MECHANISM AND VIRTUOSITY: THE CORVINO APPROACH—VIRTUAL AND ACTUAL— IN THE DANCER'S ART

Thesis

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THE DANCER

I started training late in classical European ballet. I was almost 16. I had studied classical West African ballet in my hometown of San Francisco at Glide Memorial Church[1], because it was free, wonderful and accessible and since there were musicians and dancers in the local parks, I always had 'class' to attend. I studied creative dance and theater but hadn't come from economic comfort so was unaware of opportunity for further study. I joined the dance club at Mission High School and received a scholarship to study ballet and modern dance at Carlos Carvajal's *Dance Spectrum*. Coincidence dictated I stand at the barre with Natalia Markova. My feet barely pointed and were slow to function. Her feet were like Cuisinart blades. Standing behind her, immersed in the philosophical brilliance one regularly finds in teenagers, I heard a voice in my head saying,

> Every time she breathes out *you* are breathing air that was inside her body.
> It stands to reason that what is in her becomes inside you and therefore, all
> is well and your feet will learn what her feet know

I've never forgotten this. Instead of seeing the impossible, I managed to alchemize what definitively appeared impossible into a tool, a device really, that transformed reality. What I want to talk about here is how reality is suspended in the midst of the work, and in the suspension it transforms, wiggles back on itself, related in some way or another to what an event might be. My feet actually *did* become capable and beautiful in their own way. (As The New York Times said about me, "her deft hands and feet."[2]). This is the transfiguration of feet, or body; in time. As a 16 year old, ballet became a way to learn how to dance and it was unlike any other technique I had encountered. It became important for me to understand so I read a good deal on how it had developed out of

[1] *Glide Memorial Church* on Ellis and Taylor in San Francisco was and still is a haven.
[2] Jennifer Dunning, *The New York Times, 1995*. My work *Hunger and Visits,* performed at DIA was favorably reviewed.

myriad folk dances into the Western nomenclature of what we accept as pre-classic forms of 18th century France; into the Italian, French, Russian and English Schools of Classical Ballet; and finally the American Schools. *The Classic Ballet*[3] became my lexicon and closest ally. The book disappeared, along with my future as a dancer, until I disconnected with my unfortunate family[4] and connected again to dancing. I went to New York, auditioned and with enormous good fortune, spent four years at Juilliard; spent considerable more time in various studios and for some reason spent much of the duration of my ballet class-taking life in a state of rote behavior. It was all so difficult and beautiful (and beautifully difficult), that I simply went to class and did my best.

It wasn't until 2013, when, after 7 years of much more acting than dancing, that I began to stumble back into ballet class. Since it was new again and I was considerably older, I read books. I read biographies, autobiographies, I read technical books. I read the books I had read when I was 16 and my dancing world looked like magical realism. I returned to my teachers, but it wasn't until I went to Ernesta Corvino's ballet class that I realized I had found a clear teaching method that allowed me to physically and mentally understand *how* to dance. I hadn't been to a Corvino class in well more than a decade. Ernesta teaches the way her father taught, with the same integrity and methodology. I discovered a key to why the Corvino Approach is unusual: the Corvinos are and were brilliant teachers: brilliant, generous, stable, humble and have committed their lives to being the best they can be in their work. But the epiphany I had as to why I learned so much in a Corvino class had to do not only with the quality of the teaching. There is a calm clarity to the giving of information; there is the attitude of wholesome acceptance and optimism the Corvinos impart; and then there is the time in between the exercises that is unusual for ballet class. I accidentally coined it

[3] *The Classic Ballet* by Muriel Stuart and Lincoln Kirsten; illustrations by Carlus Dyer.

[4] My mother became involved with Synanon, a 'utopian' community, later listed as one of the world's dangerous cults.

the *interstitial structure* while writing about it. Mills College Dance faculty Ann Murphy, who took class with the Corvinos on occasion and trained at Margaret Craske's school in New York, said to me,

> He injected an interior interlude into what is a social experience, and
> this defied the militarized character of traditional ballet training. Corvino made his class
> a laboratory of a group of individuals—a highly modern experience within a classical frame.
> He also treated each dancer as an artist in charge of her tool. Meanwhile, he was passing on
> Cecchetti's[5] astonishing pedagogy. As a training method it requires no attachment to an
> Ideology of ballet or modern—it's training designed to be scientifically accurate
> And classical—adhering to the determinants of physics.[6]

