



## An Interview with Blanche Evan

Blanche Evan, DTR

Founder and Director, Dance Therapy Centre  
Faculty, Alfred-Adler Institute of Individual Psychology  
Private Practice

Iris Rifkin-Gainer, DTR

Adjunct Assistant Professor  
Department of Dance and Dance Education  
Graduate Dance Therapy Program  
New York University

Belief in the art of dance as creative transformation has permeated the work of Blanche Evan. She has pioneered in the fields of dance, choreography, dance teaching, and dance therapy for over 50 years. As recently as 1981, she was commissioned to choreograph a piece for California-based dancer Anne Krantz. In the same year, The Scholarship Project in Boulder, Colorado was privately funded for the summer of 1981 with the express stipulation that the work of Miss Evan become more widely known.

I have had the unique experience of a continuing relationship with Miss Evan since 1947. I attended the marvelous creative dance classes for children in which she specialized for over 20 years. Her unique and rich contribution in this area is documented in her book *The Child's World: It's Relation to Dance Pedagogy*, of which she recently said: "I really believe that anybody interested in my evolution as a dance therapist would get to know me and the work by reading *The Child's World*." In the late 50's, as I grew into adolescence, we were guided to dance out themes which expressed our inner conflicts and those of the family and world around us. This work was to develop into her approach to dance therapy.

In 1967 The Dance Therapy Centre in New York City, founded and directed by Blanche Evan, opened its doors. For the next nine years it provided the first nucleus of dance therapy for the "normal neurotic urban adult." People came from many countries to train with Miss Evan, as well as from the United States. Despite her peripatetic life-style, I have been fortunate enough to study dance therapy with her periodically from the '70's to the present.

Miss Evan is currently active as a dance therapist and teacher throughout the United States. Over the years, she has presented her

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Iris Rifkin-Gainer, Department of Dance and Dance Education, Graduate Dance Therapy Program, New York University, Education Building, 675, 35 West 4th Street, New York, New York 10003.

material in New York University's Department of Adult Education, the Graduate Dance Therapy Programs of both New York University and Hunter College, Evergreen College in Olympia Washington, the University of Colorado in Boulder, and has given dance therapy workshops across the country. Dance therapists trained in her methods carry on her work in New York, San Francisco, Paris, Israel, and London.

Her prophetic article in *The American Dancer* (1938), in which Miss Evan foresaw the coming together of "opposite" forms of dance such as ballet and modern, is one of over 40 articles to appear in various periodicals including *Dance Magazine* and *Dance Observer*. Her published works include the aforementioned *The Child's World: It's Relation to Dance Pedagogy* and *Packet of Pieces—Dance/Movement/Word Therapy with the Normal Neurotic Client*. Within the year the first presentation of her system of "Functional Technique" will be published. In addition, three films of her work are filed in the Dance Film Archives of Lincoln Center.

In this interview, Miss Evan recalls her early influences, discusses her professional development, and states some current interests and passions in her work.

Iris: Blanche, is there anything in your early history that particularly contributed to your development as a dancer and dance therapist?

Blanche: One of my lovely childhood memories relates to Public School No. 17 (which is still on 47th Street in Manhattan), and to Mrs. August Belmont who was a philanthropist and who offered the children courses in drama and dance led by two beautiful ladies, Miss Ford, for drama, and Mrs. Simmons, for dance. I was seven or eight. The production was to be at the Century Theatre, which was a very, very large and beautiful, ancient theatre. Both teachers wanted me for a main part, a child's part, and I had to decide whether I wanted to dance or act in the play. I loved both teachers, but I loved dance more than anything it seems, even at that age, and I have never deviated.

I: And later,

Blanche: As a young adolescent, I studied ballet with Mme. Stavrova. I left after awhile, and I found a teacher, Miss Bird Larson, who was teaching a form of dance—it was then alluded to as "rhythmic dancing"—that I felt was right for me. Her technique was derived from movement healthful for the body, yet open to skill. We never *imitated* "a form." Within two-and-a-

## INTERVIEW

half years I was placed in the advanced class. Bird Larson died suddenly. I felt myself an orphan.

I: Were you also performing at that time?

Blanche: My first authentic solo recital was in the Village. I was 18½ years of age. Later, I gave solo performances in Boston, New York, and in West Virginia, with an orchestra. I performed in colleges: Hunter, McGill, and the North Carolina Negro College in Durham, and in Raleigh. I created dances of labor, of anti-fascism, and delicate dances with bells on my feet. I did a dance, a kind of emerging dance, which seemed to me to speak of some spiritual place. My last major work was "Death of the Loved One" (1946), for which I wrote the words and arranged the music. Doris Humphrey commended me on the choreography.

