

Addiction & The Humanities, Vol. 6(2) - Can Movement Speak Louder Than Words? Understanding Addiction through Contemporary Dance

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Dance is a powerful expression of the human condition. People often find a dance piece particularly poignant and thought-provoking when it successfully casts a light upon hidden parts of us: our hopes, fears, joys, and afflictions. Because dance can reveal the concealed, it holds the potential to change the way people think about problems that people often attempt to hide, such as mental health disorders.

Previous issues of *Addiction and the Humanities* have mentioned the recent surge in portrayals of addiction on popular television reality shows. To reflect on this trend, this week's issue of *Addiction and the Humanities* discusses a contemporary dance piece which Mia Michaels choreographed for the wildly popular TV show *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD). The piece, entitled "Gravity", portrays the emotional aspect of an addict's desperate struggle to escape her situation.

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The Show

SYTYCD choreographers often pick creative or symbolic themes for their dances; this often is evident most vividly in the contemporary genre. Mia Michaels, who recently left the show after five seasons of choreography, specializes in contemporary dance. Her style favors raw, physical movements that convey strong emotions and often centers on themes such as relationships, sickness, and loss. She created "Gravity", which premiered on July 8, 2009, for those who have suffered from or have been otherwise affected by addiction.

"Gravity" both reflects and challenges society's popular understanding of what

addiction looks like, what it involves, and whom it affects. Dancers Kuponu Aweau and Kayla Radomski stand in as the addiction and the addicted, respectively. Radomski's ripped clothing and messy hair lend a stereotypically negative and "junkie" quality to her character. Aweau, on the other hand, is perfectly poised and immaculately dressed. Dark and predatory, he stalks his quarry relentlessly as she alternates between clinging to him and struggling to escape his grasp. Michaels' decision to cast a human being as an addiction challenges the folk notion of addiction as a problem of weak willpower, and reinforces instead the idea of addiction as an outside force that can act upon the individual and simultaneously be a powerfully attractive force, reducing her agency and ability to break the habit, despite adverse consequences (Buchman & Reiner, 2009).

In dance performances, there often is a troublesome sense of distance between the performer and the viewer when the quality of movement is too abstract or refined. Not so with this piece.

Michaels' raw and largely unstylized choreography blurs the line between beauty and brutality. Rough physical movements like covering the addict's mouth, twisting her limbs and even throwing her, make the dance disturbingly real. At a particularly powerful moment, Radomski struggles to reach up, only to be restrained by Aweau's vise-like grip on her arm. The desperate and terrified expression on her face, set against his cold, knowing smile, pierces through any notion that a person with an addiction is in control at that point.

Discussion

The facial expressions and movements that dancers rely upon for communication also are key factors in generating empathic response from the audience. Research provides support for this assertion and some potential mechanisms for this phenomenon. In a study investigating the relationship between action and emotional perception, Winters (2008) found that embodying a specific posture and watching somebody else embody the same posture generated similar emotional states in both the viewer and the dancer. Recent neurobiological research shows that watching a person's movement activates the same regions of the brain that correspond to performing that movement oneself. Also, the evolution of empathy has its basis in mirror neurons that respond to action and expression (Parr, Miller & Fugate, 2005; Rizzolatti et al., 2001; Calvo-Merino et al., 2005). For example, witnessing pain in others activates the brain in a similar way to feeling pain oneself (Jackson, Meltzoff & Decety, 2005; De Vignemont & Singer, 2006). It follows that the expression of pain, uncertainty and fear worn by

Radomski throughout “Gravity” might have stimulated empathic responses from the audience, and drawn them into the nightmare of addiction.

Using dance as a medium to help people gain understanding can battle negative attitudes on a grand scale. For example, SYTYCD has succeeded in making contemporary dance an accessible art form for the public, as its huge viewer base evidences. During the final week of SYTYCD’s sixth season, Fox Network ranked first for viewership among teens and adults aged 18-34 (“Fox Dances to Victory”). Further, part of the reason for the show’s success is Michaels’ choreography, which brings dance down to earth and makes it both understandable and enjoyable for the common viewer. Through her choreography, she brings similar clarity to important social topics. For a reality show like SYTYCD, the typical audience is not familiar with all the vocabulary and technique of contemporary dance. Similarly, most people are unaware of the complexities of addiction. A piece like “Gravity” makes both contemporary dance and addiction, which are not instantly understandable to most, accessible to the common audience. Specifically, Michaels shows the addict’s inability to free herself from her condition despite its adverse consequences. The resulting pain is something that almost anybody who has experienced helplessness will understand. This is important because ignorance-based misunderstanding breeds stigma (Buchman & Reiner, 2009), which is an ongoing problem for individuals suffering from addiction.

Although these findings have positive implications for both dance and addiction awareness, we must be careful to remember the limitations of this research. Just as one cannot seek to address all of the issues connected with addiction in one study, one cannot even begin to try to represent all the aspects of such a complex syndrome within a ninety-second dance. It is risky to assume that one dance can represent addiction. Furthermore, it is dangerous to assume that all people with addictions experience the same feelings and emotions. However, research indicates that people who engage in different kinds of addictive behaviors share similar psychosocial experiences (Shaffer et al., 2004). This evidence suggests that addiction sufferers are alike in many aspects, and that individuals who are addicted to different substances can relate to shared emotions such as shame, fear and hopelessness.

Conclusion

The power of contemporary dance to evoke emotions in its audience, combined

with theories about the associations among perception, movement, and emotional response, indicates a potential to promote recognition and empathy among viewers. Although it is naïve to think that a simple emotional portrayal will sway the public attitude away from stigmatization and towards acceptance of addiction, dance can be a step in the right direction. In this respect, SYTYCD has the potential to do for addiction what it has done for dance: bring awareness to the general population about its different forms and manifestations. What choreographers like Mia Michaels do is valuable because it brings attention to addiction, allows the public to sympathize and identify with people suffering with addictions, and provides a cathartic moment for those involved—audience, dancer and sufferer alike.

-Katerina Belkin

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