So there I was, in my realization that I am always a dancer no matter how old I grow, my desire to continue to study, to earn an MFA in dance to add to my BFA in dance, to continue with regular ballet classes, even to get back on pointe: to recover what I had given up. In this epiphany I wanted to understand ballet pedagogy and so, the reading and thinking. The more I read and thought, the more I danced, the more I came back to Vaganova's and Karsavina's influence on ballet pedagogy.[7] I realized that, of all my teachers, it was Alfredo Corvino who held the healthiest relationship to ballet in that his approach to teaching and dancing was firmly held in clear limits; in a responsible relationship to physics and simultaneously to the dancer as a human being. The dancer, thence, is in relationship to forms that function both artistically and mechanically—the repetition of ballet exercises within natural, limited forms resulting in the effective technique of classical dance that can then be used for modern dance, African dance, or any kind of dance that I dance.

We dancers are challenged to be *in the physical moment,* and therefore, not in our *heads*. But we intrinsically understand the importance of analysis and intellectual participation. Alfredo Corvino managed to develop a way of teaching that, perhaps partly because of his humility, partly because of

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[5] Enrico Cecchetti, 1850-1928.

[6] Ann Murphy, Assistant Professor of Dance, Mills College.

[7] Agrippina Vaganova: 1879-1951, Imperial School of Ballet/Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet, Russia/The Soviet Union. Tamara Karsavina, also out of The Imperial School of Ballet 1885 - 1978; helped develop what is now the English style of ballet.

his curiosity, consistently referred to understandable systems of human function. This was evident in his language, his timing, and, of course, in the direction and flow of the exercises. I became a strong and healthy dancer not only because of Alfredo Corvino; I studied with many ballet and modern dance teachers over the, so far, 40 years of my life in dance. But in returning to dancing in my 50's, after assuming I was finished in my late 40's, I came to a modest place in receiving training. I wanted to write on the way that I, a simple human being, became a technical artist without losing touch with the basic tenets of my original self, including my original body's impulses. I was born as a natural form that danced (even in the water of my mother) in an original way and as I grew, I wanted to acquire artistic devices and mechanical principles that would allow me appearances of flight and other seemingly magical transformations while having a human body in all its supposed limitations. I was not born a bird and yet I learned about flight and how to experience flight. Most importantly, I learned how to create the appearance of flight.

Now, I'm going to tell you a brief story:

I found a letter behind a chair where my mother spent the last moments of her life. The letter was from Mills College. It's dated sometime in summer of 1974 and asks that my mother send a hundred dollars so secure my residence and that everything else is taken care of through various awards and grants. I came to Mills 40 years later as a first year graduate student. What would have happened if she had sent the hundred bucks? How is time involved? How is it that a recovery of this magnitude has occurred? What was I learning during the interval? In my personal story, Mills is suspended in time, hanging in abstraction or even disembodiment. Mills itself, of course, existed just fine without 17-year-old me in 1974. It didn't make a hair of difference to Mills unless we are willing to think in terms of chaos theory and the impact of butterfly wings. As far as linear mathematics is

concerned, no one is concerned. But if I think in terms of what Manuel DeLanda calls "machinic phylum" it is another matter. He writes,

> non linear flows of matter and energy - a condition that applies as much to the beating of hearts as to earthquakes, flames and clouds, tsunamis and amoebas. And it is in this respect that I introduce the term "machinic phylum" to designate a single phylogenetic line cutting through *all* matter, "living" or "nonliving," a single source of spontaneous order for all reality.[8]

What's interesting is the suspension of time and place where one lands again to continue a pattern. Where is that in the scheme of things? I love that classical mathematicians say that linear equations are docile:

> So docile are linear equations that classical mathematicians were willing to compromise their physics to get them. Linearity is a trap. The behavior of linear equations ...is far from typical (in nature). But if you decide that only linear equations are worth thinking about, self-censorship sets in.[9]

The suspension: a kind of earthquake/tsunami or other natural disaster that uprooted my trajectory and instead of laying the land of my aspirations flat, suspended it until which time it could continue. It seems as if it is recovery, seems as if the victim of disaster has recovered but what is more truthful is that there has been a suspension and that the suspension, allows for the delineation and likewise creativity of all reality including what is virtual reality. One might ask if Time is a disembodied version of Moment.

