

**Barbara Mettler: Interview I**  
**Interviewer: June [Warner], ca. 1979.**

June [Warner]: Recording in her studio home. I wish really that I'd had the tape recorder when she was speaking of the very basic nature of her work to my husband this morning and yesterday evening, because it seems to me it always goes back to those essentials. So if we repeat ground of what's been recorded other places it can't be repeated too often and what I notice is that in even repeating the same principles Barbara phrases it differently. Sometimes there's a nuance which is very important to me as a writer trying to record what the work is about and also as a person who was very heavily into that work for many many years at an earlier time and has kept up with it. The slight changes of emphasis while the work has remained the same seemed to be rather important to discuss. Now, Barbara, this morning you used the word imagination. I can't imagine that we didn't use that word some 40 years ago. Still, you were particularly emphatic about what imagination meant to you in the creative work and in your teaching. Do you mind going over that a little?

Barbara Mettler: No, but I see two different areas to think about. One of them I have thought about a lot and is rather simple. The other came up for the first time this morning and I found myself a little over my head. I have always talked about movement imagination because we can talk about visual imagination, we can talk about auditory imagination, we can talk about verbal imagination, and it has always seemed to me that we can talk about...I suppose we can call it motor imagination. This has come to me because occasionally in the past when our work, as it has always been, was concerned with the abstract form of movement expression, and people who come in and watch us and see us working on the abstract elements of movement – the formal elements of movement, pace and direction, and trying to put our whole selves and our whole feelings in to a certain abstract quality of movement. People would look at me and say, don't you ever have any – don't you give any themes which have imagination? Don't you have imagination? Or don't you use imagination? And I began to realize that they were talking about a verbal imagination, a literary imagination. I think that was it, at least as far as I'd gotten. And I began to realize, began to feel or think, that in the arts there are many kinds of imagination based on sensory awareness, sensory experience.

Now the way I've used the word "movement" in imagination, let me see if I can pin this down. Okay! Now here I am sitting in my chair, not moving. I can imagine a kind of movement which I'm not making but I can sense it in all of my kinesthetic sense, and that often includes some references or some inclusion of the visual and the auditory, and that seems to me to be obviously an imaginative experience! Now that doesn't mean I imagine myself galloping across the fields like a horse, in other words it isn't like the horse that makes it imaginative, it's the fact that my kinesthetic sense is imagining the movement experience of galloping, even though I'm not galloping. This is what I have meant by movement imagination. I know nothing of psychological terms or understandings and I don't know whether it's right.

Now this morning a very interesting thing came up. As you said, June, John asking me about my use of the word "imagination," and I was using it in a different way I think. I'm not awfully good at really deep profound analysis, I can sometimes analyze very well my experiences and experiences in movement but I have to throw out - I almost have to say that any analytical theory or theoretical analysis might have to be clarified and further improved by possibly better analysts. I believe that we were really almost talking about the nature of art as I understand it and I always felt that art is an activity, that it is doing something, no not doing something, making something. That the art work is something made, that the art activity - that art is an activity making something.

Now you can share other people's works and you can enjoy other people's activity, but it is essentially rooted in one's own joy in making something. Alright, what are you making? You're putting in to some satisfying, outwardly perceptible form, an inner experience. Now the minute, that is an experience of color - I'm stumbling just a little bit, I think I'd like to just forget that last thought.

