

## The Planetary Dance – Origins and Intentions

By Jamie McHugh \*

*"In the large group dances I've done in the past, an exceptional phenomenon occurs time and time again. When enough people move together in a common pulse with a common purpose, an amazing force, an ecstatic rhythm eventually takes over. People stop moving as individuals and begin to move as if they were parts of a single body, not in uniform motion, but in deeply interrelated ways. In these archetypal movements they seem to be tracing out the forms and patterns of a larger organism, communicating with and being moved by a group spirit. This is an ancient phenomenon in dance. In the Planetary Dance, this power is used for peace." - Anna Halprin*

*"We do not dance for ourselves. We dance for the life of the community." - Zuni people*

The Planetary Dance is a ceremonial dance for peace created by world-renowned dance pioneer Anna Halprin in Marin County, California. Over the past 30 years, people of all ages and abilities around the world have enacted this dance for peace in their own communities. Influenced by the indigenous dances of North America, the Planetary Dance is a participatory dance with a purpose. A moving mandala is created, a collective body is formed, and individual intentions are danced, sung and contemplated within the larger field. This article traces its origins and the intentions that have guided its development over time.

In the winter of 1980, Anna Halprin was teaching a class in the RSVP Cycles that her husband Lawrence, through his work as a landscape architect, had created to foster collaborative creativity. Anna introduced this method to the dance world in the 1960's for approaching choreography from a different vantage point – one that utilized the input of all the participants involved: the dancers, musicians, visual artists and poets.

### RSVP Cycles Summary

**R stands for Resources.** These are the basic materials at our disposal. These include human and physical resources, along with their motivation and aims.

**S stands for Score.** A score is an activity in time and space that involves people. The word "score" is derived from its original use in music, which makes it possible to instruct groups of people to carry out prescribed activities through a graph or a set of instructions. They delineate place, time, space and people. Scores can vary from being very closed (the actions are defined and leave little room for improvisation, like a Balanchine ballet), to being very open (the actions are improvisational and exploratory, like going to the beach at sunrise and staying until sunset). *Open scores maximize individual creativity, whereas closed scores maximize group cohesion.* A score tells you what to do without constraining your personal experience. The activity is there to evoke your feelings, but not to dictate how you feel.

**P stands for Performance.** This is the implementation of the score.

**V stands for Valuation.** This is a coined term meaning "the value of the action," or the analysis,

appreciation, feedback, and decision-making that accompanies the process of creation. The word also implies “giving value (or meaning) to your action”, making a valuation inclusive of subjective responses as well as objective aesthetic or practical concerns. Questions for stimulating a valuation after the performance of a score include:

- Did you perform the score as it was? If not, why?
- Did the score fulfill its intention?
- What worked/didn't work for you?
- What was your high point/low point?
- What do you want more of/less of?

On that winter day, Anna wanted to demonstrate to the students the difference between an open and closed score. As she walked down the outdoor steps to her studio, she was attracted to the beautiful, effortless movement of a large black bird circling overhead. This inspired the activity for the open score: use the motif of circles to explore the movement of your body. This exploration was followed by a closed score: run in unison in two or more circles. She was startled when the 24 students performed the closed score for close to an hour with an unexpected intensity and commitment. This made her curious. What is it about running in unison? Does it generate an altered state and establish a community bond? And does this bond enable people to go beyond their personal limits? Does the movement of oppositional circles create an archetypal form that taps into a deep, unconscious place?

Later that year, the Halprins were conducting a workshop together in Marin County, California entitled, "A Search for Living Myths and Rituals through Dance and the Environment". The collective theme that emerged for the participants was the helplessness and rage that many of them felt in the face of the unknown shadow that possessed the local mountain, Mt. Tamalpais. Since 1979, a killer had slain five women on the trails. The fear of the invisible killer had dominated the consciousness of all the surrounding communities, and as a result, the trails were closed and no one dared to venture out on the mountain alone. Anna decided to create a dance to reclaim the mountain for the community: "In and On the Mountain". The 1981 performance had two parts: first, a staged event by Anna's students, and second, a participatory event on the trails where the killings had occurred. In the theater performance, the dancers first invoked the spirits of Water, Earth, Wind, and Fire, after which the killer burst through the audience, ran up onto the stage, and raged until the other dancers rose up, surrounded him, ritually captured him, and liberated the mountain. The following day, 80 community members climbed the mountain, accompanied by a police escort and monitored by helicopters, which heightened the dramatic tension of the event. Prayers, dances and songs were offered, and by the end of the day the trails had been safely travelled. A few days later, the killer was apprehended after an anonymous tip. Was it a coincidence? Or could it possibly be that an intentional symbolic action by a group of people had some unknown power to

effect change? At the very least, people moving together in a unified way had solidified their bond as a community and came into contact with a greater mystery that had no explanation. The following year, a Huichol shaman from Mexico, Don Jose Mitsuwa, came to Anna's studio to present a Deer Dance ceremony. When he was told about the performance and event on the mountain, he said, "This mountain is one of the most sacred places on Earth. I believe in what your people did, but to be successful in purifying this mountain, you must return to it and dance for five years."