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[8] Manuel DeLanda's article *Nonorganic Life,* 1992 in the NY zine, *ZONE.*

[9] Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice?,*

If a star were confined into a tomb,

Her captive flames must needs burn there;

But when the hand that locked her up, gives room,

She'll shine through all the sphere.[10]

(2)

THE MAESTRO

In his 50 years of teaching, Alfredo Corvino developed a method of teaching ballet that is unlike all other ballet taught. Through his interest in the individual as dancer/person combined with his curiosity and interest in all mechanical things (he was a lover of cars and an amateur car mechanic), he discovered a way to interject a laboratory of analysis into the structured pattern of ballet class as it had been handed down through generations. He was most careful about the way he taught: he remained specific to one principle at a time without losing the forward physical and artistic momentum of the class (generally referred to in the vernacular of dance as *pace)*. The idea was to allow the individual dancer to be a conscious, creative and analytical participant in the process of training and in the act of dancing. The general protocol was the familiar one of delivering exercises at *barre* and in *center* performed by the students, which is the custom in ballet classes. But instead of going directly to the next exercise, Corvino would pursue a principle from the preceding sequence

[10] Henry Vaughan, 1621-1695, Wales. The 8th stanza from *Beyond The Veil*. In 1990, when my first book of poems, *The Weight of a Place,* was published I used this small part of Vaughan's poem for the overleaf.

and then ask the dancers to explore it in the interval between exercises. Over time he developed this use of the *interstitial structure* as an experimental zone and created a radically new approach to the structure of ballet class. The laboratory approach, alone, was a vital addition to the form. And it led to a very specific way of using time in class, which even more fundamentally altered the character of ballet class. Class exercises were concisely articulated before they were performed and then in the in-between time, the principle was reiterated and time given to its exploration, a kind of tell/perform/retell function. This solved the age-old dilemma of the need for more time to unravel problem spots without overwhelming students or destroying the flow of class. If, as often happens in ballet classes, a teacher presents an exercise with its musical and physical requirements, and then before the exercise is executed by the dancers, the teacher expounds upon its principles, the dancers are at a disadvantage: they have heard and seen the exercise and instead of being allowed to physically execute that exercise they are asked to intellectually understand it and *then* be physical. The body is the dancer's instrument and is ready to do the exercise upon seeing it. Dancers must be allowed to physically function if they are to become dancers. That is why ballet class should never be lecture before action. Action first and then reiteration of the principles therein, otherwise we lose the kinesthetic and musical relationship of the exercise, as well as the musical structure of ballet class. To ask dancers to analyze prior to action is a disadvantage for the dancer and exists only in a class where the teacher has forgotten about basic dancing needs. A good teacher gives snippets of analysis and allows the students to dissect at their level and pace without interrupting the entire class or its forward direction as "class". *musical structure of class, quality of class flow; time for the creation of depth in personal discovery of detail.* The Corvino Approach is grounded in this protocol. Explanation and details of principles is reserved for the intervals. This brilliant insight gives dancers agency to work

on specific principles both from within the sequence, where the musicality demands completion within a set time frame and therefore precludes analytical dissection, and outside the sequence's time frame before the next exercise or sequence. This is not to say that there is no opportunity for insight while inside a demanding barre exercise. It is that Corvino's development of this *in-between* time allows an individual dance student private and simultaneous public (hence practice for performance), exploratory time—a different kind of time: intervals of time in which to abstract, conceptualize and metabolize specific principles at the individual dancer's own pace and concentration, which brings the longed-for transformation to a more immediate epiphany. It allows for a sudden realization that the heel of the foot is the instigator of tendue (to the front and side) and not only facilitates but stabilizes rotation the way a doorknob is the tool by which a door is opened even though the door can also open because it has a hinge. The heel moves and rotation succeeds. Or the discovery that *pique turns* on a diagonal begin *en face* to the diagonal not *en face* to the front of the room and so are partially completed before the turn begins, and therefore need considerably less force. The personal *Aha* moment is experienced and realized, which is transposed back into the principle and even more important and satisfying, into the phrase of dance. This ingenious use of otherwise overlooked time within class becomes an aspect of how the dancer can make herself into an instrument that has within its completed design technically reliable function. But something more vital happens: this use of hidden time in class allows for an experience that asks the students to find solutions in themselves and thus supports the student to retain the distinct aspect of her individual and original self. Through the interstitial structure, the dancer's agency endorses the idiosyncrasy of the personality and physical self, with the measurements and proportions of the dancing body not distorted into someone's idea of an ideal but engaged as a mirror to reflect back the actual moment as well as the

ideal located in the dancer's potential. This is her future simultaneously with the exact present moment as she sees it in the mirror in front of her. Having time to access oneself inside a world of demanding time structures is something Corvino stumbled upon. Time is part of the dancer's art the way it is part of the musician's art. Time is measured and unmeasured, abstracted and phrased, nuanced, lost, materialized, reasonable, mysterious, unfair, reliable, quixotic, and miraculous. He valued the individual and believed that the dancer's art was attainable by anyone coming to class and trying repeatedly. "I believe it was just something that evolved," explained his daughter Ernesta Corvino.

