, it is not always about the preparation and knowledge, but about concentration and readiness.

“I think you can do group improvisation after you had classes continuously for about 6 months. If it is spread out, it is not so much effective. It is more concentration, not at all about background.” (TI-2)

MY EXPERIENCES

My Understanding of Contemporary Dance Through Age

First experience I had with contemporary dance was at the age of 11. After doing modern - jazz ballet and classical ballet for 2 years, my class went to watch a contemporary dance performance of in a nearby town. Dancing barefoot with strange floppy clothes and doing unexpected, strange movements amazed me. How different that dance looked compared to the modern dance I have known until then!

Until I actually started studying contemporary dance in high school, the difference between jazz, modern and contemporary was unknown for me. Slightly different mood of dance could not make a difference resulting in separation of those dances. Contemporary dance, in my early years of knowing, was just a “dark”, mysterious way of interpreting modern dance. Lack of knowledge made me think contemporary dancers are just better than modern dancers, but they dance the same dance.

Starting to learn contemporary dance as the main subject in high school (age of 15-18), gave me knowledge about some of the modern and contemporary dance techniques. This resulted in with opinion that the main difference between modern and contemporary dance is that modern is an aesthetic based dance and contemporary uses techniques for making dance.

Finishing high school, at the age of 18, growing up, thinking and contemplating made me realize there are more than just techniques in contemporary dance. Until this personal growth I was accepting and absorbing material and skills only from my professors, being just a student who blindly believes that what is learned in school is enough for being a dancer, and there is nothing to learn beside the school classes. Being able to analyze and discover my own interests and questions, I started to think about contemporary dance as a bigger world than a just technique-based dance. That was the moment I realized the huge part that improvisation takes in contemporary dance.

Changing the school and coming into a totally different environment three years ago, being thrown in a different culture, meeting absolutely different people and thoughts, seeing different

performances, opened my views. I could think out of the already-known frames about dance. Also, I accepted the existence of conceptual and more spiritual contemporary dance. Seeing performances without any dancing, or those that use dance only as a parody brought me to the wideness of the idea of contemporary dance performances.

Hodworks company's contemporary pieces made me realize that dance is not only dancing [16]. In my first year of studies in Budapest, watching "Pirkad/Down", a piece by Adrien Hod, was the "first shock", breaking my previous opinion about the contemporary dance world. I was stunned by dancers dancing naked on the stage with the audience formed in a square around four dancers. The unfamiliar way of dancing and movements themselves, and maybe being so close to the dancers made me feel exposed, uncomfortable, but also made me ask myself why is this piece made, what is the purpose of it and what is behind the movements. I realized it is not dancing for sake of dance, but it is showing bigger thoughts, problems and society. Experiencing this way of performing, organization of the audience, without the usual theatre's high-lifted stage, in Hungarian gallery, I asked myself is this contemporary dance which is danced in the world, is this the right way of using contemporary dance?

Still not knowing that contemporary dance has so many options, choices, variations and usages, I was transferring from one opinion to another, sometimes leaving all the previous behind. After that piece, I have watched different dance performances which introduced me to facts of many different options and tools choreographers use for making a piece. Acting, expressing emotions, interactions with public, engaging the public in an on-going performance, eating, speaking, singing, talking, using everyday's things used on stage in sometimes unusual ways were added to the "basket" of my perception of contemporary dance.

Next change of my understanding of performing dance is accepting the possibility of improvisation on stage. Having an option to decide on stage, answering to the task meanwhile performing was completely unknown to me. I have accepted improvisation as a tool to find material, but in my head it was followed by fixing the same material from the improvisation tasks. After some time, I got to love the idea that piece with improvisation changes every time it is played, giving all dancers the opportunity to effect the performance in every moment. Deciding instantly, choosing the moves as the dancer feels in the moment gives freedom and makes a dancer more involved in every second of the piece. The excitement of not exactly knowing how the dancers will react, how they will do the given task and what moves they will

use, all give excitement also inside the performance, not only to the audience, putting dancers in unstable position so they need to involve themselves in the piece and react while staying in the character of the piece.

