

54 Newminster Road
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE4 9LJ
31/07/08

Dear Dr. Lewis,

I would like to thank you for the £200 Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund that I received recently. Following are the details of the project for which I received your support. My report and supporting material are attached also, as requested.

22nd World Congress on Dance Research
02/07/08 – 06/07/08
Dora Stratou Dance Theatre, Athens, Greece

The purpose of my project to attend the Congress and present a 20-minute lecture was completed successfully. Although I found the 5-day Congress to be an intense learning experience, there were still some negative issues that I have outlined in my attached report. Having received positive feedback from my lecture presented during the Congress I now intend to make contact with relevant art, science and humanities departments of Universities within the northeast in order to arrange further opportunities to present my lecture.

Yours sincerely,

Helen Williams.

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22nd WORLD CONGRESS ON DANCE RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

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When I first found out about the 22nd World Congress on Dance Research, an annual event held in Athens, Greece, it seemed almost like a dream come true. As expressed on the Congress' website (<http://www.orchesis-portal.org/cdr/index.php>) it is an event that acts as "the largest gathering of dance specialists world-wide, the best opportunity to showcase one's work to a wide audience of practitioners, dance teachers, choreographers, researchers, journalists, organizers and suppliers." Directly before the Congress occurred the website also stated that they were expecting almost 1000 conferees to be present during this year's Congress.

Something I can laugh at now is that just before leaving for Athens I spent a long afternoon shopping for the perfect jacket to wear during the Congress – one that would attract attention and help people to spot me among the crowds. Well, there were no crowds! And the website has now been numerically corrected as there having been only 442 conferees at the Congress. To add to this, each day was so well packed with various dance classes, lectures, and video installations, not to mention the tourist attractions of Athens that tantalised one's thoughts, that when it came to giving my lecture, I only managed to pull in an audience of around 20.

However, this fact did not change the preparations I had already made before the Congress, in writing up my lecture, printing business cards to distribute, and assembling my mental state ready for the professional settings that I would find myself in. Consequently, my lecture was received extremely well, I made some excellent professional contacts from America, Austria, India and the Netherlands, and I gained invaluable knowledge into the state and developments of international folk dance. And as the saying goes 'it's quality not quantity that matters'.

Before going to the Congress, I thought it might be a good idea in the future to return annually in order to give follow-ups of my research developments. Organised by the International Dance Council and UNESCO, I discovered however that this Congress is actually just one of many established by them that take place in a variety of countries, some of which focus more specifically on certain dance genres. With this knowledge, my intention now is to attend these different Congresses, giving me the opportunity to get a glimpse of the host country's dance scene and access more diverse professional contacts.

The main contacts I made within the Congress were Vongku Pak (a traditional Korean drummer from New York, U.S.), Tanjore Quartet (an Indian dance theatre company from Amsterdam, Netherlands), and Zoltan Sandor (soloist dancer with Salzburg Ballet, Austria). I am now in discussion with each regarding potential future collaborations.

Over the next couple of months I will be making contact with relevant art, science and humanities departments of Universities in the northeast in order to arrange further opportunities to present my lecture and lead debate on the topic of human communication. Having now already gone through the process of presenting my lecture and receiving some feedback, I realise what I need now is a greater amount of feedback and access to more professionals in the field of human communication research.

Following is a copy of my lecture. Please feel free to publicize it on your website.



Helen Williams
Researcher – Choreographer – Director
matterinmotion@article19.co.uk
(+44) 785 225 6161

BODY LANGUAGE AND THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

The question of “what is dance?” can prove to be about as debilitating as the great question of “what is art?” For dance and art can be and not be many things, depending on the individual’s perceptions. What I do believe we can all come close in agreeing with is that dance is a language, in that it is a form of communication. Particular to the language of dance is that it uses the physical body as its tool of expression - a body language, so to speak.

