

Book review

Anna Halprin: Dance – Process – Form

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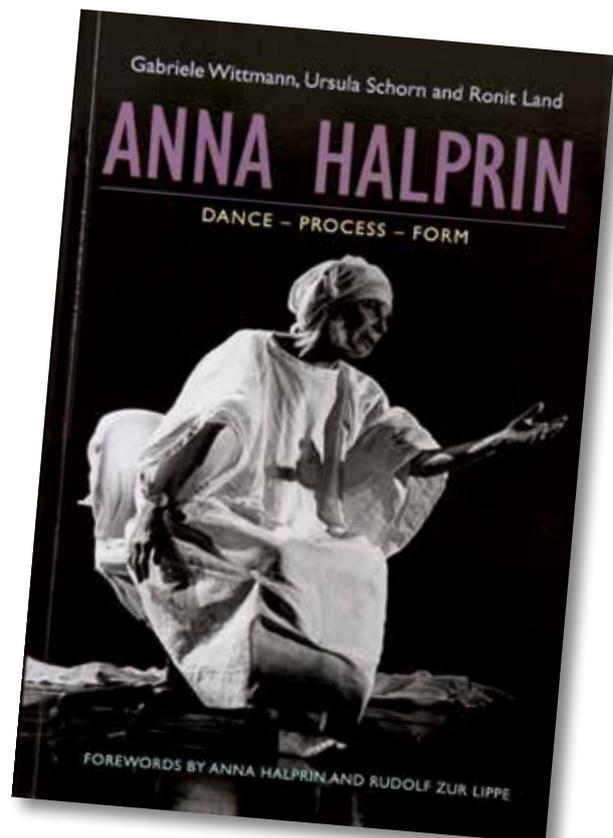
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Reviewed by Jan McConnell

This book explores the life and work of dance and movement pioneer, Anna Halprin. The three authors – all of whom trained with Halprin – work in different fields: one is the director of a department of dance, one a researcher and critic, and one a therapist. Throughout the book they journey through the body of Halprin’s creative work to show her immense and broad contribution in many arenas. They move from Halprin’s early days of training and performance, through to the development of her teaching methods and their therapeutic application, to her influence in education and in environmental and social justice. Each also contributes chapters critically exploring the views, experiences and use of Halprin’s work. Each author also discusses how Halprin’s work has shaped practice and meaning in their different fields.

The first section begins with the early influences in Halprin’s life: her Jewish roots, her travels to Israel, her meetings with Moshe Feldenkrais, and her early dance studies with Margaret H’Doubler. Her relationship with her future husband Lawrence Halprin, a landscape architect, begins her journey of collaboration, and the questioning of where dance, design, environment and body meet. As her family story unfolds, which includes the birth and early development of her two daughters, so too does the depth of her work, with each new experience resourcing her understanding of what dance and art means in everyday life.

This section also touches on her considerable body of creative work with her innovative San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop.



Descriptions of a few of her well-known performance pieces are given, allowing insight into San Francisco’s innovative artistic community that challenged pre-conceived social and political limits in the 1960s. As her Dancers’ Workshop travelled Europe, there was a constant pushing of limits, questioning the nature of modern dance at that time and what it means to be moving, what it means to be seen. She developed a connection with Fritz Perls, the most well-known proponent of Gestalt therapy, and with the Esalen Institute, the pioneering ‘personal growth’ centre, and these connections further influenced Halprin’s growth as an artist and teacher. The section also touches on her collaborative work with husband Lawrence, their exploration with

groups in nature, collaborating in the creation of powerful rituals and methods developed for collective experience. The text then moves on to the social and political nature of her work, as her dance company became multi-racial and her works continued challenging the social limits and norms of the times. The section closes with Halprin's cancer diagnosis and the beginning of a new phase in her life where the transformative power of dance as a healing art comes into focus.

Section Two introduces us to the therapeutic direction that Halprin's work took, which grew out of her experience of applying her methods in her own recovery from cancer. This aspect of the Halprin method has become known as the 'Life/Art Process', and was developed in collaboration with her daughter Daria, who trained extensively in psychotherapy and expressive therapies. The theoretical basis of this process – Fritz Perls's Gestalt therapy – is explored. A practical description of what the Halprin method calls the 'three levels of awareness' follows, and shows how the interplay of the physical, emotional and mental levels provide a means of becoming aware of bodily experience. We are shown how the exploration of these levels of awareness results in movement and dance that can develop the potential for spiritual/transformational awareness and contribute to the search for meaning in life and to the experience of connection with nature and others. Halprin's 'Movement Ritual' is introduced and explained. This movement sequence teaches basic forms of movement, leading the mover to discover the laws and possibilities of body motion and to experience them in interaction with the three levels of awareness.

This brings us to the explanation of the process the Halprins called 'psychokinetic visualization' which explores the link between visual imagination, drawing and movement, a key foundation of their method, which is of most interest to any arts therapist working in a multi- or inter-modal way. The 'self-portrait dance' and the 'five-part process' are also explored, as well as 'RSVP cycles', a method

of collective creativity developed by Lawrence Halprin and adapted by Anna in her own artistic works. There is reference to Halprin's exploration of indigenous tribal dance, and the experience of dance as ritual. There is also an emphasis on her work in nature, on relating to the natural elements, and our creative response to the natural world. This section of the book serves as the most practical guide to the Halprin method for the arts therapist reader.

The emphasis on process is continued through a dialogue between the authors, first from the dance critic's perspective and including an exploration of the reception of Halprin's historic work from east to west coast USA, and Europe, in particular, in Germany. A second dialogue looks at the therapist's view and the challenges of working at the boundary between art and therapy. This leads on to further exploration into the applications of the Life/Art Process in a therapeutic setting. The therapeutic relationship, the therapist's responsibility, group and individual process in relation to the Halprin method are explored. Once again, this is written in a practical and useable style.

The last dialogue takes us into the final section of the book, looking at Halprin's work from a multi-cultural educative perspective. There is an understanding that, through the body and its expression, cultural identity becomes a rich source of creative and healing work and a 'celebration of diversities'. This section examines some fundamental philosophies expressed in Halprin's work. It expands the exploration of how social and cultural learning can come about through this work as a respectful exchange of physical and mental resources, and how dance plays with coexistence and challenges boundaries, yet makes it possible to integrate very different social needs. It explains how the Halprin method moves from individual to tribal belonging, presence, imagination and understanding through re-acknowledgment of the body. Yet it points out that the work remains grounded in reality, in the everyday, with a basis in human values. Halprin's

influence in dance education is explored, including how this work can be used on a broader scale in work for peace and political engagement. For example, there is a description of how one author has used Halprin's approach with youth in Palestine.

With three different authors, this book felt slightly disjointed, almost like three different books, each running off in tangents, dancing to their own tune. Yet underneath there remains a collective view of a remarkable woman, one who continues to dance her own dance yet simultaneously connects us all through what she bravely offers us, connecting us to what is valued, to what is around us, to each other, and to what is essentially human. Educators, dancers, therapists, artists, and anyone interested in transformation at any level of society will find this book a resource and, in places, a very practical tool.

This book captures the breath of Halprin's work at all levels – individual, social and political – and her intention, throughout her life, to have a real and practical effect on the usually unconsidered everyday world. The book shows her as a paradigm shifter, an immense gift and resource. Ultimately it includes the reader in asking how we can continue to see dance as a powerful force for transformation that speaks to our needs today.