

Consciousness, Performing Arts and Literature

Consciousness, Performing Arts and Literature:

Trajectories, 2014-2018

Edited by

Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe

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INTRODUCTION

My retirement at the end of February 2017 gave me the opportunity of reflecting on my research, in the higher education context, since 1994. This personal trajectory interlinks closely with that of the discipline(s) I have been involved with: first and foremost, theatre studies, more recently extending to dance studies and opera studies in my own research and publications, combined with a keen interest and editorial activity in the developments of fine arts, music, film and television, and literature.

Over the years, in my own research, what I have been doing since I embarked on my PhD dissertation is to interrogate and explore phenomena of theatre in the context of consciousness studies, to seek explanations for experiences described by theatre artists, dancers and artists involved in opera, across the world. My research is thus anchored in consciousness studies, defined as the “study of how we think, feel and act, why we think, feel and act as we do, and what it feels like to think, feel and act as we do” (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2013a, 11). Within consciousness studies, I focus further on positions of spirituality to provide explanatory contexts for phenomena of theatre and performance. I understand spirituality in a non-religious way, with the implication that “spirituality culminates in the full development of mind,” and “any move in the direction of this fullness can be called spirituality” (Malekin and Yarrow 1997). My approach has been eclectic in so far as I have gone with the aspects of consciousness studies that had, for me, the highest explanatory value, independent of where any specific aspect might have come from. I have found much value in Vedanta philosophy, much of that in the form of Vedic Science as developed on the basis of Vedanta philosophy by the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

In 1991, when I had made my decision to pursue a doctorate in theatre studies and had decided to apply for a place at the then Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, I submitted two different thesis proposals, one around a conventional topic relating to contemporary British drama, and one on the actor’s emotional involvement reconsidered from the perspective of Vedic Science. In due course I received a response directly from a prospective supervisor with the clear indication that were I to want to proceed with the British drama topic, he was not interested, but he would be very keen to supervise my consciousness studies topic. I

completed my PhD in 1994 and was appointed to a Lectureship in Drama at the University of Wales Aberystwyth a few weeks later.

This particular, Vedic Science-oriented approach was based on my familiarity with the Transcendental Meditation movement--I learnt this meditation technique in my early teens, later trained to be a teacher of TM and spent several months teaching at Maharishi International University (MIU, later renamed Maharishi University of Management, MUM). I was invited to develop my own syllabus for a one-month block module relating contemporary drama to consciousness studies. While the syllabus was approved by the head of department, I was later asked to remove Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* from the syllabus at the request of the university's President. This incident alerted me to the essential necessity of differentiating between unadulterated knowledge derived directly from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and its institutional mediation. This relative openness also enabled me, in due course, to extend my knowledge base beyond that available from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi to, for example, Maharishi's former disciple Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and, most recently, German geobiologist Hans Binder. In my 2013 book *Observing Theatre: Spirituality and Subjectivity in the Performing Arts*, I introduced Binder's philosophy as the basis for discussions of aspects of theatre as varied as *nostalgia* in theatre, intuitive collaboration, praise of acting in theatre criticism, practice as research, digital performance, theatre and philosophy, the canon, applied theatre and aspects of acting including helping actors cope with stage fright.

When I started my higher education career, consciousness studies as a disciplinary area was in its infancy, as was the interrogation of the arts from a consciousness studies perspective. I vividly recall my first participation in a national conference in the UK where I presented my position, and a well-established senior figure in the British higher education drama scene told me that if I meant what I said he would certainly not send his children to be taught by me. Two years later, at an international conference, I presented on the topic of universality from the consciousness studies perspective and a colleague stormed out shouting that he had hoped never to have to encounter such ideas about universality ever again. My work was published, and in 2000 I was able to found the peer review journal, *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* (<http://www.dmd27.org/CLA.html>) with the support of my department--over the years, I even had the privilege of the services of a PhD student to help with the administrative work on the journal. In institutional terms, however, it took a long while for my work to be accepted and acknowledged to the extent that it was considered of sufficient merit for an

internal promotion. With the support of the department, an extensive outside evaluative report was commissioned on whether consciousness studies was considered, in the academic world of social sciences and sciences, as a serious subject, or a New-Age-like niche. In 2007, a newly appointed head of department summoned me to his office a month after taking up his role and told me: "I do not wish my department to be associated nationally or internationally with *Theatre and Consciousness*". He proceeded to offer me a sabbatical, "to realign your research interests to the established strengths of the department". The previous year I had edited a Festschrift for German theatre director and politician Heinz-Uwe Haus (2007), who had worked at the forefront of theatre in the so-called German Democratic Republic and had been a member of the political organisation that was instrumental in bringing about the end of that regime.