> He was always a thoughtful dancer/person, inquisitive about the how and why of everything, not just dance but of course including dance. He attracted like-minded people/dancers ….intelligent dancers (especially modern-dancers) were very attracted to this intelligent way of working...his intrinsic intelligence and respect for the work combined with his respect for the individual dancer and his non-judgmental attitude about what they might achieve...Well...that's what made every class, whether it was for advanced professionals or complete beginners, a master class!

The mechanics of building an instrument is what Alfredo Corvino took dancers through to methodically metabolise, build, create, manifest—what would become an artist's instrument: one turn, one switch, one level, one bit at a time, adding up to the mechanical development that over time becomes the thing (the self) to be relied on to produce a tone, not a general color, to sound a pitch, not an overall song. This turn, that balance, a clear awareness in the dancer's body of architecture, physics, form— "It's not that this is how I want you to do it," he said. "It's that this is how it is." The foot is actually at the end of the leg and, in vertical stance, is the first part of the self to deal with the floor, both to leave it and to return to it. This is not arguable as long as we are speaking of clear physical reality. Likewise, the dancer's musicality develops from the first exercise at the barre and continues throughout her dancing life. The developing dancer is the developing artist

and the developing human being. Philosopher Susanne Langer writes, *direct awareness, emotion, vitality, personal identity - life lived and felt, the matrix of mentality.*[11] What this means to me is that as things (people, plants, seashells, dancers…) grow, they develop outwardly. Costa Vavagiakis says that there are no concave lines in exterior anatomy.[12] The shape of anything is the result of lines of convexities; there are no holes. We are seduced by the pull of concavity but reality is that every *space* of the shape is the result of lines of convexities. This principle works in drawing so that the lines develop outwardly to govern the perception (and the reality) of the concavity so that there is the development of the space via the developing growth through lines that construct the space and shape. The growing and developing of the dancer is the result of the physical reality of developing tissue but is also the curving convexities of awareness that seek outward expression, overwrapping in creative matrix, just like the attaching ligaments to the exterior shapes of joints.

For the purposes of classical ballet, there are five extremities in the human body: the two legs with their feet; the two arms with their hands; the head. Each of the five extremities has the capacity to direct the body.[13] The head directs up if one is vertical and lengthens the entire body, which makes it immensely lighter and more easeful. The feet and hands with their arms and legs lead in myriad directions. Dancers are always architecturally related to space and, like a pair of proverbial cats, are unmatched in their relationship to geometric design. Theologian Albert Barnes, according to Susanne Langer, suggests that "our mental orientation in space, which gives freedom and certainty to our perceptual powers and is the unconscious pivot of our mental life, is what lends significance to pure geometric design."[14] *The square of space that the dancer stands in and that square's*

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[11] Susanne K. Langer's *Problems of Art, The Art Symbol and the Symbol in Art.*

[12] Costa Vavagiakis, visual artist and drawing teacher, The Art Student's League of New York. This is the result of letters back and forth and a phone interview.

[13] Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen speaks of the inclusion of the tail, making the 5 points, 6 points.

[14] Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art.*

relationship to the architectural space around it can be actual or virtual, meaning that a dancer can be in a square room or an odd shaped empty parking lot and can still find angles and edges that the square of her own body's geometric periphery can relate to. It helps a good deal to square off to the to the virtual front of the space; it helps maintain the shape and helps in balance. Shape and Balance are two important principles in dance—in all dance that I know of.

Dancers come to ballet class with either a full day of dancing ahead of them, which that class is preparation for or following a day of rehearsals, classes or whatever auxiliary gig a dancer might have. The point is to keep the instrument tuned for use. *Use* can be for the following day or the entire life of the dancer. "Class today is your warm up for tomorrow"[15] I once heard him say. I asked him about it and he chuckled and said, "One day it will make sense." Corvino often talked in puzzles. He was committed to the process of learning as an experience of individual realization and not the result of over-explanation by the teacher. He used language sparingly with short sentences that ended clearly without further exposition. He was soft spoken and spoke of mechanics and principles in an optimistic way that made you feel the cheer of existence. He never patronized, he never mocked. He left you to your discoveries and understood that the confusion would clear with the clarity of repetition through his demonstrations and our subsequent actions. He used props to great advantage: a baton or even a broomstick could be used to visually reference line in developé by lining up the stick at the hip against the thigh as the leg extends. It becomes visibly clear that the foot must go higher than the knee because the stick does not suddenly break in half or drop down, the line of the stick continues. The solution is not to insist the leg be high but to lift the knee only as

[15] From my memory, studying with Alfredo Corvino at The Juilliard School, sometime between September, 1981 and May, 1985.

high as can be supported by the form. The extension develops steadily as a consequence, and the knee is at considerably less risk of hyperextension as a result.

