Choreographing From Within

Developing the Habit of Inquiry as an Artist

Diana F. Green

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Photos by *Julian*

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To all my students,
who have inspired me with their artistry and passion,
and to Christopher and Mariana Green.

PREFACE

It is often said that you cannot teach choreography. One must have talent and an artistic ability in order to become a creative artist. I tend to disagree. I think the artist is in every one of us, but it is driven out by fear, cultural identity, social requisites, and—yes, dare I say it?—dance technique classes. When we train to be dancers, we spend hours and days and years perfecting our ability to duplicate with utmost accuracy the dances and techniques created and demonstrated by others. We learn the fine art of self-critique in search of that perfection. Often a dancer becomes so skilled at imitation and self-critique that creation becomes terrifying, if not impossible. What it will take for you to become a proficient choreographer is an extraordinary amount of courage and a good dose of faith in yourself. You must break away from lessons learned and boldly explore and experiment without thought to immediate self-evaluation, because self-evaluation before or during exploration will stop creativity at the onset.

This is a college-level text for choreography and dance composition courses. However, it may also function in a rigorous high school dance program and become a resource for choreographers at any stage in their development. With scrutiny to details that apply, a K-12 classroom teacher may find this text useful in understanding basic dance concepts to be used as tools for **arts integration,** a process of learning that combines equal and significant instruction simultaneously in arts and non-arts subjects.

> A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression.
>
> *Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay "Self-Reliance," first published in 1841.*

The text covers any and all dance techniques because creativity is the same, whatever vocabulary is used. Often the instruction for creating dance is left to modern dance teachers, which has left a void in the quality, sophistication, and understanding of creativity in the formula-based techniques such as classical ballet and jazz. Choreographers in these more formal techniques develop the habit of arranging the steps, as in classroom exercises, without realizing that elements of craft apply to their work. But it is never okay to string classical ballet steps together without logic and intent, nor should the dance competition artist depend only on flashy tricks. Good choreography will always rise to the top. It is my hope that students and teachers in these techniques will use this book just as often as modern dance students and teachers.

Art and Craft of Creativity

There are various schools of thought about how to approach students with the art and craft of creating dances. One approach is to teach the rules of fundamental design and form and require the students to use carefully planned formulas. The other school of thought maintains that these rules are too limiting and stultify creativity. In fact, some believe that if these rules are taught at all, students will be unable to break the barriers. I am a student of both schools of thought. The rules of craft may become a framework on which timid choreographers find footing until having gained the confidence and maturity to strike out on their own. However, following the rules rigidly, without thought to intent and logic, may create artificiality. Learning to defy the rules for the sake of intent and logic is an important process. Rules are broken only after they have been practiced and their effects on the work are understood. Ignorance of the rules and all the opportunities they present may be even more limiting than the rules themselves.

My approach to choreography alternates between anarchy and form, using craft with a continual eye on ways to rebel. My belief is that whatever the talent of the individual, every student has the ability

to create spontaneously and to become a fine craftsman of movement. The most important task remains to find the unique artist within the self. A choreography class or text simply offers pathways to be selected by the developing choreographer. It is my goal to provide you with as many pathways as possible so that your choices are difficult, but the result belongs to you and not to your teachers. In this way, every student is provided with the tools for creating great works of art. A few of you may use these skills to forge a career in choreography. You will soon learn that perhaps a little talent but mostly determination and luck are the prerequisites for success. If you enroll in a choreography class as a requirement, or just for fun, these skills will nurture and sustain your creativity and your ability to explore the arts and life itself.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Traditional education has focused on the memorization of facts and knowledge. Dance teachers also have taught classes by imparting knowledge from previous teachers, handing down theory and practice that may be hundreds of years old. Students have not often been encouraged to question or discover their own pathways even as choreographers, but they have been given the vocabulary, technique, and formulas with which to arrange their dances. Current trends in education are recognizing the need to prepare students for a changing world, to help them adapt by encouraging habits of mind that question and find new relevance. Inquiry means to question. It is the most natural form of learning, the most engaging, and the most rewarding for the student. It places the student at the center of the learning. The teacher becomes the mentor, guiding the student toward a focal point and allowing for multiple pathways chosen by the student. It requires teachers and students to admit that neither of them have all the answers, that answers are boundless and infinite, and that answers change as variables change. For this reason it is important to continually ask questions, particularly after solutions are found. Inquiry is the habit of mind of the true artist, who is always searching for a greater truth. This book is not a cookbook with a smorgasbord of recipes guaranteeing success. It is more like *Beard's Book on Bread*, offering a thorough understanding of the medium itself, providing a few examples, and leaving the rest up to the reader to create in his or her own unique style.

