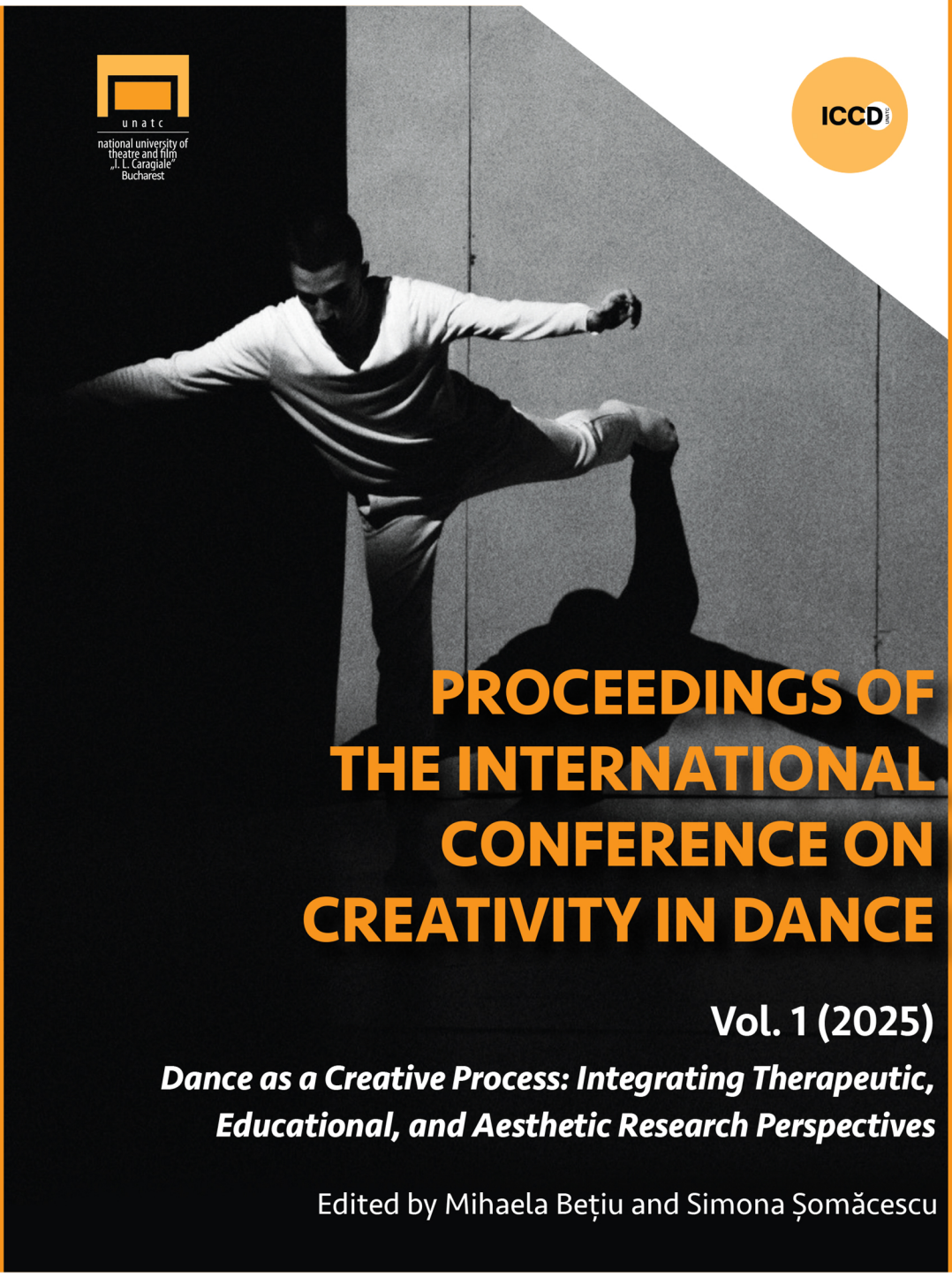

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CREATIVITY IN DANCE

Vol. 1 (2025)

Dance as a Creative Process: Integrating Therapeutic, Educational, and Aesthetic Research Perspectives

Edited by Mihaela Bețiu and Simona Șomăcescu

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UNIVERSITARIA CRAIOVA PRESS
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unatc press

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Editors: Mihaela Beţiu and Simona Şomăcescu

Editorial Board: **Andrei Anastasescu**, Călin Boto, Victor Mongescu.
Double blind peer-review committee: Bogdana Darie-Creţu, PhD; Zoia Guţu, PhD; Svebor Sečak, PhD; Lorette Enache, PhD; Andreea Tănăsescu, PhD.

DTP & cover: Corina Rezai

www.unatcpress.ro
www.editurauniversitaria.ro

Conference title/Topic of the 2025 edition:
Dance as a Creative Process: Integrating Therapeutic, Educational, and Aesthetic Research Perspectives
Date of conference: 2-4.04.2025
Location: Ileana Berlogea HALL, I.L. Caragiale UNATC, Bucharest
Conference acronym: ICCD
ICCD Project Manager & Curator: Assoc. Prof. Simona Șomăcescu, PhD
iccdance-unatc.com

Host Institution:
I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, Romania – UNATC

ISSN 3120 – 2217 ISSN-L 3120 – 2217
ISBN UNATC PRESS 978-606-082-115-1
ISBN Universitaria Craiova Press 978-606-14-2259-3
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37130/ICCD.2026.01

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

The idea of the *International Conference on Creativity in Dance* was born from both a belief and a question. The belief that dance, beyond its visible, embodied form, carries a depth of thought that deserves to be articulated, shared, and debated. And the question—simple yet persistent—of why choreography, despite its complexity and richness, has so rarely been given a sustained scientific and academic platform.

In a world where dance festivals, workshops, and artistic encounters are abundant, proposing a conference dedicated to the theoretical and research dimensions of choreography felt, at first, both necessary and uncertain. Necessary, because the field has matured and continues to evolve in ways that call for reflection. Uncertain, because such an initiative challenges established habits, inviting both openness and skepticism. Yet it is precisely within this tension—between tradition and innovation—that meaningful dialogue can emerge.

For a long time, dance has been understood primarily through practice: through movement, performance, and lived experience. While these remain essential, they do not exhaust its meaning. The reflective and critical dimensions of dance—its ability to generate knowledge, to question, to connect with other disciplines—have only recently begun to find a shared voice within academia. In this context, the conference represents not just an event, but a step toward recognizing choreography as a field of research in its own right.

The fact that this initiative is organized by the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and FIlm in Bucharest is not incidental. It reflects both a responsibility and a hope: that Romania, with its strong tradition of artistic education, can also become a space where dance is thought, discussed, and written about with the same intensity with which it is performed.

This volume continues a path that began to take shape in 2023, with the publication of the first collection of scientific articles in Romania dedicated to choreography, within the *Doctoral Horizons* journal, which I coordinated. That moment marked the opening of a conversation. This proceedings volume is a continuation of that dialogue, brought to a new level through the contributions gathered from the first edition of the *International Conference on Creativity in Dance 2025*.

The voices included here—academics, artists, researchers, therapists, choreographers, philosophers—reflect the diversity of the field itself. Each

approaches dance from a different perspective, yet all share a common belief: that dance can be thought about as deeply as it can be felt. Together, their work sketches a landscape in which choreography intersects with other domains, expanding its meanings and possibilities.

Publishing such a volume in Romania is, in itself, a meaningful gesture. It signals not only participation in an international discourse, but also the desire to contribute to it. More than that, it affirms that dance belongs within the realm of ideas, alongside other disciplines that have long been recognized as subjects of rigorous inquiry.

This proceedings volume is an invitation—to read, question, research and continue the conversation. It fulfills its purpose by identifying new interpretative frameworks, opening new perspectives, encouraging further research strategies, and bringing dance closer to the centre of academic reflection.

At its heart, this volume is a statement of belief: that dance matters—not only on stage, but also in thought.

Assoc. Prof. SIMONA ȘOMĂCESCU, PhD,
I.L. Caragiale UNATC Bucharest,
ICCD Project Manager & Curator

CONTENTS

Proceedings Papers

EDUCATION IN AND THROUGH DANCE: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DANCE **AS AN ART FORM AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE**

NICOLETA DEMIAN

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Abstract: This article examines dance education as a form of embodied epistemology, particularly within the context of higher education. It argues that dance functions not only as an artistic discipline but also as a method of inquiry that integrates body, mind, and emotion. Drawing on frameworks from cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and performance theory, the article explores how dance training develops technical proficiency, aesthetic sensitivity, and critical thinking. Special attention is given to the role of improvisation, choreography, and interdisciplinary collaboration in cultivating artistic identity and social awareness. The paper also addresses the integration of digital technologies into dance pedagogy, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges they present. Through hybrid modalities and multimedia projects developed at the Dance Department of the Gheorghe Dima National Academy of Music, students engage in practice-as-research and reflect on the socio-political dimensions of performance. The analysis emphasizes the potential of dance to foster dialogue across disciplines, facilitate embodied understanding of complex concepts, and prepare students for the demands of a rapidly evolving cultural and educational landscape. Ultimately, the article advocates for a holistic approach to dance education—one that affirms the body as a site of knowledge, creativity, and critical engagement—positioning dance as a vital component of contemporary academic discourse.

Keywords: Dance education, interdisciplinary arts, embodied epistemology, critical performance studies.

How to cite: Demian, N. (2026) "Education in and Through Dance: A Comprehensive Approach to Dance as an Art Form and Academic Discipline," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 10-20.

Dance as Praxis: Education *In* Dance

Education *in* dance comprises the formal and informal structures through which individuals engage with dance as a technical, aesthetic, and creative discipline. This encompasses codified techniques (e.g., ballet, modern, contemporary), somatic practices, and improvisational methodologies. These practices require an embodied intelligence—what Eddy (2009) calls "corporeal literacy"—that enables dancers to interpret, manipulate, and generate meaning through movement. Through structured dance education, students not only acquire technical skills but also cultivate creativity, cultural awareness, and personal discipline.

Dance education within formal institutions, such as our conservatory, emphasizes a structured curriculum designed to impart a comprehensive understanding of diverse dance styles, techniques, and theoretical frameworks. Students undergo intensive training that cultivates physical attributes, including coordination, strength, and flexibility, while deepening their awareness of movement dynamics. The Bachelor's degree in Choreography exemplifies this approach, integrating studies in dance history, anatomy, music, ballet, modern

dance techniques, and choreographic practices to provide a holistic and interdisciplinary foundation in dance education.

Education *in* dance refers to the formal acquisition of skills in technique, performance, and choreography. Through various styles—such as ballet, modern, contemporary, and traditional dances—students develop bodily awareness, control, and artistic expression. Dance classes cultivate discipline, coordination, flexibility, and rhythm, while also encouraging students to embody aesthetic principles like form, timing, and spatial design (Stinson, 2016).

Beyond technical proficiency, dance education promotes critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Choreographing and interpreting dance pieces require creativity and an ability to think spatially and abstractly. Students learn to analyze movement, explore innovative ideas, and make artistic choices, all of which contribute to their intellectual and artistic development. Following the curricular requirements, dance often involves teamwork and collaboration, teaching the students valuable interpersonal skills such as communication, adaptability, and cooperation.

In addition to technique, creative processes are emphasized. Improvisation and choreography tasks allow students to explore personal narratives and social commentary through movement. This practice fosters artistic identity and critical engagement, as students are challenged to innovate and reflect. According to Gilbert (2015), dance education nurtures the imagination and provides a space for students to "make sense of their world through embodied experience" (p. 98).

Moreover, students are encouraged not only to replicate choreography but also to create original works that reflect their personal voice and respond to broader social or philosophical themes. This process nurtures artistry, confidence, and a strong sense of identity.

The challenge for today dance teacher is adapting to diverse learner needs and backgrounds, balancing tradition with modern educational expectations and encouraging a holistic approach to learning that integrates physical, emotional, and intellectual growth.

Innovation in the teaching and learning of dance is important because primarily it actively engages students, making education more accessible and inspiring, and secondly it encourages and develops artistic expression, creativity, and critical thinking.

One of the learning experiences we propose is that, each semester, one of the dance technique exams be turned into a performance. Dance, understood as a choreographic product, cannot be conceived outside the context of performance, with all that this entails: from the training of the dancer and the shaping of their body, to the creative methods and the laws of the cultural market. In this way,

students gain insight into how the economics of performance shape the body and thinking of both dancers and choreographers.

At the Dance Department of Gheorghe Dima National Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca, the curricula of BA in Dance advocating for a comprehensive approach that integrates practical training, theoretical study, and interdisciplinary engagement.

At the master's level, education *in* dance also entails advanced choreography and performance studies, where students engage in creative research through practice-as-research (PaR) frameworks. Such approaches align with performative epistemologies that challenge Cartesian dualisms and elevate embodied knowledge as central to meaning-making in the arts (Barrett & Bolt, 2010). These models position dancers not merely as interpreters but as knowledge producers, blurring boundaries between practitioner and scholar.

Furthermore, graduate study in dance necessitates a critical engagement with the sociopolitical dimensions of performance. The dancing body is not a neutral or apolitical entity; rather, it is embedded within broader structures of power, cultural representation, and ideological frameworks. As Albright (2011) argues, bodily movement is always situated and interpreted through the lenses of identity, history, and social context.

An in-depth understanding of how race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability intersect with bodily expression is essential for developing a nuanced and ethically informed dance practice. These identity markers shape not only the experience of the performer but also the reception of the performance, influencing who is granted visibility and legitimacy within dance spaces. Consequently, dancers and choreographers must consider both the form and the socio-cultural meanings of movement, interrogating whose stories are told and whose bodies are centered.

Critically examining the politics of embodiment challenges the historical exclusions and normative assumptions that have shaped the field of dance. It also opens space for diverse epistemologies and marginalized voices to be expressed through choreographic and performative means. Engaging our students with these complexities contributes to a more inclusive and socially conscious approach to dance scholarship and practice, aligning with the broader aims of critical pedagogy and cultural studies in performance (Albright, 2011).

Education *through* Dance as a form of embodied epistemology within higher education

Embodied epistemology refers to the idea that knowledge is not solely generated through abstract reasoning or textual analysis, but also through sensory, kinesthetic, and affective experience (Barbour, 2011). In this context, the body is not merely a vessel for the mind but an active site of knowing. Dance, as an inherently physical and expressive art form, enables learners to access this mode of knowing by engaging movement as a language through which concepts, identities, and emotions are communicated and understood.

In higher education settings, this epistemological approach fosters deeper engagement by allowing students to embody theoretical knowledge, translating abstract ideas into felt experiences. For example, students studying cultural identity, trauma, or resistance through dance can internalize these concepts on a bodily level, enhancing their cognitive and emotional understanding. As Leavy (2009) suggests, the arts—including dance—serve as legitimate modes of inquiry, capable of generating new insights and challenging normative assumptions in academia.

Beyond its aesthetic and technical dimensions, dance serves as a form of critical pedagogy in the university classroom. It enables students to interrogate the cultural, historical, and political contexts that shape movement practices. Dance reflects and produces social meaning; it is embedded in systems of power, ideology, and representation. Therefore, education through dance encourages students to critically analyze how race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability intersect with bodily expression (Albright, 2011).

By situating movement within these frameworks, our dance students learn not only how to move but also why and for whom movement matters. Choreographic processes become acts of inquiry and resistance, offering space for marginalized voices and alternative narratives. Dance thus becomes both a method and a medium for critical reflection, supporting the development of socially conscious practitioners who are attuned to the ethical and political dimensions of performance.

In my pedagogical approach, dance occupies a unique position as both a creative and critical practice. Cultivating not only intellectual skills but also emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness, this strategy aligns with broader educational goals that emphasize lifelong learning, adaptability, and collaboration—skills that are increasingly important in the 21st-century knowledge economy. Moreover, dance cultivates resilience and presence, encouraging students to navigate uncertainty and engage with complexity through embodied practice.

Projects that integrate dance with academic inquiry also model interdisciplinary thinking, bridging the arts, humanities, and social sciences. For instance, combining dance with disciplines such as anthropology, philosophy, or gender studies reveals the multifaceted ways in which movement expresses and constructs meaning. Students learn to draw connections between theory and practice, recognizing the value of embodied research as both method and outcome.

Digital technology has opened up exciting new possibilities for me as a choreographer to explore and expand my creative horizon. Over the years, together with my student dancers, we have experimented various ways to use digital technology in dance creation.

Dance, music, and video techniques are interconnected art forms that can greatly enhance the learning experience in art education. These art forms are interdependent on each other, meaning that they rely on each other to create a more compelling and engaging artistic expression. A multimedia dance performance has become a recurrent project since 2017, a collaborative effort between choreographer, visual artists, musicians and student performers to create a visually stunning and immersive experience. Stressing the relation of interdependence between dance, music and video techniques, our goal is to redefine the art education for our students.

Communication constitutes a foundational pillar of art education. For both practicing artists and students, the capacity to convey ideas, emotions, and conceptual intentions through artistic media is essential. Effective communication is not only fundamental to the processes of creating and interpreting art but also instrumental in fostering relationships and cultivating a sense of community within the broader artistic milieu.

Within the framework of our multimedia or digital dance projects (*Disdance*[1], *The Pulse of the City*[2], *Dancing with the Bald Soprano*[3]), communication is enacted through multiple modalities, encompassing music, visual art, dance, and contemporary digital media. Teachers and students alike engage in expressive practices that foster both personal articulation and collective understanding. Through these forms,

1 *Disdance* – 2020, an international dance-music-performance choreographic project, coordinated by Nicoleta Demian and some of the musicians of TonArt Ensemble Hamburg. See chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://icc-online.arte-ct.ro/vol_07/13.pdf

2 *The Pulse of the City (2022)* A multimedia dance performance exploring urban architecture and interactive staging, created in collaboration with Diana Drăgan-Chirilă. See: Demian, N. & Drăgan-Chirilă, D. (2022) Pulsul orașului. Arhitectura unui spectacol coregrafic multimedia /Pulse of the City. Architecture of a multimedia dance performance. *ICTMF, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 67-75*

3 *Dancing with the Bald Soprano, choreography signed by Nicoleta Demian. See*: Demian, N.C., Drăgan-Chirilă, D., Levens, U. (2023) "Dancing with the Bald Soprano – redefining arts education / Dansând cu Cântăreața cheală – redefinirea educației artistice", *Tehnologii informatice și de comunicație în domeniul musical*, DOI: 10.47809/ICTMF.2023.01.04

participants not only express their own perspectives but also learn to interpret, critique, and respond to the creative output of others. Communication, in this context, becomes integral to the development of artistic techniques, the exploration of materials, and the refinement of conceptual frameworks.

Understanding the specificity of the non-verbal vocabulary of dance is vital for both musicians and visual art students, enabling them to construct and decode complex movement narratives and to appreciate the multiplicity of perspectives that such narratives may represent.

The multidisciplinary nature of our projects—uniting three universities and three artistic domains (music, choreography, and visual arts)—provides a unique context in which students are challenged to engage across expressive boundaries. This environment encourages them to hone their attentiveness to the diverse ways in which a single concept can be rendered, interpreted, and communicated through various artistic languages. Such collaborative, cross-disciplinary initiatives cultivate a deeper sensitivity to the nuances of artistic dialogue and promote adaptability in expression.

Collaborative artistic projects also nurture the ability to communicate with diverse audiences, including peers, educators, critics, and the general public. Students develop the capacity to articulate their artistic vision, contextualize their work, and engage in critical discourse. These competencies are increasingly important in the contemporary art world, where public engagement and interdisciplinary dialogue are central to artistic practice.

Furthermore, the communication skills developed through art education extend well beyond the studio or stage. They are transferable to various domains of life, enhancing interpersonal relationships, social awareness, and civic engagement. Skills such as active listening, clear and empathetic expression, and an appreciation for diverse perspectives are cultivated through the artistic process.

Throughout the collaborative process, all participants of our multimedia and digital dance projects came to recognize that communication—whether verbal, visual, physical, or emotional—is an indispensable component of meaningful artistic engagement. By developing the ability to communicate effectively through their artistic work and interpersonal interactions, students not only deepen their artistic competence but also acquire critical life skills applicable across a wide range of personal and professional contexts.

Education through dance exemplifies the potential of embodied epistemology to enrich learning within higher education. As a practice that integrates mind and body, theory and expression, dance challenges dominant paradigms of knowledge production and offers a dynamic alternative rooted in lived experience. By embracing dance as a legitimate form of inquiry, universities

can cultivate more inclusive, reflective, and transformative learning environments. In doing so, they affirm the body as a vital source of insight—one that moves, remembers, resists, and reimagines the world.

Graduate-level research supports dance as a form of "kinaesthetic intelligence" (Gardner, 2011), which facilitates learning that is both affective and analytical. Projects integrating dance into music and visual art curricula have demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of student engagement and concept internalization.

Dance is not only an expressive art form but also a site of cultural critique, embodied learning, and academic innovation. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, valuing embodied knowledge, and challenging systemic exclusions, graduate dance education can play a transformative role in shaping more inclusive and reflective educational landscapes.

Dance Studies as a Scholarly Discipline

The academic field of dance studies has matured into a dynamic site of interdisciplinary scholarship. It intersects with cultural studies, gender theory, philosophy, anthropology, and critical pedagogy. Graduate programs increasingly emphasize the integration of theory and practice, requiring students to contextualize their artistic work within scholarly discourses.

Dance scholarship at the master's and doctoral level in our university involves critical historiography, ethnographic methods, and performance analysis. Students investigate how dances function within specific cultural and pedagogical contexts. The written component—thesis or capstone research—requires rigorous analytical methodologies, demonstrating the legitimacy of dance as both embodied and intellectual inquiry. Moreover, practice-based research contributes to an expanded understanding of scholarship, wherein the studio is not merely a site of rehearsal but a laboratory of knowledge production.

My area of expertise in supervising doctoral research is based on three main directions: dance from the perspective of cultural anthropology, the social meaning and cultural functions of dance, and stage dance as an artistically structured discourse.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite its scholarly growth, dance remains marginalized in many academic institutions, often relegated to underfunded departments or viewed as a non-essential discipline. Graduate education in dance must therefore advocate for systemic recognition of the field's intellectual and cultural value. This

includes developing cross-disciplinary partnerships, securing funding for PaR methodologies, and actively decolonizing curricula.

The integration of digital technologies into dance education has created new possibilities while simultaneously raising critical questions about embodiment, pedagogy, and presence. As Lepecki (2006) argues, the politics of presence and movement are central to understanding how dance functions within contemporary culture. The shift to digital formats challenges traditional ontologies of dance as live, ephemeral, and co-present. In online settings, movement is captured, edited, and archived—creating a temporal and spatial disjunction that alters both perception and reception. The dancer's presence becomes mediated by the camera lens and platform design, which in turn shapes what is seen and how it is interpreted.

These conditions necessitate a re-evaluation of how presence is conceptualized in dance pedagogy. Graduate programs must equip students with the critical tools to analyze not only the formal aspects of dance, but also the implications of its mediation. This involves questioning how technology affects the body's legibility, authority, and expressivity in performance.

Rather than rejecting digital platforms, graduate programs can use them as a site of inquiry and innovation. From my experience, hybrid pedagogies that combine in-person and virtual modalities offer a promising avenue for reconciling embodiment with digital literacy. For example, my students were engaged in asynchronous video analysis, collaborative online choreography, and reflexive writing about their experiences in both physical and virtual environments (Demian, 2024).

Thus, integration of digital technologies into academic dance education presents both challenges and possibilities. While digital spaces offer increased access and flexibility, they also pose significant questions regarding the role of the body, the experience of presence, and the dynamics of teaching and learning. Engaging with these tensions critically allows for the development of pedagogical models that extend rather than compromise the embodied essence of dance. As the field continues to evolve, graduate programs must lead the way in cultivating practices that honor the complexity of both movement and mediation.

Moreover, I am convinced that a critical digital pedagogy acknowledges the socio-cultural conditions that shape access to technology and emphasizes the ethical dimensions of mediated performance. By doing so, dance educators encourage students to become not only skilled performers and creators, but also critical thinkers who understand the broader implications of their practice.

Conclusion

Dance education, particularly at the graduate level, emerges as a profoundly multidimensional field—one that demands intellectual rigor, creative inquiry, and embodied engagement. Through a combination of technical training, theoretical reflection, and interdisciplinary collaboration, students are encouraged to view dance not merely as performance but as a critical and epistemological practice. Education in and through dance cultivates not only choreographic and performance skills but also cultural awareness, aesthetic sensitivity, and critical thinking. By emphasizing dance as a form of embodied epistemology, this approach challenges traditional dichotomies between body and mind, practice and theory, and highlights the body as a legitimate site of knowledge production.

Projects such as *Dancing with the Bald Soprano* and *Disdance*, as well as sustained efforts to integrate music, visual arts, and digital technologies, demonstrate the potential of dance to foster innovation and collaboration across artistic domains. The use of digital media, while raising questions around embodiment and presence, also opens new pathways for creative exploration and critical discourse. Hybrid pedagogical models that combine in-person and virtual modalities prove particularly effective in navigating the contemporary challenges of accessibility, engagement, and technological mediation.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical dimensions of dance—its capacity to address issues of identity, representation, and power—underscore its relevance in broader academic and cultural conversations. Graduate programs must continue to support research that not only interrogates the aesthetics of movement but also positions dance as a site of resistance, inquiry, and cultural production.

As a scholarly discipline, dance studies must be recognized for its capacity to contribute meaningfully to the humanities and social sciences. This includes advocating for institutional support, promoting interdisciplinary research, and developing critical pedagogies that engage with the realities of a rapidly changing educational landscape. In doing so, we affirm that dance is not only an art of the body, but also a practice of the intellect, the imagination, and the community. Education *in* and *through* dance, particularly at the graduate level, calls for an integrative and critical approach that respects the depth of dance as both practice and theory.

