

***DANCE PRACTICE: WHERE, HOW AND WHO***  
**By Avatâra Ayuso**

**WHAT IS A DANCE PRACTICE?**

The world we live in creates extraordinary resources for us to be aware of what happens around the world in any field: from science and politics, to social issues, art, and of course, dance. It is impossible to live isolated from the circumstances that surround us. In this sense, the life experiences we have, shape our personalities but also our understanding of the world and therefore, our personal artistic practice. I cannot define my dance practice without taking into consideration the very first big trip my parents took me on: to the Sahara desert. This first encounter with the unknown shaped who I have become because from that moment on I was never afraid of meeting others, those different to me. I was nine years old.

Dance is for me the space I use to interact with the world and learn from differences. Dance is what I call a 7th Sense: the ability to understand reality from a different perspective and interact with it using special tools (the body and its dynamics).

And if this is how I understand Dance in a broader context, what is a “dance practice” for me?: I see any “dance practice” as a personal reflection on your specific approach to the world using the body in motion. The context where you establish your own questions, interests, and passions: What is relevant for you? what do you see? What do you want to share with others? What is your vision of the body in the times you live in?

**PRACTICE vs TECHNIQUE**

But dance practice is not the same as technique.

For me the idea of technique is something more static than practice. Techniques evolve, certainly, but not as quickly as dance practice might do.

There are several dance techniques that have defined me as a dancer: classical ballet, Argentinean tango, flamenco, contemporary dance and Bharatanatyam (the Indian Classical Dance) BUT these are not my practice: these are tools that have allowed me to think and reflect on how I am as a contemporary artist. I use them all to enrich my practice (and many more I’m discovering on the way such as Chinese Classical Dance or Sabar dance from Senegal) because, as the choreographer Dana Caspersen says, “All knowledge that the body acquires increases its intelligence”

For me then, technique relates to particular skills for a specific dance style. Dance practice, on the other hand, is a way of thinking that evolves and changes depending on where, how and with who you interact.

## HOW DO I CONSTRUCT MY DANCE PRACTICE?

This last point “where, how, who” is essential in the way I construct my practice.

Since very early on in my career I started to do “Cultural Dance Research” a kind of basic anthropological study on contemporary dance in different countries. I travel to enrich my practice, learn from different cultural contexts and artists, and to question my dance thinking: After each research some of my movement principles become defined, some get changed and some get forgotten. It is a never ending process.

I have visited Japan, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cuba, Azerbaijan and other European countries to understand their approach towards contemporary dance. In some countries, there is hardly any knowledge of their dance traditions when building their contemporary dance scene, whereas in others, like on the African continent, there is.

For example, my understanding of what African dance is has been channelled by my experience of contemporary dance artists in countries like Morocco, Senegal and Burkina Faso. The artists I met have a deep knowledge of traditional African dances and music, and their contemporary approach is filtered by it BUT those contemporary dance artists don't feel the obligation to represent “Africa” in their practices: Africa and its traditions are embedded in who they are, there is no need to over-emphasise that.

*I want to share with you some of the findings of my last research in Burkina Faso in 2016, supported by International Artists Development Fund AEC&British Council. I'll read 3 paragraphs on the article I published through One Dance UK to give you my perspective on what I experienced:*

*“During my stay in Burkina Faso (which coincided with the Triennale Danse l'Afrique Danse, the biggest African contemporary dance festival) I observed rehearsals, taught class, attended conferences, gave workshops, and started a new duet with Souleyman Ladji (a Burkinabe dancer). This gave me a good perspective on how they work in Burkina: They have a different pace when creating (no “express” choreography, they invest time in creating!); they enjoy pure physicality as much as conceptual work; and above all, they feel the freedom to be contemporary in the way they want to be: They don't play to Exoticism or Africanism. How liberating to experience this!*

*A curious difference: there are far more male dancers than female dancers and some initiatives have been launched to engage women in dance. The opposite to our case in Europe, but also a paradox when you see that the women are the ones that have shaped the contemporary dance landscape in the whole of Africa.*

*After three weeks, I came back inspired, challenged, with a bit of extra French! and eager to follow up on the development of contemporary dance not only in Burkina but in the whole of Africa. I feel privileged to have experienced this new wave of contemporary dance: their proposals are brave and unique. The dance sector in Europe will soon realise: Africa is waking up, they are telling their stories their own way”*

So, coming back to how I construct my dance practice:

Each culture and the dance sector in each country has taught me something I would not have been aware of, if I hadn't been in touch with them in the countries where those techniques developed originally.

And this thought brings me to an important point:

The cultural environment where you see, learn or experience a specific dance technique will define your understanding of that technique, and therefore of who you are as an artist.

This does not mean at all that flamenco, for example, cannot be learnt in the UK or

Bharatanatyam in Germany. It just means that if one wants to get deeper into a specific technique (in order to enrich one's own personal practice) one has to understand the cultural roots and the context where it developed.

### **HOW DO I SHARE MY PRACTICE?**

In the construction of my dance practice, it is essential for me to share my findings with others. I could not construct a physical discourse without having tested my ideas first on other bodies, with other minds and in different cultural contexts. Teaching, discussing, dancing, taking class, travelling, choreographing or writing articles all help me to get deeper into my personal dance investigation.

### **PRINCIPLES OF MY PRACTICE**

*What is then specific to my dance practice? To what I have defined above as "a personal reflection on your specific approach to the world using the body in motion"?*

I have found six points that at this precise moment in my career are relevant to me as a dance artist:

- 1) Freedom to use whatever technique and/or approach that is relevant for the choreography I'm developing (I don't stick to one dance technique)
- 2) Collaboration with artists from different cultures: trying to avoid the Eurocentric perspective
- 3) A strong physicality based on seven movement principles: isolation, dissociation, versatility, precision, tension/release, proprioception and expression.
- 4) Creative collaboration with the dancers: I do not give the movement to them, I develop movement for and with the dancers
- 5) Theoretical research on the subject I'm working on
- 6) The female body as a non-apologetic entity on stage

This is where I am now.

### **END**

I want to finish with two quotes that I use as a motor and inspiration to develop my dance practice. They are very important for me: I use them to lead my heart, my head and in my guts. The first one is from the choreographer William Forsythe. He says: "There are no rules when it comes to creating in dance" The second one comes from Thomas Sankara (leader of Burkina Faso in the 80s): "You cannot carry out fundamental change without a certain amount of madness. It comes from nonconformity, the courage to invent the future. It took the madmen of yesterday for us to be able to act with extreme clarity today. I want to be one of those madmen. [...] We must dare to invent the future."

Thank you very much  
Avatâra Ayuso

*This talk formed part of a panel discussion under the frame of Dissecting Principles, held in London 19th June 2017. This text is as yet unpublished. No unauthorise use is permitted.*

© Avatâra Ayuso 2017