Organization

Part I of the text deals with process. This process encourages you to discover the dance within you through questioning (chapter 1) and to always create movement with intent (chapter 2). It will be important to understand these approaches before beginning the in-depth study that follows.

Part II introduces you to the elements of movement as they are used in choreography. The sequence of these elements (chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6) will elicit variety and spontaneity from you as a new choreographer at an early stage in your explorations. I have found that approaching intent and energy of movement before exploring space encourages a full and courageous commitment to creating movement, which is later supported by the study of design and musicality. I see quality as an element of movement created by a combination of energy, space, and time; therefore it is included last in part II. As you study these elements of movement in separate categories, note that none of these elements exists in isolation. However, your focus may or may not settle on one or the other for particular effect. And since the human brain likes to compartmentalize in order to understand, you will learn to analyze and separate these elements before you begin to synthesize.

In part III, you will begin a synthesis of the elements of movement through the exploration of music and sound as they relate to choreography (chapter 7). Although you may think that it is easier to create movement with some music as inspiration, you will discover that creating a sophisticated relationship of music and sound is not a simple process. That is why you will explore the elements of movement in silence before adding a layer of sound. In the rest of part III you will discover the importance of transitions in your work (chapter 8), learn to use formulas to manipulate movement (chapter 9), play with various numbers of dancers (chapter 10), and explore how props add interest to your choreography (chapter 11). You will need to combine the elements of energy, space, and time while exploring these choreographic techniques.

Part IV introduces methods for refining and forming your work. You will have completed your explorations of the key concepts in parts I to III and at this point will be ready to formalize your presentation of these concepts in a production for the stage. The discussion of style in chapter 12 will help you understand cultural differences and

support you in developing and recognizing your unique style as a mature artist. The chapter on form (chapter 13) will help you define the boundaries you have already begun to set in your work. You will learn to evaluate your choices, discover how they affect form, and discover how form will affect the intent of your work. Finally, in the appendix is a discussion of the arrangement of works in a full-length production or dance concert. The rules for creating this arrangement should be the same as the rules for creating a single choreographic work, but I find that choreographers often forget to acknowledge the power this arrangement may have on the overall impact of the entire experience for the audience. And manipulating the audience's experience is the ultimate goal of the choreographer.

Within each chapter of the text, a systematic approach is used to actively support your discoveries of each key choreographic concept. These discoveries will be led by the format shown in preface table.1.

Preface Table.1

	Description	Procedure
Exploration	The study of each key choreographic concept begins with an exploration.	Unless indicated, each exploration is intended to be completed in one movement session.
Essential question	The essential question frames an understanding that is essential to the key concept.	To frame the exploration, answer the question before the warm-up and again after the improvisations. Record your responses in your journal.
Warm-up	The warm-up has three purposes: raise body temperature, focus concentration, and introduce the key concept.	Perform these exercises individually without watching others. Begin to focus on your kinesthetic sense.
Improvisations	Improvisations provide an in-depth exploration of the key concept.	Perform these exercises in groups to allow for some observation.
Reflective questions	These questions focus your discoveries from the movement explorations.	Respond to these questions and discuss them with your peers. Record your responses in your journal.
Discussion of key concept	This discussion is a description of generally recognized theories about the key concept.	Read this after completing the exploration of the key concept and before you create your movement studies.
Movement studies	A movement study tests your discoveries of the key concept by requiring you to apply those discoveries in the solution of a movement problem.	Create your movement studies independently and share them with your peers.
Assessment	Assessment measures your understanding of the key concept.	You may wish to explore alternative methods of measuring your understanding.
Class critique	Class critique is a discussion between choreographers, peers, and mentor that includes an analysis and evaluation of the work.	Every movement study should undergo a critique. Record key points from the critique in your journal.

