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The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing

Vicky Karkou, Sue Oliver, Sophia Lycouris, Eds. 2017.

Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1008 pp. 85 halftones. 11 combo. 40 line art.

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Surprising as it may sound, the phenomena of health and wellbeing are relatively unexplored in dance studies. The primary focus has been on dance performance. However, with the advent of increasing scholarship on somatics, dance therapy, and sensory-based movement forms, the topics of health and wellbeing are starting to gain more attention. As choreographers and dancers within dance departments and in dance professions are beginning to incorporate more somatic methods, a new set of interests emerges: in addition to learning outward shapes of movements and intricacies of choreography, practitioners are encouraged to sense movement from the inside out, to experience their anatomy rather than memorize anatomical details, and to explore their imagination, thoughts, and language in movement.¹ These goals, often accompanied with learning how to release muscular tension and find ease in movement, are likely to bring more sustained interest in movers' physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing* (2017), a majestic work of close to 1000 pages, broadens the scope of dance studies immeasurably.

In this stunningly comprehensive book, experts in dance therapy, somatics, expressive arts, psychotherapy, brain studies, and psychology from around the world explore the question of how dance contributes to wellbeing. They discuss modern and contemporary dance, as well as dance forms much more rarely discussed in dance writings, such as Biodanza, 5Rhythms, Authentic Movement, Capoeira, and Primitive Expression, among others. Movement's impact on wellbeing is discussed in professional dance performance settings, educational environments, medical contexts, and in communities formed by age, ability, gender, race, and nationality. The methods vary: quantitative and qualitative, arts-based and practice-based research projects exist next to one another. In the words of the editors, "objective observations, felt experiences, and artistic explorations are all equally valued as being able to make an important contribution to wellbeing from different perspectives" (3). More than 90 authors have contributed to this exciting account, and the cultural contexts that are being studied range from Finland, Germany, Canada, and the United States to Saudi Arabia and Brazil. Dance movement is experienced not only verbally but visually: a number of the chapters are accompanied by video recordings, accessible on Oxford University Press's website. These videos, featuring solo dancers or groups moving in natural surroundings, community spaces, or performance stages, bring the embodied movement qualities described in the chapters alive.

Several intriguing questions guide this work. How do we know we are feeling well? How do we know that dance can help us manage stress? Why do we like watching dance? What happens in the brain of the dancer while dancing and of the spectator while watching? Why do we find certain movements more pleasurable to watch than others? Is

wellbeing an essential consideration in educational settings? How do audiences, performers, choreographers, and educators experience and understand facets of wellbeing? What can they learn from one another? Indeed, what is wellbeing in the first place? June Gersten Roberts, for example, defines wellbeing as “internalized, but also vibrant in connectivity, perhaps in communion with other people, but not exclusively”; she finds wellbeing in “sensuous empathy with places, memories, and music, through diving into the experience of colour and dwelling within the visual nuances and auric presence of particular objects” (353). For Diane Amans, wellbeing refers to “a sense of vitality, as individuals are engaged in activities which are meaningful to them and help develop their resilience in challenging circumstances” (758).

The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Wellbeing is organized into five sections, each of which is preceded by the editors’ introductory chapter. Part I, titled “Dance and the Body,” bridges neuroscientific, physiological, anatomical, somatic, philosophical, and spiritual perspectives. The writings attend to the body as “the primary ‘location’ of dance where wellbeing, measured or felt, can be found” (9). The authors shed light on the “feel-good effect” of dancing, the impact of different dance forms on stress, and the influence of watching dance upon the brain. Marcus Stueck and Alejandra Villegas investigate how Biodanza can benefit children by potentially reducing chronic stress, enhancing empathy, and supporting the development of nonviolent behavior in schools and kindergartens. Jane Bacon discusses Authentic Movement as a wellbeing practice that develops the ability to notice “who we are, where we are, and with whom we are” and to “be present to our own suffering,” which can help with healing (161). Bettina Bläsing notes that to make the most out of dance, “we should first engage in some dancing

activity that we personally enjoy, that involves creativity and social interaction, and that offers a way to reach a higher level of movement skill. Secondly, we should also at times engage in watching dance in an active way, simulating the dancers' movements and letting our mind dance while our body rests" (54).

"Dance Within Performative Contexts," Part II, focuses on therapeutic performances that grow out of the work between a therapist and a client or a group of participants who choose to bring their experiences with dance and healing to the stage. The chapters challenge stigmas around mental health, physical health, and aging. Thania Acarón observes that therapeutic performances mark an "important point of growth, break, or transition" in participants' therapeutic development and life (230). "To create something that links to a patient/client's life, to witness a client being seen by others, and to have a patient/client witness themselves being seen by an outside community, can have a powerful effect, which can be incredibly constructive and/or possibly destructive to their process," she writes (235). Paola Esposito and Toshiharu Kasai memorably illuminate the healing dimensions of butoh dance and another Japanese training method, Noguchi taiso: these methods alert dancers to the "experiential and sensuous dimension within a movement or gesture, rather than its form" (268). Beatrice Allegranti discusses dance movement in response to death and grieving and describes a project that allowed movers to develop an "embodied story" of their "ongoing and changing relationship with the person who has died" (370).

"Dance in Education," Part III, examines how dance impacts wellbeing and learning in primary schools (both mainstream and special schools), high schools, and higher education. The contributors point out challenges in dance education, such as the

employment of dance practitioners who are not necessarily trained teachers, the marginal status of dance in schools, or the emotional challenges that college students may face in academic settings where scholastic demands do not always align easefully with experiential and embodied learning. Jayne Stevens emphasizes that at the core of learning environments are the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves: “it is the quality of these relationships that is especially significant for wellbeing and is that which dance pedagogy should seek to optimize” (422). Anna Fiona Keogh and Joan Davis advocate for the importance of the “felt sense” which helps us “notice and attend to the happenings of the body” (536). “Felt sense,” they argue, can be used by dance and movement students to recognize when they are feeling well and when they do not.

