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**EXAMINING THE PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY AND  
ETHOS OF DANCE TRAINING IN GREECE THROUGH  
THE LENS OF JOHN BRITTON'S PHYSICAL THEATRE  
TRAINING 'SELF-WITH-OTHERS'**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield for the completion of the  
MA Ensemble Physical Theater degree

(By Research)

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## Introduction

This thesis suggests fresh pedagogical approaches for dance teaching in Greece, as a result of my experience of the integration of elements that John Britton<sup>1</sup> uses when training ensembles in 'Self-With-Others'. Combining the experience gained from the MA Ensemble Physical Theatre core training with Britton from June to September 2011, with my experience in teaching dance in private schools in Greece since 2009, I considered that the adaptation of some principles of this training would be a helpful tool to address some difficulties that several students face in their studies and are often caused by particular teaching approaches. Moreover, taking into account the fact that Improvisation seems to be undervalued within the formal dance education in Greece, as well as in the private schools all over the country, most dance students do not have the ability to develop their Improvisation skills and find it hard when they are first introduced to it. I considered that introducing some core exercises of 'Self-With-Others', and adapting them to the needs of dancers within dance training in Greece, would facilitate students towards their journey of exploration in their own movement qualities, self-expression and confidence.

The thesis starts with a brief description of the role of dance in Greece and deals with the issues around the fact that dance related higher education is not provided in the country. The focus shifts to the curriculum and the approaches to teaching in the Further Professional Dance schools, the only educational establishments where students can gain a dance related degree. There appear to be various insufficiencies regarding the aim of the training, which results in teaching styles and approaches that might be problematic and may affect the approach to teaching the future graduates of these schools will choose to adapt. The chapter continues with

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<sup>1</sup>John Britton is a performer, director, teacher and writer of both academic and performance texts. After years of training performers he has developed his own psychophysical approach to training that sits between theatre, dance and improvisation and is specifically focused towards developing the individual within an ensemble. He calls that 'Self-With-Others' and is addressed to all kinds of performers. He is also the Artistic Director of DUENDE, an international collaboration of artists committed to ensemble practices.

a description of the training within the Further Professional Dance Schools in Greece and the fact that it seems to narrow the focus on the form of the movement and the development of the students' physical/technical skills, rather than the holistic development of dance students and future dance teachers. Consequently, the role of Improvisation, which is widely used as a helpful tool for the holistic development of the kinaesthetic awareness in dancers and performers around the world, is limited within formal dance education in Greece. This fact causes difficulty to students who never had similar training before (as improvisation is not usually offered in courses for younger dance students in private schools either), as they have to deal with Improvisation tasks in the audition for the entrance to the Professional Dance Schools, or as a part of their professional training afterwards. Examples of the experience of former and current students are given to illustrate this difficulty.

The second chapter addresses the issues around the approaches to teaching and the value of Improvisation mentioned above through Britton's 'Self-With –Others'. I considered it vital to start with a brief discussion of Britton's training, introducing its basic principles and locating it into the wider field of Physical training, identifying his influences. What influenced me the most in his training, and became the reason to conduct this research, is Britton's positive approach to teaching, which is based on the core principles that underpin his training. This chapter is therefore an attempt to introduce healthier approaches to dance teaching, which would benefit trainees in Professional Dance Schools as students, and also provide them with examples of healthier approaches to teaching for their future career as dance teachers. In this chapter it is also suggested that structured and semi structured Improvisation tasks that Britton usually uses in his training can be a good way to introduce Improvisation to dance students, either during their studies at Further Professional Dance schools or even better, earlier, in the private schools.

The final appendix offers some examples of Improvisation exercises adapted from Britton's training, as a suggestion of how to integrate his training within Contemporary dance training in Greece.

## **Chapter 1 - The pedagogical philosophy and ethos of Greek institutional dance**

### **1.1 A brief introduction on the role of dance in Greece**

Dance has historically played an important role in the culture and lives of Greek people from the ancient times until today. Being highly valued by philosophers and educators in ancient Greece, dance was included as part of their education alongside music and writing. According to Plato, it was an important part of education: 'Dance, of all the arts, is the one that most influences the soul. Dancing is divine in its nature and is the gift of the gods' (Plato). In her study about *Dance in Antiquity*, Tsekoura points out that, dance was a means of expression, spiritual development and also a way of developing gracefully one's body (Tsekoura, 2004).

It is not a coincidence that Isadora Duncan (1877 –1927), who is believed to be one of the founders of Modern dance<sup>2</sup>, was inspired and deeply influenced by the ancient Greek civilization:

Her life-long commitment to ancient Greek philosophies, rituals and ceremonies and the inspiration she derived from them affected her personally as well as professionally, in her determination to restore the ancient ideal of 'The Dance' (as she envisioned it practiced in the ancient Greek world) to its centrality in human experience [...]she understood her reference to the Greek world as a matrix that provided her with a conceptual framework from which to explore her art, her politics and her lifestyle'. (Isadora Duncan International Institute, n.d.)

Although dance was considered an important art form in ancient Greece, it is not given the same educational and artistic value nowadays. Traditional Greek dance is maybe the most active form of dance at the moment, as people of all ages dance at important occasions and gatherings, such as religious festivals, weddings and family celebrations. Traditional Greek Dances are sometimes taught as part of the Physical Education courses in the public schools.

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<sup>2</sup> Modern dance emerged from the need of dancers to break away from codified movements and balletic narrative structures. Other examples of pioneers of modern dance are Martha Graham (1894-1991), Ruth Saint Denis (1879 –1968) and Loie Fuller (1862 –1928).



However, other dance forms, such as Ballet and Contemporary Dance seem to be of minor importance and do not appear to play a crucial role in the holistic development of students, given that they are not considered important enough to be included in the public school curriculum<sup>3</sup>.

Consequently, Ballet, Contemporary and Modern dance teaching started gaining ground in the private sector. As the years went by, more and more private dance schools were established, making dance more easily accessible to students. However dance still appears to be a less appreciated art form in Greece. Stamatopoulou, a dancer and choreographer from Greece, states that compared to the theatre and the cinema dance still comes into second place, not as an artistic value, but because the above art forms have a more common acceptance, an easier, more approachable and accepted language (Stamatopoulou, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup>The fact that dance is not given great importance in Greece can be due to the complex history that has kept back the development of any art form. Greece was under the occupation of the Ottoman Empire for about 400 years, starting from 1453. During that period cultural development was not free to blossom:

It can be argued that Greece, as the whole Balkan area, was kept back in the cultural field and for this reason the Balkan Peninsula is still considered by the rest of the European states as backward. (Stamatiou, 2008, p.54)

The 20th century slowly introduced other forms of dance to the Greek society. Around the 1920's, ballet came to Greece and modern dance followed about 10 years later. KoulaPratsika (1899-1984) was the first Greek woman to open a dance school, where she spread the knowledge she had gained from studying abroad, in America, with some of the pioneers in modern dance. RallouManou (1915-1988), one of KoulaPratsikas' students, is considered to have initiated modern dance in Greece. She made great innovations for dance at a time where it "had no institutional character and no professional orientation, so there were no professional schools to attend" (Bournelli, 2008, p.56). Moreover, she tried to make modern dance accessible and acceptable to the general Greek community by infusing Greek cultural elements within the modern dance and giving public performances in various cities in Greece. With her work, she stimulated and challenged the Greek audiences' conservative perception of dance being improper, transforming it into an art that could be admired and respected (Bournelli, 2008).

## 1.2 Higher dance education in Greece

Considering dance as a hobby/ recreational activity in Greece, there are many private schools and studios where someone can have Ballet and Contemporary classes, but what about dance in terms of higher education/ at a degree level?

As mentioned earlier, the issue of dance in the Greek education system is complex. Even though dance is present everywhere in Greece, it has never been included in the National Curriculum for public schools or offered at degree level (Savrami, 2012). Consequently, it is not a subject that is officially assessed in the Pan-Hellenic National examinations for university entry (these exams are the equivalent of the A levels in the British examination system). Dance education in Greece falls within the responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Education, so there are no Greek universities offering a degree in Dance.

In 1939, the National Greek Opera was founded and in 1973, the first qualified professional dance school, the State School of Dance, was established, whereas in 1981, with the Presidential verification, the Further Education Private Professional Dance Schools were recognised<sup>4</sup>. These establishments still exist to this day (Madafounis, 2002). If someone wishes to study dance; Ballet and Contemporary, they need to audition for either the Greek National Opera or the State School of Dance or for one of the qualified Further Professional Dance Schools, licensed by the Ministry of Culture, all of which offer three-year courses. Studying at one of these Further Professional Dance Schools, leads to a Dance Teacher Diploma and is, unfortunately, the only dance related qualification one can get in Greece, as there are no degrees offered in other fields such as, for example, Choreography. No post graduate studies

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<sup>4</sup>Throughout my thesis I refer to them as 'Further Professional Dance Schools'. Moreover, I use the term 'private dance schools' to refer to the non-professional evening dance schools/studios around the country.

exist either and 'unfortunately Greece is the only European country with no academic dance education' (Bournelli, 2008, p.57).

Many artists and people in the entertainment sector have been trying for years to help give the arts the value they deserve in the educational setting and so, in 2004, three public Artistic Schools were founded in three cities in Greece; Athens, Thessaloniki and Herakleion (Savrami, 2012). According to the Government Act 1497 of 2003, these schools aim to,

encourage and support the students' interest in the Arts and prepare those that desire to follow a professional career in the theatre-film, dance (classical and modern) or visual arts sector, without, however, depriving them of a general knowledge, if they eventually choose to follow another field of professional or scientific work. (Government Act 1497/2003-number 107922/C7)

These schools are trying to change the common perception about arts in education, and are the only public schools in Greece that teach some forms of dance. As stated in their curriculum, throughout high and upper high school, students are taught a variety of subjects such as Ballet, Contemporary dance/Improvisation, Rhythm, Traditional Greek dances, History of Art, Music, Theatre, Visual Arts, Musical theatre (Government Act 1497/2003-number 107922/C7).

However, having attended these public artistic schools is not a prerequisite for someone willing to study dance in Greece. Anyone can apply and audition if they wish, so there are students who have never attended these artistic schools and limit their preparation and training to other private dance schools and studios that exist in Greece, where one can take various dance classes, ranging from Ballet and Modern, to Ballroom, Latin, Jazz and Hip-hop.

### **1.3 Studying at a Further Professional Dance School in Greece –Approaches to teaching**

As mentioned earlier, students who wish to study Dance up to a Diploma degree level in Greece can audition and, if successful, attend the State School of Dance or one of the Further Professional Dance Schools. For the purpose of this paper I will focus on the Further Professional Dance Schools, as, since the demand for places in the State School is great, due to the fact that the tuition fees are funded by the government, the places are limited. Consequently, most people audition for the private ones which are many around Greece. Moreover, the fact that I have graduated from such a school myself, will allow me to speak from my own experience, presenting views of my colleagues, as well as that of students who attended similar schools in other parts of Greece.