~ *continued*

Preface Table. 1 *~continued*

	Description	Procedure
Rubric	Rubric is an instrument used in measuring success according to particular criteria.	Use rubrics as a guide to class critiques, as a written assessment in your journal, and to accompany your work in your portfolio.
Documentation	Documentation is a record of your work. This text requests video recordings of your work.	Documentation is an effective assessment tool if it is accompanied by an evaluation instrument, such as a rubric or a formal critical analysis.
Drawing conclusions	Drawing conclusions is the final act of inquiry. Discoveries are summarized, knowledge is assessed, and opinion is formed, often spawning additional questions that lead to new inquiry.	Generally a conclusion is requested at the end of an in-depth study of a key concept or at the end of a chapter.
Breaking the rules	This is a movement study that goes against all that you have learned. It is a final test of the key concept and may open new ideas and concepts for you to explore.	Create these movement studies as they appear in the text.
Critical thinking essay	This is a formal written essay that follows the critical thinking model explained in chapter 1.	A critical thinking essay is suggested at the end of each chapter. Include these essays in your portfolio.

This format will change slightly in part IV, at which point in the text you will bring together previously explored fundamental concepts to create a whole work. This application of concepts takes conscious thought and planning, rather than improvisation. Therefore, in these last two chapters, you will begin this format at the Discussion section and practice the applications through the Movement Studies section.

Developing a Habit of Inquiry as an Artist

Having conversations about dance, questioning what you see, and listening to others converse about dance may be the most important catalyst to your development as a choreographer. These conversations will develop your eye and expand the opportunities for your own creations. All choreography students should talk about dance, whether they are new to the field with little knowledge of dance vocabulary or veterans with a great deal of experience. Dance is created for a general audience, so every viewpoint is valid. Your point of view will expand: The more you see, the more you converse about what you see, and the more you explore creating dance for yourself. The more you converse, the more you will develop your vocabulary for describing what you experience.

To maximize a point of view, you must not be a passive viewer. Passive viewers sit back and watch, waiting for an impact (or not). They finish by saying, "I liked that," or "I didn't like that." Creating a dance that is well liked by an audience may not be the goal of the choreographer. Dance is a complex form of communication that often goes beyond entertainment. Dance may be about expressing the human condition. Active viewers will ask themselves why they like or dislike something they have seen. Yet, because dance is an art form that uses nonverbal language, the why may be elusive at first. So, in search of the why, refrain from making an immediate judgment about a dance. Instead, your task in learning to choreograph is to describe what you see, listen to or read descriptions related by others, and then try to make sense out of those descriptions. To describe, you must analyze what you see. To begin to make sense of what you see, you must reflect on the meaning of the movement or the choreographer's intent,

relate it to your life experience, and evaluate it for its effectiveness on you as an audience.

The inquiry-based approach will require a lot of conversation about the dance you see. Beginning choreographers may not have practiced serious discussions about dance. Having material to converse about is the first problem to solve on this road to discovery. Even before your class begins to create, there is much to see. Television provides opportunities to view dance in commercials and on popular dance competition shows. Track public television listings and arts channels for dance performances. Search the Internet for particular choreographers, companies, and classic pieces of choreography. And always keep informed of live dance performances that take place in your area. You will gain from watching all dance, regardless of its quality or source. Eugene Loring (1910-1982), American choreographer and one of the three founding choreographers of the American Ballet Theatre, told his choreography students that he made it a point to see as much dance as possible in order to gather material for his work. "You will learn much, or even more, from what you consider to be bad dance than what you will learn from what you consider to be good dance." Later, he mentioned that when he began to create his own work, he refused all invitations to dance concerts and ballets. At that point, he did not want to be tempted into territory that was not his own. As a professional choreographer, before beginning to choreograph, Loring would enter what might be considered the research phase, gathering as much material as possible to be used in his work. Once the work entered the creative phase, the research came to a halt and the artist searched for his own unique voice. You, as a student of choreography, should consider yourself in the research phase of your development as an artist and gather all you can.

