

**TEACHING DANCE  
TO  
SENIOR ADULTS**



# TEACHING DANCE TO SENIOR ADULTS

*By*

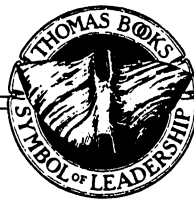
**LIZ LERMAN**

*With Forewords by*

Anna Halprin

*and*

Solomon Jacobson, Ph.D.



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**In Memory of  
Anne Lerman  
and  
Jo Apter**



## FOREWORD

**I** MYSELF am an elder. I'm sixty-three years of age and a lifelong dancer. My greatest dance achievement was healing myself of cancer through dance. I am a cancer survivor and attribute that survival to restoring my body through movement awareness and dance with imagery of positive and life-renewing values.

*Grow young along with me!  
The best is yet to come  
The last of life, for which  
the first was made.*

Rabbi Ben Ezra

Those whom the gods love grow young. It's true. The gods love those who grow young because they have taken the trouble to do so. The chronologically young is a given gift; growing young into what is called old age is an achievement, a work of art. It is an incredible achievement in our western culture, where the stereotypes are filled with degrading, even contemptible myths. You've heard them:

Old people should be dignified and circumspect.

Old dogs cannot learn new tricks.

Old people are closed minded, set in their ways, slow, and senile.

Old people are ugly.

There is no future for old people, so why teach them?

Old people don't want to touch or use their bodies.

Old people aren't interested in sensual or sexual experiences.

Old people like to sit still and be quiet.

These myths are nightmares. They may indeed be a warning, but they are not inevitable truths. If we are seduced into believing these ideas, they become the very images that form and shape our existence. We all have the potential to be fulfilled and spirited all of our lives. One of my most inspirational and delightful friends is don José, a 107-year-old Huichol Indian medicine man, who leads large groups of people in the sacred deer dance of his tribe.

I am satisfied to be my age and to grow old, but with life-supporting and new, meaningful images of what old means. For me, "growing" old can provide

lots more time to have fun, be playful, pay attention to taking care of myself, be with my young family, and above all nourish my spiritual dimension. What is your list? Whatever it is, dance is a marvelous way to fulfill and gratify these desires. The experience of dancing constitutes something more than the body in motion. There is a release and a replenishment of psychic energy that leaves one with an oceanic feeling of freedom, from which all constraint has fallen away.

Not only is dancing constructive and beneficial, it is also uplifting. I can't think of any other activity of greater therapeutic and spiritual value. Perhaps I can best describe what dance can mean to elders by sharing this story. A few years ago I was asked to create a dance for a gerontology conference to be held in San Francisco with an estimated attendance of over 2,000 people. The theme for this conference was "The Celebration of Life." After talking with many elders, one recurrent notion came to the foreground — not wanting to be isolated and wanting instead to be with other people of all ages. With this in mind, I gathered eighty people ranging in age from a six-month-old baby to a ninety-four-year-old man. We held a series of workshops, and together we mutually created a dance. It was a joyous experience to witness the excitement and caring ways with which all the ages shared their unique humanness with one another.

My mother, eighty-nine years of age, and my father, ninety-four years of age, agreed to participate in this dance performance. When I asked my father what was most important to him in life, he answered, "Love." He went on to tell me that it was his love for his wife, Ida. He said he loved all of us, his children, but that he loved Ida with his soul. For weeks before the performance he began to image himself dancing with her. When the performance day arrived, he told me he was going to dance with Ida. My father's legs had given out, and he had been in a wheelchair for three years. But when he wheeled on stage, he managed to get out of his wheelchair, stand up and holler, "Come on, Ida, let's dance." Through the power of imagery and his spirit, my father, for a split second, took my mother in his arms and danced his love dance with Ida. In doing this dance, he fulfilled and achieved the essence of his being. Not even Nureyev could have done a more astonishing and beautiful dance than Isadore and Ida Schuman, age ninety-four and eighty-nine.

Dance is a powerful human force for transforming and living the life we image.

ANNA HALPRIN



## FOREWORD

**C**REATIVITY is often arrested in the aged. It is imprisoned by inhibitions, habits, and expectations. When it is released, we get a Grandma Moses creating vibrant paintings in the primitive style. If it is never inhibited, we have Picasso creating until the week of his death. Creativity can be released in many ways—through poetry, literature, autobiography, crafts, and volunteer or paid work in the helping professions. The experiences and emotions of older persons can be translated into vibrant, creative works. Usually, however, there must be a program and a setting that encourages and channels free expression into an art form.

