

BARBARA METTLER

the
NATURE OF DANCE
as a creative art activity

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In memory of Lilian Zaner Pearlman

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INTRODUCTION

My work has become known for its emphasis on improvisation, but for me improvisation has been only a means to an end.

My lifelong goal has been to seek out creative principles of dance in order to reveal its power and to make it available to all people.

In this book I write little about improvisation. Rather I write about the substance of the art as I understand it.

Insofar as the principles I state are limited by my personal vision, I offer them humbly, realizing that there may be other ways of understanding dance.

*Barbara Mettler
Tucson, December, 1979*

PURE DANCE

Dance is an activity which can take many forms and fill many different needs.

It can be recreation, entertainment, education, therapy, religion.

In its purest and most basic form, dance is art, the art of body movement.

Art is the creation of a form to provide esthetic experience.

Esthetic experience means that there is satisfaction in the form of the experience over and above its utilitarian function.

An experience may be both utilitarian and esthetic, with one or the other aspect dominant. For example, when I walk home from the store, my satisfaction may be both in the form of my walk (its forward stride, regular step, knee spring, arm swing) and in the fact that I am bringing home a loaf of bread. If the esthetic aspect of the experience completely dominates the utilitarian, then I am dancing. It is the beginning of art.

Almost any daily life experience can have esthetic value. There can be an art of human relations, an art of living.

The so-called "fine arts" are pure art works created by workers using selected materials to create forms for the sole purpose of providing esthetic experience.

Among the fine arts is the art of body movement, dance.

ROOTS

Dance is the creation of movement forms which are satisfying in themselves, whether or not they serve a useful purpose.

We find its roots everywhere in nature.

Babies rock back and forth on hands and knees, little children skip, young animals run and jump, and some birds perform intricate group movement patterns, all motivated by a need to create a particular movement form.

Animals and primitive human beings make no distinction between a movement's utilitarian function and its satisfying form. Primitive dance is not only religion, education, recreation and science. It is also art.

BEAUTY

The form of an art work is satisfying when we perceive it as beautiful.

Beauty is order, wholeness, truth, perfection: impossible for us to achieve in our daily lives but envisioned by each of us in our own way.

The art work embodies this vision, and only in the art work can our innate hunger for man-made beauty be realized.

CREATION

Art work is motivated by a need to create beautiful forms which satisfy the worker and may be shared with others.

To create means to make something expressive of one's own unique feelings, insights, rhythms, thoughts.

It means to make something new.

Something is new if it expresses our true feelings at the time of its creation because every one of us is new on earth and at every moment we are being renewed.

Almost anything we do may involve some creativeness, but the art work is the purest form of creation. It is the creation of beauty from within ourselves for the sheer satisfaction of creating it.

THE ART OF BODY MOVEMENT

All arts are essentially the same in purpose and function. They differ only in materials and instruments used, and in the senses through which they are perceived.

Dance is the art of body movement.

Its material is movement.

Its instrument is the human body.

The sense through which it is perceived is the kinesthetic sense.

THE KINESTHETIC SENSE

Arts of sound depend on the sense of hearing, visual arts on the sense of sight.

The art of body movement depends on the kinesthetic sense: sensory nerve endings located in the muscles, tendons and joints.

This sense is indispensable because it provides us with information about what is going on within our own bodies. In combination with the organs of equilibrium in the inner ear, it tells us everything we need to know about the movement we are making: what part of the body is moving, what kind of movement it is, when and where the movement occurs.

The function of the kinesthetic sense is the dancer's main concern. Although dancing may be seen and heard, it is not dance unless it is perceived through the kinesthetic sense. This is true for the spectators as well as for those dancing. Spectators must refer their visual and auditory perceptions to their kinesthetic sense if they are to have a true dance experience.

THE INSTRUMENT OF DANCE

The instrument of dance is the human body.

The body serves the same purpose in dance as, for example, the piano serves in music. The musician uses the piano to create sound. The dancer uses the body to create movement.

In dance, as in no other art, instrument and material are inseparable, but we must make a distinction between them if we are to understand the art of body movement.

