

Questions about Movement and Dance for Stefanie Cohen

Where did you grow up and where were you raised?

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Did you like dance and movement from an early age?

Apparently, I used to walk into things a lot! As a child I wasn't particularly graceful, coordinated, or aware of my body in space. I came to movement relatively late, first immersing in theater in high school and college and then finding dance. In theater, though, it was through my body – through investigating the physicality of dramatic characters, that I found the biggest clues for portraying them. I particularly enjoyed working with very stylized character movement as in a Kabuki play I was in.

What other things did you like to do physically, when you were a girl, that were clues to your natural inclination to want to use your body and use movement in your adulthood?

That is such a good question, and yet I suspect I've been trying to make up for my lack of physicality as a girl as I've matured. I wasn't athletic nor particularly confident in my body. It wasn't until later that I really began to explore movement and dance—first to evade my high school phys. ed. requirements! I have many physical memories of childhood places though; of climbing up and sitting still on enormous rocks by the Atlantic Ocean, or crouching in the moss at the base of pine trees in the woods and letting my imagination wander in my play. I think those experiences helped me form a physical bond with environment that still intrigues me when I dance.

What is Authentic Movement?

Generally speaking, there are two roles in the practice, that of the movers and the witnesses. The movers, typically with eyes closed, deeply attend to their bodies and inner impulses for movement or stillness. These might come in the form of sensation, emotion or image, and the movers respond to their impulses, observing their responses, for a pre-determined length of time. The witnesses, with eyes open, watch the movers with compassion, attending both to the movement as it unfolds, as well as to their sensations, images, emotions and other associations they experience as they witness. When the session ends, participants might spend time writing or drawing in response to their experience, and also may share verbally with one another. Authentic movement provides opportunities for artistic exploration, for mindful, physical meditation and for access and insights to our psychological narrative.

When do you have the most fun when you are working as a movement instructor?

I love it when it feels clear that people have connected with themselves in whole new ways. Whether I am teaching technically proficient, seasoned dancers or people who are simply curious about exploring movement, I love to witness people finding the particular, unique ways their bodies move.

What do you most love about working with movement?

I love the immediacy and power. I appreciate that through the investigation of my own body and others' bodies in dance, I have everything I need for deep and creative exploration. I feel self-contained and endlessly curious. Truly, no matter how old or young we are and no matter what we feel our physical limitations to be, it is our birthright to experience our bodies fully and joyfully.

Do you dance around the house?

Certainly, I do, and I especially enjoy dancing with my children, Shane and Billie. They've figured out a great way to gain my attention and time is to ask me to dance with them; it is quite a sweet and satisfying way for us to spend time together.

Am I correct that one thing you do with movement is help people tell stories with their bodies? Can you tell us one very memorable story one of your students told, in class?



Stefanie Cohen teaches and performs Contact Improvisation, and facilitates Authentic Movement. Her business card says: *Stefanie Cohen Moving Stories: Discovering the Body's Wisdom through Movement.*

I think it's less helping people tell stories with their bodies and more, helping them listen to the stories that their bodies have to tell *them*. It's as though, through following the lead of our bodies and by delving into our sensation and movement, we gain access to tons of little secret drawers and compartments all over ourselves. Sometimes my students decide to turn their private experiences into performance. One particularly powerful performance I recall was a piece a man made about his mother who was mentally ill during his childhood. His memories were poignant and painful, but the portrait he drew of his mother was extremely compassionate and at times quite funny. His access to memory and the artistic support he found in my class made the experience of creating his piece healing both for him and for the audience who witnessed it.

Where is the most exotic or remote or exceptional place where you've danced?

The dance collective I perform with, *LAVA*, did a concert out in Portland, Oregon a few years back. While we were there we filmed a dance on video called *Groundwater*, which we shot at McIver Park, along the Clackamas River. Much of the dance takes place on an *extremely* steep cliff at the base of some enormous, old trees, and some of it takes place in the river, itself. So certainly, that was one of the more exceptional sites. Perhaps the most *remote* place though, was a site-specific dance I performed with five other dancers inside a tiny janitorial closet in rural Wisconsin!

What's a book on dance or movement that has really inspired you?

My two current favorites are the experiential anatomy books by Andrea Olsen, *Body Stories* and *Body and Earth*. They are great, accessible guides to learning about our anatomy and developmental movement patterns.

What are you most looking forward to this coming spring and summer?

I have a few nice things on my list including teaching at a great Contact Improvisation dance festival and then performing with *LAVA*, in Berkeley, California. I'm also looking forward to meeting some new babies; coincidentally, three of my students are expecting babies this spring. I'll be delighted to see them in person after witnessing them in utero these many months!

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