I: And when did you begin teaching?

Blanche: I believe I began teaching after the death of Bird Larson; she was only 40 when she died. And therein lies my fate. I taught friends, at first, adults. I remember that I still called my work rhythmic dancing. I don't know when I switched to creative dance. By the way, I don't like that title anymore either.

I: What would you prefer to call it?

Blanche: I don't know. But the more I'm involved with dance and dance therapy, as experience of one's totality, I feel that none of these titles really say what I mean in the way that I dance and in the way that I teach dance and conduct dance therapy. I never called myself a modern dancer.

I: What would you say was the next step, or the next branching out, in your career?

Blanche: I had done my first professional job of teaching and performing in Montreal, in the year of 1931-32, and when that was finished, I wanted to catch up with my studies again in New York. I did an intensive course with Martha Graham, a full season with Hanya Holm and Louise Kloepper, a course with Louis Horst, and a choreography course with Doris Humphrey. *New Theater Magazine*, *New Masses*, and *Theater Arts Monthly* published my articles which responded to the modern dance of that time; also my piece on the legacy of Nijinsky and Duncan. From that point on I was isolated in the field. After the clear viewpoint of Larson I couldn't identify with the major schools. This isolation was very serious.

When I came back to New York from Montreal, I was with the Roerich Museum and the Albertina Rasch Studio for two seasons. Then I opened my own studio in 1934 and continued for 40 years to have a New York studio, until 1975. I had worked mostly with adults. But when I opened my studio, children came; they seemed to come from nowhere, or from somewhere, because I never sought them out. For the next 20 years I was a specialist in creative dance for children.

After I had become a concert dancer, I resumed my study of ballet with Ella Daganova who was a wonderful teacher in the Cecchetti method, and then Vilzak-Sholler; also Spanish dance with Veola, who was Escudero's teacher; Indian and Hawaiian Dance with La Meri, and an unforgettable intensive with Harold Kreutzberg. I travelled to far places and saw folk and theatre dances of Spain and Portugal, a national folk dance evening in Kiev done by sailors, farmers, and other workers from all over the Soviet Union, and the Volador Flying Pole Dances in Paplanta, Mexico. I studied Haitian dance daily in Haiti for three months. I gave a concert in the Park of Culture and Rest in Moscow where the director presented me with a medal of appreciation. On the island of Ibiza, at the end of a fiesta day, I was asked to do a spontaneous presentation for the island people.

In the studios I mentioned, many of my classmates were people who then became famous in the theatre and in dance: Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd, Agnes de Mille, George Zoritch, etc. I was in Benjamin Zemach's Dance Company in the Max Reinhardt production *The Eternal Road* which ran for six months in New York, and sometime later in Elsa Findlay's *Orpheus*. Along the way I gathered experience appearing in smaller dance companies: Dhimah's Trio, Von Grona's and Jean Hamilton's Quartets. I even did one burlesque show with a partner who lost her wig. God, I could have killed her! That was really the end of any commercial ventures, although I did support myself dancing in art cafés.

During the war I was a volunteer dance teacher at Bellevue in the psychotic children's ward. I didn't yet know the name of Freud. Loretta Bender, head of the department, admired my reports on the patients in my classes and requested that I submit them for staff review. I remember in the dance class tracking down the secret of an 11 year old girl whose burden was her persistent incestuous father.

## INTERVIEW

I: Can you say more on what you call your psychological bent?

Blanche: Yes. I never looked *at* anything, even as a child, but rather *through*. I seemed particularly drawn to the person who was struggling and, who lacked the nourishment of basic elements in life. In much of my solo choreography the themes were of these people. In my "Slum Street Suite", one of the characters was the "Woman in Need." I went down to the East side of New York and looked. The women weren't bag ladies then, but they were ladies who dove into the trash cans, and I remember a very close friend making a trash basket for me that looked like those receptacles. At the end of the dance, I got into the wire basket and rolled around the stage in it. The accompaniment was a difficult piece by Prokofiev.

I had empathy and insight and association with these downtrodden women of reality. Certain dancers on their rise to fame, when they came backstage, said "Blanche, must you do dances like that?"

I: What were the elements that were responsible for the transition in your work from creative dance into dance therapy?

