

Dancing the Practice of Change

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In her article, *How To Make a Modern Dance When the Sky's the Limit*, Trisha Brown wrote, "... the modern choreographer has the right to make up the WAY that he/she makes a dance".

Brown's statement was consequential. It expressed one of many outcomes that emerged from the small revolution that shook the dance world of Downtown New York in the 1960s. Its meaning was a call to those of us who felt the pull away from formulaic dance training and traditional approaches to composing pieces. We made a colossal shift in what we now felt were outdated methods of working that led us into unconventional ways of approaching our bodies and making dances. This opened up uncharted territories when we explored diverse modes of expressing ourselves.

The unconstrained nature of the proposals put forward by the experimentations of Judson Dance Theater and the Grand Union opened the way for us to explore freely. Our explorations during the 1970s embraced the intellectual challenges of concept; the sensory delights of material; the exhilaration of performing in unusual spaces; and the thrill of constantly stepping into the unknown. These investigations placed improvisation into one of many possible ways that pieces could be made, and performances could be performed.

The liberty to explore untried ways of moving, coupled with the embrace of pedestrian movement as dance, aroused our curiosity about the form and functioning of the body. My own move away from the traditional dance techniques I had practiced assiduously began in London, England in 1972. It was there that I first encountered the Taijiquan through an extraordinary woman. Gerda (Pytt) Geddes taught a movement technique that acknowledged differences in bodies; worked with, rather than against the natural movement potential of human beings; and aimed to create expanded internal space in body and mind. Attention to breathing extended time for moment-to-moment insights. Weight was recognized as a fundamental element that gives experiential understanding of lightness.

In her teaching, Geddes spoke often of the skeleton as the framework of the body. Having gone through Reichian therapy, she was also keen to have us understand how *muscle armoring* blocks the ability to move freely. Geddes taught us specific massage techniques that liberate energy trapped within the body, transforming it into abundant free flow. Along with this physical focus, she introduced us to Eastern philosophy and Chinese medicine, and shared the poetic symbolism that ties the human being to the macrocosm of Earth and Cosmos. The power of softness, an essential aspect of the Taijiquan, became a guiding force for my work.

In each of our lifetimes, one event follows another. We build our histories through living our lives. So it was that my meeting with the Taijiquan was followed by Alexander Technique lessons with a singularly unconventional teacher, Bill Williams. The focus on the physicality of movement and the drive to understand how we move became compelling. At the time, having made the shift from the emotionally driven story-telling of Ballet and Modern Dance, the abstract movement that emerged from the Cunningham aesthetic was a welcome relief. The Alexander Technique gave my thinking body directional clarity and internal spaciousness. Dancing with the experimental

group, Strider, brought me into direct contact with Cunningham and Judson aesthetics. All of these wild and wonderful influences were in play.

It was from this primed place that I came into contact with Anatomical Release Technique in 1973 through the American teacher/choreographer, Mary O'Donnell Fulkerson. Ideokinesis and immersive work with imagery is integrated into the structure of Anatomical Release classes. Use of imagery allows one's body to rediscover dynamic alignment through *undoing* habitual physical tension. A centered meeting of bone to bone arises at the many joints in the body to create anatomical integrity. One can now discover limitless articulateness when moving. By working consciously with the reality of anatomical structure, an invaluable foundation that grounds movement is realized.

Contact Improvisation was the next step. While use of imagery is fundamental in Anatomical Release Technique and Ideokinesis, Contact Improvisation is pure physical responsiveness to present moment disorientation. Shared body to body contact, fluid weight, and the feel of momentum opens up initially strange and disorienting relationships to gravity. With time and practice, disorientation is reorganized into omni-directional orientation. Any part of the body can move in any direction in response to the stimulus it receives. Contact Improvisation teaches that possibilities are inexhaustible.

After moving from England to New York in 1975, I continued my studies of Ideokinesis with André Bernard, and Release Technique with Nancy Topf. I also took classes in Kinetic Awareness (the *ball work* as it was playfully called) with Elaine Summers. Body-Mind Centering initiated my passion for exploring the different systems of the body. Whenever they occurred, I attended Contact Improvisation jams. New York City is filled with teachers, techniques, workshops, and countless performances. My interest lay in the Downtown Dance scene, where I investigated everything I could, and performed with several choreographers whose work I admired. I wanted to learn about making dance pieces that embodied the new approaches I was encountering. Being involved in the actual process seemed like the perfect way to accomplish this. Improvisation and continuing explorations of the moving body became my central focus.

All of the techniques that absorbed my attention incorporate some form of touch. Approaches to touch within body awareness techniques go by many different names, including *hands-on* (the Alexander Technique and Body-Mind Centering); *tactile aid* (Ideokinesis); and *body graphics* (Skinner Releasing Technique). Touch helps us to understand the shape, location, and function of body parts in the here & now. Touch brings into consciousness the detailed specificity of palpable structure, and the knowledge of how parts fit together and function. Touch helps us feel and generate directional flow of energy. Touch draws us into sensation. The more detail one discovers through touch, the more articulate and miraculous the body becomes.