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BODY INTELLIGENCE: NEW HORIZONS OF **CREATIVITY IN THERAPY**

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Abstract: The hypothesis of this article revolves around the experimentation and articulation of *new methodologies of somatics* (the Feldenkrais method, Anat Baniel method and Body-Mind Centering) and *artistic interventions* (dance improvisation and dance therapy) in Romania – in psychiatric hospitals, NGOs and special schools, where through somatic attunement and dance tools we aim to establish a horizontal communication between patients and educators/therapists. We are searching for new ways of learning and communicating and we offer creative non-judgemental instruments for each person in order to take decisions and actions. I will take as first reference the *Dance Brain Rehab* program, an Erasmus+ educational project developed by neuroscientist Hanna Poikonen – in collaboration with Indie Box (Romania), Ijshaamanka (Italy), Asociación Neurociencia Aplicada Barcelona (Spain) and other local associations. Then, I will make a link between *DBR* and the second model of applied research, the ongoing *C.R.E.S.C.* project, as it aims to create an innovative platform in which research, creation, education, and health are included. The main objectives of both projects are to develop *a strong ensemble of practices* from the Feldenkrais method, Body-Mind Centering, dance improvisation and dance therapy into a continuous transformation, linked to neuroscientific studies (*DanceBrainRehab* project). Afterwards, all the partners aim *to create a network* between local institutions of care, associations, universities, dance centres, NGOs and to open the field of collaboration to students and professors. The projects are a reflection of the European *Culture for Health* programme for implementing interdisciplinary protocols in between arts and well-being- adapted to Romania's specificities, where inclusive education is not yet researched and implemented enough.

Keywords: inclusion, neuroscience & dance, embodied cognition, Feldenkrais method, somatics, constellation of care between special needs people and organizations.

How to cite: De Piante, V., Poikonnen, H. (2026) "Body Intelligence: New Horizons of Creativity in Therapy", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 21-40.

INTRODUCTION

Can a polyphony of instruments create
a circulation of care in our communities?

The hypothesis of this article revolves around the experimentation and articulation of *new methodologies of somatics* (the Feldenkrais method, Anat Baniel method and Body-Mind Centering) and *artistic interventions* (dance improvisation and dance therapy) in Romania in psychiatric hospitals, NGO's and special schools, where through somatic attunement and dance tools we aim to establish an horizontal communication between the patient and the educator/therapist. We are searching for new ways of learning and communicating and we offer creative

non-judgemental instruments for each person in order to take decisions and actions. This is in line and inspired by the research on handicap and inclusion of professor Salvatore Soresi (Soresi, 2020; Soresi, 2016) and of the major reform of Basaglia on the psychiatric hospitals (Basaglia, 1964), which led to the implementation of Law nr. 180 and the shutting down of the asylums.

Together with the somatic and artistic approach we are engaged to build alliances: a network of continuum education, involving professors and students, artists and scientists, pedagogues and psychologists all together with fragile groups of all ages and their families.

This artistic intervention is addressed especially to the students/professors of the "National University of Theatre and Film *I.L. Caragiale"* in Bucharest, which already have some creative tools to work in communities with special bodies.

In this article I will talk about my experience in special needs communities as an artist-pedagogue-Feldenkrais practitioner and as a part of a collective of artists/pedagogues, taking, as I stated, as a first reference, the *DanceBrainRehab* project, lead by neuroscientist dr. Hanna Poikonen together with 3 partners IndieBox (Romania), Ijshamaanka (Italia) ANABC (Barcelona).

As a second model of artistic intervention, I will introduce the continuation of *DBR*, the ongoing *C.R.E.S.C.* project (2025-2026), a platform of co-existence of inclusive training, performances, workshops, conferences, where artists, professors and students (UNATC and UNIBUC – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences) can learn and implement corporeal tools in special school and psychiatric hospitals. In our projects we also collaborate with expert in the field of psychotherapy specialized in dance-therapy such as Loredana Larionescu.

I want to specify how the therapy orientation we are searching for is linked to the word *care* and to awareness. The etymology of "care" is very significant to us: "care comes from *ku/kav*, which means to observe (…) Observe comes from *ob-servare*, which comes from indoeuropean roots, *swer/ sword* means to see, to take care, to be on guard" (Poli, 2020, pp. 15-16).

Therefore, we, as a collective, research how the word "care" needs to become an embodied practice and to create a system of care where everybody is learning.

For Feldenkrais, Cohen and Baniel, every *lesson*, as they don't call it session in their therapeutic methodology, must create a field of interactions, a field of attention where they give time to the child or adult to tune with them (Feldenkrais, 1996; Cohen, 2008; Baniel, 1995). And *the premise* of this artistic/somatic/inclusive approach is *the preparation of the caregiver and the parent*: the capacity to sense their body. Therefore, care became a form of defining and multiplying practices starting from the corporeal, multidirectional system, where the special person together with the caregiver/the artist/the dancer and the family learn how to

tune together, in an unknown spontaneous creative way, and not an abstract concept anymore.

Through this systemic corporeal tuning we create a field of interactions between the special person, the educator and the parent. These became the specific methodological instruments we questioned in the first project – *DanceBrainRehab* – and applied in the second project – *C.R.E.S.C.*

The International Context

The question is: "can we move towards a therapy, where a new holistic approach is applied?" — Erica Poli (psychiatrist)

Nowadays, therapy needs to bring together a complexity of perspectives: psychiatry and psychology, somatics and dance, dance therapy and the neuroscience of emotions, anthropology in order to create a common ground of research in this field (Poli, 2020). This complexity must function for us as a circulation of care: from the community, to the caregiver, to the patient, and back to the community. For us, it's essential to co-create *a constellation of care.*

Echoing this holistic perspective, the *University of Padua* – Faculty of Psychology is developing new models of education where each person is seen through a complex lens, through *the bio-psycho-social and spiritual aspects.*

Meanwhile, the *European Union* expresses its views on the importance of health and well-being, associated with *experimental practices* led by the *artistic cultural fields*. In the Culture for Health Report, there seems to be an urgency to create programs which address students and teachers in order to search for artistic-therapeutic methodologies inside institutions of health and culture (Zbranca, et al., 2022).

Prof. Soresi, senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Pedagogy and Applied Psychology at the University of Padua, creator of the University Center for Services and Research on Disability, Rehabilitation and Integration, has been working for 60 years with his team for a new vision on disability that goes beyond categorization and stigmatization and promotes the development of programs focused on inclusion, empowerment and life skills (La.R.I.O.S., 1994).

But the power and the awareness are the first absent concepts: in the institutions the patients are powerless: people take care of them and decide for them (Poli, 2020; Coaten, 2020).

Quoting Caroline Myss: "power is a concept of fundamental importance in regard of healing and health. Attitudes that generate a sense of powerlessness

not only lead to low self-esteem, but also take energy away from the body, compromising overall health" (Poli, 2020, p. 25).

Instead, when we go to hospitals, to special schools, to dance centers and NGO's to give workshops and perform, we create and witness the opposite situation: people of any age become more connected to their new sensations and actions, aware, healthy and positive through creative movement, interacting with others through dance and voice. They learn what *they don't know about themselves*. At the same time, they are watched and encouraged to express themselves up to the point where they perform similarly to the *Moving [M]others* performance and to *The Educational and Performative Values of Touch* project, where special people dance on stage together with the audience.

The Romanian context

In the Romanian context, there is an urgency to implement new therapeutic approaches. "On a legislative level, there is a draft law on the Government's agenda that will include *expressive-creative therapies* amongst the legally recognized and legally classified complementary therapies. Moreover, the *National Mental Health Plan* 2024-2029 includes the idea of training mental health personnel and medical-psycho-social staff towards this direction" (Loredana Larionescu). These actions could facilitate the possibility for our students to work in these communities. Nowadays, the "*Sf. Nicolae* Special School" in Bucharest is the institution that leads *the IncluzivEduHub Schools with the Soul*, a PNRR project where their teachers are trained in somatic methods and dance therapy.

But, by analyzing the larger Romanian context, we observe that families with special children are stigmatized and invisible to our society. Therefore, they have to organize independently, without any financial support from the government. They invite several times a year international trainers in somatic methods, in order to take care of their special children, spending huge sums of money, because viable results are obtained through methods that, as I said, are still little known in Romania, such as BMC, Feldenkrais (Hillier & Worley, 2015), JKA for Special Needs and the Anat Baniel method, which, when applied abroad, have proven to significantly help people with physical and mental disabilities (Verrel, et al., 2015) (Smyth, et al., 2004).

New therapies/Expanded territories and scientific foundation

The new therapies we propose during the *DanceBrainRehab* and continuing with the *C.R.E.S.C.* project are an interdisciplinary territory where somatics and dance improvisation must cooperate with the psychologies through a migration of

methodologies and people. Nowadays neuroscientific research is showing how the Feldenkrais method (SROT & Lyttle, 2005) (Brummer, et al., 2018), Body-Mind Centering (SPARKS, 2013), Anat Baniel method, are applied in the therapeutic field (Zollinger, 2025).

Studies that demonstrate how the autistic spectrum is considered a perceptual-motor disorder (Donnellan, et al., 2013; Porges, 2016) give value to somatic methods which work on these gaps on functioning and on the neuroplasticity of the brain.

The integration of a new logic: entering the somatic world

In the Feldenkrais method,
to heal means to get to know yourself.

The Feldenkrais method (Feldenkrais, 1996) and Body Mind Centering (Cohen, 2008) are two very complex somatic methods we apply together with dance improvisation during the *DBR* project and the ongoing project *C.R.E.S.C.* To study and work with these practices, you have to aquire a diploma that states that you followed an international training that lasted from 2 to 4 years.

They are a part of the transdisciplinary studies called Embodied Cognition, a discipline that tells us that the body is influencing the way we think, perceive, move and feel. The methods are still quite unknown in Romania, that's why I will briefly introduce this field and make a connection with the second methodological instrument we have used: dance.

For the two methods, the central focus is the experiential process of **embodiment**: to *become conscious of your body, of sensations, movements and thoughts as a whole.* "Bodily experience is not merely associated with cognition; rather, lived experience is foundational to consciousness, mind and thought. Although embodiment is of the body, the degree to which the body actually gives rise to thinking remains at the center of the debate" (Batson & Wilson, 2014, p. 75).

Theoreticians of "embodied cognition," Varela and Maturana bypass the cartesian dichotomy between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, because they demonstrate in their *Biologia Cognitionis* epistemology how all living systems are cognitive systems and that there is an identity between being, acting and knowing (Maturana & Varela, 2004). For the biologist and embodied cognitive neuroscientist Varela, every scientific experiment constitutes an individual experience in which the observer and their subjectivity are part of—and influence—the experiment. The experiment itself always includes subjective experience. The world is not

"outside" but it's a permanent production of a world thanks to the process of living (subjective experience).

Somatics deepens the focus on the awareness and expansion of the **subjective experience,** on what cannot be explained, is unique and untranslatable, which connects the biology of the person to its biography. Kandel, neuroscientist and Nobel prize winner, spoke about the implicit memory which has no words but the logic of our emotions and sensations and which is, therefore, the speaking language of the body (Poli, 2020, pp. 49-50).

Somatic methods bring a quite peculiar methodology and deep perception that reframe the theories about the body: they work with awareness in the organic systems, in precise structures of the body, interoception, memories, body image. They are an interdisciplinary field where the person is seen through many dimensions: movement, perception, affection, memory and thinking simultaneously. But the gate for change opens with a reduction, a concentration of focus:

- *awareness on the how:* how we sense and move in the Feldenkrais method. The action for dr. Feldenkrais is most of the time automatic, imbricated into an unconscious pattern of thinking, of emotion, of perception, of the tonic function. For the scientist, movement manifests complex layers of contradictory intentions, emotions, self-image, attention. So, by exploring consciously one element, the movement, you can change other aspects of the person (Feldenkrais, 1991).
- *expansion of the perceptive field* for Body-Mind Centering: studying precise systems of the body, but also the neurodevelopmental patterns and embryology (Cohen, 2008). Thomas Greil, trainer in many schools of Body-mind Centering, describes the bodymind system as a simultaneity of events, where interoception, the field of inside sensations, brings alongside it memories, images, intuitions and actions, as well, many of them unconsciously.

For Feldenkrais and Bainbridge-Cohen, through perceptual-motor experiences, through the body awareness, we form new neural-motor pathways, new mental maps, new emotional maps, fostering neuroplasticity and creative potential (Doidge, 2020).

Subjective experience is also the main interest for neuroscience as much as for philosophy (Bardet, 2011). For example, neuroscientist Candace Pert demonstrates how emotions are biochemical data which show us the relationship between the mind and the body. She speaks about emotions as physical events (Poli, 2020). On the other hand, philosopher of complexity Edgar Morin believes that subjective experience gives new tools to science and a base for new paradigms. He

proposes that the artistic experience is the best way to get scientific intuitions because it's open to the unknown, to what is not discovered yet, to new possible procedures.

The cognitive and affective neurosciences, the movement sciences and philosophy see also *dance* (the second methodological strategy we apply in our projects) *as a laboratory for exploring subjective experience*, to understand how creativity and cognitive processes work and where all aspects of cognition are trained: attention, memory, coordination, problem solving, decision making, spatial temporal thinking (Batson & Wilson, 2014, pp. 19-20). Amongst its many advantages, there is the fact that it circulates a pharmacopoeia of positive substances that help us have energy, vitality, a clear mind, develop sensitivity, concentration, strength and intuition.

> Thinking and acting are linked inseparably in dance: thinking in action is thinking as action. Thought and movement are one. Movement and mind work reciprocally within explicit contexts to become dance. As communicative, body-based art, dance engages all of cognition. (Batson & Wilson, 2014, p. 37)

At the same time there is an overall interest to understand how an embodied practice works. How "a social epistemology of dance would study the objects that interest dancers, rather than those that interest scientists; style and schools, practices and techniques, processes of transmission and collaboration, invented traditions and traditions of inventions." (Spatz, 2021, p. 68).

In this context of increased interdisciplinarity between dance, somatic education, philosophy and neurosciences in connection with therapy, well-being and inclusion, the European Dance Development Network – EDN – is developing *Embodied Transformations,* a Creative Europe project, where dance and somatics set in motion formats that address self-awareness, health, creativity and cooperation for larger communities.

Dance Well, a movement research for Parkinson and other disabilities, a Creative Europe project where Parkinson's elderly people dance with teenagers, extends and develops in three continents providing training, practices of care, and performances.

Feldenkrais Institutes nowadays run several EU projects, such as: *Neurosomatic Strategies for Improving Abilities* and *Feldenkrais4life*.

Five schools of Body-Mind Centering ran *SPARKS-Somatic Practices, Arts and Creativity for Special Needs* (2013-2015), a CultureForHealth project.

In this flourishing context of theoretical and experiential research, I will describe the *DanceBrainRehab* project (2022-2024), an Erasmus+ EU project we developed in Romania, and then I will introduce the multiannual project *C.R.E.S.C.*

– *a network of creation, education, health, research* (2025-2026), which is an inclusive platform, co-financed by AFCN (National Cultural Fund Administration), synthesizing four previous projects and four years of research in Romania.

PROJECT DELIVERY

When you see somebody dancing, you can see what a doctor cannot see.
— Marta Moller (ANABC)

Dance Brain Rehab is an Erasmus+ project led by neuroscientist Hanna Poikonen, in collaboration with Indie Box, Ijshaamanka, Asociación Neurociencia Aplicada Barcelona and with other local associations. All the partners have a lot of experience in the field of dance education, dance research and production, somatics and psychology applied to special groups. In this project we have researched how we can implement different methodologies to work with special needs people, psychiatric patients, Alzheimer's disease and neurodivergent folks.

Research Methods

We structured our research on several phases:

- From January to April 2023 all the four partners did an online research. Writing a handbook, a training program and a syllabus;
- In August 2023, in Helsinki, all partners did a training by sharing practices, concluding with a conference at *Tassintallo* – the Helsinki Dance Center;
- From October 2023 to April 2024, in Bucharest, three choreographers: Alexandra Bălășoiu, Denis Bolborea and Valentina De Piante (Indie Box) gave workshops at the Estuar Foundation, once a week, to a group of beneficiaries with psychiatric diagnoses. The beneficiaries were evaluated through a questionnaire at the beginning, at the middle and at the end. Together with them, their caregiver was also doing its evaluation of the beneficiaries. We wanted to observe a change from the subjective experience of the person and see also the caregiver's perspective upon the potential change. The questionnaires regarded four aspects: perception and movement, relationship, cognition and behavior. We evaluated them at the end: six people three times and three participants two times (the other seven people came occasionally and could not be tested).

- In February 2024, in Bucharest, we had the supervision of dr. Hanna Poikonen at the Estuar group. The second day we organized a conference at the "National University of Theatre and Film *I.L. Caragiale*". The aim was to share the methodology to students and professors and to get the students interested in this direction of research.
- In May 2024 at the *Caldera* Center in Barcelona (Spain) all 4 partners shared their results in the final conference which also included workshops with the audience.

Online Research

In the preliminary meetings, us 4 partners, from 4 different countries, were interested in what we wanted to achieve for our participants, people with psychiatric diagnoses, Alzheimer's, neurodivergence or disabled. Through this inquiry, we created together a ***Handbook*** – a collection of practices –, a ***Training Program*** and a ***Syllabus***, containing instructions for trainers who work with special people. As I explained, the methods we used come from somatics (Feldenkrais method, Body-mind Centering, contact improvisation) and dance improvisation linked to neuroscientific explanations.

What we wanted to achieve:
- connection with themselves and with us, educators;
- positive emotions;
- strengthening the inner balance;
- strengthening the self-perception;
- trusting the body as an amazing instrument to get in touch with the others;
- resilience;
- playfulness;
- embodiment of emotions not through descriptions but through your body, playing with it Local artistic intervention at the Estuar Foundation.

From October 2023 to April 2024, choreographers Alexandra Bălășoiu, Denis Bolborea and Valentina De Piante, worked with a pilot group of 8 to 12 people in partnership with the Estuar Foundation, people with a psychiatric diagnosis.

During the classes we proposed a circumferential approach to knowledge combining somatics, dance improvisation and dance therapy tools: from dancing, to the Awareness through Movement lessons of the Feldenkrais Method or to

lessons inspired by Body-Mind Centering, from using their voice and face, to dancing in couples, from moving in space with different tasks, to writing/drawing, to reflecting upon what they have experienced.

We also had to adapt: we had very little space and we could not use the floor. So, Valentina taught the *Awareness through Movement Lessons* of the Feldenkrais method on the chair.

The class had certain rules:

At the beginning, each choreographer created a ritual that connected the individual to the group, awakening the body and focusing the mind. We asked them to remain attentive as they moved, to enter a state of awareness of how their bodies move and how we move together, drawing inspiration from one another. This created a beautiful intra-group connection and it encouraged the letting go of habitual thoughts. We then suggested working with the chair, moving different parts of the body, and shifting from time to time between individual and group work. We varied the instructions and the rhythm of the exercises. We explored different intentions, especially those discouraged by society but deeply embraced by children: *doing it wrong, playing with mistakes, not doing it well*.

On an individual level, the benefits were both physical and mental: work on physical balance was reflected in greater mental balance, while engaging with their emotions made them more connected to themselves and more grounded in reality. At the group level, they became more empathetic.

On 27 February 2024 we presented the *DanceBrainRehab* public event at the "National University of Theatre and Film *I.L. Caragiale*" of Bucharest, inviting students and professors. Dr. Hanna Poikonen, together with choreographers Alexandra Bălășoiu, Denis Bolborea and Valentina De Piante, gave lectures, conducted a workshop, and participated in a round table. There were 80 people present: 40 students participated in the workshop, and the others were in the audience. Also present were the Pro-Rector, Prof. Romina Boldașu; the Director of the Dance Department, Prof. Elena Zamfirescu; Prof. Andreea Duță of the Dance Department; the psychotherapist and dance-movement psychotherapist Loredana Larionescu; and other freelance artists..

ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES

In our *DanceBrainRehab* Erasmus+ project, we aimed to understand in which ways artistic dance can support the well-being of fragile groups, such as the ones living with a psychotic illness. Since dance influences us on several levels: neuronal, sensory, motor, cognitive, behavioral and social, we chose to collect self-evaluation data from the participants and their caregivers in four different categories:

1. perception and movement;
2. relationships;
3. cognition and
4. behavior.

The participants and their caregivers filled in the evaluation surveys before starting the weekly DanceBrainRehab intervention, in the middle of it (ninth week), and after the completion of the intervention (twentieth week). Since the primary objective of the Erasmus+ EU projects is to provide vocational education rather than conduct scientific research, we did not have ethical approval for the study from any university nor was our sample size (9 participants) large enough to conduct statistical analyses to gain quantitative results for the evaluation surveys. Six people were evaluated three times: at the beginning, after two months and at the end. Three of them were evaluated only twice: at the beginning and at the end. In the 9 tables, one for each person, you will see on the left the three tests given by the patient, the change and on the right the three evaluations of the caregiver and the change perceived.

However, we observed improvements in at least some of the four categories across all participants, based on both self-evaluations and caregivers' evaluations when comparing the pre- and post-intervention surveys. Some participants showed improvement in only one of the four categories, whereas others improved in several categories. Our preliminary results suggest that artistic dance interventions for patients with psychotic disorders may enhance well-being across multiple domains, including perception, movement, relationships, cognition, and behaviour, with effects also transferring to everyday life. For future studies, it will be important to employ survey instruments—such as the one developed and used in our study—that aim to capture the multifaceted effects of dance on well-being, rather than focusing on a single domain (e.g. cognition), as has been the conventional approach in many intervention studies. A too narrow focus on well-being risks failing to capture the positive changes that an artistic dance intervention may bring about in patients' lives. Future research should also include larger sample sizes and seek to identify the individual differences that may account for the benefits reported by participants and their caregivers across different domains.

DISCUSSION

Working with fragile persons, they usually are told what to do but in our classes they were free to create movement, to move and use their voice, to listen silently, to create their own dance
Raffaella Crapio (ANABC)

At the beginning of the project, the psychologists at the Estuar Foundation told us that the participants' interest might wane, as some of them would require hospitalization. In addition, the beneficiaries were under medication, and we initially encountered low energy levels, frequent complaints at the beginning of the sessions, and a general sense of fatigue. However, throughout the sessions, we consistently observed a strong level of commitment within the group.

Over the course of these two years, as the project developed, we realized that we needed **to adopt a different perspective**: to place the emphasis on **what works** and on what is experienced, taking as a reference how a healthy system functions.

We didn't focus on the problem, but we analyzed what makes a body–mind system healthy. We used **dance** as the first language and the connection with the sensing body as the starting point to any action.

In doing so, we established a relationship not only with the body but with the whole self, with others, and with ourselves as educators. We had been told that participants would not remain for more than one hour; however, they ultimately stayed for two. During each session, they learned to cultivate their attention and to discover new actions, sensations, memories, images, and words through their experiences. They came into contact with multiple levels of experience simultaneously: perception, emotion, energy, action, and the observation of others. In this state, their minds were focused on doing, observing, and learning through the body. They experienced a state of expansion—a sense of integration across multiple aspects of the self, rather than separation.

The project meant for all of us **to expand the field of dance** and to be open to what was happening in the present moment. Awareness of the body, the music, the rhythms, the dance, the emotions were all a precious way to contact the entire person with a name and a surname, with their story. During the four months of classes, *Indie Box* and the local partner – the Estuar Foundation – created a dialogue through movement, body listening and learning from each other.

THE LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

We found two limitations: one was the way we evaluated them and the second was that we were asked: *when will you come back?* That made us realize the importance for all of us to continue this approach and create a constant network of somatic/artistic interventions.

Change the evaluation method

So our question was: *With which eyes do we see the change in the people we work with?*

At the end of the project, we realized that we needed to develop alternative criteria to those used in standard evaluation tests. We needed **to attend to what is not usually captured** by psychological assessments: coordination, intention, energy, tone, creativity in movement, underlying emotions, and subtle bodily cues.

At Estuar, we as trainers observed, within the group, increased self-awareness, a greater drive for action, and heightened energy and emotional expression in each participant—developments that were not reflected in the final assessments. We could argue that their initial awareness was not sufficiently sensitive to certain limitations that only became apparent at the end of the process (a form of reversed awareness). From our perspective, however, they became highly expressive, empowered, and enthusiastic. They developed their own dances in space, ranging from micro- to macro-movements. They began to interact more easily with others, expressing emotions through movement and engaging in mirroring exercises (in which, working in pairs, one participant proposes movements and the other reflects them). By the end of each session, they were full of energy and joy.

With regard to evaluation, we could draw inspiration from the research of Professor Isabelle Ginot *on the gaze*, applied to children with special needs, in which she used scores to apprehend the multidimensional changes in the individuals she worked with. This research was presented at a conference in Paris organized within the framework of *SPARKS – Somatic Practices, Art and Creativity for Special Needs*, a CultureForHealth project.

These scores were subsequently applied and further developed by the trainers Thomas Greil and Carla Bottiglieri, both in relation to vulnerable participants and to trainers, caregivers, and family members, in order to conceive a unified system in which the observer is also part of the process and must cultivate awareness of their own perceptual system.

When are you coming back?

The second limitation was the fact that the project had to come to an end. In all our projects, made in the last four years, the participants were asking for continuity. Being in resonance with the vulnerable persons, the collective from Romania (Alexandra Bălășoiu, Valentina De Piante, Cristina Lilienfeld and Loredana Larionescu) felt the urgency to keep working on the changes we started to see in the persons and in us. We were also assisted by the two mentors of the project: Carla Bottiglieri and Thomas Greil, creators of the practices of thinking and experiencing *Minima Somatica*.

Both of them are directors of somatic schools, and trainers in four somatic methods. Bottiglieri has done research at the University *Paris 8* in somatics's epistemology (Bottiglieri, 2010-2022) together with professor Ginot (Ginot, 2014).

The necessity to implement a long lasting program gave birth to *C.R.E.S.C.*, a national multiannual project (2025-2026), currently ongoing, being introduced during *the International Conference on Creativity in Dance-ICCD*-panel therapy, and which can be seen as the continuation and implementations of 4 community's projects the collective did in the last four years*: DanceBrainRehab* (2022-2024), *Moving Mothers* (2021-2022), *Mind Moving* (2022-2023), *The caring and performative Values of Touch* (2024). All the projects addressed vulnerable communities and were guided by the close cooperation of a collective of artists, dance therapists, psychologists.

