



**Title of the article :** DANCING “LIFE”: UNLEARNING TO LEARN

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## DANCING “LIFE”: UNLEARNING TO LEARN

Dance notes by **Sashar Zarif**

(Testimonial contributions by Srabasti Ghosh, Tanushree Chatterjee and Durga Madher)

*[This is an invited article by Sashar Zarif who was the mentor-choreographer at the WDA ChoreoLab at the Ocean Dance Festival 2019, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh]*



*Photo: Sashar Zarif*

In 2019, the Bangladesh ‘Ocean Dance Festival’ organized WDAAP’s Choreolab by the coasts of the Bay of Bengal in Cox’s Bazar. The event was for a group of 19 young professional dance artists coming from across the regions of the Asia-Pacific. The mandate of the event was to foster the professional development of these artists as well as the maturation of dance practice through research, education and creation. I had the privilege of mentoring this vibrant group of talented artists.

My participation in directing the Choreolab was one of my many international projects facilitating young and emerging professional artists into finding an authentic connection between their dance practice, their reality, and their time and space. The project focused on both creative possibilities and challenges in a process of negotiating authenticity through the contemporization of traditional cultural material. It also explored “contemporary” as a concept and how that idea relates to the arts, particularly dance.

The process of the sessions included many discussions and experimentations to examine and interrogate the concept of identity in this age of neo-colonialism that uses globalization, cultural imperialism and socio-economic conditioning. The participants of the Choreolab were invited to explore in what circumstances contemporization leads to positive transformation and empowerment.

In this article, I would like to share with you the transformative process of this Choreolab, which culminated in an in-progress dance work called *Chand (Moon): The Reflection of a Wish*. *Chand* was a 30-minute choreography for 19 performers who vocalized, sung, and moved in a collective or communal ritual, which served to understand their present by reflecting on the past and looking towards their dreams.

**Sashar Zarif** is an internationally renowned multi-disciplinary performing artist, educator, and researcher whose artistic practice invites a convergence of creative and cultural perspectives. His interests are identity, globalization, and cross-cultural collaborations. For the past 28 years, Sashar Zarif has toured in over 40 countries across the Americas, Europe, North Africa, Middle East, and across Asia, promoting cultural dialogue through intensive fieldworks, residencies, performances, and creative collaborations. In 2011, he received the honorary titles of ‘Master of Dance’ from Uzbekistan State Institute of Choreography in Tashkent as well as the Institute’s Honorary Faculty Member for his work and contribution to dance in Uzbekistan. In 2012, Sashar Zarif was awarded a Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Zarif has taught at the Dance Department at York University in Toronto, Canada from 2004-2017. He is also a two-time recipient of Canada’s prestigious Chalmers Arts Fellowship.

**Srabasti Ghosh** is an independent dance and theatre practitioner. She completed her Master’s degree in Performance Studies from Ambedkar University Delhi in 2018. She completed her Bachelor’s degree in Bengali Language and Literature from Presidency University in 2016. She has written several articles in Bengali on theatre and performance language. Her performance mostly focuses on female body, identity and the relationship between performer and spectator. Currently, she is pursuing her Diploma in Dance Movement Therapy from Kolkata Sanved.

**Tanushree Chatterjee** is currently in her final year pursuing Performing Arts from Presidency University. She started receiving vocal as well as instrumental training since she was 2 1/2 years old. Presently, for the last four years, she has been acting, doing theatre actively and practicing different dance forms. She is motivated to employ the art forms that she practices towards original and expressive creations.

**Durga Madher** is a Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) practitioner at Kolkata Sanved organization working with victims of sexual abuse and addiction. As she has been working with DMT for several years, she has realized that dance-making is a process that can bring hope and a medium for expressing and understanding our thoughts, experiences, struggles, traumas, ideas and dreams. Through DMT, Madher tries to change for the betterment and fight against all odds to develop herself and those who are underprivileged or victimized in any possible way and facilitate a positive transformation.

## Life, Dance, and Moving Memories

Life is a dance. This dance that we call life dances us into being. Dance manifests life—relative, not absolute, and always evolving, flowing and happening. Life dances our body, mind and emotions into being. Our body, mind and emotions are intelligences that allow us to become aware and seek knowledge. Awareness and knowledge inform our dance of life, and life transforms awareness and knowledge into wisdom.

