

Wellbeing Writing with Ariane Barnes



Photography, Laura Sheridan.

This series of articles concerns itself with sharing lived experiences, qualitative data sets and practical solutions towards helping dancers reconnect to self from a global majority perspective. Whilst anyone will benefit from these resources, they simultaneously create a specific pathway for those from intersecting marginalised communities to feel supported and seen.

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Article 1: Dancers Disconnect - connecting the dots between emotional weight and physical avoidance in a psychosocial context for intersecting marginalised communities.

DANCERS' DISCONNECT

What is it?

The first time I experienced 'dancers' disconnect' was at an audition. I remember clearly being terrified. As a type one diabetic there were so many things I had to do to get my body and mind in the right space, just getting up that day had been difficult. I had informed my agent that I wasn't feeling up to it and had shared concerns that the dance style would not be a good fit for me regardless and I didn't want to waste time and energy on a pointless try-out. I'd been told in no uncertain terms that I had to go or the client would be very upset, and I 'owed it to myself' to try. Against my better judgment, I 'pushed through'. The pressure was intense and the expectation placed on me completely ridiculous.

I did my duty so I would be beyond reproach, the performer that went along with questionable choices to maximise their chances. As a queer woman of colour in my early 20's, I didn't feel there was a choice. But these are not things we talk about. Especially if, like me, you grew up watching Debbie Allen in Fame, and somewhere inside, you believe you need to 'sweat through' it, no matter your circumstances or your personal obstacles. The irony of this when applying the difficult set of circumstances women of colour and queer people are faced with on a daily basis in today's society, is a little alarming. We are no longer in a position where these can be viewed as separate things from the disconnection or disassociation we experience in our craft. The result is a damaging experience that becomes internalised, an erasure of sorts, an incapacity to be in the moment and enjoy it.

And that I think is where the disconnect begins.

Why does it happen?

Typically 'dancers disconnect' occurs when the mind is under extreme pressure, or the body has pushed beyond the point of exhaustion but we need to 'show up'. Whether it's for a rehearsal, an audition or just the exploration of personal practice, 'Body people' I notice, are very good at putting pressure on themselves.

We know we need to keep in good shape and if we don't do it, past a certain point in our careers, there's no one there to tell us how or why we ought to. The main concern is being able to step into the 5,6,7,8 at a moment's notice. And for some styles at least, change things at the drop of a hat on the whim of an AD or client.

On a biological level this releases Cortisol. Whilst we need Cortisol to keep us engaged and responsive- to the body, stress is stress. It doesn't matter who it's coming from. It can be an external influence that becomes an internalised response, a limiting belief or a very real fear based on physical or mental injury that prevents us from fully relaxing.

If you are someone that sings, you will know that when the body is tense one cannot make free sound; technique becomes affected, injury is likely and dissatisfaction is almost guaranteed. That's because the vocal cords are muscles, and muscles that contract involuntarily only produce one direct outcome: a rigid outward push in movement or sound.

Imagine if you will, applying the same principle to your mind and musculature. Try it. Tense your body completely, and then try to move. Then, add the worry that you can't move like you normally can. And now, because this series concerns itself with the lived experience of intersecting marginalized communities, add the feeling that you're the only one in the room that looks the way you do and possibly has a condition that affects your performance. Both of these things could at any moment affect your capacity to retain and perform choreography in ways that for the most part are out of your control.

How does that feel? If you're overwhelmed just by thinking about it, that gives you a pretty clear indication of how it might feel to carry this kind of pressure everyday.

Suddenly, we are looking at the complete phenomenon of disconnect: how it causes mechanical failure, emotional exhaustion and social anxiety and in some cases, an identity crisis. So what are the consequences of this?

Well on an individual level, at its worst, we begin to see dancers being injured, stepping back from session and the competitive or professional circuit altogether. Even at a community dance level, where high drama or groups drawn along racial lines might exist quite overtly because of stylistic differences, the stress can be insurmountable and cause an inevitable burn out.

Society steps in to try and fix this in the ways it knows. Physical therapy, counselling, everything it can offer that reinforces the idea that the individuals experiencing this are broken things that need to be 'fixed' to keep up.

Instead, it would be more helpful to begin normalising and explaining a perfectly reasonable reaction. A response to repeatedly being placed under unnecessary and sometimes harmful

pressure for a long duration. We'd need to do this as advocates, mentors and teachers alongside our dancers, so both the structural system we operate in and generations of future dancers begin to become aware of this phenomenon.

Recently, the fixation on the term 'somatic' and adding it to everything under the sun, has evidenced there is a rising awareness level of the vital connection that needs to be present between mind, body and physical activity to maintain well being.

Yet, here too, there is evidence of this basic relationship between how the body experiences stress and how it chooses to sever physical movement from being present, being completely (and conveniently) overlooked. It's also poorly understood mainly due to confusing terminology ...