THE MATERIAL OF DANCE

The material of dance is movement.

Movement has physical properties with which the dancer can work as objectively as the sculptor works with clay.

The dance artist can create, by means of his or her body-instrument, an unlimited variety of movement forms.

It is the movement forms, not the body itself, which are the substance of the art.

THE PRIMARY ART

The art of body movement is the primary art because movement is our primary means of expression on which all other means depend.

Before we can speak or sing, write or paint, use a tool or musical instrument, work or play, build up or tear down, we must make some movement of the body.

The strokes of the painter's brush can be seen in the painting. The tension in the vocal cords can be heard in the song. The touch of the sculptor's hand can be felt in the sculpture. The movements of the builder can be perceived in the architecture of the building.

It is the movement element in every art which gives it vitality.

THE CENTRAL ART

Movement is audible. We can hear it in the sound of our breath and the beat of our feet on the ground. This leads us into the art of sound, music.

Movement is visible. We can see its position, direction, range and shape. This is the beginning of visual art.

Movement is action. It causes something to happen. It can become the art of action, drama.

The beginning of all art experience may be found in the art of body movement. Pure dance can integrate all the arts.

AN INDEPENDENT ART

Although it is central to all the arts, the art of body movement is an independent art, needing no other art to complete it.

Pure dance is expression of feeling through the language of movement.

No addition of story or music, colorful costumes or setting, can make meaningful an otherwise meaningless movement experience.

THE LANGUAGE OF MOVEMENT

Movement is our native, non-verbal language, common to all people everywhere. All living creatures communicate through movement.

Movement expresses feeling, while words express thought. Movement feelings cannot be translated into words.

Every movement we make in daily life expresses something of what we are feeling, whether or not we are aware of it.

In pure dance the movement form is the outer aspect of the feeling. It is the feeling that is the meaning of the dance.

CONTENT, FORM, TECHNIQUE

Dance, like every art, consists of content, form and technique.

Content is the inner experience (feeling) being expressed. Form is the outwardly perceptible aspect of the experience. Technique is the means of perfecting the form.

If any one of these is unsatisfactory, so is the whole.

For example, a dancer may show extremely skillful use of the body (technique) in trying to express feeling, while the movement forms are unclear, expressing only confusion ... or a dance may be potentially beautiful in its movement themes and their development (form), but the dancer's use of the body as instrument may be technically inadequate to clarify the form ... or form and technique would be satisfying if the dancer were more deeply involved in the experience (content).

A rich inner experience expressed in clear, well developed movement forms by means of skillful use of the body-instrument is the goal of every dance artist.

CRAFTSMANSHIP

Craftsmanship is the ability to make something well.

In Bali the people say, "We have no artists. We all do everything as well as we can."

Craftsmanship in the art of body movement requires skill in the use of the body as instrument, and skill in the creation of movement forms. It also requires skill in expressing feeling.

Like any art, dance must be studied and practiced intensively if a high level of craftsmanship is to be achieved.

FEELING

Movement feeling begins as a sensory experience in the muscles and joints where the kinesthetic nerve endings respond to movement.

Specific kinesthetic sensations may then be referred to the nervous system as a whole, involving glands as well as muscles, mind as well as body.

Emotions associated with particular kinds of movement may arise, directing the course of the movement's development.

In this way the whole human being may become involved and the dance may express the complete inner experience of the dancer.

INSTRUMENTAL SKILL

The art of body movement requires a creative approach to the development of technical skill in the use of the body as instrument.

Dancers need to practice basic body movements such as stretching, bending, twisting, springing, swinging, turning, jumping, falling, walking, running, leaping, etc.

Whether these are practiced as fixed movement patterns (exercises) or as free creative movement experiences (improvisation), there must be as much concern for the development of movement feeling as for the perfection of the movement form—otherwise it is gymnastics, not dance.

FORMAL ELEMENTS

The art of body movement is the only art which makes equal use of force and time and space.

Every movement we make creates a pattern of force, a pattern of time and a pattern of space. For example, a movement may be strong or weak (force), slow or fast (time), large or small (space).

