

IN Y/OUR SHOES

The Role of Empathy in Coaching Dancers

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Table of Contents:

Introduction

Declaration of gender inclusive language

1. Scrutinizing the term *empathy*

1.1 Empathy

1.1.1 Emotional-Affective empathy

1.1.2 Cognitive empathy

1.1.3 Compassionate empathy

1.1.4 Kinesthetic-Somatic empathy

1.2 Tactical Empathy and misunderstandings

2. Rehearsal director; job description of a dance coach

2.1 An overview of multitasking

2.1.1 Training dancers- the daily routine of morning class

2.1.2 Setting a piece

2.1.3 Assisting a choreographer

2.1.4 Office work and how commercial apprenticeship is a requirement

2.2 Empathy and the rehearsal director

2.2.1 Sensitive resilience and fragile strength

3. Expanding our toolbox

3.1 Reiterating

3.2 Eye-opening Pedagogy

3.2.1 Growth mindset

3.2.2 Words matter

3.2.3 Rephrasing examples

3.3 Other feedback methods

3.3.1 Critical response process

3.4 Reflecting

3.4.1 Big hearts and healthy boundaries

3.4.2 Imagining a glass wall

3.4. FBI's tactics

4. Summary

5. Sources and literature

6. Statement of authorship

Ilana Werner und Henrietta Horn

Henrietta Horn coaches Ilana Werner in the role of *The Chosen One*, in *Mary Wigman's Sacre du Printemps*.
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Introduction

The years 2020/21 were undisputedly very difficult ones. Needless to mention, the corona pandemic has taken its toll on all of us and everything. Here however, I would like to start with one positive aspect of having been locked up, deprived of our daily life and professions, and stripped of all distractions. Somehow thoughts slowed down. And without even noticing, we suddenly had the time to give thought to things we cannot explain. We were given the time to see the non-obvious. So, it was one day in August 2020, when one of my best friends came to Lucerne to have lunch with me. Always being my most honest critic and biggest supporter at the same time, he came to watch a rehearsal and performance of the *Tanz Luzerner Theater*, where I had just taken on the job of the rehearsal director for the very first time. He is the one, who has helped me unpack, understand, and clarify my own thinking and my natural skills, including those I was not aware of, and most importantly, he helped me verbalize them. I knew for a long time that I wanted to write about the profession of a rehearsal director, but I had not yet found the central concept I intended to focus on. While walking along the river Reuss and discussing the fascinating task, yet difficult process of conveying dance, directing a rehearsal and assisting a choreographer, he suddenly stopped and with contagious enthusiasm said:” You are like an FBI hostage negotiator! You have to get into the dancer`s and choreographer`s head, and even more onerous, into their bodies!” I was initially skeptical of the comparison between an FBI hostage negotiator and a dance teacher or rehearsal director because let`s be clear, the world of the FBI and the world of dance have as much to do with one another as rocket science and upholstery. But speaking about it further, I realized that there is indeed one thing that is strikingly similar. The critical role of empathy; And the catastrophic consequences of a lack of it. That day in August, the discussion with my best friend brought this central concept to the fore. I will obviously not attempt to write about empathy like a philosopher or psychologist does, nor will I try to establish some high frequency link between the FBI and dance. But maybe us *dance coaches* - which is how I will refer to dance teachers and rehearsal directors in this paper - can benefit from the hard-learned lessons of this seemingly unrelated profession. In both professions the most important (and at times most difficult) task, is to feel and understand the physical and emotional state of the person you are interacting with, see their perspective, and to *build a bridge* from our recommendations to their mind and body, and especially communicate in a way that resonates for them, to have an effect. Whether the negotiator has to build that bridge

across a relationship that is confrontational from the start, or us dance coaches have to coach and guide sensitive yet strong high-performing artist, through multi-faceted, numerous and subtle layers of dance, the creation of that very bridge is similarly important. Without it, any sent message will fail to move the person receiving it. It is an unexplored topic in dance, and surely hard to put in words. This essay is an attempt to verbalize a seemingly natural and automatic relation between the coach and the dancer, and the amount of empathy it takes to create this bridge when coaching dancers. The link to negotiators work is interesting, since in terms of *building that bridge*, they have scientific research and years of experience backing it up. This is how my essay is structured; Firstly, I will shed a light on the term empathy, then I will scrutinize the different tasks of rehearsal directors, and in the end, I will look at some tools and possible ways to avoid pitfalls when devoting one's energy and soul to the most vulnerable and beautiful of artists, the dancers.

Gender Inclusiveness:

This paper is written gender inclusively, meaning, *the dancer* in singular form, is followed by any pronoun in plural form. E.g., the dancer will face (his or her) ➡ *their* challenges. I made this decision consciously for the fluidity of reading, and no type of gender was treated and/or thought of unequally throughout the creation and revision of this paper.

1. Scrutinizing the Term *Empathy*

1.1 Empathy

The most common mistake we encounter when speaking about empathy, is the lack of distinction between empathy and sympathy. Sympathy is a conscious, cognitive (choice of the heart), we like something, or we do not, and we can change our opinion at any given time. Empathy has nothing to do with liking or agreeing with something or someone. It is not an ability we can switch on and off, we either have it, or we do not. It is the ability to *put ourselves into someone else's shoes*, mind and/or body, without necessarily agreeing, or ever having been in the same situation.

“Empathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.”
(Krznarik 2014)

It is a soft skill. Unlike any hard skill one can cognitively learn, scientists say, you cannot learn empathy, or from the other perspective, teach it. Once made aware of that already existing ability though, we can enhance it and most importantly, learn about the different forms of empathy and develop an understanding, to ultimately use it to teach, support, and draw the best out of the dancer or any other person you are intending to *move/teach*. To me, there is no other more fascinating and unexplored process in the world of dance, than building that bridge between us, the dance coaches and them, the dancer, be it in a class or in rehearsal, and it has everything to do with empathy. While numerous forms of empathy exist, we will take a closer look at three that are most relevant to dance coaches and illuminate tactical empathy in more detail. Contrary to popular opinion, tactical empathy need not be manipulative nor is it in any way dishonest towards the dancer. It emerges from wanting the best for the dancer, the performance and ultimately the audience, whilst guiding, coaching, and advising the dancer. The goal is to do our job as a dance coach as well as possible, to support the dancers' success, even if we must react and make decisions that do not necessarily reflect part of our own experiences.

1.1.1 Emotional-Affective Empathy

Have you ever watched a program on TV where they graphically show someone breaking an arm or suffering from any other severe accident? Jackass maybe? Did your own arm hurt

immediately, or did watching it make you feel you sick to your stomach instantly? Or have you cried at a wedding of someone you deeply love? Emotional and/or affective empathy is having responses and feelings that are pulling on your heartstrings. We directly feel the emotions the other person is feeling. We feel their pain or joy. One could think this type of empathy has nothing to do with the brain, but it is in fact, clearly neurological. Scientists speak a lot about the newly discovered *mirror neurons* when speaking about emotional empathy. They say emotional empathy is deeply rooted in those mirror neurons. Observing animals and how they respond to each other and interact with one another is the source those long-standing studies are based on. While animals watch each other, their brain neurons fire in a certain way, and it makes them relate to what they see, physically and emotionally. The same neurons fire in the human brain. It is an intimate and strong bond when two people connect that way. Although this type of empathy is very beneficial to professions that require coaching, management, and HR responsibilities, the close interpersonal relationship it forms, might cause pitfalls.

