

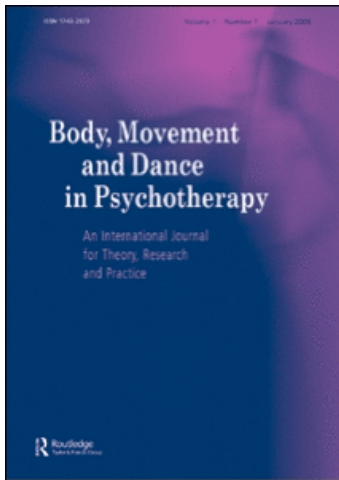
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### Sacred woman, sacred dance: Awakening spirituality through movement and ritual, by Iris J. Stewart

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Sacred woman, sacred dance: Awakening spirituality through movement and ritual**, by Iris J. Stewart, Inner Traditions, Rochester, Vermont, USA, 2000, 256 pp., US\$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0892816057

In this beautiful large-format book, rich in colour illustrations, Iris J. Stewart seeks to reclaim the sacred image of woman as dancer from the prejudices and exclusions of history, as Layne Redmond (1997) has done for women and the frame drum in 'When the Drummers Were Women.' The author's vision, for which she draws on the words of Anna Halprin (Halprin, & Ross, 2007), is simply to support women to rediscover the wisdom of the body. Equal parts search and research, this pioneering book shows the common origins and myriad applications of dance as a sacred art and practice for women.

In the first chapter Stewart asserts, 'Through dance we experience a dimension that the linear mind is not structured to perceive' (p. 14); the genius of this book is that it speaks precisely to this non-linear mind. Stewart's language is refreshingly simple and unapologetically subjective, and her thorough and wide-ranging research emphasises intuitive wisdom as much as empirical observation. Pointing out that many classic dance history texts were written by non-dancers, Stewart intends not only to transmit intellectual information about dance, but also to bring the material via exercises and meditations into the reader's felt experience. By sharing, briefly and humbly, her personal story of healing through dance, Stewart encourages readers to validate and follow their own longing for dance which is both meaningful and sacred. Stewart looks beyond established scholarly sources, on the grounds that dance, along with other significant aspects of women's sacred experience, has often been deliberately overlooked or excluded from historical texts, or else recorded only by opponents of these activities. She 'looked for things hidden by taboo' to uncover fragments of the truth behind this prejudice, and reveals surprising etymological roots for words such as 'hussy,' 'whore,' 'lewd' and 'obscene,' which now carry negative connotations for women, the body, and/or dance, but whose original significance was powerful and holy.

Part One attests to the worldwide historical presence of 'the dancing goddess,' and the woman's role as sacred dancer or dancing priestess, in virtually all indigenous cultures. Naturally, this was also the case in the area of Eastern Europe and the Near East named 'Old Europe' by Marija Gimbutas (1982) (whose archaeological research has unveiled so much evidence for woman- and goddess-honouring cultures at the beginning of human history), in which Western culture has its roots. Stewart also details the usurpation of the

priestess' role by male priests who often took on both women's clothing and their dance movements in order to also take over their status and powers.

It is perhaps well-known how the Christian Church has served as an instrument of suppression of both dance in particular and women in general, but many readers may not realise just to what extent dance was originally an essential part of early Hebrew and Christian worship. Here Stewart shows how numerous Biblical references to women's sacred dance and the divine feminine were later obscured by inaccurate, misleading translations; these explorations show not only that 'God was a woman,' as Merlin Stone (1976) has phrased it, but that God was a dancing woman. Anyone with personal experience of the repression which the Church has aimed towards women, dance and the body will be moved by this chapter (and by the stunning early Christian manuscript illustration of Mary and the Hebrew maidens dancing, found in the Vatican library).

Turning her gaze to the Arab world, Stewart shows the origins of belly dance as a women-only ritual of preparation for giving birth. Having suffered removal from the women's realm and misuse as a degrading entertainment in patriarchal culture, this form of dance is once again being recognised and reclaimed as a key source of training in feminine strength and power. The historical overview concludes with a chapter on women's costumes and jewellery as sacred adornments descending from the time of the earliest goddess figures discovered in archaeological excavations, in connection to numerology, the language of symbols, and the art of healing with amulets and gemstones. At times Stewart's scope is dizzyingly wide, drawing together diverse threads of information (including fascinating digressions into drumming, the moon, the labyrinth and the serpent) in a spiderweb synthesis that seems to spiral out endlessly.

Part Two, 'Modern Sacred Dance,' acknowledges pioneers Isadora Duncan, Ruth St Denis, La Meri and Martha Graham, and profiles many women working today with sacred dance and ritual in various forms, including Anna Halprin, Gabrielle Roth, Prema Dasara, Starhawk and Emilie Conrad Da'oud. There are descriptions of diverse modalities such as the Dances of Universal Peace, PanEuRhythmy, Sacred Circle Dance, Belly Dance and Liturgical Dance, in which the remnants of early Christian dance tradition are flourishing again. Mentions of Dance Therapy, through Mary Whitehouse and the Authentic Movement Institute, are all too brief, yet throughout the book the therapeutic quality of dance is a constant subtext; when Stewart writes, 'The function of the priestess is to facilitate the group's and the individual's process... Her dance is concerned with... connecting the personal and the transpersonal' (p. 45) she could be describing the role of the movement therapist as well. For dance movement therapists, this book playfully raises the question of why so many in our field are women, and what sacred rituals we enact and embody in our work, spoken and unspoken. Perhaps a future book addressing this theme is waiting to be written.

Scholars might occasionally wish for more specific information and more thorough footnotes, while occasional misspellings (so inconsistent with the sleekly professional production from Inner Traditions) call belatedly for a

sharper proof reader's eye, but these are minor complaints. Overall this book offers a long stroll through an abundant garden, in which the reader mysteriously feels at home (as if, yes, we always knew that this was so) and is delightedly surprised to come across some long-lost friends. A detailed Resources section listing books, recordings, organisations and individuals, will inspire readers towards further exploration.

Most readers will know of other women who could easily join their colleagues on these pages. I too wished some more women had been included: Zuleikha<sup>1</sup>, ecstatic dancer and founder of the storydancer project; drummer Alessandra Belloni (2007), who has researched the women's tarantata rituals honouring the goddess Cybele in Southern Italy, and anthropologist Felicitas Goodman (1990), who has reclaimed women's practices of shamanistic trance postures, to name but three. Stewart could easily fill a second volume. And yet all of this still offers only a hint of the worldwide renaissance in women's dance and ritual taking place, as part of the cultural groundswell towards planetary renewal which Jean Shinoda Bolen (1999) calls the movement of 'the millionth circle.' Throughout the book Stewart asserts her vision that women's dance should be a means to celebrate each woman's unique talents, a 'call . . . to seize responsibility for the survival of our planet – to use our inherent gifts, overcome our own fears, and become the authors of our own destinies' (p. 24). It may seem a formidable challenge, but the handbook she has so lovingly provided makes it easier for women to do just that.

#### Note

1. Zuleikha's CDs and DVDs are available on [www.storydancer.com](http://www.storydancer.com)

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