We're talking about putting into outwardly perceptible form an inner experience. Alright. It's got to be in some objective material. It can be a color, it can be in sound, it can be in words, it can be in movement - movement is an objective material - it can be in clay, it can be in stone, it can be in anything. You are putting it into an objective material and you are forming it and you are enjoying the form, you are enjoying making the form because of its outer - because it is an outer form of a living inner experience. Now what makes one form more satisfying than another? Here I am, I love to talk about the tangible things such as clay because it's so hard for people to understand that movement is just as objective a material and just as outwardly perceptible a form as clay. But suppose we talk about clay. Alright, I have an inner feeling and I can't put it in to words but I certainly can manipulate this clay in accordance with it. And I do so. And I achieve a form. Not satisfying to me. Not satisfying. So I manipulate the form further. And I manipulate, and I manipulate, and I manipulate. Pretty soon I have a form and I can say of that form, it's beautiful. I like it. It's beautiful. Why is it beautiful? It satisfies within me a need for, a hunger for beauty, a hunger for beauty in this case that can be touched and can be seen and can also be felt in my muscles. Then, why does it satisfy me? You can't even put in to words what's there. You can't say this is a curly sort of form. Oh, it makes me think of wind and I feel as if I were in the wind blowing around and that's why I like it. It might not make me feel that way, if I really tried to analyze it it might make me feel kind of an upwardness, coming up from the earth into the sky, around and around and around. All these words mean nothing in the abstract art form. The only thing that means anything is beauty, and beauty has to do with integration, with wholeness, with perfection, with expression of all of our inner needs for wholeness, for integration, for expression, for order, for rhythm.

And here is where I use the word imagination. The human being cannot live his life as a perfect form. It will inevitably crack, crumble in his hands or have to be reshaped with a new effort to make it ever more perfect, ever more perfect. And the surrounding circumstances and the inner tensions will never permit the perfection of form which it is capable of a human

being to imagine. This is where the word imagination came in. The human being, with his head in the sky – head in heaven, feet on the earth, can't imagine perfection. And again I think it was well to talk about imagining being sensory, or being intellectual. You could write about the imaginings about perfections in words where the intellect plays a little bit more of a role. You can dance your imaginings of perfection and never put them into words. Now this doesn't mean that you set it up, I'm going to do a dance which expresses my imaginings of perfection. Every dance you do does. Every work of art, nature, which means of course making it to put outer form, our imaginings of perfection. Visual arts, line, shape, color, texture all woven together into an absolutely perfect thing. Perfect. A perfect experience such as we can never in our lifetime experience, a perfection of form. Which we neither have in our inner or our outer life, but which we can imagine.

And it's very difficult to talk about because this form is an abstract form. The form of a melody, one tone after another. It's a form in the objective material of sound. The musician in us longs for a perfect form in sound. We make a melody we feel to be perfect, wholly abstract. This melody is an abstraction of all the sounds we've heard in our lifetime. It's an abstraction of some of the elements, or some of the sounds that we've ever heard. You don't like it because it sounds like a running brook. You don't like it because it sounds like the cardinal that I now hear singing outside our door. You like it because it's a nameless, unnamable, nonverbal, impossible to verbalize, kind of experience put in outwardly perceptible form which satisfies – not because of its association of anything but itself – a color, a painting with colors in it can satisfy and of course it can not satisfy. If it satisfies, there is something in the abstract form of wholeness, of truth to the inner life which makes it beautiful and satisfying to our hunger, to our longing for perfection and nothing but the arts can do this. No utilitarian act, no person to person relationship. Nothing can meet that hunger for perfection except the art work. Now the unfortunate thing – which is an outwardly perceptible expression of our inner experience, a part of our imaginings of the pure and the true and the good and the beautiful and the perfect. In this sense it is wholly alive to our hunger for God as the infinite, the eternal, the almighty, way, way beyond anything that our personal life can possibly meet in perfection.

Now I had another thought that had to do with the abstract though, with the imaginings, perhaps you should turn it off for just a minute so I don't waste-

I speak of the innate hunger, which means that it's natural, that it's a part of the human equipment, to take joy in a form which is perfect, created out of the need for a perfect form. Take the child, exuberant, starts to skip, bouncy bouncy bounce! Why does he skip? There are plenty of ways of expressing exuberance, he can run around and scream or shout! If he wants to get to the store he doesn't have to skip, he can run. Why does he skip? Because the form of the skip satisfies him. The bouncy bouncy bouncy. The regularity, the up down up down up down. Why does he turn? Why does he spin around? Of course our culture teaches him to spin out of competition, I can spin around many more times than you can. Or to trick, to play sort of a trick, I go round and I fall isn't it comical? That's not why he turns. He

turns because there's a form in the turn which satisfies his need to create a perfect form and take joy in it.

