

How natural is dancing?

The COVID-19 era forced a lot of the dance world outside, which turned out to be an unexpected gift. It turns out that if ballet can often feel like a foreign language, you can become more fluent (and fluid) by exploring the interconnected relationships between dance and nature

by Makena Rush

I have always leaned closely into the natural world. My greatest states of happiness exist when I am immersed in it, swimming beneath the marbled surface of the ocean. I believe that being born next to the sea has called me to the marine biosphere throughout my life; its mysterious beauty, ethereal power, and almost supernatural magnificence have always pulled at my heart, even when I am far away from the coasts.

My love of dance blossomed quickly from the first time it first entered my life, and it was easy for me to dedicate so much of myself to training and performing. Like many artists, it was difficult for me to feel fulfilled, but the fleeting moments where I brimmed with joy and exhilaration were more than enough for me to continue my growth, alongside pursuing an education in ecology and sustainability. Learning to connect my two passions was a journey that was well worth taking, it turns out, because it deepened my commitment to nature, as well as making me a better, more fulfilled dancer.

In my first year of college, I was surprised to find out how little had been unlocked from within myself, in terms of my ability to express my spirit through dancing. I had concentrated for so many years on refining my classical technique and visual presentation, it was jarring to find out that my performance quality was not entirely true to myself. It had always felt instinctive to tell everyone that I adore this art form because it was such an expressive emotional outlet—but, ironically, it was so difficult for me to actually reveal my emotions! As I watched my peers, I was taken aback by the rich fullness and giving nature of their movement. Their generous vulnerability to allow audiences to see their unique voices felt inspiring to me, and I knew that this would become one of my biggest goals in my career.

Unfortunately, my confidence seemed to dwindle more and more within the mirrored walls of the studios, where pressures of comparing myself to everyone became suffocating. When I saw no improvement, I felt hopelessly trapped and distant from becoming confident and expressive, despite how much I pursued this goal. Oftentimes, my only opportunity to find happiness and fulfillment was returning to beach shores to heal myself again.



Photo: *One*, choreographed by Brittany Woo.

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As COVID-19 overtook our lives, dancing in a confined space only exacerbated this conflict, of course, as I felt my identity and vibrancy as a dancer being pulled away from me in the dimness of my garage. However, for a fall concert, I was able to experience one of my most pivotal performances, in graduate choreographer Brittany Woo’s *One*, a work emphasizing the theme of human relationships and connections to the environment. This piece naturally became very special to me when I began to connect it to my other major, Social Ecology, where I was learning deeply about the interdependency between humans and the state of the earth.

One of the most moving moments in the choreographic process happened when I filmed myself performing outside, on the edge of a secluded seascape. It felt surreal and dream-like, with sea winds wrapping around my skin, sunlight pouring onto my upturned face, waves gently washing onto my legs. At the end of the piece, I fell to the ground, closing my eyes as my body rested into the sands surrounding me. I felt like I was really a part of my environment, no longer feeling enclosed, or hindered by thoughts that would normally psyche me out while dancing. Later, when I watched videos of myself performing the contemporary ballet choreography, I was surprised at how much my movement opened up and enlivened, after looking tense and restricted in my indoor practice videos. Uniting my love for dance and ecology had facilitated a meaningful personal breakthrough of expressing myself in a way that I had not been able to before.

Discovering this new branch of my relationship with nature was illuminating and exciting to me and reminded me first of Isadora Duncan, and my admiration for her. As the “mother of modern dance,” her spiritual journey involved her connection to the Earth, which has shaped her legacy and had profound impact on the trajectory of the dance world in general. In *The Art of the Dance*, she describes how nature always has been, and always will be the great source of all art, beautifully embedding examples of how movements of “undulating” waves, winds, plants, and animals are inherently the “great fountain-head of movement” in dance.



Isadora by Jose Clara.

“Duncan movement is grounded, and honors our personal weight and its connection to the Earth.” (Hamilton, 2020).

Duncan saw motifs of art and dance in all parts of her life, claiming that “a woman is not a thing apart and separate from all other life, organic and inorganic. She is but a link in the chain, and her movement must be one with the great movement that runs through the universe” (Duncan, 1909). However, she acknowledges how easily we become distanced from our innate beginnings, of not only being connected to Earth’s movement, but also maintaining the purity in our artistic expression. Supporting this with her observations of children, Duncan noticed that students of three or four years coming to her school were “responsive to the exaltation of beautiful music, whereas a child of eight or nine [was] already under the influence of a conventional and mechanical conception of life imposed upon it by the pedagogues” (Duncan, 1909). In her school’s own pedagogic programs, she began with teaching small children to breathe, feel, and become one with the harmonies and movements of nature, rooting her teaching in the exaltation of life through dancing. Duncan wanted to avoid “intricate artifice” and give into nature’s rhythm, freedom, and spontaneity, returning to what she called “true dance.”

