

II Estonian Dance Science Conference, Tartu, Estonia
14-16 June 2010

Healthy Dancer, Healthy Dance Teacher

Elsa Bradley MSc, Lecturer in Dance, University of Bedfordshire and University Campus Suffolk, Ipswich and Dance Scientist, DanceEast Academy, Ipswich

Following a late, yet to me bizarrely sunlit journey through the green and lush Estonian countryside to Tartu, a very eager audience assembled from across Estonia to discuss and debate the application of dance science research to the health of the dancer and dance teacher. The three days were jam-packed with lectures, presentations and movement sessions led by world-leading researchers in their field; from Professor Rodney Grahame's groundbreaking research on joint hypermobility, to proprioceptive training with Ashley McGill; from finding space in our joints with the help of overballs and Therabands™ with Annemarie Autere, to the welcome exhaustion of the Laban dance-specific fitness class with Edel Quin; and from the radical curriculum changes carried out by Fay Nenander and her team at Ballettakademien in Stockholm to my own research in positive psychology and its potential to optimise the dance learning environment. A gastronomical menu of physiology, biomechanics and psychology to whet the appetite!

The start of day one focussed on case study presentations concerning the motivation of dance teachers and the potential knock-on effects to dancers. Ülle Toming from Tallinn University contextualised the Estonian dance scene and highlighted the lack of ballet-specific research examining the psychophysical state of Estonian dancers in training. Ülle suggested that Estonian ballet teachers in particular are reluctant to update traditional pedagogy in light of research findings and, as a result, their knowledge of anatomy, kinesiology and teaching methods is outdated. She went on to question what the effects of this might be for dancers in their care. This theme was further explored by Fay Nenander. Drawing on anecdotal evidence, Fay asserted that the dance teacher's mental health has the capacity to influence the health and wellbeing of the dancer. She went on to offer practical solutions for the dance teacher to overcome the loss of self-esteem and confidence connected with issues such as burnout, career

II Estonian Dance Science Conference, Tartu, Estonia
14-16 June 2010

transition and loneliness. The need for Continuing Professional Development permeated the ensuing discussion, ranging from investment in dance-specific skills and knowledge to supporting teachers to question and evaluate the effectiveness of historical pedagogical methods in light of current research. Theoretical and practical sessions followed. Ashley McGill discussed the testing of dancers' proprioception and led an inspiring movement session in which delegates explored the application of proprioceptive training in their practice. By including opportunities to challenge the dancer's stability through sudden and unpredictable changes of direction and supporting students' autonomy in exploring their own balance, timing and sensory feedback, McGill suggests that proprioception can be trained as part of the dance class. Annemarie Autere introduced the notion of lines of energy produced by the six deep rotators when turning out the standing and gesturing leg in classical ballet technique. By using visual and kinaesthetic imagery in simple exercises with an overball and Therband™, delegates were encouraged to disengage the superficial muscle action of the gluteal muscles and rely more on the deep rotators to turn out efficiently.

Day two focussed on the efficiency of the dancing body. Rodney Grahame's fascinating lecture on joint hypermobility (aspects of which were presented at the last Annual General Meeting of IADMS in The Hague in 2009) allowed delegates to consider the implications of joint hypermobility syndrome within their own dance and teaching practice. Edel Quin led an animated introduction to dance-specific fitness, with much laughter as some delegates realised the challenge ahead! Exploring the fitness components specific to dance such as stamina, muscular strength and balance, Edel led two continuous phrases of movement building in intensity and designed to challenge the aerobic energy system. Maret Mursa Tormis from Tallinn University finished the day with a calming Alexander Technique class, focussing on Alexander's notion of the inhibition of postural habits in addressing the efficiency of the moving body.

II Estonian Dance Science Conference, Tartu, Estonia
14-16 June 2010

The final day focussed on optimising training. Fay Nenander discussed the total revision of dance training undertaken at Ballettakademien in Sweden, which has brought about great improvement in motivational climate throughout the school. Classes are fewer but longer, with the whole training year drawing on sport science recommendations for periodization. Theoretical studies are scheduled for 9am each day over 4-weeks, so that students learn in intensive blocks of time; this approach has countered stagnation and boredom in both students and staff. Students have been assigned a professional mentor designed to support students' transition from training to work and students are also responsible for developing community outreach projects to support their autonomy and competence, in terms of contributing to the wider dance context. An inspiring story of change! Derrick D. Brown, MSc candidate at University of Wolverhampton and qualified Sports Nutritionist, gave an informative and accessible lecture on nutrition and the performing artist, discussing the balance of macronutrients and the timing of food intake before and after training for optimal performance. Delegates were supplied with huge bars of Estonian chocolate as Derrick discussed the value of chocolate in lowering cortisol responses to stress – great for pre-performance perhaps! My own presentation drew on my academic research of optimal experiences amongst recreational, vocational and professional dancers and from my practice as an educator across community, vocational and university settings. After presenting qualitative research findings concerned with the perceptions and antecedents of optimal experiences of dance (using Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory), I discussed the teaching and learning strategies we might employ to ensure positive learning environments which facilitate the antecedents of flow and move towards positive dancing. Much discussion continued as dancers related their own flow experiences and the circumstances which help them to get into the flow state.

The warm-hearted generosity and eagerness of the Estonian dance community to embrace dance science research findings in enriching dance practice was an inspiration to those of us visiting the country. The questioning nature of the discussions and

II Estonian Dance Science Conference, Tartu, Estonia
14-16 June 2010

networking opportunities indicated a real hunger for knowledge, professional development and homegrown dance science research for the future. There is a real commitment to dance science in Estonia, pioneered by Inna Sulg of University of Tartu Viljandi Cultural Academy. These are exciting times in the land of midnight sun, lush landscapes and storks nesting on telephone poles ... watch this space!