Consider the dance. Here a person uses his or her body to express a mood or feeling. The body moves in rhythm and pattern that unmistakably differs from our everyday movements. Yet dance is based primarily on the walk. Anyone who can walk can dance. The dance is also based on everyday gestures, such as the wave of a hand, so anyone who can wave can dance. The magic of dances comes in controlling the walk or the wave to create meaning for the dancer and thus the audience watching the dancer.

Create a dance right now. Wave goodbye to someone. They are leaving. Wave slowly and sadly—feel your arm gain weight. Wait! They are returning. Wave them back. Use both hands. There, you have created a dance. If you got up, still waving your hands, perhaps your body swayed in a spontaneous dance of pleasure at a reunion.

Music and dance, I believe, sprang from the internal rhythms of our bodies. If we listen to our own beats, we create themes and movements that are magnificent. And we can do this at any age. A few people can take these inner compositions and turn them into structured and repeatable art forms, such as a Mozart minuet. The closer the music or dance comes to our internal promptings, the greater our enthusiasm. When there is a match between our inner beats and a well-crafted piece of music, we have a march or a waltz, such as the “Beautiful Blue Danube,” that seem to command us to move to their rhythm. But why? I feel this is because they are basically brilliant translations of rhythms we already contain in ourselves.

Modern dance will release your internal rhythms. The problem is that your muscles and skeleton may say, “Who, me?” They will, of course, eventually respond, but first you must coax and tease them into movement. This book shows you how to do that. Liz Lerman believes that everyone can dance. She further believes that each person’s movements are beautiful and can be used in meaningful ways to express emotion, re-create an event, deal with an idea, or simply create happiness. In her own work, Liz creates dances filled with energy, humor, and well-articulated moves to comment on personal relationships, religious themes, and political sillinesses.

As a teacher, Liz works with different types of students—from the very young to the very old—to introduce them to modern dance. This book contains her method for turning older people into older dancers. Her method is simple and effective. I speak with double authority. As a specialist in services to older people, I am familiar with the range of programs available in the community. Liz’s approach meets all the criteria for appropriateness and acceptability. It is a program that enriches the lives of the participant while holding the individual in the utmost respect. My other source of authority for endorsing this work is my participation, a chunky middle-aged man, in an improvisational dance group that Liz has taught and directed for two years. I know her method works, for I am second to none in awkwardness, yet under her guidance, I dance and I create dances. So do others.

Liz teaches modern dance to a group of older persons in a retirement home. As detailed in this book, she creates a mood of experiment and acceptance among the older dancers in her group. To Liz, there are no bad movements. She can find beauty and excitement in the smallest gesture. Then she helps the dancer expand on the movement. For example, if an older dancer makes a gesture that imitates planting a seed, Liz will appreciate how the dancer moves his hands. Then she will ask the dancer to make the gesture larger, with more movement. Next, she will suggest making the movement smaller and more concise. When the older dancer returns once again to the planting movement, it is more fluid, expressive, and dramatic. In collaboration with the instructor, the older person has created a dance.

What does modern dance mean for the older dancer? It allows the older person to take his or her internal promptings and give them physical expression. It means taking a thought or emotion and working it through in movement. It gives the older person an opportunity to take risks among peers in a safe and protected environment. And, it brings pleasure. These are the benefits of modern dance to the mind and spirit.

There are also benefits to the body that are even more obvious. The stretching and movement that take place in modern dance give full play to the muscles in the body. In this book, Liz gives complete descriptions of exercises that move every part of the body. She starts with exercises that can be done seated, moves

on to standing exercises, and graduates to movements in the center of the group. The exercises allow every older person in the group to join in at least some activity. Liz insists that no one be forced to work beyond his or her capacity but that all be encouraged to try. In Liz's class, it is all right to sit out an exercise or a movement.

As older people participate in modern dance, there should be improvements in their range of motion, stamina, and agility. In some cases, participation may stimulate a joy of movement that results in greater physical activity. Whether the result is turning the older person into a disco dancing freak or simply enabling them to tie their shoelaces again, the older person should experience an improvement in bodily movement after some classes in modern dance.

This book is also designed for use by professional dancers who want to extend the dance into the community by working with older people. Part of Liz's philosophy of the dance is that dancers should practice their art among people living in a variety of settings. Liz herself has brought the dance to a senior citizen residence and to a children's hospital. This book is intended to guide the instructor completely through a full program of modern, interpretive dance for the older person.