Pure dance integrates force, time and space patterns into a meaningful whole. This whole is the abstract form of the dance.

ABSTRACT FORM

We call pure dance form abstract to distinguish it from representational form. It does not represent a specific life action. Rather, it abstracts the essential nature of many life actions, resulting in a form expressive of a generalized feeling.

This is what makes abstract form universally understandable, although its meaning cannot be put into words.

A dance called "Slow Dance" might express feelings drawn from all the slow movements the dancer has experienced during a lifetime. These feelings may be shared by anyone, although only the dancer has had the specific life experiences from which they have been drawn.

All art is an abstraction of daily life, although some art works are more abstract than others. If the form is in no way abstract, it is not art but merely an imitation of nature.

FORCE PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT

Every movement represents an impulse, a single unit of energy (force).

A movement impulse may be relatively forceful or forceless, stopped or sustained.

There may be minor impulses within the major impulse.

Integration of major and minor impulses establishes the rhythmic structure of the movement.

DANCE AND DRAMA

Force patterns of movement are inherently dramatic because they represent action.

As long as the action is not specifically representational and the abstract form of the movement dominates, it is pure dance.

If the form is dominated by movements which represent specific daily life actions and emotions, it becomes the art of action, drama.

TIME PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT

The duration of a single movement impulse may be long or short.

A series of impulses may be called a pulse.

A pulse may be regular or irregular, fast or slow, measured or unmeasured.

DANCE AND MUSIC

Time patterns of movement can be heard, and dancers must make creative use of the sound of their movement.

A natural unity of sound and movement can be achieved when dancers create their own music.

Sounds of breath, voice, hands and feet, inherent in the movement, provide the most basic of all musical experiences.

Dancers may also use instruments as movement accompaniment, either carrying them in their hands while they dance or playing them for one another.

A free approach to the art of body movement requires a free approach to the art of sound.

SPACE PATTERNS OF MOVEMENT

A movement is characterized by its position and direction in space, both of which are relative to the structure of the moving body as well as to the earth, to the surrounding space, and to other bodies within the space.

Size (range, dimension) and shape are also spatial characteristics of movement.

DANCE AND VISUAL DESIGN

Space patterns of movement can be seen, so the eye can function with the kinesthetic sense in perceiving movement.

It is the inner not the outer eye with which dancers perceive their own movements. Closed eyes can deepen feeling for their movement forms.

By shaping clear spatial patterns of movement, dancers may create beautiful visual designs.

MOVEMENT, SOUND, SIGHT, TOUCH

Only the kinesthetic sense is necessary for perception of movement, so it is possible for the deaf and the blind to dance.

If one can hear and see, the senses of hearing and sight may be coordinated with the kinesthetic sense and contribute to the dance experience.

The sense of touch is involved whenever the moving body comes into direct contact with itself or with something else. It too must be coordinated with the kinesthetic sense if it is to become a part of the dance.

The complete dance experience may involve movement, sound, sight and touch. The kinesthetic sense is the integrating factor among the senses.

RHYTHM

The life of all natural movement is rhythm.

Rhythm is pulsation of force in time and space.

Pulsation means that every movement grows organically out of the preceding one and in its turn gives birth to another.

In an art which uses movement as its material, rhythm is the basic law.

To be alive, dance must follow natural rhythmic laws and shape movement forms in accord with them.

ACTIVITY AND REST

Rhythm involves alternation of activity and rest.

A movement impulse represents the expenditure of a single unit of energy followed by a moment of repose.

We can experience this as the natural alternation of tension and relaxation in the muscles of our bodies. For example, the pulsing heart relaxes after every contraction.

We can also experience it as a creative need for balance of activity and rest in movement expression. Too much or too little activity can destroy the life of dance.

BREATHING

A central rhythmic coordinator in all natural body movement is breathing.

Because breathing is both voluntary and involuntary, we must approach it very carefully, avoiding all arbitrary patterning.

The natural rhythmic role of the out-breath is to coordinate the total body movement through contraction of the trunk muscles. The role of the in-breath is preparation for the out-breath.