C.R.E.S.C. proposes to create a community of care, creativity and profound relationships between persons with psychiatric diagnosis, children with special needs, parents, caregivers, teachers, therapists, doctors, artists and pupils. In this project, we continue building a network of cooperation between the local cultural organizations (ARCUB, CNDB, The Italian Institute and The Hungarian Institute of Culture), Universities (The National University of Theatre and Film UNATC and UNIBUC – Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences), La.R.I.O.S. center of research of the University of Padua (IT), the Choreography High School *Floria Capsali*, psychiatric hospitals, special schools, vocational and social NGO's, around the four main pillars:

I. Education and mental health;

II. Professional development;

III. Somatic education/ Dance as a space for reflection in the community and

IV. Inclusive creation.

Amongst the project's activities – through which we want to stimulate both artists and professional staff, but also the audience which participates to our events – we are organizing therapeutic-creative interventions at "*Sf. Nicolae* Special

School", at two psychiatric hospitals and at Estuar Foundation that cares for people with psychiatric diagnoses, multidisciplinary conferences in educational spaces, performances in the halls of the universities, special schools and high schools.

An especially important objective in the Romanian context is to train students and teachers in the new methodologies during international training programs and inclusive laboratories. At the core of the trainings, there are three aspects: building body awareness and community awareness and giving them **new instruments to work with special people** (applying principles of the Feldenkrais method, Body-Mind Centering, Contact improvisation, Dance Therapy, dance tools improvisation).

At the end, in September 2026, a psychoeducational research will be shared to all parties involved during the CRESC festival hosted by ARCUB, CNDB, Rezidența 9, as the official closing event of the project. The research will be organized in two directions:

I. Evaluation of the 4 trainings (research group: prof. Sara Santilli and psychotherapist specialized in dance-theraphy Loredana Larionescu). Here the contribution of Professor Sara Santilli of the Research and Inclusion Centre of the University of Padua will be essential, as she has been working for decades on the development of bio-psycho-social-spiritual assessments of people.

II. Case study on one neurodivergent kid from the Saint Nicolae Special School in Bucharest together with its professor (research group: prof. Loredana Pătrășcoiu and psychotherapist Cristina Dinu Popa).

CONCLUSION

The main aim of this article is to explore new methodologies related to somatic practices (Feldenkrais and Body-Mind Centering), dance therapy, and dance improvisation, in conjunction with neuroscientific supervision (*DanceBrainRehab* project) and psychoeducational supervision (*C.R.E.S.C.*), as applied in specific communities. The article has also outlined the broader cultural and scientific context in which somatic and dance-based approaches are increasingly examined by neuroscience and philosophy as significant domains for mental and physical health. As argued, within the fields of psychology and psychiatry, insufficient attention is often paid to the body and to embodied perception. This points to the need for the implementation of new therapeutic approaches grounded in a more holistic perspective, oriented toward the individual as embedded within a community.

As a primary reference, I have presented the Erasmus+ project *DanceBrainRehab*, which aimed to establish a network of care among institutions and individuals, alongside the development of new therapeutic methods. The research methodology unfolded over time across several stages: from the design of

a methodological framework, to shared training among partners, to the adaptation and co-creation of sessions with participants, as well as documentation and the presentation of public events in dance centres (Helsinki and Barcelona) and at national universities (Macerata and Jesi in Italy, and Bucharest in Romania). With regard to evaluation within the DBR project, qualitative assessment was a secondary objective, as the project was primarily educational in nature, with additional scientific outcomes.

The DBR project has thus confirmed a direction we had already been pursuing in Romania since 2017, beginning with projects dedicated to various communities: teenagers (*H.E.A.R.T. – Humans Embodying Art*), visually impaired participants (*Earsight – Indie Box*), mothers and grandmothers (*[M]others and Moving [M]others – Indie Box*), individuals with psychiatric diagnoses (*Mind-Moving – Indie Box*), and diverse vulnerable groups (*The Caring and Performative Values of Touch – EntuziArt*). Drawing on these initiatives, we gathered insights and observed developments that led to the creation of C.R.E.S.C., an ongoing platform where care is articulated in relation to creativity, education, health, and research. Our aim is to develop and disseminate a shared methodology among students, pedagogues, and artists working within such communities, collaboratively exploring what fosters attunement and co-creating new forms of embodied language. Within this framework, resonance and awareness of the dancing body become key resources and assume a central role in this artistic–therapeutic approach.

I will conclude with the words of a participant of the *Estuar* group (*DBR* project), which I would like to share with as many people as possible:

> I feel light and fluent because I have grown taller, I harmonize with my environment and my classmates. Peace beyond sound and movement descended upon me as I sat in my chair at the end. I'm happy today.

… and with a question: *As artists, students, professors or pedagogues, do we actually think about our work as a thing that we are giving or as something we are receiving?*

Funding

DanceBrainRehab: Benefits of the Artistic Dance for Fragile Groups is an Erasmus+ EU project, co-funded by the European Union in collaboration with WiseMotion Community in cooperation with Indie Box, Ijshaamanka ricercaculturafestivalproduzioni and Asociación Neurociencia Aplicada Barcelona

C.R.E.S.C. Network of creation, education, health, research is an Areal project co-financed by Afcn – Adminstrația Fondului Cultural Național.

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Dr. Hanna Poikonen is an academic guest at the Social Brain Sciences Lab, collaborating with the political scientist Dr. Aydin Yildirim on neuropolitics. Between 2019 and 2023, she conducted her postdoc training at another ETH D-GESS lab, Learning Sciences and Higher Education. Her research focused on math expertise and embodied cognition which expanded her interest in expertise and the brain, from dancers and musicians to mathematicians. Currently, she is also a guest researcher at the Örebro University Hospital in Sweden investigating the influence of creative movement intervention in people with schizophrenia. By combining her background in biomedical engineering, neuroscience and dance, in 2018 Hanna pursued her doctoral degree at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Helsinki focusing on cortical oscillation (EEG) in professional dancers, musicians and novices when watching a video-recorded dance performance. With high interest in naturalistic brain research, she brought a live dance duet to the LIVELab of McMaster University in Canada. She has also studied contemporary dance, was a postgraduate in art therapy at Metàfora, Barcelona, and conducted her art-science project at the Museum of Contemporary Art Barcelona (MACBA). Since 2018, she is also teaching globally her WiseMotion method on neuroscience and creative movement for educators, creative and healthcare professionals, higher executives, and people with a brain-related illness. Through WiseMotion, Hanna also partners in different EU projects.

THE THERAPEUTIC VIRTUES OF DANCE

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Abstract: This presentation aims to foster connections among dancers, choreographers, teachers, researchers, and other stakeholders, in order to raise awareness of the value of (creative) dance as both an educational and therapeutic tool. The therapeutic benefits of dance have been recognized since ancient times. Across all major early civilizations, historical evidence highlights the central role of dance – with its many dimensions – in human development. As a psychopedagogue, I became aware of the importance of dance early in my career while working with children with special needs. In an effort to break down the barriers of segregation in special education settings, I invited high school volunteers to engage with these children. Dance proved to be the most effective shared activity, as it enabled natural communication through movement and music – particularly in situations where words were difficult to find. Although the scientific literature acknowledges the positive impact of dance on development and well-being, it remains underutilized in schools today. Recent studies and meta-analyses, such as those conducted by May et al. (2021) and Duarte Machado et al. (2023), demonstrate the significant effectiveness of dance in enhancing physical, cognitive, psychological, and social functioning, and consequently improving the quality of life for individuals with special needs. At the same time, these studies highlight the need for more robust research methods and tools to better validate dance-based therapeutic practices. This paper seeks to contribute to the process of scientific validation by drawing on valuable local experiences.

Keywords: Dance therapy, dance movement therapy, special needs, well-being, quality of life, inclusion, developmental progress, dance research methodology.

How to cite: Pătrășcoiu, L.A. (2026) "The Therapeutic Virtues of Dance", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 41-48.

Introduction

The therapeutic value of dance has been recognized since ancient times. Across all known civilizations, historical evidence attests to the central role that dance – through its multiple dimensions – has played in human development. In ancient educational systems (including those of Egypt, China, India, and Mesopotamia), dance was an integral component of the core curriculum. It was regarded as a refined form of expression that mediated the relationship between body and soul, both in relation to the divine (through sacred and ritual practices performed in temples) and within social life, where it celebrated existence in both spontaneous and choreographed forms. In this sense, dance was understood as a medium of both immanent and transcendent communication, as well as a vehicle for healing and therapeutic expression.

From a conceptual perspective, the relationship between dance and education is also reflected in classical philosophy. In *The Republic*, as discussed by Pfefferkorn (2021), Plato asserts that "an uneducated person is someone untrained

in choral dance, while an adequately educated person is adequately trained in choral dance" (654a9–b1; cf. 672e5–6). Both Plato and Aristotle emphasized the role of dance in cultivating aesthetic and moral sensibilities, as well as its contribution to physical development and overall well-being. For Plato, dance was essential not only for bodily training but also for the refinement of the mind, ultimately contributing to the formation of a virtuous character.

From a professional perspective, my understanding of the importance of dance emerged early in my career as a psychopedagogue working with children with special needs. In an effort to challenge the segregation typical of special education settings, I invited high school students to participate in shared activities. Among these, dance proved to be the most effective medium of interaction, as it enabled natural communication through movement and music – particularly in situations where verbal expression was limited or insufficient.

This effectiveness can be attributed to the nature of dance itself: the moving body, together with its neurocognitive representations, provides a direct channel for expressing internal states and conceptual content. Dance typically unfolds within a social context, involving a form of nonverbal communication enriched by the diverse ways in which individuals move, perceive, feel, and interpret the world. In this regard, dance constitutes a powerful tool for fostering inclusion.

Paper Body

Engaging in dance activities that bring together individuals with diverse bodily, perceptual, or cognitive conditions alongside those without such impairments leads to meaningful changes in interaction and communication at the group level. This occurs because different modes of bodily expression, particularly under conditions of functional limitation, can generate new forms of interaction and innovative movement-based expressions.

From the perspective of dancers and choreographers, performers with visual impairments, for example, rely on non-visual sensory modalities when navigating space and interacting with others during performance. This can offer enriched aesthetic experiences for sighted audiences and open new avenues for conceptualizing dance as an art form. Although the overall visual composition may differ from conventional expectations, the fundamental elements of dance and choreography – such as the body, movement, interaction, emotion, space, rhythm, and structure – remain fully present.

From a psychopedagogical perspective, the transformative implications of such shared practices are significant, particularly when considering both individual and collective experiences. Issues such as multisensory integration,

body representation, spatial awareness, motor learning processes, embodied memory, and communication dynamics are central concerns in educational and therapeutic interventions. This raises an important question: how can specialists enhance their practices through the exchange and integration of diverse professional perspectives?

The existing literature indicates a growing interest in this field. The number of studies has increased substantially, from an average of 1.3 studies per year between 1996 and 2012 to 6.8 studies per year between 2012 and 2018. In their meta-analysis of 41 controlled intervention studies (N = 2,374), Koch et al. (2019) report a significant overall positive effect of both dance and dance movement therapy on health-related outcomes. However, these findings are characterized by considerable heterogeneity and limited consistency. The analysis distinguishes between two types of interventions: dance/movement therapy and dance-based interventions. While both approaches contribute to improvements in clinical, cognitive, and (psycho)motor outcomes, variability remains particularly high in the dance-based intervention group, warranting further investigation. Dance movement therapy interventions demonstrate more consistent improvements in psychological well-being, including reductions in anxiety and depression, as well as enhancements in quality of life and cognitive functioning. In contrast, dance-based interventions show more consistent effects on motor skill development.

More recent studies reinforce these findings while also highlighting methodological limitations. For instance, the meta-analysis conducted by May et al. (2021), which examined 19 studies on dance interventions for children with disabilities, suggests that such interventions can yield physical, cognitive, and psychosocial benefits. However, the data are heterogeneous and vary in quality, indicating the need for more systematic synthesis. Similarly, Duarte Machado et al. (2023), in their analysis of 14 studies on children with cerebral palsy, report significant positive effects on cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional outcomes, although these results are also marked by substantial heterogeneity due to differences in study design.

Dance- and movement-based interventions for individuals with cerebral palsy have been shown to improve gait, balance, postural control, and range of motion. Beyond these functional outcomes, such practices also enhance participation, engagement, and active involvement in activities.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of dance and movement therapy for development and well-being, these approaches remain underutilized in educational and therapeutic contexts, particularly in institutions serving vulnerable populations. One of the main challenges lies in the difficulty of collecting and structuring data in ways that support the development of

robust evidence-based practices. This underscores the need for more appropriate research methodologies and tools.

In response to this need, the present panel brings together experiences and perspectives shared by specialists from Romania and abroad. Among them, Richard Coaten, a dancer and psychotherapist specializing in dance movement therapy, works extensively with older adults in day-care settings. He is recognized nationally and internationally for his expertise in nonverbal, movement-based practices for individuals living with dementia. He advocates for Person-Centered Care as a contemporary framework grounded in widely recognized values and principles, increasingly reflected in health policy. His work aims to deepen understanding of how theory and practice interact across disciplines and evolve over time, contributing to what he describes as "bridges of understanding" between past, present, and future perspectives.

Interdisciplinary and intersubjective approaches are central to his work, with a strong emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of individuals with dementia and their caregivers. In this context, the body is understood as a primary source of meaning, not reducible to purely cognitive processes. The concept of "building bridges of understanding" becomes essential in facilitating meaningful connections between therapist and beneficiary, particularly when verbal communication is limited. Dance and movement therapy offer valuable tools for interpreting both verbal and nonverbal expressions, even when they appear fragmented or ambiguous, and for accessing individuals' inner worlds and subjective experiences.

Dorka Farkas, a choreographer and movement facilitator engaged in inclusive artistic practice, similarly emphasizes the transformative potential of creative dance. Her work focuses on artistic creation and performance while engaging participants of diverse abilities, from early childhood to higher education. She highlights that dance extends beyond conventional understandings and enables individuals to express creativity through movement. This is particularly significant for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as demonstrated by the work of the Baltazár Theatre and the Baltazár Art Center, which involve individuals with Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, learning difficulties, and visual impairments.

Between 2012 and 2015, she coordinated the Self-Awareness through Movement Group, initially composed of visually impaired participants and later developed into an inclusive mixed group. Her approach emphasizes the importance of inclusive spaces grounded in principles of Universal Design – environments that welcome participants with diverse backgrounds and abilities and facilitate shared movement experiences.

Within the context of this panel, which aims to contribute to the advancement of the CRESC community in the field of interventions for vulnerable learners, a central focus of discussion has been the relationship between specialists and beneficiaries, as well as the methodologies employed in intervention. Emphasizing dance and movement as primary modes of communication, Richard Coaten highlights the importance of attending to the lived bodily experience of individuals in relation to themselves, others, and the world. In this view, the body constitutes a fundamental source of selfhood that is not derived solely from cognitive processes.

The process of "building bridges of understanding" involves integrating knowledge, intuition, skill, and experience in order to make sense of fragmented or ambiguous forms of communication and memory. This relational process becomes particularly significant in contexts such as dementia care, where verbal communication may be severely limited. In such cases, even small supportive actions acquire profound meaning. If communication is understood as the transmission of meaning from one individual to another, then the ability to listen, understand, and respond appropriately can have a decisive impact on well-being.

Dorka Farkas further illustrates how creative dance can empower neurodivergent individuals. As a form of movement practice – with or without music –creative dance fosters body awareness and provides opportunities for self-expression, particularly for those with limited prior movement experience. Guided by the principle that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to move, this approach emphasizes communication through movement, the exploration of the body's inherent communicative capacities, and the discovery of internal sources of movement. At the same time, participants' interests can guide the exploration of new "movement possibilities."

Finally, we have related these perspectives to students' experiences with more traditional therapeutic approaches (such as speech therapy), exploring the potential roles of dance and movement interventions – whether as complementary elements within existing therapies or as independent forms of intervention.

Conclusions

Returning to the central research question – what can specialists gain by integrating their professional perspectives? – it becomes evident that such collaboration enables both the exchange of knowledge and the expansion of professional practice. The field of special psychopedagogy is inherently interdisciplinary, situated at the intersection of multiple sciences and domains of expertise. In this context, virtually any form of knowledge can be meaningfully integrated and valued.

The contributions of specialists working in dance are particularly evident in their approach to the therapeutic relationship. Through the creation of space, careful observation, and emotional attunement, the practitioner gradually supports the child in entering a secure, trusting, and supportive environment. Within this framework, the therapist can introduce new elements that facilitate behavioral change and developmental progress. The child, in turn, feels sufficiently safe to relax, to engage, and to express themselves freely.

Such a relationship is grounded in deep learning processes, authenticity, and the co-creation of a space for creative expression shared by both child and therapist. This authentic connection – experienced both individually and relationally – represents a fundamental condition for the ontogenetic development of the beneficiary, while also contributing to the therapist's sense of professional fulfillment. At the same time, it generates well-being and enables the expansion of educational and therapeutic experiences grounded in mutual recognition and respect.

I conclude with the words of a student who participated in these shared experiences:

> Beyond the openness to new perspectives in psychopedagogical rehabilitation, this opportunity to encounter dance therapy and movement therapy touched a deeply personal dimension within me, contributing significantly to my own development. (Laura Trifu)

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A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE OEDIPUS MYTH: FROM GREEK TRAGEDY TO MARTHA GRAHAM

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Abstract: This article presents the evolution of the representations of the myth of Oedipus throughout the history of European culture, starting from its manifestations in Antiquity, continuing with psychoanalysis and finishing with *Oedipus Rex- A Night Journey*, Martha Graham's show. My methodology involves a hermeneutical approach, with the main purpose of this paper being to create a narrative that presents the development of the myth across the centuries. This research aims to underline how the myth of Oedipus, despite its stable narrative essence, accummulates new dimensions from every cultural paradigm in which it has been received.

Keywords: Oedipus, Ancient Grece, Martha Graham, psychoanalysis.

How to cite: Gligor, N. (2026) "A Cultural History of the Oedipus Myth: from Greek Tragedy to Martha Graham", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 49-56.

Introduction

This article aims to build a hermeneutic on the evolution of the myth of Oedipus in European culture. The main purpose of my interpretative approach is to underline how this essential narrative of the Greek Antiquity is retrieved in the 20th century in entirely different terms, but at the end of the day keeping the same constituent elements. Just as the act of translation keeps the basic meaning of the message while still being able to alter the nuances of the initial language to the detriment of the particularities of the other language, the new paradigms that evoke the myth of Oedipus in the 20th century rebuild it in their own terms. In this analysis, I am interested in both the continuities and discontinuities of this cultural history. My expectation is that in analyzing this narrative (which, at the end of the day, marked the entire European civilization), both its fundamental concepts which are preserved throughout the centuries, and the particularities of every paradigm can tell us something about *what is, in fact, the myth of Oedipus and what is left after incest and parricide.*

My approach is not ambitious enough to present a systemic evolution of this mythological story throughout the centuries. I will stick only to a few of the many interpretations and reproductions to which this myth was subject through the evolution of European culture, trying to underline the way it is redefined in different intellectual and cultural contexts. Therefore, this article will hesitate on two major paradigms of thought in which the myth of Oedipus manifested itself: the collective mentality of Ancient Greece, and psychoanalysis; and on two performative manifestations of it, respectively: *Oedipus King*, Sophocles' tragedy, and *Oedipus Rex – A Night Journey*, the choreographic spectacle of Martha Graham. Thus, the methodology that I suggest for this analysis has an expository dimension,

through the description of the way in which those mentioned above function, and also a hermeneutic one, by building, on the basis of common elements, a possible narrative that connects all these manifestations.

Now that these preliminaries have been made, I intend to argue in favor of the following thesis that summarizes all that was presented above:

The myth of Oedipus represents a cultural phenomenon with its own evolution, which although keeps a common narrative quintessence, it also collects throughout its many rewritings new dimensions, peculiar to every historical and cultural paradigm through which it passed, which accumulates the basic sense of classical tragedy and offers it a continuous development.

Throughout the paper, I will explain how the 20th century examples that I have chosen (psychoanalysis and the choreography of Martha Graham) contribute to the development of this phenomenon, and how they stand in relation to the classical Greek world.

A few things about the mentality of the Greek man

One of the most complicated approaches that the modern man needs to take when he wants to analyze any aspect of Ancient Greek culture is to transpose himself to that time. Although he is the ancestor of the European man, the Greek man has a completely different worldview. In order to be able to analyze any text produced by this civilization, it is important to know, at least partially, how the mentality of Archaic Greece works. Greek tragedy is born in a space which has its own way of seeing the world. In what follows, I intend to briefly present a few of the thought structures of this period, and then explain how they affect the myth of Oedipus. This section of the article only intends to describe the cultural context in which this myth first appears, not to present a direct exegesis on the myth. My intention is not to present the myth, but to explain why the way in which Archaic Greece builds a narrative about the world also impacts the way in which we relate to the myth in general and to Sophocles' tragedy in particular.

First of all, we need to keep in mind that just like the history of European civilization, Ancient Greece also has its own turning points and transformations. Even though, in reality, the transformations that appear in the Greek collective mentality throughout the centuries are more complicated than this, I will anchor myself to a great extent in the separation between before and after Plato. My intention is exactly to underline how the innovation that Plato brings to Western thought through the separation between the Forms and their imperfect copies represent a true key to reading reality, a new language in which, by the way, our entire thought was formed. But, unfortunately, neither the mythical imaginary around the myth of Oedipus, nor the tragedies of Sophocles, waited for Plato.

This narrative, so important for the history of universal culture, is born in a *preplatonic* context.

The basic dichotomies on the basis of which we currently build any reasoning (such as the separation between abstract and concrete, or the way in which any concept subsumes an entire class of objects with a series of common characteristics) come from Plato. The preplatonic Greek man thinks without using this distinction which imposes two separate ontological levels. For him, to speak about justice is the same as speaking, for instance, about a tree, because what we would call in modern language an abstraction and a concrete object are not seen as two fundamentally different elements.

This is exactly why, for the Greek man, the immediate reality is, in a way, overwhelming. Standing in front of a tree can be an experience just as powerful as contemplating the idea of justice or freedom. Platonic thought also brings along the tendency of European thought to subsume everything to a mental schema. For us, accidentally seeing a tree on the street is not so meaningful, exactly because we see it as a representative of an already existing mental image, an imperfect copy of the idea of a tree in general. In the collective preplatonic Greek mentality, this tendency of conceptualizing experience does not exist, therefore seeing a tree means meeting it. Seeing a stone means meeting it, same with seeing a sea wave. This is why the immediate reality becomes overwhelming, yet fascinating at the same time.

In the modern mentality, we tend to associate this kind of overwhelming experience, which both dominates you and invites you to admire it, with the way of relating to the things that we consider beyond us. What is for Plato the contemplation of the ideas from the World of Forms, where one can find both the Good, the Beautiful, Justice etc., and the Gods and the mythical elements, is manifested in European society in the same almost pious attitude regarding these abstract concept (I am also referring to terms such as good, beautiful, fair), based on which we build our existence, but also in the way in which we perceive religious experience today. For the modern man who thinks in platonic terms, both the good, beauty, and God, although they manifest in this world, belong to another. In Archaic Greece, on the other hand, the relation to the myth is also different, exactly due to the different way of perceiving the world.

As I said, for him, not only thinking about the Gods, but also concrete reality is overwhelming, and there is no formal difference between what we would call, in platonic language, ideas and the things that surround us. That is why the way they experience myth is, in a way, encircled by the way in which they experience the world on the whole. The Greek imaginary builds a world in which the everyday life of people is intertwined with mythical stories. Their way of life

is consolidated around this dynamic in which the mythical and reality are not two distinct paradigms.

These aspects can be seen extremely well in their mentality regarding destiny. The Greek term for destiny is *moira*, which, in free translation, would mean *part*. This destiny concretely represents the part that was dealt to you at birth. The Greek man lives his entire existence circumscribed to this fatalism, imposed by a mythical instance. Nobody can get rid of it, it cannot even be stopped by the gods (maybe, at best, delayed), but the destiny given at birth will always be fulfilled.

This is the fundamental element of the tragic. The myth of Oedipus, and Sophocles' tragedy respectively (just like any tragedy in general), are consolidated around this conception about destiny. Classical tragedy imposes a perpetual fight against destiny, an attempt to break free from it, an attempt which fails. The tragic of Oedipus does not consist in incest or parricide, but in the impossibility of avoiding them.

His destiny is known from the beginning, and despite this, his father, Laios, tries to get rid of Oedipus at birth, thinking that he can somehow change fate. Any resolution is merely an illusion. It just seems that destiny was avoided, but it becomes clear that, in fact, the truth is different. Exactly due to the fact that, in this Greek mythical imaginary, nothing and nobody can oppose moira. The murder of his father and the marriage with his mother are not themselves so relevant for the tragic hero that is Oedipus. The two events represent two examples of what could have been worse in his destiny. Even if different misfortunes had been predestined to Oedipus, the tragic essence of the story would have stayed the same.

This form of resistance against a bad destiny, which in fact represents the essence of tragism, brings the Greek man even closer to the mythical character, because just as the tragic hero, he also needs to face his own moira. Therefore, the destiny of a tragic hero is not fundamentally different from the destiny of the Greek man. No matter if you are Oedipus or a mere citizen of Athens, your moira will be fulfilled one way or another. This underlines even further the closeness between the Greek man and the myth, because the logic according to which he lives his existence is the same as the one according to which the myth develops.

