

*Laura Krasnic discusses the potential benefits of considering more than just traditional medicine for dance.*

In March, Dance UK's Healthier Dancer Programme hosted an illuminating discussion about complementary therapy for dance-related injury and illness. With thanks to the Rayne Foundation, space at the Royal Society of Medicine in London was provided for an impressive panel to be gathered. Leading the discussion was Pearl Jordan, former dancer, choreographer, and currently practising homeopath. She was joined by Dr. Brian Kaplan (Provocative Therapist and Homeopath), Caroline Kremer (Bowen practitioner), and Neville Hodgkinson (Medical and Science writer and journalist).

So, why consider complementary therapy? Well, the benefits promised include a holistic improvement in general wellbeing, as well as a quicker and more 'natural' healing of both mental and physical injuries. In a funny way, most dancers are not so far away from the practices of complementary therapy already. For example, a dancer will be the first to point out that an injury is more likely if they are not fully focussed on a movement, or to say that stress and anxiety is the reason they landed awkwardly from a jump and strained their knee. But go to your GP and he or she will most likely look at the painful shoulder or the strained knee and send you away with some pills and the instruction to rest. This may be a bit of an exaggeration, but the point is there. Dancers spend their entire time working with their whole body, and are more than aware that it works in a very joined-up way as one whole unit. It takes more than just a moving body to dance; feeling, thought and emotion are also highly involved. This essentially holistic awareness of mind and body is what gives dance a working kinship with complementary therapy.

The array of treatments to be found is vast, ranging from hypnotherapy to reflexology, and shiatsu to homeopathy. Given this, traditional orthodox medicine has approved a relatively limited pool of resources when it comes to both prevention and cure. Typically also, orthodox medicine tends to look at a patient as an almost unnamed and malfunctioning organism marked by a collection of symptoms. For Dr. Brian Kaplan, what is essentially missing here is the patient's self-awareness and involvement in his or her own wellbeing. We're taught to think of diagnosis and treatment as something that, by and large, should be left to the professionals. Added to this is the historical Western understanding of the body as something that works like a machine: parts can be mended or replaced, fluids and chemicals can be topped up or added. What the machine can't do is regenerate and repair itself in ways that the human body can, and this is something of which complementary therapies specifically take advantage.

To call complementary therapies "alternative", however, is a little misleading. Most practitioners of complementary medicine will stress that their methods are not intended to replace orthodox medicine. If you have broken your neck, for example, then go to the hospital, or in Kaplan's words, "heaven help you if you go anywhere else." But if you're suffering from irritable bowel syndrome or eczema, Kaplan's warning about traditional medicine is, "heaven help you if you stick to this."

Pearl Jordan explained how homeopathy tries to heal the patient in a general holistic way. This, in turn, allows the patient to heal him or herself. The aim is to find the underlying causes that obstruct the body from doing a better job for itself, and then prescribe a remedy to act as a catalyst in the healing process. However, these remedies are much disputed in the medical world, and Jordan is not at all reserved about the controversy surrounding the much diluted medicines used in her profession. There's an old joke stating that homeopathy is like buying very expensive water, because the medicines have been diluted so far that no trace of the homeopathic chemical remains. But the large numbers of people that have benefited from homeopathy have become staunch believers in the energy and healing properties of the water that once contained the original medicine. Jordan isn't promising a miracle cure, but has a few tricks up her sleeve to support and heal dancers as they train, perform, and eventually retire.

Caroline Kremer introduced a fascinating technique of gentle body manipulation, something like a highly specialised kind of touching, moving, and rolling of the skin called Bowen Technique. This was completely new to me, and I suspect will be new to many others. The aim, again, is to direct the body to correct imbalances and twists in posture by releasing tension in areas that are holding the skeleton out of place. Neville Hodgkinson then emphasised that science and spirituality could do with being brought into dialogue with each other. His approach adopts a holistic attitude towards the mental health of a dancer through what motivates their work. If countless medical conditions are exacerbated by stress, then Hodgkinson promotes a pro-active call to changing one's lifestyle for the better.

From the perspective of orthodox medicine however, there is little room for spirituality. The reason for this scepticism is at least partly defensible when you consider that the medical profession, like any other, is subject to abuse. Early apothecaries came under regulation precisely to prevent charlatans making financial gains from weak, sick and vulnerable patients through the sale of herbal remedies that didn't actually work. By the same token, the criticism pinned against many complementary therapies of today is that the effects of placebo are responsible for any perceived benefits. Placebo in this context is the human response to care and attention from the therapist, coupled with the power of belief in the treatment. Orthodox medicine is not in the habit of exchanging critical analysis of facts for faith and belief, so many complementary therapies including homeopathy have been scientifically rejected. But even if placebo *is* responsible for the benefits in complementary medicine, then why throw the baby out with the bath water? At the very least what is highlighted is somewhere the NHS falls frighteningly short. There is no credible bond between patient and physician, and no time for this level of care to be dispensed. Similarly, dancers may well like to try using some or other form of complementary medicine, but there is no financial or institutional support for this. Those who have benefited from Bowen technique, homeopathy, acupuncture, and hypnotherapy will tell you that they cannot put a price to their healing. But not everyone can afford the same attitude, it just depends how far you feel conventional medicine is doing you justice.