Blanche: The turning point was in the spring of 1958, in my New York demonstration: "The Psychological Content of Children's Creative Dance", in which children aged three through 18 participated. For the first time I felt I had the right to use the word "psychological" content. I had completed my own verbal therapy, and I had presented a paper "Life is Movement" to the Adler Center of Individual Psychology where I was a student. By 1958 children were changing from the wonderful creative child to the more materialistic kind of child who wanted *things* rather than feelings. Society at that time seemed to be going in one direction, and I was looking for another direction of my own. I knew then that I wanted to couple therapy with dance and to concentrate on adults. I had read that one out of 10 adults in America was hospitalized for mental disorders. I was most interested in the other nine. I saw a demonstration of Marion Chace's work at Turtle Bay Music School. Some of my own adult students were participating in that and I knew again that I preferred to work with the neurotic rather than the psychotic patient. I also took a course in abnormal psychology at the New School [for Social Research in New York City]. In September 1958 I offered my first course for dance teachers who thought they wanted to be dance therapists.

I: What are the most important elements to you and in you as a dance therapist?

Blanche: I think that the most important ingredient in me is what I've been talking about: to regard a human being, first of all, with respect. . . . I remember this as true when I worked with little three year old children, the difference was in the life experience, the span of life. I never spoke *down* to a child and I never changed my voice into a little "itsy-bitsy-witsy for little little girls" because the child was perfect in her childhood and I had to find the bridge to the child and feel, through her, the limitations of her life as well as that great wonderment that children have. And I feel that with an adult it's very, very difficult because the adult is in trouble and I have to try and see through that trouble to find the person that was born many years ago, so we then have the possibility of working from the characteristics and strengths of the born self. . . in other words, it's *not* to focus on *memory alone*, which is so much a part of therapy, but on *discovery*: what was the client born with that is endemic and cannot be erased anymore, endemic as the adult color of the eyes. The roots of a tree are deep and brown, invisible to the eye, yet it is they that are the source of nourishment. There is much hard work involved here, because the client herself has long forgotten her strengths and life has been difficult, and life is difficult, and very often a client is discouraged for a long time in therapy, the roots are so far back in her history. (I say "her" because most of my clients are female, and it is easier than saying her/his, etc.) To create continuity a client needs to carry out of the session something that she will work with until the next session.

I: How do you begin with a new client?

Blanche: I rarely give verbal interviews. Generally, I give the client a little piece of scrap paper which says on it: "Name dance experience. Name therapy experience. What is your age and your most difficult problem today?" And that's it. It leaves me open in the first encounter and helps to orient the client to her body as instrument rather than to her exclusive head.

When I speak of dance therapy I don't speak of "dance, semicolon, therapy, semicolon". My big objective and my fight in the field of dance therapy is the integration of dance *with* therapy, so that it becomes one. One, not that the dance is added to the therapy, but that it is "Dance: A Basic Therapy".

I: What about the client who's never danced?

## INTERVIEW

Blanche: We wouldn't start with dance, but with the components of dance: with awareness of tension in its chronic forms and its use as repression; or with heartbeat or habit movement versus expressive dance; or with consciousness of movement habits. There are many ways. Sometimes a novice in this work, even in the very first session, creates a beautiful improvisation, beautiful because it derives from a desire to do and because it has touched her and she is beginning to contact some depth in herself; her unique self. Every self is unique.

Therapy is change. Therapy without change can be an endless walk in the desert. Good therapy results in change of attitudes and style of life and living; change in the body and changes in communication. Purification in advanced work is achieved when the client's quest for change becomes the unmitigated pursuit of change. The limitations of the therapist are co-existent with the limitations of the progress of the client.

I: It is unusual for a system of dance therapy to include a specific body technique, yet Functional Technique is an integral part of your work. Would you introduce us here to its fundamentals?

Blanche: Because nothing has been published on the subject, not many people in the field know of my method of Functional Technique. It is the system I created for building mobility, resiliency, unstylized skill, and strength related to personal structure. Living kinesis. It deals with bodily rehabilitation. And often that means dealing with structural defects or with the results of accidents of which the patient is often unaware. First of all, it is not taught to the client until she is well along in the work of dealing with her psychophysical problems and expressing them with her body whatever present state that body is in. The object is first *not* to change the body of the client but to let the client become freer and freer in exposing the body that she *has*. For instance, in the case of balance, the client needs to expose her fear of balancing or situations where she becomes unbalanced, to expose it and then to look at the body that is doing the distressing action and gradually to reach the point where she knows that if her body will change, her balance will change. At that point, functional technique will be introduced. It would include emphasis on the formation of the feet, the impacted rigidity of the knees, the recessive groin. The model is the norm. That is only part of the story of balance. Functional Technique is a technique of wide range.

