

Why Dancers Should Start Thinking of Being a Rhizome

If you want to keep your creative inspiration and outlook fresh, maybe consider whether you grow like a tree, vertically and linearly, or a rhizome, which grows horizontally and keeps expanding to shoot up many nodes

by Julian Xiong

During the pandemic, everyone was sheltered in place, so no one was going to school in-person. Stuck inside like most people, I couldn't do any dance activities, projects, or rehearsals. Long story short, a friend's father adopted a dog. Sometimes she would bring the dog over to hang out, which then gave me the idea that maybe I could also adopt a dog, since I would have the capacity and time staying indoors. I chose not to, for financial reasons, but instead, I created a New Year's resolution for myself, to pick up a new hobby—to collect plants and be a plant dad.

Because it was my first time, I decided to do some research on plants, the same way that dance artists, scholars, and choreographers find ideas and concepts from doing research. I looked up videos, articles, and anything online to learn more about houseplants. I started off with some succulents because apparently they were considered the easiest plants to take care of for beginners. I bought planters, soil, grow lights and many things that were said to be necessary. Just like a dancer, as I learn more, I've become invested and committed to improving my knowledge. Eventually, I felt like I was ready to expand my collection with different plants. In the next three or four months, I already had a desk full of plants with grow lights installed. I even have the lights operated by my phone. My room has completely transformed, almost like a greenhouse.

I was really ambitious and curious to find out even more. I've learned so many things, such as the intensity of sunlight, the color spectrum, Kelvins, germination, propagation, transpiration and many more things I didn't realize played a huge part in plant growth! Curiosity is always a great mentality for dancers, right? The way dancers learn and become great artists is by learning different dance styles and, importantly, critical issues in dance, politics, history, and cultures. I realized that not every plant grows the same but the concept of how it grows is pretty much similar. Some grow in a linear way; for example, plants grow from a seed or node, then a stem, and the cycle repeats. But what stood out to me more was a stem system called a rhizome. For anyone who doesn't know what a rhizome is, it's a horizontal subterranean plant stem that is often thickened by deposits of reserve food material, produces shoots above and roots below, and is distinguished from a true root in possession buds, nodes and usually scalelike leaves (Merriam Webster).

Plants that grow from a rhizome are different from those that grow from a seedling or a node. A tree grows from a seedling. A monstera plant may start from a seedling but can also grow from a node, where you take cuttings and propagate it. However, a snake plant can be propagated and multiplied from a rhizome. When a rhizome gathers enough water, nutrients and sunlight, it produces a node and sprouts vertically, but what makes it different is that it continuously repeats this cycle underground and spreads out stems across the soil.

The idea of making the rhizome into a philosophical concept came from two theorists, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. This concept of “rhizome” is described as a process of existence and growth that does not come from a single central point of origin (Mambrol). Like I mentioned before, a tree grows vertically from a seedling and then has a trunk that grows branches with leaves, flowers and seeds which is more arborescent. It comes from a single central point and is bound to one plant. There are other examples that can be rhizomatic, like streams that flow into other streams, ant colonies/trails, and burrows.

If I was reading this, I may be thinking “Why am I reading about philosophy now and what a rhizome is?” To answer this question, philosophy can be applied to dance just the way it’s applied to life in general. The study of philosophy enhances one’s problem-solving capacities, such as analyzing concepts, definitions, arguments and problems (De Zoysa). It opens new ways to think critically about how we may want to grow in our artistry, creativity, and methodology.

Although philosophy can be complicated and complex to decipher, I will explain this concept to make it more accessible for you to understand and hopefully apply it to dance. But first, I’ll list here the six fundamental properties that Deleuze and Guattari considered to be rhizomatic.

1. Principles of connection
2. Principles of heterogeneity: at any point a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be (Deleuze and Guattari). One must connect and be open to newness.
3. Multiplicity; meaning it can be formed into new identities. In a video, doctoral student David Guignon explained that rhizomes are not bound to a specific plant and have systems of their own that create new possibilities (Guignon).
4. Principles of “asignifying rupture,” which means that even if it breaks off of the rhizome, it will continue somewhere from that rupture.
5. Principles of cartography
6. Principles of decalomania. A rhizome’s trajectory is only mappable and not traceable. A tree has roots where you can trace back to a singular point, but by looking at a rhizome, it is so intertwined with other rhizomes that we cannot trace the starting point.

If dancers want to start thinking of being a rhizome, they should be open to new things, possibilities, and newness. Just like how Deleuze and Guattari explained about multiplicity, it

must be forming into new identities and becoming something more. In my experience, that adaptability to new directions played out this way: I came from a hip-hop background, and that was the only dance experience I had before coming to college for my BFA in Dance. If I wanted to assimilate, adapt, or survive, I had to take on different paths and learn different styles of dance, which then led me to learn ballet and modern dance. It later became part of my dance vocabulary and DNA.

My cultural heritage and identity have always been a huge part of my life, a driving force in my artistry and the stories I tell. Now, I can now look at it from different perspectives. The more I research into my cultural identity and connect it to dance, the more I learn about the multiplicity of myself. Being a teacher, student, dancer and choreographer are all identities of mine, and I switch these hats depending on the circumstances that I am in. These identities are like the nodes of the rhizomes. The more I supply my work with nutrients, the more it might sprout into something. By opening to new possibilities, new identities and hats will form.

As dancers, we share stories, knowledge, practices and ideas with others. When I am teaching a dance class or choreographing, I am taking a part of me and giving it away to another student or dancer, which is why it's very important to me that I share something that may be valuable to them, whether it's the experience, story, or legacy. If someone teaches a warm-up or exercise that I find valuable, I may want to put that into my methodology of teaching and choreography. Inspirations are always bound to happen and methodologies will pass on from mentors and teachers. I would like to share my knowledge with someone if they find it useful. When I choreograph movements and share a concept of a piece to a group of dancers, it is my story that I am giving to the dancers.

Philosophy is hard to grasp on and takes time to understand. I realized that the more I look into philosophies, the more I dig deeper into new ideas and ways to think critically, and that's the mentality dancers should start cultivating. Even getting sucked into rabbit holes on the internet is rhizomatic, because you're constantly obtaining new ideas from every direction in life and it continues on. Dancers are just not bodies and movers but researchers and scholars who learn from history and collect knowledge.

My question for you is how can you apply the concept of a rhizome into dance? How can we keep improving our artistry as dancers, teachers, choreographers and researchers? A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo (Deleuze and Guattari). Again, think of a tree as a life form that is linear but dancers can also be rhizomatic, that is, nonlinear and continue horizontally. Are we going to be already developed, or continue to be developing? I encourage and recommend you to look into your dance DNA and find the multiplicity of your identities.

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