A clumsy distortion of this natural function can kill rhythmic vitality.

LIVING DANCE

Dance is a natural human activity and it is most alive when its movements are natural to human beings.

The range of human movement is vast and may be extended by the dancer far beyond the movements of daily life, but movements which are so distorted that they alter the normal functioning of the body-instrument are not material for a creative approach to dance.

Like any artist, a dance artist must respect the nature of both instrument and material.

FREE EXPRESSION

All human beings have a need to create, and all should have equal opportunity to express themselves freely in dance.

A free approach to the art of body movement can offer everyone, of every age and every physical and psychological condition, opportunity to enjoy and benefit from the practice of creative dance.

No two people are alike and no two should be expected to move in exactly the same way. Everyone of us should explore freely the movement potential of our own body and create our own unique forms of expression.

FREEDOM, AWARENESS, CONTROL

Although freedom of expression is the foundation of all truly creative dance, a mature dance artist unites freedom with awareness and control.

Freedom is free use of the body as instrument, freely following feeling in the creation of movement forms.

Awareness is sensing, feeling, and being aware of all aspects of the movement expression.

Control is mastery of form, content and technique in shaping movement as expression of feeling.

DISCIPLINE

There is no artistic freedom without discipline. Discipline liberates the artist by eliminating the need for all effort except that which is required to do what one has decided to do.

There are two kinds of discipline in dance: outer and inner.

Outer discipline demands skill in the execution of movement forms which have been prescribed.

Inner discipline requires the creation of new movement forms which clearly express a definite feeling.

IMPROVISATION

The freest of all dance experiences is improvisation.

Improvisation is the creating of one's own dance while dancing.

It eliminates the distinction between the dance and the dancing and it can open the door of all possible dance experience to anyone.

Improvisation is the most accessible of all dance experiences but also the most challenging because, while improvising, dancers use all available skill in both the creation and the execution of meaningful movement forms.

A dance improvisation is a unique, never to be repeated, consciously controlled, authentic life experience involving the whole person of the dancer.

COMPOSITION

A dance improvisation is a one-time movement experience created by the dancer while dancing.

A dance composition is a fixed movement form which may be repeated.

An improvisation may become a composition if the movement sequence is fixed.

THE DANCE AND THE DANCING

A dance lives only in the dancing.

Although inseparably united, the dance and the dancing are two distinct elements in every dance experience.

They may be the work of two different people: one who creates the form of the dance and one who dances it.

The dancer who both creates the dance and dances it has opportunity for the most complete dance experience.

GROUP BODY

Dance is essentially a group activity and an individual dancer can find creative fulfillment as a member of a creatively dancing group.

A group body, like an individual body, has separate members. The members of the individual body are head, hands, feet, etc. The members of a group body are persons.

Although different, members of a group body, like members of an individual body, are capable of moving together as an integrated whole, expressing unified movement feeling.

GROUP BODY MOVEMENT

There is a difference between individual body movement and group body movement.

An individual body can stretch, bend, twist, turn, jump, fall, etc. A group body can form circles and lines, break up and come together, move with or without a leader, etc.

Every group body, like every individual body, is unique in structure and function. It lives a unique dance life and has unique feelings and capacities for movement expression. The language of movement is the same for all, but every group expresses itself differently.

GROUP DANCE IMPROVISATION

There is no more creative dance experience than free group dance improvisation.

In group improvisation, dancers sense their individual body movements as part of the group body movement and move in ways which can help the group movement develop.

Group dance improvisation requires maximum creative effort, movement imagination, and craftsmanship on the part of every dancer. At the same time, the group provides continuous support for every member's individual creativeness.

MOVEMENT THEMES

In pure dance, as in any language, themes occur and are developed.

These are pure movement themes, developed as abstract forms. The meaning cannot be verbalized. It must be kinesi-thetically sensed.

In group dance improvisation, themes may occur spontaneously as the entire group feels compelled to make a certain movement at a certain time, or a theme may be introduced by an individual then picked up and carried on by the group.