One more word about the abstract form, as I saw I dance. I make a movement which is very obvious that I'm picking grapes – oh let me say picking flowers, picking flowers. Alright, I've picked flowers, so I know what it feels like to pick flowers. So I pick flowers. What's that got to do with you? You live in the city. You never pick flowers. What do I share with you? Nothing. I make a movement which is bouncy and down and up or maybe even scattering, or maybe even a plucking sort of movement. You've scattered, you've plucked things, you've bounced. Not the same experiences, but you share them, with me. We're all one.

I think I went as far – a little further than I usually do. I usually say let's make a dance called "Slowness." It will be a distilled essence of all the slow experiences I've had in my life time. And you've had slow experiences in your lifetime which are not the same as mine but we all share slowness. And this is where the abstract form is the universal form – I crawl on the ground slow like a snail. You've never seen a snail. But if my slowness is really formed, if my dance is really formed with a form that is really slow and really expressing the feeling of slowness whether it's a snail or it's anything else, then we've got something universal here. That's why our dance as we do it here has a universal meaning. There's nobody anywhere, I would say in the whole world, unless they are really chained with traditions and rules, that couldn't understand what we're talking about. We move in very basic, universal, natural human ways. We shape our movements in to abstract forms according to basic, natural human feelings, specifically not the same. I don't have the same experiences that the Nigerian dancer has, but we certainly can all share the abstract form. We can share the down up, and the out and the in, and the round and round, and the collapsing, and the expanding, the contracting, the skipping and the leaping and the running and the turning, and it's not just these basic movements, it's the way we form them! And again, why do we form them this way? Because somehow our sensory, our imaginings, can imagine perfect expression. Perfect expression of a perfect inner order.

JW: Alright Barbara, I want to come in at this point and say that there were a few phrases I picked up this morning and I'm going to say them back to you, they may not be accurately recorded but they'll be a jumping off place for some things I wanted to press you on. I wrote down "Seek and create in the abstract form of feeling, expressive of inner life; seek order, imagination beyond what is available, it is the earthly answer to the spiritual order, if art isn't a religion – if it isn't religious it isn't art, and you said dance is praise of the almighty and the eternal. Two things are playing around in my mind. You know that I don't plan to do a Jungian analysis of your work--your creativity! But I can't help making some analogies that remind me of certain things. There is the inner/outer... the earthly answer to the spiritual order. It seems to me that it has to do with another word that was introduced by John, that was "individuation." Now John paid you the highest tribute I think that Jung could pay to a person, John said that Jung would have regarded you as a highly individuated person and John also paid you the tribute that a study of your work would necessarily involve a biographical recognition of how it came about and what kind of

person you are and so forth. So as we go along, I'd like to know a little about why, why this approach to dance? Not that I don't know why, those of us who have worked with you for such a long time, but I think that it's important that you fill us in on why you developed this material. It's unique, I've had some dance experience with other groups, with other studios, not very much. But certainly seeing a lot of what's called modern dance, ballet, foot dancing, and the various emphases today are really legit with the use of some words like therapeutic movement, all this which seems to be seeking some movement experience.

Now you've developed this unique material, it's not universally understood although it seems to me that in so many groups of people I've come across a very great desire for it. I've been teaching it over the past years in a periodic way. Why this material? How did it come about in your life, how did it develop? Can you trace a little of the bridge for me, your own studies didn't lead you - they gave you dance experiences, but they didn't lead you directly I believe to this dance material. Can you remember when you first began digging it up, developing it, discovering it, and why it happened and why you did it? What you were seeking, what in your personhood, what in as you would call it in your unconscious interior caused you to develop this objective, outward-going material which did for others exactly what you thought was necessary to happen to you in this art of dance.

BM: Yes, I'd like to think about this and try to trace some of these things. I think there are so many, many elements that go together to make up a whole. I think I have been fortunate beyond imagining in finding my way because it wasn't pointed out to me, in fact it has been quite the opposite. I feel in some ways I could have found my way much, much earlier if there hadn't been definite blocks and discouragements.

(Break in tape)

BM: I feel I've been so fortunate at finding the right thing at the right time, being given the right thing at the right time, or sometimes in the nick of time, that I think I've told you, June, that if I were going to write an autobiography I would call it "Why Me?" Question mark! Why have I had all these advantages which I have had?

