

DANCE BEFORE THE LORD

Claire Blakeley—Department of Exercise and Sports Science

Editor's Note: Claire spoke with Vaun Waddell on 21 March 2007.

Claire: Sometimes a former student mentions how you impacted her life. What impacted me most were dance classes in my first few years here as a dance teacher.

Vaun: How old were you when you began taking dance?

Claire: About five. A cousin of mine was our teacher.

Vaun: Did you eventually study classical ballet?

Claire: Yes, at BYU–Provo. Did I dream about someday being a dancer? Sure. It was a dream. I was a junior in college when I went to Provo in 1969. And I went to Salt Lake and watched Ballet West. Professional companies came to Provo, and I took lessons from them too. At BYU–Provo I took ballet, modern dance, technique, history, and choreography. I took all the classes in the Dance Department.

Vaun: When I was teaching in Moscow, Russia, in 1995-6, we went to at least one concert a week, and often it was dance. I've enjoyed the dance competitions here on campus too. Well, let's get back to your study at BYU–Provo.

Claire: That was my major; I majored in dance. I had done gymnastics too, and from 1971 until 1975 we lived in Sun Valley and I taught at Wood River High School, all kinds of sports and dance. In the summers the school district let me use the high school gym to teach modern dance, ballet, and gymnastics. In those days this was the community recreation program. Professional dance companies came to Sun Valley too, mostly modern, and sometimes I went to Salt Lake to dance programs. At the end of each summer the children would do a recital. I had some really good gymnasts. One girl, whose family came to Sun Valley for the summers, went to the Olympics. As she got older, she helped me teach. Her mom would say, "She needs some ballet. She needs some modern dance." So I taught her dance.

Then in 1975 my husband was hired in Rexburg at Madison Junior High School, and we moved here. The next year I was hired at Ricks College. I taught ballet and modern dance

and gymnastics. Some years I taught volleyball, and sometimes swimming.

Vaun: You've been involved with lots of forms of dance. What have you liked most?

Claire: Well, the modern dance I really like because of the creativity and imagination, and sometimes we did character dances. One year we did a dance with a schoolteacher and students, and we had a young man as the teacher. It was very light hearted and enjoyable, and what we tried to do was make it look like a classroom in the 1940s where the students did everything in unison. It was a lot of fun. And then one year we did one with kites. I didn't do a lot of abstract dance. I like props, and I like a strong theme. I learned a lot about choreography, which I really like.

Vaun: How do you feel about connections between classical dance and modern dance?

Claire: First, the dancers have to have the classical basics. I tell students they need to study classical dance. If you think about it, the body is designed for dance. For example, your legs are at an angle for turnout when you point your toe. And the other thing about dance and gymnastics is application of the laws of physics, as in the ability to jump—levers and fulcrums and balance. Modern dancers take the classical lines and extension into creative and imaginative expressions.

Vaun: What happens when you watch creative dancers who don't have classical training?

Claire: It's obvious in the angles and body alignment and carriage. You need the basics. I love the classical ballet, but I like modern dance because of the variety. I like to see the dancers intertwined and connected. Modern dancers modify the classical positions and stretch them.

Vaun: As in Cirque du Soleil, things we see there?

Claire: Yes. I love that. Cirque du Soleil is wonderful. I love the music and the movement, with gymnastics added.

Vaun: You mentioned choreography. I remember George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, and at the University of Utah, Willam F. Christensen.

- Claire: I've seen a lot of work by Agnes DeMille and Martha Graham. A lot of people think you start with the music and organize movement to it. The old choreographers said you start with the idea and the movements and find music for it, or even find a composer to design music for what you have. Choreography is telling a story with beginning, middle, and end.
- Vaun: Anymore, when I watch a ballet and the complications arise, I find myself thinking, "If only these people would talk to each other." But ballet is not that medium.
- Claire: In your field you call it composition, and in mine it's called choreography. Labanotation is a way of writing down the movements to communicate them to others. Whether by recording the dance itself or through Labanotation, the story can be preserved.
- Vaun: Earlier you were saying that the central question about dance is artistic expression with the human body.
- Claire: I taught how dance involves an understanding of our bodies and who we are and our self-esteem. I don't think of dance as an ego trip, but as a way to get to know one's strengths and weaknesses through movement of the body. I think of it as training in a form of self-awareness.
- Vaun: With regard to the inner self or with regard to what other people see?
- Claire: It's inner, not how anybody sees you. Even in dance, they talk about the negative space. We talk about positive space and negative space, and as a dancer you're trained to look to the negative space and the movement going through that space, projected outward from the inner self. You can't be inhibited. You have to be able to move and express yourself. So many students are so inhibited. This is connected to the inner self. They are so afraid. What dance does is overcome fear. It's taking the inner self and projecting it outward. It is a method of overcoming self-fears.
- Vaun: Is an audience even implied?
- Claire: No, you don't have to have one. It's unimportant. Is the performance important? Not necessarily. To my feeling, it's the self-expression, like getting rid of pent up anger or energy or emotion, or even just learning about what's inside. It's very gradual. It takes time. It doesn't matter why you do

it, but if you would like your children to be confident, like themselves, and be aware of their bodies, then sign them up for dance. Let children take gymnastics, and buy them a jump rope. If you have strong muscles and a strong body it raises your oxygen level, it helps your blood supply to the brain and to the heart and the lungs, and it energizes your spirit. That's something else I think dance does: it connects the spirit and the body.

Vaun: This morning I found eleven scriptural passages that have dance or dancing in them. There are those two extremely dangerous dances where the cost of the dance was someone's head. But the pattern becomes very clear. Dance is intended to be connected with rejoicing, with being merry, with praising God.

Claire: Yes, I think it is. I think what we need to do is come into deeper contact with our spirits and with spiritual thoughts.

Vaun: Some people have a gift for doing that by introspection, some by reading the scriptures or serving. Have you seen people with a gift for spiritual development through dance? Do you have stories about that?

Claire: Yes, I do. In 1980, I went to Germany and Austria with Ricks College dancers. Every time we performed, everywhere we went, it was like the students bearing testimony of God. We learned "I Am a Child of God" in German and sang it at the end of the programs. It was like a five-week mission, expressing our testimony through dance and music. We even went into East Germany. It was wonderful because we knew we were energizing people through dance.

Vaun: You are suggesting that in the studio the dance student works on inner meaning and inner expression, an inner-acquaintance with the self and the world and the space. And then in a performance, the well-prepared student can communicate his own or her own discoveries to any who are prepared to understand them.

Claire: Right. Another time we had seven girls prepared to dance at a stake center in Idaho Falls for a Young Women's night. In their hurry they forgot the music and called me in a panic. I drove down with the music, but when I got there they had finished. They had danced in total silence; no one made a noise the whole time. After the dance, a mother came up

and said, “That was so wonderful. My daughter is deaf, and I never experienced until tonight what her life is.” So I think you don’t even need music to touch their spirits.

I have been enjoying the concerts here on campus. I think Wendy Bone is spectacular. Every time I go, chills run up and down my spine. Sometimes it’s spiritual and sometimes it’s just for the pleasure. Sometimes it’s intended to move the audience and sometimes it’s more the performance itself. Some, like Jennifer O’Farrell, are so practiced that they can do the same performance night after night and move every audience. As the performance becomes flawless, the communication becomes clear. ∞