I: Are there any other elements you would include here?

Blanche: Yes, intuition. In many training courses that I have given, I

have rarely if ever felt that I could successfully teach the use of intuitive powers. The therapy is enhanced by insight—to cite inwardly. To go to the place where all this turbulence is going on, where all the depression is going on, and to draw out of that the elements that are connected with the client who doesn't even know that those elements are there. Because with her, they are buried in the unconscious; the task becomes how to lead her unconscious to consciousness so that the client can eventually face up to the mass of unconscious directives that she's living with, and by which she is abiding. These are psychophysical, not mental, and they serve her neurotic needs.

I: What about the current world the client lives in?

Blanche: Very early in my work, I distinguished between social and personal neuroses, the latter going back to the family and early environment—and which in turn relate to the social neuroses of the parents. At some point in therapy the client has to, what I call, "let somebody else in". If she doesn't open up eventually to include both the outside world and the intimate family world that she's obsessed with, therapy is at a standstill. She has to go out into the world and very often back, in a mature way befitting her age, to the parents.

In America, the ambition to succeed is paramount. The client has become competitive and mostly *self-competitive*, yet there is little clarity in life choices, including that of career. And, at 30 years, "should I have a baby?" "And if so, should I be a single parent?" And then, there's the city. Except for my wide travels, I've lived in New York all my life. I used to call New York the City of Stone, when I was really struggling to develop my work without the support of the city. Later I changed some of that stone into a plot where a tree could grow. Now I think of New York as the "Utmost City". If you really survive with some of the wonderful qualities nature has given us all, the City of Stone has not won.

I: What about the influences other than the city's on what you call the "typical American urban neurotic?"

Blanche: Well, I could quote from the clients who have said to me "my head is cut off from my body." And one said it beautifully: "When I came I felt I was a walking mind, and that has changed." One night in the therapy group, I said "every time you begin to what you call 'think' put your hand up." They were dancing away with their arms shooting up toward the

## INTERVIEW

ceiling, and finally they burst into laughter because they realized that most of what they were doing was listening to their heads go on and on—that wasn't even thinking. I really believe that good thinking includes feeling and good feeling includes thinking. Both are in the brain in the body. The body is the overall containment. The body is everything that we are. Nature made the human body in terms of muscles, bones, joints, circulation, and nerves; a unique spinal verticality and a glandular seat of emotions; also sexuality, power of the brain, and character of will. Dance therapy can achieve reunion in the segmented self. The mind can become clarified, the feeling restored to vibrancy, and the client once again can claim her body as her own.

I: You don't see dance therapy as an adjunctive therapy?

Blanche: No. Absolutely not. When I became a therapist, in some cases, I was an adjunctive therapist. Rarely was there support from the verbal therapist. The more I worked with their referrals the more I realized I was doing work in my private studio which the therapist himself did not comprehend, though the client was greatly aided.

I: Through the years you have had a profound influence on many individuals, including myself, who have gone on to become dance therapists. In a new center for training therapists what would be some of your basic requirements?

Blanche: First of all, a person who wants to be a dance therapist for the neurotic client should have been trained in dance and she should have had exposure to therapy . . . .

I: What other training is needed?

Blanche: Experience and training in my system of Functional Technique, my methods of improvisation, history of dance, dance therapy in other cultures, dance studies, choreography, and depth experience in personal dance therapy—all would be necessary. Also, sound in forms of percussion and music; space in terms of space content—and on and on. We also work on language. Just as the person enters the training with habit body movement and packed-in tensions and apathies which have lost their original reason for being, so this person uses language and verbal concepts without true relationship to therapy problems. In our work, language undergoes revision for the sake of specificity and selective use in dance therapy.

I: I remember much self-research, homework, and reading lists.

Blanche: I always give assignments to trainees which really get down to what you know, what you don't know, and what you need to know. Assignments are useful in amalgamation of all the issues that come up in dance therapy. There is also the matter of application of my work to different populations: to children as differentiated from the adult, to the normal neurotic child, to the disabled person, to the retarded, and to the elderly. In other words, dance therapy for the functioning neurotic does not exclude work with the above.

I: Is there anything that you haven't mentioned that you would include in that training?

Blanche: I'm sure there is—massage, nutrition, and aikido, for starters. And, especially in America today where many cultures are present and where they color a great deal of our lives in ways undetected before, the trainee must have an understanding of the client's social derivation and ethnic background. Training and self—this is the training program.

I: You have said the dance therapy trainee can't exist in an ivory tower.