The studies in such schools last for three years and lead to a Diploma in Dance Teaching. As this is the only form of higher dance education in Greece, it is the only choice for anyone who wishes to study dance at a higher level. Students who graduate from these schools do often work as dance teachers in private evening dance schools. There are some who, at the same time, become members of small local dance companies and have the chance to perform, but since Greek society has not fully accepted dance and given it the artistic value and appreciation it deserves, the common perception is that it cannot be considered as a real professional career. The dance industry is unfortunately limited and so, while some dancers work in dance-theatre companies, others might have to work in nightclubs and other entertainment halls, TV shows, etc.

Although the training in such schools leads students to a Dance Teaching Diploma, the focus of the studies tends to be more on Ballet and Contemporary dance training and technique development, which trains them to become skilful dancers, rather than introduce them to

teaching approaches. According to the Government Act 372 of 1983, which has not been renewed or updated since, the lessons fall into two categories: the primary lessons, which are Classical Ballet, Contemporary Dance, Rhythmic, Theory and analysis of Ballet and Contemporary Dance Technique and Teaching Observations and Practice, where students should observe or help in dance lessons taught by other teachers. The secondary lessons are Morphology and History of Music, Applied Anatomy, Character Dance, Classical and Contemporary Repertoire, Greek Traditional Dance, Improvisation and Elements of Choreography, and Psychology of Education (Government Act 372/1983 number 131/A/23-9-89, article n 23).

The curriculum focuses mainly on the development of Ballet and Contemporary technical skills as well as the analysis of the movement in terms of technique. Minor importance and teaching time is given to the Psychology of Education, a subject that should be crucial, given that the degree obtained is a Teaching one. The focus seems to be on the external form of the movement, 'what' is being taught rather than 'how' it should be taught, a point which I pick up on chapter two, in relationship to my analysis of Britton's work and my proposed changes in the curriculum. The Observation and Practice lessons, although considered 'primary' are often neglected by the schools. This is not necessarily a fault of the school itself; the system is designed in a way that, although it aims at a Teaching degree, the training resembles that of a professional dancer, which is beneficial on the one hand, as achieving high levels of technical competence is important both for dancers and dance teachers, but it can confuse students as to where they are heading to, where should they focus on and aim at. Due to the fact that in the final exams students are being examined mainly in Ballet and Contemporary Dance in practice, a lot of effort is put on achieving high technical skills during the three years of training, in order to pass. This seems to be quite confusing and, in cases, quite problematic, as the goal is unclear. Antoniadou, K., a Contemporary dance teacher at a professional dance school states:

The orientation of such schools is not clear. The degree is on 'Dance Teaching' but the actual training does not correspond to that. Are the students trained to be dancers, dance teachers or choreographers? We as teachers try to give alternatives, such as classes of Elements of Choreography or a little bit of Improvisation but the time is so limited and the focus of the final exams is so technical that becomes the one and only goal. (Antoniadou, K., personal interview. 7 January 2013)

The fact that students train in order to achieve high technical dancing skills without getting the proper education on how to transfer these skills to their students later on can sometimes be problematic. There is inefficient training regarding the way they could approach students or deal with several problems that might occur in teaching and furthermore, help them overcome these problems. Further discussion on the way a training approach could help with the students overcoming certain problems that occur within the training can be found in detail in chapter two where Britton's approach to training is discussed.

There is no doubt that teachers should be trained with technical accuracy but the pedagogical part of the education should not be neglected, as it is crucial for the holistic development of a dance teacher and, since the majority of the students who graduate from such schools end up teaching in small private dance schools, a training with different requirements than what they had during their training as professional dancers is required. So it is quite possible that, when students become teachers themselves, they might transfer to their students an emphasis on a limited approach to the understanding of dance. An example could regard the emphasis on stereotypical views of the body. Some teachers might promote unrealistic body image expectations for their students, a fact that can make students feel that they are not appropriate for dance, that they should be something different than what they already are, or that they can only succeed by having specific dimensions. This can create the problem of forming negative opinions about oneself, which might block students and deprive them from finding pleasure in what they are doing.

I recall strong memories of that during my own dance studies. My body image was far from the image demanded by the 'conventional' teachers of ballet. During my puberty this was more intense as my body, as well as my other classmates' bodies, was going through enormous changes. The expectation of my teacher to lose weight, although suggested in a quite gentle way, was constant and would make me feel quite stressed. Although I was considered a good dancer, I could not understand why it was so important to be thinner and, how could these two parameters, that of having a thin body and being good at dance/having a good technique, could be so interconnected. I personally, was not facing serious technique problems and I enjoyed dancing but my teacher's approach to body image and her expectations would often block me and result in my having destructive opinions about my image or even doubts about my skills and how far I could go with pursuing a career in dance.

Puberty, according to Solomon et al. is 'naturally associated with weight gain and breast development, [and] in itself yields deviations from the idealized image of the ballerina' (Solomon et al., 1990, p.203). Going through puberty and being taught Ballet in a way that pedagogy reinforces such negative stereotypes about this dance form might be a reason to drive students away from their training to be a dancers. The heart of the training in this case should be to help students face and, ideally, overcome these problems rather than reinforcing them. If the child enters into dance training because she likes dancing but the approach of the teacher discourages her, it is likely that it will affect her and prevent her from finding pleasure in what she is doing. This may also affect the students who are, later on, going to pursue a career in dance teaching, as, having been taught in such a way may affect their pedagogical approaches and perpetuate these ideas.

This aspect of the work is connected to notions of pleasure in learning and the need for approaches in teaching that promote positivity and create an environment where learning becomes an experience that encourages students to become their best possible selves, an

environment of understanding, support and positive reinforcement. Principles of positive reinforcement followed by practitioners such as Al Wunder<sup>5</sup>, the main influence of Britton, will be discussed in detail in chapter two.

#### **1.4 The lack of valuing Improvisation as a tool in the training of Contemporary dance in Greece**

As mentioned earlier, according to the Government Act 372 of 1983 Improvisation is a part of the curriculum at the Professional Dance schools. But what is its actual importance and value within the studies towards a Dance Teachers degree?

When auditioning for the Professional Dance Schools, students are examined in three subjects; Classical Ballet, Contemporary Dance and Improvisation. I will focus on Improvisation as it seems to be a controversial issue in Dance Education in Greece. Before going deeper into why this is the case, it is important to mention that, Improvisation is not a very popular lesson in private dance schools in Greece. Most schools focus on Ballet and Contemporary technique or other kinds of dance such as Jazz or Latin. There are, of course, exceptions but, the majority of schools focus more on technical classes, however, as Improvisation slowly gains ground in Greece, there are some schools that offer Improvisation or Contact Improvisation, but such courses are usually addressed to adults and can be found in big cities, such as Athens or Thessaloniki. Unless a student attends an artistic school, he or she might have never experienced Improvisation of any kind. So, inevitably, as the chance to study at an Artistic School in Greece, where Improvisation lessons are offered, is limited, since there exist only

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<sup>5</sup>Al Wunder is an American born artist who has developed an entire philosophy based on Improvisation. His work and approach to teaching will be discussed in more detail later in this report. For more information about Wunder and his work see Wunder, A. 2006, *The Wonder of Improvisation* or visit [www.theatreoftheordinary.com](http://www.theatreoftheordinary.com) .



three around the country, there are many students who prepare for the audition in private dance schools, and might not have the chance to experience Improvisation.

The fact that, according to the Government Act, Improvisation is included in the entrance exams, seems to give great value to the way candidates respond to it. There is no official written explanation of the reason why Improvisation appears only in the entrance audition but not in the final exams. Perhaps the examiners want to see how a dancer responds to it or simply, how she or he reacts to something new and untried, which is not necessarily problematic. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a great percentage of students who had no Improvisation experience up until that moment, and who may struggle within it. For example, an instruction such as 'move as if the floor is on fire' might be a great stimulus for someone who has worked with such structures before and has explored other ways of using her or his body rather than placing it into forms according to a specific technique, whereas, it can cause great confusion to someone who has never considered movement in another way. A graduate from a Professional Dance School in Greece describes her own experience of Improvisation within the entrance audition:

I felt really uncomfortable, as it was clearly a mental process for me. I was constantly thinking how I could organize what I want to do, it was as if I was trying to build a choreography, always feeling that I was a bit before and a bit after, so I was not focusing on the moment. It was an attempt to create my own structured choreography. ( X, personal interview. 14 May 2013)

Another graduate from a similar school says that:

It was the most scary thing I have ever tried, I had never learned how to do it. I was feeling my body being very stiff and I would use my mind a lot, trying to find the next movement through the structures I had already been taught. I remember doing ballet turns, trying to make them seem more 'Contemporary' . I constantly had in mind 'What am I doing next?' without leaving space to myself to listen what my body feels like doing. (Y, personal interview. 30 May 2013)

Apart from the entrance exams, Improvisation is also included in the curriculum of the Professional Dance Schools, as an independent lesson, one hour per week. However, as the final exams do not test students' Improvisation abilities, and since the prerequisite to pass is mainly the technical skills and abilities in Ballet and Contemporary Dance, Improvisation lessons are not given much importance and is often replaced by other subjects.

So, there are dance students who struggle in order to overcome the difficulties that technique based training may have caused. My question to both these interviewees was the following: Since you were asked to do something with your body, an instrument that you are supposed to know how to use since you are a dancer, and, moreover, you were given the freedom to do whatever you like, what made it so difficult for you? 'X', the first graduate said:

I had learned to have the control, have something specific, have an instruction that comes from outside of me which I had to follow and my body was the instrument through which I would express. My body was disconnected from my 'ego' , from myself, so the body was doing what it was given to do. I was conscious from the beginning that this was my security, what I knew well how to do, so anything new was the 'unknown' and I was not sure whether there was something further to discover. So, it was very difficult for me to do something that I didn't know. It is as if I have learned a language, I know how to speak this language well, and I am suddenly asked to use my voice in a way that is not a structured language, not a language I know. It is like I have to create new words, new sounds, with different meaning and I should define this meaning myself. (X, personal interview. 14 May 2013)

Accordingly, 'Y', the second graduate answered as follows:

Who said that freedom is not scary? When from the age of seven till that of twenty-three someone learns how to use her body through specific structures and techniques, she hasn't learned to 'listen' to what it has to tell her or might need to tell her. She is scared because it is something unknown. (Y, personal interview. 30 May 2013)

The way people who have learned how to work with their bodies, respond to different aspects of movement is really interesting. There are cases of students who work within certain techniques,

who sometimes find it hard to let go and deliberate their movement. During her professional dance training, 'X', the first graduate, mentions that there were colleagues of her who considered that Improvisation should not be a part of the training, as it does not offer them anything in terms of technique (X, personal interview. 14 May 2013), an attitude that reinforces a limited view of Improvisation and technique as separate disciplines, rather than seeing how improvisation might enhance the better understanding of technique and form (e.g. increase sensitivity during floor work in Modern dance on enhance poise and extension in ballet).

