

CHIAROSCURI DELLA BELLEZZA
Sguardi sul processo artistico e terapeutico

A cura di Roberto Boccalon,
Rosaria Mignone e Cristina Principale



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MARCIA PLEVIN

Gateways of Transformation: from Authentic Movement to Performance

1 - Authentic Movement and description of the practice

Before talking about the project it is important to describe the history and practice of the discipline called Authentic Movement (AM). The foundation of AM lies in the study and research began in the 1950's by pioneering dance teacher and dance movement therapist, Mary Starks Whitehouse. She began giving dance lessons and calling them 'movement in depth' in which she integrated her studies and experience from Jungian analysis together with Carl Gustav Jung's method of Active Imagination. This work was further refined by two of her many students in two main directions: one direction taken by then dance movement therapist Janet Adler, who developed it into a formalized practice and subsequently named it the discipline of AM. The other direction taken by dance movement therapist and Jungian analyst Joan Chodorow was in the research and study of AM principles in a clinical setting. However, in early 2000, Adler shifted her practice away from the development of the form to the study of mysticism and the influence of energetic phenomena that arose during collective or group practice of the discipline.¹ Although I have studied with both Adler and Chodorow. The template for this project grew out of my years of studying primarily with J. Adler.

Authentic Movement (AM) practice reveals its complexity and simplicity in three essential components of the discipline:

1. A person who moves who is named "the mover"
2. A person who observes and gives testimony to the mover who is named a "witness"
3. The intra psychic and inter psychic relationship that develops within and between the two people or two roles.²

These three components together form the basis of the gateways to transformation within what is known as the Ground form of the

discipline defined by J. Adler.³ I am using the term gateway as a passage from one state of awareness or of being to another. Each contains transformational possibilities of relationship inherent in the practice for both the mover and witness.

Adler writes:

The center of the work in the discipline of Authentic Movement is about relationship: between a mover and an outer witness, between the moving self and an inner witness, between the self and the collective. The self and the Divine. Relationship, relationship, relationship.⁴

With eyes closed a mover may spontaneously respond to inner directed impulses - to be moved by these impulses or may exert his/her will - to follow conscious impulses for movement. The main goal of the formal discipline which is to become familiar and more in harmony with the inner witness and proceeds through progressive stages. As Adler describes "[...] with a mover in dyads, and then triads, the evolution of the work continues as the mover becomes a moving witness [...]"⁵ then silent to speaking witness onto forms of the collective practice called breathing and long circles. Practicing AM implies inner witness growth and development of the mover by following impulses to move, of becoming aware of constraints or judgements to move, as well as, making choices of when or how to move. Commonly referred to as a "path of consciousness", the practice focuses attention, raises awareness and brings consciousness to how the inner witness influences one's movement not only through the practice but in life. Practicing the role of witness similar growth and development applies: how to see and observe without judgement, how to recognize and own one's projections, when to speak or not to speak about one's experience to the mover. More than sixty years into its history "[...] it has come to mean not only the form articulated by Adler in the mid-1980's (the mover -witness dyad, eyes closed while moving, the inner witness, etc.) but a particular kind of movement based exploration-personal collective, transpersonal- structured around a core or principles and beliefs".⁶ Vignettes or scenes that could possibly be a dance or choreography spring up in a synchronistic and spontaneous manner in

the practice. They appear and disappear based on the unconscious closed eyed needs of the participants. This plus a natural aesthetic that emerges from the movements of the movers as they practice prompted me to begin this exploration.

2 - Bringing Authentic Movement into Performance

Remembering and repeating movements that emerge from AM practice and then to shape them into a dance is not a part of the discipline. However, the nature of the movements that appear in the practice, the relationship of the mover and witness, the ritual of the form that can at times be related to both dance performance and the theatre arts prompted me to begin this project. The very roots of dance movement therapy are in primitive ritual which I believe can be understood as a type of ritual theatre. My background before becoming a dance movement therapist was as a dance performer, teacher, dance maker and choreographer. Stimulation and curiosity came from wanting to discover how and if the art of witnessing as practiced in the discipline could be applied to the art of making dances. Parallel to this my interest lay strongly with tracking transformation that could come about in the movers as each person transitioned through the project towards public performance. The literature of AM that treats its use in and for performance can be found in dance movement therapy books, specialized periodicals and arts literature.⁷ If the conscious goal was in the creating and performance of the dances what became apparent as time went on was that a transformative healing process was taking place in each of the participants. It was a complex undertaking: on a physical, emotional and healing level, sourcing movement from AM, creating their dances and performing them, opened transformational gateways in inner witness consciousness for the participants. The making of the dances went hand in hand with the choreography that healed. Embodying consciously the movement found by being moved, choosing where to focus attention, repeating or improvising on the main theme that was coming out, then coming to a close of the piece were all factors which brought about the healing. By heal-