A few things about psychoanalysis

This part of the article aims to briefly present what psychoanalysis is and to showcase a few things about how it uses the myth of Oedipus as an illustrative element for the unconscious dynamics of the psyche. I want to mention that just as in the case of the exposition of the Ancient Greek collective mentality, I do not intend to present but a series of summative elements for the extremely

vast subject that is psychoanalysis. I am only interested in describing what the relevance of Oedipus' story from Greek mythology is within this theory which definitively marked the thought of the 20th century. This is exactly why I will shallowly analyze the conceptual foundations of psychoanalysis, my hermeneutic effort being focused in a different direction. My main intention is to underline how by deconstructing this myth and consolidating an entire psychological and philosophical theory, psychoanalysis develops its own mythology. Unlike Ancient Greece, psychoanalysis is much closer to contemporaneity. Thus, the cultural paradigm that it develops requires much fewer clarifications. This is why in my analysis on psychoanalysis, I prefer to rather pay attention to the impact that it had on the 20th century culture and not only.

The Oedipus complex is one of the fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis, and it aims to describe within this theory an essential dynamic of the unconscious psychical life. It is built around two elements: the erotic attraction towards the opposite-sex parent, and parricide. These two impulses, undesirable from a social point of view, are considered peculiar to man and present in the psychic life of every individual, in spite of the fact that they are constantly discharged, hidden very deep in the entrails of the unconscious. They continue not only to subsist, but also to shape the concrete dynamics and behaviors of every one of us. Even though it seems that if we inhibit them enough, we can get rid of them, the effort is futile. They continue to be there.

The Greek myth which gives the name of this psychic phenomenon has, first and foremost, an illustrative function. At first, we can see that this famous story of the Greek tragedy contains in itself the two actions repressed inside the unconscious. The story of Oedipus supposes an incest with one's own mother and the murder of the father. Therefore, we could say that it is a reason strong enough to see the connections between the two cultural paradigms, between Ancient Greece, and psychoanalysis respectively. Still, I believe that the similarities can go even further.

In psychoanalysis, the conscious is but an almost insignificant part of the psychic life. There are many more unconscious phenomena and most of the times they shape our life in a much stronger manner than our voluntary choices that consciousness dictates. A description that strongly resembles the way the Greek man conceptualizes destiny. We talk about a force that you cannot control, that even if you want to oppose, and sometimes you may succeed, it still has much more influence on you than you would be willing to accept.

A fundamental difference that we can notice is the positive connotation that psychoanalysis brings to this narrative. Unlike Greek tragedy, where incest and parricide are seen as two atrocities brought about by this force named moira, psychoanalysis somehow tries to exonerate the unconscious. The Oedipus

complex is not seen as a form of shame, but as the de facto state of the human psychic life.

I will end with Michel Foucault's comment which calls Marxism and psychoanalysis the founding myths of the 20th century. The mythological dimension of Marxism is a subject for an entirely different research, which is why regarding Foucault I am only interested in his comment on psychoanalysis. Here, my aim was simply to emphasize how a theory that names one of its fundamental concepts after a mythologiccal character is retrospectively considered a form of mythology. This phenomenon, highlighted by the French philosopher's observation, offers a wide spectrum of hermeneutics, which shows how the cultural impact of the myth of Oedipus was kept even in the 20th century.

A few things about Martha Graham

Martha Graham was one of the most important choreographers of the 20th century. She revolutionized the history of dance through the invention of a new choreographic language, which transgressed in an extremely strong manner the rigors of classic ballet. In what follows, I intend to briefly analyze the stage reinterpretation that she brought to the tragedy of Sophocles, and to present her influence on the spectacle, regarding both the Classical Antiquity, and psychoanalysis, with which Martha Graham was contemporary.

First of all, thematically, *Oedipus Rex – A Night Journey* reconstructs, in the form of a dance spectacle, the moment in which Oedipus and Jocasta learn from Tiresias about the two delicts done by Oedipus. The influence of Greek theatre is visible, first of all, thematically, exactly due to the use of the original story, without a narrative rewriting. The reinterpretation of Martha Graham emerges from the choreographic language that replaces the lines of the characters. The music and the movements of the dancers allow the development of this scene of maximal tension from Sophocles' tragedy, without the initial dialogue being needed in any manner.

The costumes and the elements of scenography also contribute to the same monumental aspect of Ancient Greece, despite the minimalist aesthetic that it tries. All this is doubled by the complete attention that Martha Graham brings to the almost sculptural presentation of the dancers' bodies. Both the movements of those on the stage, and the entire space in which the performative act takes place, highlight the bodies of those present, this gesture seeming strongly influenced by the Antiquity's view on the human body.

Regarding psychoanalysis, we can observe many elements which belong to the register of this cultural paradigm. The spectacle presents a dream-like atmosphere, where things rather *seem to be* than actually *are*.

We would not necessarily know that Oedipus, Jocasta and Tiresias are there if we did not already know the story, but just as with dreams – so important for

psychoanalysts – a complex dynamic emerges between what we recognize and what we do not. In this sense, even we, as spectators, engage in a hermeneutic game, trying to deconstruct the things that are before us, a process that is similar with the one that the psychoanalyst does on the dream and on the symbols that hide inside it.

In the same direction, we can even see most of the elements of scenography utilized as symbols which allow decoding in almost Freudian terms. The rope, the staff, the leaves are mere decorations in the spectacle, but they are also very often invoked by psychoanalytic literature. Given, on the one hand, the huge cultural impact of this psychological theory, and on the other hand, the fact that they are used exactly to underline the moments of erotic closeness between Oedipus and Jocasta, I believe that it is in no way exaggerated to try to notice a psychoanalytic influence even on the choreography of Martha Graham.

Conclusions

In conclusion, through those presented above, I tried to make a cultural history of the Oedipus myth. Through the hermeneutics that I proposed regarding the paradigms which it traversed, I tried to underline the fact that, with time, it developed in almost surprising ways, yet kept a common essence. Ending on a rather lyrical note, we could say that such an important story as the myth of Oedipus must be translated in several languages, across several eras, and among these languages there can even be a psychological theory from 20th century Vienna, and a spectacle of an American choreographer.

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DANCE MOVEMENT THERAPY AND DRAWING AS TOOLS FOR BODY AWARENESS: A CASE STUDY IN NON-VERBAL AUTISTIC CHILDREN

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Abstract: This paper explores the integration of Dance Movement Therapy and drawing as complementary tools to support body awareness and emotional self-regulation in a nonverbal autistic child. Over the course of 20 therapeutic sessions, a variety of movement-based techniques—such as mirroring, movement and sound attunement, touch, contact improvisation and object play—were carefully adapted to meet the child's individual needs and internal rhythm. These sessions were complemented by a visual practice involving drawings made before and after each encounter, using a body outline pre-drawn by the therapist. The child was invited to colour the outline freely, without specific instructions, offering a visual and nonverbal method to monitor changes in perception, integration, and emotional state. At the beginning of the intervention, the child showed signs of low tolerance to physical and visual contact, reduced attention span, and resistance to task engagement. As the therapeutic process evolved, notable improvements were observed: increased emotional expressiveness through movement and sound, improved motor coordination, stronger eye contact, and a more active use of touch as a communicative gesture. The drawings reflected these developments as well—becoming more integrated, less chaotic, and more expressive of specific body areas over time. This case study suggests that the integration of drawing into dance movement therapy may serve not only as a valuable evaluative tool for nonverbal children but also as a therapeutic extension of embodied work. The findings point to the potential of multisensory and nonverbal approaches in supporting emotional and bodily development in nonverbal autistic children.

Keywords: dance movement therapy, touch, autism, body awareness, drawing, assessment.

How to cite: Dumitrașcu, A.M. (2026) "Dance Movement Therapy and Drawing as Tools for Body Awareness: A Case Study in Non-Verbal Autistic Children," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 57-75.

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed growing interest in the use of expressive arts and body-based therapies in the support of autistic individuals. Many studies have been done on supporting the idea that Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is an effective tool for development in nonverbal children, creating relationship (otherwise a lifelong difficulty) and developing body awareness and expressiveness. Being a multimodal and integrative approach, DMT complements other expressive arts and somatic practices, enriching the therapeutic process. Its flexibility allows for the incorporation of music, visual art, props, and vocal play, creating a dynamic, individualized space for engagement and regulation (Koch et al., 2015; Samaritter, 2015; Tortora, 2011).

Rooted in embodied cognition and somatic psychology, DMT provides a multisensory, nonverbal pathway to emotional expression, regulation, and

interpersonal connection (Koch et al., 2015; Samaritter, 2015; Tortora, 2011). Simultaneously, drawing—frequently used in both art therapy and DMT—offers children a concrete, visual channel for emotional processing and self-exploration (Faber, 2019; Samaritter, 2015).

This study investigates the integration of DMT and drawing in therapeutic work with a nonverbal autistic child. It seeks to understand how body awareness and emotional regulation can be enhanced through movement, touch, and visual expression. Moreover, it explores the use of drawing as a qualitative assessment method in therapeutic contexts. The structure of the paper includes a theoretical overview of embodied approaches in autism therapy, detailed methodology, observational and artistic results, and a discussion on the implications of this integrative method. This case study follows the therapeutic journey of Radu (pseudonym), a 10-year-old nonverbal autistic boy, over the course of 20 sessions combining DMT, Body Mind Centering (BMC), and an experimental body-based drawing protocol.

The intervention took place mostly at home and for a few times at school, offering insight into Radu's relational, sensory, and environmental dynamics. By following his lead and offering structure only when needed, I sought to create a space of safety, attunement, and bodily expression. Using Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) for observation, floorwork inspired by BMC, and spontaneous drawing as both assessment and integration, the sessions evolved into a rhythmically responsive and affectively rich space, positioning DMT not as a corrective tool, but as a relational and embodied medium that supports emotional regulation, body awareness, and the child's ability to make choices and engage actively in the process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Dance Movement Therapy and Autism

DMT engages the body as both medium and message, creating a unique space for expression and self-awareness, emotional regulation, and interpersonal connection. This is particularly relevant for children on the autism spectrum, who often face challenges in verbal communication and social reciprocity. Grounded in sensory-motor engagement and affective attunement, DMT bypasses the need for verbal language, instead drawing on rhythm, movement, and play to foster co-regulation and expression (Koch et al., 2014; Samaritter, 2015; Chiang et al., 2020). These movement-based interactions echo early developmental processes of connection and affective mirroring, in which bodily attunement forms the foundation for social and emotional communication (Tortora, 2011).

Nonverbal children, in particular, benefit from Dance Movement Therapy's ability to engage pre-verbal channels of expression and meaning-making (Cornacchini, 2020; Koch et al., 2014). As Cornacchini (2025) emphasizes, DMT's strength lies in blending movement with creative expression, offering neurodivergent children diverse sensory and relational entry points. Given that autistic individuals often perceive and interact with the world through unique sensory and motor pathways, DMT serves as a responsive and inclusive medium, especially where verbal communication is limited, helping children feel seen, settle their nervous systems, and express themselves through movement. (Tortora, 2011; Koch et al., 2014; Samaritter, 2015; Porges, 2011; Faber, 2019)

Further, critical perspectives in the field encourage a shift from correctional or normative approaches to those emphasizing relationship, safety, and the individual's embodied narrative (Faber, 2019; From Fixing to Connecting, 2020). Multimodal DMT approaches (integrating sound, imagery, props, and art) create openings for participation and enrich communication across sensory domains (Lesley University, 2019).

Touch and Body awareness

Touch, movement, and body awareness are foundational to sensorimotor integration and emotional development. In somatic approaches like BMC, touch is understood not merely as physical contact but as a deeply relational and sensory experience that nurtures internal coherence, embodiment, and a felt sense of safety (Cohen, 1993; Greil, 2020). For children on the autism spectrum, carefully attuned tactile and proprioceptive input—offered with respect and sensitivity—can reduce hyperarousal and support self- and co-regulation (Tortora, 2011). As Greil (2020) emphasizes, touch in BMC is non-intrusive, specific to each child's process, and invites curiosity rather than compliance. Over time, tactile engagement may shift from resistance to openness, becoming a dynamic medium for shared presence, trust, and kinesthetic communication (Faber, 2019; Samaritter, 2020).

Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP)

KMP is a psychomotor assessment and observation system that decodes movement as an expression of psychological and developmental functioning (Loman & Merman, 1996). Developed by Judith Kestenberg, it maps tension-flow rhythms and developmental patterns that correspond with emotional tone, sensory preferences, and relational style.

In children with autism, rhythmic patterns such as biting, drifting, snapping, and sucking can reflect internal regulation strategies, affective states, or attempts at self-soothing (Samaritter, 2015; Lesley University, 2019). By observing these rhythms and qualities, the therapist gains insight into the child's internal world and may respond through attuned movement, offering either resonance or contrast to support modulation (Chiang et al., 2020).

As a therapeutic tool, KMP deepens the therapist's capacity to perceive and respond to the subtle language of the body. It allows for the observation of developmental shifts over time, offering insight into how a child grows into movement and emotion (Loman & Merman, 1996). By tracking rhythmic patterns and tension-flow affinities, the therapist can begin to decode embodied signals of need, stress, or regulation (Samaritter, 2015; Kestenberg-Amighi et al., 1999). Rather than seeking correction or normative movement, the KMP approach fosters relational attunement, meeting the child within their unique movement vocabulary and offering a nonverbal bridge between internal states and social connection (Samaritter, 2020; Loman & Merman, 1996).

When used in combination with DMT and BMC, KMP provides an embodied language for observing, relating to, and supporting children who communicate primarily through movement.

Multimodal integration

DMT practices are often enriched through multimodal approaches that integrate music, props, visual arts, storytelling, and vocal play. These offer multiple entry points for children with diverse sensory preferences and communication styles (Cornacchini, 2020; Lesley University, 2019). In a therapeutic setting, such combinations may support attention, motor planning, creativity, and social participation—especially when tailored to individual rhythms and interests (Faber, 2019; Samaritter, 2020). As *Rethinking Autism* (2020) suggests, interventions that privilege embodied experiences over normative goals support more inclusive, empowering outcomes.

Drawing as assessment an expression

Drawing is a well-established tool in child therapy, functioning as both expressive outlet and diagnostic mirror. In children with limited verbal expression, drawings may reveal inner emotional states, body image, sensory processing experiences, and even relational patterns (Faber, 2019; Samaritter, 2015).

Anchoring these drawings in a body outline, as in this study, helps bridge the gap between inner sensation and external form. Elements like colour use,

line pressure, symmetry, and attention to body regions may indicate shifts in perception, regulation, or affect. When applied before and after movement-based sessions, such drawings can serve as a visual diary of change and integration over time (Chiang et al., 2020; Art Therapy Interventions, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

Case description – initial observations

Radu is a 10-year-old nonverbal autistic boy who lives with his parents and grandmother in a rented house with a long, narrow garden, not far from school. Most of our sessions took place

in his home, in a room used mainly for therapy and homework. Toward the end of our work together, we moved to a larger, more comfortable and neutral space, where Radu adjusted easily.

Almost every time, Radu and his grandmother would come to meet me at the gate, which was helpful, since one of their dogs could be aggressive. Radu often came outside barefoot, sometimes in shorts, sometimes in just his underwear, his legs dark from dust and covered with mosquito bites that he would often scratch during the session.

In the beginning, I hoped the family could be more involved in the process. But I soon realized that this wasn't realistic for several reasons. His grandmother, who I saw as his main caregiver, would use the session time to take care of house chores that were hard to do while watching over him. His parents were usually at work. I did get to meet them from time to time and share some feedback. They listened kindly, smiling and nodding. From my point of view, they seemed tired from years of therapy and mostly wanted Radu to be safe, happy, and able to grow at his own pace.

Radu goes to a regular school in the neighbourhood, where he is supported by a specialist known as a Shadow. When his Shadow couldn't come, I took him to school a few times while he was in 2nd and 3rd grade. We were seated together at the back of the classroom, separate from the other children so we wouldn't disturb, something that's common in Romania. The teacher didn't come to greet him, and neither did the other students. Most of the time, we worked on preschool-level activity books, but I tried to involve him in whatever creative activities the class was doing, like drawing, gluing, or writing letters during special events.

It was hard for Radu to sit still for four hours like the other children. He wasn't allowed to move around the classroom when he needed to. After a while, usually one or two hours, he would start crying, screaming, throwing things, asking for food, hugging me, kissing me, anything to avoid staying seated. So

sometimes, I would take him outside to run on the football field, shake, throw a ball, or do whatever else he needed, sometimes even just lying on the ground and looking at the sky.

Being able to see parts of Radu's home and school life helped me understand him much better. It gave me insight into how he relates to people and situations around him and helped build a real connection between us. I could better understand what he liked, what he didn't like, what he needed, and what he struggled with. It helped me meet him where he was.

At home, Radu often seemed tired of the therapy room and would leave it to walk around the house whenever he could. I usually followed him quietly, and he didn't seem to mind. Sometimes he would look back and notice I was there. These moments gave me a good view of how he moved when he was free and relaxed. Using the Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP) as a guide, I noticed that his movements often showed certain rhythms like snapping, running, drifting, or jumping, which seemed to reflect how he was feeling or helped him calm down.

He liked to walk back and forth in the room, looking like he didn't have a plan, and rarely stopped. Sometimes his walk became more rhythmic. He would bend forward, raise one knee, and breathe loudly, going forwards and backwards. Other times, he would jump on his bed and kick his legs up on the wall. In the first sessions, he often walked in circles while breathing heavily, sometimes stopping to flap the edge of a rug or flip through books and papers. Then he would retreat to a corner and not want to interact. In rare moments when he was very upset, he would bang his bottom on the floor and cry. Luckily, those moments stopped after a few meetings. One behaviour that continued for longer, though less often over time, was slapping his own legs or belly, maybe as a way to release tension or feel something more clearly.

From the start, Radu showed some clear behaviour patterns. He had a short attention span and would leave an activity after only a few minutes. He avoided touch and eye contact, but he really liked tactile experiences. He could become frustrated quickly, though he sometimes surprised me with sweet and affectionate moments, giving kisses or cuddles. He was very sensitive to sounds and movements happening in the room, the house, or even outside in the garden. Out of all the activities, painting (especially with his fingers) was something he really enjoyed and stayed focused on.

Later in the process, a colleague of mine joined the sessions to observe. She mostly watched and took notes, which helped us see more clearly how Radu's behaviour and way of connecting were changing over time.

Therapeutic structure and techniques

The intervention included 20 sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, held weekly or bi-weekly. The initial phase focused on building rapport, exploring Radu's preferences, and establishing co-regulation. As trust developed, the sessions adopted a more consistent structure, generally unfolding in three parts: a warm-up, interactive movement and body awareness work, followed by a closing segment that often included drawing.

In the early sessions, I primarily followed Radu around the room, observing and gently mirroring his movements. I invited interaction through playful gestures and the use of props, occasionally initiating brief, respectful touch on the arm, hand, or shoulder. At times, I simply witnessed from a distance, allowing him space. He sometimes appeared puzzled or annoyed by my presence, curiously watching me from the side, freezing in response to touch, or tossing aside the scarves I offered for comfort when he became upset. However, as our bond deepened, these reactions softened. Gradually, Radu began to engage more directly, while episodes of frustration and emotional outbursts diminished. He started to greet me at the gate and would head straight to the therapy room, waiting with anticipation and often responding with joy to invitations to dance.

Over time, I became more attuned to his rhythms and preferences, shaping the session structure organically around his needs. Sessions typically followed this three-part format:

1. *Grounding and body awareness (floorwork)*

We often began on the floor with a quiet moment of connection, simply being together. This served as a grounding ritual, allowing us to attune to each other's energy. Background music (usually a lo-fi playlist) played softly, adjusting it as we moved forward into the session. Using BMC techniques, I offered gentle, attuned touch to support body awareness and sensory regulation. Movement arose naturally and intuitively, without a fixed goal. Sometimes I used a toy or musical instrument to help focus Radu's attention while guiding his body and naming body parts or actions. I responded to any sounds he made, matching them vocally or rhythmically. My attention moved between the sensations in his body and mine, maintaining awareness of the space and its dynamics.

If Radu chose to get up and walk around in his usual patterns, I often let him, observing with openness. At other times, I gently introduced resistance to his movement to invite new responses, encourage boundary-setting, or engage him playfully. As his energy built and he seemed ready for more active play, I proposed floor-based movement, using developmental patterns such as rolling, reaching, pushing, pulling, creeping, crawling, rocking, bridging, and transitions

between prone, supine, and side-lying positions. These were combined with fundamental patterns like head-tail connectivity, body-half and cross-lateral coordination, spinal undulations, and weight shifting. All were introduced in a playful, imaginative manner, often mimicking animals, while prioritizing our therapeutic connection.

2. *Dynamic movement and interaction*

The second part of the session adapted flexibly to Radu's readiness. I followed his lead and introduced change only when it was welcomed, ensuring that the experience remained free of pressure or frustration. As Radu became more comfortable, he began to accept new suggestions and interact more openly with various props and activities. This phase included dance, improvisation, physical exercises, and vocal play. The environment remained playful, responsive, and stimulating. Although I held a structure in mind, nothing was rigid and everything unfolded as a response to Radu's cues.

Techniques and activities in this section included:

a. Weight shift using contact improvisation

b. "Follow the leader" using the elastic band (with or without verbal prompts)

c. Neck and back-strengthening exercises

d. Upper and lower body coordination tasks

e. Cross-lateral movement

f. Sucking, twisting, or swaying movements based on KMP rhythmic qualities, supported by props

g. Expressive dance, with or without mirroring of movement and sound, often using textured scarves

3. *Integration and closure*

The final part of each session often included calming or integrative activities. Depending on Radu's state, I would sometimes propose painting, playing instruments, or singing familiar songs, while other times we would shift toward quiet, regulating activities such as massage, gentle caresses with props, or rocking (either Radu or a toy). Especially during the earlier sessions, Radu could become easily overstimulated, so this segment played an important role in helping his nervous system settle. It also supported a smoother transition toward the end of the session and the rest of his day. We often closed with a simple improvised dance, playful, expressive, and intuitive, serving as a way to say goodbye through movement.

Drawing protocol

Like many elements in our sessions, the drawing practice emerged intuitively. During one early session, I found some printed outlines of children's figures, likely left behind by another therapist. I casually offered Radu one to colour while I prepared the space. Near the end of the session, I had a hunch that perhaps repeating the drawing could show a shift and so I gave him a second outline to colour. The difference between the two was striking. Curious, I photographed them and shared them with an art therapist, whose feedback confirmed my intuition: the drawings appeared to reflect a kind of emotional release.

That moment became the seed of what developed into a drawing protocol. At the beginning and end of each session, I created for Radu the same body outline and invited him to colour freely, without giving specific instructions. A set of coloured pencils was always available.

These drawings were later reviewed for emerging patterns, shifts in expression, and potential correlations with behaviour or movement observed during the session.

Role of the therapist

In my role as therapist, I took on the position of responsive co-regulator and embodied companion, continuously adjusting to Radu's emotional cues, movement rhythms, and sensory thresholds. My primary aim was to build trust and safety through presence, not pressure. Observing quietly, following his lead, and creating space for expression on his terms.

Touch, when used, was always purposeful and attuned, often inspired by BMC techniques to enhance body awareness and grounding. Rather than imposing a fixed plan, I allowed structure to emerge from Radu's own preferences and pacing. Movement, sound, and playful interaction became our shared language, where every proposal could be accepted, modified, or declined freely.

I shifted fluidly between roles: sometimes a witness, sometimes a partner in motion or sound. I monitored both his regulation and my own, adapting the session flow to match his energy and focus, while incorporating familiar rituals to create predictability and closure. Above all, I aimed to foster a relationship rooted in safety, curiosity, and mutual respect. One in which Radu could explore new forms of engagement while remaining grounded in his own agency and rhythm.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from Radu's parents for his participation in therapy and for the anonymous documentation of the work. His name has been changed, and all identifying details have been altered or omitted. No video or photography was used during the sessions, except for photos of his drawings, which were taken thoughtfully and used solely for observation, analysis, and reflection within the therapeutic context.

Throughout the process, I was attentive to Radu's emotional and sensory boundaries, working moment by moment to modulate intensity, proximity, and activity. Interventions were always presented as invitations, never demands. Respecting his autonomy was essential, and I remained committed to fostering an atmosphere of predictability and attunement. Co regulation, rather than correction, was at the heart of the ethical stance I upheld, ensuring a relational space where safety and connection could naturally emerge.

FINDINGS

Across the 20 sessions, clear patterns and developmental shifts emerged in Radu's movement, behaviour, and emotional expression. These offered insight into his evolving needs, preferences, and internal rhythms, while also highlighting the transformative potential of the therapeutic relationship.

Movement patterns as communication

Radu consistently relied on rhythmic and repetitive movement (circling, pacing, jumping, flapping) as a means of regulating internal states and navigating sensory input. Viewed through the lens of the KMP, these patterns often aligned with rhythmic tendencies such as snapping, biting, drifting, and jumping, reflecting states of arousal or disorganization. Over time, his movement vocabulary expanded: he began to initiate cross-lateral actions, weight shifts, and fluid level transitions, suggesting increased neuromotor integration and body awareness.

Sensory sensitivities and preferences

Initially highly reactive to environmental stimuli, Radu showed strong responses to sound, texture, and proximity. He avoided eye contact and touch, yet was drawn to tactile exploration, especially through finger painting or textured props. As trust developed, he began to seek out deep pressure and proprioceptive input, gradually shifting from avoidance to co-regulation through touch. His growing comfort with sensory engagement mirrored a broader emotional openness and reduction in reactivity.

Emotional regulation through movement

Large-scale, dynamic movement like rolling, jumping and rocking, proved vital for emotional discharge and nervous system regulation. These actions allowed Radu to process and express affect nonverbally, while floorwork based on developmental patterns (creeping, crawling, bridging) supported emotional containment and organization. Over time, he transitioned more smoothly between states of high arousal and calm, demonstrating a greater capacity for emotional modulation.

Relationship development and engagement

At the outset, Radu appeared distant and often disengaged. Gradually, however, he began to greet, anticipate sessions, and initiate shared rituals. His ability to engage in joint attention and sustained interaction improved, and his tolerance for co-presence expanded. Activities that once prompted withdrawal or frustration became entry points for connection and play.