As seen in the curriculum and through the experience of several students, the focus of the training within further professional dance schools in Greece, as well as the other private schools, seems to be more on 'technique', by which I mean the external form of the movement or what the movement looks like. This idea is limited to the external appearance of the form rather than understanding of technique which also includes the feeling or kinaesthetic sense of the movement, a more holistic approach<sup>6</sup>. It is possible that the idea of the focus on the form in dance teaching is reinforced by the use of mirrors, a helpful tool used widely in dance training, but one which can also be detrimental. In her study about Body Image and Mirror Use in the Ballet class, Radell writes:

The mirror can be an effective tool in the ballet classroom. It provides several benefits, including allowing a student to evaluate his or her technical growth and the ability to see the activities in the classroom from more perspectives, which can aid in the learning process. However, it is also a potent tool which can play a pivotal role in affecting how each dancer feels about his or her body image. Many overlapping factors come into play which influence the effect a mirror has on a dancer's body image, including skill level, years of training, level of material taught, comparison of self to others, degree of stress when learning a phrase, or former expectations of our experience in the ballet art form. It seems clear that mirrors are useful for some aspects of dance training but detrimental to others. (Radell, 2012, p.10)

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<sup>6</sup>Erik Franklin is a Swiss dancer, movement educator, university lecturer, writer and founder of the Franklin Method, which combines creative visualization, embodied anatomy, physical and mental exercises and educational skills. In his books *Dynamic Alignment of Imagery* and *Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance* suggest ways in which alignment or posture can be improved through imagery and developed kinaesthetic awareness.

It is the role of the teachers to encourage their students to have a more critical approach regarding the use of mirrors, not focusing only on the form itself but allowing themselves to experience the movement from inside. Focusing on the form can cause problems related to the discussion earlier in this chapter, where opinions about the way the body looks like may block students from fully engaging into dance and pursuing pleasure from it or an understanding of moving primarily from the kinaesthetic sense instead.

The fact that in the Professional Dance Schools in Greece the focus is mainly on the form of the movement may narrow the development of a dancer and, furthermore, that of a dance teacher. This development should be more holistic, not only focusing on the development of the technical skills and the way a movement looks like, but also taking into consideration the development of the 'Kinaesthetic awareness' that focuses on 'how the movement feels like'(Chaplin, 2002, p.17) :

How does gravity influence your movements? [...] What is the difference in sensation between making large slow circles with your arms and making tiny ones? [...] What is the range of an isolated part of your body? [...] Can you feel the cohesiveness of the whole body moving with the intense focus, all parts collectively contributing? When is your leg really straight? [...] The answers to these questions are not found in words but in one's body, in the awareness of the experience itself. (Chaplin, 2000, pp. 16-17)

Unfortunately, there is a lack of techniques that would be useful for students' development of kinaesthetic awareness within the professional dance training curriculum in Greece<sup>7</sup>. Having a deep awareness of the feeling of each movement, encourages a better understanding of the way a movement connects with the previous or the next one, of the way this movement feels in relation to the rest of the body, the space around and the others. Developing such awareness

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<sup>7</sup>Such techniques are *Alexander*, which promotes general wellbeing by increasing students' awareness of themselves as well as *Feldenkrais*, which aims at 'helping people unlearn bad physical habits and return to a balanced state of rest and poise in which the body is well-aligned' Gray, John (1990) *Your guide to the Alexander technique* (1st U.S. ed.). New York: St. Martin's Press. pp. 14–20. ISBN 0312064942.

can be a helpful tool for the better understanding of the form of the movement. It can, furthermore, be useful for dance students who are introduced to Improvisation either for the first time or not, and becoming helpful for the expansion of their movement repertoire.

## **Chapter 2 – Examining the Greek Institutional dance through the lens of John Britton’s physical theatre training ‘ Self- With- Others’**

In this chapter I will try to address the areas which I consider problematic within dance training in Greece. These are related to particular approaches to teaching as well as the attitude towards Improvisation and its contribution to the holistic development of dance students. After having trained with Britton, as part of my MA Ensemble Physical Theatre course, I have concluded that there are some principles underpinning his training which would be helpful if integrated into the dance training in Greece, principles which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. In order to give a better understanding of the impact of Britton’s training in my work, I found it important to start this chapter by giving a brief description of Britton’s training and his influences.

### **2.1 A brief description of ‘Self – With - Others’ and its principles**

Performance training may concern the communicative relationship of performers to audience. However, there are some training approaches that focus on the relationship between the performers within an ensemble<sup>8</sup>. There are several practitioners who are concerned with the development of ensembles, aiming at their performers’ sharing a common training. To give a

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<sup>8</sup>For more information about defining ‘ensemble’ see Britton (2013), *Encountering ensemble*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, pp.3-48

few examples, Jacques Copeau (1879 – 1949), apart from his professional company, established a school aimed at developing ensembles and training young actors, who did not preferably have a conventional training before.

Another example could be Richard Boleslavsky (1919- 1977), who established the American Laboratory Theatre to introduce Stanislavsky's working methods to America who stated that: 'In order to get the most harmonious results, a group should be trained collectively' (Boleslavsky cited in Sharon Marie, 1998, p.37). NicolásNúñez<sup>9</sup>, a significant figure in the development of approaches to developing ensembles within institutions in Mexico also identifies the relationship between performers as central to his training:

For (learning to be a performer) to take place, the work must be done in a group; this gives forth the possibility of collective confrontation and contribution to individual development. (Nunez, 1996, pp. 65-6)

Constantin Stanislavski (1863 –1938) and Copeau also developed the idea of training ensembles further by relocating and training their companies in rural areas. They considered retreat to the country quite beneficial to the process of building ensembles<sup>10</sup>:

Working in the comparative isolation [...] proved beneficial. The new company lived as a community. As there were no servants, they had to keep the place clean and fend for themselves. (Benedetti, 1999, p.69)

Britton has developed his training through extended periods of practical research with ensembles, in a number of countries, for the last twenty years. His approach to training also

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<sup>9</sup>NicolásNúñez is the founder and Director of the *Taller de Investigación Teatral* (Theatre Research Workshop [TRW]) in 1975. From 1980 to 1981, he worked alongside Grotowski on projects in Mexico and Poland (Theatre of Sources), and in 1985 he coordinated a further project with Grotowski in Mexico. He has written the *Anthropocosmic Theatre* which traces his researches with Grotowski and Strasberg, at the Old Vic in London, and in Nahuatlán and Tibetan theatre.

<sup>10</sup> Britton does also organize residential workshops in rural areas around the world, as an attempt to move the ensemble away from the distractions of urban life, encouraging performers to 'drop ingrained habits and find new ways of coexisting' (Britton, 2013, p.287).

places its primary focus on relationships between performers. Ensemble training, according to him,

has an intention more fundamental than the acquisition of technique; it promotes the development of shared sensibility, enhanced sensitivity, common vocabulary, collective understanding and even, shared ethics. (Britton, 2013, p.274)

He names his training 'Self -With -Others' as it offers participants interlocking ways of thinking about themselves in relationship to others as his interest in working with ensembles for twenty years became 'a systematic search for approaches to training that would help performers experience and communicate a sense of ensemble'<sup>11</sup> (Britton, 2013, p.314). He supports the idea that,

if one can learn to be open to and with a fellow performer, one can learn to be open to and with an audience. (Britton, 2013, p.280)

His training was developed out of his interest in 'psychophysicality' frequently associated with the work of Stanislavsky, as part of his life-long practical research into the nature and processes of acting. Stanislavsky thus developed a 'psychophysical' approach to Western acting which focused equally on the actor's psychology and physicality applied to textually-based character acting. Phillip Zarrilli<sup>12</sup>, who inspired Britton's work, also labels his work as 'psychophysical' describing his approach as one that,

does not begin with psychology or emotion, but rather with work on (...) preparing the actor's body, mind, sensory awareness/perception, and energy for the expressive work of the actor'. (Zarilli, 2009, p.8)

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<sup>12</sup>Zarilli is known for training actors in an intensive pre-performative processes combining yoga and Asian martial arts—*kalaripayattu* from Kerala, India, and *taiqiauan* Wu style from China. He is also internationally known as a director and performer. In his book *Psychophysical Acting: an intercultural approach after Stanislavski* (2009) London: New York: Routledge, he explores the theory, philosophy, and practice of methods of psychophysical acting.

In his training, Zarrilli also uses some psychophysical exercises drawn from traditional Asian disciplines to introduce participants to a psychophysical paradigm. A psychophysical approach to training encourages a performer to pay attention to the way she experiences her body action in relationship to the thinking that underpins this action.

Britton defines psychophysicality as 'an integrated view of mind and body, thought and action' (Britton, 2013, p.315), a perception that the human organism 'recognizes the holistic interrelationship of processes of the mind and actions of the body' (Britton, 2013, p.283) which emerged from his interest on the 'European Laboratory' approach to theatre.

There are many other practitioners around the world who have developed their own approach to training performers, from whom Britton got his influence, both in terms of theory, regarding approaches to teaching, as well as in practice, by adapting some exercises and Improvisation tasks in his training. The ideas of practitioners such as Zarrilli, who has been mentioned before, as well as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Grotowski, Chaikin and Barba have significantly influenced his understanding. Al Wunder<sup>13</sup>, an Australian-based teacher of movement and Improvisation, with whom Britton trained and worked in Australia, seems to have had great influence on Britton's work and the development of his training. Wunder has developed a form of 'Improvised Movement Theatre' in which there is a wide range of instruction offered covering all the performing arts using Improvisation as the primary source of discovery and development. Paraphrasing Wunder, this improvised approach fosters an experiential way of learning, suggesting that everyone should have the opportunity to perform, not just the professionals; that is why he calls it 'The Theatre of The Ordinary' (Wunder, 2006). Wunder has also influenced Britton in terms of his approach to teaching and providing positive feedback, which will be

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the relationship between training performers and these two psychologists, see Britton, J. 'The Pursuit of Pleasure', *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*, Vol.1, No.1 (2010): 36-54.



discussed in more detail later in this thesis. His experience with Wunder's work was supplemented by encounters with the writings of psychologists Maslow and Csikszentmihalyi<sup>14</sup>. 'It is at the meeting point of European 'laboratory' psychophysicality and American dance improvisation that I locate 'Self-With-Others' (Britton, 2013, p 315).

Britton considers 'Self-With-Others' a foundational training addressed to a wide variety of performers: dancers, acrobats, actors, clowns, musicians, circus performers, improvisors, as the principles on which it is based are intended to be applicable to all performance, not just particular performances in particular art-forms. Similar to Al Wunder, Britton's workshops are not addressed only to professional performers but are open to any participant who is willing to have this experience. As Britton suggests, 'the training is not about how to perform this or that, but about how to perform'(Britton 2013, p 315). It is a foundational training, a 'cross art form, interdisciplinary, pre- expressive training<sup>15</sup> that encourages the efficient and appropriate use of the bodymind<sup>16</sup> in relationship to others' (Britton, personal interview. 16 November 2012). As he points out, 'a subtle and responsive bodymind can serve any style of performance' (Britton, 2013, p.316) and furthermore, be more effective while working with others.