Class in the Corvino tradition begins with a preliminary stance at the barre in first position. The legs naturally *rotate* outward in their cylinders; the shoulders do the same. The dancer *collects* the energy into the center of the body. *Lengthening* begins from the head. "Why not rise from the head?" is what Ernesta Corvino might say. The tips of the fingers are placed on the tops of the shoulders. Weight is moved to the balls of the feet. The head lengthens up further and from that length and placement the body rises to a low ½ or ¼ inch relevé. The dancer might slightly bounce from the heels (in their friendship to gravity) and then lengthen the heels down into first position. The legs lengthen upward through the knees into the powerful legs, into the center. Rotating is a natural occurrence needing no effort: the legs and arms naturally rotate in their sockets; it is how the limbs are designed. But the rotation needed in dancing is rotation with a tension needed for function. Added then is the principle of collecting (like gathering or centering, a kind of pulling together of the back muscles into the torso for support), which leads to lengthening. Since the head is at the top of the body (and we are assuming a vertical stance here), and will heavily weigh us down if not challenged otherwise, it then stands to reason to lengthen from the head. The dancer places the left hand forward (elbow in front of shoulder; hand in front of elbow) on the barre. The heel of the right hand (the fleshy part at the thumb) directs the right arm into second position. That is the beginning of a ballet class taught in the Corvino Approach. It's a way of readying the body for barre that brings a moment of realization to the three important principles that will be used throughout barre, center and the day and life of dancing: *rotating, collecting, lengthening:* in a circle of continuity. In Ernesta's words:

Dad sometimes expressed standing in first was like plugging into an electric

> socket. Not quite as poetic as the lit candle, but equally as energizing. He always used to say that energy begets energy. His belief was that if you showed up, put your hand on the barre, and proceeded to do the work, you would overcome any tiredness and be energized[16]

There is endless relationship to gesture (which can mean all sorts of things to all sorts of dancers including the possibility of the line of the hand connecting to a star in space: the relationship of gesture to creation ~ cosmogony. And there are eyes in the head that see and what we are dealing with here is the relationship to inner ear, to balance and of *seeing* to dancing. We look this way and that because we are seeing aspects of the space that support existence in space. Once the dancer owns relationship of seeing the room, theater or space, herself in the mirror, her imagined world she is dancing within, she is present fully in dancing. The glazed-over unwillingness to see is not helpful at all, no matter that it can be an introspective tool or even style. The dancer's friend and tool is the mirror, which reflects back reality; reflects back imagination, potential, the space she is in now, where she will be one day, who sees her now, who might be seeing her; the future of her virtuosity that she has yet to see. The mirror is the virtual image of her present experience in that it is image of self and not self; the mirror is the tool used to create the self into the dancer. The dancer is then the material in the dancing AND the dancer. Susanne Langer says, artists

> ...do not create the materials of the dance—neither their own bodies, nor the the cloth that drapes them, nor the floor, nor any of the ambient space, light, musical tone, the forces of gravity, nor any other physical provisions; all these things they *use*, to create something over and above what is physically there: the dance[17]

But I must disagree on the point of creating their own bodies, if, by creating, we mean transforming them into vehicles of dance. Dancers, like actors, create their instruments. With mirrors, teachers, books and good floors, dancers then RE?create themselves. Somehow, Corvino hooked into this

[16] The result of several notes back and forth between Ernesta Corvino and me during the autumn of 2015.
[17] Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art, The Dynamic Image.*

idea when he discovered the in-between time to work on principles allowing and supporting individual time to work. None of us is perfectly proportioned. Corvino's attention to the specificity of each body, each dancer, and that dancer's experience was a means to underscore how vital it is to accept what (and who) we actually are while we are building and creating ourselves into these protean beings called dancers.

The Corvino Approach to teaching ballet is committed to an absence of mannerism, which is implicit in classicism. Arabesque, for example, is not meant to be the shape of the letter *L*. If arabesque is in the shape of the letter L, it is an example of a counter-classical arabesque because it is going against principles of harmony and balance. Arabesque is a curve. In classical ballet, the mechanics are such that the heel of the foot lifts up and back while the torso lengthens up and forward, the base of both shoulder blades maintaining the horizontal plane. The space that was in front of the dancer is now occupied by the dancer. In the classical arabesque the dancer's head, neck and torso—the entire length of the spine—lengthens and shifts forward in a curve to balance the lengthened line of the extended leg in a long, continuous curve from the toe to the fingers.

