

The Two Worlds of Jill and Amnon Damti

Using Dance and Movement with Children and Adults of Varying Abilities Deaf and Hearing

Interview and Transcription by **Bella Rubin**

Jill and Amnon Damti come from different backgrounds: Amnon from the world of classical ballet and contemporary dance; Jill from water ballet, gymnastics and swimming with dolphins; Amnon from the world of the deaf; Jill from the hearing community. Together they have created the Damti Method of working with children and adults of varying abilities to express themselves through movement and dance, enabling them to engage in the world of art. Based on their philosophy of "Two Worlds," their method can expand the power of communication among the deaf and hearing communities, among people of varying abilities, enabling them to work together to create a work of art. They have developed a full curriculum of studies carried out in an engaging environment by which they impart the values of their philosophy: Everyone can participate and everything is possible. Their program is described in their recent book, *The Damti Method*, which also introduces the Damti Method Legacy Program, an outgrowth of being artists in residence at Orange County Music and Dance in Southern California. Jill and Amnon have traveled widely in Israel, Africa and the United States to perform and to work with children and adults of different cultures and abilities.

This interview consists of transcriptions of conversations between Jill and Amnon Damti and the interviewer carried out in the following manner:

Bella asked questions in English directed toward Amnon and/or Jill. Jill used Israeli sign language to communicate questions to Amnon. Amnon signed his answers back to Jill and then Jill stated his answers in English.

There are occasional short remarks in brackets which describe Amnon's physical and facial gestures and sounds which he often uses to express himself.

Bella: Thank you for participating in this conversation. I have been following your dance careers for many years and have recently learned about your unique method. My first question will be addressed to Amnon.

Bella: Amnon, from your book *The Damti Method*, we know that you come from a Yemenite family background and that you were born deaf and spent a long time in an institution for deaf and children with varying abilities.

How did you become interested in dancing – was it while you were living in the institution or later as a teenager? How did you get into it? Did dancing come naturally to you as with many children or were you introduced to it by someone or maybe from tv or movies?

Amnon: That's a good question. I was in the institution from age 5 to 15. Before that I was in a *moshav* (farm community) in an environment where they didn't know how to communicate with deaf children. At times I was sent out of the institution to develop more but it was very basic: They used pantomime and facial expressions that were easy for the deaf.

Bella: Was this a place where they studied dance?



Jill and Amnon Damti

Amnon: No! It was very limited. I didn't know about studying dance but there were different workshops in art, and I understood that I love art and that I could develop myself through art, and then they brought in a television. It was black and white; there was only one channel. Then they brought in a new tv, but they locked it! Every week there was a different series and one day they showed the Bolshoi Ballet from Russia, and I got so excited. I had never seen anything like this before. I was shocked. I saw the dancers leaping and it was so masculine. How could they dance and do the pointing? I was so excited that I wanted to learn to dance, but I thought I wouldn't be able to because of the music.

Jill: Amnon was 10 when he saw this for the first time.

Amnon: I felt like my blood was in a new world. I felt like Wow! Afterwards I found out that the name of the dance was "Spartacus." [Amnon raised his hands high, signifying strength and power.]

Bella: Amnon you are very expressive.

Jill: Yes.

Amnon: And suddenly when I was 15, I was introduced to movement and mime and Moshe Efrati was the leader.

Bella: But how did you find out about this?

Amnon: When I was 15 I had moved into Tel Aviv and studied in high school and slept at the Helen Keller Institute and Moshe Efrati came there.

Jill: Someone had told Moshe about Amnon and that he was an athlete and good-looking.

Amnon: Moshe Efrati came in wearing all kinds of bracelets, with a bag at his side and dressed in high heeled shoes, boots, and I was impressed. I had never seen anyone like that before. It affected me. I didn't want to learn from him. He was too much. He looked like a one-man-show. Everybody was looking at him. I

felt very modest next to him. On the stage he was powerful, very talented.

Jill: Moshe Efrati was destined to do work with the deaf from the time when he was in the Bat Sheva Dance troupe. Someone there suggested that he do volunteer work with the deaf.

Bella: So that's how it began. He found Amnon and that's how it all started with "Kol Udmama" (Sound and Silence) dance troupe.

Amnon: Yes. We worked on ideas with pantomime and with our voices which were strange and the vibrations from Moshe banging a stick on the floor and also touching each other and facial gestures.

Bella: What you are doing now goes much further than what was being done then. The film I saw of your work in Africa revealed many different aspects of how you work and it inspired me to interview you. You took it all and brought it to a different space, a different level, out into the community.