Another leading figure in the field of theatre and an important theatre director who has significantly influenced Britton is Jerzy Grotowski(1933-1999). In his book *Towards the Poor Theatre*, first published in 1968, he promoted the idea of a theatre in which the fundamental

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<sup>14</sup>For more on the relationship between training performers and these two psychologists, see Britton, J. 'The Pursuit of Pleasure', *Theatre Dance and Performance Training*, Vol.1, No.1 (2010): 36-54.

<sup>15</sup>'The level of organisation of a performer's body which deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is, with how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectators attention, is the pre-expressive level' ( Barba, Eugenio and Nicola Savarese. *The Secret Art of the Performer: A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*. London; New York: Routledge, 1991, p.188)

<sup>16</sup> The term 'bodymind' is used in different meditation traditions to differentiate this perspective from ones that suggest a dualistic understanding of the mind and the body. Shapiro (1990) suggests that there is no separation between what is happening in our minds and what is happening in our bodies; relatively we do not exist separate to the body in which we have our existence.[...] For as much as our bodies manifest our conscious thoughts and feelings, so too they manifest the unconscious energies which underlie our every action.[...] The bodymind matrix reflects psychological and somatic harmony: the body is simply a gross manifestation of the subtlety of the mind. Britton suggests "The term bodymind is used to describe the totality of a performer's organism as a holistic, interdependent system.(Britton, 2013, p.316)

concern was the work of the actor with the audience, not the sets, costumes, lighting or special effects:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. (Grotowski , 1968, p.19)

In his view these were just trappings and, while they may enhance the experience of theatre, were unnecessary to the central core, the meaning that theatre should generate. He developed methods of training that could help actors confront their personal blocks and could remain flexible enough for actors to continue using them even as their personal obstacles changed, shifted, or returned. For this, the heart of his training was 'via negativa'<sup>17</sup>, that is, 'not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks' (Grotowski, 1968, p.17). The aim of via negativa is to eradicate blockages in the journey through what he considered to be the heart of the actor's process: 'stimulations, impulses and reactions' (ibid, 1968, p.185):

[. . .] one must ask the actor: 'What are the obstacles blocking you on your way towards the total act which must engage all your psycho-physical resources, from the most instinctive to the most rational?' We must find out what it is that hinders him in the way of respiration, movement and—most important of all—human contact. What resistances are there? How can they be eliminated. (Grotowski , 1968, p.209)

As Murray (2003) points out, versions of Grotowski's *via negativa* have been used by other actor trainers and practitioners such as Jacques Lecoq and Phillippe Gaulier.

Britton chooses via negativa to be the heart of his training and a core approach to learning in 'Self-With-Others'. He describes it as 'a process of stripping away, of identifying and dissolving blockages' (Britton, 2013, p.315). Blockages in any action are a manifestation of blockages in

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<sup>17</sup>More information about *via negativa* can be found in Grotowski, J., *Towards a Poor Theatre*, Methuen: London.

thinking that block them from authentic and spontaneous reaction to impulse resulting in the obstruction of the flow (Britton, 2013). Britton encourages trainees to notice distractions which occur while they are training, usually within a structured physical exercise. Then, he suggests that they pay detailed attention to these blockages, reflect and, gradually, find ways to eradicate and dissolve them (these stages will be discussed in detail later in this report). According to Britton, it is a process of,

encouraging trainees to notice the blockages to the flow (between receipt and transmission of energy) , either in habitual physical activity or habitual thought. (Britton, 2007a, p.8)

This allows the trainee, afterwards, to explore and find her own responses to the complex emotions and problems she is experiencing.

‘Self-With-Others’, is a structured principle-based approach to training that includes structured, semi-structured and free Improvisation tasks, where trainees encounter and apply some specific principles which Britton calls ‘attitudinal’ (Britton, 2007a, p.1). They are the foundation of this training and constitute an,

interconnected suite of ‘ways of thinking’ – guides to useful, productive, developmental attitudes to engaging with one’s own training while learning to be open and responsive to others. (Britton, 2013, p.315)

The core principles in ‘Self-With-Others’ are, according to Britton (2013, pp.315 - 323):

- Pursue pleasure
- Have no opinion
- Only pay attention to what you can do something about
- Don’t be helpful
- Know your hierarchy of tasks

- If there is nothing to do, do nothing

Apart from these six main principles, there are some additional ones underpinning the training, described in a booklet published by Britton called 'Principles for Performers'. Britton gives it to people he trains with, and the principles it contains are intended to be light-hearted and humorous, an attitude towards creating a positive environment during his training, which will be discussed later in this report in more detail:

- Exist in the moment only
- Get out of the way (your own way)
- You cannot start at the end
- Today is different
- Tomorrow will be different
- Make mistakes
- Only you can know what you can know

As mentioned earlier, Improvisation is widely used as a training tool for artists and performers in general. Nachmanovich<sup>18</sup> (1990), for instance, considers Improvisation as a master key to creativity (the role of Improvisation within dance training will be also discussed later in this chapter). Before going deeper into Britton's training by describing the standard Improvisation exercises he uses when training performers, I consider it important to mention examples of several other practitioners who use Improvisation tasks as a tool to train actors and performers. Al Wunder, who was mentioned earlier, bases his training in Improvisation, using several

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<sup>18</sup>Stephen Nachmanovitch performs and teaches internationally as an improvisational violinist, and at the intersections of music, dance, theatre, and multimedia arts. He is the author of *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Penguin, 1990). Born in 1950, he studied at Harvard and the University of California, where he earned a Ph.D. in the History of Consciousness for an exploration of William Blake. For more information about his life and work see <http://www.freeplay.com/bio.html> .

improvisation exercises when training performers. There are, moreover, other practitioners who have designed their training around semi-structured Improvisation exercises, encouraging their trainees to work individually, in pairs or groups. In his book *Body voice imagination: a training for the actor*, David Zinder<sup>19</sup> introduces a variety of 'partner exercises' that allow 'creative cooperation' (2002, p.84). His teaching approach does also aim at establishing relationships within an ensemble. He moreover offers a variety of Improvisation exercises in groups and pairs using balls and sticks (e.g. pp. 36 ,57). Michael Chekov according to Zinder 'made extensive use of balls exercises in his warm up sessions with actors' (Zinder, 2002, p.36). Clive Baker in his book *Theatre games: a new approach to drama training*, Methuen Drama (2010, p.73) does also suggest various ball exercises when training actors. Zinder's training also offers a wide variety of exercises that include walking around, accelerating, pausing, and others where voice and speech are integrated.

In 'Self-With-Others' , as discussed earlier, Britton suggests some structured, semi-structured and free Improvisation tasks in which he encourages trainees to apply the principles mentioned above. These are some core exercises that allow trainees to encounter the above principles while engaged in a physical task. The main exercises<sup>20</sup> are:

- The Ball Game
- Pairs Dancing
- Walk/Run/Stop
- Scored and free Improvisation
- The continual lift sequence

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<sup>19</sup> David Ziner is an Israel born and based director and acting teacher. He was deeply influenced by the work of Eugenio Barba and Joseph Chaikin and, the work he did with all of these mentors formed the basis for the development of his own unique system of actor training: Image Work Training.

<sup>20</sup>Detailed description for each of them can be found in : 'Self-With-Others' in Encountering Ensemble; Britton, J. (2013 :330-349) as well as in <http://ensemblephysicaltheatre.wordpress.com/>

These are standard exercises that can be used in their basic form as well as in many different variations. By revisiting the same exercise the trainee can 'notice how she has changed, how she is developing and where significant blockages remain' (Britton, 2013, p.21). The Ball Game<sup>21</sup> is one of the core exercises with which Britton usually starts his training, while he uses juggling balls and wooden sticks in pairs or group work during his training. Examples of such exercises and the way I chose to adapt them in my teaching can be found in the Appendix of this thesis.

## **2.2 Teaching approaches**

### **Positive feedback**

In the field of education in general there are examples of teaching approaches that encourage students to search and find what they like and what they are good at. Robinson (1995, p.18), Dearing (1994) and Gardner (1999, p.159) all share the same view that education should help equip young people with the knowledge of *how* to learn and understand their own personal journey into finding what ultimately they are good at doing.

The methodology and the approach that each teacher chooses to follow seems to play an important role in the field of education. Murray commenting on *how* Lecoq taught and his relationship with students says that,

the ability of any student to learn is as much to do with the effectiveness of the form or methodology of the teaching, as it is to do with how interesting or relevant the content appears to be (Murray, 2003, p.44).

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<sup>21</sup>Detailed description and videos about the Ball Game and its variations can be found in : Britton, J. 2013, Encountering ensemble, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama. p.330 as well as in <http://ensemblephysicaltheatre.wordpress.com/>

What has been of significant importance during my training with Britton and which inspired me as a teacher, was the fact that it is based on providing a positive learning environment that allows students to grow. He encourages an environment of joy and laughter in class, which allows trainees to be at their ease within an environment where they work because they want to:

It's fun that makes students want to come back for more. The idea that there is 'more' is crucial, for fun soon pales into tedium, leaving an important hunger for something deeper and more nutritious. (Britton, 2007b, p.6)

As a support to creating a permissive atmosphere comes the fact that Britton always encourages 'positive feedback' during his training, a philosophy drawn from his training with Al Wunder, one of the people who has influenced John the most. As a teacher of Improvisation, Wunder creates a teaching environment in which, when you give feedback to students, you only emphasize the positive elements. According to Wunder, always giving positive feedback not only helped to alleviate negative judgment, it also 'became a very powerful learning tool' (Wunder, 2006 p.42). His theory and the incorporation of it within his practice came from his experience of Gestalt therapy. He supports that,

the imposition of judgment over oneself can slow down and even stop the intuitive creative process. Introducing a style of critique where people talk about a single event or ongoing happening they found enjoyable helps to alleviate a negative state of mind. At any one moment there will be things that we can both like and dislike in our performance. Focusing our feedback on what is going right rather than what is going wrong forces the negative judge that sits on one shoulder to take a back seat to the positive voice on the other. (Wunder, 2006, p.42)

Warren Burt who also trained with Wunder says:

At the end (of each training), people sit down and tell the other members of the seminar what they enjoyed doing. They can't make any negative comments. Negativity is entirely forbidden. You can only make positive comments. 'What did you like about that thing? Even if you felt terrible, find one thing you like and talk about that' and then the audience actually has to feedback but they can only make positive comments too. ( interview with Warren Burt by Nina Sofo , 26 June 2011, Full interview available: <http://www.warrenburt.com/storage/Nina-Sofo-July2011Improvisation.pdf> )

There are various exercises where Britton encourages trainees to give positive feedback to each other . For example, when trainees work in pairs, one dancing and the other watching (then swapping roles) trainees are encouraged to reflect on their work or their partner's work. Britton encourages students to provide only positive feedback; three things they liked in their dance or/and three things they liked in their partner's dance. This positive feedback,

is predicted on a requirement that reflection – personal and shared – is based on an analysis of the details of what actually took place rather than being based on what the reflector feels 'ought' to have happened. (Britton, 2007a, p.5)

The training focuses on finding positive things in what actually happened, in the reality of the exercise, not what ought to have happened or what one would have preferred to do or see her partner doing and this, 'develops into a profound sense of personal acceptance' (Britton, 2007a, p.5). He moreover suggests that one should accept what exists and seek for ways to develop it, rather than working from the basis that his or her work would be better if they were someone else, in another place, under different circumstances (Britton, 2007a).