Now, by advantages I mean things that I needed in my environment, giving me things that my nature needed. I know - I have known for a long, long time ever since I've been in my field and wanting to understand it I have known that no two people are alike at all. I mean we're all human beings and we all have the same faculties but in their different needs for expression and different inner structures sometimes we are really just very, very different. And this need to express one's individuality has been very, very strong in me since I - ever since I can remember. I have needed to do what seems to be doing the thing to do, regardless of whether anybody else was doing it or thought it was the thing to do. In fact I have been wholly, remarkably - I won't say wholly but I will say remarkably unconcerned with what people thought of what I was doing.

Now I remember as a teenager, wishing I was as pretty as other ones, wishing I had things and was like other people, wishing that I were like other girls and so forth and so forth and trying to be like others. But this was a very superficial coat that I had on. Underneath pretty much has truly been a lack of concern for what people thought of what I did. Now this may reach its climax of fulfillment these days when I may have a group of 45 students going out to show their work to 300 spectators and I say to them we don't care whether one of the spectators thinks it's beautiful or not. We don't care whether they like it or not. It's beautiful. It's beautiful! And whether everybody likes this or not, we have created more beauty in the world.

Now I don't think I ever remember doing anything because someone else thought it was the thing to do. I very often remember doing things that people said was not the thing to do, some good and some bad. Whether this has to do with a natural self confidence or independence or whether it was early childhood environment... I had a mother for whom, during – thought that what was right was the right thing to do was very important, very important. When I became a Catholic at the age of about 20 – oh, let's see, I guess I was in my 40's wasn't I. My family of course was anti-Catholic as most people in our environment were. My mother didn't – she was terribly shocked. But she saw that I was a little reticent in broadcasting this fact because I knew I was in an anti-Catholic environment when I went back home to see her. She would take me by the arm, lead me over to her friends, and say, "You know my daughter is a Roman Catholic!" In fact she had only contempt for me if I didn't stand up and shout it to the winds, even if she thought it was an awful thing. So I guess there's a lot of that in my early environment even though whether it's hereditary we don't know because my father didn't have that. My father was more conservative and more of an adherer to rules. My mother was not. She did value freedom. Now all of this that I'm saying –

(End of Side 1)

BM: Have I already spoken of the freedom ---,?

JW: No, and I have a question about that unless you wanted to continue immediately about your mother.

BM: No, that's fine.

JW: Two things were coming immediately in my mind and one was to say to you, yes you were seeking beauty. Now the – as I remember the concept of beauty and movement had been pretty well administered by ballet. This was considered to be the pinnacle of dance and ballet stood for beauty. Other people who were breaking away from that concept of beauty, I know that you were studying with Mary Wigman and it came at a critical time and gave you so much for your experience. I know that someone like Martha Graham, for instance, broke away from the concept of beauty and ballet, but to me the interesting question is, although you studied with Mary Wigman, that didn't lead directly to the material you discovered or unearthed or invented, and although Martha Graham broke away from ballet's concept of beauty my objection probably could admire her as a hardworking, creative artist. I felt that with each generation of studies you had a fading carbon copy of

Martha Graham and I have to conclude that her movements pretty much – her own personal movements and her own personal expression pretty much dominated her students apart for the ones who broke away and then had their way of movement.

To me, you were the great innovator, dance innovator, the great dance educator, and this led you to the discovery of movement material, of how to free for their own creativity and how to develop totally their own way of moving – how can you explain this in words to people who are not going to come in to the studio, who are not going to experience it, is there any way we can get that in words? Where did this material come from, why does it work? Because the forms that emerge have great coherence, bring the people studying with you together. Each is set free through material although common forms come.

Barbara Mettler: I know this is a very difficult question but-

J: I know, maybe we can break it down just a little, when did that material start to come? Can you remember a transition, a bridge? You come back from the Mary Wigman studio, you start to work teaching, dance, what is the bridge? Why that material? Where did it come from, where did you find it?