“One downside of emotional empathy occurs when people lack the ability to manage their own distressing emotions. It can be seen in the psychological exhaustion that leads to burnout.” (Goleman 2021)

We might easily feel overwhelmed when *taking it all to heart* too much. Daniel Goleman further states:

“Emotional empathy is when you feel physically along with the other person, as though their emotions were contagious.” (Goleman 2021)

In teaching and coaching it is one of the most important empathetic skills, and at the same time critical if unaware of possible inappropriate and overpowering misinterpretations that can occur for both, the sender, and the receiver.

1.1.2 Cognitive Empathy

When I was a dancer in Munich, I had an accident on stage where I ripped my hamstrings off my sit bone. I was forced to stay home for 10 months, and eventually it took an entire year until I was back performing. The injury was so dire, I recall nearly fainting. Just imagine losing the tendons and muscles at the back of your thigh, that connect your knee with your bum. And now imagine walking. I was taken to the hospital immediately and was in the care

of a surgeon on duty I had never met before, while desperately trying to reach my doctor, the one treating me for over ten years, on the phone. The surgeon on duty only stayed with me for five minutes. He looked at the magnetic resonance images (MRI), then at my leg, then at my file, paused for what felt like an eternity, (or what it probably felt like for people in the middle ages having their head in a mechanical guillotine, waiting for the cutter to fall and behead them), and finally said:” Well, that is by far the worst leg injury I have seen in sports in years, and to be honest, you will surely never, ever dance again. I suggest you go see your regular sports doctor and discuss surgery so that hopefully you will be able to walk normally again one day. Best of luck.” He left me feeling hot and cold, white like a wall, and obviously so panic-stricken, the nurse was seriously concerned about my circulation.

Now imagine though, he would have entered the room, looked at my leg and the MRI, fell to the ground sobbing, declaring how utterly sorry he is, feeling pain at the back of his leg too, starting to limp as well and have a complete meltdown. That would have been... very, very awkward, and not helpful in any way.

“Cognitive empathy responds to a problem with brain power.” Daniel Goleman states, “and it is simply knowing, understanding and comprehending on an intellectual level.” (Goleman 2021)

That doctor was doing his job, giving his medical opinion, in an utterly insensitive manner, no doubt, but he was neither my friend nor a family member, and most definitely not a lover or appreciator of dance. He would probably deliver life threatening diagnoses in a more human way, or at least I truly hope so, but little did he know that for a dancer to hear it is the end of their career, is just as devastating. In hindsight I am thankful for his beheading delivery of the devastating news because he made me understand the seriousness of my injury, and therefore immediately seek treatment of the *crème de la crème* in hamstring injuries, with no lesser than the team doctor of the FC Bayern and the German national football team, Dr. med. Hans-Wilhelm Müller-Wohlfart.

“Cognitive empathy is the type of empathy that can be a huge asset in circumstances where you need to *get inside another person’s head* or interact with tact and understanding.” (Goleman 2021)

Perspective-taking, as cognitive empathy is also described, is mandatory in negotiations, motivating people and understanding disparate viewpoints, and a key element in the

profession of a hostage negotiator. The problem is “It is a bit like mixing apples with oranges”, Daniel Goleman (2021) says, “because to truly understand a person’s feelings, don’t you in some sense have to be able to feel them yourself?” Chris Voss, the FBI hostage negotiator I referred to in my introduction, and author of the book *Never Split the Difference*, speaks about this mixing of apples and oranges in his fourth chapter called, *The FBI gets emotional*. He compares old school negotiation methods with newly discovered, much more successful ones. Their (old) core assumption was that the emotional brain could be overcome through a more rational, joint problem-solving mindset, with cognitive empathy. It all changed when Amos Tversky an economist, and Daniel Kahneman a psychologist and Nobel Prize winner, proved, that man is an irrational beast. They made clear that negotiating with emotionally driven beings, which all humans are, requires methods that are laser-focused on the animal, emotional, and irrational, before even thinking of applying ratio. (Voss 2016)

It was the opening bell for the FBI, a completely brain-powered and tight structured crowd, to understand that neglecting emotions when trying to create that bridge and move a person, is “like trying to make an omelet without first knowing how to crack an egg. They became experts in empathy.” (Voss 2016)

1.1.3 Compassionate Empathy

“Feelings of the heart and thoughts of the brain are not opposites. In fact, they’re intricately connected.” (Goleman 2021)

Compassionate empathy seems like the absolute ideal form of empathy, the one we want to strive for, combining both, the felt senses and intellectual situation of the other person *without losing your center*. Goleman further states:

“Compassionate Empathy is taking the middle ground and using your emotional intelligence to effectively respond to the situation *with loving detachment*.” (Goleman 2021)

For dance coaches it could be an interesting approach, since as Goleman writes, not all situations are the same and require different tools/approaches, and it seems that compassionate empathy is a middle way that is rational, yet not ice cold. It could be a good answer to questions like “*is too much feeling inappropriate? Too little, too hurtful?*”

1.1.4 Kinesthetic – Somatic Empathy

Susan Leigh Foster (2011) wrote about choreographing empathy, and kinesthetic empathy. Watching a dance performance moves us/is moving, whether we want it to be or not. When circus artists take a deep and dangerous leap into another artist's arms, we hold our breath. When we watch a dance couple holding hands on stage, we automatically think of a past or present lover, or we create stories in our heads that the couple could be experiencing. Kinesthetic empathy is based on the same principles as emotional empathy. Our mirror neurons. Watching dancers on stage in a live performance, seeing a physical movement, an expression without words, triggers the same neurons to fire, as when watching something emotionally strong or painful, like a loved one getting married or someone breaking an arm. But while emotional empathy is based on human and neurological responses, for dance coaches it goes further than that. I argue that you can only be a dance coach if you really know how it physically feels to e.g., stretch a foot, lift a leg, or do a pirouette. We need to be masters of these physical sensations, in order to convey them. Dance is a kinesthetic art form. To do it and to watch it. But even more to teach it! Dance coaches, or any ex-dancers, do not watch a performance like a regular audience does, because we are more than just moved by what we are seeing. We feel what the dancer is feeling themselves, in the very moment it is happening, especially when watching the dancers we've been coaching, and it can even be tiring at times. Dance coaches could also be referred to as a first audiences, and it is up to us to anticipate what the performance audience could be seeing and feeling and deciding, if it is in accordance with the choreographer's and the dancer's artistic vision, or not. To take that distance in a rehearsal, as if watching the piece for the first time, requires a great deal of perspective-taking, cognitively and emotionally. Kinesthetic-empathy-anticipated, so to speak.

1.2 Tactical Empathy and Misunderstandings

The centerpiece of the ex-FBI negotiator Criss Voss's book, *Never Split the Difference* (2016), is tactical empathy. He writes that negotiation is at the heart of all collaborations. And he meant really all collaborations in life. That made me think. In arts we never speak about negotiations when collaborating with each other, and the term *negotiation* itself, reminds us of the business world, lawyers and contractors, deals and money making. But not coaching dancers. Not teaching and guiding a dancer, or artists in general. Making art and/or taking care of art. Even when just mentioning tactical empathy in the arts, people cringe, and it is rather frowned upon, but where does that come from? Why do we think that using

tactical empathy, which is nothing else than using tools/tactics that benefit the dancer best, might be dishonest? It is not dishonest in any way. The resistance may lay in the fear of appearing unauthentic. We want to be straight forward, honest, open in giving and receiving, pure and transparent, just as we were as dancers, and to think of *tactics* does not fit in the list above. Elke Antwerp, an expert in cognitive empathy and leadership wrote a book in German called *Empathie mit Köpfchen* (2019), (*empathy with brains, and why it requires brains and not heart to motivate people.*) She writes, although the differentiation between *heart people* and *brain people* may suggest that one is purely emotional while the other is strictly rational, that viewpoint is literally and also effectively not correct. The opposite of rational is not emotional, but irrational. And the opposite of emotional is emotionless, unlike layman may state, rational. This suggests strongly that one cannot separate the two, when guiding, leading, teaching or coaching a person.