According to Britton, considering this process as a developmental pedagogy ,

growth will come through an individual or an ensemble allowing their areas of strength to flourish and that development within areas of weakness will be enabled by the self-confidence intrinsic to knowing what your strengths are. (Britton , 2007a, p.6)

'Y', a graduate from a Professional Dance School in Greece and an MA trainee with Britton says about positive feedback:

Up until that time, I was always focusing mainly on what I was *not* doing, on what I *don't* have, what is missing, not what *there is* in what I am doing. When I started paying attention to the good things of what I was doing and started developing from that point on, it altered my thinking way. It was a revelation for me. According to John, we already know the things we are missing, what we would like to improve, what we are not very good at, at least most people do. What we do not, however, focus on is our positive things, the things we already have. (Y, personal interview. 30 May 2013)



'N', a student who worked with me during my attempt to integrate Britton's training within my Contemporary dance teaching says about positive feedback:

At the end of the exercise, when we had to say three things we liked about the performance of our partner and three things we liked in our performance I remember that it was easier to find three good things to say about her, but it was almost impossible to find three things I liked about what I did. I would only think of what I did not like [...] when my partner gave me her positive feedback, I was surprised as, most of the things she said were things I had not even noticed about what I did. It made me feel good.(N, personal interview. 26 November 2013)

'X', who also trained with Britton in his workshops in Greece and the UK was also inspired by this aspect of providing positive feedback decided to adapt it to her teaching :

I have a better approach to what is right and wrong. I now chose to say 'You don't need to do this' or 'what if you tried something else?' I tend to give more positive feedback rather than point out what is wrong. I encourage my students to find what they like in what they are doing and they seem to enjoy their lessons more. (X, personal interview. 14 May 2013)

### **The Pleasure Principle**

Apart from the positive feedback, it is important to mention that the heart of Britton's training and the main principle infusing his training is the Pursuit of Pleasure:

I have found that approaching learning through the lens of pleasure-seeking, provides valuable and transformatory perspectives on the educational process'. (Britton , 2007b, p.2)

He moreover adds:

I want students to put the pursuit of pleasure at the heart of their engagement with education [...] it is not about a student doing what they want, but about a student finding a pleasurable way of engaging with what their education requires of them. The demands of the task come first, pleasure is to be found within the doing. (Britton, 2007b, p.5)

He encourages trainees to find what gives them pleasure within the task they are doing. It is the trainee who gives life to the task so it is her responsibility to find pleasure in it. The task itself is not alive without the attention of the trainee:

I base the entire training on the requirement for the trainee to identify active pleasure in her work. It is not about doing what you like but about finding what you like in what the task requires of you. This is a way of asking the trainee to take responsibility for her own work – she is working because it gives her pleasure, not because she is being told to. It is also the mechanism that keeps the trainee wanting to keep returning to training. She trains because she enjoys training. (Britton, *The Ball Game 2*, p.2)

We cannot wake up one day and say, 'Ok, today I will enjoy what I do'. It is a continuous process of pursuing pleasure in everything we do, by deciding on what within a task we want to focus on. Trainees are not asked to get their task 'right' but simply to 'do it' and discover what it is in it that gives them pleasure. Of course, not every task is easy, nor are we always able to find pleasure easily within a task.

Britton suggests that :

This does not imply that a trainee should avoid difficult or unpleasant tasks. Quite the reverse- it requires that they construct a positive, pleasure-based rationale for undertaking tasks they might otherwise seek to avoid. It requires that they find the strength to be vulnerable, to endure pain, to take emotional risk by structuring their engagement with the task in a way that they expect to yield tangible pleasure-based outcomes. Even if, on balance, a trainee does not 'enjoy' a task, it is necessary for them to be able to identify what within the task was pleasurable for them. For that nugget of identifiable pleasure within a painful task can be the key to the performer being able to repeat the engagement with a thing they fear, or to engage with other weaknesses and vulnerabilities. (Britton, 2007c, p.5)

Connecting this aspect of Britton's training with dance training in Greece, I suggest that dance teachers should be trained in order to provide positive feedback and encourage their students to focus on the positive aspects of their training. This can be a healthier approach and be beneficial both for teachers and learners. Of course this will result from their own training to be teachers in the Further Professional Dance Schools as, training within an environment where

the pursuit of pleasure is the heart of the training, the future teachers will want to transfer this to their students and provide them with a healthy teaching environment based on the development of each one's strengths. Focusing on the negative aspects of a training or weaknesses might prevent students from pursuing pleasure in what they are doing, and might be a source of forming opinions about whether they are appropriate for a career in dance. Students should be encouraged to search and find what it is that they like in what they are doing and furthermore, find ways to develop it. Dance students do, sometimes, not act freely in fear of being 'wrong', and this can be quite intense in students who are trained within a specific rigid technique (e.g. Ballet), which will be discussed later in this chapter, when referring to 'breaking the form' and the role of Improvisation within dance training.

In his article on 'The Pleasure Principle' Britton suggests that,

It is useful to create an environment where the ideas of 'right' and 'wrong' are redundant; one where mistakes are welcomed and the trainee feels that they are uncritically accepted and respected for who they are and for what they bring to work. (Britton, 2010, p.38)

Providing uncritical acceptance and allowing space for errors is about encouraging students to take risks, allowing them to fail and thus make discoveries which would never have been possible in an atmosphere that outlawed flexibility and intellectual uncertainty.

Lecoq suggests that,

error is not just acceptable, it is necessary for the continuation of life, providing it is not too great [...] a small error is essential for enhancing existence. Without error there is no movement. (2000, pp.20-22)

Britton very often uses the phrase 'You are Perfect' with his trainees. He says that 'the perfect version of each one of us is present here today'. He often says during the training:

You are perfect like a tree is perfect, like a bird is perfect; but that doesn't stop a bird from growing, or a tree from growing, and just because you are perfect, it shouldn't stop you from growing.

Each one is exactly who she is but that is the start of one's journey towards self-development; it is not the end of it. According to Britton,

we cannot grow from what we feel we ought to be, we can only grow from what we are [...]we can only grow healthily from absolute acceptance of who we are. (Britton, The Ball Game 2, p.2)

It is important that dance students be conscious about what they like within the training and what their strengths are. This is the starting point for the future development of the skills in which they are already strong. So dance students in the Further Professional Dance Schools in Greece should learn how to develop a healthy approach to teaching, a pedagogy that reinforces positive stereotypes. Learning dance within an environment of acceptance and positive feedback, a student will find what she likes in what she is doing, which will make her more mature and conscious about her choices. It will, furthermore, help her with her approach to teaching later on, as she will have experienced the idea of pursuing pleasure within her training, and will encourage her students to do so as well.

## **2.3 Improvisation**

### **Paying attention to detail**

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the way Improvisation is used as a training tool for various kinds of performers, as well as the fact that it does exist as an art form for training dancers and dance students in Greece but is not given great value. Improvisation is often used by many

dance teachers and practitioners, in various countries, encouraging students to explore new ways of moving their bodies, free them from habitual movement patterns, allow them to pay attention to what the movement *feels* like, and, moreover, stimulate ideas for the creation of new movement. For example, Steve Paxton<sup>22</sup>, an American choreographer, who was fascinated with the exploration of the human body developed a dance form known as Contact Improvisation:

The improvised dance form is based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia. The body, in order to open to these sensations, learns to release excess muscular tension and abandon a certain quality of wilfulness to experience the natural flow of movement. (early definition by Steve Paxton and others, 1970s, from *Contact Quarterly Vol. 5:1, Fall 1979*)

'Self-With-Others', as described earlier, is a training form that consists of some exercises of various kinds of Improvisation (free , semi-structured or structured) that work as tools for the development of both structured and non-structured expressivity. Britton places Improvisation at the heart of his training:

Psychophysicality represents my assumptions about the workings of the human organism, via negativa is my core approach to learning and Improvisation is the predominant form through which the training operates (Britton, 2013, p.315)

After having trained with Britton and attempted to apply some of his training in my Contemporary dance teaching, I suggest that examples of such semi structured exercises could be really useful for those dance students in Greece who are introduced to Improvisation for the first time, or have little experience in it. Such examples can be found in the Appendix of this thesis.

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<sup>22</sup> Paxton was a member of José Limón's company in 1960 and danced for Merce Cunningham from 1961 until 1964. He began his association with other artists of the post-modern movement in New York during the 1960s. He invented *Contact Improvisation*, a form of dance characterized by two or more people moving together in almost constant and spontaneous contact. Since his initial experimentation with the form, Paxton has also investigated solo improvisations and has created set choreography.

In the previous chapter there were examples of dance students who, after having received a technique-based training in Ballet and Contemporary dance, came across various difficulties when dealing with Improvisation for the first time. Some would attempt to retrace movement vocabulary they were familiar with, which would make them feel confident, but which would lead them back to paying attention to the form of the movement:

When improvising, I had in mind that I had to prove something to my teacher. I was trying to create complicated structures with my body, but at the same time having in mind that these movements should not remind ballet forms. I did not know where to focus on. There was always an internal monologue which I was challenged to silence. (X, personal interview. 14 May 2013)

What makes the semi-structured Improvisation tasks that Britton suggests useful for dance students, in this case, is not only the nature of the exercise itself but the fact that Britton encourages his trainees to draw their attention to a specific thing each time:

Through the structuring of attention, the trainee obtains specific outcomes (even if those outcomes are not readily quantifiable). (Britton, 2007d, p.2)

Taking 'Pairs dancing' as an example, a slightly structured improvisation exercise that Britton suggests in his training where:

Two performers move/dance together, usually to music, within structures (or 'scores') I give them. Depending on the details of the score, they work closely with one another, work independently (but 'in relation to') one another, or mainly ignore one another, using each other only as occasional stimulus. (Britton, 2013, p. 26)

Some examples of these 'scores' might be: keeping eye contact or not, maintaining body contact or not, or moving in all levels (low, medium, high). By paying attention to these 'scores' the trainee is given a structure, she knows what she should focus on and is encouraged to return to the score every time she feels she is losing her attention or the meaning of the exercise. This is a nice tool and approach for those dance students in Greece who have learned

how to work within structure that technique based training offers. Examples of such exercises, with specific guidance on what to pay attention to would be quite helpful for the introduction of dance students to Improvisation, starting ideally from a younger age. In that way the dance student is not left alone, she has a precise task to pay attention to so she should not feel lost. The sooner a dance student starts familiarizing herself with different aspects of movement, the easier she will respond to it later on, when dealing with the audition for a Further Professional Dance School or when having Improvisation classes.