The human experience is processed, accepted, perceived, evaluated and lived through three channels: the mind, the body and emotions, the three platforms that people possess to connect with themselves. In its foundation, dance also needs to follow the natural order of the universe.

In any form, dance carries the part of our history that cannot be expressed in words. The history of the body, like many other forms of history, is often compromised and/or manipulated to facilitate socio-political agendas.

We can have an authentic engagement through the traces left in our dances, stories and songs. There is wisdom and intelligence embedded in them. They are treasures that have been left behind to be decoded and rediscovered.

As part of the human experience, dance needs to have a fertile ground for growth. This happens through the natural process of construction and deconstruction, or through learning and unlearning. This is the way in which it can maintain its integrity and stay authentic: true and relative to time and space.

My artistic practice has evolved through, and is inspired and motivated by the same integrity through the last 30 years of dance, music and storytelling. What I share with others through

research, collaborations, teaching, creations and performing is an interconnected process of learning and unlearning that I call “Moving Memories”.

“Moving Memories” explores an undefined place beyond ideas of traditionalism, modernism, reform, progression, and so on. It is a process of negotiating the authenticity of past life experiences (through memories) with the reality of here and now. It relates to the past and present as part of a continuum out of which our future unfolds. “Moving Memory” is what I consider as “contemporary”, or the negotiation of the past in the present.

As a process-oriented dance maker, educator and creative facilitator, my purpose is to inspire an authentic experience. My strategy is to encourage, facilitate and promote growth by seeking awareness, knowledge and understanding, and by applying each of these states to life in order to transform them into wisdom.

“Moving Memory” allows us to experience the dance of life in everyday moments and movements. Therefore, I try to encourage everybody to consider dance as an experience rather than a performance. This enables the dancers to be honest and unguided in the presence of witnesses. It also awards them the opportunity of the experience as something that they can claim for themselves. These dance experiences are reflections of the dance of life.

The process of this Choreolab can be divided into two kinds of engagements: lectures that led to discussions, and experimentation that resulted in the creative materials through which the choreography came about.

I will follow these two paths in this article, drawing from the notes I collected from the

participating artists' feedback, and the writings of three of the Choreolab's dancers—Srabasti, Tanushree and Durga—who participated in the post-Choreolab sessions. I have organized these sessions on Zoom upon the request of the participants to review and continue our process.

## **Reflections and Discussions**

### ***Durga Madher***

I am a senior dance movement therapist at Kolkata Sanved. When I joined this institution in 2011 for DMT, I had absolutely no idea about it. Previously, I was a part of an amateur dance group named “Srishti” where I used to dance to Western songs. At one point in my life my engagement with dance and movement got disconnected but then somehow I started working at Kolkata Sanved and slowly started understanding what dance movement therapy is as I started noticing some changes in myself. DMT has not only helped me reconnect with dance but also helped me manage my anger issues and has boosted my self-confidence. Practicing DMT has led me to an emotional, social, physical, and mental transformation. It has taught me to express and communicate through movement. Even though practicing such a form of movement was very fulfilling, I still felt like I had something lacking in my practice. To begin with, prior to Choreolab I could never let myself completely enter a choreography and experience the journey. It used to take me a lot of time to embody each choreography. This performance of *Chand* taught me to enter and live a performance, and see myself in a new light. When everyone in the Choreolab,

including Sashar, would share their stories, it would work as a way to heal my wound because I could feel that I was not alone. This process taught me to see myself in the mirror and to look back and relive different experiences in order to understand them better and to use them as a source to empower myself. I have tried to include *Chand* as much as possible in my self-care and wellness practice process.

### ***Srabasti Gosh***

As individuals, we came with our training in dance, which was form- and technique-oriented. Our preconceived notion of dance taught us to work towards perfection. This included correct body posture and beautiful movements formed into symmetrical choreography. It trained dancers to follow instructions, and thus, to memorize techniques and special movements. Therefore, it lacked critical analysis and any personal understanding. As a result, dance became a performance-oriented process, an element of entertainment, and a product for others.

The Choreolab offered the opportunity of unlearning what we had come to know while discovering the idea of dance in a very different way. During the initial days, there was a constant struggle between not making a story, and finding a meaning in dance. There was a constant negotiation to stimulate emotional and mental memory, and fit it into body memory. The dancing regulated us towards the present moment. The constant stimulation of mind and emotion was helping the body to evolve and move in the way the moment required.