In her 70-year career, Anna has always pushed dance beyond the boundaries of convention. From breaking through the proscenium arch into audience participation and environmental theater in the 50's and 60's; through multi-racial dance encounters and dance as a self-healing art in the late 60's and 70's; to her efforts at creating a global dance to promote peace and intercultural understanding in the 80's until now, she has focused on answering the question: how can dance engage with the issues of our time? Anna believes the purpose of dance is to evoke individual meaning and collective connection; each time a score is performed, it deepens in meaning and more information is gathered through the valuation of both participants and witnesses. "Recycling" is the process of including that information as a Resource for the next Score, so there is repetition with innovation and ongoing development of a theme and an intention.

The circular running score from that winter morning, which became part of "In and On the Mountain", was subsequently presented by Anna at several conferences and was named "The Earth Run." Along with the name came a phrase that set the intention - "Each step upon the earth is a prayer for healing". "In and On the Mountain" itself was also recycled each year thereafter as a theatrical performance until it evolved into a community ritual, "Circle The Earth", for 100 or more participants in 1985, which happened to be the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Don Jose's advice. Whereas the first performance was local in nature - reclaiming peace on Mt. Tamalpais, it had now become a global plea for peace around the world. The various performances in 1985-86 of *Circle the Earth* in Marin and Europe made a strong impact, with many participants wanting Anna to bring it to their communities. As it wasn't possible for her to travel to all these places and re-create *Circle the Earth*, it did occur to her that the essence of that score could be transmitted. If each community performed the *Earth Run* with their own unique concerns, then it could truly be a universal dance – a *Planetary Dance*. Instructions were sent to people who were interested in being part of this worldwide dance, and on Easter Sunday 1987, 2,000 people in thirty-seven countries around the world performed the first Planetary Dance.

The form of the Planetary Dance is quite rudimentary: running and walking in concentric circles within the container of the four directions. The constant repetition of the drumbeat, and the formation of one circle after another, transports us from our individuality to an experience of collective oneness. At the same time, the simplicity of the form and its expression is actually challenging. It requires a softening of one's ego and

preferences while simultaneously demanding full presence and openness to what is happening – internally, spatially, and interpersonally. What are my own needs in the dance - when to rest in one of the four directions, when to change circles, or when to shift energetically from walking to running, or the reverse? Where am I in space - what is in front, behind, beside, above and below me? And how does the interface with the collective body determine my participation - when do I blend, merge and follow, and when do I assert, change and lead? In the dance, we both lose ourselves and find ourselves over and over throughout its duration as leaders and followers, inside our own experience and outside as part of the world, sharing an interpersonal (and transpersonal) experience in a non-ordinary social setting.

After participating in and leading many Planetary Dances for almost 30 years, I am struck by its continuing relevance to people of all ages and ethnicities around the world. By running, walking and standing for others in unison, we can get a feeling for the possibility of our individual actions influencing the larger whole – just as the larger whole impacts our actions. Giving over to the form creates a spatial coherence that is similar to cellular integrity. All life needs a container. Without the form, the spirit can be aimless and dispersed; and without the spirit, the form is empty and meaningless. This is the essential metaphor of the Planetary Dance – how do we occupy a collective form without losing our individual spirit? The Planetary Dance, as it continues to evolve over time and in various communities, gives us an opportunity to explore these and other questions as we dance with purpose upon the Earth.

**Jamie McHugh** is a dancer, educator, and somatic coach. He was the assistant director of Anna Halprin's large-scale ritual performance *Circle the Earth* in 1988, 1989 and 1991. McHugh has also been a longtime collaborator on the Planetary Dance, most notably co-leading the dance with Anna Halprin at the American Dance Festival in 2007 for their first community dance day; and in Paris in 2012, training 20 French choreographers to lead the dance in their own communities around France on the same day.

*\* This article owes a great debt to material from an unpublished manuscript, "Circle the Earth: Dancing with Life on the Line" by Anna Halprin, Rachel Kaplan and Allan Stinson.*

Copyright 2016 by Jamie McHugh. All rights reserved. [www.somaticexpression.com](http://www.somaticexpression.com)