In situations when everything is going well, meaning, successful and healthy dancers, happy choreographers, enough time on our hands, overall good atmosphere, it is rather easy to create that bridge in a coaching situation. But I believe we should take the time to reflect and learn about empathy for situations of conflict. Empathy is always important, but it is in situations when that bridge between coach and dancer is in peril somehow, be it for interpersonal reasons, physical or emotional, stress, fear, and worry, where a more systematic appreciation and knowledge of empathy is key to successfully manage the situation. At times of conflict, the non-existence of that bridge, not primarily between the coach and the dancer, but between a step, a correction, a difficult task, tiredness, -and the dancer, is where empathy is key. And tactical empathy therefore too. It is for moments of disagreement that we need to be conscious of and trained in empathy and know about certain tools. Chris Voss writes about different tactics regarding those situations, some that I will speak about in my third chapter, when trying to expand our toolbox.

2. Rehearsal Director: Description of a Dance Coach

2.1 An Overview of Multitasking

Now that we have scrutinized the different forms of empathy, and also understood that it is *not about sympathy or a matter of the heart*, but a key component of effective, multi-layered

communication, let us pragmatically look at a rehearsal director's daily tasks. You will soon understand why I find empathy is a key element of successfully mastering the profession. The job is anything but simple. Next to training, coaching, rehearsing, and accompanying dancers from morning class through all rehearsals, and all the way to and after performances, we also assist choreographers, learn pieces from scratch by video, plan weeks and days ahead, take care of technical procedures, and link the different elements in the theater, including but not limited to, the dancer and the choreographer, the dancer and the director, the direction and the choreographer, the choreographer and the set designer, the costume department and the direction, the administration and the director, the scheduler and the dancers and the direction. It is well known that a rehearsal director is like the many links in a chain that must run smoothly. An intermediate *go to* person, a keeper of schedules and deadlines, an indispensable character who knows the choreography and who is an expert in the art of teaching and conveying dance, and hopefully an expert in communication too. A rehearsal director carries far more responsibilities on their shoulders than is visible to the audience. Those interactions require empathetic skills. We must permanently be in someone else's shoes, anticipate organizational bottle necks, and difficult situations, by proactively guiding the dancer, be it to avoid injuries or unhealthy mind sets or habits. We must provide personal capacity for interhuman relationships and sometimes tensions, and ultimately, solutions. As a young rehearsal director, I went into my new task with utmost enthusiasm, working hard and remembering my principle that made me choose to become a dance coach in the first place, which is: "Dancers deserve the very best platform to train, rehearse, and perform their art, and to receive the best support in any situation."

While I still follow that principle, I have gained a new understanding of the profession, and came to see the complexity of the role of a dance coach that I was not aware of before. Whether the dancer is facing dance technical difficulties or personal difficulties that are hindering the dancer in succeeding at a task, it is up to us to build the bridge between the solution we as the coach might see, and the part in the dancer that is not yet feeling it or seeing it. But it is not only situations of distress that require skills in the building of that bridge, obviously distress obscures the task, but in fact, we are permanently building those bridges, whether we are giving corrections and feedback, or teaching new steps or assisting choreographers. We are setting the foundation day by day, akin to civil engineers, to then reach across to the dancer most effectively, finding a language, and formulate or message in a way that resonates for them. Like mentioned in chapter one when speaking about

kinesthetic-somatic empathy, to be a dance coach is one of the very few professions where it is mandatory that the coach knows exactly what the dance movement feels like physically. Only then, will we be successful in building that bridge. The muscular sensation, the dynamics of movements, the transitions, possible physical pains, including moments of physical and mental fatigue, is information that gets imprinted in a body and can be fully understood only by those who have *been there/danced* themselves. Even when working on a piece the dance coach has never danced themselves, they must be able to intrinsically imagine and feel the movement, and then verbalize, to finally correct/coach the dancer in that movement. I experienced a few pitfalls when I started as a rehearsal director, and would like to argue, that if I would have read this essay beforehand, I might have been in a better position to navigate those situations more skillfully.

I used to say *skills and empathy* is what it takes, but now I would say, *knowledge of different empathetic skills and expertise* is what is needed.

2.1.1 Training Dancers, the Daily Routine of Class

Training and coaching professional dancers is wonderfully rewarding. Whether it be classical ballet dancers or contemporary dancers, their level of technique and artistry is so high, it is a pleasure to choreograph exercises or give corrections and see them respond to them. That said, it also comes with huge responsibility. Professional dancers are high-performing athletes. They depend on the best professional training, with a coach that can provide that. The primary responsibility for a dance coach lies in getting the dancer warm and ready for the day, while simultaneously improving and maintaining their technique. And that happens through and by giving valuable, useful corrections. How to give corrections and feedback is vital, and this is where empathy plays a huge role. It is the bridge. But trying to accomplish all the above, whilst respecting each and everyone's daily form, mood, and personal wishes, can easily feel overwhelming. Making everyone happy in every day's morning training is impossible. Analyzing the current repertoire of the season is mandatory and essential. Is the piece strenuous on stamina, we choose exercises that increase endurance, is the piece hard on thighs like in contemporary pieces, we chose light and uplifting exercises to not increase tension in the thighs etc. But what if several different pieces are rehearsed the same day? Or when not all dancers have the same challenges to face? That is where it becomes tricky. We can also ask how the dancer's daily form is and take it into account and

construct the class according to those two thematic anchor points, make overall compromises hoping it sort of fits everyone, but mostly, we can try to continuously expand our toolbox with new perspectives, insights, and tactics, which will help us help dancers. Clear goals and concepts for the class and at the same time a big amount of flexibility is one of the many divergences a dance coach deals with on a daily basis.

2.1.2 Setting a Piece from Scratch

The process of setting an already existing piece is full of obstacles and full of fun. It is obvious that a rehearsal director needs to know the piece inside out. Counts, steps, transitions, dynamics, stage design, atmosphere of the piece, color and style, and most of the time, not ever having danced that piece yourself. That takes weeks of preparation, studying the piece by video if existent, taking notes, deciphering, reviewing, analyzing, finding your own wording, making a rehearsal plan, reviewing again, reaching goals, and not reaching them, pushing to reach goals, and knowing when to let it go, in the hope that the following week you will achieve, etc. Casting dancers for a piece is another task of a dance coach that happens in collaboration with the artistic direction, and it is essential for a smooth procedure, since it must make sense in terms of distribution and rehearsal time and studio space, and also fulfill the choreographer's vision. Once accomplished the above, you take care of other important and crucial aspects, such as designing the studio with colorful duct tape according to the original set design so that dancers have an idea of how it will feel on stage, keeping costume hazards and costume changes in mind and informing the dancers, preparing props, organizing the days mindfully, respecting dancers' brakes and contractual conditions, and still getting the entire piece ready on time. Studio time is often limited due to other pieces being rehearsed or created simultaneously, and you find yourself *needing elbows* during disposition meetings when the weekly plans are made, to make sure you get enough rehearsal time for *your* dancers and the piece you are responsible for. To plan the following week with many estimates of how much time a section of a piece takes to teach and rehearse, is difficult, and one must never get to fixated on the schedule. To the best of our abilities, we can try to plan ahead, but it is like in any conveying situation, there is a sender and a receiver. Or in big companies, one coach (sender) and sometimes 90 dancers or more (receiver). How fast one can set a piece is a fragile question, but I have never heard of a rehearsal situation where the coach complained about having too much time. It is also vital to find a balance between repeating sections of choreography, and letting some sections go, because we want to avoid

overkill. Over-rehearsing leads to dancers losing creative curiousness and creating problems where there aren't any. Planning rehearsals weeks ahead is mostly a formality. But it's a big and important one, and it gets tricky, as mentioned above, when there are several pieces that need to be rehearsed, lacking studio space, and you find yourself squeezing costume fittings into the schedule too, all during the dancers work time, and in a way that it makes sense to the rehearsal plan.