The whole group must sense the nature of the movement theme if it is to be developed meaningfully. The dance must be an expression of the feeling of the whole group.

COLLECTIVE ART

An improvised group dance is a collective art work in which the individual helps shape an experience greater than any which one could create alone.

This is true of large dance groups and small. The larger the group, the more difficult the work but the more rewarding the accomplishment.

Today, when there are many people in the world, none of whom should be deprived of creative dance experience, large group dance improvisation can fill an important cultural need.

ENVIRONMENT

In a creatively improvised dance, as in daily life, environment influences the feeling and form of the movement.

A dancer's environment includes the dancer's own body coverings and things held in the hand, the surrounding space, other dancers in the space, spectators, etc.

A dance which is wholly alive will have a relationship to these factors.

Sound is also a part of the dancer's environment and, whenever possible, it should be creatively controlled.

OUTDOORS

Dancing outdoors evokes an entirely different feeling than dancing indoors.

Where there is a natural environment of open sky and vegetation, the outdoor environment can add a new dimension of freedom to the dancer's expression.

Dances may be improvised in relation to wind, rain, trees, buildings, and even in relation to sounds in the environment.

BODY COVERINGS

Body coverings are the most immediate aspect of our environment.

Any body covering, whether in daily life or dance, alters the movement potential of the body. For example, a long skirt may limit the movement of the legs while adding movement of its own.

In pure dance, dancers wear a minimum of clothing, except when the movement theme requires the addition of a specific material.

There is nothing more beautiful than the freely moving human body.

It is the movement of the body, not the body covering, which expresses the meaning of the dance.

A THREE-DIMENSIONAL ART

The art of body movement is three-dimensional and should not be conceived as a two-dimensional framed picture.

It is a kinesthetic experience which should be beautiful from any angle.

A circular dancing area is best for both dancers and spectators because it gives the movement freedom in all directions and offers spectators the greatest possible involvement in the movement experience.

It is also the most appropriate setting for creative group dancing because any group of people anywhere who want to communicate with one another on an equal basis find it natural to form a circle.

SPECTATORS

A movement experience can be shared, and spectators as well as dancers can enjoy a dance.

This depends on the dancers, who must express an authentic movement feeling, and on the spectators, who must be able to understand the language of movement.

If the movement feeling expressed by the dancers is truly shared by the spectators, they may want to join the dance.

A dance can be created with the aim of encouraging spectators to join.

In cultures where dance is a part of daily life and all people dance, the distinction between dancer and spectator is not sharply defined.

PERFORMANCE

To perform a dance is to show it to others. It is the sharing of a dance experience.

Performance is not necessary to validate a work of art.

True art is beautiful whether or not it is shown to anyone.

Overemphasis on performance can turn any art into show business.

A BASIC HUMAN NEED

If approached as a free creative art activity, dance can be an integrating factor in human life.

It can further integration of body, emotions and mind; action, feeling and thought; individual and group; human beings and their environment.

Dance experience should begin in the home where parents encourage their children to move well and dance freely, just as they encourage them to speak and write expressively.

Creative movement and dance should be a serious subject of study in the school curriculum from preschool through university.

Someday there may be whole colleges devoted to the study of body movement both as science and art.

VOCATION, AVOCATION

Everyone has need of dance as a creative art activity and everyone should have opportunity to satisfy this need.

Some have more need than others. In dance, as in any art, there are very few whose natural inclinations warrant their making the art a life work.

The avocational dancer (amateur) dances for the joy and re-creation of the experience.

The vocational dancer (professional) works to develop sufficient skill to be able to provide a service for which a return may be asked.

In times when economic pressure threatens the integrity of the professional dance artist by offering temptations to commercialize art, we should look to the amateur (lover) for the future of pure art dance.

DANCE ARTIST AS TEACHER

A dance artist who believes that creative dance is a basic human need and that it is a group activity will teach.

The purpose of this teaching is to share with others the joy and enrichment of practicing the art of body movement.

It is also to gather people with whom to dance

... and to create more beauty on the earth.

DANCE TEACHER AS ARTIST

Students learn the language of movement from a teacher who communicates with them in this language.