'Z', a dance student who had some improvisation experience before, describes the way her perception on improvisation altered after being introduced to such semi-structured Improvisation tasks:

I remember last year during my Contemporary lesson in the private school our teacher asked us to move along the room changing the level and the 'quality' of our movement. I could not understand what she was asking from me to do. I would try to see what the rest of the class was doing, to make sure I am doing the right thing. I did not know how to move. [...] Our teacher was sitting down looking at us, as if she was expecting something from us and I remember being stressed about whether what I was doing was right. I did not want to do it. I did not like improvisation because it made me feel very uncomfortable. [...] This year, when our new teacher introduced us to these new forms of improvisation, it was very different. When we were working in pairs, she asked us to pay attention to a different thing each time. Once she asked us to pay attention on how much tension we put to our hands when we move and play with soft and intense movement. I never had the chance to focus on how much tension my hand needs to move. I only knew that it should be strong to stay in a specific pose in ballet. At that moment I realised what the old teacher meant by the shifts in the 'quality' of the movement. (Z, personal interview. 18 May 2013)

### **Kinaesthetic awareness**

Apart from the fact that paying attention to specific details within a semi-structured Improvisation task works as a helping tool for the students who have learned to work with structure and find it difficult to respond to Improvisation, it also allows them to experience the movement from

'inside', observing the changes that occur in the body and, furthermore, explore their own movement qualities:

Form-training is given rigour structure by the detail of the form itself. If the trainee pays sufficient (and appropriate) attention to the details of the form- how to stand, how to shift from one position to the other, the appropriate qualities of the movement, how to quieten the mind- she or he will encounter her – or himself as the doer of the form. Through that encounter the trainee learns to make more subtle the self she or he meets. (Britton, 2007d, p. 4)

This will offer them a better understanding of the *how* and will help them develop their kinaesthetic awareness, as mentioned in chapter one, encouraging a more 'holistic' development for dancers. Paraphrasing Britton, this exercise, apart from allowing trainees to develop performance relationships with one another, and pay detailed attention to what they are doing while they are doing it, it allows them to share an exploration of details of looking, touching, qualities of movement, responses to music (Britton, 2013).

### **The Principle of Having No Opinion – Approach to errors**

Another aspect of Britton's training that would be useful if applied when teaching Improvisation is that he encourages trainees to be less critical about what is right and what is wrong, a notion that is often cultivated in students who train within rigid Ballet or Contemporary techniques. 'X' says:

Within my ballet training all these years , knowing that this movement is 'right' and this movement is 'wrong' was very helpful as it made things very clear to me, I knew what I should do to get things right or what I should avoid which seemed quite helpful. (X, personal interview. 14 May 2013)

When Britton asks his trainees to 'dance' during the improvisation tasks he defines it as 'moving or not moving when music is or isn't playing' (Britton interviewed in person. 16th



November 2012). This might challenge the students' attitude towards the definition of 'dance'. When improvising, these students might find it difficult to 'break' the forms they have so far learned, and explore their own movement qualities, thinking that what they might 'create' might not be acceptable. Here is an example of the 'Ball Game' where Britton encourages students to alter their perception of right and wrong:

I usually introduce it through encouraging people, in the Ball Game, not to worry, telling them: 'You can't get anything wrong'. This already is a challenge for some people who enter training wanting to succeed, who, assuming that catching is a success and dropping a failure, place all their attention on catching the bag – often at the expense of allowing the energy to flow. Much training and education (and much social pressure) tries to divide actions into 'success and failure', so even the idea that one can get nothing wrong can be a significant challenge. However once that idea is embedded into the training I might introduce the idea that just as there is no such thing as wrong, so there is no such thing as right. All that there is, is the doing of the task. This works for a while, but still people tend to feel, reasonably enough, that it is better to catch than to drop, for it makes the flow of energy via the Ball smoother. There is a spectrum of possible responses, Sometimes NOT catching a ball is the more appropriate response if, by doing so, the performer manages to deal with two other balls, it all depends on the context and how each specific action fits into the hierarchy of tasks. The binary right/wrong approach is not useful in finding the appropriate reaction to each impulse. Thus the principle might develop to become: ' Though there is neither right nor wrong in the moment that an action happens, there are more and less appropriate responses which later one might want to reflect on. (Britton, The Ball Game 4, p.6)

Not having in mind the two extremes of right and wrong, but retaining the option of later reflecting on what is more or less appropriate, according to what is more appropriate and less appropriate each time, lessens the tendency of a trainee feeling that she has failed. Furthermore, feeling that what she has achieved is not utterly right, gives her space for further development. In the field of dance, where ideas of 'perfectionism' exist, Improvisation exercises, such as the one described above, in which a dance student deals with an Improvisation task knowing that she will not be criticized for having done something wrong, might offer her a healthier approach to errors and allow her to be less critical about herself :

This dismissing of the concept of right or wrong also offers us a strategy to tackle the utterly destructive paradigms of 'perfectionism'. Somehow some still consider 'perfectionism' a virtue – a torturing virtue, but a virtue nonetheless. Performers strive for

the 'perfect' performance – which is, by definition, impossible – and then they have to live with the twin disappointments either of failure ('I know a lot of it was great but I got that move wrong....") or fear ('I did so well, what if I never achieve that again, or what if I set my sights too low....'). If we can free trainees from a striving for rightness, we might be able to replace it with a faith in their own capacity to sculpt any moment towards an appropriate outcome. (Britton, 2007a, p.6)

Accepting the fact that dropping the ball or being hit by the ball on the face is not wrong, but rather a consequence of not having paid appropriate attention is a step to facing reality within the Game, and this reality is what we look for.

'N', another student of mine, who participated in the Contemporary class where I attempted to integrate some elements of Britton's training, comments that:

During the Ball Game, I realized that I would get quite stressed when trying to catch all the balls that were coming to me or when a ball hit my face . I was also feeling angry every time I missed a ball. When our teacher started saying that 'Dropping the ball is fine' it took me long to realize that I should not feel bad for it and that it was, indeed, ok to drop it. Feeling that it is ok if I miss a couple of balls made me feel less 'guilty' and less stressed, It was only a game. (N, personal interview. 26 November 2013)

I recall memories from a reformulation of the Ball Game during my training in 'Self-With-Others' that has been of great significance to me, as it helped my approach to 'errors' and acceptance of the reality of the moment. During our Ball Game in the circle, Britton paused for a while to describe the various ways we usually respond when a ball comes to us. Someone can catch it consciously because she saw it coming, or might catch it unconsciously due to an automatic reaction of the body. He could miss the ball as a result of a late response to the impulse, or might catch someone else's ball, usually the one standing next to them , again as a late response to an impulse. After that, Britton asked us to play the ball game again, focusing our attention on which of the above happened each time.

What made this version of the Game more interesting is that Britton encouraged us to say a number aloud (1 for the first, 2 for the second etc.) at the moment each action happens. So,

when someone catches or drops the ball she has to say the corresponding number aloud which, the way I experienced it, had two functions: the first was that, by saying the number aloud she became more aware of the action and of the cause of her response (maybe she was not paying much attention at that moment). She could reflect on it later. Secondly, by saying the number that represents each response aloud, the response is shared with the rest of the group. This sharing allows a trainee to understand that dropping (which might feel as something 'wrong') happens to everyone, which makes them less critical about self.

It was very interesting to observe the new shape the exercise took. Everyone's levels of attention seemed enormously high. This moment was a true revelation; it made me notice, very clearly, the way I respond and immediately reflect on it. By saying the number aloud, I realised clearly and accepted what I was doing, even if it was not what I was intending to do (catch the ball). I could even go one step further by forgiving myself for the way I responded. Furthermore, by naming the number of the response I felt that I was giving all four equal value, as if nothing was right and nothing was wrong, it was just what was happening at that moment. Last but not least, it was a chance to admit in front of the others that 'I am here and yes, I dropped the ball', or 'I stole someone else's ball' accepting the reality of now, listening to others doing the same, always allowing a smile on our face, letting go of any guilt or expectation about what had to be done. Then, it was easier to focus on choosing how I would like to respond, or what the exercise asks from me. This version of the ball game uncovered, and made very clear the relationship between impulse and reaction to me, as well as the whole process of notice – accept – reflect – change.

Having in mind what is wrong and what is right when Improvising can be related to Britton's discussion on 'Having opinions'. For dance students, forming opinions about body image, as mentioned in chapter one, can be a great source of blockage within the learning process. These opinions work as mental obstacles that may distract a dance student from focusing in order to

achieve her goals. Through Britton's training, the performers are encouraged to have no opinion about themselves, about how they look like now, how they looked like in the past, or how they would like to be. In other words, he suggests that the trainee should be present here, now:

Be attentive to and present within, each moment [...] to work with what is actually happening rather than indulging in opinions about what ought to be happening. (Britton 2013, p.14)

A principle such as 'Have no opinion' can threaten the fundamental ways of working a dance student or a dancer, who has worked with rigid Ballet or Contemporary technique, has developed. Taking into consideration what Radel discussed earlier in this report, mirrors can be 'a potent tool which can play a pivotal role in affecting how each dancer feels about his or her body image' (Radel, 2012, p.10). They can be a great source of both physical and mental distractions, if used in a wrong way. Mirrors can be a means through which students may judge what they are doing, at the same time as they are doing it, forming opinions about whether they are doing things right or wrong, how they look, or even, how they would like to look like. Paraphrasing Britton, a mirror can be a distraction in two ways, one is that, when a dancer turns her head or eyes to look at herself in the mirror, this automatically alters the position of her head and neck, so in a sense, it disconnects her eyes and head from the performance. What she sees in the mirror is not what she intended to see, as her position has altered. Secondly, when a performer sees herself through the mirror, she sees herself from outside rather than experiencing it from the inside (Britton, personal interview. 16 November 2012).

Dance teachers should encourage their students to pay attention to the way she experiences herself here and now, and focus on the task itself, without unnecessary opinions about the way she or her teachers expect her to look.

Putting everything into account, although Improvisation is examined in the audition for the entrance in Further Professional Dance Schools in Greece and is, moreover, a part of the

curriculum, no great value is given to it and the way it could benefit dance students. There are few private schools that offer Improvisation lessons that could prepare students for these exams, and Improvisation lessons are often neglected within the Further Professional Dance schools, or often replaced by Ballet and Contemporary technique lessons. As a result, students who have worked within rigid Ballet and Contemporary technique, focusing on the form of the movement, face some difficulties when encountering Improvisation tasks where they are asked to 'break' these forms. Improvisation, that works as a helpful tool for the deliberation of the movement of dancers and their holistic development, should become of more importance both in the private schools as well as in the further Professional dance schools. Some exercises that Britton uses to train ensembles can be quite helpful for the introduction of students to Improvisation. Although the tasks are simple, encouraging students to pay attention to the detail of the exercise becomes a kind of structure that creates a more secure environment, giving them something to pay attention to when feeling lost. Moreover, paying attention awakens their kinaesthetic awareness, as it allows them to experience the movement from inside. The fact that in some of his exercises Britton encourages students to take risks, not thinking of whether what they do is right or wrong, can create an environment of healthy risk taking which is quite beneficial for students who deal with Improvisation and fear of breaking the 'rules' they have been so far following. This perception of having no opinion about what is right and wrong when Improvising can also lead to better self awareness, where students are less critical about themselves, take risks and explore their own unique movement qualities.