Overflowing with an abundance of groundbreaking information about physical and creative process, I returned to Australia in 1976 to work with the experimental group, Dance Exchange. The new ideas and practices we were exploring were limited to only a few individuals within the Australian dance world, so while working with Dance Exchange, I returned to New York for a few months each year. I wanted to re-engage with colleagues and teachers, and reconnect with the ceaseless evolution I had been part of while living there. I was curious to see the latest performances, and was itching to perform again within the context of the Downtown Dance scene,

so different from the isolation I was experiencing in Australia. Keeping abreast of new developments in the fast-moving New York dance world was an ongoing priority essential to my personal evolution as a dancer.

While I was performing and teaching extensively in Australia with Dance Exchange, I began to develop my distinctive physical and creative practice. It took me time to figure out how to work alone, for myself. Dance schools don't teach dance students how *not* to take classes, how *not* to be dependent on what others tell us to do. Of the many techniques I had learned, I began to focus on those that offered the skills, qualities, and strengths that inspire me to be the dancer I wish to be.

I began to internalize an expanded meaning of Brown's words, "... the modern choreographer has the right to make up the WAY that he/she makes a dance". I told myself that every dancer has the right to make up the WAY that he/she *trains* their body-mind. I began to adopt an approach that foregrounds each dancer's agency to develop their own unique practice, and create the kind of work that interests them in the way they wish to make it. In time, as I taught in many countries and many contexts around the world, I began to pass this message on to my students.

When I returned to New York in 1979 to join the Trisha Brown Dance Company, I felt I had arrived where I wanted to be. Brown's work was compelling in the rigor of its physical and conceptual intelligence. Everything I had been practicing found its place within the freedom, complexity, sensuality, and effortless flow of her dancing.

I danced in Brown's company for six years. Her compositional proposals, and the breathtaking beauty of her dancing stimulated me. She invited our participation in the creation of her pieces by presenting us with exacting tasks. She treated us with respect. Rehearsals were exciting, suffused with her wonderfully subtle and incisive sense of humor, which is visible in all of her pieces.

We fulfilled straightforward tasks in her elegant and deceptively simple *Line Up*, while the score of her seminal piece, *Locus*, invited us to configure our bodies in ways that dancers never had before. As I hurtled through *Glacial Decoy*, *Opal Loop*, *Son of Gone Fishin'*, and her masterpiece, *Set and Reset*, I was intoxicated by the wild rides that we set into motion when dancing her pieces. Brown's zest for life seemed inexhaustible. I was completely swept up in her world.

In time, however, I realized that Brown's vision was leading the company into large-scale dance environments that reminded me too much of circumstances I had rejected. My passion still lay with intimate working and performing contexts. The fascination I felt for improvisation that was stirring in me eventually became impossible to resist. I made the decision to leave Brown's company, and embark on a journey of my own choosing.

For the past 36 years, I have been immersed in the inexhaustible joys of exploration. I have built a physical and teaching practice that includes Western body awareness techniques (primarily Ideokinesis, and the Alexander Technique); along with Eastern martial, meditation, and healing forms and concepts. These are integrated into the Release Technique class model. In my current practice, I continue to practice and reflect on body awareness techniques that continue to expand my vision of what dance can be.

An important facet of my teaching is the attention placed on the structures and systems within the body. These include the skeletal framework; connective tissue (the tensile fabric that links every constituent part of the body to every other part); and the fluid weight of organ content. I share this passion through touch-focused explorations coupled with the use of poetic imagery. This approach to anatomical inquiry serves as inspiration for a reimagining of the internal landscape of the body. It leads the dancer to a state of greater physical integration, one that informs and supports easeful moving and injury-free dancing. When embodied within improvisation, movement that emerges out of this newly inhabited state enables the discovery of novel physical and imaginative possibilities.

My passion for improvisation invariably leads me to performance, and my love of performing prompts me to explore approaches for structuring material and creating work. I am absorbed by both solo and collaborative processes. My collaborations have taken me from worlds of movement into more intimate relationship with other disciplines. With the support, intimacy, and trust I develop with my collaborators, I can dive into an even more detailed understanding of the nature of moving. I can refine sensitivity and sharpen responsiveness in order to expand and engage further afield with my environment and audiences in cooperative process.

Transformation takes time. It entails a commitment to the discipline of dailiness, and the on-going work of fine-tuning awareness. When I take time to forge the internal connections that ground my moving practice, I am creating a firm foundation from which I can enter into experimentation courageously. As I share my unfolding discoveries with younger dancers, I am keenly aware of our mutual exchange. While they keep me connected to current developments, I can transmit the embodied knowledge and wealth of experiences gathered over a lifetime of dancing, creating, teaching, and performing in experimental contexts around the world.

There is no end to being curious and awake to new impulses, to continuing to grow and change, to dance and create. To not know what happens next continues to exhilarate me. It demands that I give full attention to the present moment, as if my very life depended on the precision of my perception, the agility of my response, and a steadfast commitment to my art.

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