Jill: Amnon has a talent which is taking children or other people who don't know how to dance and bringing out the best in them. Amnon sees the light, what their talent is, and he finds something to bring out. A kid might say "I don't know how to do anything!" and Amnon will find something and make it come alive -- Moshe also had that talent. We worked in San Diego in a dance camp for the deaf 3 years ago. There was a dance teacher and theater teacher there who worked with the kids for 2 months but Amnon worked with them for only one and a half hours and they already looked like a dance company! All the parents came and the music suddenly stopped but nearly all of the parents were deaf, so it didn't matter. I have the talent to see everyone around me and to bring everyone in. I always had that talent before I met Amnon. Nobody is left out. For instance, when we were working with kids that are very limited, there was a child in a wheelchair sitting very far away, and his assistant said he's deaf and he can't walk, so I went over to him and took his arm and put it on the bar [chair] and he felt he was part of the dance.



Amnon Damti

Bella: I'm very interested in the communication aspect of the workshops you give to children or adults who are deaf, hard of hearing and especially if there are also participants with other abilities in the group. When you are trying to teach dance, how do you give positive feedback to a child who is deaf? Let's say a child learns something and has to dance in front of the group. How do you give feedback to that child so they can improve?

Jill: We only give very positive feedback. We teach the kids that when you give criticism, it's always to do something better, so if you don't have something positive to say, then you shouldn't say anything until you find a way to say something that can help. It was very complicated when we started working with the deaf and kids of different abilities and cultures because I don't know American sign language. Amnon knows American sign language without knowing English spelling so he'll sign fluently with someone who doesn't know English or Hebrew but they'll sign in American sign language. For instance, they'll make the sign for "window" and it will be understood without signing each of the letters: w, i, n, d, o, w. So we had to bring interpreters to the workshops, but they had to understand that they have to interpret for everyone so when they interpret for the deaf, they have to interpret for the hearing participants when the deaf are talking as well. It was very complicated because the interpreters are used to working with the deaf but not with the hearing. We also brought in different dance teachers to teach different tools so once we brought in a very good classical ballet teacher but she stood with her back to the deaf dance kids so they couldn't see her! There are so many things to consider. About 2 years ago we were asked to do a pilot with a group of autistic kids who are often closed into themselves so we insisted on including kids with normative abilities as well: Two Worlds! We brought in 15 and 16 year old kids, most of whom dancers from the schools, and we explained to them that they are part of this group for themselves as well and everyone in the room would participate in the program, even those only observing. There were also Arab speakers so we needed different interpreters.

Bella: Is there sign language for Arab speakers?

Jill: The deaf Arabs and Jews speak the Israeli sign language. If they go to Jordan or Egypt they will use a different sign language. A few months ago in Nazareth we did a movement workshop for the deaf, and some were blind, but we didn't need an interpreter because they all used the same sign language. This was amazing.

Bella: What do you do with the blind kids? Touch?

Jill: A lot of touch. You can't just say things and explain.
Amnon: You have to go to each one individually because everyone has different needs. And everyone can bring out their movements.
Jill: Something many hearing people don't understand. The deaf participants can lie down in a relaxation session that I do but they can't close their eyes because they won't know what to do!

Bella: This is very complicated. Communication is the most important thing here in these classes.

Jill: Yes, communication is number one! We have kids with a lot of different problems. We had a kid, Tyler, who actually wrote me because it was my birthday. He lives in California. He's deaf and autistic but he wanted to dance. That was his dream. He has ballet shoes like Amnon does and his mother told me that the deaf community didn't accept him because he's autistic, and the autistic community didn't accept him because he's deaf. All he wanted to do was dance. Then she brought him to our program. Amnon was working with a kid at that time, Carlos, a kid with many difficulties, and Tyler was making all kinds of noises and gestures because Amnon was acting like a robot, and his mother was going "Sh sh sh!" It was the first time Tyler made a voice because everyone was always telling him to be quiet so we encouraged him. We said it's perfect. We should have recorded this!

Jill/Amnon: And then when everybody was doing their solo he said, "I want to learn but I'm not good." So I asked him what he loves and he said he loves skateboarding so he brought his skateboard and rode around the studio, and they wanted to kill me for letting him skate all around the linoleum floor! Communication is number one, and it's very interesting for us because we're a couple, we're married, but our professional life is very separate. In our day-to-day life I'm not stuck to Amnon to interpret for him. He's very communicative and will talk to people even though they don't always understand him, but we made the decision when we first met not to be dependent on each other, not for me to always interpret for him, and neither do our children.