Barbara Mettler: Well, I was so rejoicing in my dancing, so rejoicing in my opportunity to dance, and to dance creatively with at least something of myself in it. I hadn't been taught in as free-creative a direction as I am now teaching but there was creativeness in it. And so rejoicing that the need to share it was overwhelming, I think I had a need to share as we all do. But this was just inherent in my love of it. That this is natural, well I grew up in nature and everything in the arts was very natural to me and everything about dance was very natural. So this belief that this is the most natural thing in the world to do! Everybody should do it, why isn't everybody doing it?

And people would say to me, I'd say, "Do you want to dance?" "Oh, I don't dance!" I began to realize that there was something wrong. And getting other people to do it was absolutely inevitable. That was inherent in it. This wasn't anything that you just did by yourself. That you had to get other people to do it... no! This is all absolutely so completely unconscious. The only conscious thoughts I had when I got back from my studies at the Wigman school were "Let me get to work in the field of dance!" I don't know what, how, when or where, I went to the various studios and ended up in Doris Humphrey's group and couldn't take that very long. And got out of there and thought, well I guess I better just try it on my own because everything everybody else is doing doesn't really satisfy me, doesn't feel right at all.

And my tremendous enthusiasm rubbed off on so many people that everybody was begging me to teach them. And it was a time during the Depression when things were whirling around there in the creative arts and it wasn't difficult to set up classes as I did all over the city and Brooklyn and Harlem and Manhattan and other schools and finally my own studio. Here we have a studio with people coming to be taught. And my goal, getting them to dance for the joy of it. And how do you get them to dance? I

opened my doors wide for many reasons. One reason is I wanted students, I needed students. Two, I wasn't feeling particularly selective, I thought let's get some people in, let's get dancing! And I suppose always that little feeling of feeling a need, somewhere that feeling, they need it, let's give it to them, let's do it. And opening the doors to the laymen, the old and the young and everybody coming in and me trying to give them a dance experience!

Well, how do you do it? Well, first of all I didn't have every facility I thought I needed. I thought I needed a piano in the background as I'd had at the Wigman school. Well I couldn't afford a piano in the background so I made them dance without a piano. That meant that I had to make the movement experience alive for them. That was big step number one. Movement. The movement has to be the experience. Not that dancing to music and the combination. The movement has it so and again, to think as I do, I said sometimes I'd think hours and hours and hours of how to prepare a lesson, I would spend hours trying to prepare lessons for the college boys and girls in the evening and the Park Avenue women in the morning. And I was right around the corner from Broadway where I was in competition in some ways with the much more theatrically oriented places. And trying to make – I see it as I'm talking! To evoke in anyone who came through those doors an authentic experience in dance as I felt it. I couldn't have defined it then, but I could as a creative art activity. And on any level, on the child level, on the aged level, on the inhibited level. That was one big step indicating gradually coming through this feeling that dance is for everyone, we must get more people doing it!

I mean here in New York City, even then, putting the attention on seeing, get more people to see it. And the philosophy's being expressed. We only teach so that we have bigger audiences. I mean really! In so many words! It didn't feel right to me. I thought we've got to get more people to do it. Now inherent in this is an inordinate love for dance as a creative art. As the art of body movement, let's say art of body movement. I have always loved to move but I found myself rather inept in many sports in high school. I loved basketball because I could jump! The only part of baseball I loved was the running. The movements which I loved so much, I think I've said many times about the ridicule that I – I did some dancing in high school and in college and if I did like it I was ridiculed and if I didn't like it may not have been worth liking. So the movement, the movement, I love to move! I love to move, I never thought of movement as anything to study, I just love to move.

Okay here I am in dance without any support, no music, no nothing, and people coming to me for movement experience and having to find a way ... Well, I really dug. And naturally built on what I'd been taught, but found my way more and more out of that because I had been taught that the thing was... Well, no it's not so very different. Only finding my way into an ever freer – you see, it really did have to do with an innate feeling that it is creating satisfying movement forms according to your inner feeling.

