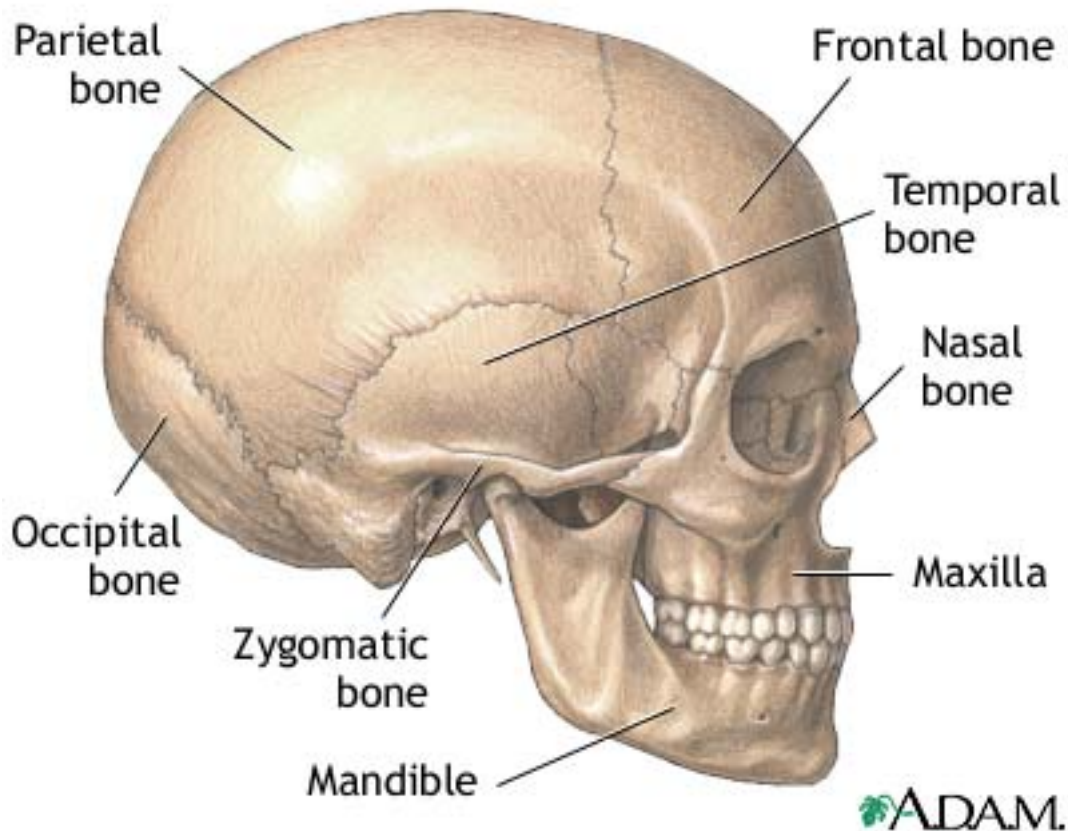


Head weight. The Missing Link?



I have actually started to comprehend the use of head weight in dance after all these years. Not that my brilliant teachers and mentors have not tried to make me aware of it's value, it is just my ears are now ready to hear.

Standing at the barre in a basic Finis Jhung Ballet class recently I finally heard what he was saying about the body's plum line and how it shifts when a dancer has to shift his or her weight from foot to foot.

If our legs are in a split weight position as in a second position with equal distribution, the head weight naturally stays in the middle. As in a "semi- static" position like a grand plie. But we all must eventually move in some direction. If we shift our weight totally to the left foot it helps to visualize the inside of your left shoulder in line with the inside edge of your left foot. As well as the outside of your left shoulder in line with the pinky toe of that same foot. Let's talk about that subtle mental shift of the head weight. The test has always been in dance can one rise or turn at any given time in a "state of ready"? This must be a conscious choice , action and addition to ones weight shift whether performing by oneself or with a partner. The actual action of including ones head weight in this action was literally mind-blowing to me. No pun intended. Once I understood that I must actually include my head weight and account for its placement in all directions life was beautiful. I could actually rise up and balance without much difficulty and with much more confidence.

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I researched my thoughts and questions on head weight and actually found very little reference to its actual use in dance action. "Yes" I learned the weight of the head is anywhere between nine and eleven pounds, there are twenty-two bones in total. Eight cranial, fourteen facial. The bones are not formed at birth and that in the 1920's the young osteopath named William Sutherland proved there was a motion or rhythm of the cranial bones. All excellent information but how do you actually apply and use your head weight while dancing?

Again back to the brilliant Finis Jhung. After drilling into the class about that center line and how to shift that position as I stated before he talked about progressing across the floor or room. He stated that when one is continually moving or turning to the right as an example that one must keep their head weight poised over their left shoulder. And of course the opposite applies when turning to the left. As soon as I had this awareness in my actions my dancing became weightless. My first thought was how do I transcribe this into helping Ballroom dance and partnering. If one is doing American Style this can be a very helpful action. One of the more difficult styles in my opinion. One has to pop in and out of dance position in a flash with perfect balance and placement. When I started coaching this and just hinting at it I must say I received lightening fast results. I also incorporated this into a basic underarm turn. Just telling the lady her head may stay poised over her left shoulder while turning to the right seemed to really help with balance issues and allow her to produce more speed, leg, hip, foot action and style.

Of course we have the issue of maintaining ones head balance and poise in a closed dance position. I think there are many factors involved. What level dancer are you. Are you so well balanced that you can take liberties with your alignment and posture. Basically it is always best in a closed dance position to shape ones body and head weight around a shared axis but there are always exceptions to the rule. Wonderful modern dance companies create whole bodies of work with head pitching movements across the stage defying acts of gravity to no end. When an advance dancer hits a pose line like a throw away oversway they may use their head weight with artistic license to increase the finished shape, to produce stronger musicality, light and shade of choreography or use it for a new direction, counter balance or lead for a partner. This applies to open partner work as well.

But I guess what bothered me the most on my journey was why it took me so long to catch on. And I realized several things I learned many years ago that just did not compute at the time. What is a walk? According to the Olympics both feet must be in contact with the ground at all times. That's why you see those Olympic walkers kick their hip back and jut out their heel with a locked leg. To achieve the longest stride possible while maintaining correct contact. Which brought my attention to the human being and his or her walk. We have a natural rolling action(or gradual weight shift) we do not consciously shift our weight from foot to foot like a runner or a trained dancer. So our head weight naturally stays in the middle of our body. So even if we practice hours in a studio we still WALK home in that state. For me this was the most amazing revelation that I had to consciously include my head weight with awareness in my life.

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As Ballroom Dancers we blend many different styles and techniques. Partnering is a whole different ball game. Using a gradual or instant weight shift may help us to produce the desired effect of a dance we choose to execute that day. Awareness of head weight can only help.

Head weight is an amazing tool. I thank all my wonderful mentors for trying to get in and around my head and never letting me off easy. And again so grateful to the magnificent Ballet Master Mr. Finis Jhung for being the one to finally let my ears be willing to hear. Ironically attached to my head by the way. "The Missing Link" It was there all the time.

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