

Jacques d'Amboise

The mind in dance

At eighteen years of age, I had already been a member of the New York City Ballet for three years and had just been made a principal dancer. While performing at the ballet company's home, the City Center of Music and Drama on 56th Street in New York City, I developed a system that I believe has maximized and improved the quality of my performances.

Early in the morning or on my days off, I sit in the empty auditorium, gazing at the stage. I am envisioning a variation from my repertoire, imagining, in detail,

Jacques d'Amboise is a well-known dancer and choreographer. He became a soloist with the New York City Ballet in 1953. Best known for his roles in works such as "Filling Station," "Stars and Stripes," and "Apollo," d'Amboise also danced in several movies, including "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" (1954) and "Carousel" (1956). His own ballets include "The Chase" (1963), "Quatuor" (1964), and "Irish Fantasy" (1964). He also taught at the School of American Ballet and the State University of New York. In 1976, d'Amboise founded the National Dance Institute, a nonprofit organization that introduces the arts into public schools, using dance as a catalyst.

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first how I will look in costume, then how I will enter the stage and from which wing. As if watching a movie, I then dance the variation in my mind the very best that I can, or even better – the leaps a foot higher, the space covered double what I have done in the past. I picture the expression on my face, the use of my arms and hands, and the speed at which I move. A dream of the possible, glorified, runs on an imaginary loop through my mind, sometimes in slow motion, sometimes accelerated.

At first, I run this imaginary film to rhythmic counting alone (without music, melody, theme, harmony, etc.) – creating a blueprint of mathematical time. For example, I launch into a leap on the first count (or beat), float through the second and third counts, and land noiselessly on the fourth. Next, I rerun these movements, adding, in my head, the melody of the music in place of the counts. Each of these processes I repeat multiple times.

Now I am ready to make the imagined concrete. Up on the stage, I rehearse what I have envisioned – step by step, count by count, without music, over and over again. Sometimes I spend as much as two hours on a dance sequence that is perhaps one-and-a-half minutes long. During these repetitions, I count the

beats out loud as I dance, even rehearsing how I will breathe. I also practice the dance movements in three different tempos: slow motion, ideal, and accelerated (in case the orchestra conductor has an adrenaline rush during the performance). I am now prepared to handle any tempo that may emanate from the orchestra pit.

To end my practice session, I dance the entire variation, singing the melody as though it were an aria. Sometimes as I dance, I speak out loud to an imaginary audience. I comment on what I am doing and sell it to them: "Watch this! Did you like that? Here comes the biggest leap!"

Many years after creating this process, I read about athletes who demonstrably enhanced their performances using visualization techniques. Scientific articles on the mind-body connection confirmed my own experiences. Similar anecdotes from fellow artists further corroborated my belief in the connection between the body and the mind. Several times, the ballerina Suzanne Farrell described how she would lie in a warm bath and mentally rehearse a ballet. Conrad Ludlow, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, would put on his makeup while wearing a wool skullcap. "Why, Conrad, are you putting your makeup on with a wool hat?" His reply: "I'm warming up my brain. While I'm using the time putting on my makeup, I imagine my body doing my warm-up. That way, when I actually have to do them, I don't have to do as many – or maybe, if I'm lucky, I won't have to do them at all!" I laughed and thought him eccentric. But he was not alone: Rudolph Nureyev would also wear a wool knit cap as he led barre exercises. "It all comes from the brain to the feet," he told me. "If the brain is warm, it gets to the feet faster."

Kay Gayner, a National Dance Institute teacher and a performing artist in

the fields of dance, theater, and music, once described the exercises she does in drama class: "In order to create a character, we program pictures in the mind and then trust that the body will respond. You don't have to do anything; just trust your mental pictures." Her teacher, John Osbourne Hughes, also believes that physical actions are always a direct result of mental images or impressions. If you can create, prepare, and store mental images from, say, Lady Macbeth's life, you will begin to walk, sound, and look like her, and even think her thoughts.

After thirty-five years and many thousands of performances, I can recall a handful of moments where I experienced a distortion of time and space. Time slowed down markedly – it seemed that I could create a freeze-frame of the moment – and I became an observer, detached, watching and enjoying every moment unfold as it was happening. The dancer on stage was my Siamese twin, parted momentarily – one of us watching from somewhere above the audience; the other, on stage, in perfect control of the timing of every movement and gesture in space. I believe this phenomenon activates the same brain center or centers as when one is under great stress – during a car accident, when you watch your every action in slow motion; battle; or even death, when some people have described leaving their bodies and watching themselves die. It is a function of the brain under stress – at times enjoyable, and at times not.

Oh, what a beautiful thing the human being is, and how extraordinary the mind! It is not divorced from the body. Rather, they are entwined, as a successful marriage, a union, and a bond.

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