Part IV, “Dance in the Community,” explores sociological, anthropological, and political aspects of dance. The authors study moving in groups, such as in movement choirs, which enable the participants to experience “the unnameable bond that happens among people who intentionally move together” (Pratt, 598). Sherry Shapiro connects wellbeing to the context of political and social efficacy, to show how “human beings are able to represent and express their resistance to, and transformation of, oppressive and unjust social conditions” (661). In an evocative piece, Petra Kupperts discusses the Tiresias Project by the Olimpias Disability Culture Collective, which allowed “disabled artists and their allies to play with the portrait camera, to expose themselves and explore erotic spaces,” in outdoor spaces or dance studios (607). Kupperts writes, “I continue to learn new ways of finding experimental intimacy. I shiver as people merge skins, as their bare skin glides over the fine hairs of my arms, and my nerve endings tingle. I learn how

to move respectfully with autistic self-advocates, begin to understand how I can rethink the erotic beyond eye contact and touching skins” (627). In their piece on 5Rhythms, Mati Vargas-Gibson et al illuminate dynamics between dance and creativity: the task of the dancer, they suggest, is to find in dancing “the discipline to become a free spirit: that is, to keep showing up past fixed notions of ourselves and let movement inform us as a vehicle to turn our life into a work of art” (727).

“Dance in Healthcare Contexts,” Part V, features chapters on the healing potential of dance movement therapy in the lives of patients who suffer from depression, dementia, schizophrenia, breast cancer, and cardiovascular diseases, or experience difficulties in mother-infant bonding. Several chapters suggest that dance movement therapy might help regulate aggressive behavior and prevent violence in the playground, school, and neighborhood communities. Several articles draw attention to the role of emotions in dance and healing. Alexia Margariti et al show how Primitive Expression, a form of dance therapy that uses psychoanalytic and anthropological principles, enables participants to play out different archetypal figures such as a warrior, hunter, or a tribal leader. They suggest, “This provides opportunities, and justifications, for satisfying the most varied desires, for exploring new behaviors, for trying out unfamiliar stances, and for expressing a wide range of feelings such as power, anger, pride, fear, and tenderness, leading to a therapeutic experience” (793). Marko Punkanen et al emphasize that forms of therapy that combine body movement and emotional expression can “help alleviate symptoms of depression and reduce levels of depression as shown in psychometric measures” (857).

An interdisciplinary discussion that emerges from this book is one of its strongest aspects. For scholars and thinkers on the humanities spectrum, being confronted with scientific studies can offer a refreshing leap into a different set of methods. Poetical and lyrical accounts stemming from personal experiences with embodied movement can open up new questions to neuroscientists and health care professionals. The handbook has the capacity to make readers more curious about methods of inquiry and scholarship with which they are less familiar. The account is a testament to dance movement as one distinct area of human experience that necessitates cross-disciplinary knowledge and conversations.

The abundance of writing styles contributes to the remarkable reading experience. The editors employ an approach unique in academic texts: “Since we argue for the value of an embodied cognition and an embodied emotion, we ask you to play with the idea of engaging with this text as embodied beings, and to respond to the text through your emotive selves” (4). Keogh and Davis evoke a similar intent: “We invite you, as you read, to not only track your mental processes as you follow the discussion, but also to try to track your inner processes – bodily sensations and emotions” (536). Their epigraph manifests this impulse: “As you are reading this, how do you feel? How do you know that you are feeling well at this moment? What is your ‘felt sense’ of wellbeing?” (355). Andrea Olsen’s writing includes “somatic excursions” throughout the piece in which she asks readers to attune to their bodies. For example, she says, “It could be useful to pause now, close your eyes, and let your body respond to what you are reading and viewing” (189). These chapters thus ask us not only to think, understand, and probe but attempt to

raise our awareness of bodily sensations and emotions as we read. Indeed, at times the authors ask us to stand up, move, and connect to our embodied selves.

This awe-inspiring handbook contributes to the fields of dance studies, health and wellness, dance therapy, and to scientific and medical accounts of movement. It is a powerful testament to the importance of studying how dance can help us feel better emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually, as individuals and as members of particular communities. In bringing together experts from different disciplines, this account offers a remarkable example of interdisciplinary thinking and its energizing power. Even amidst such range of perspectives and methods, the book is characterized by an unparalleled unity of intention: it has a sense of “wholeness” of its own, a sign of the thorough, thoughtful work of the editors in organizing and introducing the material. This book will provide an immensely rich resource for scholars and general audiences who are curious about mind-body communication, different types of dance movement, somatics, embodied learning, kinaesthesia and empathy, and the therapeutic potential of movement.

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ⁱ For recent accounts, see Martha Eddy’s *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2016), Lauren W. Kearns’s *Somatics In Action: A Mindful and Physical Conditioning Tool for Movers* (Pencaitland, Scotland: Handspring Publishing Limited, 2017), and Nancy Romita’s and Allegra Romita’s *Functional Awareness: Anatomy in Action for Dancers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For dance and neuroscience, see Glenna Batson’s and Margaret Wilson’s *Body and Mind in Motion: Dance and Neuroscience in Conversation* (Chicago, IL: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2014) and Sandra Cerny Minton’s and Rima Faber’s *Thinking with the Dancing Brain: Embodying Neuroscience* (Lenham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).