## **Appendix**

This appendix includes a number of exercises that I have drawn on from Britton's training 'Self-With-Others'. I used these exercises during the year 2011-2012 while teaching Contemporary Dance in the non-professional Dance school of the Public Benefit Organization in Kavala, Greece. As a part of my research, this was an attempt to introduce my students to 'Self-With-Others' by integrating introducing some semi-structured Improvisation tasks in a way that would allow them to overcome the difficulties discussed in Chapter One. These improvisation tasks were integrated in the Contemporary lesson, both as part of the students warming up and as separate Improvisation tasks. Fortunately, in this school I had the freedom to design my own curriculum and the permission to introduce new elements in the training, so I would dedicate almost half an hour of every lesson to Improvisation tasks (the lessons would normally last one hour and a half). I suggest that students be introduced to such semi-structured Improvisation tasks from an early age, so as to minimize the levels of difficulty they might face later on, when dealing with improvisation within a Professional Dance School in Greece.

Here I introduce Improvisation tasks for two different classes, (I name them group A and group B for this report). Due to the fact that this was my second year teaching at this school (I taught the year before my MA training with Britton), I had worked with some of these students before and I was familiar with the age diversity within the groups and the difficulties this might cause.

### **Group A**

**Profile:** This class consisted of ten students at the beginning of the year, but gradually grew into a class of fourteen till the end of the academic year. All fourteen students were girls, between nine and twelve years and for most of them, apart from two, this was their first time in a

Contemporary class. Their main training was Ballet, and some of them were having street dance that year.

The aim of this lesson was to introduce students to the primary principles of Contemporary dance ('Limon' and 'Safety-release' technique), but at the same time, familiarize them with Improvisation through several semi-structured tasks in a way that would allow them to experience movement from the inside, develop their kinesthetic and spatial awareness, and finally, establish relationship with other dance students by working in pairs. As most students in this class were not familiar with improvisation, I chose some pair exercises that Britton uses in 'Self-With-Others', where he encourages them to pay attention to the details of specific tasks while working with a partner, which, as mentioned in chapter two, will be a helpful tool for those who are not familiar with Improvisation and fear the less structured work.

### **Warm up Improvisation activities:**

During the first ten-fifteen minutes of the lesson, I often use exercises that allows students to bring their attention to the room while warming up their bodies, by moving in various levels and speed. Here are two examples:

The first exercise is a structured Improvisation, where students are asked to move from one side of the room to the other, creating two or three aisles. I give students specific scores to pay attention to each time, for example, move only in the medium level, let their left hand lead their movement, focus their vision on a specific spot and try not to break it, try to move as silently as possible etc. By having a specific score to pay attention to students become more aware of *how* they move and what initiates their movement, and have something to go back to every time they feel lost, or do not know what to do next. Such an exercise allows them to pay attention to the way their body works and can develop their kinesthetic awareness.

The second is a game using balls that Britton uses in 'Self-with-Others'. I will give a description of the exercise the way Britton describes it and afterwards introduce some elements I chose to add in it.

All students walk in the room in random patterns and, as Britton continuously says during this exercise,

they are always looking for empty spaces, or the spaces which will be empty by the time they reach them. (Britton, The Ball Game 5, p. 2)

At some point I introduce a ball and the game continues with passing a ball from one to another, with music being vivid and quite fast:

Two sorts of flow are happening simultaneously – flow of the ensemble round and through the room and flow of the bag between members of the ensemble. (Britton, The Ball Game 5, p.2)

Students are encouraged to pay attention to where they are in the room, where others are (taking care not to crash with someone), but at the same time, paying attention to where the ball is all the time. This exercise allows them to bring their attention to themselves, to the group and to the room while, at the same time, warming up both their body. As Britton suggests, the Ball Game 'is about a quantum of communication passing from one performer to another' (Britton, The Ball Game 5, p.2). Of course sometimes the ball might be dropped, so it is their responsibility to pick it up and continue the game.

Britton suggests a variation of this game, in which everyone has to fall to the floor and stand up again whenever they see or hear the ball hitting the floor 'without interrupting the ongoing flow of the balls' (Britton, The Ball Game 5, p.2) , which trains them to pay attention and respond



fast to stimulus . At this point, I add a small detail that would allow them to explore their movement. I ask them to pay attention to fall as silently as possible on the ground, or explore different ways of standing up each time, using one hand, both hands, or no hands at all. Having a task to pay attention to in this exercise allows students to place their attention to something specific, while, at the same time, explore the way their body moves and make decisions on how to organize their body in order to fall more silently. It does also keep them alert and awakens all their senses. One might either see the ball touching the floor, might hear it, might predict it from the reaction of another student.

#### **Other Improvisation tasks:**

I chose Britton's exercise 'Pairs Dancing'<sup>23</sup>. Such exercises in pairs give the opportunity to the students to 'explore and manipulate the possibilities of their performative relationship with another person' (Britton, 2013, p.317).

The variation I chose to use with this group is one in which students are encouraged to dance in pairs, placing their focus on a specific score (it actually gives them a series of scores to choose from) and connect with their senses:

There are three places you can look - your partner's eyes, your partner's body or your own body. Pay attention to detailed and deliberate use of your eyes. Really see the thing you are looking at. Allow your dance to follow what you are looking at.

Later I introduce touch:

You can touch your partner's body, your own body or your own face. Be aware of the difference between touching and being touched.

Looking and touching are later combined:

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<sup>23</sup>More information about this exercise can be found in 'Self-With-Others' in Encountering Ensemble; Britton, J. (due for publication 2013 :334-335)

You have three places you can look (partner's eyes, partner's body, your own body) and three places you can touch (partner's body, your own body or your own face). Pay attention to the difference various combinations make to your experience of the relationship between you and your partner. What is the experience of touching your own stomach while looking into your partner's eyes? Or looking at your own feet while touching your partner's spine?(Britton,2013,p. 345)

Once again here, the existence of a specific scores trains students to focus on a specific task while exploring their own movement, instead of searching for what they should pay attention to. In this way the attention of the student will not be on 'what am I doing now' or 'what should I do next', which will allow the body to relax and produce spontaneous movement. The engagement of the senses is also important for the awakening of the kinesthetic awareness of students.

Britton suggests that:

This score asks you to pay attention to the detail of your own activity while, simultaneously, paying *appropriate* attention to your partner. The different roles demand different attention. The still performer need pay no heed to the mover - she can choose to start moving whenever she wants. However as soon as she has done so, she must pay attention to her motionless partner, and must keep moving until, by her partner's decision, she is instructed to stop.(Britton, 2013, pp. 343-344)

Pair work also prepares students to become members of larger groups. For Britton pair work serves three functions for the development of ensembles:

It enables ensemble members to spend time in a detailed performance relationship with one another, [...] it is a way of rehearsing specific elements of a performance vocabulary, as they share an exploration of details of looking, touching, qualities of movement, response to music [...]allowing this rehearsal to take place” and “ It encourages specific attention to complex situations [...] require performers to pay attention to what they are doing, while they actually doing it. (Britton, 2013, pp.334-335)

Another pair exercise I often did with this specific class was the Ball Game<sup>24</sup> in pairs, taken from 'Self-With-Others' core training. This can also appear in variations but I chose to use 'Right Side/Left Side' catching (Britton, 2013, p.334) as well as 'Catching in rhythm' (Britton, 2013, p.333). In 'Right Side/Left Side' I retain the structure that Britton describes in his training:

Stand about 3 meters from your partner, facing one another. A ball is thrown from your left hand to your partner's right hand (i.e. without passing across your body). A second ball is passed from your right hand to their left hand. The balls flow back and forth between you, one on one side of the body, one on the other. The balls are entirely unrelated to each other. If one ball is dropped, the other continues to flow. Do not force the balls into rhythm with each other or hold them back to make it simpler (for yourself or your partner). Do not 'help' your partner by holding on to one ball as she or he struggles to retrieve the other. The left and right sides of your body work independently. Sometimes the two balls are in rhythm, sometimes out of rhythm. The two impulses are experienced and responded to independently. You are neither competing nor cooperating - you are simply allowing the balls to flow independently. Paying attention to your spine helps identify the separation of left and right side. (Britton, 2013, pp.332-333)

'Catching in rhythm' is also an interesting version of this exercise as it engages music and the coordination of the body with rhythm. In this version, students try to pass a single ball,

focusing on making it possible for your partner to catch the ball within the rhythm. You are not throwing in rhythm, but enabling your partner to catch in rhythm. At the point of throwing, you 'imagine forward' to the moment of catching, and throw accordingly. You try to catch precisely at a moment you identify in the rhythm - choosing a precise moment to pluck the ball from the air, rather than simply 'catching it'. (Britton, 2013, p.333)

I consider this exercise very important as, apart from developing the coordination in the use of both sides, it introduces the idea of allowing the energy to flow, not stopping the game if one drops a ball, but find ways to quickly deal with it, while maintaining the flow by continuing

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<sup>24</sup>Detailed description and videos about the Ball Game and its variations can be found in :Britton, J. (2013), *Encountering ensemble*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama as well as in <http://ensemblephysicaltheatre.wordpress.com/> .

playing with the other hand. It is vital that students not focus on the ball that is on the floor, thinking that they failed to catch it, or that they are not good enough for this game, but rather continue playing, and feel free to enjoy the joyful atmosphere that these exercise creates, without forming opinions.

## **Group B**

**Profile:** This class consisted of eleven students two of which were boys. Their age was from thirteen to sixteen years. Some of them had some Improvisation in the past but the majority of the class was not familiar with Improvisation. However, their main training was Ballet, and some of them were having Street Dance lessons. I decided to introduce them to Britton's Ball Game, some, semi-structured Improvisation tasks in pairs and in larger groups. As my main focus for this group was to encourage them to take creative risks that would enable them to let go of fear of not knowing what to do in Improvisation, I tried to apply exercises from 'Self-With-Others' that would encourage that. In this group, apart from paying attention to a detail, that is a specific score, I also tried to encourage them to develop their kinesthetic and spatial awareness, make use of their senses and learn how to give and receive positive feedback.