They learn the meaning of rhythm by experiencing the rhythmic progression of the study program.

In the art of body movement the teacher must be an artist in the organization and presentation of the study material.

A dedicated teacher-artist may find creative fulfillment in the making of every study period a dance.

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

Dance was once an integrated expression of the whole of life.

With civilization comes disintegration, and dance breaks up into many specialized forms.

A contemporary approach to the art of body movement can help reintegrate dance as expression of the whole person and of the whole group, pointing the way to a healthier society.

It can do this only if it is rooted in creative principles of movement, and if it is cultivated as free expression for all.

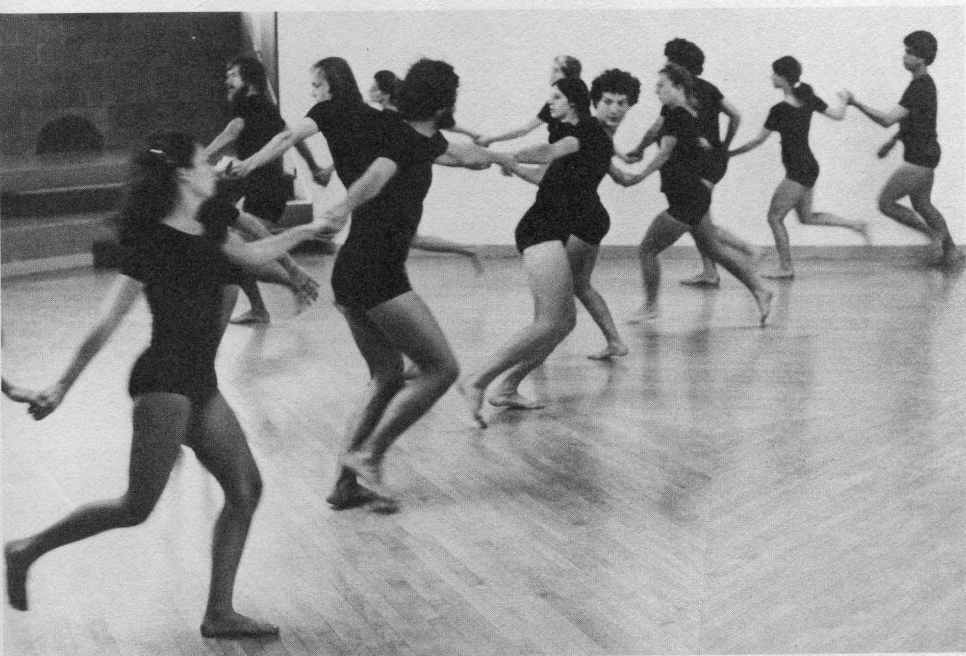
CREATIVE DANCE COMMUNITY

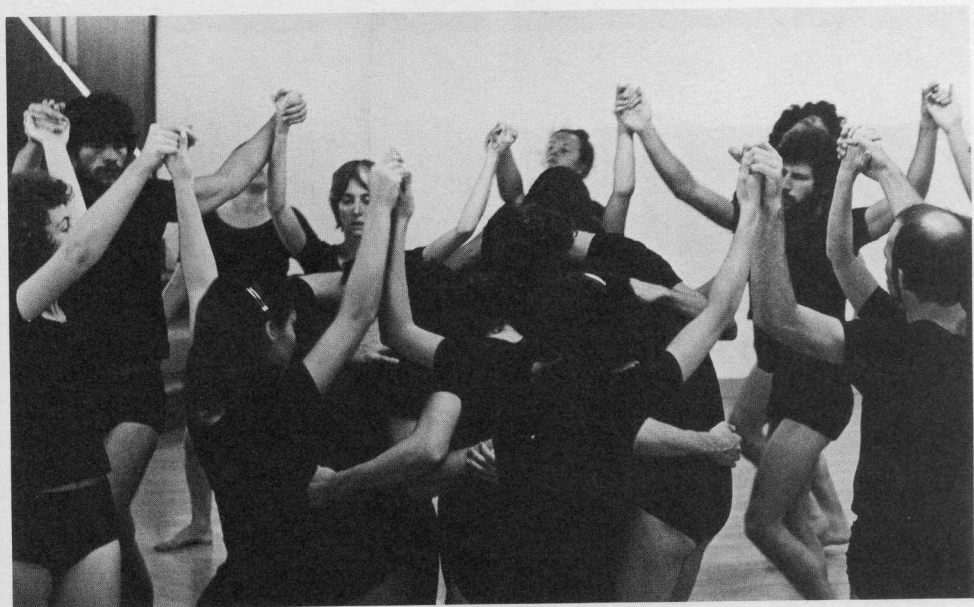
A group of dancers who meet regularly over a period of time, pursuing a common goal of practicing dance as a free creative art activity on an ever higher artistic level, can become a creative force helping to counteract the disintegrating forces in daily life.