Now I didn't know all these things. Sure we went down for the summer from New York, we went down to a farm in New Hope [PA]. I only took six people with me. We had no place to dance but outdoors. So we danced outdoors



and we were fine – see I had been taught all the conventions, you dance indoors, it's not good for dancers to be in the sun, you've got to do this, you've got to do that. One after one these rules, these restrictions fell away. Not because I said I'm going to rebel against the rules, because I couldn't follow them! How can you not dance in the sun if you don't have any other place to dance? How can you dance with music if you can't afford the music? And it is inherent in everything I have done in the development of my work that the deprivations and being unable to have what I absolutely had to have were breakthroughs in finding my way.

Now I didn't set out to New York City and say, I want to find basics so everybody can dance, I just wanted everybody to dance and here they came! I said let's dance, well they couldn't dance! They couldn't even move! I had to find ways of getting them to move. Now the steps along the way – oh this is perhaps another theme.

Now we haven't spoken at all about nature. The good fortune of my life has been something of the favorable environment for my particular nature. I was brought up in the woods. In the woods on the shore of Lake Michigan. And nobody ever tended me, I was a wildflower, I played around outdoors, indoors all the time. And then of course sometimes down in the farm country where my mother was born. So the nourishment of the trees and the grass and the sky and the lake and the clouds and the air and the thunder and the lightening and the storms is part of the nourishment in me, and to this day I'm not sure I could get along in the city.

We did have a little bit of desert around it [the Tucson Creative Dance Center]. If the city closed in, which of course it is doing, we may get 20 feet off the back way, 20 feet off the front, I think I can hold on to the third acre. I don't know quite whether I would make it or not. To say nothing of that, that I'm approaching dance has always been the most natural thing in the world. All I'm trying to do in teaching dance is to tune people in to their own nature! And what is hard for me is to help them get rid of all the unnatural, artificial patterns taught to them by other dance schools and by other dance teachers and in fact by the very life we live in. So the fact that I got down to basics has been a result of trying to find common denominators which could get everybody and the least likely of any age, any sex, and size, any shape, any color, temperament, background, training, to dance! And I found consistently material which is so workable which you would say, June, and others, it's foolproof. And these are basics. I think I do like to create, by that I mean make new things, make better things. And to this day, after 45 years of teaching, it takes me a couple of hours to prepare a day's work because I can not go back and say what was good enough for last year's group is good enough for this year's group. I've got to try to do it better! And in ever, ever, ever trying to find better ways of liberating – at first it was just liberating and now it is cultivating – the natural creative movement resources which I know to be in everybody. This is what has led me down the path of discovering such basic material.

JW: Barbara, this is very important to me to break in to this point because I've mentioned to you before what Stephanie at the Art in Unison Symposium, the one John and I attended I believe two falls ago, we had these fine scholars of the human psyche, of religion. I remember their names and I'll

insert those here too. The question that I raised for myself at that time was why are these people speaking about the needs of human nature, the spiritual needs of the day and the future, why, for the first time that I've heard it liturgized with every speaker there, the words "liturgy" and "dance" recurred over and over again. And I am reasonably sure that these people have had no experiences of the kind you're describing.

Now some of the keys that are coming to me, some of the bridges that I want to make, are in these words that you've just been using. "For everyone, back to the basics, free everyone, liberating and cultivating their natural resources." And I want to insert at this point that this begins to make something of a bridge for me to what seems like a formidable task and I thought, as I listen to them, they know what they're talking about but do they know what dance is about? Because I know what dance is about and I know what they're talking about because it seemed to me to bring these two emphases. For me your work has been very central, very important, not just for my life but potentially for the life of anyone who comes in to the studio or anyone who hears about it. Anyone can partake in it, anyone can have these experiences. These men seem to be talking about extremely important thoughts of the great writers spiritual, psychological, religious. But also they're using a word that I'm very familiar with and know a great deal about. Now can these two areas of emphasis, areas of seeking, areas of experience, enter at least into dialogue, possibly approach one another. If we're asking what should human beings be doing for value and significance in their time, psychologically, spiritually? To express religious impulses it seems that what you said is very important at least to me, and if I can clarify it I think it will be to others.

