

-1 **“Why can’t I Dance?!”:**
How I changed from a Klutz to a Choreographer

Yes, I developed my own technique—but I didn’t start dancing until I was 20!!!

I grew up sitting in trees reading books. I never did any sports. I grew up singing beautiful madrigals because my parents were Renaissance musicians, and I liked watching the beauty of ballet, but I wanted to be an actress and express my emotions. However, in acting school they forced us to take ballet. I hated it. I made no bones about it-- I thought they were wasting their time with me, because I was a complete klutz.

But one day at school a guest artist came who was a modern dancer. She did a solo, and I realized that dance wasn’t just beauty as in ballet, **it could be a form of communicating any emotion--** a language I could express myself in. So I started taking modern dance improvisation.

Improvising dance opened my awareness of emotional expression through the body. My own movement felt good, I grew in confidence and decided to take ballet, jazz and tap too, to improve my chances of being hired in musical theater. It seemed a reasonable idea. After all, I’d been singing all my life and acting since I was young.

Though I became stronger and achieved better alignment, I lacked coordination when learning any combinations of moves. In tap class, I was especially frustrated with my inability to use my feet to match the rhythms I could hear or sing perfectly.

And if truth be told, I didn’t really like musicals! I knew I wanted to write my own musicals, for I had always thought the story and music could be more integrated. The stories and music of traditional musicals bored me, and they had always looked to me like a bunch of **“singing heads, and dancing bodies, and never the twain shall meet.”** In 1995 I had a vision in the center of my forehead, of musical sounds coming from the mouths of moving bodies—even bodies doing flips and spinning leaps and fast whirling gymnastics. The vision was intriguing but seemed utterly impossible to me, who was a bookworm and a complete klutz. “Wouldn’t it be cool if... But I can’t do that.”

During acting school I had written a musical, which had a successful readthrough/singthrough at the Ashland New Plays Festival in 1994, and since I wasn’t getting regular work as an actress, eventually I went back to school for music composition. But I took dance as my electives, and realized I wanted to work on manifesting my impossible vision. I made up the word singdancing while I was at Cornish College in 1997, when I stood on my head while singing a song from the second musical I had started writing.

After transferring to the California Institute of the Arts for various reasons, I continued to take dance and the classes got harder. I found more problems. **I ran out of breath easily and had to sit down. I sometimes got motion sickness and had to leave the room!** Gradually I figured out why: I couldn’t focus on the movement because the sound was always turned up so loud for the dancers, who couldn’t seem to hear the beat. To my

musician's ear, the movement didn't even go with the music. **The vibrations of the music conflicted with the dance.** In fact, both the music and the movement I was learning brought up emotions within me that I didn't realize I could express, by improvising a little bit right then. I was unconsciously repressing my internal vibrations in my effort to learn the dance. All these conflicting vibrations in my gut, plus lack of oxygen, created nausea.

I started improvising on my own, late at night in the dance studios when the "real" dancers were danced out and had gone home. I vocalized my emotions and allowed my body to move along. I released and healed many emotions, and I found that vocalizing while moving helped me *hear* the dance. I discovered that certain moves lent themselves to inhaling, others to exhaling. I realized that **if I decided when I was going to breathe during a dance, I would always have enough oxygen.** Then, if I vocalized during the exhale, I could hear that the movement itself affected the voice and made it clear to my ears which move I was doing. This way **I was able to use my auditory sense to remember a dance.** My composer's ear was wild with delight trying to figure out how to repeat moves in a way that would bring the same melodies back.

At the same time, I had created an independent study for myself so I could get credit for singdancing. I had a mentor, Noah Riskin, who videotaped my sessions once a week. Watching the videos, while my ears were getting excited, my eyes were finally waking up to the fact that dance was a visual art form that I needed to learn how to control. In the dance classes I took, I still couldn't remember the same phrase from week to week. I couldn't even remember it on the same day unless the teacher was in front of me—and this was after eight years of classes!

Meanwhile, due to personal relationship problems, my need to understand the human mind and expression grew volcanic in its pressure. I had discovered in the worst way that I was unconscious to my own movement—I would do something against morality and wake up the next day not knowing how I had done what I had done. I craved to understand, why do some people act out their expressions in movement, while others melodize their emotions in passionate voices, and still others use logical linear words? **Don't we all, as humans, have all of these abilities?** Why are some modes of expression unconscious for some, overly manipulated for others?

I graduated college and returned to my hometown to take dance with Suzee Grilley. Her style combines with capoeira, a Brazilian martial art form using upside-down moves including cartwheels, twisted flips, walking on hands, etc. Now my vision of gymnastic flips became a possibility, and now I understood why it works: the movement of a cartwheel shakes the vocal apparatus around so much, that the force applied to the vocalization creates an instant melody.

Finally freed from music theory homework, which had just gotten way too mental for me, I began to map out the materials of dance: space, direction, left side, right side. I started corresponding the mental categories in dance to those in music. For example, I realized that dancing a phrase starting on the left, after I'd already learned it on the right, was

similar to changing the key of a melody. Every new discovery thrilled me. I was now skilled at handling my physical problems by deciding when to breathe, my emotional conflicts by just improvising a bit freely while the teacher was thinking or talking to someone else. The act of improvising helped me own the moves I was learning, just like jamming on a riff. I could even hum under my breath to keep track of the moves. At last I was beginning to remember phrases. At last, I could make them up myself. I took choreography with Suzee and my emotional expression became more focused as well, as I learned how to channel my expressions into repeatable phrases. I created simple forms for emotional solos, using an awareness of time to shape pieces. **At last, I could speak in movement.**

Now that I have achieved control of, due to awareness of, my movement, I can create phrases in which the force of my body's movement (affecting my vocal apparatus) elicits melodic shapes that my ear can refine into exactly pitched melodies. Now that I can remember phrases, I can string them together to make longer pieces—singdances—and I can have many singdancers at once, in homophonic harmony. The linear aspect of music and time used to annoy me, but now that I have discovered that time is the grid with which we come together, I can see time in spatial dimensions, and create polyphony by showing simultaneous, differing and overlapping actions.

New challenges appear, new questions inspire me. I am crazy about the particle-wave theory, and wonder if that can describe a vibration traveling within me, becoming a note and a shape, or a series thereof. I burn to unravel and show more of the ways that **we create our own realities.**

Yet most of all, I feel such elation that I have conquered my urges of unconscious action, without losing my truth. In fact, I have channeled my wilderness of emotions into forms of clear, beautiful expression. **I have transformed my weaknesses into strengths.** I can have greater intimacy with others because, joy of all joys, I know myself.

I hope my words have inspired you to believe that **you can dance and understand your own body's movement.** Feel free to contact me for any reason.

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