

## Book Review

# On the Gifts and Perils of Choreography:

*Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move*, by  
Arawana Hayashi (PI Press, 2021)

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In the prologue to *Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move*, the Japanese-American court dancer turned systems transformation technologist, Arawana Hayashi, writes that the book is primarily about the origins and vision of her work, and although instructions for some Social Presencing Theater practices are included, “this volume is not intended to be a detailed practice manual” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xxix). This is not exactly true. While it goes far beyond a set of workshop notes, for those of us who took Social Presencing Theater trainings, and then immediately lost our notes, the book is a fantastic replacement, complete with reader-friendly, visually distinct pages (black background, white text) of Instructions.

The roughly 200-page volume is the first and definitive introduction to Social Presencing Theater, which is described in Otto Scharmer’s forward as “a new social art form—a set of methods and tools that change-makers worldwide are using to facilitate transformational change in their relationships, in their communities and organizations” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xii). Hayashi calls it “a set of embodiment activities and reflections that support personal transformation, social creativity, and systems change” (Hayashi, 2021, p. xx).

The book is organized, primarily, around seven practices (or methods, or tools, or activities and reflections—Scharmer and Hayashi do not land on a single phrase; they use these terms interchangeably). Hayashi situates and describes them in a gentle, deliberate voice, using many of the same frames, anecdotes, metaphors and endearing phrasing she uses in her trainings—now immortalized between white covers.

The seven practices, which (it is important to note, for the uninitiated) are more dance-like than theater-like, and happen almost entirely in silence, followed by dialogue, are:

- The 20-Minute Dance—a solo mind-body synchronization practice, in which a person makes the feeling of the body the object of their meditation, and spends 20 minutes doing whatever the body feels like doing, going from simple shape to simple shape.
- The Duet—a two-person meditation, where the awareness rests on the bodies of a pair of humans (the smallest social body) who alternatively move and remain still, letting each unplanned gesture rise from the empty, unspoken space between them.
- The Dance of Five—in which the size of the social body grows to five humans, who spend time experiencing the feelings of lying down, sitting and standing next to each other, attempting to choose their next movement, level, direction, and distance from the others based on what the body-of-five feels like doing.
- Stuck—in which one person explores a predicament in their life by physically arranging a body-of-five to represent the systems forces that keep it stuck in place in a Sculpture 1, and then experiences the spontaneous movement of the quintet ending a few minutes later in a Sculpture 2 from which some insight may be drawn.
- The Field Dance—where a solo walk unfolds in front of a seated audience, the walker attempting to take in and move from an awareness of herself *and* the audience, sometimes offering a gesture or verbal phrase that naturally arises in the process.
- The Village—a contemplative large group practice, in which participants move simultaneously according to their own and

the group's felt desires, in the process creating spatial patterns—clusters, centres, edges etc.—that sometimes resembles the patterns of communal life—weddings, funerals, trade etc.—one might find in a village.

- 4D Mapping—a performance-like representation of a social system (say an organization or community), in which a group of participants volunteer to embody the most relevant system roles—mayor, media, moral courage etc.—and arrange themselves in a Sculpture 1, moving with awareness of the social body into a Sculpture 2, with hopes of generating insights about the system under examination.

Sometimes, hilarity ensues. More often it is brokenheartedness (Hayashi, 2021, p. 85) given that the practices make visible the invisible dynamics at play in the social systems we find ourselves representing or mirroring. We see and sense what it is like for a person to be excluded from a team, for example, or for a community to walk around in confusion and purposelessness for a long time, failing to cohere. But just as often, we see and sense the goodness of humans in the tenderness of a person turning to another, in the beauty of a small group propping up a vulnerable act of leadership, protecting someone who is down, or celebrating joy.

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Hayashi's prologue rightfully warns us that "learning to engage in a movement practice by reading a book has its limitations." I might go as far as to say that learning to engage in a movement practice by reading a book is impossible. On that note, if you have never experienced Social Presencing Theater, please head over to the Presencing Institute's demonstration videos on YouTube so that you have at least a visual reference for these practices. Readers are cautioned against reading the book—or watching the videos—and thinking they are ready to lead a group in these practices at their next team retreat or international conference.