Growing up psychically and emotionally, engaging professionally and living a life of a dancer brought modifications and changes in my understanding, learning and opinion about contemporary dance and dancers. After Hodworks' pieces, few guest- performances brought me back to my prior understandings and all the stages of views on contemporary dance. Having many options for making a contemporary dance piece gave me a bigger picture of how to perceive contemporary dance, how it occurs and what it represents. A dancer can use everything he/she knows, wants and believes in. There are no standards, there are just "trends". A dancer/choreographer can follow them, make new ones, or stick with the old ones.

Difference in Understanding

As an individual, with different experiences and thoughts, with minds functioning in different ways, each dancer has his/her own way of learning and understanding the knowledge that is provided in a field of contemporary dance. Depending on previous education, familiarity with the subject, system of accepting new things can change ability to acknowledge and understand a particular topic, it can develop or be an obstacle for a person in a phase of studying. Only experience can generate much faster quantity of understanding, and receiving the information. During schooling sometimes understanding comes with a lot of experience, but also depends a lot on a personal psychological development.

When I started doing contemporary dance in high school at the age of 15 in Novi Sad, Serbia, I was living on two locations, in my hometown attending grammar school, and in Novi Sad where ballet school is located. Everyday traveling was confusing for my mind and my body and I could easily forget to bring all the stuff I needed for both of the schools, and could not focus on doing just one thing at the time. As classes started, I was not attending all the dance classes because of the grammar school schedule and travelling. It was very obvious that I could be behind the class, because of the absences, tiredness and many grammar school obligations that were in front of me. However, it did not happen. My visual skills gained during ballet

classes in elementary school helped me to easily remember exercises. I realized that my skills in remembering exercises in very short time gave me a lot of advantage. Even when I was not there all the time, I was the fast-learner when it came to sequence-learning. I always got or made imaginary pattern of exercise work and looked at it as mathematics or logic.

Learning that way, I focused only on the outside aspect of the exercise and being precise gave me no freedom to see inside the movement itself. I could pick up all the details and focus on little things that my professors even did not realize they were doing. It had a good effect on developing the technique in sense of pure movements, but not on essentials, and not on understanding what is the technique based on.

Focused on being more precise, doing clear and pure movements, taught me there is just one way of doing the task: how teacher says, how teacher does. During my high school classes I found improvisation tasks very difficult, as instructions were wide and not understandable for my mathematic brain which was “programmed” for visual learning, repeating given movements without freedom. I was completely turned inwards and did not let myself to do the task because I found it not clear enough. Not knowing what I should do made me insecure and made me vulnerable as I was not sure of the quality of my own movements. My brain was full of thoughts and doubts, which blocked me from moving and dancing and I usually misunderstood the task as I had so many questions without answers.

After high school, I had two choices - to choose a college or to go abroad to be a dancer. Opportunities in Serbia are less wide comparing to other European countries. I chose to apply to Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy (BCDA). When I decided to move to Hungary I believed it will later bring me somewhere else. Being a “nomad” kind of dancer is popular in past few years. Dancers for many reasons travel abroad, take classes, give classes, do performances, learn and teach. It appeared typical to change residences, approach different styles of dance, perform and meet other people as contemporary dance was spreading through the world. There are more and more free-lancers and most of them do not have a permanent place of living. Working in many destinations is typical in these years and almost every dancer has many jobs and has done many performances and courses abroad.

Coming to the academy of contemporary dance at the age of 18, where professors pay more attention to essence and quality than aesthetic of the movement, I got to know that contemporary dance is not only movement but the feeling and usage of particular motion and guidance through dance technique. My fast detail-learning skill was still an advantage in a way I got more time for searching the quality which I missed.

