

An Interview with Trudi Schoop

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Trudi Schoop is an internationally acclaimed mime and dancer and an innovative and inspirational pioneer in dance therapy. She was born in Switzerland and performed in Europe and the United States for many years. After World War II, she came to the United States and worked as a dance therapist at Camarillo State Hospital.

In her first book, *Won't You Join the Dance?* (1974) written in collaboration with Peggy Mitchell, Schoop discusses her theory and philosophy and presents cases from her work at Camarillo. Now she conducts professional seminars in the U.S. and in Switzerland, France, Germany, and Italy. In addition, she provides in-service training for clinic and hospital staff and for dance therapy trainees. She is currently finishing her second book, which will be published in Switzerland.

Schoop has a special talent for working with psychotic populations which can be traced to her performing career in mime and dance where she created characters who expressed her own inner feelings and fantasies. She feels that it is essential to bring out unconscious fantasies and shape them into objective physical form so that emotional conflict can be perceived and dealt with constructively. Schoop believes that you need to fly with the patient in his or her world for a while and then descend with him/her for a safe landing on this earth. Then, ". . . as he finally gives shape to his visions, he will create a production that fuses fantasy and reality" (Schoop, 1974, p.150).

Schoop is direct, energetic, encouraging, and, above all, she has a zestful spirit, a joy for living, and a wonderful sense of humor. She is a woman who knows herself and who has integrated all aspects of her being—her strengths, fears, anger, and sadness—so that she is able to have remarkable empathy for others. She has helped many to transform their outlook on life by eliciting feelings of self-esteem, self-trust, and self-affirmation.

During our interview, she often jumped up to demonstrate the movements of a particular patient or one of her mime characters. She is able to

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capture through gesture the very essence of a person's behavior. She believes that a therapist should be like a very good actor. A patient will respond if the therapist is experiencing a feeling and projecting it fully—just as an audience responds to feelings conveyed by a good actor.

In the first interview I had with Schoop in 1977, she said, "In spite of all the difficulties and drama, life is something very, very exciting. I try to convey that feeling" (Wallock, 1977, p.67). And she does.

Susan: Trudi, can you describe some of the influences that have affected your work as a dance therapist?

Trudi: I think, actually, what influenced me the most, although it may seem funny, are books. When I was quite young I read almost all the philosophers. I loved philosophy. Philosophy provides a way for man to understand life. Of course later I was influenced by dancers—Ellen Tells, for example, a disciple of Isadora Duncan. She didn't dance herself but she had a school. She taught fluent movements. The movement she encouraged was like water, absolutely beautiful. It made a big impression on me. I suffered a lot in ballet. I was plump and un-coordinated. I was an ugly duckling but I wanted to preach beauty with what I did. Today what I really would like to do is to bring beauty into the mental hospitals. That's my first wish. I also want people to be involved.

I think most people are not really deeply involved in life. They look at life. They live, they drink their coffee in the morning, they earn money, they buy a dress; but, I think there are not many people who really feel they are living, that they have one chance to live, to see, to smell, to touch with all their senses. I think most people are bored and afraid. The more I teach, the more I realize I would like to involve the human being in life—in suffering as well as in beauty and harmony. I think we would be happier. I think we are very unhappy human beings. Of course there are moments in life when people are really happy, for example when a woman has a child. When you see how sad and miserable the faces in a town look, you realize how rare those moments of involvement are. I think when you move you become involved and you learn to love yourself. When you love yourself you love life, you love others, you love!

S: What experiences in your childhood do you think influenced you later as a dance therapist?