From this work I realised that in my department I was witnessing the beginning of a totalitarian regime in miniature, with the whole range of responses, from real or feigned not noticing anything amiss, via a conscious accepting a role in the opposition but without the option of leaving, all the way to seeking immediate escape. I escaped, to a professorship at the University of Lincoln, signing my contract only three months after that memorable meeting with the new head of department. In Lincoln, the journal could continue, as well as the two book-series I had launched in 2005, *Theatre and Consciousness* with Intellect and *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* with Rodopi--any "re-alignment" of my profile in Aberystwyth would have included discontinuing the journal and the two book-series.

In the social sciences and sciences, it has been notoriously difficult, even impossible, to argue any causality—correlation is as close as these approaches get. It is against this background that I point to the following broad development, which overlaps with my own. In 1991, I began with my research into the relationship between insights in consciousness studies and theatre. In 1994, the Center for Consciousness Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson launched the first of the ongoing bi-annual conferences, Towards a Science of Consciousness. In 1994, the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* was launched, 1996 saw the launch of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness with its annual conferences and its journal, *Consciousness and Cognition*. 1996 also saw the publication of my doctoral thesis. The British Psychological Society founded its sections on *Consciousness and Experiential Psychology* and *Transpersonal Psychology* in 1997. It is also in these years that other publications began to emerge in the field of theatre, literature and

consciousness, for example with Peter Malekin and Ralph Yarrow's *Consciousness, Literature and Theatre: Theory and Beyond* (1997). In 1999 I edited, "Performance and Consciousness" as a themed issue of *Performing Arts International*, in 2000 I launched the peer reviewed journal *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts*, in 2001 followed an issue on "Consciousness and Drama" in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*. The Intellect and Rodopi book series were launched in 2005, as well as a bi-annual conference series, *Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts*, which I hosted in Aberystwyth (2005, 2007), Lincoln (2009, 2011, 2013) and New York (with Gregory Tague at St Francis College, 2015). In 2006, Jade Rosina McCutcheon and I launched the working group *Performance and Consciousness* at the International Federation for Theatre Research. In the Lincoln School of Performing Arts at the University of Lincoln, an MA Theatre and Consciousness ran from 2008/9 to 2010/11, with a total of ten graduates, and the subsequent MA Drama in the Lincoln School of Fine and Performing Arts had a pathway "Theatre and Consciousness" with five graduates.

The editorial policy for both the CLA journal and for the two book-series was intentionally wide open, not geared towards any specific ideology or methodological approach. In particular, the editorial boards of the journal and the book series embraced new ideas, no matter how radical, as long as they were presented in a robust way. Rodopi in particular supported this policy by allowing decisions about accepting a proposal or, based on the accepted proposal, accepting the completed manuscript, to be taken solely by the members of the editorial board, who engaged in thorough peer review. When Rodopi was taken over by Brill quite recently, their new requirement for peer review outside of the editorial board would have been problematic in the earlier phase when the consciousness, literature and the arts field was in its infancy. However, the field has become sufficiently established in the meantime, and such concerns are no longer needed. Those still active in Higher Education will need to consider carefully whether explicit rules and implicit expectations or fears regarding research audit procedures, such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the United Kingdom, may have a debilitating impact on the opportunities they allow researchers to develop and present genuinely new insights, as they have been presented in the CLA journal and the Rodopi/Brill and Intellect book-series, and as I am presenting them in this book. It stands to reason that it is in principle impossible, or at least very difficult, to predict anything genuinely new—if it is predictable, it cannot be new to the extent that it is being predicted. The danger is that structures such as the REF limit what is acceptable as

research, or what scores highly, to predictable contexts, because in that way the chance for new insights is at best limited. REF-procedures might serve to consolidate and perpetuate the status quo and managers afraid of losing funding that depends on the outcomes of such audits might award work that plays it safe.

Approximately the same time that the conference series, and the two book-series were launched marks the beginning of the “cognitive turn” in performance and literary studies—insights specifically from cognitive science were used to further understand phenomena of performance, including theatre, and literature. A few years later, spirituality, anchored in religions and religious studies/theology entered the formalised scene, with a *Performance, Religion and Spirituality* working group within the International Federation for Theatre Research, which also launched its own journal. The open nature of the initial Consciousness, Literature and the Arts development separated into those two more formalised, but also by the very nature of that formalisation, more limited branches. At the University of Huddersfield, UK, the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, founded by Franc Chamberlain and Deborah Middleton, focuses on Mindfulness and performance, with a new journal on that topic launched in 2017/18. It is even possible to refer to the Performance Philosophy area in this context, which may well have been first formalised through the foundation, by Dan Watt and myself, of the working group *Performance and Philosophy* within TaPRA (Theatre and Performance Research Association) in 2005, still continuing, and the immensely popular Performance Philosophy network formally launched in 2013 with an international conference of which Watt was a co-organiser—it now has its own book series and journal (the journal co-edited by Watt).