Before coming to Hungary, I used well-known movements in improvisation as well, ballet movements, no freedom, repeating movement by movement with no flow. I knew I should not be so closed and afraid of improvisation, so I tried to watch, be aside and think about movements other classmates use, and slowly I realized it is all about researching movements and possibilities, in your own style and movement. "Nothing is wrong" I used as a mantra for some time as I heard a dancer from Germany said it as an advice for auditions. While in high school I tried to fit in one group of similarity, I realized that individual solutions and decisions are appreciated in improvisation and I accepted that being different is good. In the Academy I learned to use the wideness of the task and possibilities, to use my creativity in creation of the movement in improvisation.

For being a dancer, I thought it is necessary to be strong, stable, and use all the muscles while dancing. Learning Limon technique during high school and academy caused strong change in my attitude towards movement. To use gravity, fall and recovery, suspension, weight [17] properly, I started at the classes in the Academy. I understood the same exercise four years later totally differently. By being exposed to different approaches of learning the movement, feeling and motion it gives, I finally understood why and when to use tools of Limon technique. Also, using principles of the technique gave me so much freedom in the movements which I could not have only by copying the movement.

Freedom inside the technique gives liberty for your own experience and style, decisions within the movement. Within the frames of a technique, choices are various and a dancer can apply any of them or make his/her own. Giving a personal note makes the dance more effective and joyful. When I started to dance contemporary dance I was thinking that a dancer is a tool, and must be prepared for any direction and task: how to be, what to be. He/she is to be shown how to do movements, how choreographer wants it to look like and what the dance represents. After two years of studying in Budapest I accepted that dancer should offer what he/she is, what he/she likes and how he/she does. Dancer should have his/her own style which a choreographer

can use, modify and adapt to his/her needs to make a contemporary piece. I learned that by watching performances, talking to professors, to experienced and unexperienced dancers who had their own style of moving and used them in different ways cooperating with different choreographers.

Finding your own style of dancing has a lot to do with personal growth and changes with time and experience. Maturity of the movement goes along with accepting yourself, your needs, your thinking and opinions. I started doing contemporary dance in age of changing and finding my ways, my personality. I listened to the professors and accepted their ways of thinking and doing things as they were my own. I always wanted somebody to explain me how I should work and learn. With growing up and experiencing things I developed my personality and applied it to dance. I stopped accepting things I do not find comfortable and useful for my body. I started to make my own choices and accepted that not all styles of contemporary dance are for me. Some techniques I enjoy, in some not. I applied all personal beliefs, values, standards and opinions to dance in years of studying at BCDA. It formed my dance, and it formed my personality as I find these two connected. Personality gives the note and sense to the dance. I started to adapt the movements that I learn for myself and to use it to express myself. I realized that my dance changes as my personality changes. During the period when I was more stable and knew what I want, my dance was reflecting my state. During the period when I was confused, insecure and searching for myself in the beginning of studying abroad, it showed in my dance, character and motion as well.

In early years of dancing in high school, I wanted to be a good student. I did what was asked from me, accepted every suggestion and direction teachers gave me. I had no personal moves and no character on my own, only pure technique or character for the role I was chosen to have. That made me doing only what other people think I am and I need.

Personally, I think contemporary dance is expressing yourself, your believes, your problems, feelings, thoughts using movement. Expressing what other people think you are is not needed in contemporary dance, and it can lead you to a wrong approach. As I came to BCDA I was still trying to figure out what I am and what I want to be. Finding myself in a movement was long-term work for me. I went through phases when I did not like anyone and anything, or when I liked everything and everyone.

My understanding of contemporary dance, what it includes and how it is performed had changed according to my personal experience, professional experience, beliefs and it developed through forming my personality.

Difference in understanding what it represents and approaches that I have to contemporary dance developed and changed more in BCDA than in high school. Coming to BCDA meant speaking in a non-native language, using English in everyday conversations and learning in English. Using English words for understanding and explaining contemporary dance was easier and more clarified, as Serbian language has no such words and 'muscle tension', 'flesh', 'spiral', 'fall and recovery' in usage in the dance field. Changing dance habits, explanations of movements, different understanding and different language were the beginnings of learning how many topics and spheres contemporary dance can consist of.