Before you go any further in this text, begin your inquiry immediately. Find some dance to view and begin conversing about it with others. Ask questions. Listen to the questions of others and try to respond. Develop a habit of inquiry. Develop the habit of an artist.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I know that my approach to teaching choreography is a collection of thoughts from many personal experiences, workshops, conferences, books, teachers, and colleagues. It is tough to separate which ideas are truly mine and which ideas have been borrowed from others. But then who can say that anyone's approach to choreography is totally original?

I began my training as most dancers from my era: with the traditional Doris Humphrey text *The Art of Making Dances*. Martha Hill Davies gave me my first shot of confidence as a choreographer at a National Association of Regional Ballet Craft of Choreography Conference. Eugene Loring, who originally terrified me, mostly because of my own insecurities, became my trusted mentor and friend. His example as a true craftsman and choreographic genius nurtured me during my four years at the University of California at Irvine which extended through the generosity of his residencies with my youth company for several years after my graduation. As luck would have it, because of my ability to read dance notation scores, I was assigned to Antony Tudor as a rehearsal assistant during my two years of graduate work at Irvine. Tudor recognized my desire and perhaps some talent as an instructor and director and made it his mission to train me in the intricacies of teaching classical ballet and creating dances. He is responsible for tearing me away from my relentless acknowledgment of music structure.

I attended numerous craft of choreography conferences held by the National Association of Regional Ballet, where my work was torn to shreds, requiring me to start anew and gain strength with each rebuilding. Students from the Montgomery Ballet in Silver Spring, Maryland, became my inspiration for the first 15 years of my teaching and choreographing. Later, in my move to higher education, my colleagues at Hamilton College, Elaine Heekin and Bruce Walcyzk, opened my eyes to the opportunities of postmodernism. Tim Wilson at the University of South Florida introduced me to methods of teaching contact improvisation during a Southeast Regional Festival of the American College Dance Festival.

My students at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, honed my skills as a provider of instruction in choreography. To them I owe my deepest gratitude for trusting me, giving of themselves, delivering their creativity, blossoming in their craft, and urging me to write. In those classes I used *The Intimate Act of Choreography* by Blom and Chaplin, which I found to be the closest approach to my own philosophies. Eventually I began teaching out of pieces of this text in draft form.

Special thanks to Judy Wright, acquisitions editor at Human Kinetics, who encouraged me to forge ahead and complete this text, even as I remained unsure whether the schedule in my new career would allow it. In preparation for the completion for this text, I was honored to receive advice from Patty Phillips, Vincas Greene, and particularly Maida Withers.