Back in 2004, after having already spent much of my career as a dancer, I began to feel as if my body was being held in a constant dance. I became especially aware and intrigued by my body’s natural movements during such tasks as cooking and cleaning, standing in a queue, and even by the positions I would find myself in during sleep. After initiating my own research into the basis of these movements, I discovered that what I was encountering was what is labelled today as nonverbal communication, in layman’s terms – body language. The concept of body language suggests that as we carry out our every day activities, no matter how ordinary or specialised, social or solitary they are, we are still bearing thoughts, intentions and emotions within our bodies that become unavoidably and spontaneously conveyed through all of our movements.

Body language, as dance or nonverbal communication, is particular to every member of the human race. However, due to our preference and capacity for verbal communication during recent human evolution, there now exist over 5000 spoken languages, without much acknowledgement to our continued expression of body language. This accumulation of spoken languages highlights our amazing vocal creativity, nevertheless, it doesn’t help us when it comes to international politics, and almost seems to separate us as a race rather than unify us.

As the field of communication research continues to gain increasing attention, it is bringing to light our need to seek answers to urgent social problems, such as health, inequality, digital divides, workplace interactions, cultural development and preservation, respect for diversity, and relation among nations. And while globalisation is being reinforced, its success for which we are completely reliant upon our communicative skills, the questions I would like to ask are these:

- What was the role of body language in the evolution of human communication?
- What is the role of body language in society today?
- And through the rediscovery and nurturing of human body language, is it possible that we might introduce a greater unity and peace back into our nations?

There is a theory that the answer to a question may lie in its root, so let us first consider the roots of human communication.

Around 5 million years ago our hominid ancestors were actively discovering their surroundings, making use of their developing hand-eye coordination, depth perception, and balance in order to select the most appropriate dwelling on the forest floor, or remove the tastiest leaf from the best branch. Their choice to live in small groups as a mutual defence against predation meant that sociality became the very core of their existence, as it still is in society today. This sociality became what Robin Dunbar called our “principal evolutionary strategy.” In other words, if our hominid ancestors had not chosen to share and cooperate within such communities,

evolution would not have brought us to where we are today.

And so the hominid social life of 5 million years ago was expressed through a constant sense of busy-ness, in which every waking moment had something of significance going on. "Here is a grooming, there a squabble that is sorted out by an ally, elsewhere a subtle deception – the whole welded together by a constant watchfulness, taking in who-is-doing-what-with-whom." (Dunbar 1996) And it was the grooming that had the most impact on hominid social structure. While making use of their skilled hand-eye coordination, they would carefully comb through each other's fur in search of dead skin, matted hair, insects or bits of leaf. What seemed to be a selfless devotion to the interests of hygiene became an expression of friendship and loyalty. It also induced a state of mild euphoria and relaxation that was greatly appreciated, especially when every day was filled with the stress brought on by the potential dangers of predators. And it was these actions of grooming, of such interpersonal communication that represented some of the first expressive gestures of hominid body language.

As their geographical surroundings of 5 million years ago began to alter due to powerful seismic activity, our hominid ancestors found themselves being forced out of the trees and onto the open savannahs. These tall grasses immediately minimised their visual scope, however their group size forced them to keep moving in order to locate food sources, and so they bravely struggled onwards. Over the 2 million years that followed, evolution resolved this problem by bringing new physical adaptations to the hominids. The most important of these was the ability for bipedal locomotion, which gave them a little added height and a more economical way of moving around. This new and still evolving feature also helped them to explore much greater areas of their surrounding land, which in turn increased their knowledge of, and sensitivity to nature.

Communication played a vital part as they communally considered the world in which they lived. And as walking on two feet gave immediate freedom to their upper limbs, their vocal grunts and noises could now be accompanied by expressive movements of the hands and arms. It was by these gestures of the upper body through which they were able to express power, affection, warning, hunger, aggression, enquiry, determination, and much more.

And so human evolution continued, bringing with it the appearance of a newly emerging genus. As the first to be given the name of Homo, Homo habilis, or 'handy man', displayed the beginnings of a slow increase in brain size. Cognitively, the birth of what psychologists call a "Theory Of Mind" also occurred, leading the way to the ability for empathy and better consideration of one another.