Bella: Yes. I noticed that as soon as he came in today. He was communicating to me in all kinds of ways – sounds, gestures, movements. I would like to ask you how you first met. How did you communicate then?

Amnon: There were no cell phones then. There was a friend of mine, a hearing friend – one day he told me about you [Jill]. He asked me to come with him to visit you.

Jill: They came into the house. I was 23; Amnon was 26. We didn't know each other. When he came in, Avi said, "This is the dancer who is a real piece. He always goes out with women who are a real piece..." So we were introduced to each other and after that we kept on meeting each other by accident in Tel Aviv. There was a place called Watermelon on the beach and a discotheque called Penguin, and suddenly we connected.

Bella: But how? How did you connect?

Jill/Amnon: At the time I didn't have a boyfriend...it was after I had a long relationship. Then I started learning sign language from Amnon and I learned it really fast. It took me about two weeks. [Amnon signs that in the beginning it was hard for me; when I didn't understand him, I would look down.] We learned from each other but then we connected after about 3 months; it was like a magnet; we couldn't get away from each other; it was very intense.

Bella: How do you prefer to communicate today? Do you sometimes have misunderstandings or disagreements?

Jill: Sometimes we like to communicate with no voice, just in sign language. I like that because sometimes in the mornings, I don't feel like talking and sometimes I don't want people to understand so I love using sign language. Yes, of course, we have disagreements just like regular couples do. We sometimes have misunderstandings because I like people to read my mind and I don't always explain myself so well even in a regular language. Sometimes I want Amnon to understand me without words or sign language. We try to find a way to overcome those times.

Bella: So you were a couple then but not yet married, right?

Jill: We had been performing together professionally. For a few years we were a couple on and off. I was very confused. A close friend of mine, Yemima, helped me realize that Amnon and I worked very well together. She had seen us performing on television and told me that I belong on stage next to Amnon, not behind him or next to him. I then understood that we belonged together as a couple.

Bella: Let's talk a little about how you got to the "Two Worlds" concept.

Jill: After Amnon left the *Kol Udmama* dance troupe, we later went to work at the Gallaudet University for the Deaf in Washington D.C. where deaf people come from all around the world to study every profession from cinema to medicine. We worked there together. Amnon created a choreography for us called, "Two Worlds." At first we called it solo/duet so the dance was about me and Amnon growing together and breaking up and getting together again, me following him and he following me. We presented it with a text, a poem. That night I wrote a text and Amnon said that's exactly what he felt. Let's put it in the music, so the poem was put into the music. I wrote it in Hebrew and then we translated it into English. A lot of my texts are used in our music.

Bella: "Two Worlds" existed even then!

Amnon/Jill: After we left Washington we came back to Israel. Amnon had left *Kol Udmama* and didn't know what to do and he wanted to keep dancing.

Jill: I also didn't know what to do. I had studied film and television and when I finished studying I created the first international student film festival in 1986. I created it from nothing with another artist, and I didn't know what to do next. Then Amnon said let's continue to create our "Two Worlds" performance and develop it in different ways. Suddenly we had this idea to present the "Two Worlds," not only because it represents deaf and hearing but because Amnon came from dance and my world was gymnastics and water ballet as well as film and television. It had multiple meanings, and it could also become the philosophical basis for our method of working with others, especially people with different abilities. We continued to develop the underlying motivation for our "Two Worlds" philosophy. We believed that participating in art can help everyone transcend their limitations and eliminate barriers to achieving their goals. By introducing children and adults of varying abilities to the art of dance, we could help them find a

way to express themselves and even to connect and communicate to other members of the community whose abilities were different from theirs. Thus, the idea of creating workshops based on the values of inclusion and acceptance, we could provide tools for participants to learn how to engage in movement and dance. A curriculum could be established with specific practices and goals constituting a method: The Damti Method, as described in the recently published book.

Bella: How do you impart these values?

Jill/Amnon: The values of the philosophy are presented in each of the 10-12 workshops in the form of 10 "guide stones", where each stone represents a value: inclusion, acceptance, passion, openness, dialog, intuition, respect, creativity, interest in others, mediation. Facilitators and interpreters (instead of teachers) provide the tools whereby these values are imparted and practiced in daily and additional activities, e.g. welcome circle, warm-ups, relaxation, sign language dance, creating sounds.

Bella: Let's talk some more about what happens in the workshops. Do you allow the participants to do improvising?