Emotional expression and communication

From early expressions of distress (screaming, crying, self-slapping) Radu began to access a wider range of nonverbal communication. Posture, breath, gesture, and vocalization became increasingly expressive and purposeful. He showed more nuanced emotional states and began to invite or respond to touch and sound with greater flexibility, marking a shift toward relational reciprocity.

Mirroring and reciprocity

Radu's early mirroring behaviours were sparse and inconsistent. However, by mid intervention, he engaged in rhythm-based interaction, brief shared movement sequences and even micro-mirroring. These behaviors, while subtle, indicated a progressive development in Radu's capacity for nonverbal attunement, co-regulation, and engagement in reciprocal interaction—core components of early relational and communicative functioning.

Creative expression as emotional outlet

The spontaneous integration of body-outline drawings provided a parallel, visual record of internal shifts. Radu's artwork evolved from chaotic and disjointed forms to more coherent, expressive compositions. These served as valuable tools for reflection and integration, reinforcing insights gathered from movement and behaviour.

The evolution of Radu's drawings: A comparative analysis

The drawing protocol (two outline-based images created before and after each session) offered a visual window into Radu's emotional and somatic states. With minimal verbal guidance and consistent materials, the drawings revealed distinct patterns aligned with observed behavioural changes.

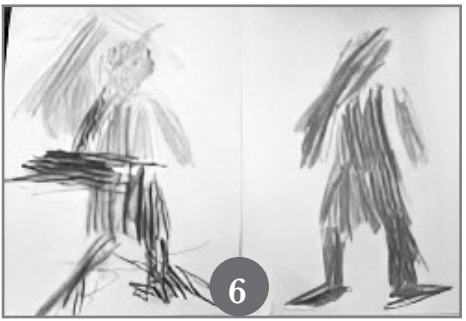
Use of colour and composition: Drawings completed in a single colour tended to reflect calm and cohesion. These often occurred during sessions marked by body integration and emotional regulation. Early phase drawings (sessions 1-10) from the initial sessions were often chaotic, fragmented, or overcrowded with colours. Many featured intense, overlapping

strokes, a lot of the times using different colours for isolated areas of the body. Later phase drawings (sessions 11–20) revealed increased coherence and intentionality. Monochromatic schemes became more common (nine across the full period, particularly in this phase), suggesting a growing sense of internal calm and unity. Compositions appeared more balanced and integrated, with layered, softer, rounder strokes and a more deliberate use of colour and space.

Attention to body boundaries: When colouring remained close to the body's outline, it suggested growing awareness of personal boundaries and spatial orientation, mirroring increased comfort with relational and tactile engagement. Colouring during the first half of the intervention was often focused only on parts of the figure, while other parts seemed to be extended out of the lines. These tendencies may reflect blurred body boundaries or difficulties in spatial organization and self-containment. Such patterns paralleled moments of heightened arousal, sensory overstimulation, and a low tolerance for physical closeness in sessions. Several drawings in the second phase (eight in total) demonstrated focused contour colouring, suggesting clearer awareness of physical limits and personal space. This visual boundary-setting reflected Radu's growing capacity to tolerate safe touch and sustain a consistent relational bond with the therapist. However, in the final two sessions, his drawings once again suggested emotional overflow, echoed in moments of anger during the sessions. This may indicate that the drawings served as a sensitive mirror of his inner emotional state.

Emotional tone and visual rhythm: During periods of heightened stress at home or school, Radu's drawings became agitated, marked by overlapping colours, erratic lines, or visual disorganization. These mirrored real-life dysregulation and contextual distress. In the early sessions, Radu's drawings conveyed a sense of agitation, marked by dense, rigid lines, strong pressure on

the crayons, and repetitive, straight strokes. These visual elements reflected inner tension, emotional overload, and limited expressive flexibility. As the intervention progressed, a notable shift occurred. In the final sessions, his compositions became lighter, more fluid and spacious, marked by airy strokes and an overall softer rhythm. These changes pointed to greater emotional regulation and the release of built-up tension, likely supported by dynamic movement work and co-regulatory experiences. The evolving visual rhythm mirrored Radu's increased tolerance, sustained attention, and expanded emotional expression.

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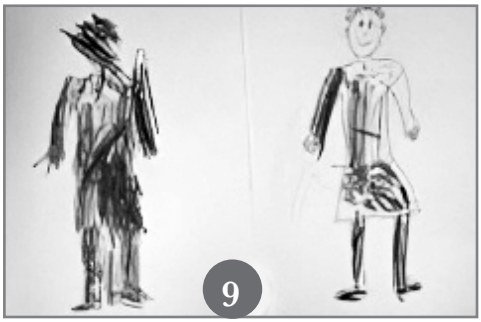
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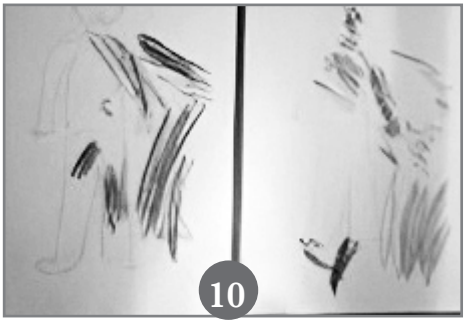
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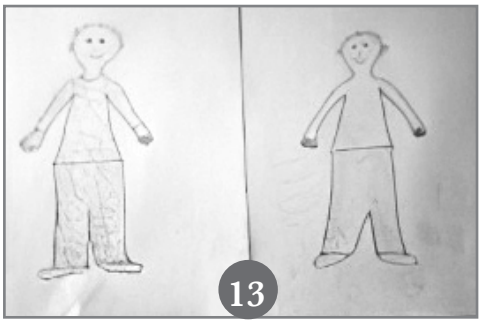
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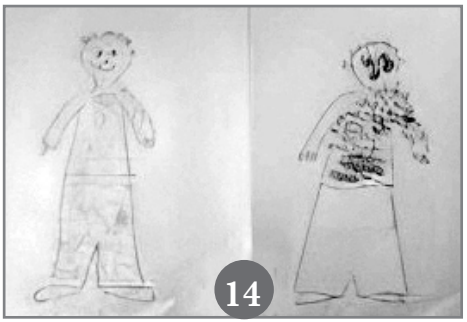
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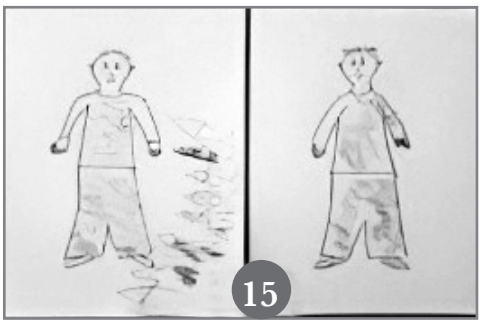
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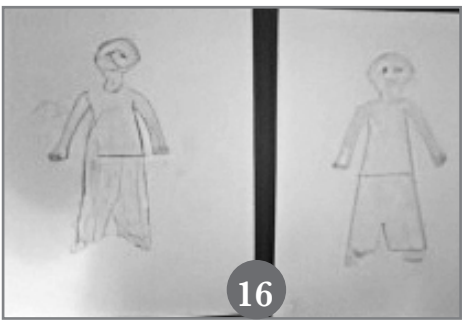
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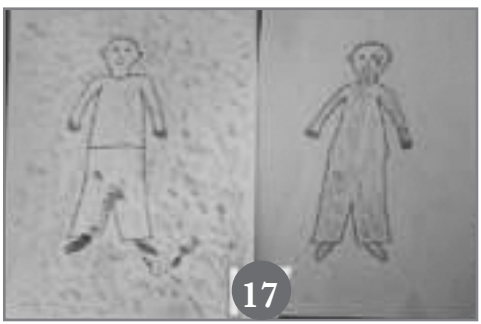
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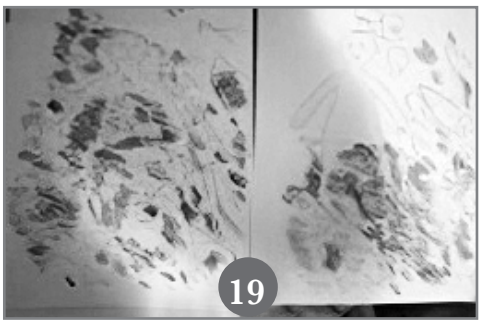
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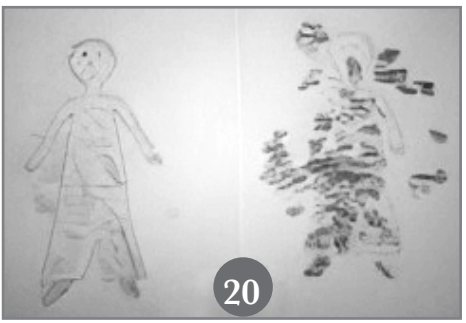
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CONCLUSION

The progression of Radu's drawings offered compelling visual evidence of his internal transformation throughout the therapeutic process. Early images revealed signs of fragmentation, sensory overwhelm, and relational distance, while later compositions reflected growing coherence, self-regulation, and emotional openness. These visual shifts paralleled broader behavioural developments, including enhanced motor coordination, adaptive emotional responses, and increased relational presence.

Far beyond creative expression, the drawings became meaningful indicators of somatic and emotional change, providing a visual narrative that complemented movement-based observations and deepened insight into the child's embodied experience. Their consistency and evolution underscored their value as both expressive and evaluative tools within the therapeutic setting.

This case study highlights the benefits of combining DMT, attuned touch, and drawing to support self-awareness and regulation in nonverbal autistic children. The integration of these modalities fostered spontaneous expression, reduced dysregulation, and nurtured relational connection in a developmentally attuned and sensory-responsive way.

Overall, this work encourages a playful, flexible, and child-centered approach that honours neurodiverse modes of communication. It suggests that multisensory, arts-integrated interventions can offer safe, resonant pathways for expression, healing, and growth in children for whom words may not yet suffice.

DISCUSSION

The intervention facilitated visible, meaningful shifts in Radu's behaviour and expression. Movement and drawing offered reciprocal channels for embodiment and communication. Drawing served not only as an evaluative tool, but as a continuation of movement—a visual echo of the somatic experience.

Findings support existing literature on the effectiveness of DMT with nonverbal populations and extend it by illustrating the value of visual integration. The child's increased use of micro-mirroring and attention to body regions in drawings align with somatic learning theories.

The co-regulatory nature of the relationship was central. My adaptability and the predictability embedded in touch, rhythm, and movement may have supported vagal tone and encouraged social engagement behaviours, helping to create a sense of safety and relational openness. This was reflected in Radu's growing tolerance for touch, participation in floorwork, and use of affective gestures such as grabbing my hand and calling me to dance, mirroring, smiling.

The body-outline drawings further externalized his internal experience, allowing insight into his sensory world and progress over time. The use of the KMP allowed me to decode rhythmic patterns and offer movement-based responses tailored to his internal state.

These findings align with existing literature advocating for relational, play-based, and body oriented approaches in autism therapy (Cornacchini, 2020; Samaritter, 2020; Tortora, 2011). Notably, the drawings did not merely assess change but contributed to integration—bridging movement and meaning in a way that honoured Radu's agency and sensory language. This supports a shift from goal-driven correction toward relationship-centred development, affirming the child's embodied narrative. In practice, this study highlights the importance of co-regulation, rhythmic attunement, and creative modalities in autism therapy. It reinforces the value of arts-integrated approaches that respect neurodivergent embodiment and foster relational presence over correctional goals.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This case study focuses on the experience of a single child and cannot be generalized to all autistic children. The drawing protocol, although insightful, was interpretive and lacked standardized evaluation or inter-rater reliability. The absence of pre/post quantitative measures and a control condition further limits empirical conclusions.

Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies involving multiple participants and therapists, comparative protocols exploring the added value of drawing in DMT, and integration of physiological or psychometric tools to support embodied observations. Additionally, it would be valuable to further investigate the role of rhythm, attuned touch, and relational safety in building therapeutic alliances with nonverbal children.

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REFLECTIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WALKING IN DANCE AND PHILOSOPHY

OR ON HOW WE BEGIN TO DANCE AND THINK

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Abstract: From the moment Isadora Duncan danced barefoot in the first part of the twentieth century, dance gained a new foundation, both from a theoretical point of view and from the point of view of the professional dancer. The relationship of the dancer-performer to the ground/stage and the phenomenological sensation specific to this bodily turn marked the choreographic avant-garde, from the expressionism of Mary Wigman to the dance theatre of Pina Bausch. Yet, following in the footsteps of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, we will discover that behind these movements of conceptual and practical reorientation in choreographic art lies a rethinking of a fundamental gesture of everyday life, far too often taken for granted: walking. In the following short essay, I will develop two directions of interpretation concerning the significance of walking for philosophy and for dance: a metaphysical one and a phenomenological one. At the same time, this text is a faint echo of Mindy Aloff's splendid 2022 book on dance, *Why Dance Matters*, in which walking reappears as a leitmotif of dance and of life itself, which inspires dance.

Keywords: walking, dance, phenomenology, embodiment, ecstatic temporality.

How to cite: Stoicescu, A. (2026) "Reflections on the Significance of Walking in Dance and Philosophy or On How We Begin to Dance and Think," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 76-85.

It is often believed, in the spirit of the Heideggerian *das Man*, in radical distinctions that divide the domains of human knowledge or activity with flawless logical clarity. Thus, philosophy would appear to be an exclusively mental practice, while dance would be a predominantly bodily practice. Of course, the fact of being embodied at all is a necessary condition of existence, and artistic creation also depends on the structural configuration that is the product of thought. This is a truism. Yet it is a truism that reminds us of the superficiality of radical distinctions when we truly attempt to account for the phenomena of our experience.

One such "classical" aesthetic distinction is that between the arts of time and the arts of space. Music, for instance, would be pre-eminently an art of time, while sculpture is, without any ambiguity, an art of space. Applying this classical ontological understanding, dance and theatre would be synthetic, "spatio-temporal" arts, which ultimately, in the semantic substratum of the linguistic expression, means that they cannot properly be defined, that they do not possess a categorical identity to which they belong without remainder, and that, therefore, they are dependent artistic forms. Sculpture has life and movement; it can be touched and, most importantly, it has the power to stir in the viewer the nostalgic feeling of (a)temporality. Music unfolds "in time," yet, on the one hand, it expresses its nature through the corporeality of those who perform it vocally and instrumentally and, on the other hand, it is always listened to, ideally,

in the presence of the artists and in a particular place.[4] Thus, the arts exceed our pedagogical need to think in rigid distinctions, because at the level both of creation and of reception the ontology of art becomes fluid and plastic.

Dance and philosophy have not intersected explicitly very often in the history of Western culture. In general, choreographic art is regarded as a "Cinderella" of the arts, because the philosopher's inclination toward abstraction, textuality and contemplation has most often directed him toward painting and poetry. This metaphor—already itself, unfortunately, a cliché without a strong echo—is used to imply a state of injustice and the additional efforts that cultural actors in the choreographic sector must make in order to be seen (perhaps hoping, too, for a happy ending), but, whether by chance or not, the Cinderella metaphor conceals a detail especially relevant for dance: *the importance of the foot*. We know the story (and its many Prokofiev-inspired choreographic versions), and we know that in this narrative beauty and truth are recognized through a bodily clue that simultaneously embodies the principal means by which dance is materialized. Beyond dance itself, the foot is a structure and a symbol of stability, of verticality, and of the relationship—not merely gravitational—that we have with the earth, indeed of the inexorable rootedness of our relationship to nature. Probably, among all fairy-tale characters, Cinderella is the only one who, by her archetypal nature, is destined to be choreographed. Yet the importance of the foot in fact opens up a path of connection with philosophy, a speculative road that is more relevant than if we were to seek out texts expressly written by canonical philosophers about dance.

Walking is a way of meditating, and reflective activity lies at the centre of philosophical life. This aspect links theoretical, academic and technical philosophy to practical philosophies, centred on a way of life or inspired by ascetic practices. It is well known that in Ancient Greece, constantly rediscovered with new meanings for the present, the Aristotelian school was nicknamed "peripatetic" precisely in order to underline the natural relation between walking and contemplating (Kenny & Amadio, n.d.). Dance, too, has always had walking as an integral part of certain genres and styles, for example in many folk dances, in Renaissance court dances, and in modern "social" or recreational dances—*tap* being the most direct stylization of the act of walking. For this text, the point of departure is Mindy Aloff's recent essayistic book on dance, *Why Dance Matters*, in which, among many other subtle observations, she writes: "Walking intensifies consciousness of oneself in space. (…) If you're prone to meditative moods, walking as a solitary

4 In the case of music, there is a complex discussion concerning its tendency to become de-corporealized, about music for the "eyes," and about its capacity to "break away" from acoustic necessities. In *The Aesthetics of Music,* the philosopher Roger Scruton calls this characteristic of music "its acousmatic principle" and considers it axiomatic for understanding the art of sound.

can prompt conceptual thinking or free up the brain for a Eureka moment, or even an epiphany" (Aloff, 2022, p. 67).

Yet, beyond the historical recurrence of a theme, *a fundamental difference is established between what is at stake in the act of walking in dance and what is at stake in the same act in philosophy*. In philosophy, walking leads toward meditation, whereas in dance walking leads toward movement and toward the ek-static leap. In the first instance, the effect is a return to the self, a detachment from the outside and a deepening within the universe of theoretical abstraction. In the second instance, the effect is an exit from the self, an expression that shows itself outwardly, and a forgetting of the self in the nature of the act. Thus, what is revealed is *a complementary opposition between philosophical contemplation and ecstatic expression in dance, mediated by one of the essential gestures of life*.

If we were to attempt to trace a "chronological priority," walking would certainly manifest itself before dance, at least if we define "dance" according to human intentionality, productivity and craftsmanship—thus leaving aside the problem of its continuity or discontinuity with analogous manifestations in the animal world. The capacity to walk, together with the function of "running," is essential to the articulation of humanity; but when does dance begin? Mindy Aloff also writes: "If you can walk, you can dance; (…) What is the impetus that transports walking into dancing?" (Aloff, 2022, p. 62), thereby laying out the fundamental question concerning the passage or the difference that arises between the two acts. This difference is not a purely functional or structural one, but, following the Heideggerian technical thread, it is precisely the *ontological difference* between the human being and *Dasein*, between being and Being, between taken-for-granted everydayness and the signifying character of everydayness, the fact that something is understood as something definite. It is precisely the difference between observing a causal event in nature and formulating "causality" as a principle of physics. This is the nature of the difference between the simple fact of walking and "walking," which can be transformed either into a meditative-speculative practice or into dance. In both situations we are dealing with an "impetus" that "moves" the subject either toward the self or toward self-expression.

A fruitful deepening of the originary role of walking in choreography is the rediscovery of the ritual expression of dance in the first half of the twentieth century. Isadora Duncan marked the turn from classical dance to modern (and implicitly contemporary) dance by returning to ancient Greek movement practices and by exposing on stage what is (apparently) the simplest gesture: walking and moving barefoot. Joseph Campbell[5]—in the aptly titled volume *The Ecstasy of Being: Mythology and Dance*—marks the significance of this gesture of Isadora's: "Inspired

5 The renowned specialist in mythology, who was also very close to choreographic modernism through his wife Jean Erdman, a former dancer in Martha Graham's company and later a creator in her own right.

by an enthusiastic study of the forms of the truly classical dance represented on Greek vases in the British Museum, she had stepped forth, barefoot, uncorseted, and as scantily clad as a woodland nymph, to electrify the concert halls of Europe" (Campbell, 2017, p. 101). The foot without pointe shoes and the feeling of placing the whole sole on the ground are elements of modern and contemporary dance that contributed to the change in the paradigm of choreographic thought in the last century. Dance is the art of human corporeality, and the phenomenology of bodily experiences—as they are felt, described, compared and analysed by the subject—has a direct impact on aesthetic expressivity. The technical training of classical and neoclassical ballet configures the dancer's body in a certain way in order to transmit precise formal-choreographic qualities. In the case of modern dance, the same relation manifests itself between the type of technique applied and the scenic-artistic result of choreographic language. Thus, the relation between sole and ground inaugurated by Isadora Duncan marks a symbolic return to the feeling of the organic connection between the dancer's body and its concrete foundation; it is not by accident that floor work and the development of principles of organic movement, which do not forcibly "educate" the body, would become, over the course of the twentieth century, self-evident elements for any modern and contemporary technique.

The choreographic movement that stylistically rethought "walking" in dance on the basis of its ritual-archaic revalorization was expressionism (*Ausdruckstanz*). Procession, slow and weighted movement on the ground, theatricalized walking—all these are more or less artistically stylized forms of this everyday, banal activity. The choreographies of Martha Graham and Mary Wigman are exemplary for this ritual, processual walking, and their impact has been felt as far as creators such as Pina Bausch. For example, in Mary Wigman's case: "Wigman would develop a dance vocabulary of her own which was, like Laban's, a distinctly anti-balletic tradition. In addition to performing barefoot and placing particular emphasis on improvised movement, she experimented with dances performed to spoken word accompaniment, percussion or, more radically, silence" (Weir, 2018, p. 8). Thus, the bare foot returns as a sign of proximity to the ground and as an expression of the original need to recover the metaphysical impulse of dance, that impulse which metamorphoses the body's basic physiognomic capacities into artistic means, into means of creativity and, in the case of movement inspired by ritual, of transcendence.

An extraordinary choreographic essentialization of walking and of the body's grounding in relation to the floor/stage is a contemporary dance piece created by the Taiwanese choreographer Lin Lee-Chen, *Anthem to Fading Flowers*, a work that belongs to a larger performance/choreographic cycle entitled *Anthem*.

A phenomenological-descriptive presentation of this moment is more than eloquent for the transition from dance to philosophy that can be achieved performatively through analysis of the relation between walking and movement. This cycle was conceived as a celebration of the seasons of the year and of natural processes such as birth, growth, death and decomposition (Anderson, 2005). Consequently, the entire creation points toward the ancestral cyclical rhythms that the human being senses and re-senses. The choreographic piece *Anthem to Fading Flowers* carries an ontological stake both through what it set out to convey and through the way the dancers behave throughout this masterpiece. Not only this work of art *exists* in a wholly unusual way when compared with classical European choreographic creations—and we cannot sufficiently emphasize the role of walking in Asian dance and theatre—but it is also the scenic and symbolic mirroring of philosophical reflection in general.

A man and a woman, painted in pale blue with azure shades, appear simultaneously on stage from opposite directions, emerging out of a dark haze. They keep their eyes closed throughout the choreographic moment. They approach one another slowly; in this approach one senses the idea of an archaic procession, of a *weighted walk meant, quite literally, to convey gravity, importance and solemnity*. The slowness maintained throughout the whole development of the movement and the essentialized scenography produce, on the one hand, the effect of a transcendent space as an atopic place—or, using Foucault's concept, a *heterotopic* one—of this movement and, on the other hand, the effect of an act taking place not in a petrified, stopped instant, as in a *nunc stans*, but in an instant that continues a process, an instant one feels is resumed cyclically and continuously. The temporal effect is also supported by the movement itself, which is carried out sequentially, "step by step", at equal and sustained rhythmic intervals. From the way the dancers appear to us, we realize that they do not represent some particular man or woman, but rather symbols for the relation between human being and nature. In expressionism, the dances with the strongest impact are usually solos that begin from the personal and contextual experiences of an individual (such as Martha Graham's *Lamentation*), although expressionism also developed techniques of group movement. In this case, the duality presented corresponds to the archaic idea of the contradictions of nature and life that are mystically and mythically reconciled. The movement is not an attempt to conceal the ponderability of bodies, as in classical ballet, but an elevation from the level of two solid bodies toward meta-physical meaning and symbol. The dancers' tread and their presence, despite the whitish-azure paint of their skin, are borne on the whole sole, maintaining a sensitive contact with the ground, as in the case of Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman. Likewise, the slow, continuous and collaborative processuality of the two dancers, who come together and then

interweave just as slowly, rhythmically and sustainedly in technically difficult grips, is a choreographic co-working through which a perfectly unitary movement is produced, because they do not stop for a single second in any particular position, but maintain a continuous and coherent dynamic flow. The man permanently supports the woman's body, being the hard and stable element, while the woman directs the movement, being the flexible and destabilizing element. Their heads are always, spatially, within one another's horizon (not necessarily facing one another) through the symmetry of their positions. They are highlighted as visual reference points by black hair extending all the way to the ground. Their braids, reaching the ground, create the axis between the planes above and below, and the dancers move together both in the plane of height, at the level of the upper body, and in that of depth, at the level of the floor/soles. Owing to this pendular movement, deviations from the body's verticality—from the fundamental position of human equilibrium—occur, as do returns to this position, but never completely, because both at the beginning of the choreography, when they walk toward each other, and at the end, when they part, the dancers keep their knees bent. The movement itself of the two within the unity they form suggests the successive, contradictory tendencies of approach and distancing. The manner in which they support one another, with the man playing the predominant role, is one that uses the whole body. They do not rely exclusively or predominantly on their hands, but, depending on the spatial level at which the movement takes place, they use the whole body for balance: legs, hands, abdomen.[6]

First of all, in dance, what we effectively see before us are people who move, who create the choreography through themselves. Any dance shows us, through itself, *the being of the human starting from what is most intimate to it: its own body*. Secondly, the references to the sexual act are explicit in the choreography and do not refer to this act in general as a means of preserving life, but to the human *Mitsein*, as an important factual aspect through which we relate to others. Lastly, the title is a reference to death. Through the presence of sexuality, which makes birth possible, and the idea of death, conveyed by the rupture induced by the final moments of the performance, the interval of life in general is symbolically reconstituted. All the thematic elements of the cycle are present. Temporality, in its ek-static unity, is the substance/substratum of the movement we see. All three temporal modes are present in this work of art: when the dancers enter the stage their gaze is directed, though their eyes are closed, toward one another (the future); in the moments when they intertwine in order to form architectures of movement, the present/the instant is what is emphasized; at the end of the

6 To view the choreography, see the QR code at the end of this text.

choreography, when they detach themselves from one another, they move away in opposite directions while keeping their gaze turned toward one another (the past). Thus, the idea of cyclicity, of the naturalness of death, through the detached presentation of approach and separation, of the passage of time—this little jewel of movement, inspired also by the choreographic-theatrical tradition of Taiwan—captures how, through walking and through simple slow-processual movement, a metaphysical image can be conveyed.

