

Awakening the Social Body Amidst the Institution

How Gaga Movement Language connects social and physical agency in the body

by Cayla Bauer

Being an “artist” is a loaded task; a responsibility, no less. A responsibility to record history— to abstract, and to be truthful. To know what came before us, and open to what lies in front of us. To accept, and to challenge. As dance majors, we have trained and trained and trained, and when graduation creeps along, we approach the days when we will likely be asked to apply our artistry outside of the university. Our critical thinking, bodily awareness, and creative problem-solving will be needed in many scenarios, not just in the arts. But will dancers be able to apply these things outside of the university, when their minds and bodies have been entrenched only in the university’s training?

Art has been used to exaggerate, rebel against, challenge, and appreciate all aspects of life, so as artists, we should ask ourselves, “Through what lens am I receiving my training? Who is deciding what I learn? How is it limited? What is it ignoring?” Each university has a very specific lens through which it teaches its students—and with its reason—and in order to fully understand, appreciate, and challenge the lens of the university, I believe it’s crucial for artists to seek out training and experiences that contrast those provided by the university. I found a certain awakening of physical, creative, and social intelligence through working with the Gaga Movement Language, a movement practice created by Israeli choreographer and director of the Batsheva Dance Company, Ohad Naharin. That experience transformed my approach to my artistry and my studies.

Gaga was created after Naharin had endured a debilitating back injury and found himself unable to dance. After many medical modalities failed him in recovery, he committed to a belief in the “healing, dynamic, ever-changing power of movement” (Gaga—Ohad Naharin’s Movement Language). That the body’s intelligence is far more profound than outside instructions of healing. He began very subtle movement research on his own body, applying different sensory imagery such as “floating” in water, and the “rope of the spine.” In time, he created mobility and strength in his body, purely through this method of movement, and then continued to develop it into movement training that was sufficient to train his professional dance company, the Batsheva Dance Company.

As a wide-eyed first year dance major at the University of California Irvine, I could not wait to get into my first ballet, modern, and jazz courses. For months I thought about what I wanted to wear in my classes, or potentially even more exciting, what was customary to wear for my classes. I asked my sister, who had been a dance major at UCI before me, countless questions about how to act in a classroom and what all of the professors were like. For the many of my generation who are part of the Harry Potter family, higher education dance may as well have been my Hogwarts, as I am sure it was for many of us.

In my first year, I arrived early to all of my technique classes so that I could warm up the best I knew how, and would heartily jot down notes after class about efficiency of movement and directing the tail bone. My dancing body was a source of endless research, and I didn’t want to waste a single minute not looking into it.

Over time, though, the magic wore off. Our modern foot warm-up became militant, and I was forcing made-up narrative after made-up narrative into my body to keep myself interested in

my parallel tendu and the shifting of my weight. Each week, I became more and more resistant to enjoying class. I berated my conscience, trying to understand the source of this, as my love and faith in the power of movement and creativity had never been stronger, but my ability to research these aspects of dance in technique class every day was diminishing, no matter the force of my efforts.

It was not until the end of my second year in college, when my weakening efforts left me injured and on a fast shifting road to depression, that I found it absolutely necessary to look for answers elsewhere. This is when I found Gaga and decided to study abroad in Israel so that I could study the movement language more thoroughly. For one year I took Gaga two to three times a week, and found that a Gaga class contradicts the technique classes that I had come to know in many ways. The teacher does not stand at the front of the room, there is no mirror, you are given only imagery, you do not have to perform a specific movement in any specific way; it is all guided improvisation, and the main goal is to find PLEASURE. Something had enlivened in me that I had been yearning for, for quite some time. Not only a physical and creative intelligence that I had been hungry for (one that is innate in all of us but only needs feeding), but I had sensed in my social body experience a sort of awakening. I recognized my body in space very differently, everywhere that I went. I recognized the differences between my body and someone else's very acutely, and how those differences were perceived by those around me, and by those in power.

Since then, I have been keen to understand the differences between the Gaga training and my training at my home university. What did one give me that the other did not? Do I enjoy one more than the other? Why?

I cannot lie, my love for the Gaga Movement training surpasses my love for any other form of training. I could not understand it at first; the efforts and intelligence of my professors at my home institution was not any less than that of the efforts and intelligence of the instructors in Gaga, and my work ethic had not risen or fallen (though it may have widened, as it does with new experiences). In fact, the more I asked myself these questions, the more I started to become aware of a larger narrative, a systemic narrative, that might account for some of my deadening spirits in something I loved more than anything else I could name.

I began to see not just my personal experience through my own body, but also the body that is the university; the body that is the institution(s). It took leaving UCI, seeing this institution in other contexts, in other countries, to notice that this institution has a life of its own, an agenda of its own. I began reading more, finding that revolutionaries such as James Baldwin and TaNahesis Coates have written about this life of the institution again and again. For me, a social awakening came through the Gaga Movement Language.

I believe that searching for this social awakening as artists of the body is crucial in order to observe and be critical of the spaces we occupy throughout life, that we have a responsibility to reflect that in our art. My interest is in acknowledging the structural make up of Gaga as a movement practice, the effects it has on the individual, and how that might contrast normative practices in the institution.