Against this background of trajectories, personal, institutional and cultural, I present work I published and wrote (unpublished) between 2014 and today. I begin with three forays into the discussion of dance from a consciousness studies perspective. This section starts with a professorial reflection on the nature of dance, a conversation with Barbara Sellers-Young. This is followed by two articles about German dancer/philosopher Aurelia Baumgartner, considering her approach to spirituality and its expression in her dance performances in general, and specifically in her work with horses.

From there I move on to opera, with a reassessment of the apparent clash between *Regieoper* and *Werktreue*—director’s opera and productions that seek to be true to the composer/librettists’ intentions, and an introduction to the spiritual nature of the work of International Opera Theater. In shorter contributions, I comment on the alleged crisis in opera

that critics note at regular intervals, and I expand my work on conducting beyond my 2013 insights.

Eight chapters follow on theatre and consciousness. Here I offer a new perspective on liveness and livecasts (chapter 6), revisit, with Anita S. Hammer, the concept of a universal language of the theatre (chapter 7), discuss two productions of new plays (with Yana Meerzon, Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*, chapter 8), and with Gregory F. Tague, Stoppard's *The Hard Problem*, chapter 9), and the use of science in Prebble's *The Effect* (chapter 10). I add a new dimension to debates of ethical issues in relation to theatre in my consideration of the ethical implications of children playing characters in plays with "adult themes" (chapter 11). I introduce the concept of *theatre of the heart* in chapter 12, bringing a 2017 publication up to date with more recent material. With Tanatchaporn Kittikong I discuss the concept of beauty, comparing Western and Thai positions (chapter 13).

In the final part of the book I develop the concept of "practice as research". In chapter 14, I tackle the question of whether theatre needs conflict to be successful. The final chapter is taken up with my first novel, which launches the genre of spiritual romance—I make use of a number of the issues I raise in my 2013 books and in the preceding chapters of the current book, integrating them in the narrative.

Each chapter begins with a general statement that places the chapter within the context of the book overall. For previously published work, the contextualisation also charts the publication history. I do not change the text itself of previously published work—rather, I identify any additional, later thoughts as such in the contextualisation and they usually follow after the previously published text. In this way, development of thinking over time is always transparent.

PART ONE:
DANCE AND CONSCIOUSNESS

CHAPTER ONE

PROFESSORIAL REFLECTIONS: INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

BARBARA SELLERS-YOUNG
AND DANIEL MEYER-DINKGRÄFE

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Contextualisation

The launch of *Dance, Movement and Spiritualities* with Intellect Publishing in 2014 is one stone in the mosaic of the expanding development of seeking further understanding of phenomena, particularly subjective experiences, of fictional characters, and of artists and spectators across the disciplines of literature, film and TV, fine arts, dance, music, and theatre. I was invited by the founding editor, Dr Amanda Williamson, to join the editorial board. For issue 1:2, I was invited to contribute the first of an ongoing series of “professorial reflections”, on open format of conversation between two established colleagues. Having become confident with collaboration via skype for previous publications, I approached Barbara Sellers-Young, whom I had met many years ago at a conference of the International Federation for Theatre Research—I was aware that she had extended her research within the field of theatre and performance studies to dance, and she was interested in the consciousness studies / spirituality context—she contributed to the *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* journal as early as 2002. In 2009, I chaired a session at an IFTR conference to which she contributed a paper on “Rationality, neuroplasticity and contemplative practice”. In 2013, she co-edited, with Jade Rosina McCutcheon, a book on *Embodied Consciousness: Performance Technologies* for Palgrave MacMillan, to which I contributed a chapter. We talked over skype for a number of occasions for this reflection and edited the transcript into five sections, starting with increasing acceptance for the topic of spirituality in relation

to the arts, and the emphasis on the body that is necessary particularly in an art form that involves the body to the extent that dance does. We discuss social aspects of dance and spirituality in terms of ritual and consider the personal dimension of spirituality and dance in the contexts of choices that the dancer has to make, and the dancer's age.

Introduction

Sellers-Young

One of the things that emerges from some of the articles published in *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities* is an attempt to define spirituality as separate from religious belief. This seems a very comfortable place to work from.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

I met neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran at the 2002 'Towards a Science of Consciousness' conference in Tucson, Arizona, and I asked him "from your background, you were brought up in India, aren't you aware that there is more to life than what science can deal with at the moment?". He said, "Yes of course I am". He was very lively and passionate, as he always is, about that as well: "but I am a scientist. As a scientist I can talk only in terms of what science can achieve at any point in time, but I am also trying to push the boundaries of science for science to be able to grasp a little bit more of what is still out there, and which I am aware of".

Increasing acceptance

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

If I look back over the last twenty years that I have been working in this area, you get a completely different response at conferences to the idea of spirituality. In the past, colleagues' responses could range from mild irritation to major concern; nowadays they take up ideas and develop them further.

Sellers-Young

That idea of spirituality in dance seems very popular at the present moment as the discipline considers the phenomenon of perception of wholeness with self and the universe that is an integral part of a dancer's experience. For example, there is a conference that is going to take place next March called 'Law and the Curated Body'. It is going to have a

significant section that includes contemplative practice as in North America there is an increased inclusion of contemplative practice in programmes/academic environments. Simon Fraser University in British Columbia has actually started a two-year M.A. in Contemplative Practice in Higher Education.