I want to add a somewhat humorous side note, to go back a little way in what you were saying earlier. As I asked that question of how did you work out this material, I had a flashback of many people asking me, "Where did she get her material?" And I would say, "She worked it out on our bodies, the bodies of her students. That's where she got her material!" (Laughter) And if it had been an especially hard work day I would say it was something she'd written. Would you accept that? (Laughter)

BM: That is so true in this respect. Absolutely. I did not go to that studio alone and say, what did I discover that would be of universal value to human beings? I simply took it one step at a time. Everybody who came in I tried to invoke an authentic dance experience. If he was totally unlike anyone else, totally like anyone else, and I had different levels, I'd have different people coming in just like you, June, you'd been there longer, and I was still experimenting on every level. If I'd had someone there a long time who was highly advanced in the basics of the work then I'd try to go on, I'd try to go on! As you say, I was really and truly working with many many many people just exactly as you say. Which is why I went after the different handicaps, just to search for the common denominator. I went off to teach the blind, I went off to teach the deaf, I wasn't especially interested in them or in handicaps, I was interested in everybody! And I wanted to be sure that these were things that - well, this is a joke, I'm not sure I was seeking, I think I always felt I knew! I went to Gallaudet College not to see that the deaf could dance without music but to prove that the deaf could dance without music!

I worked with the blind – not to see if they could do it but to prove that they could do it and to prove how. It wasn't that I had it in my pocket but the conviction of everybody's idea of dance being an elitist something for the few and the most people were condemned to sit around and watch a few people dance were so terribly, terribly false! I think I am interested in seeking truth, and dance is my field and my love, and everything seemed so false. I say today to people who come in to my studio, if you're satisfied with what you're getting outside of the studio don't come here. Because the studio actually exists, because I felt – I felt unsatisfied with the philosophies of dance, with the way of dance which makes it an elitist privilege. I just don't believe it, I think it's false, absolutely false.

JW: Well, Barbara, you not only worked out your material on the bodies of your students but on the minds of your students! I think I'm the one student you had who majored, who has a degree in this approach to dance, it was one of my majors in college and I came away with a Bachelor's degree in it, in what we're calling basic dance or creative movement, creative dance. And I think the other offering of a major was at Bennington and it was very much with emphasis on performance there. Now you had your students, including me, studying Fritz Kahn's man and structure and function, we were studying anatomy and you were sending us off to New York to study the movement possibilities of people with [?] and cerebral palsy and you were sending me for my field periods up to work with children who at that time were labeled cretins, some of them were – they had all sorts of deep seated problems, you sent me down to the White House school for the blind. The books I had to study, I remember it ranged from, oh, Rise of Music in the Ancient World, East and West, Anatomy, the History of Dance, and I think I used to say to you "Barbara, you're like Sherwin Williams paint, you are covering the world and the rest of us are having to cover it with you and that's what dance is!" You have to cover the world and deem the knowledge and background which – I don't really know how to put it, I'm not, you know we studied all that material and somehow it all related to dance and it was a practical program. I mean we were in that studio just hours and hours and hours, creating creating creating, working on technical problems to free our bodies so that we could be more creative and working on that carefully graded series of steps leading to our own creativity and to more and more sensitivity to others in their creativity and their musical expression so that our dances, individually and in twos and in groups became richer and richer and more free for the flow of pure movement and rhythm. It was just a fantastic four years.

BM: But you see, the study of movement of the human being is a vast area. Did you know there was a University of Body Movement in Berlin before Hitler where they studied body movement as science, as art, as therapy, as recreation, as education, as everything. I've often felt – I'll tell you, you know if I were 45 years younger and knew what I know now and the world were as it is now, I would try to get money for a college of body movement in which of course I would only be interested in the art of body movement. But I don't think we can have a college just for the art of body movement, and the whole of body movement is so completely and totally unknown, nobody's interested, least of all dancers. Don't you know what they were saying to me? "What are you talking about movement for?" Dancers aren't

interested in it, nobody's interested in movement, people aren't interested in it, apparently even the [?] aren't interested in it! So the fact that you say there was so much to study, well that's it! There's an enormous amount to study! Here am I with no scientific background at all, and feeling that maybe somebody needed some science out there, realizing that a real opportunity for exploration and for development was in the direction of handicaps, because even though dancers look at us and say, well that's not dance, the handicapped will welcome it as dance because nobody else would be able to dance – it was a ray of need, such a real need that it would be accepted.