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I have rarely felt more aware of the limitation of a book as a vehicle for conveying knowledge than I have while reading a book on embodiment. In the case of *The Art of Making a True Move*, I couldn't shake a feeling of sadness for readers who were experiencing Arawana Hayashi in the two-dimensionality of a book. We do get glimpses of her humour, her softness and humility—she writes, for example, "I often think that flow is highly overrated. Stuck is so interesting and juicy" (Hayashi, 2021, p. 44). She tells us about her own 20-Minute Dance in which she begins to cry as soon as she lies down on the floor (Hayashi, 2021, p. 104). She meticulously credits fellow practitioners—Ricardo Dutra, Manish Srivastava, and others, who are genuine co-creators, but also a workshop participant in Denmark who happened to contribute a single, perfect phrase—claiming hers is "just one story" of Social Presencing Theater among many

(Hayashi, 2021, p. xxviii). Still, the genius of her presence doesn't quite translate across to the page. Of course, we wouldn't be aware of what we were missing unless we had met her, as I was lucky to do.

I met Arawana around 2005 in Nova Scotia, at the annual Shambhala Institute for Authentic Leadership gathering. This was also the setting for the fortuitous meeting between her and Otto Scharmer, which led to their co-creation of Social Presencing Theater, thus this book, thus this book review. I was in fact among the rag-tag group of mostly young people at the Shambhala Institute who acted as the makeshift crew for Arawana the summer she started experimenting with the forms that eventually became Social Presencing Theater (see Hayashi, 2021, p. 187).

Meeting Arawana in my early 20s (she was about 60 at the time) was significant for me in ways that I have not acknowledged fully until recently. For one thing, though I didn't have enough critical consciousness to name this at the time, I felt somehow represented in Arawana's non-Whiteness given the context of mostly-White spaces we shared. She was the first person leading from the front of a room about whom I remember thinking/feeling *the texture of her power is available to me*, and therefore, *I think I could lead*. At the time I never imagined that some 20 years later I would be leading a Centre for Dialogue at a major Canadian university, facilitating groups grappling with the most complex challenges of society, drawing regularly on Arawana's Social Presencing Theater, among other methods that I came to meet at the Shambhala Institute. What I observed in her was a possibility of absolutely commanding a room from inside a slight frame, absent a big voice and immaculate hair, absent the extroversion and witty verbosity of the other facilitators I had been enchanted by up to that point. Instead, she was endlessly relatable in her down-to-earth-ness, endlessly trustworthy in that she seemed almost incapable of pulling a fast one. She was masterful with relatively simple words, and the crowd hung onto every one of them. It is easy to name, in retrospect, that people responded to her sense of dignity (the secret to which, she shared with us in the book, is an awareness of the back of the body [Hayashi, 2021, p. 101]), grounding (which, she tells us, grows out of a practice of regularly lying down on the ground [Hayashi, 2021, p. 94]) and presence (which, she shares, is the result of a synchronized body and mind [Hayashi, 2021, p. 106]).

Some ten years later she changed my life again with one seemingly random gesture during the Advanced Social Presencing Theater training. She was talking about the physical space of the room we were in, the walls and ceiling, the room as a kind of frame for the art form we were practicing. At one point she gestured to indicate a corner of the room, but instead of using an index finger to point like any regular human being would do, she lifted a knee and pointed out the corner of the room with her pointed toes. My world fell apart and was remade in that moment. Surely it was in part the breaking of a gendered taboo, a slap in the face to all the societal messages I had received about girls keeping their knees together. In the surprise of it I had a sudden realization of our

underutilized—possibly suppressed—physicality as human beings in dominant Western culture. A facilitator, or leader, or teacher is *not* meant to be a talking head complete with hand gestures. We are *not* flat and meant to be relegated to the front of the room. We have volume and length. We have a lower body. We are holding space with our entire physical apparatus, and we can use it in so many more ways than we typically do. That realization forever changed how I enter a room, and particularly how I move in the space of a meeting entrusted to me.

You just don't get that kind of teaching from reading a book!

