



The emergence of dance/movement therapy in Estonia

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ABSTRACT

In 1991 the Baltic nation of Estonia peacefully achieved independence from the Soviet Union. The arts played a significant role throughout this historic process and they continue to be an important in contemporary Estonian society. Out of these roots, there is growing academic and professional focus on the uses of creativity to facilitate health, well-being and other therapeutic goals. This paper is based on the author's experiences as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar teaching at Tallinn University's Department of Applied Creativity in 2011. It examines recent academic and professional developments in the field of dance/movement therapy and other creative arts therapies in Estonia. It also analyzes the academic, cultural, and economic factors that will likely have significant influence on the future of Estonian dance/movement therapy and creative art therapies.

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Introduction

My class is sitting in a circle, bundled against the dampness of early spring. Through the window, I can see the medieval walls of the university's old city campus, which descend to a narrow, curving cobblestone street. Three of my students are practicing leading the group and the rest of the class, despite their supportive good spirits, is struggling to understand and follow the instructions. The facilitators are valiantly, but unsuccessfully, attempting to engage the class in a cohesive closure experience, when suddenly one of the class members jokingly suggests 'let's sing a song'.

Half-heartedly, hesitantly and with much giggling and fidgeting, a few students nod while simultaneously collapsing their torsos and looking at the floor. With a slightly superficial 'bravado' tone, someone begins a popular drinking song. A few of the students reluctantly join in, while others become glassily unfocused or look away with uncomfortable smiles. After a few more abortive attempts, someone begins a song with a slow, lyrical melody. Within seconds the entire class joins in. Suddenly, we are all singing and swaying together, even me, although I don't understand the meaning of the words (Estonian is a challenging language that I had been struggling to learn for months). The mood of the group has shifted and I feel a sense of buoyant calmness, wholeness and strength. As I watch the gentle rhythmic swaying of the group members, I imagine rivers flowing and tall trees swaying gently. When the song ends, we remain in the silence, luxuriating in the mood that our collective breaths, voices and movements have created.

This moment is a cherished memory for me. My body easily remembers the power and cohesion that day. However, it was not the only time I witnessed the unifying power of movement, dance and song during my time in Estonia. For Estonians, individually and collectively, the arts and arts experiences have transformative power. Based on my experiences, I believe that the creative and expressive arts will have an important role in the continued growth, healing and transformation of the citizens of this small nation in northeastern Europe.

To start at the beginning: I received a Fulbright Scholar Grant¹ to teach graduate and undergraduate courses, and to advise and consult about the development of dance/movement therapy (DMT) programming in the Department of Applied Creativity/Art Therapies curriculum at Tallinn University, in Tallinn, Estonia from January to June, 2011. I hoped to introduce American DMT approaches and techniques and help nurture the emerging sprouts of Estonian DMT. I also hoped to excite both students and colleagues with the many ways that psychotherapeutic uses of movement and dance can promote mind/body wellness and transformation. On a personal level, I wanted to learn more about the culture and people of this region and broaden my own understanding of the issues, forms and practices of Estonian, Baltic and European DMT. By the end of my six months teaching, traveling, and learning, I had made many enriching contacts with new colleagues, students

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¹ The Fulbright Program is an international educational exchange program of the United States Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. Awards are made every year to academic institutions in countries around the world wanting to host a visiting scholar from the U.S. Additional information can be found at: <http://www.iie.org/fulbright>.

and friends. I deeply appreciate all who generously shared their journeys, experiences, stories, dances, and songs with me.

Methodology

This paper is based on both informal and formal sources. Informal sources included ongoing conversations, observations and interactions with individuals in university courses, supervision sessions, community and professional workshops, and psychotherapy sessions in Tallinn, Tartu, and Hapsalu; attendance at multiple community festivals, events and performances; conversations with European and Estonian colleagues, undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Tallinn; and occasional 'coffee shop' conversations with Estonians wanting to practice their English language skills.² These conversations were not recorded verbatim but my impressions were documented in personal notes and journals soon afterwards.

This information was then supplemented with a written questionnaire that was sent to selected Estonian and non-Estonian DMT professionals. The seven questionnaire recipients were persons who I perceived to be directly and currently involved in the local development of DMT. I also had an exchange with one of the earlier Dutch DMTs who had influenced local Estonian dancers interested in DMT. After collecting this primary information, I used journal articles and texts to augment the information I received from my interviewees and my own impressions. Finally, several Estonian colleagues generously reviewed and provided additional information to an earlier version of this paper.

