

Twelve Conceptions of Imagination – by Leslie Stevenson

- (1) The ability to think of something not presently perceived, but spatio-temporally real.
- (2) The ability to think of whatever one acknowledges as possible in the spatio-temporal world.
- (3) The ability to think of something that the subject believes to be real, but which is not.
- (4) The ability to think of things that one conceives of as fictional.
- (5) The ability to entertain mental images.
- (6) The ability to think of anything at all.
- (7) The non-rational operations of the mind, that is, those explicable in terms of causes rather than reasons.
- (8) The ability to form perceptual beliefs about public objects in space and time.
- (9) The ability to sensuously appreciate works of art or objects of natural beauty without classifying them under concepts or thinking of them as useful.
- (10) The ability to create works of art that encourage such sensuous appreciation.
- (11) The ability to appreciate things that are expressive or revelatory of the meaning of human life.
- (12) The ability to create works of art that express something deep about the meaning of life.

Dance and the Imagination

An inspiration turned into a fantasy based reality
A dream envisioned and resourcefully staged
Mental creative pictures coming to life
Inventiveness using human movement in space
Innovation and individuality whether improvised or more formally choreographed
Expressive bodily ideas
Experiential corporal representations
Artistic power and ingenuity transposed into physical form
Presentational musculo-skeletal creative power
Originality of how bodies relate to space, to music, to themselves and to other bodies
Nonconformity through make believe physical play
Unorthodox arrangement of body, space and time
Flair to everyday actions and movement sequences
Conceptual panache of motion (human bodies or maybe not human bodies)
Visual designs of the mind's eye
Fancy blueprints of tangible physicality
Intricate enthusiasm concretely organized with body parts (singular or multiple)
A formation of remembered or re-created scenes
A mock world of actuality
An abstract universe of bodies and or objects
A styling of romantic interpretations
A pretended, logical moving sculptural composition
A clever physical realization

- **Teresa Ceccon**

So much of the teaching/training of dance comes down to many of these statements/concepts for me. Imagination equals transcendence. Inclusive of statements 1, 2, 3, 5, 11, and 12 are all things I work to create an experience of in technique class. From exploring concepts to learning rep, there are many times that I am focusing the dancers effort to go beyond what they know, what they think they know and what they have as finite in their imagination. The ability/skill to embrace possibilities known and unknown and go forward, with faith and commitment.

Similar to statement #3, "The ability to think of something the subject believes to be real, but is not. Often, student dancers are full of what they are "unable" to yet do-focusing on their 'known' limitations to push them heavily through class (bogged down with negativity). As an educator, empowering them to not only acknowledge and embrace their artistry, but to further go beyond their perceived liabilities to unknown (and often extraordinarily beautiful) territory is my job to encourage and light a path of possibilities.

1. Dancers seeing beyond what they think is possible for themselves as individuals
2. The faith and subsequent belief that they can create the artistry they wish to
3. Not limiting themselves solely to form and 'end level' limiting beliefs (i.e. perfect turnout, 5 turns)
5. Entertaining images is so much of what we do as artists
11. For me-almost all of the class/rep work I do with them centers on the ability to appreciate things that are expressive or revelatory of the meaning of human life

Lakey Evans-Peña

Dance and the Imagination

In looking at these given concepts about dance and the imagination, I can't help but instantly gravitate towards the last three. The ability of creating and appreciating is so gracefully intertwined in the idea of imagining. As a dancemaker, my goal is to share a vision that I birthed in such a way that is abstract, beyond the immediacy of ones' interpretation. As a dancer, I appreciate the generosity of other imaginative creators to provide me with the imagery and freedom to translate through my own movement understanding. This would obviously fall into the category of entertaining mental images. One of the definitions of imagination is " the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful." I believe this holds true in the simple fact that imagination can only spur from things that do exist. You take something that is real and then

you add fantasy or abstraction to it and it becomes fictional in a sense. It becomes something else. Dance has a special way of transforming the known into the unknown.