Expressionism was a rewriting of the foundations of Western dance through a deconstruction and rediscovery of the past, of the origin of dance. Yet, through the deconstructive inclination, we also arrive at the structuralist and postmodern interpretation of the role of walking. In Trisha Brown's 1970 performance *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*, we encounter *a paradox of stability, the concomitance of the sensation of the stability of walking and that of the instability of falling into the void.*[7] It is not dance but performance, yet a performance carried out in the contemporary spirit by a member of the group of theorists and experimentalists associated with Judson Church, a group of major impact in choreographic-performative postmodernity. Furthermore, the concept at the basis of the performance traces a limit of the role of "walking" in dance. The strong sensation produced before this paradoxical movement in fact refers us back to dance, which likewise constantly balances the leap against gravity with the stability of the ground, tension with relaxation, yet is at the same time an extremely acrobatic form of using "ritual walking." Postmodernism truly brings everydayness to the fore, yet as far as possible either in its blunt sense, or as a means of social critique (the chosen type of building is not accidental, being characteristic of industrialized American contemporaneity), or as a "forgotten" object of reflection.

All these perspectives and layers gathered around an action as simple as walking can be found, for instance, in *Seasons March*, a fragment of dance theatre created by Pina Bausch.[8] Here we find the reference to the cyclicity of nature symbolically understood by archaic communities, we find nature itself through the earth, and we even find multiple postmodern resonances (the dancers' varied corporeality, their clothes, their gestures). Thus, walking is used in modern and contemporary dance either as a ritual-symbol, as a structural linking element, or simply as a self-evident everyday activity, one that nevertheless requires a deeper analysis. Certainly, however, all these forms express that metaphysical impulse to which Mindy Aloff referred, for the simple reason that mere exposure within a special scenic, performative or personal frame, within the rehearsal studio, already raises a simple gesture to meanings above itself.

7 A very short recording of this performance is available online and may be accessed by using the QR code at the end of this text.

8 This work, too, can be viewed on YouTube by using the QR code at the end of the present text.

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QR Codes

Lin Lee-Chen, *Anthem to Fading Flowers*, Part I.

Lin Lee-Chen, *Anthem to Fading Flowers*, Part II.

Trisha Brown, *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building*.

Pina Bausch, *Seasons March*.

Andreea Stoicescu is at present Lecturer PhD at the National University of Music in Bucharest and Teacher of Philosophy and Logic in Bucharest. She has an interdisciplinary PhD in Philosophy (2022) awarded *Summa cum laude,* with a thesis titled *Emotion and Aesthetic Judgment in the Musical Experience*, published in 2024 at EIKON. Her main areas of research are: aesthetics, contemporary metaphysics, philosophy of culture, cultural anthropology and critical theory. During her PhD studies she was part of the CIVIS project *Modernisms in Transit: Dialogues and Crossings* (August 2021, France, Aix-en-Provence) with the presentation *Romanian Composition and Choreography at the Beginning of the 20th Century: Between National and European Expressions*. Andreea also took many dance classes, as an amateur, with leading Romanian choreographers such as Simona Deaconescu, Arcadie Rusu, and Andreea Gavriliu at *Linotip*, and she took part at two workshops within *Bucharest International Dance Film Festival*, „Words and Gestures" with Luís Malaquias and Bruno Duarte and „Body States, Resonance, Presence" with Lucie Eidenbenz. Two relevant studies she published, related to dance, are: *Animation and the Mimetic Posthuman: Pandemic Vulnerabilities Mirrored by Music and Dance* (BRILL, 2024), *Despre dans și filosofie, plecând de la cursul universitar Pregătirea coregrafică a actorului semnat de Vera Proca–Ciortea* (Saeculum, 2021).

PARKINSON DANCE – PIONEERING AND DEVELOPING EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN DANCE THERAPY **FOR PARKINSON'S IN ROMANIA**

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Abstract: This paper explores the pioneering development of ParkinsOn Dance, an initiative bringing evidence-based dance therapy to individuals with Parkinson's Disease in Romania. Recognizing the established benefits of dance therapy in managing Parkinson's symptoms internationally, the project addresses the gap in accessible, structured artistic-therapeutic interventions within the Romanian healthcare landscape. Experienced somatic educators Dr. Melanie Brierley and Sari Lievonen conducted an intensive training for local artists and healthcare professionals. Subsequently, workshops were delivered to beneficiaries and their caregivers, tailored to address motor and non-motor symptoms. Pre- and post-testing, utilizing medical measurements, cognitive testing, and expressive mediums such as letters and drawings, facilitated a mixed-methods assessment of participant well-being. Qualitative methods — beneficiary feedback, drawings, personal letters, and in-depth interviews — revealed profound positive impacts: improved mobility, enhanced mood, and a renewed sense of community. This project underscores the power of dance therapy within the broader framework of Culture in Health and Art Therapy, bridging the gap between established international practices and emerging therapeutic methods in Romania. Next steps include a comprehensive mixed-methods study in collaboration with neurologist Bianca Nițu, alongside a long-term, sustainable framework for ongoing workshops. The initiative was funded by AFCN and ARCUB (2023–2025).

Keywords: Parkinson's disease, dance and movement therapy, healthy ageing.

How to cite: Larionescu, L.C., Marinescu, I. (2026) "ParkinsOn Dance—Pioneering and Developing Evidence-Based Practice in Dance Therapy for Parkinson's in Romania," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 86-108.

Introduction

Parkinson's disease (PD), a progressive neurodegenerative disorder affecting over 6 million individuals worldwide, presents with a complex combination of motor symptoms (e.g., tremor, rigidity, postural instability) and non-motor manifestations such as depression, anxiety, apathy, and cognitive decline (Li et al., 2024). In popular media, Parkinson's disease is most frequently associated with visible motor symptoms—particularly tremors. While tremor and dyskinesia (involuntary movements often linked to long-term medication use) are indeed some of the most recognizable features, the clinical reality is far more complex. Parkinson's manifests through a wide spectrum of motor and non-motor symptoms, including rigidity, bradykinesia, postural instability, cognitive decline, mood disorders, and autonomic dysfunction. At its core, the disease results from the progressive degeneration of dopaminergic neurons in the substantia nigra, leading to significant disruptions in motor control and emotional regulation. These impairments significantly reduce patients' quality of life and functional autonomy (Batzu et al., 2024). In light of the multifaceted challenges posed by

PD, there is an increasing demand for complementary interventions that extend beyond pharmacological or surgical treatment, aiming to support both physical and psychosocial domains.

Historically, therapeutic recommendations for Parkinson's patients prioritized rest and the minimization of physical activity, based on concerns about fall risk, fatigue, and joint vulnerability. This conservative approach dominated until the 1980s, when emerging evidence began to challenge the prevailing view. Since then, a paradigm shift has occurred, favoring structured movement-based therapies as essential components of disease management.

While the rationale for earlier recommendations is understandable—given Parkinson's impact on motor control, proprioception, balance, and gait—recent studies demonstrate that consistent physical activity can delay symptom progression and improve functional capacity. Patients often experience "on/off" fluctuations, where mobility varies depending on medication cycles, leading to episodes of freezing, postural instability, and altered gait patterns. These limitations increase fall risk and may cause secondary complications such as fractures or reduced confidence. Nevertheless, contemporary research affirms that supervised physical activity—particularly modalities emphasizing rhythmicity and coordination—can improve motor symptoms and support neuroplasticity.

Dance-based interventions have proved to be powerful therapeutic tools for individuals with Parkinson's disease. One of the most influential initiatives is the Dance for PD® program, launched in 2001 in Brooklyn, New York, through a collaboration between the Mark Morris Dance Group and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group. The initiative, developed under the guidance of Olie Westheimer, demonstrated that dance could serve as both a creative and functional intervention for Parkinson's, supporting mobility, emotional expression, and social connection.

Dance and dance movement therapy (DMT) have emerged as promising integrative approaches in PD rehabilitation. By combining rhythmic and expressive movement with music and social interaction, dance offers a holistic form of engagement that has shown beneficial effects on balance, gait, executive function, memory, and emotional well-being (Bek et al., 2020; Gil et al., 2024). In contrast to recreational dance classes, DMT integrates psychotherapeutic principles, utilizing movement as a primary mode of communication to facilitate emotional awareness, self-expression, and body integration in a structured therapeutic relationship (Jiménez et al., 2019).

Dance interventions have been associated with enhanced cognitive performance, particularly in domains assessed by tools such as the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA), and have been shown to activate neural circuits involved in motor planning and emotional regulation (Bek et al., 2020). Moreover,

public performances of dance involving individuals with PD serve multiple purposes: they enhance motivation, promote social inclusion, reduce stigma, and foster community awareness and advocacy (Hackney et al., 2021).

Improvements are noted in participants' physical confidence, emotional well-being, self-expression, and social connectedness. Moreover, dance sessions led by professional artists in cultural venues contributed to redefining the roles of people with Parkinson's as active cultural agents rather than passive patients. This approach shifted perceptions within communities and among participants themselves. The project also foregrounded the importance of artistic quality and long-term commitment, arguing that meaningful artistic engagement—rather than health-focused metrics—provides sustainable well-being benefits (Lando et al., 2025).

Importantly, dance interventions also hold potential benefits for caregivers. Dyadic approaches—where caregivers and patients participate together—can reduce caregiver burden, alleviate stress, and reinforce relationship quality through shared experience and mutual support (Zhang et al., 2023). These formats foster resilience within the caregiving unit and contribute to a more sustainable and empowering model of care.

The growing body of evidence supporting dance-based interventions in PD rehabilitation underscores the need for further empirical validation and programmatic refinement. Ensuring that such initiatives are culturally sensitive, scalable, and supported by interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for maximizing their impact.

This empirical study investigates the psychocorporal and relational effects of therapeutic dance in individuals and couples affected by Parkinson's disease, with an emphasis on its transformative, expressive, and socially integrative potential.

Launched in 2023, *ParkinsON Dance* is the first Romanian-based initiative to implement structured dance therapy for individuals with Parkinson's. Developed by choreographer Irina Marinescu, dance therapist Loredana Larionescu, and neurologist Dr. Bianca Nițu, the program piloted a series of eight bi-weekly workshops in Bucharest. The sessions integrated tango and contemporary dance and were designed for small groups (five participants per session), including dyadic formats for patients and caregivers in the Tango group.

Each 90-minute session incorporated artistic, therapeutic, and somatic elements, supported by pre- and post-intervention assessments using medical, psychological, and expressive tools (e.g., standardized tests, letters, and drawings). The program combined evidence-based practice with cultural and emotional sensitivity, positioning dance not only as therapy but as a mode of creative expression and social inclusion.

Paper Body

Methodology

Participants (over 2 in the course of the two years of work in this project) were enrolled for an 8 sessions structured dance therapy program. Single individuals went through an intervention based on contemporary dance, while couples were offered an intervention based on argentine tango.

Each participant (patient or caregiver) was evaluated before and after the intervention. Evaluation was carried out by a neurologist (Dr. Bianca Nițu) and a psychologist (Loredana Larionescu) and included a wide-ranging battery of medical, cognitive, emotional and projective tests.

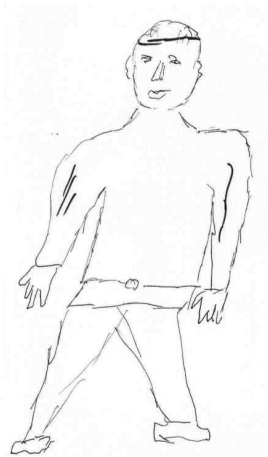
As part of the projective part of this assessment, participants were offered pencils, crayons and markers and asked to draw their own bodies, using as little or as much colour as they wish. We chose this more free and creative invitation instead of the typical instruction of the draw-a-person test (Machover, 1964), in order to gain a more refined view on the changes in people's body image and creativity. Criteria from classical projective techniques (posture, facial expression, line quality, symbolic elements, and the presence of affective content) were used alongside a more artistic overview of the drawings. Each case was explored both individually and, where applicable, in relational dynamics.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, we have chosen to illustrate our points with four case studies: two single patients and two couples (spouses and siblings).

CASE STUDIES

Case study 1: Mr. N—single male patient

Figure 1. Mr. N—Before



Formal and symbolic observations

Posture and body language

• The figure is slightly tilted, with legs wide apart—a position that suggests a search for balance or postural instability.

• The arms are drawn thickly and almost identically—but do not express function or gesture.

• The hands have visible fingers, but they are rigid and tense.

• Details such as a collar, clothing, and accessories are missing, suggesting a poorly defined self-image.

Face

- The eyes are small, the gaze is vague, but there is a smile—perhaps an attempt at a positive social interaction.
- The horizontal line on the forehead appears to be a symbol of tension or a "barrier"—possibly an unconscious representation of a mental boundary.

Contour and graphic line

- Shaky, uneven lines—possible manifestations of motor symptoms or mental hesitation.
- The drawing is monochrome, without symbols, background or spatialisation—a reference to emotional isolation or lack of expressiveness.

General interpretation: The drawing expresses a tense human figure, with a timid attempt at a smile, but with a closed body language. The image appears flat and symbolically unsupported, which may indicate a fragile self-perception and difficulty in expressing emotions and identity.

Figure 2: Mr. N – After

Formal and symbolic observations

Posture and body details

• The posture is straight, symmetrical, with arms slightly apart—the figure expresses stability and openness. The fingers are expressive.

• The clothing is detailed: coloured trousers, buttoned shirt, bow tie—clear signs of a confident identity and individual expression.

• The legs are more clearly defined, with shoes—solid anchoring.

Face

• The gaze is defined and directed, with clear eyebrows and features.

• The mouth is well drawn, with a red outline—a possible expression of the desire to communicate, to express emotions.

Colours and style

- A wide range of colours appears (red, yellow, blue, brown)—an expression of vitality and emotional diversity.
- Firm, confident lines—a sign of increased confidence and greater control over expression.

Signature: hidden for anonymity, accompanied by a black hatched heart—a poetic but ambiguous sign: emotional acceptance and expression, possibly with connotations of introspection or melancholy.

General interpretation: The figure is confidently outlined, stylised but clearly individualised. It expresses a stronger self, capable of identity and emotional expression. Colour becomes a medium for communicating emotions, and the choice of clothing indicates a reconnection with social and aesthetic roles.

Table 1. Transformation of Mr. N.

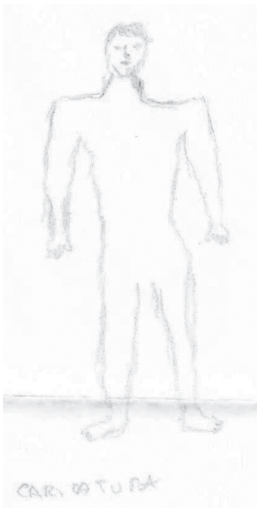
Dimension	Before	After
Posture	Slightly tilted, unstable	Vertical, balanced, affirmative
Facial expression	Vague smile, hesitant eyes	Clear gaze, clear contour of the mouth, expressive
Body and gesture	Rigid, shaky contour	Detailed, balanced
Clothing	Outline	Elaborate (shirt, trousers, bow-tie)
Colour	Absent	Diversified, vivid
Signature	Inexistent	Present, with added symbol (masked for privacy)

Conclusion

Mr. N's transformation reflects a clear reconnection with his identity and expressiveness. While the initial drawing conveyed fragility and emotional minimalism, the 'after' form is full of presence, personality and artistic intent. Therapeutic dance worked here as a catalyst for inner visibility: the body is expressed, colour is reclaimed, and the individual seems to reclaim their place in the world—not just as a patient, but as a unique person.

Case study 2. Mr. O—single male patient

Figure 3. Mr. O—Before



General contour

• The line is very faint, the drawing barely visible—this may suggest major inhibition, fear of expression, decreased mental energy and a blurred or dissociated self-image.
• The figure is centred but **very small** in relation to the space on the page—this indicates a feeling of smallness, possibly social anxiety, withdrawal or lack of self-confidence.

Body

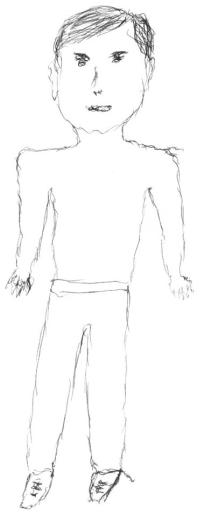
• The drawing is schematic, rigid but generally proportionate—this may express a poorly integrated body image.
• The hands are slightly outlined, almost absent—a symbol of difficulty in acting, getting involved or expressing oneself in relation to others.

The text 'CARICATURE': an interesting choice—it may reflect a difficulty in accepting one's own image or defensive self-irony, suggesting an ambiguous relationship with the self and one's own body.

General interpretation: This drawing expresses great restraint and psychological minimalism. The small, poorly outlined figure, without colour or expressiveness, may indicate a poorly defined image of themselves, marked by possible body embarrassment and a defensive relationship with vulnerability.

Figure 4. Mr. O—After

Formal and symbolic observations



Contour and size

- The figure is now proportionate on the page, with a firm presence and consistent contour—suggesting increased psychic energy and self-assertion.
- The body is more "organised", with balanced proportions.

Head and face

- The face is detailed: expressive eyes, eyebrows, mouth—the patient now presents a recognisable identity with individual features.
- The hair is outlined—indicating a concern for personal appearance.

Clothing and posture

- Trousers, detailed shoes and a clear signature appear—the patient becomes a defined, active and socially present person.
- The hands are now more clearly expressed, even if they do not gesticulate—which marks a recovery of action function and bodily self-delimitation.

Signature present: (masked for anonymity) + an almost ornamental graphic sign—a sign of acceptance and individualisation of artistic expression.

General interpretation: The drawing after expresses an important transformation in the self-image: the patient occupies space, presents himself with clarity and identity, assumes his features and body contours. The figure is alive, present, contoured—indications of a profound physical and emotional reconnection.

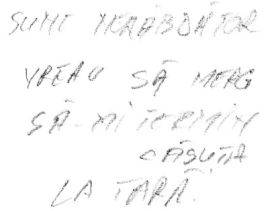
Table 2. Transformation of Mr. O

Dimension	Before	After
Size and positioning	Small, withdrawn	Proportionate, centered
Contour	Weak	Ferm, clear
Facial traits	Almost absent	Complete, expressive
Posture	Static, symbolic	Clearly defined, realistic
Identity expression	„Caricature"—defensive self-irony	Full name + ornamental symbol
Energy expression	Reserved, minimal	Assumed, personalized

Conclusion

The transformation of O.'s drawing reflects a departure from a state of withdrawal and psychophysical inhibition towards an emotional and aesthetic acceptance of identity. Dance therapy seems to have contributed to "occupying space", to reaffirming a physical and social self, and to rediscovering a valued, integrated self-image.

Case study 3. Mr. & Mrs. C—husband and wife



Mr. C (patient) and Mrs. C (caregiver) came together and attended the 8 sessions of dance therapy based on argentine tango proposed in our project.

Figure 5. Mr. C—Before

Formal and symbolic observations

Weak contour, lacking pressure and variation: may indicate a state of psychophysical fatigue, low energy, difficulty in asserting oneself in the context of the illness.

Rigid, frontal posture: the body is static, with the arms slightly lowered, suggesting low body tone and difficulty in expressing one's will. This is common among people with motor impairment and body-related anxiety.

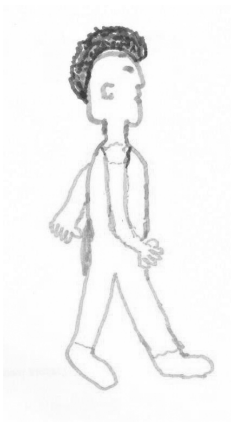
Simplified facial expression, but with a smile: the patient is trying to maintain a positive attitude, although the smile may be more of a social mask than a reflection of a balanced inner state.

Suggested footwear: indicates a desire for functionality, but uncertainty about the "path" they want to follow (no clear routes).

Associated text: "I am hardworking. I want to finish my little house in the countryside." The text indicates a motivation oriented towards practical action: the desire to complete a construction (in real life), which may also have a symbolic value (restoring an internal "shelter", rebalancing).

Figure 6. Mr. C—After

Formal and symbolic observations



Firmer outline, use of colour: indicates increased emotional investment, higher mental and expressive energy

Body in motion, in an active posture: the character appears to be walking, with one foot forward, reflecting a desire for action, for progress. This is a classic indicator of self-energisation

Sideways gaze, looking forward: may signal a focus on the future, curiosity or taking one's own path, as opposed to the initial frontal figure (which may be linked to conformity or blockage)

Rainbow-coloured hair: a positive symbol of diversity, self-acceptance, a visual metaphor for hope and emotional complexity

Clothing present: reflects a better definition of the self, clarity of identity and a more defined self-image.

The text is a conscious exhortation: "Be upright in any situation" denotes a form of self-affirmation and restructuring of personal resilience.

Table 3 – Transformation of Mr. C

Dimension	Before	After	Psychodynamic interpretation
Tone and energy	Low, rigid shape	Active, walking, open for action	Improvement în vitality and global tone
Self-image	Simple, outline	Ferm contour, clothing, color	More integrated and expressive self
Symbolic orientation	„Country home"— regression, protection	„Be upright"— verticality, ownership	Passing from protection to autonomy
Text & inner message	Practical, somewhat defensive	Motivational message	From desire to affirmative intention
Movement and orientation	Static, frontal	Dynamic, walking	Openness to future and adaptability

CONCLUSION

Dance therapy appears to have a positive effect on:

- body language (from stiffness to mobility),
- identity contours (from schematic to expressive),
- internal motivation (from evasive to affirmative),
- self-cohesion (through colour, shape, message).

This transition from a rigid and functional representation to a dynamic, symbolic and vibrant one is indicative of emotional integration and a positive reconnection with one's own body—a central goal in dance therapy, especially in the case of Parkinson's disease, where control over the body is concretely affected.

Mrs. C—Wife of Mr. C, no specific diagnosis

Figure 7. Mrs. C—Before

Formal and symbolic observations

The figure is frontal, rigid, schematic: Indicates an organised but inflexible self-structure, with possible difficulty in spontaneous or emotional expression.

Dishevelled hair, rigid hands, no fine details: Signs of internal tension, a structure affected by chronic stress or a lack of space for expression.

Large, round eyes, no eyebrows: may signal anxiety (hypervigilance), a need for control and hypersensitivity to the external environment.

Neutral-positive facial expression: seems to be trying to smile, but the overall figure remains static and cold, with a potential social mask.

Related text:

"Be strong!" is a direct statement, addressed to oneself or others, and contains an intention to support, a tone of self-motivation and resilience.

Figure 8. Mrs. C—After

Formal and symbolic observations

Use of various colours (green, red, blue): reflects emotional openness, better self-integration and revitalised expressiveness. The colour green (dominant) is associated with balance, hope and regeneration.

The figure is more feminine, elegantly dressed: the dress, coloured buttons and pointed shoes all denote a more polished, carefully constructed self-image, with an emphasis on femininity and dignity.

A clear smile and rounded cheeks: express a more positive emotional state, openness to contact and a desire to communicate.

Large eyes, no more glasses: retain a hint of vigilance/ anxiety, but in the overall context seem to express curiosity .

The posture is upright, stable, balanced: it signifies commitment, self-assurance, steadfastness in the face of difficulties.

Table 4. Transformation of Mr. C

Dimension	Before	After	Psychodynamic Interpretation
Colour expressivity	Reduced palette	Varied	Affective and emotional opening
General tone of the figure	Rigid, schematic	Stable, centered, feminine details	Improvement of self-image
Posture	Frontal, fixed	Vertical, balanced, clear contour	Bodily and mental rebalancing
Facial expression	Neutral, smiling, but weak	Authentic smile, red cheeks	Passage from mask to authentic emotion
Identity & message	Implicitly defensive	Affirmative—„be strong!"	Consolidation of will power and self-support

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Participation in dance therapy seems to have had a clear positive impact on Mrs. C's body and emotional awareness. The evolution is visible in:

- the expressiveness of the drawing,
- the assumption of a strong feminine identity,
- the symbolic use of colour and written messages,
- the transformation from a poorly defined figure to a lively and assertive presence.

This transformation supports the hypothesis that dance therapy, as an expressive and relational body intervention, provided a space for reconnecting with one's own body, with the role of partner, but also with one's inner self, in the context of a chronic disease process.

Analytical synthesis: The emotional and physical evolution of a couple with Parkinson's disease through dance therapy

Context: The couple analysed (husband and wife) participated in a series of dance therapy sessions dedicated to people diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. The present analysis is based on the Projective Person Drawing Test (PPDT), conducted before and after the intervention, as a means of exploring the psychocorporal and affective evolution following therapy.

Couple analysis

Pre-intervention dynamics:

- Both partners express rigidity, marked emotional control and reserve regarding physicality
- Lack of detail, minimal expressiveness, signs of anxiety (especially in the wife)

Post-intervention:

- The husband adopts an active and assertive posture.
- The wife moves towards powerful emotional expression, accompanied by a message of support.
- Both partners access a more autonomous, expressive version of themselves, with physical and emotional reconnection.

General conclusion: Dance therapy had a visible beneficial effect on the couple, both individually and relationally. The two partners made a transition from rigidity and inhibition to vitality, acceptance and expressiveness. Couple resilience was expressed both through affirmative messages and through the shaping of a new relationship with their own bodies.

This journey validates the role of dance as an integrative therapeutic method for couples affected by neurodegenerative diseases.

Case study 4. Brother (A.M.) and sister (L. M.)

General context: A.M. (45 years old), diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's disease, former martial arts practitioner, participated in a dance therapy programme alongside his sister L., a lawyer, clinically healthy and deeply involved in supporting her brother. The Projective Drawing Test was administered to both participants before and after the interventions.