It is important to recognize the potential of bringing these ideals most traditionally associated with modern dance into the ballet world. World renowned dance artist Alonzo King often brings this theme into conversation and work with his San Francisco-based company, Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Although deeply rooted in ballet traditions, King’s work extends far beyond, into spiritual connections with the Earth and universe. In his TEDTalk, “We are larger

than our Definitions,” he delves into how the process of identifying ourselves is strongly determined by our social conditioning, and inevitably limits us to being defined as solely physical bodies. “Our life forces and spirits are bursting to get out of this physical form,” he explains. “That is what creation and creativity is all about” (King, 2017). His intention to “dissolve” from individual to universal, and let go the limitation of “the body as the self,” emerges in performances like *Biophony* (danced to a completely naturalist sound score), and *There is No Standing Still* (danced completely in nature-scapes). In these works, dancers offer audiences hope, and a chance to explore their own intuitive connections to the natural world. “When you see the dancers in nature, they’re back in the origin of dance,” he says. “It’s back into the larger picture. And it’s a reminder that we want to continue to expand” (King, 2020).

The empathy that dance can invoke is already powerful, but it can be intensified when nature is intertwined. Kimerer L. LaMothe, an acclaimed dancer, professor, and scholar, draws from this need to expand the spirit to reframe dance as a practice and resource for earth-friendly ways of thinking and perceiving. In her article, ‘*Can They Dance? Towards a philosophy of bodily becoming*,’ LaMothe, like Isadora Duncan, relates to Friedrich Nietzsche’s perspective of how “dance is the fruit affirming all life” (Nietzsche, 1954). She suggests that dance stirs a visceral response that bonds spectators to the dancer “in a surge of recognition or identification” that is “the power and joy of participating in the forces of nature” (LaMothe, 2012). This “entire symbolism” that audiences are able to experience is described as a “magic transformation” by Nietzsche, guiding all of us towards spiritual and scientific truth.

LaMothe says that to cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships between humans and nature, we must create this transformed sensory awareness of movements from where we originate and honor both our own bodies, and our sources of living (LaMothe, 2012). For her, dance should not only be a truthful embodiment of ourselves, but also of the worlds and culture that surround us. It follows that there is untapped potential within social activism and dance when it comes to environmental conservation, sustainability, and social justice issues.

It became clear to me that empathy for our planet can surface in dance when I encountered one of my professors, Lindsay Gilmour, a passionate performer, choreographer, and improviser. She believes that we have so much to learn from our natural environments as a whole. We must be reminded that they are always alive, with an active consciousness and history that is ever-reflected through us as humans. She points out the natural patterns that have been embedded within us over time, the creases in our palms identical to river valleys stretching across landscapes, the way our breath moves as the ocean swells. Thus, rich stories of the natural world can be seen and expressed through our own existence and movement.

Born out of a renewed need for wildness again during the pandemic, Gilmour returned to nature as a disciple of a somatic practice called “Authentic Movement,” repetitively visiting a particular area of nature near her home in Southern California. Here, she discovered a new reciprocal and connected relationship with nature through witnessing, listening, exchanging, speaking, echoing, and moving as one with it. Over the course of a year, each day’s ritual

allowed her a deeply intimate knowledge of the animate land around her. These mystical conversations facilitated a heightened sensory awareness, perception, centering, resilience, and inner expansion that followed and resonated within her long after she physically parted from the space. From these experiences, she is reminded that she is an intricate microcosm of the ever-changing whole (Gilmour, 2021).

With all of these inspirations in mind, I am resolute that as dancers, we must continue to find our way back to remembering and embodying our own essences of the natural world, along with taking active roles to respect and protect it. Seeing ourselves and our environments as one entity not only allows us to fully open and express our identities as people, but also to bring holistic compassion, consciousness, and healing into our world. The gift of redefining and deepening my personal connection to the Earth has been an unexpected and beautiful gift brought to me during the pandemic, and one that I will always cherish.

I will never forget the initial feeling of dancing by the ocean, in the warm sun, and uplifting sea breezes. There is still so much more of myself that I can release through my dancing, but I am grateful for this opportunity to realize another method of reinforcing my confidence, expressivity and acceptance of myself as a dancer and person. Adding more diverse and spiritually attuned approaches to our dance practices, and allowing ourselves the freedom to dance and explore outside in any natural environment can help mold new generations of dancers, who form healthier relationships with themselves, their art, and their surrounding world.



Rush onstage. Photo: Skye Schmidt

Makena Rush will receive her BFA in Dance Performance, BA in Social Ecology, and Minor in Global Sustainability in the spring of 2021. She plans to pursue a career in dance, along with one in marine conservation, sustainability, and artistic activism.

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