When it comes to the imagination, it's also important to remember that each individual has different understandings or opinions about what's real. When you talk about religion there are those that believe God is real and others who do not. Some believe the afterlife is real, others do not. I could go on but I think it's evident where I am going, "real" is a state of mind, perception, individual experiences. So when we bring dance into the equation, there's the body that people see on stage doing real, unbelievable things, and there's the intent behind what the body is doing that takes viewers on a mental/emotional and spiritual journey. That in itself, is the imagination taking form. **Lauren Putty White**

Imagination is, at its simplest, allowing your inner child to thrive through constant play and exploration, uninhibited by the strict rules of science, reason, law, or a judgmental and codified society. It requires serving as an open channel to allow information and ideas to flow freely into your space from other realms; realms that may stem from one's environment, or somewhere less definable. It requires an open mind and a sense of freedom and limitlessness.

While I believe strongly in the idea of every human action stemming from a complex intermingling of genetic and environmental factors, I believe an extra ingredient is somehow part of imagination. An *internal magical world*, if you will.

While creative practices may be implemented by artists, I think true imagination is an ongoing mindset, 24/7. The imagination will not be held hostage by short blocks of carved time – it requires and chooses time to focus on such things. If inspiration for a piece strikes, it should be worked on in that moment if possible.

Extreme creativity also requires openness to unlimited sources of inspiration; ideas can spawn from anything and everything. It's also critical to not let personal judgement of your own creations (or expected critique from others) taint your process (and spirit). True imagination also encourages an appreciation of the oddities and bizarreness of others, in both creative work and life in general. – **Rebekka Nodhturft**

When I think of imagination, I think of the ability to make connections when things don't seem to connect — call it, 'Creative Problem Solving.' Vinod Khosia's quote comes to mind: "Not thinking it's possible is a failure of imagination." It's 'out-of-the-box' thinking. A large part of that is imagining something that doesn't exist. In terms of dance and imagination—they are inextricably linked. One uses imagination to recall emotions needed in interpreting a character for performance, to picture an overall aesthetic before it comes to fruition, to invent new artistic concepts, to invent new movements and phrases, to connect old movements and phrases, to picture your body executing a movement before you've even done it, to try something new...the list goes on and on.

Imagination comes to most at an early age. Certainly, a child playing make believe already has an understanding of imagination. Once grown, a person may imagine an idea and actually act on fulfilling it, while others are content with the mere image of it. But, while it is possible to cultivate imagination, it is not possible to dance without it at all. Whether a student or a choreographer, imagination exists. In order to fully participate in dance class, the student must imagine what the teacher is asking in order to execute a movement. The same with learning or creating choreography. Even if one is to look upon a dance technique as utilitarian, imagination was still used in order to create that technique. That imagined technique leads to a dance that viewers, in utilizing their imagination, can then "sensuously appreciate" it as it is presented. One can only imagine the endless options when using one's imagination. – **Laurena Barros**

Sometimes a child is said to possess an "hyperactive imagination." Dwelling too much in pretend can be dangerous.

Artists fabricate hyperactive untruths. We entertain ourselves imagining the art we will make and the fame we will garner.

In making dances there is a tension between that which is imagined and that which is embodied. I often have a picture of a dance before I make it. This picture may come about as a result of writing a grant proposal. I describe what my future dance will look like and what it means. I think of this dance prevision as a "future memory," like the image you have of a travel destination before you visit. The dance pre-memory (the moves you never made) might linger in your imagination past your experience of the real thing (the dance you actually perform).

I've imagined so many more dances than I will ever get to make. And I must abandon each one before I go to the studio. Fortunately, imagination takes many forms. When I get started with the dancemaking, there is a generative physical imagination. In this spontaneous phase, you respond to the phenomena of the room or the inner workings of your body or the shift of weight of a partner and go with the flow, dareisay, without "thinking too much." Then this other imagination kicks in and grabs ideas here and there and assembles, expands, varies this material various ways: first in the mind; then in a notebook; and then on bodies. Seeing these assemblages--constructed mentally or actually embodied before you--prompts further imaginings of where this dance could go. Arriving at a destination--a "finished" work--involves both engaging and suspending imagination, leading with the image and following with the body, leading with the body and following with the image. – **Jody Sperling**