The book may also be used by nonprofessional dancers. These include persons with some dance training who are now working as recreational or activities directors, physical or occupational therapists, or some other profession in which movement plays a part. The older person with some dance background can also use the book to set up and conduct a modern dance class. The method Liz devised may be used in senior centers, housing for the elderly, or homes for the aged—virtually any place that older persons congregate. The classes can also be held in Ys, community colleges, or neighborhood recreation centers. The prerequisites are a committed teacher, a room large enough to move about in, and a group of interested older persons.

How many potential older dancers are there? It is estimated that over 80 percent of the older population are fully mobile; thus in my opinion, they are physically able to dance. That means there are at least 16 million potential dancers and possibly more. The number of older persons who dance is unknown. My uncle taught dance in 1915, and he still dances three times a week. Any polka party or square dance has its share of older dancers. I estimate that at least 2 million persons over age sixty-five dance for recreation. That means there are still 14 million potential recruits. Admittedly, only a minority of these would be willing to try modern or interpretive dance. Thus, the potential market for modern dance is a "mere" 1.4 million older adults who have yet to try dancing.

How many dance teachers are needed? If each class contained 20 dancers, there could be 70,000 classes meeting each week. If one instructor handled five groups each, there would be 15,000 teachers employed. There are now only a

handful, including Liz and her colleagues. While modern dance for older people may never replace ballroom dancing, it can attract a fair sized following.

Imagine older dancers interpreting their experiences and emotions into meaningful movement. Imagine older dancers giving performances in which they confound the stereotypes by creative expression of their knowledge and feelings in a dance form. After reading and using this book, many thousands will perform as older dancers to the enlightenment of themselves and for the enjoyment of many others.

SOLOMON JACOBSON, PH. D.

## PREFACE

I AM a dancer. I teach, choreograph, and perform. These facts affect the way I experience the episodes in my life. Seven years ago, my mother died of cancer. While she was sick, we spent hours together talking of our lives. During these conversations, my mind raced with provocative stage images of dancers moving in and out of her landscape. I always imagined older bodies as part of the scene, usually representing long-lost relatives, or I saw pictures of my mother's own body floating Chagall-like through the living room.

After her death, I returned to my home in Washington, D.C., and began to look for older people to fill the needs of this developing dance, and that is what led me to teach dance classes at The Roosevelt for Senior Citizens. I already had experience in working with unconventional dancers, that is to say, people not highly trained but very willing to move, learn, and express with their bodies. By this time in my life, I knew how to find such performers. I would go to a group that already existed for some other purpose and teach modern dance classes, and when a safe emotional environment had been established, I would ask for volunteers to be in a dance.

That is what I did, and after six months of classes, the dance *Woman of the Clear Vision* was premiered. Making that dance reminded me that performance is a wonderful process for building community among people who would not otherwise find themselves together. In this case, while confronting issues about life and death, young people and old people were also able to rehearse and grow as artists, to learn to be comfortable in each other's environment, and to pay attention to each other's lives.

This work with older adults has convinced me of things about dance that I suspected all along — things I knew as a child dancing and things I came to know later as a questioning professional dancer. Dancing, with its expressive and creative aspects, is a natural activity for all human beings. Although the beautifully developed ability of the professional dancer makes for a spectacular display of human potential, it is also true that the inherent characteristics and benefits of dance belong to everyone.

Dance magically combines exercise, self-expression, fun group activity, intellectual stimulation, and spiritual uplift. All people should have access to these activities no matter what their age, ability, or body type.

This work clearly has value for the participants, but it is also important as a symbol of the values a society incorporates for its culture. If art reflects life, certainly it is no surprise to see contemporary dancers pushing for technical virtuosity, for if there is a symbol for our age it must be technology. Dancing artists are no different from anyone else in their urge to achieve efficiency and perfection.

Unfortunately, this places enormous pressure on the development of the technical aspect of dance. There are, however, many other facets of dance to discover, maintain, and develop. They include expressiveness, the exploration of contemporary themes, and the affirmation of a community's deeply felt ties. Older dancers can contribute in these areas.

Senior adults, particularly those who begin studying dance after age sixty, will probably not become fine technical dancers. What they bring to the activity, however, whether it is class warm-ups, improvisation, or informal performing, is an expressive body filled with life experiences. They remind us not only that dance belongs to everyone but that it can speak on many different levels. To ask a senior adult to do a fast, repeatable combination of ballet steps, for example, will mock both the person and the movement itself. But, when that person moves in harmony with an idea or emotion, with a movement vocabulary that is inherently personal in the body, the result is sometimes staggeringly beautiful.