## **Warm up Improvisation activities**

As I described earlier for Group A, during the first ten to fifteen minutes of the lesson, I often use exercises that allow them to bring their attention in the class, while warming up their bodies by moving in various levels and speeds. In addition to the exercises used for that group, I chose

Britton's 'Run/Walk/Stop'<sup>25</sup> exercise which starts with students walking in the room, 'filling the empty spaces or the places that will be empty by the time they arrive' (Britton, 2013, p.28), as described in the warm up activity with the passing of the ball for A Group :

Members of the ensemble do not connect on an interpersonal level, neither eye contact nor physical contact is necessary. They travel through the room, each allowing her or his energy to be seen and responded to by others. The intention is simply to walk. I ask that they notice and relax unnecessary tensions in the body - demonstrative swinging of the arms and noisy use of the feet are the most common. I am not asking that they 'walk neutrally', (that's neither possible nor desirable), but to eliminate from the act of walking everything unnecessary. (Britton, 2013, p.336)

Once the ensemble has mastered this task, Britton introduces two other states, that of stopping and running:

When I say 'run' everyone breaks into an easy run.Nothing else changes. The primary tasks remains to balance the room and to move efficiently through the space without 'demonstrating' running. When I say 'stop', everyone completes their step and becomes motionless. Nothing changes. Your attention projects forward to the empty spaces. Calmly and efficiently do everything needed to be stopped in space. Be present, in relationship with others. (Britton, 2013, p.337)

There is a development of this exercise which strengthens communication within the ensemble:

I ask each performer to notice when she has an impulse to alter the energy state. If she does, she should respond immediately, changing from walking to stopping, running to walking. If one person changes, everyone, immediately and with neither anticipation nor memory, does the same. Each individual starts to become aware of when the energy of the exercise is 'live' and when it is not (which is when they experience the impulse to change it). This is not an exercise in 'everyone deciding at the same time'. A decision is made by an individual and immediately accepted by all. (Britton, 2013, p.337)

As Britton suggests:

Each individual starts to become aware of when the exercise is 'live' and when it is not [...]This is not an exercise in 'everyone deciding at the same time'. A decision is made by an individual and immediately accepted by all. (Britton, 2013, p.337)

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<sup>25</sup> More information about this exercise can be found in 'Self-With-Others' in Encountering Ensemble; Britton, J. (due for publication 2013 :28)

### **Other Improvisation tasks:**

Group B worked with the Ball Game in the circle, an exercise that Britton often uses to start his training:

Standing in a circle, evenly spaced, we throw balls to one another in random patterns. Each throw is precise and intended to be easily caught, reaching its destination at roughly chest-height. We do not need to make eye-contact before we throw, as everyone should be ready to catch a ball - or several balls simultaneously. Sometimes there are a lot of balls, sometimes only one. Sometimes the balls are in pairs of the same colour, usually they are single. Unless we are training the integration of speech with action, we do not talk. We learn to pay attention. (Britton, 2013, p.330)

The students of this group worked with single balls (up to 6), or with single balls including a pair of balls of the same color that, if split, should continue in the game as two single balls. If, by chance they come together again during the game (trying not to force them come together but letting it happen, if it happens), they would continue to exist as a pair again.

The Ball Game is a structured Improvisation which encloses all the principles of Britton's training. I attempted to encourage students not to have notions of failure when dropping or missing a ball as it is 'not a learning-to-catch exercise' (Britton, 2013, p.330). I asked them to be present, pay attention and respond appropriately:

The Ball Game is 'impulse-response' stripped of content and aesthetic. It makes 'impulse-response' concrete, so we can learn to manipulate and develop our ability to respond, spontaneously and appropriately, to what's being asked of us. Although it's a very physical activity, it is fundamentally a mental training. (Britton, 2013, p.331)

Britton sometimes encourages trainees to pay attention to a specific task, which enables them to place their focus on something specific, rather than wasting attention on searching what they should pay attention to:

Usually I will set a focus for the ball game on each specific occasion. I might ask the group to pay attention to the rise and fall of the energy as the balls fly. I might ask them

to work specifically on allowing themselves to be calm amid the apparent chaos of multiple flying balls. I might ask them to work with choreographies to rehearse the sequencing of thoughts – for example that they clap before catching, jump, touch the floor and spin after throwing. I might ask them to work with their hands behind their backs to allow them to experience vulnerability and help them realize how little they need to defend themselves from the exercise. (Britton, *The Ball Game 1*, p.1)

By focusing on a specific task, a trainee has the opportunity to pay attention to the details of the form where she ‘encounters ontological, psychophysical and self-revelatory insights’ (Britton, 2007a, p. 5). She, furthermore, has the possibility to observe, in deep detail and accuracy, the relationship between impulse and reaction:

In the bag exercise, the trainee is asked to observe the mechanics of self through directing attention to the details of his or her encounter with the moment-by-moment tasks that constitute the exercise; to making more subtle the use of the bodymind in facilitating the easeful flow of impulse into reaction. As each action comprises myriad details, in paying attention to each task he or she gets better at concentrating, at pursuing multiple objectives simultaneously, at co-coordinating body/hand/eye interactions, at engaging peripheral vision, at remembering and enacting sequences of tasks, at identifying and eliminating wasteful and habitual physical movements, at balancing attention-to-self with attention-to-others, at using different parts of the body separately but simultaneously. Trainees learn to accept the risk of being hit by a bag and to accept personal responsibility that, if they are hit, it is because their attention was insufficient. Crucially the trainee also improves his or her capacity to think clearly and with precision, focusing available psychic energy on the easeful execution task. (Britton, 2007a, pp. 7-8)

This observation may include the way each trainee receives an impulse, the way she responds to it, or what may intervene or distract her:

She observes how her mind interjects unnecessary thoughts, fears, judgments into this most simple of processes- impulse, response, impulse, response(...)she sees how she responds to multiple impulses emerging simultaneously – is her thinking clear and sequential or does she succumb immediately to panic? (Britton, *The Ball Game 2*, p.1)

The Ball Game works as a mirror for the trainee to observe herself and the several changes that occur in her by paying concrete attention to them:

It requires, discipline, calm and absolute self-acceptance, for in it the performer encounters the totality of the material she has to work with as she grows towards being the artist she aspires to be – her own activated bodymind. (Britton, *The Ball Game 1*, p.1)

Another semi structured Improvisation task I used with this group was one that Britton often does during his training and it is mainly about providing and receiving positive feedback, a very important aspect in the learning procedure, as discussed in chapter two. The exercise is simple. Students form pairs. One student sits down and the other performs/dances for the other for one or two minutes. Students have the chance to experiment with their own movement style, find what they like doing and experience a different perspective of what 'dance' is (as discussed earlier in this report where Britton defines dance as 'moving or not moving when music is or isn't playing'. The student who performs can dance the way she likes. As some students might not be confident enough to produce their own movement and, most of the times, end up creating ballet poses and postures, I encourage them to place their attention to something specific, the way they do when training in pairs while having a specific score to pay attention (i.e. pay attention on which part of the body they move less and try to bring it to the dance). At the end of each 'dance' the student who was observing has to say three things she or he liked in their performance or in their pair's performance. This is a quite representative example of an exercise that encourages positive feedback in terms of finding what we like in something we do, what we like in what other people do, but also learn how to receive positive feedback and be less critical about self.

Another Improvisation exercise that worked really well with the students' taking creative risks was one inspired from a scene during our MA final performance. The scene was called the 'Chair Sequence', where we were asked to explore various ways of being in relationship to a chair. When planning this group's Improvisation exercises, I wanted them to explore the



different functions of an object that is used in a specific way during everyday life. So I decided to place a chair in the middle of the room, giving a simple instruction: 'What can someone do with a chair?' As the exercise did not have a specific structure, I can describe my experience while observing the specific group responding to it. (I assume that the same exercise can apply with various other objects):

At first most students were hesitant. I did not want to model the exercise as I did not want them to form opinions about what they should not do, what is 'right or wrong'. I simply reminded them that 'there is no wrong in this exercise'. Some students took the initiative to approach the chair, one at a time, finding alternative ways on sitting on it, by it, lay under it, stand on it. Some would create a pose related to it, some would ignore it and others would place it upside down and imitate its shape. Soon the students got more involved to it, exploring other possibilities. There were some who moved the chair in the room, others would place it on the class barre or they would support it on the edge of the window. There was one student who decided to take the chair outside the classroom and continue without it, until someone else decided to bring it back. As this was an exercise that we did more than once during the year, it was interesting to observe the shape it would take, starting always from the beginning, developing faster and faster each time. After a certain point, more than one student approached the chair, forming relationships with each other, leaving when feeling that they no longer had something to offer to this image, coming back when they felt they could contribute.

It is what Britton often says about larger group Improvisations:

Sometimes I tell performers they can leave the improvisation and become audience. It is a significant moment of choice for a performer to decide there is nothing for her to do, that the improvisation will be fine without her. She can, of course, always rejoin, when she experiences an impulse she wants to respond to. Leaving and re-joining requires clarity of decision. (Britton, 2013, p.339)

## **Conclusion**

After having trained with Britton and 'Self-With-Others' as part of my MA Ensemble Physical Theatre training, I realized that some teaching approaches that are based on the core principles that underpin it, if applied within Contemporary dance teaching, would be beneficial both for students in private schools, as well as students in Further professional dance schools in Greece who graduate as Dance Teachers.

What I was primarily concerned about were the teaching approaches in dance training in my country. It seems that little importance is given to providing students with samples of pedagogical approaches to dance teaching that would facilitate them beyond the accomplishment of technical proficiency and which would allow them to create positive learning environments for their future students. A key aspect of Britton's teaching approach that addresses this issue is the fact that he places fun, joy and pleasure at the heart of his training. He encourages the creation of a permissive atmosphere where students are allowed to perceive learning as a trip to self exploration with less self criticism. The aspect of providing positive feedback can be quite beneficial in the field of dance training, as students focusing on their weaknesses can make it harder for them to develop. Starting from a point where one acknowledges her strengths and what she likes in what she is doing, will allow a healthier approach to learning to develop.

The second issue was the fact that, in dance training in Greece much focus is given to the dancers' development of ballet and contemporary technical skills, which allows them to achieve high standards, but narrows their development, not enabling them to experience a deeper understanding of the movement that is, the development of their kinesthetic awareness. For this

reason, some students, who have worked within such rigid ballet and Contemporary techniques for years, struggle when faced with an Improvisation task and find difficulty in breaking the 'form'. In this case, Britton's training offers some semi-structured Improvisation exercises, where he encourages students to pay attention to detail, that is specific scores. Students are given a structure that works as a guiding tool every time they get lost and do not know what to do. Moreover, paying attention to these scores allows dance students to become conscious of what they are doing, experience movement from inside and develop in a more holistic way. Another teaching approach that can be quite beneficial when teaching improvisation, is the fact that Britton encourages trainees to take creative risks, not fearing that what they do might be wrong. The notion of not fearing the idea of being wrong can disrupt the fundamental ways of working that a dance student or a dancer, who has worked with rigid ballet or contemporary technique, will have developed.

As a part of my research, I attempted to integrate these teaching aspects as well as some Improvisation tasks within my teaching Contemporary dance at the Dance school of the public Benefit Organization of the city of Kavala, during the year 2011-2012. Some examples of the adaptation of Britton's exercises are found in the Appendix, as an attempt to Introduce Improvisation into my Contemporary dance lesson. Not everything I did during my training with Britton can be applied within dance training, but so far, I have chosen to investigate and comment on what has, in my opinion, been particularly valuable within Britton's work. This thesis is not just an outcome of research, but an open door for further investigation of other practitioners' approaches to teaching and a consideration of material that would also benefit dance teaching in Greece and in general.

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