

# To Dance a Lasting Song

*Alison Marshall*

The dance is the most natural and beautiful aid to the development of the growing child in its constant movement. And only that education is right which includes the dance. *Isadora Duncan*

God guard me from thoughts men think  
in the mind alone;  
He that sings a lasting song  
thinks in the marrow bone. *W.B. Yeats*



It is a cold, grey, February day. The pathways are edged by a snow crust and riddled with a maze of great ice and water puddles. We tolerate a miniature ordeal of the school day — getting 23 children, aged six through eight, fully suited in boots, jackets, gloves, and hats — so that we can tromp up to the music room several buildings away, take off all this winter gear, and pare down to dance in bare feet. We go on faith that persistence brings rewards, trooping off for our weekly “out of the classroom” dance time. Forty minutes of direct exploration of ideas and personal expression through movement. Forty minutes of whirling, swooping, pouncing, turning, leaping dance.

The children find a good place to sit on the floor, quiet their voices, and are ready to begin. We warm up through activity. I suggest beginning formats. “Find a new, low level

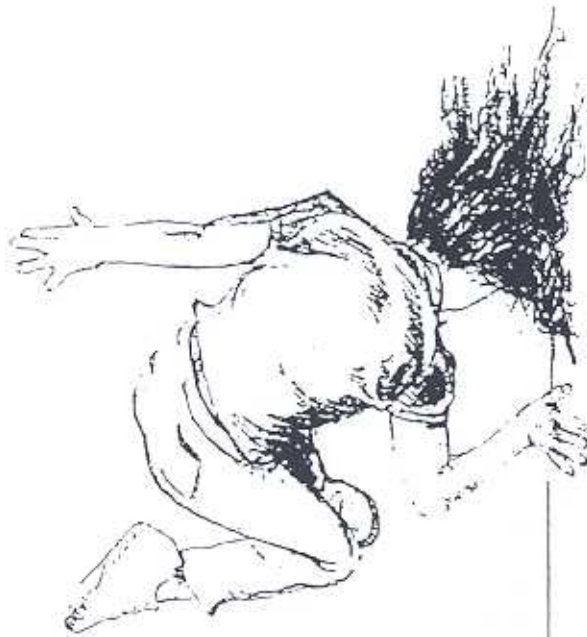
shape to sit in. Find a movement for the sound ‘whoosh’. Find three different ways to wave at someone . . .” The children learn to focus on the activity, the idea being presented, on the group and, importantly, on themselves.

Our class has been dancing together for several months now; the second graders for a year and a half. A rhythm to the work we will do today has developed over this time. It has not always been so. Often I battle the self-consciousness that children feel about their movement. They are mesmerized by the mirrors in the room, because they are busy trying to garner information about the ways they look and dance. They are already affected by ideas that will limit their movement vocabulary — wanting only to “walk like an Egyptian,” to make themselves smaller or fiercer, to show off their latest gymnastic feat, or to dance like an

the quality of a movement. The idea is not simply to "move like a giant" but to discover the ways a giant might move, to explore weight and gravity, the ponderous quality of slow, heavy movement, length and speed of step.

Creative movement study is an area of curriculum that is infrequently addressed in primary education or in children's daily lives. It is a fundamental element of experiential teaching and learning. It allows children to learn through their very muscles and bones. The child engaged in creative movement has the chance to discover, or to rediscover, that the self is present in the physical body — in movement, impressions, images, feelings, and ideas. When children use the elements of dance for their own creative expression, they have made the connection between their inner being and the language of movement. Creative movement study and practice represent the connection of the mind, body, and spirit of the dancer. *Feeling* is the primary factor that transforms the child's movement into expressive movement. An awareness of feeling prompts and sustains the movement. Creative dance supports the child moving with a sense of delight and confidence, because every movement expression originates with the child. The movement is the child. In creative dance, the dancer draws upon inner resources to make a statement, and that statement precedes the development of technique.

Too often children are unaided in learning how to use movement as a tool to integrate aspects of academic/cognitive and creative/artistic skills. Integrating creative movement into the learning process is essential, because it provides a rich multisensory experience. The degree and potency of learning is based upon the variation, intensity, and frequency of interaction between the student and the subject matter. Through improvisational movement compositions children explore space, force, time, and the body. They find out how they are put together, what strengths they have, and how to focus their ideas and hear their inner voices. In the course of creative movement



older brother or sister.

Children are rarely asked to consider how they move or to discover new body shapes or ways of traveling. The world of today's children is typically information rich and action poor. Yet movement is an inherent, intrinsic element of all of our lives. From their earliest days, children use movement as their primary form of expression. In running, sliding, jumping, or skipping, children find a release for unspecified physical energy, just as in emotionally charged movement they find a sure way to express deep feelings. Sadly, their potential can atrophy through disuse or habituated misuse.

Children's dance is too often characterized by pink tutus and images of falling snowflakes or trees blowing in the wind. But dance is not simply a pantomime of some animal or event or an attempt to look like something. Creative movement is an attitude and approach that is predominantly concerned with process. In creative dance, children explore

practice, children work with the intricate interweavings of time-space, kinesthetic perceptions and abilities, imagery, and the creative self. They leap and feel what it is like to leap. They become aware of time, rhythm, and tempo. They discover space, direction, size, and level. Children will build a movement vocabulary both when they are encouraged to move freely and when they are guided through movement discoveries. Just as the external senses are trained in the classroom to hear and see the outside world, so a child's inner senses can be developed with structured training and encouragement. Their inner eyes and ears will learn to recognize and create images linking movement with culture and history.

Through dance, students can explore elements of the sciences, language development, and the visual arts. Movement can be employed in the study of shapes, angles, counting, sequence, sets, and time. Young children can learn to write by making dances based on letter forms drawn in the air and on the ground using various parts of their bodies. Through dance they can study rhythm, meter, word patterns and meanings. While dancing, children can actually see the concept of opposites. Movement can provide a means to study additive sculpture, as children form and change pieces of themselves. Through movement children can consider food chains, erosion, planet pathways, and shapes of constellations. As they study music they can move in relation to intervals. Children can discover new sensations of movement by enacting erupting volcanoes, rivers carving canyons, animals stalking their prey, or machines producing cars on an assembly line.

In my own performance work, or when I attend a dance performance with friends, I am often asked, "What is that piece about?" This question does not trouble children. When a dancer choreographs a piece, there is an initiating idea, an exploration of content and context, a point of view. Yet children are not confused by what dance is about. For them, dance is not about something; it is something.

It is time to finish the day's dance class. We have moved through free, whole-body moves such as running, skipping, swinging, and shaking. We've worked with one or several dance elements: time, space, force, body. The children have explored movement possibilities and given them a form: starting shape, varied movements, ending shape. We've shared our dance moves with one another and cooled down. The teaching method is one of problem solving, of questions and challenges. The learning is from inside out.

Children's expressiveness grows with so little help. All they need is a protected time to explore, an open space, a willing teacher, and a weekly trudge in snowsuits up the icy paths. As they whirl, swoosh, glide, explode across the room, their bodies sing.