ing I mean the unifying nature of experiencing wholeness rather than curing, which implies bringing an end to an ailment. Healing came through awareness of the change in relationship the participant felt to her inner witness. At every gateway, there was another shift, an expanded consciousness in their relationship to themselves, to the dance and to this author.

The project seemed to reinforce and develop inner witness presence in the movers. The founders of AM, Whitehouse, Adler and Chodorow, have written extensively in their seminal essays about how the practice engenders healing and have offered how the healing may be constellated and connected to inner presence.⁸ Through evolution of the practice one can see these connections between healing and presence as well in dance performance (Olsen 1993⁹), in somatic psychotherapy (Stromsted 1998¹⁰), in meditation and spiritual practice (Avstreith 2007¹¹, Plevin 2005¹²), in dance ritual (Lowell 2007¹³), in theatre performance (Koltai 2007¹⁴) and in other venues.¹⁵ Deeper self acceptance as a consequence of integrating unconscious aspects of themselves became evident as the women and myself moved through and confirmed the four transformational gateways: to be seen, to see oneself being seen, to be seen by the collective and to be seen in a public performance. The question for myself and the women was how to keep in a true relationship with movement emerging from the practice particularly in the moments of being moved? What if any meaning was being articulated by these movements and what kind of a dance was asking to be shaped? Whitehouse (1999) writes about these moments of being moved in the following way,

it is a moment of un premeditated surrender that cannot be explained, repeated exactly, sought for or tried out. If it is used as raw material for a dance something is lost, but something has to be lost since that moment was an instant, a happening in and of itself, the structure needed for a lasting work of art is something else.¹⁶

Other questions came up: what is the purpose of making and bringing a dance onto the stage for an AM practitioner? What happens to the original intention as it is shaped and molded by repeating or improvising on the movements? How would I be able to maintain a

witnessing role in the making of the dance? One of the transformational growth processes was the consolidation of an inner witness that was ready to deal with emotions surrounding the process of creating a dance holding on to its inner truth and being able to bring it out “under the lights”. For myself as witness, it was practicing over and over again how to let go of my own convictions about where or in what direction the dance was “going”, in order to be in the present with the mover, to see and hear what she needed to say through her movements.

3 - The project

The project was a four month dance making project, which had at its base the discipline and practice of Authentic Movement. The invitation was specifically to participate in a project which would involve creating a dance which emerged from movements found in AM practice and bring it into performance. Accepting the invitation opened the first gateway, which was based on “being seen” by the author but also the acknowledgement that their dance would be seen in public. According to AM language, the invitation was the result of my “seeing”, a recognition of people who had studied AM with me, had trained in Creative Movement (CM), or were dance movement therapy (DMT) colleagues, only a few of whom had formally studied dance or were dancers. The acceptance of the proposal was to co-create a solo dance together from movement emerging from the dyad stage of AM practice (the second gateway) to perform it in front of the collective of women involved in the project (the third gateway) and then finally the fourth gateway to bring it into public performance. In the spirit of being the witness which, in the AM context, means to practice “mindfulness”, to be open to whatever arises in myself or the other, I would respond to the movement found in the second gateway and together we would find a way to shape and form the movements into a repeatable dance, a piece of choreography.

More than ten women, from ages thirty-five to sixty or, as is called in AM, “movers”, responded. Two benefit performances were given

in the Vascello Theatre in Rome to collect funds for UNICEF to aid Japanese children after the tsunami of March 2011. The performance was part of a series of cultural events called *Cultè* organized by Art Therapy Italiana Lazio. Another invitation was given to the movers after the performance to write about their experience of the project from any angle. Today you will see a three minute video clip of the performance and tomorrow see the whole performance live.

4 - Healing dances : The movers response to the project

What follows is a sampling of the participant's writing about their experience in the dyad stage of the project. They have given permission to use their real names. My comments are interwoven in the responses.