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THE DANCER'S ART

Dancing for the stage—concert dance—is a visual art and as such is involved in appearances. The composer and theorist Arnold Schoenberg wrote,

> The material of music is the tone; what it affects first, the ear. The sensory perception releases associations and connects tone, ear, and the world of feeling. On the cooperation of these three factors depends everything in music that is felt to be art[18]

[18] Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony.*

The material of dance is the line, what it affects first, the eye; the rest of Schoenberg's quote can be equally applied to the art of dance by replacing *ear* with *eye*. The subsequent *world of feeling* is substantiated for the dancer and for those who experience dance by watching it. We see or perceive. Because we see, we feel and sense. We see and perceive what we sense we see and what we seem to see, what we expect to see, what we assume we have seen, are seeing. And since dance as a form for performance is a visual art, as the dancer gains technical virtuosity, line is actual and visual proof, is the seen and perceived reality of the dancer's achievement. Good balance, that valued principle of the dance art, is supported by line. Line continues, holds energy and connects the limbs in space to the particular shape. If line is static then it isn't a danced line. Line moves, nor is balance static. Line continues. The line continues until it becomes the next form or shape, moving through forms inside their fulfillment of natural principles. Mechanics are the *how to* of it all. Movement seems stable but that is actually achieved by continuing in a direction. We actually take aim. This is the finding of the shape. It is imagined first and then actualized. It all happens very quickly when it functions well; we know what we are going for.

Balance is equipoise, the equal balance of weight, of forces that counter each other. Balance keeps going, travels from an original point to another point through shapes. Direction, employed as a principle in dance, actually exhibit characteristics of liveness and becomes more alive during its deployment due to the laws of motion. The goal of direction is to arrive. Where? There, via a mental image and physical execution the dancer intends. In classical ballet, shapes and steps are encased—and become one—with principles of movement that exist within mechanical truths that directly relate to laws of motion that are then expressed through *rotating*, *lengthening, balancing, turning, impulse, torque, pivoting, etc* . Classical ballet and its pedagogical orientation organizes itself around these

fundamental laws that maintain relationship to organic properties that dancers, having bodies, relate to directly. The truth is, the building of any instrument relates to principles in the organic world that enable the built instrument to function. If it is badly built it won't do what it is meant to do or will do it with so much effort that what it should be capable of is stifled or impeded. It will also falter sooner than it needs to. A dancer in training is a living being with a full dancing life in front of them, and that dancing life should have as much longevity as the gods allow.

Intelligent dancers go to a good daily ballet class for harmonizing symmetry and strengthening, because it feels good to the instrument and supports what is required of the instrument in rehearsal. They study classical ballet because it's a smart choice to collect and organize one's body before giving it over to the rehearsal room and the artistic demands of a choreographer. Choreographers are not by nature interested in a rehearsal room full of symmetry and good health; they've got other fish to fry. It's the dancer's responsibility to preserve health and sustenance of the instrument and the teacher's responsibility to help in the building of that awareness. To elaborate further on this, the system of a ballet class that adheres to classical principles trains the dancer not only in dancing but in the forming of the mind of the dancer that intrinsically understands concepts of meter, rest, balance, breath, as well as classical art-making devices, including the antithetical device that will aid in the willingness to take chances artistically. Choreographers need instruments that can withstand dysfunction; that can withstand alteration. First position at the barre is all about symmetry and balance, art making is another game. Choreographers are making art and involved in the possibility of expression that might-and-actually-does go to all sorts of dangerous places. The body is physically and psychologically challenged through the aesthetic and spiritual world of the choreographer's vision. Art demands willingness, so dancers come into the rehearsal room, willing

and beautifully capable of danger. The requirement to support this, if one is truly aware of one's responsibilities, is a daily dose of the basics—like oatmeal. And like oatmeal, if you add a bit of salt to the simmer, then a touch of brown sugar, cinnamon and maybe if you're lucky, cream, it will surely get the wild day begun.