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Though I have not experienced this side of Hayashi, I understand that she was a choreographer for many years, and I think her choreography skills shine through the arrangements in the book. It is structured purposefully to open with a couple of contextual chapters emphasizing the view behind the practices. The view—the fundamental way of looking at the world, the foundational beliefs, if you will—is a critically important starting point, as I learned again and again in my years at the Shambhala Institute where no conference could begin without an extensive framing talk to explicitly name *the view*. The book ends with chapters elaborating on the origins of the methods, situating it in the larger body of social arts and arts-based research. Sandwiched in between, the practices chapters are cleverly arranged, not from individual to couple to small group to large group practice, as I have done above, but in an order that allows for the scaffolding of key concepts. It is almost as if the introduction of each practice is an excuse for further clarifying an aspect of the view that is best illustrated by that practice. For example:

- Chapter 3 on Stuck illustrates the view of basic goodness, that each human body has inherent wellness and knowledge that can be relied on to move us in the direction of sanity in the face of complex challenges (Hayashi, 2021, p. 50).
- Chapter 4 on 4D Mapping introduces the view that systems are not just “out there” but also “in here,” and that any change we’re going to make in systems can only come from changes in the consciousness of its members (Hayashi, 2021, p. 63).
- Chapter 5 on the 20-Minute Dance dwells on the critical role of genuine presence, and the possibilities that become available when we stop planning and controlling, instead learning to “delight in not know what comes next” (Hayashi, 2021, p. 100).
- Chapter 6 on the Duet goes deep into the meaning of *ma*, the gap or the silence or the not-doing from which fresh movement arises (Hayashi, 2021, p. 111), and introduces the idea *aesthetics* as the presence of feeling or perception (as opposed to anesthetic which is the absence of feeling and perception) as basis for decisions (p. 114), and the *true move* as unforced and unconcerned movement (Hayashi, 2021, p. 113).

- Chapter 7/8 on the Dance of Fives describes the link between simplicity and the true move (p.145), and details what it means to see, sense into and act as the social body, each individual exercising “almost a choice” (Hayashi, 2021, p. 146).
- Chapter 9 on the Village introduces the social field (“the sum total of the qualities of relationships we collectively enact” in Scharmer’s words), and instructs on the use of the three-dimensional body (strong back, soft eyes) to fully sense into it (Hayashi, 2021, p. 160).
- Chapter 10 on the Field Dance challenges notions of leadership as authority with the notion of leadership as awareness of—and responsibility to—the whole (Hayashi, 2021, p. 177) and hones in on the value of awkwardness and leaning into nowness as a basis for genuine creativity (Hayashi, 2021, p. 179).

I found myself deepening my grasp of each concept, relying on the scaffolding presented by the book’s structure to carry me forward. But I was also super aware of the book’s architecture as I was reading. There was, somewhat ironically, very little by way of not-knowing-what’s-next. Very little awkwardness. I got quickly familiar with the shape of the book and the boundaries of its form—descriptive and instructional prose, punctuated with first-person anecdotes and occasional images, garnished with the rare poem here and there. I could have skipped around and gone to the chapter on a specific practice if I had wanted to (evidence perhaps that the book *is* a practice manual). There was a relatively predictable plot—enjoyable because clearly planned with the reader in mind (evidence of the author’s care for the reader). It is strange to observe this about a non-fiction book, because they are almost always written this way, but the book felt *staged* to me. This felt like an incongruity given the material. It was almost like the form of the book didn’t match the spirit of the practices presented within. I had the thought that the book was more similar to the early prototyping days of Social Presencing Theater when Hayashi imagined it as a performance form rather than a contemplative unfolding of true moves (Hayashi, 2021, p. 187).

Which got me thinking: What would it have been like to write a book as a 20-Minute Dance? What would have happened if Hayashi had let a synchronized mind-body decide where to take the reader next, through a meandering, unplanned journey? Can a book hold together if it is made of one true move after another? And would such a book be truer to life, if not particularly conducive to a comfortable reading experience?

Which of course got me thinking: What would it be like to write a book review as a 20-Minute Dance (or is it more like a Duet since it is in conversation with the book)? Could I resist the urge to plan ahead and instead let each paragraph, each section, emerge from the empty space left at the end of the last? Could I let the pen go wherever it wanted to go? Would it give readers another,

perhaps more representative experience of what a Social Presencing Theater practice feels like? Or would it clash so strongly with readers' expectation of linear, choreographed writing that they would put it away in disorientation?

Readers, you decide.

## References

Hayashi, A. (2021). *Social presencing theater: The art of making a true move*. PI Press.