T: I think I had an extremely happy and an extremely fearful

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childhood. The setting in our family was ideal. Everyone in my family became artists. My sister excels as a dancer, ceramist, actress, and painter; one brother became a painter, and my other brother was a musician. I had a wild, dreaming mother—unbelievably loving and tolerant—with no taboos, and a father who earned the money for the family. He was the editor of a Zurich newspaper and he liked form; my mother did not. My mother was really without any barriers. She said what she meant. My father loved beauty; my mother loved fantasy. I feel these two extremes very strongly within myself. I remember when I began to improvise, I let myself go and it was then that the spirit of my father said, "You have to form it; you have to understand it." And so I did. I think everybody who saw my pantomines understood them immediately. Both the characters and the story were clearly designed. I wanted it that way. I am very grateful to the two who sent me into this world. They were so different but they loved each other and that is probably why I could use their influence later on. My father loved the wildness, the strangeness of my mother, and my mother loved this gentleman who was always beautifully dressed. Looking back, she was a hippy—a very nice hippy. She taught us how to live that way. We children were the first in Zurich with short hair and comfortable clothes. We lived in a beautiful paradise up in the mountains. So, where the fear comes in, I don't know, but I suffered from fear for a very, very long time. It was really terrible fear. Later on when I decided to go into dance therapy, my first urge was to work with schizophrenic patients and I think it had to do with the fear I mentioned. If you feel you have to fulfill something in life, the fear of life goes away. I'm sure that I had, as a child, a fear of death but now it's gone. I feel so often that old people feel they have nothing more to fulfill, but actually that's not true. They have a purpose to fulfill.

S: Talk a little more about the fear.

T: I had fear of everything! Night! Being alone! I had to go through the forest sometimes to go to school and behind every tree I saw something. Then I began to conquer this fear. It's very difficult to talk about so that it makes sense. I thought fear was a god, and I had to quiet him down. So to quiet him down, I prayed at night. We were not taught to pray. My mother said that it was ridiculous. So when she said that, I thought she was right; but, later when I was alone I thought she was not right. I remember that I prayed kneeling down, but I never saw that in my house and I did not go to church. I prayed for everybody I knew. If I forgot somebody, I would have to go back and say the whole thing over again. I prayed for all the people I

didn't know and for all the animals. Then I turned around and prayed on my side and my stomach and then on my other side. Sometimes it would take hours and hours. It was really crazy. If I am absolutely open about it, I think I had a long period of being like a schizophrenic. I didn't talk about my praying with anybody, because I sense that they wouldn't understand what I was doing. All the others, my brothers and sisters were quite happy. They had friends, they didn't have to go to church. I had such a bad conscience about God. I didn't know if He existed or not. For me He existed, but I had to make fun of my feelings to survive in my surroundings.

Then I began to dance. That was very strange. We had a big front room with a record player. And I loved this record player. There were lots of records. I began to dance. I danced. . . I closed the door. Nobody could come in. I danced and danced and improvised. I danced flowers, I danced birds, clouds, danced like the trees and like the corn in the fields. I danced all the things I saw. I did this after school from the age of five on. When I was about 12 or 13, I began slowly to form things and not just improvise. I also wanted to become an actress. I had lessons with a very good drama teacher who thought I was a genius as an actress, and wanted me to audition, but at that time I was still in school. Then my father took my brother and me to the mountains in Switzerland for a five week vacation. That was very beautiful and healing. When I came back, I decided I wanted to be a dancer, but when I announced this to my family at the dinner table, they laughed. My mother came to my rescue and said, "It's wonderful that Trudi knows what she wants to do. Why don't we give her a chance?" The chance was that I could rent a room and a pianist, and I could make costumes and put on a recital. One day I said to my father, "You can see what I do." He watched my dances and I saw that he cried. He was moved. I was just sixteen. He knew that I choreographed the dances, and he saw I was serious. He saw somebody who wanted to do something and maybe he also saw some beauty in the child-like dances. So then he said, "Now, what do you want?" I said I would like to perform in a theater and I needed proper costumes. He told me to go to the most expensive store in Zurich. I made the designs and they made the costumes. The recital was an unbelievable success. I couldn't believe how successful.

Then I said to my father, "You know what I want. Now I want to study because I have to jump and I have to turn and I need to learn how." That was the first time I went to a ballet teacher. He was very cruel and I didn't understand him at all. I didn't know why we had to

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do a thousand grande pliés and battements. I suffered also because it was very hard for me. He hit us and hurt us when the leg didn't go up high enough—things like that. But I took everything because I wanted my body to be an instrument for what I wanted to see. I had found out in my first performance that I wasn't able to execute in movement all the ideas I had.