Francesca

"My inner attitude towards AM alternated between the fear of losing control, to find the unknown and my wish to let myself flow into the unknown." Her first memory in our dyad work was very strong, a place of intimacy with her arms and hands around her shoulders which opened a warm sensation in her heart. Her body softened, she cried gently. It was, as she wrote, "out of the ordinary". Little by little, the fear of this intimacy became apparent, together with symptoms of nausea, when she moved freely in space.

If nausea came while she was moving and repeating movement phrases in setting her piece, this became a signal to heighten consciousness, to become aware of kinaesthetic sensations, and particularly to plant her feet on the ground. To feel her feet.

Kinaesthetic sensations, the feedback loop of her body to her inner witness, being seen by the external witness, all helped her find a more knowledgeable place, a lived in relationship with her body and aided in memorizing her dance.

Valeria

Valeria was aware after years of practicing AM that repeatedly she began her movement with her back to her witness. This would be a

place of healing if she could know it. Facing and moving towards me became a central part of our dyad work and found its way into her dance.

This is an excerpt of a poem she offered about this challenge.

[...] I am a snail rolled into myself,
The gesture begins to dig from within
an extreme gesture that is born from my cave,
my body is a cave.
I move forward
overburdened
inevitable
out
there is no space [...]

She continued,

My dance needed to have space for my impetuous fury, my aggressiveness which comes out every time there is a cause. My witness encouraged me to go back into AM practice to find this place in myself. No form came. A horrible fear to be seen in this rapacious place came instead. We found together that hiding my eyes, protecting myself made more sense. I walk forward with hands over my eyes.

Valentina

About to finish her training as a dance movement psychotherapist, Valentina made the following revelation while improvising one section of the dance.

My witness guide suggested I try to sense a brief sequence of movements to practice waiting until one movement came to a close in order to sense the emergence of the following movement. It seems simple to say but the more I tried to do this I realized that I could not do it. I broke into tears with the astounding consciousness that I did not have faith in my body. I do not have faith in my body?! But are we kidding?! [...] I, who always talked about how important it is to listen to the body, [...] I discovered that in my deepest place exists distrust in what I feel are body sensations that make me anticipate successive movements, fearfully thinking that they could not emerge by themselves. [...] I discovered something that gave me permission to risk more, to let myself

go, to try to go beyond the fear, the risk to feel nothing. Risking not to feel, I could wait and feel the movements coming into being developing from my body instead of my head. I began to sense my body in a new way.

Valentina had awakened her body and mind connection.

4.1 - Healing dances: being seen by the collective

A showing of their pieces by all the women took place two evenings before the public performance. There was awe, surprise, respect and a “knowing” that ran through all the women that evening. Each had separately gone through the same experience and here in front of them was the piece of choreography that emerged.

As their primary witness, in the creation of the dances in the dyad phase, I held the knowledge that these women belonged together even though they had never seen each others’ dances before this moment. The evening of our collective showing, I invoked the same non-judgemental atmosphere that I tried to maintain in individual sessions. Each woman had been seen in my reflecting eye and with their own inner witness. It was now time to be seen in a larger context. They were about to practice the art of silent witnessing for each other and to see themselves being witnessed by the collective.

Luisa wrote, “[...] there was this ‘other’ that accompanied the voyage, this other that was close by but we never saw. This created expectation and the fear of being seen that revealed itself as a great treasure”. She added, “[...] I like to think it is because the breath of each one of us left in the studio was breathed in by the other who entered”. Francesca wrote, “I felt we were always united even as the witness worked with each of us individually. My experience in seeing the dances of all my companions of this voyage was of synchrony, as if in seeing the birth of each dance, I gave birth to each one myself”. The collective’s support found in this third gateway became the foundation from which the mover/performers could step onto the performing space to be seen by an unknown public. The final gateway was at hand.

4.2 - *Healing Dances being seen in public*

Before the performance, I spoke to the audience briefly about the practice of AM and the project. I also anticipated that they would have time to comment on the performance afterwards. I shared with them that,

in the beginning I was the witness for each of the women in the creation of their piece, they then became witnesses for each other and were seen in the larger collective. Tonight I want to orient you, the audience, to be witnesses as well, to give testimony, because that is what you are doing here tonight, giving testimony to a journey of deep personal work. I invite you to open a non-judgemental attention to what will be seen; a difficult task, as if bringing attention to something means to naturally judge it. Instead, I ask you to bring attention and consciousness to the lens out of which you see: that the dancer and the dance is her gift, a haiku poem to be read through her body. Although still in your chair you may experience 'moving' with each of the performers connecting the space that separates you. You are both observer and participant.