If imagination is the ability to envision or develop ideas constructed in imagined realms, then imagination is a strong prerequisite for being a choreographer. It also could be seen as a necessity for being an effective performer. The expressive quality of dance could perhaps be considered synonymous with imagination. If dancers can not visualize or make connections between non obvious realms, they would not have the same ability to connect with movement. In order to create a dance that has the ability to express something abstract like sorrow or regret through movement, choreographers must have the ability to entertain mental images which can then be translated into movement. Definition #12 “The ability to create works of art that express something deep about the meaning of life” seems to apply directly to choreographers. Without the use of imagination I think the artistry of dance would be much more limited for dancers, choreographers, and audience members.

Definition #11 “The ability to form perceptual beliefs about public objects in space and time seems like it could be a definition for site-specific dance choreography. To sit in a place and imagine how to embody that space through movement requires many degrees of imagination. In addition definition #9, “The ability to sensuously appreciate works of art or objects of natural beauty without classifying them under concepts or thinking of them as useful” seems to be something that audience members would need to possess in order to appreciate a dance work, especially post modern dance, or dance that works with the abstract as a focus.

Lastly definition #5 “The ability to entertain mental images” is often my starting point for the choreographic process. You have to be able to mentally imagine what a dance might look like as a starting point. It can often be a challenge to make that mental image come alive with the tools you are trying to work with, but I can’t imagine not having imagination and still being able to make meaningful choreography. (hahaha). – **Alexis Kamitses**

I don’t recall many times hearing a choreographer use the word “imagination.” Is the word “creative” more sophisticated than “imaginative?” “Imaginative” sounds *more* sophisticated than “imagination.” However, I wouldn’t think to use my imagination when creating a new piece, I would default to using my creativity, even though I would assume my imagination is working in the creative process.

Creativity can act like an experiment to see what “lands.” Imagination is a voluntary adventure into a new world that is understood to not be reality, yet, at the same time, exercising the ability to fabricate and experience mental images, believing they are real even though it is known at the same time it is fiction. To dive into one’s imagination is to be the driver and passenger at the same time. We are told that children have “wild imaginations” and that word

“wild” can have a slightly undesirable connotation. It is only natural that the use of such a *wild* habit is stifled in adulthood. Adults with *wild* imaginations can oftentimes be labeled as out of touch with reality, aloof, or immature.

We are all born with an imagination and we’ve never needed explicit instruction in how to use it. I transformed the woods next to my house, the construction sites in my backyard, the farm at my grandparents’ house. Recalling these memories invigorates my mind. I can relive those years with feeling, specificity, and excitement. During my childhood, my imagination had *space* to be exercised. As an adult, that area of my brain has atrophied. But, my imagination is resuscitated when I’m playing with my 3 year old niece, and her tent becomes a secret cave, and mommy becomes an evil troll that we’re spying on. Sweet Shiloh and I lean in and experience our new world as equals.

QUOTES

Creating Minds - Howard Gardner “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranging the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?”

“What may distinguish creative individuals is their ways of productively using the insights, feelings, and experiences of childhood...It is in this sense that the adult creator draws repeatedly on the capital of childhood.”

“...one of the essential traits of the artist is that he is born an experimenter...Only because the artist operates experimentally does he open new fields of experience and disclose new aspects and qualities in familiar scenes and objects.” -John Dewey (Ecker p.286-287)

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” (Eliot)

--Lindsey Ferguson

Imagination is an important key in dancing for many reasons. We use imagery constantly in a classroom setting. We imagine an arc in space as we grand battement. We think about the shape of a spiral as our torso coils around. We use our imagination when devising choreography. Each aspect of a dance starts as a spark in the mind- we see movements, spatial patterns, costume ideas, the set design. I use my imagination in preparation for a rehearsal or performance by visualizing myself executing the movement. In my personal practice, imagination may be the most important element and catalyst for discovery and change. I can use the power of imagination to expand the scope of possibilities and conjure sensation from a mere thought.