Gaga turns the individual INWARD in order to relate their physical experience to the external world. Often, in the university and other institutions and marketplaces in the United States, we are product driven. In these models, the experience of the individual is irrelevant, how they feel in their body, how their body is being treated, and what they make as a result of those effects. There are many speculations as to why this is, whether it's a result of industrialization, or

as observed in Robin Lakes' article, "The Messages Behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals," it may be tied to ideals strewn throughout Western education models—that the body is a "lazy and willful beast of burden that needs to be broken and whipped into shape in order to perform its assigned tasks." Whatever the reason, the result is the same: it matters only what bodies produce.

With Gaga, on the other hand, the focus on the product is removed; it is only the research being done in the current moment that matters. The movement that ensues as a result will be as it is. Because of this, the Gaga movement language is always evolving, Naharin is always changing what he focuses on and does not promise himself or the Gaga language to any one particular idea.

Some of the examples of past movement ideas in Gaga are "floating" and the "rope of the spine." A Gaga teacher might begin the class with floating, asking the participants in the class to "submerge their bodies in water" and to imagine that every molecule of their body is sensing the weightlessness of the water and the sensation of it on their skin. This encourages a physical awareness in places of the body that the participant may not have previously experienced by engaging their imagination to create that scenario in their body. Water also holds specific connotations and experiences for each individual, making the task unique to each person. As a result, what is created by the movement task is also unique to each person.

The "rope of the spine," also referred to as the "snake of the spine" or "seaweed spine," is meant to engage the participant with the entirety of their spine, to make it a vital part of their awareness, bringing awareness to new places in the spine and body. This task centers the attention on their own creativity with their spine, that which holds up the life of the person. Deborah Galili quotes Naharin in her article, "Going Gaga: My Intro to Gaga Dance Classes," as saying, "Gaga provides a framework for discovering and strengthening your body and adding flexibility, stamina, and agility while lightening the senses and imagination." The agency that this instills in the body, at least for myself, and for the many I've been in contact with through Gaga, is unparalleled. Not only does the mindfulness of Gaga strengthen in the spine, but this mindfulness is connected to every movement that the person does thereafter and the creativity used to engage in that movement. This is in stark contrast to the forgotten spine that sits in front of a computer screen for hours, attempting to produce for the deadline, while repressing neck pain and headaches. Or in contrast to the participant in a ballet class who forces the spine into the straightest line, awaiting the approval of the mirror, chasing the most satisfactory model.

What allows each artist in a Gaga classroom the freedom from production is in part, the structure of the classroom. The Gaga instructor stands in the middle of the room, surrounded by the participants. A mirror is never allowed in a Gaga classroom, as a mirror immediately takes the participant outside of the body. The progression of the class is a collaboration between the instructor and the participants. The instructor is not to have a lesson plan; they begin the class with one movement or sensory idea, and then read how the bodies interpret the idea, which informs the next direction that the instructor decides to take the class into. The teacher is suggesting sensory ideas for participants to interpret and create in their own bodies. So, it's the body's own ideas that create each individual's movement vocabulary, giving the body agency. For me, Gaga ignited a bodily intelligence past anything I had ever known. It allowed me to not just be a dancer who knows how to move my own body in impressive ways, but how to break the physical habits taught to me by society over the course of my life.

I know that I am not the first dancer or person to discover this, nor am I suggesting that Gaga movement is the only way to do this. In fact, the structure of Gaga resembles practices

found in non-Eurocentric communities, and those practices can also challenge an institutional understanding of the body. While Hip Hop, Jazz, and many other dance techniques can be foundational modes of breaking an institutional understanding of the body, Gaga is unique in that it has recently surged into acceptance in the concert dance world. Hip Hop and Jazz, with roots in African aesthetics, are often undervalued in the hierarchy of concert dance. And Gaga's potential for appropriation of Africanist aesthetics can surely come into question, while also diving into how Judaism and Zionism have interjected themselves into the middle of the Arab world in the recent past, and whether or not that can be of ethical acceptance. This, of course, is a complex matter, as are all matters involving the Middle East, and is appropriate for another paper. But, ethically supported or not, complex influences have given birth to the Gaga Movement Language, a technique that at least references Africanist aesthetics while also impacting the cut-throat concert dance world. It both challenges the institutional understanding of the body and speaks to its desire for a deeper understanding of the human being's physical impulses.

I emphasize the agency of the body because I think it is an elemental aspect of what is taken from the human being in production-driven models of working. It is also a necessary aspect of having social agency—understanding the body in a social context, observing the difference of treatment between one's own body and another's, and analyzing fairness of treatment or the need for change. It all requires a person to have an understanding of their own body's needs, in order to truly empathize with the needs of others. How can artists truthfully reflect the experience of the body—the beauty, pain, or terror experienced in the body—if they never at least attempt to free themselves of what the Institution subjects the body to? They can't, I believe. I believe it the same way that I believe the laws of gravity hold us to the floor of the Earth. The body is the force of gravity that binds us to social experiences, and the Institution has grown into our atmosphere. It would have been a disservice to humanity not to at least attempt to make it to the moon, and so it is a disservice to bodies everywhere to not at least attempt the break the binds that society has put onto our bodies.

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Cayla Bauer graduated from University of California, Irvine with a Bachelor's degree in Dance in June of 2017. Excited by the knowledge and fueled imagination her experiences led to in the last four years, Cayla looks forward to moving to Los Angeles, New York, or abroad and continuing to pursue her interests in choreography, performance, health, and the many facets of the arts.