But dancers of theatrical entertainment, we didn't meet the standards there. So that to soldier on in those directions, and of course as you say my desperately trying to follow the theories. I'm sure you've realized this, I may not have mentioned it before, there hasn't been one theory of mine, one theoretical thought, that hasn't evolved out of the practice. I have been on fire, really on fire, to find ways of – I'm repeating over and over again, of evoking in everybody anybody an authentic dance experience and in developing the skill of craftsmanship in expressing that in creative art forms.

And I have been so – I got a little off the track, I was speaking of the theory as evolving out the practice. Now this is consistently so. I don't know of one theoretical thought that I have that hasn't evolved out of the practice. All I started with was a totally immature, unclarified, inexperienced passion, that's the word for it, for creative dance activity. Now that is the whole thing. And somewhere, either by temperament or by training from my very social mother, the need to get everybody doing it. Something democratic deeply in my nature – it's in the nature, you see I have had, at least as a child, easy economic circumstances. And even as a child, suffering because everybody – being unhappy to see that I had more than others. And I suppose that came out in dance. I have this great thing, well everybody ought to have it! It's in my nature. And then, having discipline in my studio and having to teach people, if I wanted to get people to dance I had to have people to get in, so it's always been completely realistic, I had to have people, finding ways of getting people, namely giving them a real experience that they would come back for. And gradually, and then beginning to think what am I doing, why does this work, what is it? And as I often say coming in to focus with a need to clarify theoretically what I'm doing.

JW: Thinking back to those earlier times, Barbara, I have to compare where we are today and some of our early experiences. When you took a little group of college students, and later on the small group from New Hampshire or the Boston period, out to show others that they too could be dancing. This must have been a really unique experience because I remember the receptions we'd have. Sometimes we'd go to a church and show a women's group what we were doing, and they were astounded at times, horrified, some people responded sometimes and thought it was wonderful, but there was almost no understanding of dance, certainly no understanding of creative movement, and it was all so strange that we had quite a mixed response. It seems to me that we've gone from that period, where dance was almost an unknown word except for what we could see on Broadway to a period where the other end of

the spectrum is being misunderstood by it's being also fashionable. Everybody is doing it, everybody's calling everything dance or creativity or free movement, all these terms, and I believe you have what you regard as a misnomer of astounding proportions when you were labeled, what was it, the mistress or the leader or the expert in improvisation in the United States, the authority on improvisation. Now improvisation is certainly a word that you've used a great deal and I think this would be a good time in our taping to clear up something of what they seem to think of improvisation and what you know about improvisation and what that has to do with your work.

BM: I think that you really have taken a leap a level of what I said about that. I think I am the leader in improvisation in free creative dance in this country because it was 1953 when I took this group on tour. And it was the first time anybody, anybody had improvised and it was criticized by the New York Times, it sounds great, it's what modern dance needs, why doesn't somebody bring it to New York? And we did, and we went down the East Coast, and that was in 1953. And since then we've done nothing but improvise. And it was considered indecent because you don't show your feelings in movement, you don't show it to others. So I had been doing it all along, and growing in the craftsmanship of creative dance, improvisation, I'll lump them together. And the only thing – it's a fact, lots of people are improvising now, and making up all their rules about it and saying how it has to be done. And people come to me. Now the only thing that I am not happy about is that I'm teaching dance. You see, it's so interesting. What are you teaching? I remember about 20 years ago when I was talking about my work with people, he said "You're not teaching dance, you're teaching people!" I said no, I'm teaching dance. Now they say, you're teaching improvisation! I say no, I'm teaching dance. Now improvisation is a method, but I – I had to write some papers to get college credit here – even these people I've been working with are still saying something that makes me realize, "What did you study with Barbara Mettler, why did you want to study with her?" "I wanted to study improvisation!" And the fact that I'm known as the leader, the first one down the line, and probably the most experienced, I'm proud about that! But for heaven's sakes...

(End of Tape)

Hampshire College Archives:

MG7: Barbara Mettler Archive, Carton #22, Tape 11