Attending academy classes in the age of 18-22 has a lot to do with forming my personality and deciding who am I and what are my needs. That affected my approach to learning dance. Influence the teachers had in high school on my dance was replaced with teachers' influence on my own thoughts which then influenced my own dance. Understanding movement qualities and using rules in contemporary techniques came to the practice after 5-6 years of doing contemporary dance.

Changing Priorities

Becoming a dancer does not mean only learning how to dance a particular type of dance/dances. There are more aspects, more than just dance in contemporary world. While learning it, I got to know more and more things and approaches to dance and those have been changing my way of learning it. Knowing and listening to your body, developing technical abilities, knowing how to use your body to the maximum without hurting yourself, using creative approach, trusting your body, etc. Among many other things, those are some to learn in order not to be a mirror of someone else, but a person in contemporary dance world.

In the beginning of replacing modern ballet and jazz knowledge with beginnings of contemporary dance, I was mostly based on aesthetics. Trying to be the best I can was based

on looks. Learning different shapes and movements was my first goal - to get familiar with it and to be able to use it freely.

Lifting the leg higher and copying the details among the aesthetical skills were my priority in learning dance. Being fast, having higher jumps and higher legs compared to the other students in the class was more important than the essentials and understanding, because at that time I could not understand there is more behind the movement. Trying to look like and do as the professors do was my goal during the first two years of learning contemporary dance. Mirror was my best friend and I used it as much as possible to see the difference between the professor, other students and myself moving.

The Ballet school in Novi Sad had one contemporary teacher for each group. I had been seen as a “clever student” because of the ability to copy small details. Looking at the whole dance and seeing small details as movement in the fingers, shoulders or knee and remembering it when I was dancing, made it easier for me to see what are the differences between the dancers I was surrounded with.

After changing the professor, mirror was not allowed in the studios. Not being able to look at myself during classes, made me concentrated on using the whole body while doing exercises, being strong and keeping all the muscles active.

In the third year of high school, after being asked to perform as a substitute for the main role in a piece, I started to concentrate more on joy of dancing instead of paying so much attention to technique. My priority then changed to trying to be more free and enjoy dancing in every class.

Giving in emotions in dance led me to a wish to be a professional dancer as I realized that is the way to express yourself. Fourth year of doing contemporary dance was devoted to teaching myself to listen to inner feelings and emotions, and to act and dance as I feel in particular moment.

After coming to BCDA, these feelings transferred to be the essentials of the dance. The looks and the aesthetics priority changed to body feelings, and learning from where the movement starts.

After one year at the academy, getting to know what is the use of a particular technique and why is it important, became the main point in learning. Acknowledging what are the main points in particular technique and trying to lean on those points became the skeleton of my dance classes. Aesthetics were not any more important, and I focused on body feelings and momentums that drive the movement.

At the finish of my studies, my priority now is to find the balance between all those beliefs and approaches to dance, from aesthetics to philosophy. At last, I realized the magnitude and teh range of options contemporary dance gives, and the importance of being up-to date with all slight or monumental changes and developments. Also, I accept the ability to try and invent new things, and all the freedom this particular dance gives. It gives different possibilities and requires courage for try-outs and new inventions. At last, understanding the word contemporary as presenting expression “up-to-date” and “present”, the present is constantly changing, so contemporary fashion is always adding different approaches and understandings, to inner and outer contemporary dancer’s world. Therefore, my understanding continues to change and my dancing as well.

CONCLUSION

Doing research on this subject during the school year, I have heard and observed experiences of my fellow colleagues and my teachers. As I went deeper into the subject, it showed that there are no universal paths to understanding contemporary dance. The ability to be involved into this wide and ever changing field depends on psychological maturity and willingness to commit oneself to a life of a dancer. Every learning process is individual and depends on experience, thoughts and beliefs.

Finding way to express yourself as a child does, while being natural and creative as they are in their first years, might guide you to find your own approach to contemporary dance. In that way, you can discover what you need and like in contemporary dance.