History of the Baltic Region and Estonia

The Baltic region of Europe is composed of three nations: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania (moving from north to south). It is encircled on land by Russia, Belarus, Poland, and faces Scandinavia and Finland across the Baltic Sea. The region is small. It takes barely eight hours by bus to travel from Tallinn (the capital of Estonia) across Latvia to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. It is an exceptionally diverse region, with different languages, religions, traditions and cultures. It has had a long history of repeated invasions from larger, more powerful neighbors. In the 13th century Christian crusaders forced conversion on its pagan, nature-worshipping inhabitants (Sillaste, 1995). This was followed by subsequent invasions from other continental, Scandinavian and Russian rulers. The experience of being dominated by larger European empires (Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Russia, Prussia, and the Soviet Union) had an important impact on the cultural identities of each of these Baltic nations. In 1920, following the end of World War I, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania briefly experienced independence (Sillaste, 1995; Tusty & Tusty, 2007). But with the emergence of Nazi Germany, and the westward expansion of the Soviet Union after World War II, national autonomy ended. In 1944 the Baltic nations were forcibly 'joined' to the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) (Sillaste, 1995; Tusty & Tusty, 2007).

In 1991, as a result of growing resistance to Soviet rule and the internal collapse of the Soviet Union, all three Baltic nations were able to achieve national independence (Sillaste, 1995; Tusty & Tusty, 2007). For each country, singing, dancing, poetry, visual arts and theater had important roles in the expression of civil discontent, national identity and the desire for political autonomy (Sillaste, 1995; Tusty & Tusty, 2007). Called the 'Singing

² Although I was able to interact with Estonians in many different settings, my minimal Estonian language skills meant that these interactions tended to be with individuals who were younger, urban, more educated, often more affluent and who usually spoke English.

Revolution' in Estonia (Tusty & Tusty, 2007; Chakars, 2010), the arts became vehicles of national resistance. This included the formation of a human chain of over two million people on August 23, 1989, that connected Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in a non-verbal statement of their collective desire for freedom (Sillaste, 1995; Tusty & Tusty, 2007).

National independence resulted in the establishment of democracy and a free-market economy. Continued westernization and globalization has resulted in NATO and European Union membership in 2004 for Estonia (European Union Information Center, 2011) and both technical and economic support from the U.S., Finland, Scandinavia and other European nations. More recently, each nation has been struggling to continue its development and growth, in the midst of the current world economic crisis. While each Baltic country is forging its own unique 21st century national identity, the countries also share similar strengths and challenges as a result of almost 50 years (1944–1991) of Soviet repression.

Estonia, the most northern Baltic country, is relatively small with approximately 1,340,000 people inhabiting 17,462 square miles (45,227 square km) of land (European Union Information Center, 2011). This is a population approximately size of the U.S. state of New Hampshire living in an area that is slightly smaller than New Hampshire and Vermont combined (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The low population density combined with the successful struggle for independence and national autonomy has resulted in a national cohesion that is simultaneously energizing and challenging. On one hand, as students, friends and colleagues often explained to me, 'everyone knows everyone in Estonia'. But, while cohesion and blending in were essential survival skills during Soviet times, not standing out also meant that people who were culturally or ethnically different were often voiceless and invisible. Currently, an emerging equal rights movement is beginning to challenge the collective perceptions of social cohesion. One example of this is the Estonian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) community, which is actively working toward become more visible and accepted.³

I believe that there is an active desire to honor the past without allowing it to limit the future. The recent emergence and development of the therapeutic uses of creative arts is one area where this dynamic process is occurring.

History of creative arts therapies (CATs) and DMT in Estonia

The arts and creative expression have always had an important place within Estonian culture, although using them to intentionally facilitate therapeutic goals is a recent development. According to Dr. Eha Rütel, a psychotherapist and dean of the department of Applied Creativity at Tallinn University, the first symposium on the relationship between the arts, health and psychology was held in the 1980s (personal communication October 4, 2011). It was followed by additional trainings led by non-Estonian specialists under the aegis of Tallinn University. Throughout the 1990s, creative arts therapies classes and training programs, mostly taught by non-Estonians, were locally available. An introductory psychodrama course was offered in 1990, and by 1995, there were two different psychodrama training programs available, the Estonian Moreno Centre and the Tallinn Psychodrama School (E. Rütel, personal communication January, 2012). A Music Therapy minor became

³ I also observed this pattern in several of the Russian minority communities as well as in the LGBT community. I am more familiar with the latter as a result of attending a government sponsored diversity conference, observing Baltic Gay Pride-2011, and conversing with Estonian human rights officials and activists. Religious identity or religious issues appeared to be absent, possibly reflecting recent polls that identify Estonia as the least religious European Union nation (Crabtree, 2010).

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