The body and somatics

Sellers-Young

Spirituality is also strongly linked to somatics, which has a long history in dance, beginning with Mabel Todd's book *The Thinking Body*. The body/mind methodologies integrated with somatics include Alexander, Feldenkrais, Yoga, T'ai Chi and Pilates. Each of these has, as part of its history, a relationship to Asian physical disciplines either directly as in the case of Yoga, T'ai chi, chi gong, or indirectly in the approaches evolved by the founders of the specific somatic approach. Inherent in each of these is a form of contemplation in which the breath, imagery and the exploration of the dancer's somatic landscape play an integral role in expanding the dancer's proprioceptive and kinaesthetic awareness. This allows them a level of self-understanding that can be incorporated into learning the technical vocabulary of a specific dance form. Also inherent in somatic training that is integrated within contemplative practice is an opportunity for stillness in which the body's neurological structures experience moments of deep calm. Anthony Damasio discusses these moments as opportunities for the dissolution of previous neurological organizations in order to allow for new neurological arrangements. Thus, moments of contemplative relaxation promote the opportunity to release muscular tensions and to allow for new pathways of creativity. The experience of creative expression is another area of deep connection that is a spiritual state for dancers.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

It is always interesting to observe how especially in dance it is necessary to talk about spirituality in terms of the body, because more than many other people, dancers are, by definition of their art and in what they are doing on a daily basis, more aware of their bodies than other people. So, anything that will be related to spirituality for the dancer will have to be experienced also in the body. It is in the body anyway, but the dancer is probably most likely able to pinpoint also a spiritual experience in relation to the body: if they have a specific spiritual experience, they are able to say where it is located in their bodies.

When I think about dance and body, what I am thinking about, especially from my knowledge and experience of having seen many South Asian performances, is that I find that I can often detect without much effort any non-South Asian dancer in a group of South Asian dancers.

Sellers-Young

When you say, “non-South Asian”, do you mean in training or in authenticity?

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

In authenticity, even if they have trained obviously in the South Asian dance form. In some ways there is a difference and that is probably not just limited to the South Asian context; I would also say that, in very broad terms, if African dance is performed by dancers from Africa it is different to when it is danced by Caucasians who have trained in that particular dance form. There is a different physicality there.

Sellers-Young

I just gave a paper at the Congress on Research in Dance core conference on Edward Said and his homage to a very famous Egyptian dancer called Tahia Carioca and though he does not use necessarily the language of Egyptian aesthetics he is trying to make an argument for an Egyptian aesthetic in relation to what they call *raqs al sharqi* in Egypt, which is what we call belly dancing. His underlying comment was that if you did not learn the dance in Egypt you did not know how to dance because you would not understand the implicit nature of the aesthetic that is embedded within the ritual formations of Egypt. So, you are right, that is true, so how is that related then to spirituality, particularly from a trans-national or cross-cultural standpoint? Do you create a new kind of spirituality in relationship to the body or can you say that you really never embody the deeper levels of the original form so therefore your spirituality is defunct? It raises many questions that are often part of contemporary theorizing about performance, spirituality and the body.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

What could be the reasons for an apparent difference between a dancer of South Asian origin and a dancer not of South Asian origin when they perform in a dance or drama form originating in South Asia? I discussed this a few months ago with my colleagues Arya Madhavan and Sreenath Nair – they had this to say:

The kinds of differences that can be observed may relate to the ways in which movements characteristic of the individual dance and drama styles are being executed by the dancers. For example, a movement may need to come across and be executed in a very gentle and flowing manner, which may be difficult for a non-South Asian performer due to the ways in which their bodies were conditioned within the culture in which they grew up. Their execution of such movements might be sharper. The same applies for martial arts.

Much depends thus on the way the bodies are cultured. In Chinese martial arts, for example, much emphasis is placed on a sitting position, and young and old can sit in that posture with apparent ease, because they will have learnt it and practiced it from a very young age. The level of experience is important as well. A dancer with less training will be less proficient in their dance, and this will show. Although this applies to both South Asian and non-South Asian performers, there has been a tendency for non-South Asian performers to embark on their training later in life than South Asian performers.

There are clear differences in the structure of the bodies: South Asian performers have a shorter torso in relation to their legs, while non-South Asian performers, in particular Caucasians, tend to have a longer torso, which tends to be similar in length to their lower bodies. Some non-South Asian performers compensate for this by bending lower for some positions, but the difference is obvious. Despite this physical difference, on rare occasions non-Indian dancers can achieve near-Indianness. Perhaps this has to do, in individual cases, with an upbringing close to Indian philosophy, for example as members of the Hare Krishna movement.