Blanche: Yes!

I: How much time would be required to complete a training course in your methods?

Blanche: Three full years, five days a week, plus a year of supervised practice.

I: You spoke of language, and the word has permeated your work in various ways. In your professional evolution you have gone from naming your work "Dance," "Creative Dance," "Therapeutic Aspects of Creative Dance," and "Creative Dance In Therapy," to "Dance Therapy," and later to "Dance/Movement Therapy," and "Dance/Movement/Word Therapy." Why do you include "word" at this point?

Blanche: I include it because I believe that the use of words in therapy is essential in our time. Everybody is talking in sessions. No therapy is valid in our society without the use of meaningful words. I know of no therapy in the arts that can dispense with the word. However, what kind of words are we talking about? Now this is a big part of our therapy. Vocabulary in our times always changes. I didn't know what a "punk" was until I saw the dyed hair in the street—and I think that's terrible, I should know. That is part of the world that the client has to deal with.

Everybody loves and yet the word "love" seems to have lost meaning. Has love become a synonym for sex? Sex—the advertising, the legs turned upside down in a store that sells hosiery—I think a demeaning kind of attitude is prevalent in the commercialism that I abhor. And so, what does the word mean? "Sharing" is another word like that. Well, I may as well tell you, we have a list of words that we're not allowed to use in my therapy, because of the lack of clarity to both the therapist and the client herself of what the client means. My intention is to cleanse the word of conventional use, since such use only perpetuates the blocks and defenses of the client. I find that clients use, when they don't know what else to say, "I have to get centered". I don't believe that Isadora used the word "centered"—and she seems to have found a place in her body where she could go as a source of quiet and concentration. She used it; as an emotional source, not as a label.

Clients are very hazy about words, which become another defense. But if you *do* a dance that feels like love, a dance that feels like looking for one's center—not trying to find a word for that—the word will come, after true experience in the delving. There is an analogy between the meaningful word and meaningful dance improvisation. I developed ways of initiating creative improvisation for the purpose of stripping styles and habits from movement. Fresh movement evolves. Its content is that of the clients' and trainees' therapy problems. Improvisation as I use it exists when the person has given all of herself to its power. It deals in memory and psychophysical associations. Honest improvisation in dance is a direct route to the unconscious. Training includes studying improvisation which uses creative dance as its base, while constantly enriching it through concentration, depth, and an increase of movement vocabulary.

I: In closing, then, would you summarize your objectives in dance therapy with your clients? It's a huge question.

Blanche: Haven't I answered that yet?

I: Yes you have, but if you would pull it together in your own way . . .

Blanche: To grow, from confusion to clarity to practice. To develop the strength to make the statement. To arrive at self-choice of one's identity: sexual, social, economic, whatever. The growth that leads the client towards eventual self-therapy. For the client to build her courage in transforming insight into action and re-

newing the sense of the totality of her person. To continue to challenge the narcissism of our American culture, not to revert to the solitude of the secret, but to keep breaking down the secret.

I: After listening to your responses, I am reminded that you always had a great personal and often poetic way of using words.

Blanche: Thank you, Iris. Last night I went through my little notebook where I write spontaneous thoughts that come to me. Here are a few: "In my work the objective is in the method. Objective and method are one."

"Reality in a neurotic world is that for which no fantasies can be found."

"We don't 'feel', we work"

"You become greater, not by being someone else, but by being unflinchingly more yourself."

"When in doubt, study."

"A neurotic is in his own trap, or prison, or playpen, spends a lot of time (the lost years) pretending he wants to get out."

"When crying is a block, it equates with self pity."

"What seems spontaneous, is that moment of a chain reaction . . . often it is the missing link."

But I also know the other side of the world where, despite our efforts, I know how alone we are, how lonely we are, and how we hold on to what we believe in, despite lack of encouragement or understanding.

I was walking down the street in Carmel where there are pretty gardens of flowers and I saw them and sat down and this is what I wrote:

#### Poem

A million fields of flowers  
Before I die to see  
    them, every kind and variety  
Tall touching the sun  
    (or so they believe)  
short stemmed cuddled  
    by the earth  
wide petalled to  
    east and west, like  
    the horizon with  
    no beginning and no  
end—

On death row the prisoner  
is asked . . . one last request?

"a field of flowers, mostly  
pink and purple, wide and  
high and forever"

"I told you she was crazy," the  
executioner whispered  
as he pressed the switch, pulled the  
rope, or fired the last shot

\* \* \*

I: (There was a deep silence. We clasped hands and said a silent  
good night.)