The joy of seeing a piece come together is great, nonetheless. There are many techniques and approaches of setting a piece, many of which are for the dance coach to discover themselves and develop knowhow.

2.1.3 Assisting Choreographers

A completely different feeling and procedure is assisting a choreographer in a new creation. Once the piece has premiered and the choreographer has left, it is in our hands to rehearse the piece, maintain the quality of the piece and of the dancing, and maintain what the choreographer's artistic vision was. Furthermore, it is highly recommended to keep a close eye on the second and/or third casts, making sure they are fully ready to step in incase of injury of a first cast, and there for provide them with enough time to rehearse too.

You enter the studio with a blank notebook, and in an ideal case, a fresh and blank mind. All you do in the beginning is observe. Sometimes not even knowing or never having met the choreographer up to a few minutes before the first rehearsal, you must immediately take in every move and gesture of the choreographer, actively listen to what they say, start to find a basic structure of their work and the piece, but without asking too many questions. We want to assist, meaning help and accompany the choreographer, not interfere, and ask questions during the choreographer's creative process. Unless they ask. We must be like a sponge, quietly observing the work process in the background, but already starting to take notes in our mind and on paper. It is almost like being back in the studio as a dancer yourself. Expect it is all happening in your mind and you document what you see. Learning steps, counts, artistic vision, style of movement, and discovering a story line if existent. Recording each and every move and color of movement the choreographer is creating. Listening, observing. Assisting a choreographer can be an intimate and touching journey, since you are witnessing a creation of an artwork, diving into their mind, understanding what they want, and feeling their intentions and movements in your own body to such an extent, once the choreographer

leaves and you are left alone with rehearsing the piece, you are simply continuing the work process the choreographer had begun. The piece becomes *your baby too*, and seeing it be performed for the first time is both exciting and nerve wracking. “I hope they succeed,” is the sentence on your mind, not because mistakes cannot happen and not because success is the primary goal, but because you hope the dancers are happy and enjoying their performance, the choreographer’s vision is accomplished, the artistic director of the company is happy with the resonance, and because hopefully, the outcome of the long journey of the creation of the new work is satisfying for all involved.

2.1.4 Office Work and how Commercial Apprenticeship is a Requirement

The more a rehearsal director is organized, the better. And the more computer knowledge they have, the better. Writing those daily and weekly rehearsal plans is a daily task, and you want to be quick in doing so. Change of plans happen almost every day, and one little change in the plan can cause a snowball effect that requires informing several other departments immediately. While spending most of your time in the studio, it happens that the passing on of those changes take place on your laptop in the corridor, while going to the bathroom or having a sip of water. The costume department, the makeup department, the technical department and the disposition is in permanent contact with the dance coach. We need to check the plans carefully, to make sure all people involved in the piece are mentioned on the plan. Is the sound and stage technician informed? Light department? Costume and make up department got the information? Did I forget something? Yes! The musicians are missing. A lot of juggling balls in the air. That’s when computer skills and effective communication are imperative. In smaller companies, rehearsal directors also take on tasks in administrative work. Whether it is helping dancers with translations, organizing doctors’ appointments, or calling authorities for work permit issues, writing letters to sponsors, or asking for admissions, it can all fall into the rehearsal director’s hands. Quick typing and good communication skills are very helpful, while *Excel* and *Office*, shouldn’t be foreign words.

2.2 Empathy and the Rehearsal Director

I hope it is clear by now, why I focus on empathy: one of the most important aspects in being a dance coach and one of the least discussed. You must be everywhere, and in everybody’s shoes, develop a forecasting ability to anticipate possible hotspots, situational chaos, and bottlenecks between feelings and needs of dancers, stage designers, choreographers, and

every other employee in the theater. It is a lot. In March of this year, I held a panel discussion about empathy in coaching dancers with three experienced experts in the field of coaching dancers, and what was scheduled as a 45-minute talk, turned out to be 1.5 hours. Cathy Sharp, a teacher for the bachelor of contemporary dance students at the ZHdK, former director of her company *Tanz Ensemble Cathy Sharp*, former rehearsal director and recipient of the cultural prize of the city of Basel, made an important statement during our panel discussion. She said: “The dancers know why they have come to the company. They have come to be dancers, and also to fulfill a contract.” (Sharp 2021) That said, and I entirely agree, it provokes the urge though, to try to solve the discrepancy of mixing apples with oranges. We as coaches, love our art and the dancers, but we want to gain perspectives and methods to deal with the aspect of trusting the dancers that they know it is a tough business and give responsibilities back to them, but also accompanying them to the best of our abilities. I will speak about this in my third chapter, where we will look at the whole concept of carrying too much, and why it may backfire. -

2.2.1 Sensitive Resilience and Fragile Strength

I have always found the expression of *you need to have thick skin in show business* very confusing. When I was a dancer myself, I was often asked to try to develop a thicker skin, and it always left me startled. Any dancer can relate to the feeling of having vomited one’s soul out on stage, or at least I hope so, because there is no other more fulfilling feeling than post performances emptiness. It is when you touched an audience, expressed a story and /or feelings nonverbally, and soul stripped in front of many people. It is that energy that comes across to the audience. The magic of a live show. When as an audience, you suddenly realize these are humans on stage, doing *it right here right now!* It is what kinesthetic empathy means. The audience being moved by what they are seeing. But in order to trigger the audience’s kinesthetic empathy, the artist must not only believe in what they are doing one hundred percent, they must also be exceptionally sensitive and receptive. Dancers are naked on stage. Not literally, but metaphorically. To interpret a role needs genuine acting skills, and that requires utmost receptivity and deep feeling from the artist. Expressing feelings and telling stories through only movement and facial expression, so clearly, delicately and in same time magnified, in order for the emotion to reach across an entire orchestra pit and all the way the last person sitting in the last row, requires, and against popular assumptions that dancers are drawn to the spotlight, a huge amount of selflessness. Competition is incalculable

in the dance world, directors and choreographers often have hundreds of applicants they can choose from. It is a very tough business. No one is handled with satin gloves. And time is always short, so dancers must get going. Be on top, fully there. Perform their best. Every. Single. Day. It is an *elite sport*, you snooze, you lose. That strongly denotes needing a thick skin.

Can you picture dancers leaving the theater and walking home after a performance? They look very strong, muscular, determined, and tired at the same time, happy and fulfilled, and somehow, they appear to be in their own world. Vulnerable, yet undefeatable. Fragile and unbreakable. Lost and found. Accomplished and in same time at the beginning of something. Sensitive but with thick skin... I have always thought of that as a contradiction. A paradox. The complexity of a dance coach working with those strong yet sensitive people, whilst being on a time schedule, needing to push them, and sometimes slow them down, from the moment of class through rehearsals, is why I think this paper is hopefully an opening bell for analyses and awareness of empathy in the field of coaching dancers. Sensitive and strong goes together, like cognitive and emotional. Heart and brain. I argue that coaches should be extra trained in that field.

