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Dance & Dancing: Just Doing What Comes Naturally

By Michael Crabb



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Human beings probably danced even before there was a word for it. **Rhythmic bodily movement is instinctive.** It connects people, even if unconsciously, to the rhythms of nature. Dance springs from a human desire for personal expression and social connection. and it feels good.

People dance for all kinds of reasons - to mourn, to celebrate, to heal, to give thanks, to preserve cultural heritage and treasured legends, to demonstrate physical prowess, to assert individuality, to provoke and to entertain.

Almost anyone can dance, regardless of age or ability. Maybe it's the Argentinean tango, the American square dance, the Viennese waltz, an improvised riff at a club or a step or two at a family wedding. Whatever the style or situation, dancing can be fun and a great way to socialize.

Related but different, **theatrical dance is presented as art and entertainment.** Trained dancers perform for an audience and the goal is to evoke a response. Dance becomes another way of communicating. A dance could express something specific like a story. It might seek to convey an idea, or it might simply be about creating an abstract effect, the way music often does.

Theatrical dance is often non-literal. **The moving body conveys feelings or ideas that cannot be put into words.** Try explaining the mesmerizing effect of Japanese butoh, with its meticulously controlled movement; or the exhilaration of break dance, with its fast, punchy jumps and turns.

Dance is a part of many popular entertainment forms, from ice shows, movies and music videos to Broadway musicals and the circus. It also stands on its own in concerts featuring solos, duets and ensemble works, often to live music.



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Performance styles are varied and evolving. They may reflect or challenge the social, cultural, even religious traditions and values of their root cultures.

Ballet, for example, is danced in many parts of the world but it is a European form, originating in the courtly entertainments of 15th century Italy. Courtly life requires formality and gracious behavior. Though it has changed over time, ballet still expresses these values today.

In contrast, various forms of South Asian dance now seen in a theatrical context have their roots in ancient temple dances. The characteristic rhythms of bharata natyam or kathak dance derive from musical traditions. The resulting grounded movement is notably different from ballet's upward lift - itself in relation to western melodic forms.

Start dancing ballet to jazz music and the movement begins to change. A new freedom in the hips creates a whole new effect not immediately identifiable as classical ballet. The labels we use to identify dance forms are arbitrary. They are designed to help analyze and categorize what is ultimately **a shared human experience - the impulse to move.**

Through dance, we can better understand our common humanity by appreciating and exploring the different inflections of this impulse.