The women were seated in the front row of the performing space with, as Alessandra writes, eyes like "burning embers". Behind them was the audience. They were not in the circle of formal AM practice but sitting silently, each one ready to enter the performance space to be seen and to witness their companions.

Costanza wrote that it took courage to witness naked emotions, her own and others. "To feel the thread that also connects our dances, the existence of one body dancing, to feel us together in front of all those eyes". Betta, on the other hand, not only found playfulness but amused herself in the performance. "In telling it I feel it is more true. I am present to every moment of my dance as I never have been before, I amused myself with myself". Giovanna talked about her inner witness becoming an ally helping her focus on each and every moment. Space held an emotion for Francesca, "I have found space for more love inside me". Valentina witnessed and felt that the soul (anima) released by each mover raised the soul consciousness of the audience to an archetypal and universal dimension, the goal of theatre. Being seen in one's truth led to strengthening the self, taking one's place in a collective, helped to recognize one's rela-

tionship to the whole, and transcending this brought the women to a knowing place within. These are gateways of transformation in the practice of AM as experienced in this project.

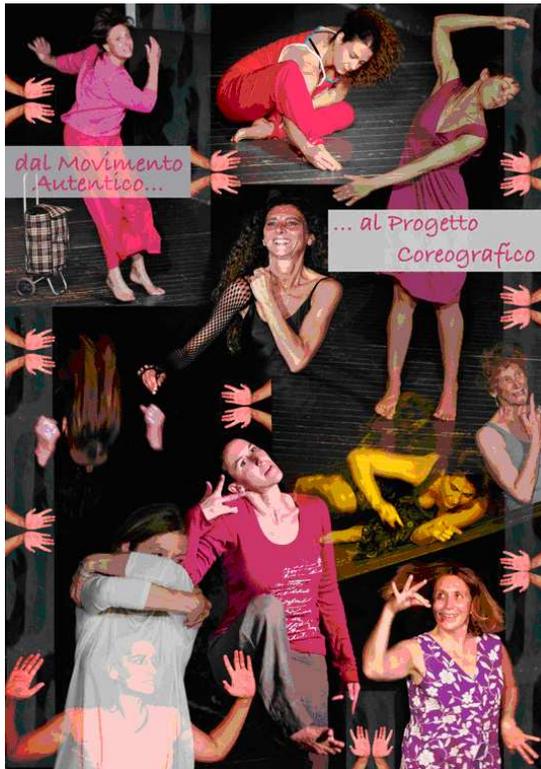


Fig. 1 - *Cultè dal Movimento Autentico alla Performance, 2011*
(foto S. Ottolenghi).

Conclusion

In hindsight, the project confronted the theme of dualities which is also found in the discipline of AM: the polarity of will and surrender and the polarity of inside to outside, or internal to external body experience. Each woman's will to participate in the project brought her to experience moments of being moved (surrender) that by her will (I move) and in response to witnessing, she began to set into a

phrases of movement to remember to repeat, then finally to surrender to what would happen on the stage. Continually, there was the process of shifting between inner sourcing of movement, being present to what was felt intimately in oneself and how it would change or become when shaped into a form.

I nourished my need to participate as witness/dance making collaborator through an embodied awareness practice, Authentic Movement. One basic healing place for me was to simply allow myself to actually initiate the project. If I was a catalyst in the dyad phase of the project to midwife themselves to themselves, the participants took the relationship further by establishing a bond, a strong sense of belonging, a cohesiveness as a group. The group itself became a healing witness. They all expressed a willingness to go on with the project.

The initial goal of the project was to see if movement found in AM practice could find a meaningful dance form for dancers and non-dancers and subsequently be brought out into the world. This is what we accomplished. The public responded by talking about the courage needed to reveal oneself, about seeing presence, how their witnessing became more emotionally involved and how they became more present to themselves and to the mover/performers. The gifts of the entire project were different for all but what I consider of crucial importance that became apparent in the process was that these were dances that heal. AM practice, where the outward roles of mover and witness are accompanied by inner witness presence respectively, produces what I am naming "transformational choreography" that brought to performance had the power to heal. There was a healing, I would say, with or without the performance. Yet I believe that the act of bringing it out into the world developed their inner witness further. The performance date gave them a time and a place for affirming themselves. Every woman opened up to the gateways of change through the dance-making process and recognized a personal statement made in that period of life. Each found her piece of wholeness within life's flow.

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