People feel better when they dance. People learn about themselves and their world when they dance. People recognize their limits, strive to overcome them, and can see the results when they dance. These things occur as a person trains to dance. The goal is to develop a person at home in his or her body, a person capable of expressing feelings and ideas through movement, unafraid to move freely in a room filled with people, capable of learning a sequence or structure, willing to try new things, and willing to engage in the simple act of moving for no reason beyond the joy of the experience.

As I have travelled and worked this last decade, I have taught over 3000 dance classes. Everywhere I go I see vast numbers of dancers being trained for a world where no one will pay them to do what they so love to do. The demands of the field wear heavily on many people, clearly emphasizing a narrow definition of dance as a performance art. In the end, for many, the pressures are too great, and they choose to leave dance. With that decision they lose a major part of their lives simply because they did not fit into a precise and rigid structure.

It is hoped that the theory behind the teaching in this book can help younger dancers see that there are alternatives, not just in terms of social rewards and fulfillment as one experiences the joy that dancing can bring to older

people but also in the effects this work can have on the dancer herself, as a dancer. There are people to be taught, people who will want to see their dances, people who will want to dance with them. This is in no way compromising to their art, their technique, or their own performing aspirations. It is broadening for everyone.

The significance of this work lies ultimately in its ability to bridge the isolation of artists and of the elderly. The validation and meaning come from positive use of mind and body, the sharing of knowledge, and the resultant joy of people dancing together.





## INTRODUCTION

### THE PROGRAM

**T**HIS book is based on a program of dance, exercise, and improvisation developed over an eight-year period under the auspices of the Dance Exchange, a nonprofit arts organization I founded in 1976. The Dance Exchange is “an association of dancers who believe that the skills, discipline, expression, and beauty of dance belong to everyone. It is committed to programs and policies that nurture the growth of the individual, the artist, and the community.”

The Dance Exchange houses a school and a professional modern dance company called The Dance Exchange Performance Company. It is also a center for an outreach program that extends to hospitals, schools, office buildings, and senior centers.

The project at the Roosevelt developed into a comprehensive program for senior adults that has four components. The first is ongoing modern dance classes open to all residents and guests at various senior centers. The second is the Dancers of the Third Age, an intergenerational touring group open to any older adult who can handle the rigors of the schedule and who wants to perform in this improvisational company. On my invitation, certain older people are invited to join the Dance Exchange Performance Company in formal dance concerts, which is the third part of the work. The fourth component is teacher training, and this takes place through the Dance Exchange in the form of workshops or on an individual basis. Interested organizations who wish to learn more fully about this work have also sponsored one-day workshops or weeklong residencies.

Although the professional or preprofessional dancer has much to gain from participating in a dance program for the elderly, this book is also intended for use by the interested amateur. To many readers who have done only party dancing, dance may seem to be a mystery. Yet, many of the people who would most benefit from use of the information in this book are not dancers. Recreation therapists, activity directors, and administrators of facilities for the elderly may feel that a program such as this would be very helpful to their clients. For

those people, the main ingredient to understanding the information in this book is to try all of the movement ideas on their own bodies. They should spend time alone with the exercises and some of the improvisations and see how it feels. They should monitor their own responses to the movement and ask the following questions: Does it feel good? Does it feel silly? Does it seem possible? Does it feel awkward or graceful? Is it fun?

In answering these questions, instructors will be able to project in part how their dance students will feel. It is also true that the more a movement makes sense to one's own body, the more it will work with others. If instructors already have exercise classes going, they should simply incorporate a little of the new information in each class and go only as far as it seems right to them.

In addition to dancers, recreation therapists, activity directors, nurses, and administrators, this book can be used by individuals who are looking for a form of exercise, relaxation, and enjoyable use of their bodies. Although it is easier to stay active by dancing in a group, it is also possible to do much of this alone.

Older people who may have danced in their younger days may find these ideas stimulating. They make very fine dance class leaders because they can draw on their own experience as well as learn new skills and techniques.

Chapter One deals with the question, Why modern dance for senior adults? A brief definition of the different kinds of dance will be offered so that the reader can understand how modern dance can borrow from the other forms but in the end can have its own reason for success.

Chapter Two addresses the theory of these classes. The discussion includes attitudes of positive support that must permeate the environment of a dance class. Particular emphasis is placed on requiring the dancer to adapt traditional dance movement to the needs of the students without feeling personally compromised, or condescending.

The administrative setup is the focus of Chapter Three. Attention is given to the relationship between teachers and other people at the senior center, funding support, and the little extras such as live musical accompaniment, which can make such a difference in the success of these classes.

The next four chapters explain and describe a typical modern dance class for senior adults. They take the student from warm-up on the chair, to standing exercises, and finally to work with improvisation and performance.