3. Expanding our toolbox

3.1 Reiterating

All dance coaches have (hopefully) a lot of information and knowledge. We once were dance students, then professional dancers, then teachers and maybe dance coaches too. Or even directors and choreographers? We went through each position in the studio, experienced and lived through every viewpoint of our art. Dance teachers and coaches all share one important aspect, they intuitively pass on what they experienced themselves. That experience is golden. Add a methodical teacher training, and we can be good coaches. Especially in classical ballet, there exist several methodical schools, (French, Russian, British, etc.) all similar to each other, and the training of the method in teaching children from 10 years of age all the way to producing professional ballet dancers, is rigorous. Classical ballet methods are 400 years old. And when we speak about methods, we mean programs in training and forming the body of the dancers, constructing athletes. Those methods have proven to be successful

since many incredible dancers come out of those schools every year. But how come, during the course of those 400 years, no one ever thought of including a training in pedagogy, developmental and sports psychology, or raising an awareness of the aspect of empathy? In that regard, contemporary dance has overtaken classical ballet and developed schools and programs, contextualizing, and verbalizing, and raising awareness in educating their pupils to become autonomous and critical humans and artists. Unfortunately, classical ballet academies seem behind sometimes. Because of the lack of research, innovation and overall padlocked theories and approaches in teaching, one could say that the ballet world is stuck in a conceptual prison of its own making for over 400 years. Gustav Mahler beautifully said:

” Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.”

I got carried away... Back to the fact that dance coaches automatically convey what they experienced themselves. I would like to give it a name. It is what is referred to as *presentation* in pedagogy. Klaus Mollenhauer (1998), an important figure in pedagogy of the 20th century and foundational theorists of Critical Education, has developed the theory of five stages in teaching.

1. Presentation, who we are
2. Representation, what we chose to convey
3. Plasticity, trusting that humans want to learn
4. Self-activity, tickling curiosity and interest
5. Identity, developmental psychology

The first and second stage of his theory is what I want to look at here. *Presentation*: Mollenhauer said, you cannot not present. Any coach or teacher who is in a conveying situation will present who they are, what they learnt and experienced, and what they have seen and heard, in their lives. Our DNA is always part of our presentation. We cannot take that out of ourselves. The second stage of Mollenhauer`s theory is *Representation*, a crucial process of selection. It is what we choose to teach. Be it based on own experience and adapted to whom we are teaching, or be it something we have never experienced ourselves. We make a conscious choice to include it in our teaching, approaches, and concepts, because we believe it is important and correct. We represent. It is an old and long-lasting theory, which in pedagogy is taught in the first lecture. Pedagogy also being hundreds of years old, like classical ballet, is under constantly scrutiny by experts and scientists. Reforms and

studies are being held regularly, and although they too conclude that there is no ideal recipe in teaching and coaching, they can draw from a rich toolbox full of practical knowledge and concrete knowhow. This paper is not looking for the ideal recipe either. None of us have it. Even when interviewing experts, they cannot give a solid concept or clear answer to what role empathy plays. It makes me realize how unexplored the aspect of empathy is, in conveying dance. Another guest of my panel discussion was Mark Wuest, also a teacher of the bachelor of contemporary dance students at ZHdK, and a former choreographer and director of his *company of shadows*. Towards the end of our discussion, he stated:

” Some of these topics cannot be explained, it is like asking what love is, or what happiness is. Those topics cannot be put in a box, and we cannot expect to have a clear answer on how it is handled. Empathy is a blurry topic in the world of coaching. And that realization can be an answer too. (Wuest 2021)

I find the sentence of Mark Wuest very important. But let us also persevere and continue to search for system and precision in this diffuse concept of empathy.

3.2 Eye-opening Pedagogy

When I enrolled in the Master Studies at the Zurich University of Arts ZHdK, I was amazed by the school, the seemingly endless possibilities this university offers, and the many, many opportunities that come your way. It is one of the only schools worldwide that holds all art forms under one roof, and you can only imagine the daily exchange of ideas and creative encounters that are often mind-blowing. One department that interested me very much is the department of Art Education. I always knew I wanted to take a closer look at pedagogy, since I never understood why dance teachers are not educated in basic school pedagogy, yet they deal with children and adolescents and later on high-performance artists, in the most fragile and complex way. I therefore enrolled in the pedagogical course with big interest, and other than it being incredibly demanding, it was eye opening. I couldn't help but imagine how much any dance teacher could benefit from just hearing a couple of those lectures. I completed the first half of my pedagogical studies with an exam and am currently finishing the second half, developmental psychology. One theory I found very interesting and relevant when coaching dancers, is the concept of *Growth Mindset*. The main target group of *Growth Mindset* are children and adolescents, but also for professional dancers, situations can occur where this concept is relevant, since a professional dancer too, is in a receiving/learning

position in class or rehearsal. How to give feedback and corrections is important. Our voice, besides our body language, is our main instrument when building the bridge. What we tell dancers in class and rehearsals matters. Words matter. They matter a lot. While we certainly mean well with positive, encouraging words, and as important as it is, we want to have a look at a phenomenon that might cause limitations to the dancer, without it ever being our intention. Let us critically look at how common feedback, and look at examples of different phrasings, that for the dancer receiving them, might be game changing.

3.2.1 Growth Mindset

A fixed mindset is based on the idea that abilities are predetermined from birth and therefore cannot or can hardly be changed. Intelligent is the one who can do something quickly and perfectly or who finds something much easier than others.

Defeats and setbacks in learning are experienced as personal failure.

Efforts in which one could fail are avoided for fear of failing. "I am not talented enough in pirouettes, I always fall over. It's not worth working on. I will not give it a chance, because I do not want to fail. Failing is a personal setback." If difficulties arise, interest in the subject quickly fades, and the conviction of "I'm not good at that", is linked to pirouettes for good.

A growth mindset is based on the idea that skills can be developed through practice, personal effort, and smart learning. And it is based on the idea of failure is a good thing, I can grow from it. Learners with a growth-oriented mindset do not shy away from challenges. They feel strong in situations that do not come easily. After defeats, setbacks, or mistakes, they work harder and more determinedly toward the goal. For them, setbacks prompt to rethink, adapt, or change their own strategy. They are curious and open to difficulties. It is the teachers or coaches' job to establish and nurture that growth-oriented mindset in dancers, and since every dancer is different, to be attentive to who is listening to you and receiving your comments. It is obvious that it is a mindset that should be encouraged from a very early age on, and that it is in general difficult to unravel a fixed mindset, but the relation of a coach and dancer is on a daily basis, and reeducating thought patterns is possible as psychologists have argued for decades.



Online: Strelnikova 2020

3.2.2 Words matter

As mentioned, implying growth mindset is most important when working with children and adolescents, but an awareness of it, benefits professional or pre-professional dancers as well. Any professional or pre-professional dancer is in a learning situation day by day, they start from scratch working on and maintaining their technique in class, and therefore might sometimes encounter a feeling of a beginner. We can all hear, how at the end of class when dancers are executing grand allegro, we shout out:” Good!”, or:” Wonderful!”, or:” That’s it!”. Where such exclamations are energizing, motivating and provide a fun atmosphere, in some situations it’s better to avoid them. In one-on-one coaching, and when dancers are facing struggles, but also generally when communicating with dancers, the concept of growth mindset is a good thing to be aware of.