Though I cannot see my own skeleton, I imagine my bones floating inside the sack of my skin. They are weightless and barely tethered to one another, bobbing in the liquid that fills the cavity of my form. I see them begin to drift out of place, toward the edges of my skin. I can combine bits of the present reality of my body and snatches of residual sensation from other experiences with a dash of fantasy, a flourish of the impossible. Sometimes the mind can overpower the blunt facts of physicality. Now the aqueous sack transforms to a glass jar. The once swimming bones, now dry and brittle, rattle against the hard contours of the jar. I see them, long and thin, clattering wildly. In space, my body follows suit as parts project haphazardly in the space around me. I embody imaginary situations and create a sort of magical realism game for myself. I am no longer limited by the confines of technique, style, or anatomical function.

- **Candice Schnurr**

Whenever Flaubert, the French 19th century novelist, ran out of ideas, he would throw himself on the sofa and close his eyes: he called it the “marinade”. In an essay on writing, Barthes analyzes this moment as “an ambiguous situation since this sign of failure was also the place of phantasms from which work would slowly resume.” (48, 1968).

I often ask my husband, an illustrator whose work depends on the ability to generate ideas quickly to respond to various genres of texts and who often marinates: “how do you do it?”.

It is a question of habit he answers, a sort of gymnastic of the mind that can only happen when you take the time to let your mind free to wander. The more you do it, the better you get at it. It makes sense to me. Although I seem to only have one idea every two years, ideas around that idea come in the morning as if sleeping (dreaming? Thinking in dreams?) had brought new perspectives.

Imagination is the ability to create bridges between different ideas, the ability to connect and combine images, stories, concepts and movements together in order to extract a different “reading” than when they were first perceived and received. Everybody has imagination. Imagination is Penny’s necklace exercise. The more one is exposed to - the more one observes, experiences and reflects - the more connections can be made. Balanchine’s advice to a young dancer aspiring to become a choreographer was: “your eyes is camera and your brain is a file cabinet” (in Dixon Gottschild, 1996, 64).

References

Barthes, Roland. *Flaubert et la phrase*. Word 1968 24:1-3, 48-54, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.1968.11435512

Full citation “La séquestration flaubertienne a pour centre (et pour symbole) un meuble qui n'est pas la table de travail, mais le lit: lorsque le fond de la peine est atteint, Flaubert se jette sur son sofa: c'est la "marinade," situation d'ailleurs ambiguë, car le signe de l'échec est aussi le lieu du fantasme, d'où le travail va peu à peu reprendre” (48)

Gotschild, Brenda Dixon. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*. Greenwood Press 1996.

- **Emmanuele Phuon**

Imagination and dance applies to both the observer and the practitioner.

Phenomenologically, dance projects images and fosters mental recollections of personal moments, stemming from personal experience. Alternatively, it can take you somewhere beyond yourself as you connect these thoughts and images. This is the limitation of human experience, our limited perspective, but through this we may then leap into new territory. Imagination can also stems from the subconscious, so imagined scenarios and images that seem unrecognizable are generating from experiences that have embedded themselves into the subconscious and away from memory and makes connections with the stimulus of dance to catapult into a new direction.

Imagination can be felt, and the dance observer's kinetic empathy can lead the mind to imaginative realms, stirring the physical potential within the body, that are separate and yet layers upon the performance action. As a performer, kinetic imagination fuels movement and moments within a work to construct texture. This sometimes has nothing to do with the work being performed, but more the way a movement or moment sparks the mind individually, such as imagining you have wings or that something is crawling up your spine to illicit a specific texture or approach.

Dance can sometimes serve as a meditative form for both viewer and dancer, and from meditation, imagination is sparked to see and feel images as a "ghost" of an experience.

