

The Role of Somatics

Eva Karczag

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Somatics are no longer the little-known esoteric practices they were in the early 1970s when I first met up with them, practiced by a few individuals working on the fringes of the dance world. Especially during the last decade or so, many Somatic forms are included in the training programs of major dance institutions and mainstream dance companies. The simple reason for this is that Somatic techniques work. They encourage dancers and dance students to immerse themselves in investigations of their own physical structure and patterns of use. Increased awareness leads to a more nuanced understanding of their body, with greater respect and trust in its intelligence. What goes on inside the body has undeniable impact on what is seen from the outside - the look of a movement is different when awareness is honed and when internal connections that create each movement are considered. Somatic techniques establish the practice of paying attention to internal sensation, and they provide a way of attuning to the micro-movement that is the foundation of all movement. An additional and important benefit, observed repeatedly in dance programs and dance companies, through research as well as through personal experiences, is that dancers schooled somatically are less prone to injury.

One way of using Somatics is to improve already existing forms. However, many dance artists are delving deeper, into the philosophies underlying these practices in order to chart new territory and open up new ways of working, be it training, creating or performing. It is this latter use that interests me.

As well as developing the discipline of a rigorous Somatic-based practice where physical exploration allows for and stimulates personal discovery, in techniques such as the various forms of Release (eg, Skinner Releasing and Anatomical Release) classes are not just about refining the body but are structured to generate multi-directional availability in each student by sharpening their curiosity, igniting their imagination, and engaging them in the immediacy and challenge of continually examining movement and compositional choices. Students are taught to take responsibility for themselves and, through connecting with their own sources and resources, they are schooled to become inquiring and innovative artists in their own right. This focus on creative process and decision making feeds the development of a maker. In today's world, where creativity is increasingly valued more than rote learning and where workers in all fields are more often required to contribute ideas and not merely to follow orders, where most dancers will not find employment in established dance companies but will need to rely on their own initiatives and entrepreneurship, this seems to be not merely one option out of many but an immediate necessity.

During the recent Conscious Body conference in Paris, an interdisciplinary dialog between dancers and neuroscientists, Steve Paxton spoke about his groundbreaking work as an improviser and innovator to a group of students from Université Paris 8. He began with the questions: have you examined what you mean by dance, since in that thought is the seed of your dancing and your development, and do you have any concept of yourself in movement? Many of us, who are freelance dance artists working in experimental idioms, have asked versions of these questions. Students need to be encouraged to shape their own physical and creative practices so that they, too, will be motivated to ask similar questions and have the ability and skills to discover their own answers. When students are only stimulated to perfect what is already known, and space is not given for entering the unknown, then learning stays within recognized parameters. The possibility for invention can happen only when notions of right and wrong are discarded, and students are taught to value their impulses, aspirations and preferences. As Deborah Hay so fittingly puts it, the dancer can redefine his or her role “as a site for inquiry.”

Using Somatics in the training of dancers within applications that are not limited to simply the physical but also include intellectual and creative considerations, is surely the way into a future where dancing and dance making are responsive to changing contexts and new worldviews and trends. In my own teaching I have seen over and over again that it is possible to train students for a career in dance through humane health-promoting methods that generate experiences of both kinesthetic and intellectual delight.

Conscious Body conference <http://theconsciousbodymeeting.wordpress.com/>
Deborah Hay <http://www.deborahhay.com/>
The expression "kinesthetic delight" is from Barbara Dilley

Eva Karczag is an independent dance artist who, for the past four decades, has practiced, taught and advocated for explorative methods of dance making. She performs solo and collaborative work and teaches internationally. Her performance work and her teaching are informed by dance improvisation and mindful body practices. A member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company (1979-85), she continues to teach through the company education program in NY and elsewhere. She has a Master of Fine Arts degree (Dance Research Fellow) from Bennington College, Vermont, USA, and is a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique.

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