BALANCING A HEALTHY MIND AND BODY AS AN INDEPENDENT DANCER

I have worked as an independent dance artist for the past 12 years. My work has involved extensive collaboration with many choreographers, touring nationally and internationally, teaching from beginners to professionals in choreography and directing, and the occasional job as a freelance choreographer. My career has certainly been artistically fulfilling and tremendously exciting, and I have worked with truly amazing and talented people. But there have also been times when I have often felt like a hamster on a wheel, and the stress of coping with getting a show on, the emotional involvement in the work, injury, looming unemployment, and financially trying to make ends meet can be utterly draining.

Mind/body balance? Are you kidding?

For independent dance artists, managing the juggling act of generating and organising work and training, coping with financial difficulty, dealing with injury and giving enough attention to personal growth and relationships can be a demanding and exhausting. When you are in the thick of things and running from one job to the next, it can be hard to have a clear sense of perspective and go about your work with clarity and ease. For myself, a large part of mind/body balance is to surround myself with close friends who can remind me that it's not only dance I'm doing, not saving the whales or world peace. But there are also ways you can actively address mind/body health through different approaches and disciplines.

Dancers are no strangers to complementary medicine, often trying different therapeutic approaches to treat and manage injury. Alternative therapies/disciplines tend to view the person holistically. This approach of treating the emotional wellbeing, as well as the physical wellbeing, of a person can also foster a healthy mind/body balance.

My first wake up call to address my health came several years ago. A recurrent back injury flared up to such an extent that and I ended up being told by a consultant to give up dancing and have surgery to graft bone from my pelvis to patch up a fracture in my lumbars spine. I declined his advice. I was physically in bad shape and in constant pain, but I was determined to totally readress how I worked. I found an amazing Alexander technique teacher who let me pay what I could afford, and I began to practice yoga with my landlord's lady. Within weeks I was pain free. Jump forward a couple of years and, even though the fracture will never heal, the Alexander and yoga work have made me a more physically intelligent dancer and I have never had lower back trouble since.

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I was enjoying the yoga work and I decided that the best way to deepen my understanding of it was to do a teacher training course. Little did I know then how it would influence my work in the future. The foundations of yoga practice – undoing tension, following the breath, ‘listening’ to the body, heightening kinesthetic perception and increasing the awareness of weight – are the principles that have most influenced my dancing, dance teaching and yoga teaching. The work has allowed me to tune into a more physically instinctive way of moving and understanding movement, one that taps into what one of my yoga teachers used to call ‘old brain’ or ‘back brain’. Hands-on experience with non-dancers (many of whom have not touched their toes for over 30 years) has taught me about the responsiveness of the body and its ability to learn, thrive and change. Most importantly, when I am teaching or practising yoga my mind and body totally calm down, a welcome respite from having to write yet another essay in over 8 years.

Another aspect of mind/body balance that I would like to mention is further education. Through the guest lectures on the philosophy section of my yoga teacher training course, I found out about the MA that he ran at Chichester University. Even though a complete atheist, I began an MA in comparative religious studies with culture, psychology and ethics, and started travelling down to Chichester once a week. The course was stimulating and fascinating, offering a view of the history of man and his existential mind. It was just what I needed – a thematic structure to reading and learning away from dance. Even though writing my first essay in over 10 years was nerve wracking, it was a rewarding challenge, one that gave me a great sense of achievement and confidence. Later, material from the course often began to contribute to the conceptual background of dance projects in which I became involved.

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