Figure 9: A.M—Before

Formal and symbolic observations

Excessively broad and rigid torso: betrays deep tension accumulated in the chest area—the seat of breath, energy and identity. It is a common compensation for loss of body control (Parkinson's disease) and may signal an unconscious desire to retain strength.

Small, disproportionate head, tense features (straight nose, empty eyes, large ears): signs of a distorted self-perception, possibly influenced by anxiety and high self-expectations.

Lack of authentic facial expression: the face lacks vitality—there is a noticeable lack of facial expression, a common feature in patients with facial rigidity and masked emotional distress.

Hands—one smaller than the other: possible projection of bodily imbalance or a disharmony between control and will.

Minimal background with Mount Fuji and trees—but lifeless (no clear leaves): indicates a weak relationship with the environment, isolation or lack of emotional anchoring.

General interpretation: the drawing suggests an inner struggle for control and stability. It is a drawing of tense strength, emotional and physical rigidity, which can mask vulnerability. The figure also expresses the need to "stay upright", to oppose the passivity of illness—but with a tense, distorted physicality.

Figure 10: A. M.—After

Formal and symbolic observations

Wide, relaxed posture, with arms apart: a classic sign of acceptance and self-confidence. The gesture of the hands on the hips often denotes a position of control over one's own physical and emotional space.

Smile present, arched eyebrows, contoured eyes: markers of a state of well-being, of an emotional reconnection with the self and with others.

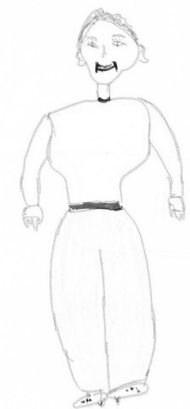
The head is now more proportionate to the body: an indication of the integration of thought and action.

The setting has been retained but improved: clear outlines of vegetation appear and the background is framed—a sign that the individual has regained their anchor in space.

Subtle added colour—purple on the torso, green in the landscape: symbols of balance, introspection and regeneration.

General interpretation: the body image has reorganised itself. The drawing expresses a regaining of control over one's physical and emotional identity. It is a figure with leadership qualities, a self that has found itself again in its posture, expression and attitude.

Through dance therapy, A.M. managed to reconfigure her relationship with her own body—from a tense and fragmented body to a coherent and accepted self. Dance acted as a bridge between her physical past (martial arts) and her current need for psychophysical healing. The posture in the drawing after ("hands on hips") can be interpreted as a return to a "fighter" identity, but without aggression—instead with stability, calm and reconnection.



L.M. (Sister of A.M.—no specific diagnosis)

Figure 11. L. M.—Before

Formal and symbolic observations

Rigid, upright posture with controlling elements (small hands, tense smile)

Sporty but basic clothing with clean lines

Strong, emphasised signature suggesting control and responsibility

Overall impression: rational, supportive, focused on performance and empowerment, but emotionally closed.

Figure 12. L. M.—After

Formal and symbolic observations

Curved, sweeping lines, loose contours: the figure is drawn with fluid, expressive contours, suggesting a liberation of the self from constraints. The body shape is curved and symbolically feminine—acceptance and embodiment.

Rounded middle and torso: there is no longer any rigidity or excessive rational control. The figure seems to be dancing or moving—a sign of reconnection with one's own body and the joy of being.

Red heart in the chest: an extremely valuable symbol—it expresses genuine emotional openness, and its position in the centre of the body indicates a refocusing of emotional life.

Words on the side (written in colour):

- "ENTHUSIASM"—in light blue: mental clarity and openness.
- "HOPE"—red-orange: regenerative vital energy.
- "CONFIDENCE"—red: commitment, willpower.'JOY'—bright green: present emotional experience.
- "ENERGY"—yellow: vitality, zest for life.

Facial expression—relaxed smile, arched eyebrows: the face appears relaxed, receptive and balanced.

Shoes with colourful details: symbols of self-care at the most 'earthly' level—contact with the ground.

The signature is almost unchanged—but highlighted in yellow: the clear identity is retained, but with a warm, radiant energy.

Through dance therapy, L.M. has transitioned from a rigid, rational form of support to a lively, emotional, and physically expressive presence. The drawn heart is a symbolic turning point—a sign of emotional reconnection not only with her brother, but also with her own body and emotional life.

Table 5 Dyadic evolution (brother-sister dynamic)

Dimension	M.—Before	M.—After	L.—Before	L.—After
Body posture	Rigid, tense	Open, affirmative	Upright, reserved	Fluid, round
Facial expression	Absent, tense	Expressive smile and eyes	Controlled smile	Warm expressiveness
Emotional symbols	Lack	Implicit revived	Lack	Heart, positive affirmations
Message/ voice	Tension, resistance	Ownership	Responsibility without emotions	Confidence, joy
Relation to space	Weak background	Detailed vegetation	Black and white	Words and colour

Psychodynamic conclusion

Dance therapy worked for this couple as a catalyst for deep reconnection with their physical and emotional selves. Matei regained his symbolic uprightness and physical dignity, while Lavinia moved from logical support to authentic emotional expression.

Despite their very different roles, both members of the couple underwent a transformation that brought them closer to an integrated, vibrant and expressive version of themselves. The dance process allowed them not only to express themselves, but to rediscover themselves in movement, in their relationship and in their own bodies.

Results of the Study

Each patient demonstrated distinct shifts in posture, line expression, and emotional articulation. Rigid, schematic, or defensive pre-therapy drawings evolved toward more open, expressive, and colorful representations. Notably, patients who initially portrayed fragmented or blocked self-images (e.g., hidden

hands, absent faces, or "STOP" gestures) later illustrated integrated, mobile, and affectively vibrant figures.

Couples participating together (e.g., spouse or sibling dyads) displayed parallel or complementary evolutions. Often, the partner without Parkinson's initially expressed inhibition, detachment, or a care-based role. Post-therapy drawings revealed mutual vitality, bodily anchoring, and symbolic resonance. In several cases, feminine figures transitioned from delicate, schematic outlines to confident, dynamic postures, while male partners reclaimed stature, expression, and relational engagement.

The participants were also asked to address a letter to their disease. While there were no instructions provided as to how the manner or tone should be, the results varied in intensity and in emotional range, from anger, to resilience and even gratitude. It emphasized not only the effects the disease has on the participants' life, but also the relationship that they have with Parkinson's. Below are excerpts from some of the letters:

Letter 1

Dear Mr. Parkinson's,
I wish you got some rest, as the manifestations and the ailments transmitted are very hard to bear. Treatments and research don't keep up with you.
I wish you went away and never came back.

Letter 2

Dear Parkinson,
I did not think in my youth that I would get to know you, but now I frequently come across your name and the effects of the disease that you have given your name to are influencing my daily life and activity.
I have studied, researched and consulted specialist doctors, and with their guidance and a lot of will on my part, the symptoms of the disease are easing, and I am behaving normally in society and feeling well. I won't let you enjoy what you want to do to me, because I want to get on with my life.

Letter 3

I don't have anything endearing to say to you at the conclusion of this letter, but rather I would like to tell you to get out of my life.

Letter 4

My dear friend Parkinson,
For 9 years we have known each other, we have accompanied each other's footsteps through all the moments of life, and when you broke my nose and my lip, and when I endured carpal tunnel

surgery, and when I lost my mother, and when a wonderful granddaughter came into the world, and when you allowed me to welcome a loved one into my life.
Thank you for the confidence I've gained in myself.

From the facilitators' point of view

The sessions focused not only on addressing balance and gait through the movement scores and customized choreographies, but also in increasing the range of expressivity, from facial to body expressivity. Another objective was building up confidence in individual ability as well as increasing awareness of the support available in partners and in the group. The facilitators ensured a safe context, where each individual could express and contribute and they addressed the group dynamics, in addition to the proposed ranges of motion and dance movements.

At the beginning of a new group the participants are invited to introduce and talk about themselves. They can embody the individual state of mind or emotion that they are feeling, as a group, through the use of a Chacian circle, voicing and moving their names and/or emotions.

The facilitators guide the group through a warm-up focusing on breathing and muscle relaxation, approached in creative ways that distinguish the session from other, more directed movement contexts (such as kinesiology sessions). A session may address the concept of balance — both as a metaphor and as a physical state — working through this idea via movement and stillness. Some parts of the session may invite participants to become performers: to be seen, to interpret, and to bring their own creative voice, while also taking time to reflect on what is not working on a given day — moving towards acceptance, or giving voice to resistance through movement.

The participants' personalities, life and work experiences and also the degree to which they are affected by the disease are very different. The sessions have offered a context where these differences can be seen and sometimes brought to a common denominator. A key factor is transformation, with the participants obtaining a set of movement vocabulary, together with a sense of wellbeing and connection.

Limitations

The results presented are part of a wider study, which involved over 20 participants throughout two years, evaluated with a complete battery of medical, cognitive, emotional and personality tests. This paper presents only a part of the qualitative data gathered in this ample endeavor. We will perform further analysis in the coming period in order to understand the correlation between all this data as regards the complex effects of our dance therapy intervention.

Conclusions

Dance therapy enabled significant psychological and embodied transformation for Parkinson's patients and their relational partners. The Person Drawing Test proved a sensitive tool for documenting these changes, revealing shifts in identity, autonomy, and emotional integration. The approach supports the integration of expressive arts within neurorehabilitation strategies, emphasizing the value of relational and symbolic embodiment.

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METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN CONTEMPORARY DANCE PEDAGOGY

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Abstract: This article examines the methodological challenges faced in contemporary dance pedagogy, drawing on critical and historical perspectives to understand how teaching choreography has evolved. It begins by contextualizing contemporary dance as an art form characterized by hybridity and openness, yet notes that this very openness creates pedagogical difficulties in traditional training environments. Three key contexts are analyzed: competition circuits, institutional repertory dance, and independent creative practice. Each context presents distinct challenges, from the emphasis on spectacle and virtuosity in dance competitions to the replication of established forms in academic or company repertory settings, and the self-directed nature of independent dance production. The paper discusses how these challenges stem from tensions between old and new paradigms of choreographic education. Grounded in theory and examples, the article then proposes pedagogical strategies to address these issues, including flexible, context-responsive curricula; interdisciplinary and collaborative learning; reflexive practices like writing and archiving; and a commitment to inclusion and diversity. Through this structured analysis, the article argues for a reconfiguration of contemporary dance pedagogy that balances rigorous training with creativity, thus preparing dancer-choreographers to navigate and contribute to the ever-evolving field of contemporary dance.

Keywords: Contemporary dance, dance pedagogy, choreography, competitions, repertoire, independent practice, dance education.

How to cite: Mavhima, S.E. (2026) "Methodological Challenges in Contemporary Dance Pedagogy", *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 109-122.

Introduction

Contemporary dance has emerged as a terrain of confrontation between pedagogical, aesthetic, and social paradigms, defined by hybridity, interdisciplinarity, and openness to diverse bodies and contexts. However, this very openness comes with a series of methodological challenges in training the next generation of dancers and choreographers. In countries like Romania, as in many other parts of Europe, professional dance training remains anchored in a traditional model that emphasizes the transmission of codified technique, the replication of established choreographic forms, and the cultivation of a predefined aesthetic canon. This reality raises fundamental questions: what does it mean today to teach contemporary dance, and what should the training of a choreographer entail in an era where the boundaries between dance, performance, visual arts, and somatic practices are increasingly fluid? How can educators build a pedagogy that maintains formative rigor while also embracing experimentation and critical reflection?

To explore these questions, this article analyzes three key contexts in which contemporary dance is practiced: international competitions, institutional stage

repertoire, and the independent production sphere, each of which poses distinct pedagogical challenges. By examining these contexts, we identify how conventional approaches may conflict with the ethos of contemporary choreography, and we consider strategies for reconfiguring dance education to better serve today's creative and critical needs. Before delving into the specific contexts, we outline a theoretical framework tracing how the concept of choreography and approaches to dance teaching have evolved, especially since the mid-20th century.

I. EVOLVING CONCEPTS OF CHOREOGRAPHY AND PEDAGOGY

Teaching contemporary dance is closely linked to how we define choreography itself. For centuries, choreography was conceived as the art of arranging movement in space and time according to musical or narrative structures, the choreographer was the author of a set form, and the dancer its faithful interpreter (Morgan, 2012). In the tradition of classical ballet and early modern dance (e.g. the techniques of Martha Graham or Merce Cunningham), this model rested on a hierarchical relationship between creator and performer, and a transmission model of teaching in which students learned by imitating movement vocabularies demonstrated by an expert teacher. Education was often a one-way delivery of predefined steps and styles from teacher to student, reflecting what dance scholar Sherry Shapiro termed a shift from "disembodied" to "embodied" knowing in more recent decades (Medina, 1999). By the mid-20th century, however, choreographic practice underwent radical change.

The postmodern dance movement of the 1960s and 1970s, exemplified by the Judson Dance Theater and the influence of performance art, rejected the conventions of earlier dance in favor of experimentation and process. Choreographers like Yvonne Rainer famously declared "No to spectacle. No to virtuosity" (Rainer, 1965), opposing the theatrical excess and fixed techniques of prior forms. Movement was no longer treated as a given vocabulary to be mastered, but rather as a raw material for inquiry and discovery; composition became understood not as a fixed sequence to be set on dancers, but as an open-ended process of structured improvisation and task-based exploration. The dancer's body was reconceived not just as an instrument to execute an external idea, but as the very site where meaning is generated through presence, action, and relationships. This paradigm shift, from dance as the execution of set forms to dance as research and exploration, fundamentally altered what it means to teach choreography. Instead of merely drilling steps, contemporary dance education increasingly emphasizes developing the dancer's creative and critical thinking alongside physical technique.

In light of these changes, the role of the choreographer expanded. No longer simply a creator of steps for others to perform, the choreographer in contemporary practice often engages dancers as collaborators, blurring the lines between author and performer. Dancers are frequently encouraged to contribute movement material or improvise within scores, reflecting a more democratic creative process. Performance theorist André Lepecki observes that choreography is no longer about movement, but about the conditions of movement, about what makes movement possible or impossible (Lepecki, 2024). This insight highlights that modern choreographic work often interrogates contexts and frameworks (social, spatial, political) that shape how and why movement occurs, rather than focusing on virtuoso movement for its own sake. Consequently, training a contemporary choreographer today involves not only honing the body's capabilities, but also cultivating a mindset capable of asking questions, generating ideas, and crafting meaningful contexts for dance. As one educator put it, the goal is to foster choreographic thinking in students, an integration of physical practice with conceptual and reflective skills. (St. John, 2023)

Parallel to the evolution of choreographic art, dance pedagogy in recent decades has been moving away from the strict master-apprentice model towards more holistic and student-centered approaches. While the traditional teaching model in dance was largely authoritarian and product-oriented (with teachers imparting set knowledge and students striving to replicate it), current educational theory advocates for active learning, self-reflection, and inclusivity in the studio. Researchers Anu Sööt and Ele Viskus, surveying trends in 21st-century dance pedagogy, note a broad shift: techniques and choreography are no longer the sole focus; educators now emphasize self-regulation, somatic awareness, and reflective learning, among other themes (Sööt, 2024). The teacher's role is increasingly seen as a facilitator of experiences and inquiries rather than just a drillmaster of steps. This theoretical grounding, a view of dance training as an open, inquiry-driven, and collaborative endeavor, will inform our analysis of the specific contexts below. Each context illustrates a tension between older pedagogical paradigms and the emerging needs of contemporary dance as an art form.

1. Contemporary Dance in Competitions

One setting that illuminates a significant methodological challenge is the world of dance competitions. In international and commercial competition circuits, "contemporary" dance has become a popular category, yet the way contemporary dance is realized in these events often diverges sharply from the experimental, process-oriented ethos described above. Instead of perceiving choreography class as a space for inquiry, exploration, and creation, students in competitive studios

are frequently trained to approach dance as a set of "emotional codes" and "visual tricks" to be delivered for maximum impact on audiences and judges. In other words, competitive contemporary dance tends to prioritize virtuosic tricks, crowd-pleasing moves, and overt emotional display, because these elements score well under competition conditions. Technical difficulty and passionate performance are rewarded as signs of commitment and artistry in this context, leading young dancers to equate choreography with athletic feats and melodrama. As university dance educator I can say that many students entering higher dance programs after years on the competition circuit must essentially "un-learn" what they acquired, having absorbed a notion of contemporary dance as highly acrobatic spectacle rather than an investigative art practice.

The pedagogical consequences of this competition culture are profound. Training for competitions often emphasizes product over process, short-term polishing of a routine to win awards, rather than long-term creative development. Students may become adept at performing set pieces with stunning precision and emotion, yet miss out on learning how to generate original movement or engage critically with choreographic ideas. I observed that this dynamic creates a rupture between the pedagogy of spectacle and that of process, between choreography as a product and choreography as research. In a competition-driven pedagogy, choreography risks being reduced to a formula, an assembly of impressive tricks and stylistic clichés, rather than an open-ended exploration. The notion of integrity in the creative process can be compromised: young dancers focus on what will impress, not why movement is meaningful. As a result, when these dancers transition to more experimental or academic dance environments, they often face a difficult adjustment. They must shift from executing choreography to questioning it, from embodying someone else's score to improvising and composing their own. The challenge for contemporary dance pedagogy, then, is how to bridge this gap. Educators need to find ways to integrate the positive aspects of competition training (such as strong technique, performance confidence, and commitment) with a deeper cultivation of creativity, somatic awareness, and critical thinking. One approach is to explicitly address the differences in values: making students aware that virtuosic execution and authentic exploration are not mutually exclusive, but that true artistry requires going beyond spectacle to engage in process-driven discovery. By reframing competitions as opportunities for creative inquiry (for example, encouraging original student choreography in competition pieces, or feedback that rewards innovation and risk-taking), teachers could begin to align competition experiences with educational goals. Ultimately, the competition context highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that counterbalance the allure of trophies with the less tangible, but more enduring, rewards of artistic growth.

2. Contemporary dance in institutional repertoire

Another realm posing methodological challenges is the institutional setting of repertory dance, for instance, state-funded dance companies, high schools, and university programs that maintain a repertoire of contemporary works. In these contexts, contemporary dance is often taught and performed within a framework inherited from classical ballet or established modern dance institutions. Despite the progressive nature of contemporary choreography, the training model can remain conservative. Dancers in many situations learn set pieces or canonical works by renowned choreographers; they drill techniques codified by prior masters, and are assessed on how well they conform to prescribed aesthetic standards. Thus, even though the content is "contemporary," the pedagogy may still function as if choreography were a fixed body of knowledge to transmit. As noted earlier, many institutions operate on a technique-and-repertory paradigm: students take technique classes (often a blend of classical, modern, and contemporary techniques), then learn repertory choreographies to perform on stage. This tends to cultivate excellent interpretive skills, dancers become proficient at reproducing complex choreography and embodying a given style, but it may not sufficiently nurture their capacity to create and adapt in the face of new artistic challenges.

If students are only ever taught to replicate a teacher's movements or a choreographer's past works, they risk becoming technically adept but creatively limited. This is not a new dilemma, dance educators like Susan Stinson (Stinson, 2015) have long advocated balancing the "reproduction" of existing choreography with opportunities for student composition and improvisation in curricula. The situation today is acute because contemporary dance itself is an art of constant change; ironically, some institutionalized "contemporary" programs may lag behind the cutting edge of choreographic practice. For example, a foreign university dance department might still emphasize Cunningham technique and repertory pieces from the 1990s, while the professional field has moved towards release technique, interdisciplinary performance, or socially engaged dance. Students trained in a static notion of contemporary dance may find themselves ill-prepared for the plurality of practices in the real world.

Addressing this challenge requires pedagogical openness and curricular reform. Institutions are increasingly introducing creative process labs, choreographic workshops, and collaborative projects into their programs to complement repertory work. Rather than positioning students solely as performers of others' choreography, teachers invite them to be co-creators, devising movement studies, contributing improvisations, and even choreographing pieces of their own. Such practices help break the hierarchical mold and give dancers a sense

of agency and authorship. Moreover, linking coursework with current trends, through guest workshops with contemporary choreographers, interdisciplinary courses, or theoretical seminars on new dance research, can ensure that the repertory taught is contextualized as one possibility among many, rather than an absolute model. The role of the instructor also evolves from authoritarian director to mentor or facilitator, guiding dancers through a process of discovery. Implementing a more process-oriented, student-centered pedagogy within institutions can be challenging, especially where traditions and expectations are deeply rooted. It may encounter resistance from those who fear a loss of technical excellence or artistic quality. However, far from abandoning rigor, such pedagogical shifts aim to produce dancers who are both technically proficient and intellectually flexible, capable of interpreting established repertoire with integrity and engaging in the creation of new work. In summary, the institutional context highlights a need for pedagogical strategies that preserve the richness of dance's legacy while freeing students to push the boundaries of that legacy. The challenge is to transform the repertoire class from a one-directional transfer of steps into a dialogic space where past and present, teacher and student, creation and re-creation inform each other.

3. Contemporary dance in independent practice

The third context is the independent sphere of contemporary dance, the world of freelance choreographers, project-based companies, and DIY productions that operate outside large institutions. Over the past few decades, independent practice has become a dominant mode for contemporary dance artists, especially as funding structures and artistic preferences have shifted away from permanent ensembles to more fluid project collaborations. This sphere is often where innovation flourishes: freed from the constraints of tradition or competitive scoring, independent choreographers can experiment boldly with form, content, and method. However, the independence of this context is a double-edged sword from a pedagogical standpoint. On one hand, it exemplifies the ideals of contemporary dance pedagogy: hybridity, interdisciplinary, diversity of voices, but on the other hand, it lacks the built-in support and structure of schools or companies, making the learning process ad-hoc and uneven.

One challenge is that emerging dance artists entering the independent scene must be far more self-directed than previous generations. Without a fixed curriculum or mentor hierarchy, they often piece together their training and professional development through open workshops, festivals, peer learning, and trial-and-error in creative projects. The question arises: how do we prepare students in formal

education for the realities of independent artistic life? Traditional pedagogy, with its scheduled classes and clear syllabi, may not fully equip dancers for the adaptive, entrepreneurial, and collaborative skills needed when one is essentially one's own artistic director. From my experience, independent choreographers must not only choreograph and perform, but frequently also produce, fundraise, network, and publicize their work. This demands a pedagogy that extends beyond technique and composition to encompass broader competencies, such as project management, interdisciplinary creation, and critical self-reflection.

From a methodological view, independent practice underscores the importance of teaching dancers how to learn continually. Because the field is always evolving, an independent artist's education is never "finished" upon graduation; it must be ongoing, with the dancer able to identify their needs and seek knowledge throughout their career. Thus, contemporary pedagogy should instill habits of lifelong learning and curiosity: for instance, encouraging students to research and write about dance, to engage critically with performances, and to develop somatic or theoretical practices on their own. In many respects, the independent context amplifies issues already present in the competition and institutional contexts. Like competitions, the freelance world can be precarious and may incentivize chasing trends or visible "success" at the expense of process, except now the "judges" are festival curators or social media audiences rather than competition panels. And similar to the institutional setting, independent artists must often justify their work's relevance, negotiating between personal artistic vision and the expectations of diverse, sometimes non-specialist audiences or funders.

To meet these demands, pedagogical approaches are increasingly incorporating elements like collaborative creation and cross-disciplinary projects that mirror real-world artistic collaborations. At "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, students are tasked with devising a small production from scratch, taking on roles from choreography to lighting to marketing, as a capstone project. Such experiences simulate independent production and force students to apply their training in a holistic way. Another key pedagogical focus is building resilience and adaptability: by exposing students to unfamiliar styles and mixed environments (for example, working with actors, visual artists, or community groups), teachers can help them become comfortable moving between contexts, a necessary skill for freelancers who may one day be devising an experimental piece in a gallery, and the next day teaching a community dance workshop. Mentorship networks can also be a part of pedagogy for independence. Pairing young choreographers with experienced mentors in the field, or encouraging peer feedback circles, creates a support system akin to an "alternative institution" that sustains learning outside formal structures.

In summary, the independent practice context challenges educators to think beyond delivering dance technique or repertory, and to consider whole-artist development. The pedagogical question shifts to: what do dancers need in order to not only perform works, but to generate and sustain their own artistic practice? By addressing that question, dance education can better serve those who will navigate the independent landscape, arguably the frontier where contemporary dance's future is being written.

II. PEDAGOGICAL PROPOSALS

Confronting the challenges identified in the three contexts above requires a reimagining of contemporary dance pedagogy. Building on insights from current educational discourse and the needs of the field, we propose several key strategies for a reconfigured pedagogy. These proposals aim to bridge the gap between tradition and innovation, spectacle and research, theory and practice:

1. Instead of a rigid, one-size-fits-all curriculum that follows a linear progression (e.g. technique — composition — final showcase), dance programs should adopt flexible structures that can be adapted to specific contexts and individual learners. An open curriculum might allow students to influence the content of their training (for instance, choosing electives in somatic practices, technology in performance, or community dance), ensuring relevance to their interests and the evolving dance landscape. The learning sequence can be non-linear: creative exploration and critical discussion can occur from the outset, not only after years of technique classes. Such a curriculum consciously breaks the old model where technique is segregated from creativity; instead, technical training is integrated with improvisation and choreographic tasks, teaching students to apply skills in context. This responsiveness in curriculum design acknowledges that contemporary dance has many faces, from dance theatre to conceptual performance, and prepares students to engage with dance as it is actually practiced in diverse settings.

2. Contemporary choreography increasingly exists at the crossroads of multiple art forms and fields of knowledge. Pedagogy should reflect this by encouraging transdisciplinary collaborations and learning experiences beyond the dance studio (Morari, 2023). Workshops or modules that bring in visual artists, musicians, dramaturges, digital media creators, or even scholars from humanities and sciences can greatly enrich a dance student's perspective. Working collaboratively with other disciplines not only expands creativity but also teaches

essential skills of communication, flexibility, and collective problem-solving. For example, a joint project between choreography students and architecture students might explore how bodies relate to designed space, yielding insights neither field could produce alone. These experiences train dancers to be inventive and resourceful, qualities needed in both independent projects and innovative institutional works. Collaboration is also a social pedagogy: it helps dismantle the isolating, competitive mindset (lingering perhaps from competition culture) and replaces it with a model of collective artistic inquiry. By learning to co-create, students come to see choreography not just as personal expression, but as an exchange of ideas shaped by multiple contributors.