The inner cultural context is equally important, and this is exemplified by the lighting of the lamp at the beginning of a South Indian dance performance. They begin a process of transformation that brings them closer to their tradition, leads to concentration and to submission of the ego to the higher purpose. (Nair and Madhavan 2014)

From my own perspective, I added that the South Asian dancers enter the energy field of their tradition and are thus supported. It stands to reason that someone to whom this tradition is new, and who is thus not part of this energy field, will not have access to it at all, or to a much lower degree.

Social dimension: Ritual

Sellers-Young

So, the question is: do religious tradition and ritual inspire some form of spiritual experience in the performative dimension of the dancer?

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

Also, the rituals that go with performance. My daughter Myfanwy was taught for several years in Kudiyaattam by Arya Madhavan, and even at the age of eight, Myfanwy said that there was a difference if she did the rituals at the beginning of the training and at the end of the training. Recently we had a conference on women in Asian performance and Arya did a brief Kudiyaattam performance. I noticed that she had forgotten to do the ritual at the end and I reminded her. She said, “Thank you so much” and immediately went back to the performance space and did that particular part of completing the performance. It was something that was very important to her.

Sellers-Young

Dance is a part of rituals to celebrate a variety of occasions from personal life cycles to community and national events. Ethnography provides an opportunity to understand how dance and the moving body are organized as a medium of expression integrated into the ritual and social ethos of the community through a particular aesthetic. As some of the most deeply held beliefs are related to a community’s ritual foundations, an understanding of how dance functions within ritual and related spiritual frameworks helps us to understand the implications of dance in secular environments.

For example, traditional ritual forms taught in a dance programme provide an opportunity to understand the latter through an embodiment of the form. For example, this is a description of an African dance class at the University Oregon:

Dance and music are integral to African ceremonies and rituals that relate to many aspects of daily life – welcome, harvest, healing, initiation, possession, and more. Explore African spirituality and the way indigenous spiritual concepts are given form. Learn dances from a variety of cultural groups, while becoming familiar with the ideological and historical contexts that ground such forms of expression through readings, videos, and discussion. This class places a very heavy emphasis on student engagement with the course material. You will attend the performance of *Dance Africa* on campus, and also create and perform an original dance piece with your classmates.

The personal dimension

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

In addition to these social aspects, spirituality is eminently personal.

Sellers-Young

One of the dance forms I have been completely fascinated with is belly dance. I have just done a second edited volume and I am using my sabbatical year to actually do a single authored book on the form. It looks at the dance form in two ways: on the one hand it looks at its inclusion as part of the second wave of the feminist movement, and on the other hand in terms of the incorporation of a whole mythic dimension of the concept of the goddess. Dancers from the 1970s write about a desire to create a new religion that celebrates a woman's body and negates the patriarchal conception. This attitude has continued to exist, but even more fundamentally, belly dance has become a real place of spiritual development for women from around the world.

Studying belly dance has caused me to contemplate the possibility that we do not respect enough the possibilities of being us, the range of levels of conscious realization that are encompassed in those possibilities: spirituality is about how you conduct your life as an individual or how you conduct your life with a group. You can look at it from many different directions and as far as I am concerned there is not a god out there being beyond who we are as individuals. For me, spirituality is just completely devoid of religious tradition but at the same time I can see how ritual traditions actually inflect and impact your experience. My spirituality has evolved from the fact that I have been a member of various meditation groups for years and I love the combination of reducing experience to a moment of stillness.

In addition to ritual, which we discussed earlier, the whole area of somatic and spiritual studies stands out for me as a teacher and impacts even on courses not directly related to it. I am teaching two courses, an undergraduate and a graduate course in ethnography and this is where in dance studies, you really see the incorporation of spirituality either directly or indirectly. Certainly, all of the studies that come out on African dance on the continent or in the diaspora, including by people that are very theoretical in their approach, people like Barbara Browning, who still actually begins in the language that she uses to discuss, incorporate an attitude of the potential spirituality or the extreme presence of the moment, which is another way I would describe spirituality.

Personal dimension: Choices*Meyer-Dinkgräfe*

Going back to the observation that spirituality has become an interesting topic for discussion in many contexts over the past few years, including

dance, we must realize that it has become almost an industry, with many approaches to it on offer, including for sale, in bookshops or workshops or courses. While that is exciting and interesting, it also points to a dimension of spirituality that several traditions actually emphasize: the need to be both open and ready, and to differentiate between approaches that are conducive for spiritual development, and approaches that claim to be beneficial for spiritual development but are in fact not, and decide, on the basis of such differentiation, for oneself (not for others) on which approaches to take further.

For example, I recently received a video from German dancer/philosopher Aurelia Baumgartner of her horses, Arab Grey, Pegasus, and chestnut mare, Mabrouka, performing with a Butoh dancer. The dancer's movements came across as compacted, strained, a kind of hunched movement possibly deriving from Noh in terms of that form's concentration and the slowness. I am wondering whether much of the energy in Butoh is created in the solar plexus because Pegasus in particular was very interested in that region of the dancer, always having its nostrils near there and on one occasion accidentally touching the dancer's skin and shying back a little, but immediately going back. The themes of Butoh are intentionally dark, "negative", and in my experience this is reflected in the kind of energy that Butoh generates.