Individual approaches can be different and depend on personal life experience, background and amount of previous dance training and knowledge. Regarding to the aspects discussed in this research, understanding and learning contemporary dance is influenced by person's life, interests and intelligence. Willingness to change, accept, adapt and grow makes the progress noticeable.

In early years, as children, we perform some aspects of contemporary dance – we are intuitive, free and curious. Somehow, the openness and simplicity sometimes gets lost. Later, using our psychological abilities, knowledge, body intelligence and exploration we try to find and gain qualities we need to express ourselves.

Based on the attitudes, aspects and views that are developed and encouraged during my schooling, following the understanding and thoughts about contemporary dance within these two institutions, two countries and cultures; age, considering number of years, is not crucial for learning and understanding contemporary dance. That is related mainly to age as psychological maturity of a person. Being a contemporary dancer, beside appropriate technique level, creativity, body awareness, physical strength, includes broadmindedness, openness, ability to adapt, philosophical approach to connect a person, the society and the world.

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APPENDIX

Ballet School, Novi Sad - Curriculum

Contemporary dance

Subjects	YEAR (number of classes)								Total
	First		Second		Third		Fourth		
	Per Week	Per Year	Per Week	Per Year	Per Week	Per Year	Per Week	Per Year	
Contemporary dance-major	10	350	10	350	10	350	10	320	1370
Contemporary dance repertoire	2	70	2	70	4	140	4	128	408
Classical ballet	8	280	8	280	6	210	6	192	962
Folk dance			2	70					70
Modern pas de deux					2	70	2	64	134
Dances of XX century	2	70							70
Dance history					2	70	2	64	134
Acting					2	70	2	64	134
Serbian language	3	105	3	105	3	105	3	96	411
French	2	70	2	70	2	70	2	64	274
Foreign language	2	70	2	70	2	70	2	64	274
History	2	70	2	70	1	35	1	32	207
Biology	2	70							70
Informatics	2	70	2	70	2	70	2	64	274
Sociology			2	70					70
Psychology					2	70			70
Philosophy							2	64	64
Civics education/Religion	1	35	1	35	1	35	1	32	137

Budapest Contemporary Dance Academy - Curriculum

BCDA 3 (or 4) YEAR BA CURRICULUM / AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY PROGRAM	
EVERYDAY INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE	30 minute morning warm up
	90 minute early afternoon individual practice
	rehearsals of student works and/or research
REGULAR DANCE TECHNIQUE	Contemporary dance
	Contact
	R&D - folk dance based Rhythm & Dance
	Classical Ballet
WORKSHOPS	Modern Dance Techniques
	Choreographic workshops
	Dance workshops with active professionals
	Chi Kong, Tai Chi, Yoga
	Climbing
	Diving
	Parkour
	Acrobatics
	Voice training
	Lighting design
	Stage craft
	Dance for camera
	Dance video making
REGULAR CREATIVE PROCESS CLASSES	Composition
	Repertoire
	Improvisation
RESEARCH	Practical research of creative methods, dance languages
	Writing, presenting, and defending essays and thesis
PERFORMANCE	Bimonthly student's studio performances
	Annual theatrical school performances
	Open air and site specific performances
INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC	Weekly classes and daily practice of selected instrument
	Students' concerts twice a year

STRATEGIES, METHODS	Learning
	Creative processes
	Production processing
	Career building
	Strategic planning
	Short, middle and long term time management
	Task organization
	Teachers', mentors' and self-evaluation
	PR and marketing skills
	Budget making
	Fund raising
	Networking strategies
REFLECTIV PROCESSES	Dance diary writing
	Discussion, criticism, feedback practice
	Creative writing
THEORY	Anatomy
	Dance History and Applied Aesthetics, Criticism
	Theory and History of Music and Singing
	History and Present of Arts
	Psychology
SUPPORT TO STUDENTS	Health advice
	Medical care
	Mentor, tutor and buddy system
	Mental hygiene
POST STUDY ACTIVITIES	Planning of individual creative and foreign study plans
	School sponsored individual study and research program
	Open professional training and studio space program
	Annual ex- student meetings