A choreographer may also imagine the progression/trajectory of a work in process, or an observer may imagine the next expected pathway or movement. A well-crafted work will defy the imagination or satisfy it at times as a structural tease. – **Caitlin Dutton**

The human brain is humanity's most powerful feature. It is what separates and classifies humankind as an advance, high intellect species and houses its intangible gift, the conscious mind. Ironically, like the physical brain, the mind holds imperceptible qualities as well, such as thought, feeling, attitude, belief and imagination (William B. Salt II., MD), which all are utilized to navigate through life. These attributes are significant and are used differently by each individual. One of the most diverse and unique of these qualities is imagination, for it is a skilled intimately connect to one's distinctive character and assists in comprehending the incomprehensible, making or remaking desires, sharing values and as a method of escaping realities or problem solving, giving rise to the notion that imagination is a chief skill among those who create or investigate aspects of life, such as an engineer, scientist, chef, educator and even, artists.

Particularly those in dance and other performing arts, artists allow imagination to help conceptualize and materialize their work by using the entertainment of their craft as a medium of expression, with intentions to stimulate or inspire a sense of enlightenment in spectators. To produce, artists undergo a form of qualitative problem solving by using selected knowledge obtained from previous experiences and fuse that knowledge with their imagination, which can take the form of realistic or fictionalized theorizing, mental and physical embodiment or applying unrelated qualities, such as movement having emotional characteristics in dance. Other proficiencies include observing and remembering details of physical and mental qualities, practicing diverse methods of exploration, identifying idealism or fantasy, being visionary, mentally transporting oneself into other perspectives or worlds that are unattainable or not physically present, suspending beliefs and dismissing normalcy. It is through these methods that one sensibly judges their product and practices making impossible, possible, and uniqueness out of commonness. <https://www.sharecare.com/health/teen-perspective-learning-and-memory/what-difference-between-mind-brain> - **Mark Harootian**

Imagination and Performance

“Go onstage with 80 images in your back pocket, because when you get out there, 79 of them will fly away.” --Anna Sokolow

A performer can use imagination to convey non narrative, non specific, abstract undertones in performance. This adds a dimension to performance which is at once intangible, and both visible and visceral to the viewer. Imagination is the private playground of the performer – the vast spaces within rhythm and meter. Freedom layered onto and detachable from the prescribed gesture — infinitely expandable or disposable and replaceable on a whim. Imagination, when joined with movement, projects non-verbal subtext to the audience and adds maturity and subtleties to the performance. Imagination provides a structure for individuality even when the dancers move simultaneously. Imagination also becomes a mechanism for variables within the performance script, so that the dance may be revealed anew without changing the choreography. It exposes new crevices and clearings within a dance and protects a work from turning rote or stale. While imagery can be easily shared and disseminated across a cast of dancers, imagination, and how an artist accesses it, is immensely personal. Imagination can seem to be attached to the front of a movement like a prefix, the end of a movement like a suffix, or be over-arching to encompass the whole. Movement can drive the imagination, or imagination can drive the movement. All of this fluidly churns at any given moment so that the motion can pour out of the dancers as though thoughts.

– **Samantha Geracht**

I find that I use my imagination, and make use of imagination, in several ways throughout my dance making process. When choreographing a musical, there are lots of factors pre-determined for you, but most of these elements are either described in stage directions, or come in the form of a designer’s drafts, renderings, or models. I have to use my imagination to envision the summation of this info into a world for the show, how my ideas might function with all of this, and to think of how my ideas can evolve.

After collecting all of this outside information, I listen to the music over and over to make myself incredibly familiar with it, and to let my imagination take control to see what there is to see. In this sense, I make use of my imagination as a transitional space in which reality mixes with fiction, though be it only in my mind. These moving mental images help me establish the movement qualities, phrasings, shapes, patterns, and storytelling moments that I will then begin to develop in a studio.

Further along on in the process, when rehearsals begin, I then have to ask the dancers and actors to use their imaginations in order envision what it is we're working towards. Here, imagination is used as a unifying agent that allows for a collective consciousness and awareness. I share with them what it is I think I see, and how I imagine it all working, and allow them to influence them as it may.

The end result aims to create a production that sparks the audience's imagination to the effect that it allows and invites the audience to accept and invest in an altered representation of reality as reality itself. – **John Scacchetti**