Anyway, I went to Germany and gave performances at a time when it seemed that all of Germany danced. Unfortunately, this period was not long enough. At this time I studied with Wigman¹ for a very short time, but I was afraid of her. The first time she gave a lesson, she said, "Imagine that the whole floor is full of snakes." I was so frightened. The whole studio was also very strange for me. It was black and had black curtains all over. Yet somehow I loved her and knew she could give me something I needed, but it all seemed too scary for me. Later when I toured, I performed in Stuttgart and Laban² came backstage and said to me, "I will make a second Wigman of you." I said, "I don't want to be something second and I think I want something else." Anyway, he said, "Come to my school," and I did. Laban gave me a lesson, and he said, "Listen, Trudi, you are so talented, come to me and study. You don't have to pay anything. I will teach you to dance." I just couldn't. Also, very early I had begun to parody, to dance humorously, to criticize. Theirs was an entirely different world—Wigman and Laban's.

I encountered Wigman again when she was in the U.S. She was with a friend and quite sick. We talked about those times and she said, "Trudi, you were so right not to come." She had seen me dancing later and she knew immediately that mine was a different way of expression. She was really the first one who was not afraid of being expressive. She was a terrific woman, just terrific! We liked each other, and we also knew that we were very different. And that was okay, too. Laban also came once when I had my own group in London. He came backstage and said, "My God, I knew you had talent."

S: You really had to find your own way.

T: Yes.

S: Who would you say were your major role models? Your mentors?

¹Mary Wigman (1963) was a renowned modern dancer in Germany.

²Rudolf Laban was a dancer and choreographer whose publications include *Effort*, *The Mastery of Movement*, and *Principles of Dance and Movement Notation*.

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- T: I was very interested in Daumier,³ especially in his simplifying of gesture. Also music influenced me. For a long time I could not move or dance without music. The minute I have music, the music tells me what to do.
- S: A lot of dance therapists prefer to work without music and I know you always include music and rhythm.
- T: I think, first of all, rhythm belongs so much to life. I mean everything has rhythm—our breathing, the ocean, the wind, our walks, animals, everything. But going back to what influenced me, I first read the philosophers. Then I began listening to music. Music just lifts me into another world, immediately.
- S: Talk a little bit about your performing career.
- T: I was on stage for a long time. I realize now that I had no other way of expressing myself. That was the form that I chose to say something. I had a school in Zurich where there were a few very talented people. Taking five of them, I had my first little group and we made a program. At first I didn't have professionals; but later, I had the possibility of hiring professionals and did. We were very successful wherever we went. I had terrific dancers, singers, acrobats, and actors in my group, and I had a pianist. I chose them because they had a lot of variety. It was beautiful. Then the war came.
- S: So the period before the war was a beautiful time of your life?
- T: Yes. We went to America seven times.
- S: And you were married during that time?
- T: Yes. My husband supported me and loved my pantomimes. He had studied psychiatry. He was a doctor of philosophy and a newspaper man and a critic.
- S: An art critic?
- T: Yes. That's how I met him.
- S: How long were you married?
- T: Almost 30 years. I was married for a long time but I was on tour a lot. I came home in summertime to rehearse a new pantomime or to perfect the one we had, and during that time I was with my husband. My husband was in love with theater. He thought it was the most

³Honore Daumier was a French painter (1808-1879) who caricatured bourgeois society.

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beautiful way of getting thoughts to the public.

S: He really appreciated what you did.

T: He appreciated what I did very much. He was my best critic. If he said, "Trudi, there is something which is not good," I could be absolutely sure he was right. So he lived very much with me even when I was away.

S: How did you make the transition from being a performer to becoming a dance therapist?