Traditional Yoga, that might be considered the ultimate diasporic art form, is a great example of this. The recent tendency to add the word 'embodied' to yoga, demonstrates in itself how the west has sterilised an art form that was always intended to work as a holistic system to connect mind and body whilst releasing trauma. It speaks of hoards of people around the world undertaking a set of punishing physical exercises with no concept of why they're beneficial other than for physical agility or stamina...In a sense this is the very definition of dancers' disconnect.

Rushing through choreography for the sake of it. Relying on repetition so heavily it's nothing but a set of exercises to music. Dance without feeling. Asana without breath or mindfulness. Movement without joy. It's the same thing and it's a much safer place and process to be in than consciously examining the reasons why it's happening.

I like to think of it as taking shelter under your favourite tree in a storm... and then refusing to leave long after the pitter patter of the raindrops have subsided. It's therapeutic but isolating and ultimately damaging to your psyche. Being stuck is not fun. Humans need many other things in life than the feeling of safety and at some point all wounds must be looked at and disinfected in order to heal...

Fear is then at play. It may seem like a small step to those on the outside when there is seemingly no real danger or pressure to speak of but for those experiencing the fear of numbness or being awakened from it for the first time, it can be very disarming. An example that comes to mind is how students sometimes react to overwhelm when faced with live percussion.

As a British-Mauritian, island woman, teaching my own holistic dance form, connection to percussion is second nature to me. Through teaching it I have come to learn that not everyone is ready for what this type of connection can unleash. I have witnessed students be so intimidated by the idea of making eye contact with a drummer or even getting too close to the drums as a terrifying thing.

Live percussion has an effect that short circuits the psyches need to protect itself. It forces deep and instantaneous connection, not everyone can handle that. With time these students become more comfortable with the drums' call and gradually come to *play with rhythm with childlike release*. That is most often, where magic lies. Beautiful movement quality, deep feeling, increased syncopation... *Embodiment*. Surely, there is something about this process that can be taken in to help the very human tendency to disconnect from the body...

Ways into creating awareness around dancers' disconnect are quite simple.

As choreographers, we can easily facilitate the journey by encouraging our students to think and feel whilst moving and picking games, methods and times that create safety and joy in the rehearsal room.

As dancers and makers it's a harder job, self dictating joy is a bit like screaming at yourself to relax- it never works.

So for those that prefer the fancy language, it's about returning the body and mind to a state of childlike freedom through play praxis.

For those that prefer to say it like it is: get raw, get real, get ugly and remember that's half the fun...then come back to the serious business of being a professional performer.

There was a time that trainers at pineapple dance studios used to tell their students to go to clubs and raves to relax, not because they needed practice but because their bodies needed time to experience ecstasy, and in coaching terms - remember their 'why'. It benefits us to hold space for these experiences because quite simply if we as performers are not having fun, *neither are our audience*. On a chemical level if we enjoy something we are compelled to repeat the experience. And lastly, if you've ever watched a dancetok and enjoyed it, please help take care of our community so we can continue to make the world smile in difficult times.

WAYS TO ENCOURAGE PLAY PRAXIS AND PREVENT DANCERS' DISCONNECT FOR DANCE PRACTITIONERS AND FACILITATORS

Play time: portion out time in the week to move to things you enjoy just for the sake of it.

Mindfulness: enter practice with a question around how your body feels coming in and leaving. What did you enjoy and what made you freeze or worry? If you can't get past the worry, think about the next action that would help resolve it. Talking to someone important to you, asking for something you need, training at a different time etc, then act accordingly.

Repetition & Reconnection: take yourself through choreography from a detached perspective until you have it. Then try it on different pieces of music and in silence allowing yourself to feel every piece fully whatever happens. If that's your normal process. Try the opposite- go full out with feeling like your life depends on it and see what comes out... this will give you an emotional map to navigate your disconnect or possibly your over-identification to a section that gets stuck or causes numbness.

Space holding: openly communicating a sense of disconnection or the potential for this happening can sometimes eliminate it entirely. It kick-starts the externalisation and dialogue around discomfort and increases the likelihood that a solution will be found very quickly.

Trauma Consideration: some things are there to protect us and are anchored so deeply they can be difficult to shift without psychological assistance from a professional. Both as facilitators and performers it's important to understand the line between what can and can't be dealt with within the scope of a rehearsal room. Take courage and seek assistance, your practice will thank you.

CLARITY ON LANGUAGE

Somatic Awareness means bodily awareness and the ability to question one's physical experience through physical sensation.

Somatic experiencing means to experience something through the body with the end goal of connecting to self on a deeper level.

Embodiment refers to the ability to concurrently practice somatic experiencing and allow oneself to add depth of feeling and relational dynamics to movement, people, places and things whilst doing what you are doing. The end goals are authenticity and being fully present.