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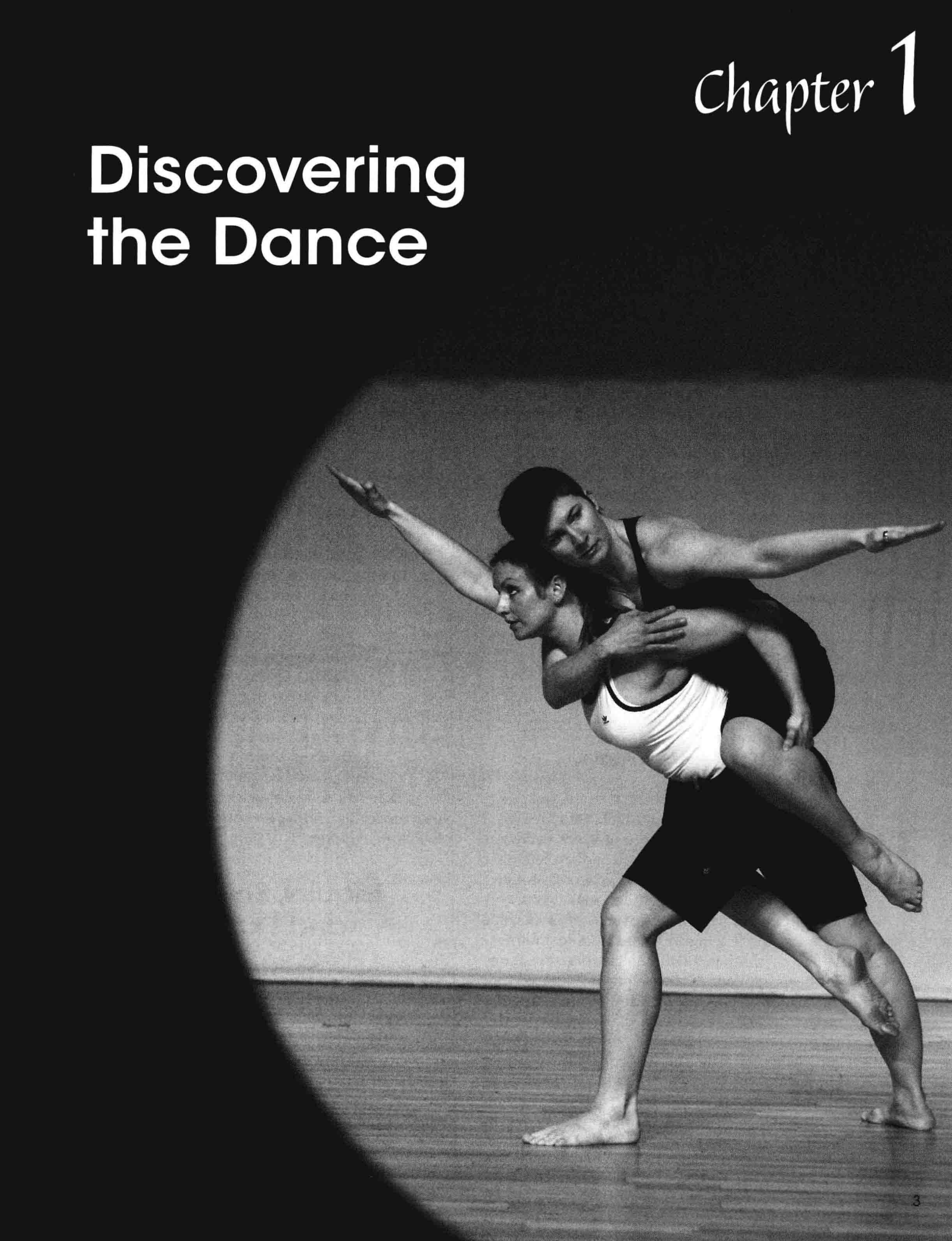
Part I

Starting the Process

Chapter 1

Discovering the Dance



To choreograph from within means the capturing of one's innate ability to create movement in a very personal and unique way. **Choreography,** very simply, is the arrangement of movement to express an idea or concept. But the art of choreography is far more complex and defies boundaries provided in definitions. It involves searching within your soul for truths that may be expressed only through movement. It involves the process of discovering movement that provides a window into your soul. No one can tell you what exists within your soul or how to express those innermost secrets through movement. That ability for discovery already exists within you. Once you connect to that ability and create a movement that belongs to you, no matter how small, because it expresses who you are, then you are a choreographer. Before that you are simply an arranger of movement. The craft of choreography teaches you effective ways to arrange movement. This text provides you with an exploration of craft through a process of discovery designed to help you connect to the choreographer that already exists within you.

Tell me
and I forget.
Show me
and I remember.
Involve me
and I understand.
Ancient Chinese Proverb

As a student in the learning process, you may initially feel most comfortable with "Tell me." When you are told what to do, it keeps you from having to solve problems and make your own decisions. You may mistakenly believe that if you follow someone else, rather than make your own decisions, you are less likely to make a mistake. But without experiencing what you are told and practicing a method, you will quickly forget what has not been applied. And without problem solving and exploring choices, learning becomes narrow and limited to the experience of the person delivering the knowledge and your ability to interpret that knowledge correctly. This is particularly true when translating words, in the telling, to movement as the interpretation of that knowledge.