Sellers-Young

They are trying to challenge your conceptions of beauty and I might be a little outside of my knowledge base here because it is something that I have read about and seen performances of, but not immediately practiced. One of the influences is Mary Wigman and German expressionism, so if you think about expressionism, one of its explicit roles was trying to get you to re-see the world around you. For example, at the time expressionists sought to challenge a view of the landscape that did not see light or did not see relationships between elements. Butoh is actually also trying to have you see things differently and very definitely in terms of the social political elements, not necessarily returning to a concept of the beautiful that is related to the traditional forms of Japanese past. It's not trying to be Kabuki, because that would be how in Japan you would have defined the beautiful, but they are actually trying to get you to rethink beauty and its implication. Particularly after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki you have to ask: how do you then redefine the beautiful when you have had such historically destructive things happen within the context of your society where people's bodies are literally challenged?

I remember the Butoh performance of Kazuo Ohno. I saw him perform at the age of 85. It was in a theatre that held about 2,500 people – so it was a pretty good-sized space. I was mid-way back in the theatre. With minimal gestures you could literally feel the man performing. It was almost like he would move a hand this way and the energy of that movement would reverberate out to the audience. This is one of the things Zeami, the founder of Noh, talks about: you come onstage and learn to breathe with your audience and by breathing with the audience and integrating your breath with that of the audience, you transform the space.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

When Baumgartner took Pegasus and Mabrouka out of the arena into the paddock [after their encounter with the Butoh dancer], the horses galloped at full speed for a very long time, back and forth, until they were breathing and sweating very heavily, as if they wanted to get rid of the energy they may have picked up from the dancer. Taking several aspects of this encounter with Butoh into account, the dark nature of the energy, the focus of energy on the solar plexus (which as one of the chakras, in the context of Indian philosophy, is a highly sensitive area of the mind/body), and the response of the horses to the Butoh dancer, I come to the conclusion, for myself, that I would rather not encounter more performances, live or recorded, of Butoh, because I'd rather have different kinds of energies circulating in my body that I experience as more conducive to spiritual development. Such a personal choice, which is part of the development of spirituality for everyone, can of course come across as controversial in wider discussion.

Age

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

You mentioned already another point that I find very interesting and worth discussing further and that is age in relation to dance, the body, expectations and possibly then taking it further to wisdom and experience and in that sense, spirituality. I remember that in 1993 in Toronto I saw a performance of Chandralekha (1928–2006) who was then 65 years old; her age did not matter in the performance. I also then remembered that I had been at the last performance of the Düsseldorf Prima Ballerina, Tilly Söffing, in the late 1970s. Because my mother is an actress and other actors were there as well, and some of them knew this dancer, we went backstage afterwards and Söffing, who was in her early 30s at that point, said that her whole body had been in excruciating pain throughout the

performance, and that she would now look forward to a long time recuperating in a sanatorium. In the second half of that performance we saw her successor as Prima Ballerina; I think Tilly Söffing had done the fire bird and the new one was the dying swan. She was younger, though not quite young as she had already been in a number of other places for a few years, so there was talk among these acting colleagues of my mother's about how long she would have until her body wouldn't make it anymore, five or six years, and that would be it, and they also talked about what those dancers would be doing when their active careers ended: would they go into a sanatorium for a year and when they got out of there what would they do then, would they become choreographers and artistic directors of ballet companies? When I saw Chandralekha dancing at the age of 65, I realized that there were quite a number of Indian performers who were way beyond that age of western classical ballet dancers and still active and performing well.

Some years ago, I attended the performance of a Cardiff-based Bharata Natyam company in Aberystwyth, in the company of Mohiniattam performer Kalamandalam Radhika. She commented that the leading dancer and artistic director of the company was a very good teacher, explaining that judgment with reference to the observation that this dancer's students were better than she was herself, but she and they were appearing onstage together. I asked her whether she could give me examples because I can't see the difference because I am not trained. She said the hands should be bent backwards to a certain level of flexibility and her hands were just not that flexible anymore, so she could not normally bend them to the extent her students could. The students learnt from her and she taught them properly and allowed them to show the better technique, as it were, or execution of the technique onstage next to her.

Sellers-Young

I do think that age is pivotal, particularly in ballet and to a certain extent modern dance, as both are about the body conquering the space.

Some forms I think are more comfortable with the body as they are working with gravity and the earth rather than trying to conquer the earth. In Japan, I attended a celebration of older dancers; nobody was below the age of 70. They were making a real point that you can age and dance in Japan and not have the same kinds of issues that you find in the West in general. What is the relationship between the wisdom/spirituality that the body would have because of its practice for years and years that they are then passing on something spiritual or something aesthetic?