Sometimes it is important and necessary to speak to a dancer openly and directly about their technical deficits, but as an example, the sentence:” Don’t worry, you cannot be good at everything, we all have our strength and weaknesses!”, is said too quickly and while it is well intentioned, it can be very limiting to the dancer. They will undoubtedly close the window of possible growth in their mind for good. To be better at jumps than turns, for example, or the other way around, is perfectly normal, but why close that window of possible growth, by stating that it is a weakness? Whenever the dancer will confront that step or movement again, it is doomed to go wrong, and mostly they will not find pleasure executing it. It is the dance coaches’ job to tickle the dancer’s interest and especially their enjoyment in what they are less good at, be it with exercises and different, perhaps playful approaches, or by just being attentive in our wording.

3.2.3 Rephrasing examples

“We all have our weaknesses and strengths; we can’t be good at everything” = While correcting a dancer who is for example struggling with jumps, and using these words in hopes to make the dancer feel better, we have fixed their mindset irreversibly. Whenever the dancer will get to that particular jump, or any jumps, their mind is set for failure, knowing *it is my weakness*, and the dancer will not approach any jumps in a positive way again.

REPHRASE: *“You seem to have so much fun doing pirouettes and spinning around. I can see how much that interests you, and how any new pirouette challenge is welcomed warmly! Try to find that same kind of joy when jumping...”, “Let’s do some fun exercises and see if it triggers your interest. I’m sure you can develop a similar feeling towards jumps.”* = While

pointing out the fact that the jumps of the dancer is not as strong as their pirouettes, the dance coach is signaling that it is very possible the dancer will become as good in the jumps as they are in pirouettes, despite of the obvious bigger challenge they will face, but the dancer preserves a positive approach to jumps.

“Well done”, “You`re beautiful” = Used during rehearsal or/and after performance too often, we link the dancer`s success in their craft, to their person. We do not want the dancer to base their self-worth on success or a positive feedback in a rehearsal or performance.

REPHRASE: *“You did this jump/step/section very well.”, “You danced beautifully.”, “Your dancing in this performance was superb.”, “I love seeing you enjoy this solo/exercise/movement so much. I wish, you could enjoy this other part as much.”* = The compliment is directed strictly to the craft, not the dancer`s person. Dancers` self-worth as a person is disconnected from their craft. The possibilities of this dancer discovering joy in other tasks remains open. With mentioning the visible enjoyment in a step/section, we trigger their curiosity in finding that enjoyment throughout the entire piece.

“Don`t worry, it will come” = We imply that there is indeed the need to worry and console the dancer with the promises of a soon better time. Unless the dancer directly expresses their worry about a step, we do not need to remind them that there could be reason to worry.

REPHRASE: *“New abilities take time to be learnt, and you are on the right way of discovering the joy of it.”* = We signaled that developing new abilities takes time and shine a positive light on the dancer`s process of finding it, which lowers the level of possible frustration through trial and error significantly.

“Don`t make yourself crazy over the step, let it go and try again tomorrow” = We do not want to remind the dancer of possibly going crazy over a difficulty, unless they directly express that concern. Linking negative thought processes to a particular step will cause the dancer to not find joy in working on it. Telling them to let it go and *try* again the next day deprives the dancer of finding new technical or artistical approaches to a challenge.

REPHRASE: *“There are many ways to approach a difficulty, and by repeating only one approach, you are depriving your body of possible new perspectives. I would suggest a break to breath a bit. Maybe some air and water? Or a good night`s sleep?”* = Providing the dancer

with different approaches and giving them a chance to discover it themselves is yet another way to keep a growth mindset.

3.3 Other Feedback Cultures

Interesting additions to the growth mindset can be found in other feedback methods. While, as we established in the previous chapter, words really do matter, there are other components of effective correction and feedback giving. Time, setting and dialogue. Effective communication has produced many theories of sending and receiving messages, but another interesting concept is the *Critical Response Process (CRP)*, a concept used in schools and companies across the US. It teaches us how to cultivate the process of giving and receiving feedback. CRP is used in feedback group-sessions but can also be applied to one-on-one coaching situations. Practicing CRP might seem rather unnatural in the beginning and it takes some time to get used to it, but once understood, CRP is a valuable addition to our toolbox.

3.3.1 Critical Response Process

Liz Lerman, co-author, and originator of CRP, is a performer, writer, educator, choreographer, and Founding Artistic Director of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in Maryland US. The Critical Response Process originated in the early 1990's and has made its way across the Atlantic into European classrooms and is received with big interest and appreciation.

“The Critical Response Process can be applied in very diverse contexts, such as post-performance discussions, curatorial decision making, choreography classes and many more artistic collaborations, like a coach-dancer's relationship. CRP affords dancers a voice and degree of control within the critique of their work, while promoting a dialog with mentors and/or other colleagues.” (Lerman 2003)

It would be important to introduce CRP in all dance schools and companies because it raises great awareness of a feedback culture. Dancers are drilled in receiving criticism from dawn till dusk, whether they like it or not, and I think we have all been in a situation Liz Lerman writes about below:

” I had a sense that there was a supposedly mature way to hear comments of others: keeping silent, writing private letters in my mind and never sending them, and if something really stung, letting time heal the wounds. To respond in this mature way to criticism meant quietly taking it, rather than attempting to engage in a dialogue, since to respond at all was somehow deemed either defensive or a violation of an unspoken boundary.”
 (Lerman 2003)



Critical Response Process: Borstel 2003

Educating pre-professional and professional dancers in CRP is essentially a way to respect and preserve the dancer’s autonomy. How to give feedback, and especially how to receive it, can be either extremely constructive or demotivating. Receiving feedback and criticism is something a dancer is very used to, but they can feel overwhelmed by the constant criticism thrown at them. Only few texts exist on the important topic of how to give corrections and feedback in a dance studio, which makes Liz Lerman’s CRP even more needed. There are three roles in CRP, the artist, the responder, and the facilitator.

1. The artist/dancer, working on their craft, whether it is a work in progress or a completed work.
2. The responder, people invited to a feedback session, audiences, colleagues, outside eyes, or a coach.
3. The facilitator, a major and complex role of the person guiding the feedback session (Lerman 2003).

Those roles can be interchanged during a feedback session, which is important because it makes us discover how it feels like from other perspectives. Having been in all three positions, provides us with more understanding and thought for one another. The entire process consists of four steps:

1. Statements of meaning
2. Artist as questioner
3. Neutral questions from responders
4. Permissioned opinions (Lerman 2003).

I will translate the four steps into a dance studio situation. Imagine we're in a rehearsal situation of a piece with many group sections and solos, and dancers are individually working on their solos. We decide to hold a CRP feedback session for the solos, and one dancer, let's name her Lena, will be the first to present her solo, and therefore has the role of the *artist*. Her colleagues watching will be the *responders*, and I/the coach, will be the facilitator. Before Lena shows her solo, I will have a quick private talk with her, to find out what her central questions about her work are, which makes my facilitation focus on the artists interest in a better way. After having watched her perform her solo we sit down in a circle and launch the critical response process.

Statement of meaning:

Responders offer statements of meaning. The goal is to set the focus to the *power of art*, rather than having a dialogue about the individual. By giving meaning to the artwork and asking the responders to be precise in their statements, we enable responders to name their experience, which affords the artist a different way of accepting the information. Step one should always be shaped in a positive way. Facilitators can ask a question like: What has meaning to you about what you have just seen? What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, and meaningful to you? Other adjectives such as imaginative, unique, or different can be used too, the goal is to offer responders a pallet of choices through which to define and express their reactions. Facilitator: What was surprising about Lena's solo? Responders: I was surprised about the sudden change of dynamic at the end of the solo. I didn't expect it and it meant it will stick in my memory. Or, it was stimulating to see you use the entire range of dynamics in one solo, etc. We have now established a positive, fruitful platform, and the artist is in a receptive mode (Lerman 2003).