As hominid technology began with the creation of the first stone tools, manual manipulation increased in strength and dexterity. The making of tools was an important part of their daily activities, during which their minds could ponder on matters that were beyond the 'here and now'. While searching for meat to scavenge, their upper limbs and torso were pushed to their physical limits as they threw a rock to ward off predators, wrestled with an animal, or tore away at meat. While gathering and selecting edible plants and fruits their hand-eye coordination and various hand grasps were compelled to continue in their developments. All of these physical pressures on the hands and arms further impacted and informed the style, meanings, and interpretations of the communicational body language that continued to evolve between them.

This lifestyle of scavenging and gathering, combined with the usage of simple stone tools continued for almost another million years without much change. Even though the hominid brain was continuing to increase, they didn't yet have the ability to imagine, to think or create something beyond the known. However, just the fact that they were surviving amid a land and climate that was often harsh and unforgiving was a feat in itself. The most important matter of the day to them was the survival of the group. Harmony and understanding played a key role in this, and although communication continued through simple noises, facial expressions, and upper limb movements, a body language was nevertheless evolving.

By 1.5 million years ago, our ancestors were evolving more rapidly, especially with regards to their brain size. The brain also began to alter its structure, bringing more prominence to the frontal lobe, an area that is mostly active during planning, coordinating, controlling and executing behaviour. They were truly beginning to understand the world within which they lived, finding ways in which to control it through the use of better technology and skilled hunting. In their communications, through a much clearer understanding of one another, they were now able to express something about one friend to another friend, therefore maintaining a different representation of the world that was not directly observable. This was an important step towards symbolic thinking, and although we know from archaeological evidence that the hominid was not yet physically constructed for true speech, language was building and becoming more elaborate through specific movements and more complex sounds.

During the time that followed until the appearance of our own species, Homo sapiens sapiens, our ancestors continued to be challenged by new obstacles, such as the drastic climate changes that brought ice to the north and drought in the south. However, they were now becoming astutely observant of their surroundings and growing confident in their ability to problem-solve. Fire was discovered and mastered, and most importantly, they learnt how to be resourceful, how to prepare for the morrow.

Communication was no longer just about displaying emotions and social bonds. Names had to be given to the animals and plants. Intentions needed to be expressed. Hunts needed to be well planned. Though of course the social gossip still avidly continued, especially during the evenings that were now lengthened by the gatherings that took place around a night-fire.

Experts in the field of language evolution believe that true verbal language wasn't in place until around 50,000 years ago, accompanied by the visible appearance of symbolic thinking and art. And yet our ancestors survived together to successfully evolve through 5 million years of life that was very often 'touch and go'. They had found their own ways to communicate all that they needed and felt within the mental and physical boundaries that had been given to them. They had learnt to share, to cooperate, to listen, and to talk, all through a language that had inherently relied upon the nonverbal - that of body language.

So returning to my original questions - What was the role of body language in the evolution of human communication? What is the role of body language in society today? And through the rediscovery and nurturing of human body language, is it possible that we might introduce a greater unity and peace back into our nations? - Although some of these questions are today being answered to a certain extent, it has mostly been through academic research and observation of nonverbal communication that such answers have been reached. What I propose is to bring a new method of research to the field of human communication, using dance and physical movement to explore the vocabulary of body language and its role in society, both past and present. As an art form, dance not only

brings a creative approach to the research, but also adds a direct angle of access in that the field of body language would be explored by the vocabulary of body language itself. Consequentially, this approach can then inform and be informed by the other methods of human communication research that continue to develop.

I have so far completed several small research projects along this journey, during which I have taken on the role of choreographer, researcher and director. Some of these projects have been managed in collaboration with various science or art centres (such as the International Centre for Life in Newcastle upon Tyne, England). I have also worked alongside freelance dancers and musicians, and other appropriate professionals in the relevant academic fields. However, it is not enough. This method of human communication research, which crosses the boundaries of science, art and the humanities, I believe has great potential to answer so many questions that are still unresolved in the field, but there is much awareness, interest and support that still needs to be raised before it can develop any further. And so it is my purpose in addressing you now – to stimulate excitement, debate and support for my work, to find new partners for collaboration, and to simply hear your response whatever it may be. For I believe it is time to open up our bodies once again to the dance of body language.

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