T: When my husband died, I decided to stay in the United States. I felt that I didn't want to perform on stage anymore. I also had the feeling that I would like to find another form of expression. One day I decided that I would go to work with sick patients. I remembered that in my youth in Zurich, there was a big hospital where Bleuler was the director. It was he who developed the label "schizophrenia." He worked a lot with Jung also. Bleuler had asked me once when I was 16 or 17 if I would come and dance for his patients and I did. It was very interesting and I loved it. I danced and the patients loved it. Afterwards we sat together and they showed me photos of their children and their wives and included me as if I were a patient. Later I had a friend who was a psychologist at a private institution, and who asked me to dance for his patients, which I did. So I was somewhat familiar with the scene. I think it's interesting that I immediately liked all those men and women very much. This is still true today. I don't especially like neurotic people, but I love psychotic people. They have fantasy. They are in another world which is very different. I think we all are not only living in this world, but that we have fantasies. There is a cosmos and we belong to the whole of life, not only to our earth. I try very hard in my sessions to bring those two worlds together. When I began, the doctor on the ward told me that if I saw somebody hallucinating or going into fantasy, to bring him down as fast as possible. I thought it would be much better if I would try to enter the other's fantasy—to go with the person into the fantasy and try to understand, and also make him understand, that we all have thoughts like that. We should find a way to shift from one level of existence to the other. Artists do that and it has nothing to do with schizophrenia or being crazy. A child does it. I think we should not be afraid of this other world, of time without limit, rhythm without limit, thought without limit, and so on. I think then we would be happier.

S: Specifically, how does that effect your sessions? What do you do in a

session that helps to bring those two worlds together?

- T: For example, I might work with the theme of circles. When you put a stone in water, circles form. Man sometimes goes in circles. Cooking—stirring—makes circles. So in a session I might say, "Why don't we try to cook soup?" Then something very interesting happens with everyone: their realism is more or less out. You may add "salt" or just as easily, add something else that is good! You add beauty and a lot of fantasy and the soup becomes something that, in a very small way, connects those two worlds. I think it is very good to find a form. I also ask people to dance a story they cannot forget, a story that is around them all the time. They can write it or do whatever they want to do with it. Then I ask how one can deal with the story. If you want to resolve it, you have to go into fantasy.
- S: Dance can be a way to make that connection.
- T: Yes, because you live it with your whole being, not just a part of it.
- S: What would you say is your theoretical framework, your philosophy?
- T: I think basically it's being able to say yes to life. I believe that all people have a right to be here, and that being here has an important reason. I would really like to make people believe that. And I also believe that to dance is wonderful; with movement you change the chemistry of your body. I'm absolutely sure. You see that when you make a depressed man or woman first walk a little bit fast and then finally maybe run. They feel, look, and talk differently. The feeling is not changed. If you dance, you include the whole human being, not just the intellect.
- S: I know you work mainly with groups. Why?
- T: Working alone with someone has two difficulties for me. One is that I take over, without even saying anything, I influence the person. Or, the patient may take me over. In a group you share the leader together. Everybody is part of it. Also, I think in a group you can see much more how very similar we are; one makes funny faces, everybody also makes funny faces. It's an entirely different thing. Sometimes we are alone, but we need to be in a group. When you are alone and the teacher looks at you and you feel something should happen and nothing happens, there is terrible pressure.
- S: You talked a lot about the expression of emotions in your book and educating the body to be able to express the polarities and the range of emotions.

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- T: When you educate the body there should be no style in it. I think that that is one of the most important things. When you put children into a ballet school, I think that's a dangerous thing, because ballet is a style. It is not dance itself as I understand it. It's a style and a child especially should not learn a style. We, as adults, should not either.
- S: What do you recommend for the movement education of the body for a child?
- T: I would think modern dance, as it is handled today. The body is not in a corset. The body can express itself. The jumps are jumps we would really jump over a creek or whatever. Maybe it should be a mixture of modern dance and gymnastics and all the things the body should be able to do: climbing, swimming, falling! Falling also comes into modern dance—being able to fall without hurting yourself, being able to turn fast or slow, to jump. All those things should be included. From childhood on until we are grandmothers we dance!
- S: Natural movement.
- T: Yes, natural movement.
- S: Do you encourage people to work mainly with their eyes open?
- T: If somebody improvises and wants to close his eyes, I will not discourage him. But I think usually when we go places, or turn, or jump, we open our eyes to know where we stand. I also do a lot of exercises with closed eyes. For example, if there are partners, one partner closes his eyes and the other leads. It's an absolutely wonderful exercise for leading, for being gentle with the one who can't see; the one who can't see must trust that the one who leads does the right thing. It's very valuable, I think. Again you have to have both; you have to be able to crawl into yourself, shut off the outer world and really be with yourself; and then the other side—to go into the world.
- S: I know you observe very carefully. Can you discuss that? What do you see when you observe someone?
- T: I look very keenly at the alignment of the body. I think alignment says a lot. Do you have your pelvis pressed forward or backwards? Also, the rhythm of the body is important. I see most through observing the tension of the human being—where life doesn't go through. I also observe the expression of the body: for instance, if you have a smiling face and an angry foot, there is a split of tension, so that you are never actually harmonious. Never do we have only one thought in our body. We have a lot of them. And this you can see in just

watching.

