

Contemporary Movement Choirs – Dance in Public Spaces connecting people, place, and sometimes ‘issues.’

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My own contemporary experience is that the process of developing a “movement choir” is where self-expression and group cohesion can be in dialogue. There has been debate as to whether performing in ‘movement choirs’ results in diminishing one’s individual self-expression, amplifying an experience of nihilism as performers dedicate themselves to a larger cause. With awareness of the popularity of Flash Mobs, the urgency of the physical and social need for help on our planet, and the joy of choral engagement in mind I invite you to design and engage in movement choir dancing using a contemporary movement choir perspective. The following ideas can help you to make your own decisions about the nature of choral and community dance - linking Laban history, current day themes, and your own community values.

In creating a modern movement choir I like to explore contrasting features within diverse large choral dances. The important features of modern choral dance events that I have identified include:

- the movement capacity to be shared with large groups of people (its level of complexity-simplicity, gestural-postural, pathways, use LMA to determine),
- degree of spatial clarity in performance
- pedestrian movement and basic dance (and special placement of virtuosity)
- the use of unique indoor or outdoor sites,
- play with large or colorful props,
- the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the participants,
- costuming with pedestrian clothes or special clothes,
- whether a message is being delivered (text on T-shirts, banners, or video),
- orchestrating dance with live or popular music,
- quality of video documentation,
- whether the work is backed by corporate or shoestring financing,
- and the juxtapositions of groups or soloists - communicating varied types of relationships.

And of course another key feature is the degree to which the event involves the audience, has no audience, or surprises the local community into becoming the audience or even a participant.

Here are some specific types of choral events that provide elements as food for thought:

RE: Dancing for Pleasure - Flash Mob in Belgium Train Station:

“People like viral videos, they like flash mobs, and they like weird junk on the Internet, but this video has struck an especially emotional chord with those

who've watched it..."¹ The dancers are presenting the purest form of art imaginable: art simply and truly for the sake of art...They managed to punch right through my cynicism and show me that good things are still out there and there are good people in the world...In a small way, I have a deeper understanding of what it is to be human because of the actions of 200 fellow humans in a train station in Belgium." It's a publicity stunt for a reality show, but that doesn't seem to bother anyone, they just like it for what it is: a really cool, well shot video, that lets average people express their joy and talent and make those around them happy for a brief period. The producers chose the exact right song: one that harkens back to our childhoods, but also recalls Maria's unabashed upbeatness in the face of evil. We're in a global economic crisis, America's fighting two wars, there's genocide in Darfur, AIDs running rampant, and a pretty good shot that we could all be killed by bird flu in a year or two. We need this video."²

RE: Dancing at a Gallery Opening at the University of Maryland, USA

Author Judith Lynne Hanna describes her experience dancing in her first movement choir. She writes "During this period," says Karen Bradley, Certified Movement Analyst (CMA) and professor of dance at the University of Maryland's College Park campus, "the confluence of various art forms with the ideas of free love, feminism, organic gardening, and freemasonry inevitably led to explorations of new forms of dance making and dance performance." Laban's Movement Choir drew upon improvisational impulses, music theory and visual design for a new kind of folk dance. ...Bradley continues, "The movement choirs were amateur groups, everyday people who came to Laban's training programs to fulfill what was a growing concern about the human being within the state, the role of spirituality within religion, and the role of the psyche within the dark and light forces at play in the 1920s. Adult students would come into classes that explored expanding and condensing, individual and group consciousness, breathing and storytelling, space (choreutics) and expressivity (eukinetics)."³

...With the experience of dancing in the choir led by Karen Bradley – Gretchen Dunn's response to participating in the Choir: "I embrace ANY opportunity to dance. Improvisation, especially in a group, is a joy because you can play off one another--ignore, mirror, play with. It is the ATTENTION / LISTENING / ACTION that you do that is so satisfying. The score/outline is there, too, to coordinate, make a whole."³

RE: Movement Choirs and the Environment

Moving On Center's work in Participatory Arts (Martha Eddy) There is a strong history within the fields of Somatic Education and Dance Somatics of getting large groups of dancers together to do simple but powerful dances about a theme. Themes span from cultural values, work experiences, or environmental concerns. The forms that these Community Participatory Events have taken include Laban Movement Choirs, Anna Halprin's Planetary Dances, and current Movement Events that incorporate different mixes of flash dancing, movement choirs, and tableaux. One type of flash dance – movement choir morph has been

called EarthMobbing. Born out of the SEEDS festival in 2008 I presented the term eco-somatics and a curriculum for teaching ecological concepts through somatic movement. Prior to that Marylee Hardenburgh coordinated 7 simultaneous site specific dances for the public in seven cities along the Mississippi River.⁴ In 2009 my students of Dynamic Embodiment combined information from Environmental Sustainability with movement choirs for the Bioneers conference in Ithaca, New York. Members of the team continue to lead movement choirs under the name EarthMob.

However the concept of helping bring awareness to ecological disasters through dance is not always considered positively. The following sarcastic statement “I am sure your flash mob will reverse the laws of physics,” was in response to an invitation to join a flash mob intending to protest BP involvement in the Gulf of Mexico disaster.⁵

Members of the Laban community will continue to work toward environmental consciousness with our project Global Water Dances that includes sections with movement choir elements (www.GlobalWaterDances.org)⁶, as do Australian Youth gathered in Sydney calling for “PowerShift” for climate change.⁷

RE: Linking Up through Space and Place

And as many of you know, Movement choirs have recently been developed here in Berlin and as a way of linking people and spaces across continents. The partner city was New York. From CMA, Kristi Spessard we learn about her collaboration called URBANCHOIR Project with Cheryl Clark-Hopkins, D. Chase Angier and Balinda Craig-Quijada. Spessard writes: ‘The purpose of URBANCHOIRS Project is to investigate the transformative nature of large movement choirs for participants and viewers and discover the relevance of this choreographic form to the 21st Century. As artists we are interested in cross-cultural exchange and how the “life story” (atmosphere, architecture, nature, and communities) of a cityscape influences movement behavior and action... A Movement Choir is a choreographic format created by movement theorist Rudolf Laban (1879 – 1958) that created solidarity and excitement among participants and viewers alike. Being himself an architect, a choreographer and a visual artist, Laban believed Movement Choirs promoted a basic need in human society: sharing, relating and constructing together.’ This project worked to connect Washington Square Park in NYC and with Tiergarten in Berlin through dance.⁸

We come full circle in discussing Movement Choirs for pleasure. Engaging in movement choirs to experience the joy of being involved in art-making. Or for community building, as in the work of Sam and Susie Thornton in England.⁹

One blogger Chloe Veltman, a journalist who viewed a dance event called the *Illustrated Journal of Invisible Stories* by Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton performed in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center in January of this year wrote ‘...I found myself thinking of the movement

choir as a force of nature or an energy field that's ever-present in our lives but completely unknowable. I guess the best singing chorales in the world convey the same feeling when they sing masterworks like Monteverdi's *Vespers*, Tallis' *Spem in Allium* or Mozart's *Requiem*. Whether standing still and singing, or keeping their mouths shut and moving, choirs at their best can make us understand the word "harmony" in a profound way.¹⁰ Jan, 19 2010 in ArtsJournal blog

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