*Photo: Sashar Zarif*

### ***Tanushree Chatterjee***

There seems to be a distinction between Sashar's relationship with body, mind, emotional intelligences and what we, as dancers, experience in our training. I feel that in his pedagogy, the body (dance), mind (story) and emotions (music) are considered as one cohesive unit that inform one another. There is not a linearity and there is no detachment. Our dance training detaches dance and the body from the mind's stories and the sound's emotions. Our dance training imposes postures, poses, gestures and suffocates our mind/story since we are not asked to think. If mind and emotion are disconnected from body, then how can our body and dancing develop or progress? By stepping away from our training, we, the dancers, had to find other ways to move, and in ways that engaged mind and emotion.

It is neither uncommon nor unnatural for an artist to chase after creativity, public validation or money for that matter. However, rather often, it is by doing so that an artist's work loses its integrity and purpose. When creativity becomes the engineer of art, rather than being a vehicle for the artist to use her/his intuition, it replaces the intuition. As a result, the process becomes all creative rather than

intuitive. Slowly but steadily, entertainment and the urge to maintain the normative reality replaces the intuitive nature and originality of an artist's vision. Even though such changes may seem drastic, in reality, such transitions have no specific boundaries or landmarks, and they often happen without the realization of the patron; they go unnoticed. Hence, such transitions take place within the span of a long-term practice.

When art becomes the object of exhibition rather than introspection of the artist, it loses its integrity and sole purpose. Consequently, what we have in front of us is a series of art works that lack connection. The connection of the artist and the artwork is compromised. Therefore, the work of art then becomes a muse more than a window to the unknown. As a result, we fail to let ourselves and the people see the reality of life, and offer another window to look out or in from.

### **The Revelation of Chand**

#### ***Srabasti Gosh***

The entire process of making *Chand* was based on intercultural communication. The process brought movement and music from Azerbaijan, Iran, and Central Asia, and was inspired by poems

and songs from Bengal. As a mother voice took the central role in the process, Bengali became the primary language that was used throughout. In *Chand*, emotional memories from childhood came up and the mother became the central character. Lullabies also played a major role in the performance. Additionally, a poem of Tagore set the mood in the beginning and knitted the whole performance together by returning later as a refrain. The poem is about a conversation between a mother and a son. They talk with clouds, waves, moon and the land. In the process, they create their own fairy-tale. There is a metaphoric cosmic call in the poem, which became a driving force in the performance.

Thinking back for a moment, I want to mention how that poem came into the process. Miles away from our individual homes, we were a group of dancers sharing a space. We were sitting in a boat-like structure. We were asked to think about leaving home and being refugees in a floating boat in a mysterious ocean. The clouds, and the sound and smell of the waves were layered in the English version of Tagore's poem. Most of us were in tears as the story awakened us in our individual displacement. The process was about stimulating emotional memory. Sometimes it happened through the body and often by sharing memories.

### ***Tanushree Chatterjee***

*The Reflection of a Wish* began with 19 practitioners from different countries, cultures, backgrounds and training. We came together in order to explore various perspectives in a performer's journey towards the development of a work. It was to be produced at the end of the Choroelab however, instead of chasing a deadline,

the emphasis was on the journey and to tell a story that was completely ours.

Of course, the space we shared was culturally diverse and demanded us to step out of our comfort zone. We had more to offer to each other than what was familiar. Movement being the common element binding everybody, it became the primary structure. On the other hand, music and emotional flexibility threaded everybody and everything together.

It was not difficult to dance together but to understand why each movement was necessary and was more difficult. Each member contributed something meaningfully irreplaceable. It helped us become a team and work in harmony.

The process of *Chand* had me realize that it was the unpredictable nature of the choreography, and our mentor, Sashar Zarif's incomparable guidance that led everything work in such precise synchronization. The elements that caught the attention of the audience were the diverse Indigenous rhymes and songs. They worked in harmony with the movement. For example, the poem "Aye Aye Chaandmama" which is originally a melody was transformed into an intense emotional song with a self-composed *aalap*-based music.