By using the common language of movement and by building up common experiences, the group becomes more and more capable of expressing unified feeling and creating collective dance art works while retaining the freedom of the individual.

The purity of the art experience can set standards for purity in daily life and, although the life of every group member may take a different form outside the studio, all are united in a kind of creative work which cannot fail to be a positive and integrating factor in the cultural life of our time.

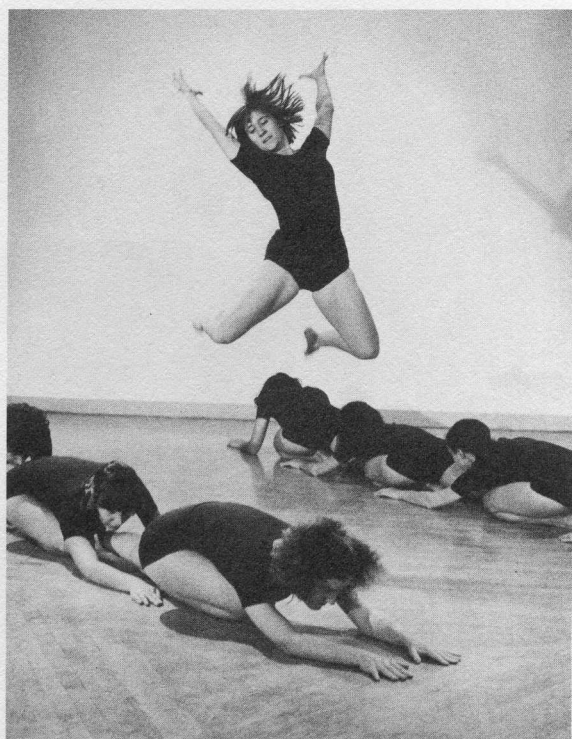














Photographs are of the Barbara Mettler Dance Company

1977 – 1980

The publication of this book was made possible by a donation from friends of Lilian Zaner Pearlman, who, with the author, offer it as a memorial to her.

Lilian Zaner Pearlman (1919 – 1978)



Lilian was one of my first dance students, my first secretary and a member of my first performing dance group. This was when my studio was at 139 West 56th Street in New York City and she was a student at Brooklyn College.

Lilian's involvement in my work was deep and her help immeasurable. She danced with me during the Depression. She came to New Hampshire with me in 1940 to help turn an old farm into a summer dance

school, and she suffered with me when the newly reconstructed barn burned down in April, 1941.

Through the years Lilian always remained close to me, reporting on her dance activities and showing an unfailing interest in mine.

I know she would have been pleased to have this book published because she too was a seeker of truth and beauty.

Barbara Mettler

DANCE SONG

I dance a song of myself. I live in a city where sick trees grow out of round holes in cement. Eight million people live in my city.

In my city live eight million people, by joyless toil in ugliness and poverty.

I am young and I feel my body strong within me but my dance is a sad dance. I see ugliness and I want beauty. I see sick trees growing out of round holes in cement and I want a forest.

I am one sad dancer but I know another and he knows two more. Because of the ugliness which is our world, our dance is a sad dance, but by our dancing it grows less ugly.

Lilian Zaner Pearlman
1938