Jill/Amnon: Every day there's a different activity. Improvising for us is very important to bring out the individuality of each person, but not in the beginning. Usually it happens not the first day because it takes time to know each other and many times the kids don't even know what the word means. One day we were working on improvising and each person was telling about himself or herself, explaining something but not with words, with movement. It could be with pantomime, dance or touching but not using words. It's very challenging if you want to tell someone you are deaf, without using the word. You can do something like this [Jill makes a gesture]. We were helping them. There was one autistic kid who said, "I don't like anything!" So I said, "What do you do in your free time?" "I watch television." "What do you watch?" "You don't know it!" Amnon was helping him with pantomime to show us what he watches. In the end he was so happy. There was a helper from one of the Arab villages in the area sitting around so I asked her to also tell her story and I said to her, "Say something about yourself with movements. What do you love?" And she said, "Food. Don't you see! I'm fat!" "What kind of food?" So she starts showing how she cooks, making the food. Amnon says, "movement without using words!" We were trying to bring in facilitators to work with us. We really wanted people of different ages, even people in their seventies, to show kids that not all old people are sick and can't do things. It's really important to show them this. Older people can have a great deal of vitality.

Bella: It gives them hope for the future.

Jill: We have this activity where each person tells the other one who they are without using words, so two kids -- one deaf, one hearing -- have to try to communicate. For example, one kid whose name is Yochai -- he's our "Billy Eliot" (from the 2000 film about a boy who wants to become a dancer) -- and he's dancing and leaping. He can't say deaf so he shows us like this (with a gesture) using hip hop dance movements.

Bella: I think I know what the "Two Worlds" are but I'm wondering how did you develop this, how did you get to this philosophy, what was the process?

Amnon/Jill: Actually in our natural way, we live according to this philosophy. When Amnon worked at Gallaudet University in 1989 and all these deaf kids were coming in to do auditions, Amnon said we don't need auditions because everybody will be accepted. There was this girl by the name of Ezme, she had CP, cerebral palsy, and was also deaf, highly intelligent, she knew six languages just from reading, and she said she wanted to dance. The instructor said that she can't dance but Amnon said yes and he worked with her for about a month. We both thought then that you could find something beautiful in everyone. It's not a cliché. We were inclusive before they used the word inclusive about us.

Bella: Was she in a wheel chair?

Amnon/Jill: Now she is but then she wasn't. Amnon worked with her for a month. Her face was painted white like Pierrot the clown and the audience didn't know that she had CP. [Amnon said her movements were part of her body and her hands were like this. He began to dance in the room as she did then even leaping. She could even do that.]

Bella: Amnon, that's fantastic, how great! You can remember the dance from so long ago!

Amnon/Jill: I was sitting next to her father who was a photographer for National Geographic and he was crying and said that was because you gave us so much hope. That was her dream to dance on the stage. It was a time when dancers were supposed to be very thin and perfect, not fat; today it's much more open. We didn't care. We wanted to bring everyone in. Everybody has something interesting. People would sit on the side while we were working and say "I can't dance" but we didn't accept that. Then we became artists in residence at the OC Music and Dance Center. We were brought in by a Chinese man, Charlie Zhang, and later we became Israel Foreign Ministry Ambassadors for Culture and Acceptance. Charlie saw us dancing at a church and said he was creating a center and he invited us to be part of it. We would be the first artists in residence. He's now working on getting our book translated into Chinese. For many years people have been asking us to write a book. It was Doug Freeman, CEO of Orange County Music and Dance, who said that after you perform, everybody is uplifted and people want to ask questions. People want to



Jill Damti

know more about your method, so you have to write a book, and it should be called, The Damti Method. With the help of my siblings, especially my sister from Vienna, we were able to get the book written in which we describe our philosophy of the Two Worlds and describe the curriculum, the workshops, the values and how they are taught.

Bella: Thank you so much for participating in a most stimulating and fascinating conversation -- in sharing with us how you work using movement and dance with people of varying abilities enabling them to participate in the world of art. Your method, your philosophy and values, and your dedication may indeed contribute toward creating a world of equality and acceptance of one another.

Bella Rubin, Senior Lecturer at Tel Aviv University, a recipient of a junior Fulbright Scholarship, has participated in the Gila Dance Workshops for several years. After retirement from the teaching and research of academic writing, she participates in Holocaust Education giving writing workshops throughout the world to survivors, 2nd and 3rd generation and publishes widely in this field. I would like to thank Uriah Rubin for his excellent recording of the interview which made it easier to transcribe all the elements, spoken language and sign language.