Most dance classes involve "show me." Teachers demonstrate and you repeat the movement, therefore experiencing what you are shown. You become involved immediately in the experience, developing a deep kinesthetic understanding of what is being taught. So the teaching of dance automatically progresses to the third and most effective level of learning in this proverb, "Involve me and I understand."

However, in the learning of the choreographic process, it is important to go a step further. Rather than repeat a process that is demonstrated to you by a teacher, or create what is described to you in words from a text, you must be involved in the creative process itself. You, as the learner, must be involved in the discovery of the **concepts** you will use as tools of this trade. There will be no right or wrong decisions to be made but only choices that work better for you and your audiences. You must learn to evaluate those choices to find what works best for you as a choreographer. In this way you will discover the dance within you; that is completely yours and is not a copy of any other dancer or teacher.

This text gives you enough structure, or telling, in the instruction to allow for a degree of comfort, but at the same time it will require you to discover, solve problems, and make individual choices before any telling takes place. This is the **inquiry-based approach**. It begins with exploration and without detailed explanations of rules to follow. This process allows you the freedom to find your own way. Later you are offered generally accepted rules that you may either conform to or break away from, depending on your unique approach as a choreographer.

Inquiry, Science, and Dance

Inquiry is an established approach to discovery for the field of science. Scientists search for a truth often just beyond reach. Theories are established and tested and inquiry begins again in order to get closer to the truth. When one discovery is made, it is always possible to explore further without stopping at a right or wrong answer. Science advances by these new discoveries. Artists also create in search of an expression of truth. Both art and science involve a form of discovery that leads to a

deep understanding, or truth, that remains elusive enough to encourage more discoveries and greater truths. It is the mystery of this truth that engages us and holds us to our task.

> The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.
>
> *Albert Einstein*

The scientific method includes explore (collect data), describe (analyze data), question (hypothesize), explain (conclude or develop theory), test (experiment), communicate (publish theories), and retest established theories. Compare this method to the inquiry-based approach to choreography in this text (see table 1.1).

Exploration

The study of each choreographic concept in this text begins with exploration. I encourage you to read and perform each chapter in sequence in order to gain the maximum benefit of this inquiry-based approach. This is not a text in which you should read an assignment the night before and then try the exercises the following day. The movement exercises and questions that accompany them will help you discover the knowledge for yourself before you are given the accepted rules for the craft of choreography in the discussion of key concept.

Essential Question

Each exploration begins and ends with an **essential question,** which provides the focus for the exploration. (An essential question frames an understanding that is essential to the learning of a particular concept or idea.) The icon shown in the margin will appear with each essential question. This question begins the inquiry and points toward an understanding of the key choreographic concept being explored without providing the answer. To test your current knowledge or your instincts about the concept, you may wish to attempt to answer this question before you begin the movement activities. Record your first answers in your journal and compare them to the answers you formulate at the end of your study of each concept. If you feel you cannot answer the question at the beginning, simply keep it in mind as you progress through the lesson. You should ask the question again at the end of each in-depth study of the choreographic concept. Essential questions frame your exploration, so it is important to revisit the question at the end.

Warm-Up

Each warm-up exercise has three objectives. The first objective is to raise the body temperature gradually and prepare you for more intense movement. Second, the warm-up should bring your concentration into focus, exclude outside noise, and leave the mind completely free to follow a **kinesthetic response** to the exercises given. During the warm-up you must work toward an **internal focus** that excludes worries, frustrations, and everyday business that may follow you into the dance studio. And finally, each warm-up provides an introduction to the particular concept to be explored.

Improvisations

After the warm-up, specific movement **improvisations** are suggested. They provide an in-depth exploration of the concept. It is recommended that

Table 1.1 Comparison of Inquiry-Based Approach and Scientific Method

Inquiry-based approach to choreography	Scientific method
Exploration: essential question, warm-up, improvisations, and reflective questions	Explore (collect data), question (hypothesize)
Discussion of key concept, journal writing	Describe (analyze data)
Movement studies	Test (experiment)
Assessment: class critique, rubric, documentation	Describe (analyze data)
Drawing conclusions: breaking the rules, critical thinking essays	Explain (conclude or develop theory), retest established theories, publish theories