A dance, any dance, a dance of 4 minutes or a dance from evening til the curtain comes down at midnight, is the result of the construction and composition of materials and devices; the creation or manifestation of not just an alteration of the body toward some shape or other that appears as a dance form but the *feeling* that this moment is removed from the vernacular of effort and has entered the realm of magical possibility. There is something that has occurred with the materials, tools and devices that transcends effort and transcends original source of the dancing body. It exists but it is, in Langer's view, a transformation from the personal or subjective, through symbol into an object that holds meaning— "an apparition of active powers, a *dynamic image."*[19] And as all moments do, it disappears back into a transfigured subjective source of each who experiences it. A drawing is never the thing the drawing is made of. It is always a virtual projection of its subject, made only of materials and devices and pursued in its manifestation as if it might live forever or at least long enough to hold life within itself. In the dancing arts this "forever" might exist for a fleeting moment but what it contains is eternal or at least vast in its range. In watching it, our longings follow the images. As audience, we enter the moment as if we are sharing it. That is one of many reasons why dance is so fulfilling to the watcher. The artist's imagination is an act; is actual. Dancers are not only tools for other artists, they are artists themselves and each dancing moment is the effect of their experiences: their daily barre, their improvisations, their readings and explorations,

[19] Susanne K. Langer's *Problems of Art, The Dynamic Image.*

their love. To arrive at the imagination actualized, to have the capacity to create from endless possibilities, classical training is vital. A classical education strives not for perfection but rather for the achievement of principles in classicism: balance, rotation, relationship, perspective, etc. as part and parcel of reality—great aids in art making. If there's an ideal implicit in classical values then it is derived from a kind of pragmatism that presumes the student can embody classical principles as an individual. Classical style teaches us that limits are valuable and essential. Boundaries are inherent aspects of classical study and enable us to hold form and play within defined structures. Classical study can then better enable us to play in deconstruction. We simply have more tools in the practice of art-making. A ballet of classical steps in combinations (enchainements) is not precluded from being a work of art the way a drawing of a nude figure or still life of half a cantaloupe is not precluded from being a work of art. It exists as support in art making for dance the way life drawing exists as support for (other) visual arts. Studying ballet gets dancers interested in forms in nature that echo laws of principles and devices in art and how those laws function for the dancer: how many turns can occur inside of a particular amount of time within a particular controlled form; how a form retains its shape even when it tilts; how gravity is employed, how it is defied, how the controlling force of gravity is altered, actually or virtually.

(4)

THE DANCER AS PUGILIST

(psst...Alfredo Corvino was a boxer before he was a dancer)

Not all ballet is classical. There's a good deal of ballet that is counter- or anti-classical. It doesn't matter that it might call itself classical: if it pursues distortion of harmonically balancing

principles it is going against principles of nature and is counter to classical ballet's origin. It's still ballet but is no longer rooted in harmonic relationships to organic principles. It's modern ballet, neoclassical ballet and contemporary ballet. It's choreography and it's art. Not all ballet is interested in symmetry or balance. Some ballet is interested in an artist's personal statement through ballet's vocabulary and in the disruption of symmetry and balance. George Balanchine's neoclassical ballet (as the term implies) gave the world a new ballet. Balanchine was directly interested in distortion and trained the dancers toward that end. The result of his commitment is a strong artistic achievement and an invaluable addition to the art of dance. I have no quarrel with Balanchine's tremendous contribution. As a matter of fact, I adore Balanchine's choreography and waited in front of the fountain countless times for altruistic souls to give me an extra ticket freed up by their ill friend who could not accompany them. (I was a Juilliard student and the State Theater was my second home.) I am only here to reflect back the value of what preceded the contemporary and the modern. Let's say that for this argument, I am in a retro-modern stance: *modern* because I live in and cannot get out of it, *retro* because there is a mirror before me (and at my back) reflecting physical beauties that are becoming lost as the modern world I live in encroaches, And *stance* because I am a dancer and one of our imperatives is to *stand on our legs*. In *standing*, I am willing to argue. It is the forward drive (*direction* again) of the argument that holds my interest as well as the discourse. I argue to be contended with in the interest, not of my own opinion but of the subject and the sense I have of its importance to dance, dancers and to art.

Why not a conference on dance methodologies? Why not? We could have a drink and duke it out under the bald sky. Why not vigorously debate? Why not? Isn't it important? Aren't we civilized enough for it? The individual is fine but the group is needed in this effort. Isn't that what

defines civilisation? The willingness to forgo our individual ideas for a commitment to teaching others, not just our own styles but classical, proven craft and technique developed over hundreds of years. We do not want to lose classical forms. Some of us are committed to fighting for this so that those coming up in their training are benefited by forms that have more than the individual teacher's stamp going for them.