3. In contemporary dance, it is often said that what you do must go hand-in-hand with what you think about what you do. Developing a habit of reflection is thus a crucial pedagogical practice. Students should be guided to reflect critically on their processes and performances, through methods like journaling, group dialogues, and even scholarly research or writing about dance. Incorporating written assignments or creative documentation (for instance, creating a process notebook or a video diary of rehearsals) compels dancers to articulate their intuitive experiences and situate them in a broader context. This reflective practice builds the "metacognitive" awareness essential to choreographic thinking (Stinson, 2015). Archiving comes into play as well, students might compile portfolios of their choreographic studies, with notes on what they tried and learned. Not only does this produce tangible documentation (useful for future grant applications or artistic proposals), it also instills an understanding that dance can generate knowledge and that dancers can contribute to discourse. Moreover, engaging with dance theory and history in the classroom, reading texts, viewing and analyzing their works, allows students to converse with past and current ideas, refining their own voice. In sum, reflection and archiving activities ensure that learning is not just "in the muscles" but also in the mind, encouraging dancers to become thinkers and writers who can advocate for their art form.

4. A truly contemporary pedagogy must critically examine who is included in dance education and whose voices are heard. Embracing diversity of bodies, backgrounds, and perspectives is both an ethical imperative and a source of creative strength. This involves rethinking traditional selection and evaluation systems: for example, questioning rigid entry requirements that favor certain body types or training histories, and expanding definitions of technical excellence to accommodate varied movement styles and abilities. In practice, educators can adopt principles of inclusive teaching, ensuring that exercises can

be modified for different physical capacities and that class examples draw from a wide range of cultures and genres, not solely Western concert dance canon. Representation matters as well, inviting guest teachers from underrepresented communities or studying the work of choreographers of color, LGBTQ+ choreographers, and artists from different global contexts can profoundly enrich the learning environment. A diverse cohort of students and faculty fosters an environment where dialogue about identity, aesthetics, and equity becomes part of the pedagogy. By doing so, we not only broaden the pool of talent entering the field but also challenge aesthetic norms, bringing in new movement vocabularies and narratives that reflect a wider human experience. The outcome is a dance pedagogy that not only trains dancers, but also cultivates empathetic, culturally aware artists equipped to create relevant work for diverse audiences.

These proposals are interrelated and aligned with broader developments in dance education scholarship. Together, they outline a pedagogical approach that is open, collaborative, reflective, and inclusive. Implementing them requires institutional support, teacher training, and often a shift in mindset for both educators and students. Yet even incremental changes, such as adding a weekly improvisation jam, or assigning a self-evaluation essay, or hosting a workshop with a hip-hop artist, can start to recalibrate the learning atmosphere. The ultimate goal is to empower students as creative agents, capable of navigating any context, rather than passive recipients of tradition. In doing so, we address the challenges identified in competitions, repertory institutions, and independent practice: we teach dancers not only how to perform, but how to adapt, invent, question, and collaborate.

Conclusions

Contemporary dance pedagogy stands at a critical juncture, facing the need to reconcile legacy practices with the radical openness of contemporary art. The challenges presented by competitions, institutional repertory, and independent practice are, in essence, manifestations of one overarching question: How do we teach an art form that is itself continually reinventing its methodology and purpose? The analysis in this article suggests that the answer lies in embracing a pedagogy of flexibility and critical inquiry. By examining each context, we have seen the consequences of clinging too tightly to either end of the spectrum, whether it be the hyper-competitive emphasis on outcomes, the academic preservation of established models, or the unstructured freedom (and uncertainty) of the independent route. The way forward is an educational approach that takes

the best from each sphere: the discipline and drive from competition training, the respect for heritage and technique from institutional training, and the innovation and autonomy from independent practice, while shedding those aspects that limit dancers' growth and creative potential.

Crucially, this article underscores that methodological challenges are not merely logistical or curricular issues; they are tied to deeper philosophical stances about what dance is and what teaching means. Should dance education simply produce performers for the next generation of shows, or should it cultivate artists and thinkers who will shape the future of dance? The stance advocated here is firmly the latter. That means valuing questions as much as answers in the studio, encouraging risk and experimentation alongside mastery, and viewing diversity and change as assets rather than complications. The role of the contemporary dance educator expands in this vision, they are not only instructors of movement, but also mentors in creativity, facilitators of collaboration, and advocates for inclusion.

Implementing the proposed pedagogical shifts will likely involve ongoing effort and refinement. Just as choreography is a process, so too is pedagogy. Educators must remain reflective practitioners, continuously assessing what works in their teaching and what needs reimagining. Institutions must support this by allowing room for new courses, interdisciplinary ventures, and community-oriented programs. Signs of progress are already visible: many Romanian universities now include improvisation the first year of training; festivals and networks provide young artists with platforms to develop work with guidance; and dialogues on equity and wellness in dance training are becoming more common. These are encouraging developments, yet much remains to be done to fully realize a 21st-century model of dance pedagogy.

In conclusion, the methodological challenges in contemporary dance pedagogy, while complex, offer an opportunity to rejuvenate how we teach and learn dance. By situating technique within a broader context of creative inquiry, by breaking down silos between disciplines and cultures, and by foregrounding critical reflection, we can nurture dancers who are not only superb performers but also innovators, leaders, and sensitive observers of the world. Such dancers will carry contemporary dance forward as a living, dynamic art form. As we respond to the challenges and implement new methodologies, we move closer to answering the question posed at the outset: What are we actually teaching when we teach choreography today? Ideally, we are teaching the skills, knowledge, and values that enable the next generation to both honor the rich past of dance and boldly choreograph its future.

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INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY IN ARTS EDUCATION. **(RE)IMAGINING FOLK DANCE BY INTEGRATING CONTEMPORARY DANCE TECHNIQUES**

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Abstract: Our proposal focuses on the role of the teacher in the student's artistic education. What is the level of influence of the teacher on their creative and human development? How can the teacher instill values, attitudes, and knowledge by example? What are the educational benefits of art in general and dance in particular? The methods used by the teacher in artistic education and education as art (through art) aim to encourage curiosity and help the student develop at a psycho-emotional and artistic level. The art of dance offers attitudes, behaviors, expressions, and values. We will analyze new perspectives on dance, how two distinct dance styles can merge, and how we extract the stylistic particularities of each style to achieve a relationship of complementarity. Creativity is vital in constructing and developing the skills to design an individual and impactful choreographic language. Creative approaches are based on improvisation, initiating a dialogue in movement, awareness of the dimensions of body shape, space, kinesthetic development, and interaction. The role of the teacher is to train professionals who can identify new meanings within choreographic creations. We strive to provide a safe, trustworthy environment, encourage experimentation, and offer emotional support by cultivating cultural values collaboratively.

Keywords: Education; folk dance; innovation; methods; contemporary dance.

How to cite: Olar, C.M. (2026) "Innovation and Creativity in Arts Education. (Re)imagining Folk Dance by Integrating Contemporary Dance Techniques," *Proceedings of the International Conference on Creativity in Dance*, pp. 123-133.

Education is considered a fundamental pedagogy category and has been a constant concern in people's lives throughout history. Since ancient times, education has played an essential role in shaping the Greeks into exemplary models of human conduct and harmonious development, particularly from an aesthetic perspective.

Education is essential and plays a key role in:

- cultivating human behavior,
- forming a balanced character,
- influencing intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects,
- developing aesthetic competencies, which help foster critical thinking, imagination, and sensitivity.

Art education involves the practice of an art form—such as movement, dance, or eurythmy—and is present in many cultures.

It has developed and adapted to people's needs to understand and discover the human essence. The art of dance made real progress with the appearance of the first project to elevate dance to an academic level, initiated by the poet Jean

Antoine Baïf. Exposing dance to the public in various forms has served—and continues to serve—as a means of educating both the performer and the viewer. It is a form of continuous education that requires discipline and rigor.

In 1661, ballet master Pierre Beauchamp established the first dance academy, L'Académie Royale de Danse, with the support of King Louis XIV. Here, the nobility received education through the art of dance.

During the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the modern era, the study of the arts was also considered a prerequisite for a rich and fulfilling adult life, enabling the cultivation of the mind and the senses, social success, and, as John Dewey stated,

The fulfillment of the natural processes of human development" (Apostu et al., 2016, p. 19). In the postmodern period, education has increasingly come to value dance and to support the training of artists in this field through engaging educational programmes. Thus, over time, dance—through its depth and complexity—has contributed to the development of an education grounded in artistic practice.

Artistic education, primarily through the art of dance, also shapes students and prepares and develops their aesthetic values.

> Achieving the specific objectives of artistic education allows the acquisition of aesthetic competencies that are essential for the formation and development of students' personalities, generally through:
> a) artistic receptivity (in terms of sensitivity, thinking, and creative behavior);
> b) artistic motivation (in terms of creative interests and intrinsic beliefs, demonstrated in various school and extracurricular contexts);
> c) regarding general and specific creative aptitudes, artistic creativity is especially developed within certain educational subjects. (Cristea, 2014, p. 55)

Art education through dance brings numerous benefits to both students and educators.

Through the practice of dance, we can observe the cognitive, aesthetic, social, and moral development of students, aligning with the philosopher Immanuel Kant's assertion:

Education is the activity of disciplining, cultivating, civilizing, and moralizing the human being, and its purpose is to develop in the individual all the perfection of which he is capable (Kant, 2002, p. 12).

The student will become more adaptable to challenging situations, develop a sense of responsibility, and engage in self-education.

Dance belongs to the arts category that offers the practitioner freedom of expression, yet is grounded in precise movement techniques. Moreover, by instilling aesthetic, moral, social, and cultural values based on strong principles, the educator also develops accuracy and consistency in shaping their educational approach.

Researchers Charlotte Svendler Nielsen and Stephanie Burridge compile various studies in their book *Dance Education around the World: Perspectives on Dance, Young People and Change*. They explore the influence of dance on different groups of people from various social backgrounds and attempt to discover how dance can influence emotional intelligence and the understanding of personal values.

The educator adopts the role of the value-provider while also considering the student's perspective, who likewise contributes to developing their value system.

Educators' methods in artistic education—and education through art—aim to encourage curiosity and help students develop psycho-emotionally and artistically.

Through practicing dance, the student will acquire a wide range of competencies, including: communication skills, understanding of motor qualities, overcoming limitations, developing a structured way of thinking, awareness of the body-mind connection, formation of a personal value system, harmonious physical development, cultivation of creative imagination, introspection, the ability to express emotions with ease etc.

We believe that the proper functioning of the educational process is due to the teacher, who must be a professional in the field he practices and a good pedagogue. The teacher must also respect certain ethical norms of a didactic nature. Methods, strategies, and style distinguish the teacher's teaching qualities. The approach to these three elements also depends on the genre/style of dance taught by the teacher.

The teacher plays a crucial role in shaping students' visions and experiences through education. The teacher needs to engage students in their learning activities to help them build confidence in their abilities. The teacher can stimulate the learner's creativity by approaching the material encouragingly and innovatively. The teacher's responsibilities include instructing, educating, motivating, coordinating, and guiding students as they discover their artistic qualities.

We believe that a good educator establishes their teaching strategies and methods with a personal style of course delivery, while adapting them to the students' ability to absorb and process the content.

Teaching, as an activity, has no real meaning if it does not lead to learning, as it is essentially a process of content transmission. The teacher's behavior defines

teaching, while learning is determined by the changes in the student's behavior under the influence of teaching (Palicică, 2002, p. 79). The quality of education is reflected in the students' responses to the teacher's requirements. It is important to note that the efforts made by the teacher to deliver successful artistic education are insufficient if the student—as the recipient—is not actively engaged in their development.

The teacher provides vision and learning experiences through the educational process. They must involve the student in the didactic activity to foster self-confidence. The teacher stimulates the student's creativity through the way the material is presented. We believe the educator must be able to respond to the class's needs, using inventiveness and spontaneity. They are concerned with shaping students' characters by acknowledging their traits. The educator's role is to instruct, educate, motivate, coordinate, and guide students in discovering their artistic qualities.

By clearly presenting and delivering the teaching material, the student will gain a clear understanding of the subject matter and its practical application. The educator encourages the student to explore and discover. Through the originality of the topic and the way it is presented, the teacher can spark the student's curiosity. Demonstration is one of the most effective ways to build trust with the teacher. Through example, the student becomes aware of their role in acquiring moral, aesthetic, and human values. Studying the arts aims to discover new abilities, behaviors, and attitudes. Art holds value when one practices it, ennobles it with their values and beliefs.

The art of dance, in particular, produces changes on physical, cognitive, emotional, and social levels.

Throughout history, dance has evolved into various styles and genres, each contributing to its integration into the broader context of human history. It is a valuable educational tool that can positively influence personal development and improve academic performance. Dance is crucial in self-discovery, helping students cultivate discipline, develop creativity, and establish a universal artistic language.

In educating students through art, especially dance, we can highlight several key objectives of such a course.

The teacher sets the course objectives according to the dance genre or teaching style. In this case, we will focus on contemporary dance, which proposes a new vision of the body and its positioning in artistic performance. Contemporary dance combines techniques developed in the 20th century and adapts them to today's needs. The objectives of such a course are primarily centered around cultivating cultural, aesthetic, moral, and social values.

Physical Objectives:
- improving motor qualities;
- body awareness;
- spatial-temporal orientation;
- development of a harmonious body;
- overcoming personal physical limits;
- improving rhythm.

Intellectual Objectives:
- development of body memory;
- development and improvement of creative capacity;
- nurturing imagination;
- adapting to new situations;
- improving communication.

Emotional Objectives:
- introspection;
- unlocking emotional barriers;
- expressing emotions;
- personal development;
- improving the relationship with oneself;
- experimenting with new emotional states.

Aesthetic Objectives:
- awareness of executing movements correctly from a technical perspective;
- development of bodily expressiveness;
- ability to recognize and correctly appreciate an artistic moment.

Social Objectives:
- enhancing social integration;
- behavioral improvements;
- belonging to a group.

The present research also aims to reimagine dance from the students' artistic background by proposing creative methods for exploring familiar and unfamiliar movement material.

Our goal is to provide a safe and supportive environment that encourages experimentation and emotional support through the collaborative cultivation of cultural values.

The research is directed toward students from a folk dance background who wish to discover dance beyond the boundaries of their known field. Thus, within the Choreographic Art course, students go through an initiatory journey into a dance style unknown to them, eventually capable of imagining new choreographic constructions. For a thorough understanding of the teacher's proposals, theoretical grounding must be developed alongside physical training. Creativity is essential in constructing and developing the ability to design an impactful and individual choreographic language.

We will analyze new perspectives on dance, how two distinct dance styles can merge, and how to extract stylistic elements from each to create a complementary relationship. As this is only part of what a choreographic creation course entails, we must mention several key aspects without which the act of creation cannot occur. We also rely on the adjacent subjects from the choreography specialization to grasp the movement material fully. Students undergo movement training that familiarizes them with various dance techniques while laying the foundation of a theoretical vocabulary to make meaningful connections.

Courses in body technique develop bodily awareness, coordination, strength, flexibility, and expressiveness. Theoretical courses complement the practical ones. There is no purely practical course; explanations and analysis of the movement material always accompany each.

Once the initial stages of the course have been completed, students are encouraged to explore through their own bodies, drawing on the knowledge acquired in their original field of study. Thus, folk dancers (though not exclusively, as participants may also come from other dance styles) propose familiar movements and interact with space, music, and one another.

Together with them, we developed a set of working stages, through which they gradually discovered their own—sometimes innovative—choreographic language. The process begins with individual exploration, and group work is introduced once all stages have been covered.

By following these steps, students develop the ability to identify a wide range of existing movements and form their vision of utilizing the diversity of folk dance styles from various regions in conjunction with abstract elements of contemporary dance. Folk dance offers a rich framework of meanings, traditions, and rhythms reflecting people's collective identity.

Each region's specificity is unique and can be distinguished through crossed steps, small and fast steps, jumps on both feet, spectacular elements, rhythmic clapping, quick pirouettes, demi-plié, virtuosity, energy, etc., as well as through structural formations such as circles, semi-circles, boys' dances, girls' dances, and partner dances. Movements are often accompanied by stories, symbols, and customs that give emotional depth to the dance.

Through the fusion of these two dance styles, we aim to highlight the innovative side of dance by creating a hybrid language, while preserving the cultural heritage and emphasizing the strengths of each style.

The stages covered in the Choreographic Art course during the first year of study in the choreography specialization:

- selecting 10–15 movement elements/figures from the student's dance style, without music;
- structuring and organizing the movements into a movement phrase, without music;
- adding new dimensions and dynamics to the movement content;
- developing spatial and movement awareness with space;
- improvisation using already known elements, now accompanied by music;
- improvisation using new movement themes and elements from contemporary dance, with and without music;
- combining folk dance elements with contemporary dance elements, without music;
- combining folk dance elements with contemporary dance elements, using a chosen piece of music;
- using compositional techniques to refine the movement material;
- interpreting movement (meaning and significance);
- selecting a narrative to guide the choreography;
- combining movement structures with a partner;
- creating movement structures with clear dramaturgy through teamwork;
- introducing costume elements;
- adding scenographic elements;
- incorporating light design elements;
- adding multimedia elements, if necessary;
- creating the complete choreographic composition.

Regarding the originality of this working method, we can observe that in the 21st century, we are returning to the past. Thus, we mention two of the most critical figures in Romanian choreography: Floria Capsali and Vera Proca Ciortea. Through an in-depth study of dance, these two revived Romanian folklore and integrated modern reinterpretation techniques.

> A persistent concern of Floria Capsali was the study of Romanian folk dance to extract an artistic interpretation in a modern spirit. She demonstrated to Western art circles the originality of our choreographic folklore by stylizing and creating the Romanian character dance – a cultivated language, a noble expression (DS Project Lab, *s.a.*).

Floria Capsali proposed a new choreographic vision for dance in Romania, blending classical dance with elements of Romanian folklore. Critics praised her for her style, exuberance, beauty, originality, and inventiveness during a somewhat sterile period. A dancer, choreographer, and pedagogue, she succeeded in founding the first ballet and choreography school in Romania. Today, the Choreography High School in Bucharest bears the name of the famous Floria Capsali, in honor of her remarkable contribution to the development of choreography, especially the creation of the cultivated Romanian folk dance style, in 1998—many renowned dancers and choreographers of the time studied at Floria's school, including Vera Proca Ciortea.

The choreographer Vera Proca Ciortea studied in Romania and abroad, exploring various movement styles. She studied modern dance, ballet, and Romanian folk dance while simultaneously attending the National Academy of Physical Education. She later became a professor at the Institute of Theatre and Film Arts, where she taught choreography for theatre.

Her contribution to preserving traditional Romanian dance stands out through developing a personal movement vocabulary that retained the essence of Romanian folk dance. She stated that the ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu taught her: How to collect folk dance and encouraged me to create a notation system for folk dance, which I eventually accomplished after several years. Since then, I have felt called to this path (DS Project Lab, *s.a.*).

Therefore, we can recognize her contribution to dance through an innovative notation method that combines traditional Romanian dance with modern dance.

Throughout time, Romanian folk dance has been a constant source of inspiration in the creations of great Romanian choreographers.

In the educational process, students are encouraged to explore, seek, and identify new elements when creating choreographic pieces and developing their expressions. Naturally, the ability to reinterpret a dance style varies from one student to another, and the role of the pedagogue is to find practical solutions to improve the student's creative capacity. The pedagogical approach plays a key role in developing a harmonious relationship with the student. The student responds to the dynamics of teaching and reacts accordingly. This dynamic evolves depending on the students' receptiveness, with the teacher being more

than a pedagogue—they are a human being who feels, acts, and reacts based on what they receive.

The character of the teacher will influence the student's behavioral changes. What defines you as a teacher is what the student will absorb from you, through imitation of behavior and attitude, but primarily through how these actions are conveyed. The role of the teacher is to train professionals in the field, capable of identifying new meanings within choreographic creations.

The objectives of the choreographic art course are, in particular, to:

- develop students' creativity and originality in choreographic composition;
- improve technical and artistic skills in dance interpretation;
- promote understanding and interpretation of the language of movement and its expressive potential;
- encourage critical thinking and problem-solving during the choreography creation process;
- foster collaboration and teamwork within group choreographic projects;
- support the development of students' artistic vision and personal style;
- integrate knowledge of dance history and theory into the creative process;
- cultivate awareness of cultural diversity and different dance traditions.

Thus, by integrating symbols from folk dance into a contemporary framework, students learn to view dance beyond its physical form. Dance becomes a profound communication that addresses universal and current themes, bridging the past and the present.

Thus, by integrating symbols from folk dance into a contemporary framework, students learn to see dance beyond its physical form. Dance becomes a profound form of communication, addressing universal and current themes, creating a link between past and present.

Therefore, we can conclude that artistic education leaves its mark not only on the student's artistic qualities in the classroom but, first and foremost, on their human qualities through the transmission of knowledge aided by art.

Furthermore, the teacher must encourage the students to learn to interpret their feelings and thoughts through movement, allowing them to experiment and discover their choreographic style. The teacher can help students refine their artistic language and express their ideas clearly and coherently by providing constructive feedback and detailed choreographic analysis.

The teacher's role is to shape the students' artistic thinking and guide them to understand dance techniques and their artistic foundation. By fostering a continuous exploratory attitude, the teacher helps students engage deeply with their ideas and translate them into movement. A professional must not only understand dance technique but also be able to adapt, transform, and integrate it into their creations. Therefore, the teacher's role is to teach movements, stimulate the students' creativity, and encourage them to build their artistic portfolio based on innovation and originality.

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Choreographer, dancer, and teacher **Cristina Maria Olar** graduated from the University of Arts in Târgu-Mureș with a bachelor's degree in theatre and a master's degree in acting. She also studied at the I.L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, where she obtained both bachelor's and master's degrees in choreography, as well as a PhD in performing arts. She has collaborated with several directors and choreographers, including Alexandru Darie, Erwin Șimsensohn, Gigi Căciuleanu, Vava Ștefănescu, Mihai Măniuțiu, Alina Nelega, and Răzvan Mazilu. Her training includes work with Mirva Mäkinen, Ivonne Ramos, Massimo Gerardi, Brice Mousset, Vava Ștefănescu, Gigi Căciuleanu, and Milan Maurer. Among her performances are *The Land of Dreams*, *Love Triangle*, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, *Don Quixote*, *Carmina Burana*, *The Nameless Star*, *Vivaldi and the Seasons*, *Christmas Story*, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, and *Broken Column*. She conducts contemporary dance workshops for students, professional dancers, and actors at festivals and universities across the country. She also participates in national and international conferences in the field of theatre, where she has published several significant articles. Currently a lecturer at the University of Arts in Târgu- Mureș, her research interests include applied performing arts, as well as practical work with student actors and dancers.

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For a long time, dance has been understood primarily through practice: through movement, performance, and lived experience. While these remain essential, they do not exhaust its meaning. The reflective and critical dimensions of dance—its ability to generate knowledge, to question, to connect with other disciplines—have only recently begun to find a shared voice within academia. In this context, the *International Conference on Creativity in Dance* represents not just an event, but a step toward recognizing choreography as a field of research in its own right.

Publishing such a volume in Romania is, in itself, a meaningful gesture. It signals not only participation in an international discourse, but also the desire to contribute to it. More than that, it affirms that dance belongs within the realm of ideas, alongside other disciplines that have long been recognized as subjects of rigorous inquiry. At its heart, this volume is a statement of belief: that dance matters—not only on stage, but also in thought.

Assoc. Prof. SIMONA ȘOMĂCESCU, PhD,
I.L. Caragiale UNATC Bucharest,
ICCD Project Manager & Curator

In a famous essay, *Beauty as a Physical Sensation* (Paideia, 1998), Borges spoke of that certain something which is not the result of a judgment, which cannot be reached through rules, which is either felt or not felt... and Dostoevsky argued, through the words of Prince Myshkin, that "Beauty will save the world"... a saving beauty, of light, of love, of the divine. Beauty has permeated the human universe through art, throughout its entire history. The beauty of thought, of feeling, of the word, and of movement. The beauty of movement—that is what choreography means—the beauty of thought embodied beyond the word. But, if, from the very beginning of the performing arts, we have been fascinated by movement as a flight toward perfection, we must always acknowledge that the ineffable is underpinned by diligent work, arduous research, a valuable structure, and a journey toward constant refinement. This is precisely what is taking place at a high academic level in our university, and, within the Department of Choreography, the existence of the ICCD fully demonstrates this approach. This book of undeniable value, which encompasses research in the artistic field, is useful to theorists and practitioners, but especially to young people aspiring to a career in choreographic pedagogy—that is, in the *pedagogy of the beauty of movement*.

Prof. BOGDANA DARIE-CREȚU, PhD,
I.L. Caragiale UNATC Bucharest,
President of the Scientific Committee of ICCD

This volume is a *manifesto* stating that dance should be integrated more substantially into the academic canon. We hope this is the first in a long series of volumes dedicated to dance, exploring its connections and interdisciplinary relationships with other fields of art and science. The articles presented here broaden conceptual horizons, identify new avenues for inquiry, and offer thought-provoking ideas for a more in-depth methodological exploration. The ICCD conference provides the worlds of dance, dance education, dance-movement therapy, and performing arts with a stable hub for research in the field and positions dance as a pivotal subject of academic scrutiny.

Assoc. Prof. MIHAELA BEȚIU, PhD
Editor-in-chief CONCEPT academic journal
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ISSN 3120 – 2217 ISSN-L 3120 – 2217
ISBN UNATC PRESS 978-606-082-115-1
ISBN Universitaria Craiova Press 978-606-14-2259-3
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37130/ICCD.2026.01