You and I have both had a range of experiences in terms of performance and a range of experiences globally. As you were talking about India I was thinking about my experience of being at a performance in southern Sudan and age is just not an issue. You participate according to your age and there is a real acceptance that it will be different if you are 20 or if you are 70 and everywhere in between, or if you are pregnant or not pregnant, or if you are male or female, but the group is all moving together in a generalized pattern in relationship to the instrumentations in the centre.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

So, it is considered as something “normal”, and probably in that context nobody would be surprised to see an older person dance and would possibly also not admire an older person because they are dancing because it is something that an older person otherwise does not do?

Sellers-Young

Older people dance, there is no expectation, no critique of it actually fulfilling a certain kind of specific aesthetic.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

I am saying this because there is a television series in the UK called *Britain's Got Talent* (2014) where otherwise unknown people will perform and are selected by the panel and audience; the winner will receive £100,000 and they perform at the Royal Variety Show in front of the Queen. During the 2014 series they had a 79-year-old woman in one of the preliminaries who danced some Latin dance with her dance teacher and everybody was amazed that she could move in that way at her age. There was surprise, praise, astonishment and appreciation because she is so old and so I wonder whether in Sudan there would not be this wonder and this combination of wonderment that she is so old and can still dance like that?

Sellers-Young

No, I don't think it operates in the same way. I think it has to do with the function of the form. Everything I saw that takes place in Sudan was really in original format, and rituals serve a different purpose in society and so in a ritual format it was the position of yourself and the community and being with that community in the performance. One ritual in particular is called a Pumbo, in and around the family coming to the point where they can actually cover the graves with cement and the family can take off the white clothes of mourning and go back to normal life. It was a primary ritual that was taking place. There were some things that took place at

other points of time, but this was the big one that united the community. The dance itself is part of a celebration of being alive and the difference between their lives and our lives is great. They get up with the light and go to bed with the light, they have one set of food to eat in the dry season and another set of food in the wet season, so their relationship to each other and the land is fundamental. There is not this other layer that gets built upon, they operate on a fundamentally different level.

Meyer-Dinkgräfe

Maybe the link might be that with increasing age, performers become more at home, familiar, confident with, feel independent in relation to their own tradition and that will have an impact directly, not mediated, on their ability to express any spiritual content that the form has or that the contents they are presenting has. They might be independent even of their own intellectual knowledge of it: they might not be able to tell you about it, they might not be able to give you a lecture about it, but because it has become embodied to such an extent without the intellectual interference of thinking about it – especially in academic terms – their connection with the spiritual is stronger. That might then explain, or could be related to, this experience that you talked about earlier with this 85-year-old in the large auditorium where every movement, and especially in the Butoh form, reverberates in the whole auditorium and you felt it sitting a good way back.

Sellers-Young

I think that is a good possibility. As you were talking I couldn't help but contemplate my own ageing. There is a deeper realization of the preciousness of being able to move and its impact on others, whether it is playing with my grandchildren or doing T'ai chi in the morning. There is an impact that is constantly on-going, this recognition that as you get older you think a lot about how long you are going to live. All of those factors come together with the way you age, and for me the spiritual component of it is that it is not about me, there is a generosity that I think comes through you in some cases. In terms of what people would tell you about acting, it's the way that you approach the subtext of your character that actually creates the characteristics: it's not the words, it's the subtext that is important, and as you get older your personal subtext changes. In that changing, particularly if you follow any kind of spiritual path in life, I meditate daily and I think it actually transforms how I experience things: only now I am realizing things that my T'ai chi teacher said to me ten to fifteen years ago because you get deeper into a place within your body that

is not about how big the gesture or how strong or dynamic it is, it is really about how subtle and integrated it is within the framework of your entire being and your sense of relationship to the world. I feel like I actually sink into the world's energy and for me that is the most profound spiritual component that ageing has given. I had a kind of energy when I was younger and using up all that energy I felt I couldn't have that deeper love or focus but ageing has given me that.

CHAPTER TWO

SPIRITUALITY IN AURELIA BAUMGARTNER'S TANZPHILOSOPHIE

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Contextualisation

In April 2013, the newly launched network *Performance Philosophy* organised its first conference, held at Surrey University. Many presentations at many conferences have been characterised by sharing knowledge and insights that are “safe and sound”, of the kind that would elicit a few polite factual questions in the time allocated to post-presentation discussion. At the Surrey conference, there was an unusual spirit of innovation and originality that led to genuine excitement and lively debate at the prospect of the genuine marriage of performance and philosophy. Sadly, almost at the end of the conference, much of that free spirit was at best dampened, in many cases killed off entirely, by the voice of the establishment: the Harvard University-based keynote speaker argued, categorically and very eloquently, that such a marriage was impossible in principle. The performance philosophy debate has not quite yet recovered the liveliness and rigour of innovation pre-Harvard-keynote. At that conference, I first encountered German dancer/philosopher Aurelia Baumgartner, and was intrigued by her work, particularly her 2012 performance involving horses. An extensive email communication after the conference led to my attending a performance of her work in December 2013 near her home and dance studio on the shore of Lake Starnberg near Munich, Germany, followed by a wide-ranging three-hour interview. Since 2013, Baumgartner has presented both theoretical papers and her dance practice at academic conferences, such as the 2004 World Congress of the International Conference for Theatre Research, the 2015 6th International Conference on Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts (New York) and the 2015 annual conference of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) in Worcester. In the first of two articles I