There is integrity in the pedagogy of Alfredo Corvino's teaching method that his daughters, Andra Corvino and Ernesta Corvino, continue to impart. The Corvino Approach to teaching ballet is committed to a technique noted for the absence-of-mannerism that is implicit in classicism. Although Alfredo Corvino died in 2005[20], the tradition of the Corvino Approach continues in a weekly schedule of ballet classes in New York City and annual teaching seminars at The Corvino Ballet Center in Norwalk, Connecticut. Andra Corvino and Ernesta Corvino travel the world continuing the legacy of their father's work. Ernesta has taken over the Maestro's role as ballet master for Tanztheater Wuppertal/Pina Bausch in Wuppertal, Germany and is also ballet master for The Limon Company. Until her recent retirement, Andra Corvino was one of the ballet masters at The Juilliard School. Beth Hoge was mentored by Alfredo Corvino and founded Danspace in Oakland, California. Danspace hosts regular workshops in the Corvino approach taught by Ernesta Corvino.

Ernesta Corvino is my mentor.

[20] Alfredo Corvino: 1916, Montevideo, Uruguay - 2005, New York City, New York.

NOTES

1. Glide Memorial Church. Reverend Cecil William presided when I was a child. There were and still are, all kinds of free events, support systems and workshops. A peek at their website will give you a sense of what it was like for me at 14 to dance and sing there. I had no interest in religion and don't remember ever feeling odd about that. I was, as we all were (and are), welcome. My mother often came, with me in attendance, to hear the speakers, including Angela Davis. My mother's kitchen was a hotbed of radical voices. It was a fortunate time in my childhood.

2. Jennifer Dunning, *The New York Times,* March 21st,1995. My work *Hunger and Visits,* at DIA Foundation for the Arts, on Mercer Street, was favorably reviewed.

3. *The Classic Ballet* by Muriel Stuart and Lincoln Kirsten, Illustrations by Carlus Dyer. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1952.

4. My mother became involved with Synanon, a 'utopian' community later listed as one of the world's dangerous cults. My dancing and intellectual life were truncated at 17 when, awarded college scholarships and California scholastic awards, Synanon first subverted my Mills College acceptance in 1974, my second semester at Lone Mountain College in 1975 and proceeded to put me through numerous adversities until my escape (a dramatic word, I know) in October of 1979.

5. Enrico Cecchetti, Ballet master and pedagogue, 1850-1928.

6 Ann Murphy, Professor of Dance, Mills College. My advisor and considerable aid in this paper.

7. Agrippina Vaganova: 1879-1951, Imperial School of Ballet/Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet, Russia/The Soviet Union. Tamara Karsavina, also out of The Imperial School of Ballet 1885 - 1978; helped develop what is now the English style of ballet.

8. Manuel DeLanda's article *Nonorganic Life,* in the NY zine, *ZONE,* edition: *Incorporations,* editors, Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter. 1992. p.138

9. Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice?* p.83. Cited from Manuel DeLanda's article, *Nonorganic Life. ZONE.* p. 134.

10. Henry Vaughan, 1621-1695, Wales. The 8th stanza from *Beyond The Veil.*

11. Susanne K. Langer's *Problems of Art, The Art Symbol and The Symbol in Art.* p.139.

12. Costa Vavagiakis, visual artist and drawing teacher, The Art Student's League of New York. The result of letters back and forth and a phone interview.

13. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen speaks of the inclusion of the tail, making the 5 points, 6 points. There is much good thought in the addition of the 6th point, making the directions of energy consistently balanced in their continual *yield/pull; yield/pull; push/pull* behavior. In a recent workshop with her, she told me she was embarking on a study with ballet teachers. I can hardly wait to see

how she unravels embryonic development toward the study of classical ballet. She is a brilliant anatomist, physiologist and mover; a brilliant thinker. The *Neurocellular Foundations of Movement and Learning* workshop was at *Luna Dance Institute,* Berkeley, Ca. 2/06/2016.

14. Susanne K. Langer writing about Albert Barnes, *The Art in Painting/Art in Education.* These two books are so densely full of thoughts on art and perception. I was not able to find the repeated quote that Langer uses in her book, *The Problems of Art.* The thoughts of others are within the Langer's book including the thoughts of Albert Barnes. *The Problems of Art.* p.92.

15. From my memory, studying with Alfredo Corvino at The Juilliard School. Between September, 1981 and May, 1985.

16. The result of several notes back and forth between Ernesta Corvino and me during the autumn of 2015.

17. Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art*, *The Dynamic Image.* p.4.

18. Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony.* p 19.

19. Susanne K. Langer, *Problems of Art, The Dynamic Image.* p.5

20. Alfredo Corvino: 1916, Montevideo, Uruguay - 2005, New York City, New York.

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