In the beginning, as we were improvising with some Indigenous songs and lullabies, Sashar asked me to improvise an *aalap* with the just two lines of "Chandmama". That is how the song was born. While I composed the "Chandmama" song and experimented with the boat sequence, I understood that the emphasis was on the lullaby and a motherly emotion.

Not long ago, I realized that every melody and movement has a separate purpose and necessity. These triggers contain emotions and give

pleasure to the audience. Such perceptions are based on one's individual memories and experiences. Similarly, while composing the music, I had the idea for a lullaby that led me to channel my own memories in search of a melody. That melody, in turn, reminded me of a simple time: a time when there was no judgement, no right or wrong, but just musical conversations between two people and their shared affection. Everywhere I sing this song, my aim is to share the experience with everyone and allow them to get carried away.

### ***Durga Madher***

The choreographic process showed how the playful lullaby was transformed into a music that momentarily helped the participants channel their pain, empathy and the reality of their lives. It helped them to look back, revisit memories and experiences, and renew their relationship with them. Tagore's song, "Amra Shobaai Raja" was brought to a playful childlike moment without it losing its dignity.

The Choreolab concentrated on how revising our history, memories, and narratives in a supportive environment could provide resolution,

acceptance and healing. With a mysterious hybrid of his discipline and humour, Sashar managed to help make our rehearsals safe. He also managed to help us give ourselves permission to go to a dark corner of our memories that we would have otherwise avoided. During the days of the Choreolab, many of us had an opportunity to work through some of our traumas. There was much laughing and crying through the exercises that led to the story being presented as the choreography.

Even though the Choreolab is over, I often feel like singing the "Phooley Phooley" and "Chaandmama" songs. They evoke a wonderful feeling of nostalgia and astonishment. I find these songs very peaceful and relaxing. Considering that, they are about the creation of nature—for example, flowers, moon, and wind—the lyrics are attractive. When I sing these songs, I feel very connected to the earth and my roots. What is surprising is that they are capable of influencing people regardless of age, understanding, or knowledge.



*Photo: Sashar Zarif*



## Conclusion

“Chand” means the moon with its cycles of transformation, from waxing, to full, to waning, and again to new. The moon is a beautiful reminder that things change, and is a beautiful reflection of that, since we see it occurring night after night. The moon also affects our waters, our oceans, and us.

We see the moon because of its ability to reflect the light of the sun, and because of the presence of the night and the absence of day. The sun is the source of light and the moon is the reflection of that light. The light is what all of us wish for and the moon is the reflection of that wish. Moreover, our stories are meant to connect the dots of our life so that we can find our way to the light.

*Chand* reflected a journey of two weeks of intensive experience, working together over 10 hours a day by the beach or in the studio across from the Bay of Bengal. What made this transformative journey a success was the generosity of 19 sounding and moving souls. The community, bonding and relationships established through this journey surpassed its creative outcome in many ways. Like many choreographies this choreography revealed its title—*Chand: The Reflection of a Wish*—at the end of the creation. In other words, even though the result of our process was edited through dramaturgy so that it could be witnessed by the spectators, the work was not created to express something to the on-lookers. Rather, the purpose of the work was to reveal our story to ourselves.

Through the decades of working with my “Moving Memories” method, I have always noticed that the participants of my residencies—whether it is in Toronto, Prague, Morocco, Uzbekistan or Bangladesh—have all embraced the process-oriented approach to dance. However, they have a hard time to continue their exploration as they go back to their everyday life. The reason is the pressure out there in today’s product-oriented system that further promotes a culture that is compelled and conditioned by pressure to belong.

The longing for belonging has been a burden on our shoulders as humans and as artists. Why do we need to belong? Where do we need to belong? If life is a nomadic experience, why do we need to belong? Moreover, to satisfy that urge of belonging we crave solid beliefs, mandates, life routines, and more, all of which give birth to the need for righteousness and stability: the never changing traditions inducing the traditions that are there in the name of modernity and progress. The very fact that many civilizations look at nomadicness as primitive blocks to the flow of life, produces social and environmental disasters in the name of progress. As artists, we carry our own share of this dis-functionality in the name of belonging. Where belonging can be seen as the source of human motivation for survival, I think as an artist we need to live not to survive but to live each moment to its fullest authenticity. It is this reality that needs to be the source of our motivation and the seed of new possibilities.



*Photo: Sashar Zarif*