S: What do you do once you notice these contradictions or distortions?

T: If I see a hand, for example, one hand held constantly in a fist, I try to encourage the person to put the same strength into the arm, the chest, the face, the pelvis, into the legs and the feet, so he has the same strong tension all over. When he has that, it's fine because that's not distortion. Then you can make it soft to any degree you want to. The most beautiful thing is to be able to have one tension all over your body, that is, if you are whole, not split. Consciousness plays a big part. Music also has the ability to bring your body into one tension—not into two or three or four at a time. Sometimes when you see people sitting they might sit with a smiling face and it seems as if they feel comfortable. Yet one finger perhaps presses on the other one so that it hurts. This is the split. I think we see the split in the body, when, for instance, one part of you wants to go forward and the other wants to go back.

S: What do you think is the best way to train a person to be a dance therapist?

T: I would think that it would be best in the first few years to come into contact with as many people as possible and to change teachers and views often. I mean to know about T'ai Chi, ballet, modern dance, and so on. To know just how people dance, and fight, or whatever, and then maybe to choose which theory is closest to yours. I think you have to rely on yourself. When I watch sessions and the teacher is there and always watching the student, I think that is kind of dangerous and limiting. It is like a father or mother who tends the child and tells him or her what to do and what not to do. I think it is dangerous if you cannot rely on yourself. I think you learn by mistakes. Beautiful. I learned by mistakes. The best lessons I had were learned through mistakes.

A humanistic education is also important. Knowing what people write, how they paint, how they write poetry, raise children, knowing, knowing, knowing. And then to do it yourself. It's not so difficult if you have dance as a vehicle. You just have to have a little bit of courage.

S: What advice would you give someone today about dance therapy?

T: Jump into the cold water and swim! Do not be afraid. Don't need the whole world to love you. You have to do things because you love and when you feel that you don't love your dance therapy any more, give it up.

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S: Is there anything you haven't said about your life in relationship to your work that you feel would be valuable?

T: Something that makes me happy is that I was born in another country and that I got at least a flavor from my parents of this other century, where people were different. My happiest days were from my birth to the first World War, about 1914. That period was absolute heaven. All of us children were in a huge, garden-like paradise and only slowly, slowly—and I am also very happy that it was a slow process—did I emerge out of this paradise. It was a gradual understanding: I was once in paradise, but I'm not any more. But I have never, in my darkest days, forgotten the first days, weeks, months, and years on this earth. And so I wish that every child could have something like this, but they don't. I know that I take strength from that. When I am with patients I can give them some of that strength and they need strength. They really need it. I think that it is a kind of healing.

S: How has your work changed over the years?

T: I am not so afraid to hurt somebody, to do the wrong thing. When you begin, you are terribly careful. My God, if he cries, my God, what do I do? and so on. Today I am happy if somebody cries because I appreciate any expression from these very, very sick people who swallow instead of giving out. I think that it is so important that they can cry, that they can love, that they can scold and stomp, that they can express themselves. It doesn't matter in which way, but they should express themselves—in the walk, in the movement, in the gesture.

S: What is your major thrust now? Your direction? I know that you are currently working on a book.

T: I would love to go into institutions, into hospitals, and work with the staff: talk to the staff, dance with the staff, bring in the patients and then, with the staff, work together with the patients. That is what I am doing in Europe now. Then I think the staff would have a very different relationship to the psychotic population. I think that everyone in this world, man, woman, and child, is an artist. Our whole nature is something so unbelievably beautiful and artistic. How could we not be part of it? If we can reinforce that, and give men and women, especially those who are in institutions, the opportunity to create, it would be a big step forward.

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