Artist as questioner:

This step is for the artist to ask their questions. One could be: "Do you think I am using my eyes enough in my solo? Can you see the look in my eyes clearly?", or "should I detach my upper body in the middle section more clearly?" Responders answer the artist's question.

Neutral questions from responders:

This part is the trickiest, and often requires the facilitator to intervene and remind the responders what a neutral question is. Best explained is what is seen in the picture above: "Why is this cake so dry?" This implies strongly that the cake is dry, and the artist would be pushed in a corner and would be left with only having one mode to answer the question: in a defensive way. We should rather ask: "What texture were you aiming for when making the

cake?” The artist has the chance to explain and most probably will comment on the texture of the cake themselves, all while utmost respect was preserved towards the artist’s work. Example of an opinionated question to Lena:” Why are you behind the music (late)?” Same question a neutrally:” What is your relation to the music during the solo, how do you want to interpret the music during your solo?” A neutral question can appear ridiculous when giving criticism, but the actual process of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the value at play (see 2003).

Permissioned opinions:

At this point opinions are welcomed, but they must follow a certain protocol. It is based on the acknowledgement that the artist is going through a creative process, a process that we know little about. A creative process is an intrinsic journey, full of research and doubts, realizations and changes, certainty, and many questions. We want to avoid being clumsy when giving our opinions to an artist. Liz Lerman gives the example of wadding up a piece of paper and suddenly, without warning, throwing it at someone. The person being hit by the wadded piece of paper gets surprised and starts explaining in defensiveness. We do not know at what point the artist is in their creative process, and to respect that *not knowing*, the protocol of a permissioned question would be:” I have an opinion about your choice of dancing barefoot, would you like to hear it?” The artist is free to decide if it has been enough for the day, or perhaps they already heard opinions on it, or perhaps the artist does not want to hear it from that particular responder, or maybe also just not in that very moment. By exclaiming” catch!”, before throwing the waddled piece of paper (the opinion) at the artist, we show respect towards the artwork and the artist, and the artist will respond amenablely (Lerman 2003). Once having enough practice in CRP, we can, depending on the situation, navigate through the process and skip certain steps. No matter how you imply CRP, the centerpiece of the process is to limit the nonproductive behavior of defensiveness, and it gives dancers the opportunity to take the lead in the cultivation of their own work (Lerman 2003). When defensiveness starts, learning stops. We must find a way to turn discomfort into inquiry (Borstel 2003).

3.4 Reflecting

The following subchapters leading up to my summary enclose own observations, suggestions and ideas that might be food for thought. I cannot provide the reader with theories that directly support my thesis, because there are no empiric studies on the role of

empathy in coaching dancers. Since I started dancing, I am fascinated by the process of coaching, and the closeness a dancer and their coach develop. Or do not develop. I witnessed fruitful collaborations, and big fall outs, dancers having meltdowns and desperately longing for psychological support, I witnessed and experienced horrific accidents in the studio and on stage, and the dancer and myself fighting their way back all by themselves. No, it is not the dance coaches' job to pamper dancers or support them psychologically. We cannot because we are not trained in that matter. We are not their psychologists, not their mother or father, not even their best buddies, but the level of trust, nearness, and understanding between a coach and a dancer is above average. Dance coaches develop their skills and methods through time and experience, and obviously some coaches do the right thing and handle any situation intuitively correct from the beginning, while others may be less suitable for the job or need more time to discover their approaches. During my panel discussion the talk quickly turned to the divergence of caring about a dancer but knowing when to distance yourself, and that that fine line between the two, is a very blurry one.

3.4.1 Big Hearts and Healthy Boundaries

Another guest on my panel discussion was Leslie Wiesner, an ex-professional dancer, musical performer, and co-founder of the *Hochschule für Zeitgenössischen Tanz in Zurich*, with many years of experience in successfully coaching professional dancers and students. She has always been an example of positivity in a dance studio to me, and she interestingly described the juggling act in handling many dancers and their needs at the same time, by using empathy on different levels, and finding a way to say, "I care, but we have to go" (Wiesner 2021). The closeness and caring of the dancers is real, but so is the danger of taking it to heart too much. It can become overwhelming, not only for the coach but also for the dancer. We have all heard the sentence; do not get too involved. Keep your distance. But the common well-meant advice of *keeping your distance* just isn't enough. When conveying dance, no matter what setting, you are *together with* the dancer. The simplistic advice to keep a distance is not helpful and actually nonsensical. We cannot, and I don't think we should aim to distance ourselves. Maybe going about our job of training and coaching dancers as a craft, looking through our toolbox to find the right tool for that particular situation and dancer, is where we automatically preserve this much needed wide perspective, and therefore distance. Daniel Goleman's quote on compassionate empathy in my first

chapter finishes with the words “responding to the situation with *loving detachment*.” Loving detachment. Towards the end of our panel discussion Lesli Wiesner said:

“And there has to be heart and soul, and that is where it all comes together, the sympathy the empathy, ... the topic is so vast, I do not think there is any black or white at all.” (Wiesner 2021)

I can imagine that the danger of caring too much and taking it to heart too much exists in other professions too. We always have to be aware of our own boundaries, and since I do not like the general wording *protect ourselves*, (I do not consider we are permanently under attack), I prefer to say *care for ourselves*, with awareness and respect to our own nature.

” It is important to care for the dancer, but we must not carry them.” (Sharp 2021),

Cathy Sharp stated this clearly, and she too is an example of a loving coach but seems to have very clear boundaries for herself. *Loving detachment* might be key, in caring for the dancers and not taking it to heart too much. An expression we should analyze further.

3.4.2 Imagining a Glass Wall

Dancers and their coach spend eight hours a day in the studio together, training and rehearsing a high-performance art form, and it is only natural that situations sometimes become critical. Performing on a high athletic level whilst creating delicate art, demands a lot from the dancers and the coach. Some days, when on top of everything, we face a sudden last-minute replacement emergency, having to repeat the entire piece from the beginning once more in order to involve the new person, when everyone is already physically exhausted, mentally tired, and maybe fed up, we face a situation that is about to plummet. I spoke about how we must try to foresee those bottle necks in my second chapter, in order to avoid them. But being humans, we sometimes fail at avoiding them. Confrontational situations occur, and some lead to emotional responses. When feeling that there is a hostile energy developing in the studio, which I personally did experience, you find yourself racing to contain a potentially volatile situation. When it happened to me, I was not sure what to do. I wondered if there was a way to withdraw from the situation, without giving up my role as the leader of the rehearsal, and my task of coaching that group of dancers in front of me. I decided to assert my leadership, in an attempt to interrupt the hot-blooded dynamics, but unfortunately my reaction was not received well, and state of affairs deteriorated.

Later in the week, while reflecting on the very ugly occurrence, I suddenly imagined how I could have had a glass wall in front of me. Thin glass, transparent, a bit wider than me, and as tall as me. An amorphous solid structure, that keeps hostile energies away from me. And no one knows about it, no one can see it. Unfortunately, I did not yet know about tactical empathy at the time, and my predominantly emotional empathetic trait made me drown in the situation. The thought of having this protective glass wall in front of me, however, gave me a certain distance to the unhealthy dynamics in the studio over the following weeks. In my imagination the hostile energy could not reach me, and I needed to look through *that glass* even more carefully in order to find the right way to deal with the situation. I needed to look closer. And that looking closer, gave me time and distance and that time and distance eventually helped me deescalate a heated situation much better than when being overwhelmed and having a *fight or flight* reaction. It was an initial and intuitive image that symbolized, though not yet clarified, some of the concepts discussed here.