wrote about and with Baumgartner, I address her spirituality in general, in the second one I focus specifically on her work with horses in *Tanzende Pferde—Spiegelungen im Raum / Dancing Horses: Reflections in Space*.

Spirituality

From the earliest history, the arts have been associated with a beneficial impact on those exposed to it as makers or receivers. In the West, Aristotle in his *Poetics* wrote about the cathartic impact of theatre, while in the East, the *Natyashastra*, the ancient Indian text about drama and theatre, which also includes music and dance, relates how dance/drama were created by Brahma, the creator, in response to the request of the Gods for him to create an art form accessible to all human beings and with the explicit purpose of restoring the golden age to humankind. The use of the arts in therapy (dramatherapy, dance therapy and so on) confirms the validity of such early claims of the beneficial impact of the arts on humans in terms of increased well-being, as does research into that impact.

This role of the arts in improving our lives has been contextualized further in the fields of religion, philosophy and consciousness studies. The high currency of contextualizing the arts in these fields is reflected in academia in the emergence and continuing success of the “Theatre, Performance and Philosophy” working group within the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA), the working groups “Performance and Consciousness” and “Religion and Performance” within the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), the “Performance Philosophy” working group within Performance Studies International (PSI), the network “Performance Philosophy”, the Institute of Performance and Spirituality with its associated journal, and the recently founded journal *Dance, Movement and Spiritualities*, as well as, in the context of consciousness studies, *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts* (refereed online journal, book series with Intellect and Rodopi, and biannual conferences since 2005).

For most of these contexts, spirituality, explicitly or implicitly, is central, and in many, the term and concept of *spirituality* has been understood in a non-religious way. It is this understanding that forms the basis of my article, with the implication that “spirituality culminates in the full development of mind”, and “any move in the direction of this fullness can be called spirituality” (Malekin and Yarrow 1997: 90).

Aurelia Baumgartner

It is against this understanding of spirituality that I discuss the performative practice of German Aurelia Baumgartner (www.tanzphilosophie.de). The discussion is drawn from a personal, three-hour conversation I held with Baumgartner in one of the studios of her dance school, within a few feet of Lake Starnberg near Munich, in December 2013. The tranquillity of the studio and its surroundings provided an ideal environment to allow the physical and emotional memories of Baumgartner's performance of *Nomad's Rhythm* on the evening before that interview to inform the conversation.



Figure 1: Aurelia Baumgartner in *Human without Cerebrum: Attempts* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).

Following many years of training in a wide range of classical and contemporary approaches to dance, she founded the School for Contemporary Dance, housed in a pavilion within a few feet of the shore of Lake Starnberg in Berg, near Munich in Germany, where she has developed a student base of around 120. Her studio also serves as the basis for her own dance projects, which she launched in 2004 under the umbrella of “Aureliana Contemporary Dance Project”. Her website provides documentation of her projects, including video clips of some, and complete video recordings of others of her productions. Most of the video material has been edited from recordings of live performances, only some is artwork created specifically for the video medium.

I would like to present my discussion of Baumgartner's work in terms of concentric circles around a core. The circles are:

1. *Inspiration* (how she gets ideas and how she develops them into the performances open to the public);
2. *Intuitive collaboration* (details of the way she works with the dancers, musicians and other artists she involves in her productions);
3. *Femininity, beauty and non-linearity* (overarching characteristics of her approach and performances);
4. *Biography* (her training, a pivotal, life-changing crossroads she encountered at the age of 14, and her heritage);
5. *Cultural and philosophical contextualization* (training in a wide range of approaches with related dance vocabularies that she now has at her disposal in creating her choreographies, and studies to M.A. level in western philosophy, in addition to further reading and practice of eastern philosophies).

It is possible to describe and analyse Baumgartner's work in terms of these circles. They constitute an approximation of the core, which can be understood as the communal experience of Baumgartner's performances, arising in the spaces she shares with her spectators: the physical spaces of the venues she performs in, and, much more intangibly, the spaces of consciousness, where the contents and characteristics of those concentric circles merge with the sensitivities and existential orientations of Baumgartner and each spectator at any moment of any performance. This approach must thus be understood as a heuristic tool to capture a holistic practice leading to a holistic experience.



Figure 2: Aurelia Baumgartner in *Asturias* (photographer: Dorothee Elfring).