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Photo: Christina Catanese

From the Home Studio: Lessons from Gaga Online in a Global Crisis

by Christina Catanese

tD is maintaining a list of resources available to dance artists impacted by the COVID-19 crisis [here](#).

Do less. Listen more.

Somewhere in the midst of our collective descent from “coronavirus, huh” to “EVERYONE STAY HOME,” a notice passed through my Instagram stories that [Gaga](#) movement classes would be [offered online for the next two weeks](#). It felt like a life raft in a deluge of unfathomable news, and I clung to it.

Gaga is a movement language developed by Ohad Naharin during his tenure as Artistic Director of [Batsheva Dance Company](#). It focuses on collective improvisation, guided by a teacher in hour-long classes rich in visualization, imagery, and layered movement tasks (such as imagining the spine as seaweed). Movers are instructed to listen to the body before telling it what to do, and to let go of preconceived notions of what our movement should look or feel like. No mirrors, recording, or observers are allowed in classes. We loosen our attachments to certain forms or qualities and let movement pass through us.

Gaga classes are taught exclusively by certified teachers highly trained in the style, and they have rarely been available in Philadelphia. Until now, Gaga classes had only been offered in person, meaning a trip to New York or Tel Aviv was needed. But “due to these extenuating circumstances and in the spirit of continuous research,” and to support Gaga teachers (freelancers and artists suddenly out of work), this online option is now available via Zoom. With eight daily Gaga classes being offered, it’s a wonderful opportunity, even if the impetus is a global health crisis.

“If you had asked me last year if we would be doing Gaga online, I would have said it was a few years down the road,” said Artistic Director Saar Harari in a recent conversation. But, “our mission has always been to bring Gaga to the people, and this was still the

mission even when the coronavirus hit.”

The only pain allowed is the burning sensation in our muscles.

At 6pm on Monday, March 16, I logged on to take my first online Gaga class, taught by [Bobbi Jene Smith](#). I futzed to get my laptop in just the right spot where I could see the screen and my webcam could send my image into the collective. After a sound and video check, Bobbi asked movers to deeply listen to our bodies and tune into all our molecules, putting in effort and welcoming the feeling of doing so while moving away from more harmful kinds of pain. In this case, “harmful pain” extended to the emotional realm. This class was the first time during the pandemic when I was able to drop out of the terror-anxiety space, by tuning into my body and the present moment. I had taken Gaga classes in person before, but this release was unique.

Work with eyes open. Be inspired by what you see in the room.

During Gaga classes in the studio, we generally turn inward as we explore the movement tasks within our own bodies, but the research also includes observing and drawing inspiration from the teacher and fellow students. Gaga classes typically foster more of a reciprocity than online classes allow. As Harari explained to me, “classes are created between the research of the teacher’s body with the language and the reaction to the needs and reactions of the bodies of the users,” which is more limited in the remote, condensed format.

Zoom’s “gallery view” allows you to see 25 people’s videos in a grid at once. Experiencing the class this way, though substantially different than being in a studio with others, approximated the connection of a traditional Gaga class much more than I expected. In a socially-distanced world, I was grateful for even this pixelated grid of movers, which still allowed me to see how others were researching the movement in their own bodies (and in their own home spaces). Before the class, I had scrambled to make space in my dining room for a makeshift dance studio, displacing furniture and half-unpacked boxes from my family’s recent move. During the class, I found myself noticing features of the room I hadn’t before, like the curvy diamond grates of the heating ducts, and I allowed them to inform my movement.

Connect to faraway engines.

The first time I took an online Gaga class, there were more than 300 people; the next time, over 600. For the second week of classes, the organizers had to put a 1000-person limit on registration. In the moments before class started, I loved seeing the activity in the chat sidebar where people said hello from all over the planet. Though I was alone in my home, I suddenly felt a sense of global connection. How terrible it is that all 7.8 billion of us are living through this crisis together; and how beautiful it is that several hundred people choose to gather through this miracle of technology to move together, though we have to stay apart.

Give in to gravity. Connect effort with pleasure. Welcome the pleasure of weakness.

Over the past two weeks of classes, Gaga teachers have told us to smile, encouraged us to laugh and be silly, directed us to feel that lighter energy in all our pores. I was allowed to enjoy bright spots within the horror, and I found some comfort in the fact that we have limits, weaknesses, and there is only so much we can control. Many of the classes have explored the effects of gravity on our bodies and how we can use it, give into it, work against it. In one exercise, we lifted our arms above our heads and let them drop to experience the speed of gravity working on our bodies, then tried to recreate that speed in the opposite direction as we threw our arms up. Later, [tube man](#)-like, we practiced pressing into the floor with our feet from a deep [plié](#) and feeling the reverberations up through our snakey spines to our fingertips. Working with this fundamental earth force was a reminder that there are systems and processes much bigger than us that are very much not cancelled. Gravity still works. Spring is still coming. My breath is still here. I’m still here.

Let it happen to you. Let it overwhelm you. Overwhelm yourself.

During a particularly transcendent class with [Zina Zinchenko](#), I felt overwhelmed during the last dance, when she allowed us to explore the ideas from class in our own ways, together but apart. Seeing (and somehow, feeling) hundreds of people moving together in their own spaces across the world seemed a perfect manifestation of where we all are now: isolated but moving forward together. As the music faded, the organizer unmuted everyone, and a digital flipbook passed across the screen. Faces of many colors and voices with varied accents expressed gratitude and waved goodbye to each other. The salt of the sweat on my cheeks was slightly diluted as my

eyes welled over.

Float.

There is now [a wealth of dance classes offered online during this time](#), but I have found Gaga to be especially well-suited to the moment. It lets me meet myself where I am and explore where I can find space and freedom on a given day, and its communal nature fosters the socially-distant connections that we must maintain.

Will there be Gaga classes online once the pandemic has passed? Harari was noncommittal. “Our best investment in the future is this moment. We are doing the best we can to get better and bring Gaga to the people right now. But we are always thinking about how we can do more and reach people who don’t have access.” In just the past two weeks, the online translation process has fostered much learning, which will help to enrich the continued evolution of Gaga once we are able to return to the studio together.

For now, we’ll meet on screen.

Author’s Note: Italicized text is paraphrased from Gaga principles and movement research tasks offered during these online classes.

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