Chapter Eight describes performing as a development of class work. This leads into Chapter Nine, which assesses the benefits of the program for young and old. Included are remarks by participants reflecting on what has happened to them as they have come to dance.

Chapter Ten is a summary and describes research needs for the future.

Dancing for older people works. The program will grow as fast as the teacher takes it. Whether that teacher is a dancer, activity director, movement therapist, or very interested amateur, it is hoped that this book will help bring dance and its vitality to many senior adults. They in turn will have another environment and medium through which to share the richness of their lives.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**M**ANY people have participated in making this book a reality. It is impossible to mention every dancer, administrator, volunteer, audience person, and friend by name, but I can say thank you to all of you.

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**TEACHING DANCE  
TO  
SENIOR ADULTS**





## Chapter One

### WHY MODERN DANCE FOR SENIOR ADULTS?

WE know that exercise is good for people. All of the joggers, dancercisers, and TV fitness fanatics and the millions of Americans who participate in some kind of regular recreation can attest to the well-being that comes from physical activity. The elderly, too, need programs designed to meet their special needs and still allow them to gain the better mental and physical health derived from regular exercise. Research indicates that there is a need for such programs. Dance is a wonderful form of physical activity that goes beyond exercise to involve the emotional, spiritual, and social self, but what kind of dance works, and why particularly modern dance?

There are many ways to dance, and many kinds of dancing. Moving alone in one's room responding to music or to an intense personal experience is a kind of dance. So is the highly stylized technical brilliance of a ballet company. The spectrum includes disco, interpretive dance, improvisation, ethnic dances, and many more, including TV commercials that feature dancing. What they have in common, to a greater or lesser degree, are the concepts and images we as people project onto body movement in order to call it dance.

In describing and defining movement as dance, people use words such as *joy, expression, graceful, moving to music, sweaty, routine, stretch, groups of people moving together, relaxation*. However one describes dance, it is clear that a dance-related activity can be a part of the life experience of people of all ages.

Despite the commonality of dance forms, there are differences among the various styles and types of dance. The distinctions will affect the actual experience of the activity, the context in which it happens, and the product. These differences originate in the motivation of the dancer, needs of the group, and the goals of the activity.

In her book *Dance from Magic to Art*, Lois Ellfeldt (1976) defines the multitude of dance forms that have evolved to meet contemporary society. She defines modern dance in three categories: interpretive, classical, and

contemporary. The interpretive, or creative, form she defines as a natural movement style that represents a new freedom (pp. 116-117). The classical modern dance is defined in terms of the choreographers who sought to find material that reflected a social consciousness and internal feelings (p. 122). She sees the contemporary modern dance as still forming. Its characteristics include using movement for its own sake so that it has a logic without having to tell a story or be emotional (p. 123).

The program described in this book is a synthesis of the interpretive, classical, and contemporary modes of modern dance. It provides a wide spectrum of activities from which student and teacher can choose depending on their needs, expectations, and abilities. Older people can be challenged by the discipline and tradition of a dance form, as well as by a confrontation with the freedom that exploring new movement possibilities can bring.

In modern dance, one is faced with technical demands as in other dance forms, but a person can also develop new movement vocabularies based on the needs and motivation of the choreographer or on the student's own interests and abilities. Modern dance is not steeped in a rigid tradition; it relates to fundamental ideas found in other systems of dance.

There are also many ways to experience dance. In our culture we are accustomed to viewing dance as audience members. The young sometimes take dance classes, but generally only the dedicated continue dance training. Few people have an ongoing participation with dance. This is unfortunate for several reasons. Participation at the amateur level increases appreciation for dance performance. More importantly, experiencing a modern dance class leads a person to discover many things. The technical training teaches physical control and provides a framework to explore a wide range of movement possibilities. Confronting one's physical limitations and learning how to extend beyond them create a new knowledge and appreciation of the body.

The improvisational element of a modern dance class can teach freedom of expression and an ability to relate to other people in a physical way. Here the relationship between the imagination and the physical representation of that imagination develops a partnership between mind and body that is very exciting.

Through performance, whether it is an informal classroom exercise or a more formal learned repertory piece, one can acquire a sense of confidence and achievement. The approval from the audience brings a sense of well-being. The viewer's attention creates an intensity that sometimes provokes a deeper understanding of the material and the self.

Experiencing all these elements of modern dance offers a person a physical, thoughtful, and giving way to be in a group. At any one moment, however, a person may wish to become private, and the focus of the work can become internal. This is the true gift of dance. It is simultaneously a solo or group activ-