

Releasing the Dancer Within

By Greacian Goeke

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I was in a T'ai Chi class, holding a standing posture, when the vision burst into my consciousness: "I am going to start a dance group for women over fifty." I was forty-six at the time, and I had recently finished my Orff Level III certification.

This statement bore the weight of a promise to myself, and I held to it with growing certainty. Through teaching in the Orff Schulwerk

approach, I found a creative path that awakened parts of me that had been silent for years. Dancing every day with my students I became my childhood self—spinning in the basement to Strauss waltzes on old seventy-eights in my mother's red satin skirt. I have been a dancer all my life, I realized. I wondered if there are others who would benefit from this same insight and opportunity?



Greacian Goeke

When I turned fifty, life was suddenly consumed with family responsibilities, and I put my vision aside. To begin healing from these stresses, I joined a class exploring women's sacred dances of Eastern Europe. As we grew to know one another, several members suggested I lead an adult "playground" for exploring music and movement. "Why should children be the only ones who play?" they quipped, eyeing my "Art of Play" T-shirt.

Our class launched last summer with a few members of the folk dance class meeting weekly for ninety minutes at the same senior center. Their ages ranged from sixties upward. Some participants danced as children but never had the opportunity to put their dance passion front and center. Others are lifelong dance teachers or are creative in other fields. Together we are reclaiming the art of creative movement as a powerful, necessary expression for older dancers.

A month or two after our first meeting, the members told me that they wanted to work toward sharing our work with a larger public such as at the senior center and elsewhere. I hesitantly revealed to them my long-held vision of older women creating dances together—something they were already amazingly bringing to life, without my prompting. Soon after this they decided that we needed a name, and *Impromptu No Tutu* spontaneously emerged. (The movement group is open to all at the Albany Senior Center although currently there are no men participating.)

Years of teaching in the Orff approach prepared me well to design and lead improvisational structures, to listen for where the energy is going, and to shift quickly to build on the group's interest. It is as if I have an entire parallel curriculum for adults ready in my mind. This is an exhilarating teaching experience. Since the group is still small, I also take part in the movement activities as often as possible.

Music and movement vocabulary and theory are woven into our warm-

up exercises and reflection process, and the class is becoming familiar with Dalcroze quick-response exercises, group and individual shape-sculpting, mirroring, shadowing, call and response, body and voice percussion, ostinato, sequencing, canon, and rondo. We play drums and un-pitched instruments to accompany ourselves, and eventually we hope to incorporate xylophones.

Members are astonished that they can move during class, as dancers, in ways that they are not usually able. Canes rest against the wall, people dare to get down on the floor and back up, aches and pains disappear for a magical hour and a half. If anyone

needs to sit down we always find a way to include them in our creative project for that day. Sometimes they can be a witness and reflect what they see from a large group improvisation; another time they might join the dancers on the floor in a wheeled office chair. Working with older adults is refreshing because they don't hesitate to communicate what they need. No one has time to waste.

We have collaboratively developed opening and closing rituals for our meetings. At the opening, we gather briefly in chairs (it's important to let older folk arrive and catch their breaths) so that we can shed whatever is weighing us down, using



Seniors in the movement group at the Albany Senior Center.

movement and voice. In closing, we stand in a small circle and silently perform four archetypal arm gestures created by the group. This sequence grew out of a discussion of gestures of worship in Orthodox Christianity in which we concluded that, for us, all dance is praise.

After nine months, the group has evolved organically into a core of six very committed participants who view themselves as a movement ensemble, not just a class. Many are well versed in literature and other art forms and we often take inspiration for movement projects from these media. Some of our recent springboards have been The Gee's Bend quilts, Elizabeth Alexander's Inaugural poem, "Praise Song for the Day," and Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." One day, we unexpectedly created a complete mourning dance to the music of Arvo Pärt and discovered that each one of us is an instinctive choreographer. A deep trust has taken root.

This engaged and active group of older adults knows firsthand the benefits of movement and musical patterning to brain health and longevity. Foundational principles in the Orff and Dalcroze approaches, such as exploring through play and responding flexibly to change, are valuable skills to cultivate at any time, but particularly in later life. Impromptu No Tutu is a model for the joy and power of creative movement, music, and dance in community throughout older adulthood.



Greacian Goeke trained in modern dance with Peggy Lawler and Janice Kovar at Cornell University and in trapeze dance with Terry Sendgraff in Berkeley. She completed her Orff Certification in the Mills College summer course. She teaches children's classes in several Bay Area public and private schools, including Crowden Center for Music in the Community. She also works with frail elders through the Goldman Institute on Aging, San Francisco. E-mail: ggoeke@mac.com.



A playful moment

The Difference Orff Schulwerk Makes to Adults

These testimonials of how well the Orff Schulwerk approach works for adults as well as children reveal that it is something life-changing for all ages. As Orff Schulwerk practitioners, it gives us a reason to always think of ways to implement the Schulwerk beyond the traditional elementary school classroom.

Group members enthusiastically offered these comments:

- "I do a lot of hospice work. My friends ask me what I do for fun. I tell them, this class is my fun."
- "I come because dance and music activities promote relationships between us. There is total acceptance here."
- "I appreciate the nonjudgmental reflection when witnesses tell a story about movement they observe."
- "I enjoy sharing leadership in the class. It is very liberating to lead and do my own thing."
- "I am dancing around the house to music again, after years of not doing so."
- "I like reflecting both in movement and in language. It engages more parts of the brain."
- "This class is an antidote to depression."
- "This is a safe space where we have total freedom to explore."
- "I love that our work is spontaneous but always based in theory."
- "Have a sense of truly being seen."
- "Live alone. This is more physical contact than I get in a week."
- "When we improvise sometimes there is no sense of who is leading. We have simultaneous understanding. I think that's called compassion."
- "In this group we learn to see ourselves as beautiful. That is so hard for us."
- "Play inspires joy. Joy gives us courage."