3.4.3 FBI`s Tactics

Other than in a creative ambiance of crafting art, hostage negotiators face very hostile and different, rather obvious elements when creating the bridge: the stakes are high (life or death), and it's the role of the negotiator to solve the problem with someone who is on a completely different side/planet/belief etc. The importance of the successful creation of that bridge in a negotiator's world is amplified. If the negotiator fails to build the bridge, any sent message will fail to move the person receiving it, with devastating consequences. Because they deal with the worst confrontational relationships one can imagine, they are experts in empathy. Nothing in the world of coaching dancers is confrontational, (or at least shouldn't be). But the art of dance, whether it is conveying it or practicing it, is equally important. It matters because dancers and their art matter. In chapter one I wrote about the FBI understanding that going about an emotional topic in a cognitive way, leads to failure. Dance itself, is a fragile collaborative endeavor, so why not draw from experts, even if they live and perform in different worlds? Chris Voss`s core concept of his book, tactical empathy, resembles an approach Lesli Wiesner had during our panel discussion:

” One of the most important skills in coaching dancers is the ability of imagination. How do I get to this (one) dancer, what image or wording can I find to move this (other) dancer?” (Wiesner 2021).

Finding out *what works for whom* is a form of tactical empathy. Before introducing tactical empathy, the FBI used to think the best approach is to separate the person from the problem, keep a poker face and keep your distance. But how can one separate the person from the problem, when the emotions of the person *are* the problem (Voss 2016)? Two of Chris Voss's tactics that I want to elaborate are *Labeling* and the *Accusation Audit*. *Labeling* is a way of not only feeling someone's pain or worries but giving them a name. Labeling your counterpart's fears or worries, diffuses them. By feeling and understanding the counterpart's feelings, and especially verbalizing them and repeating them back to them, we convey that we are listening, and once they know we are listening, and feel that they are actually being heard, they might start collaborating in a fruitful way. Denying barriers or negative feelings gives them credence. Get them into the open (Voss 2016). A coach-dancer example could be: "It looks like this section in the solo is troubling you. It seems you are worried to trip over this pirouette. It sounds like you are worried that you are about to overwork yourself."

The accusation audit works similarly by explicitly stating – and bringing out into the open – a feeling in the other person. But, in this case it's a feeling in the receiver (for our purposes, the dancer) that is a direct result of a message that the sender (here, the dance coach) is communicating. The key concept is the realization that for the dance coach there is no choice that has to be made between either (a) empathy, or (b) communicating something that the dancers might receive negatively. Indeed, empathy is perhaps most useful in exactly these situations. Sometimes a dance coach has to push the dancer to their limits, and depending on the situation, the messages can potentially meet resistance and/or frustration. Empathy can lower these counter-reactions and help ensure those messages are received and then implemented.

"Look, you're going to hate me, you will think I'm cruel. You will think I'm ignoring the fact that you're tired, but we have to run the piece again from the beginning.", is an example of the *Accusation Audit*. Or: "You won't like to hear this. I imagine you will think I am inconsiderate, but we are out of time. We will use the remaining 30 more minutes to finalize the middle section and all the remaining parts will be rehearsed this afternoon. Let's go."

List the worst things that the dancers could be thinking or say about you, and say them before the dancers can. Performing an accusation audit in advance prepares you to head off negative dynamics before they take root. And because the accusation often sounds exaggerated when

said aloud, speaking them will encourage the dancers to claim that quite the opposite is true. (Voss 2016) An example of combining the *accusation audit* and the *labeling* would be:

“You are about to learn the hardest, most difficult solo/exercise you have ever danced. It is technically tricky, requires stamina, and simply feels horrific. Shall we?” We have labeled a potential feeling the dancer could have and diffused any worry or fear towards a difficult solo or exercise, and at the same time we signaled that we are very aware of how horrific it will be, and therefore signaled *being with the dancer*. The dancer will now attack the solo with positivity, perhaps subconsciously aiming to prove the coach wrong.

4. Summary

After my master project, which was a short movie about the topic, the majority of feedback was; This topic is so interesting and so important, and we must to speak about it, but it is one big question mark, and I cannot tell you what the secret is, I do not have an answer. The summary of this essay is similar, and maybe there is indeed no clear answer, but doesn't an overall opinion of the topic being important show us that we should begin to research this under theorized area in dance? The work needs to begin, and a knowledge of some tools and methods that can be used, is better having than not having. The list of tools and methods that I have highlighted in the preceding sections, is naturally just a beginning and ought to be continued, but I think we can safely say that while us dance coaches intuitively do the right thing sometimes, it would be good to be aware of different approaches, especially when facing situations where tackling them does not come easily.

Not only can we be systematic about emotions, we have to be. We are artists, we know about feelings and emotions, intuition, imagination, and an artform that sometimes cannot be explained, but I argue that that is not enough. We should become more critical, systematic, precise, and conceptual in the aspect of empathy when coaching dancers. I hope I illustrated that the discussion about system and precision when speaking about emotions is possible.

Henrietta Horn, dancer, choreographer, teacher, and former co-director with Pina Bausch of the Folkwang Tanzstudio, is the lady in the photo in this essay, who is coaching me in *Mary Wigman's Rite of Spring*. I will never forget her last advice before my premiere: “Now you're on your own. Accept your vulnerability and turn it into strength. Your emotions are your most valuable asset.”

5. Sources and Literature

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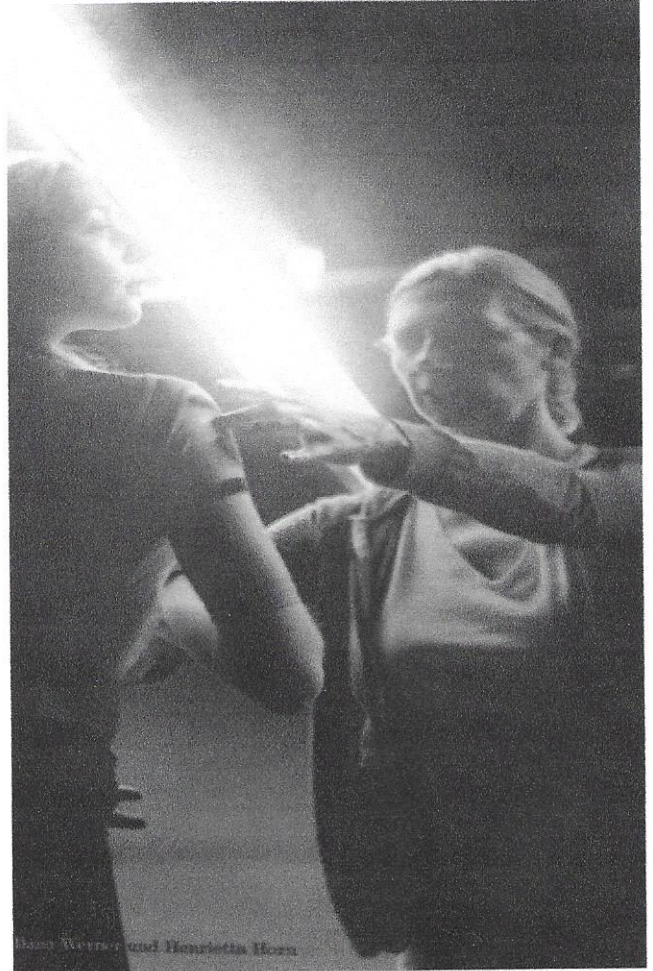
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6. Statement of Authorship

I hereby confirm that I have written the accompanying thesis by myself, without contributions from any sources other than those cited in the text and acknowledgements.

This applies also to all drawings, graphics, maps and images included in the thesis.



Place and date:

Zurich, May 23rd, 2021

Signature: