ISSN 2754-4125

Movement, Dance & Drama

Geraldine Stephenson at home

Magazine of Laban Guild International
Registered Charity No 266435

Volume 44 No 1
April 2025

Laban Guild International
Registered Charity No. 266435

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Magazine Contributions
Copy dates: 15th March, 15th July, 15th November
Format: email or scanner-ready copy to the Editor

Front Cover Image:
Geraldine Stephenson at home
Photo by B J Lewis

ISSN 2754-4125 (Online)
ISSN 2046-3065 (Print)

www.labanguildinternational.org.uk

Contents

Movement, Dance & Drama is published in England and is distributed worldwide. It is free to all subscribers to Laban Guild International.
Individual annual subscriptions for printed copies for UK addresses £40; affiliated groups UK £54; individual Europe £52; world zones 1,2,3 £58; groups Europe £76; world zones 1,2,3 £82.
Online rates: individuals £20 groups £40.
Library and institute subscriptions on request.

Editorial

In this edition of the magazine there is interesting contrast. Ewan Clayton's article, on applying Laban's work in his practice as a calligrapher and artist, testifies to the all-embracing nature of Laban's thinking. However, Louis Laberge-Côte's article on Flow does not mention Laban but, to anyone familiar with Laban's work, the links are obvious. Similarly, Laberge-Côte's list of 'rules for teachers' will not come as a surprise to those who studied how to teach dance in the halcyon days of three- or four-year dance teacher training programmes. The magazine is a wonderful resource for articles and reflections on many aspects of Laban's work – see, for example, Enid Bailey's 'Flow, the odd one out' (1998, 17.1) - with all the magazines published between 1947 and 2020 available online at https://labanguildinternational.org.uk/movement-dance-drama/

Trustees Report

The Trustees continue to meet regularly by Zoom. The usual topics for discussion are the upcoming magazine, Hub activities, accounts and finance, and new proposals/ developments. The most recent meeting discussed supporting the event in honour of Geraldine Stephenson (see below) and an event growing out of the December 2024 on-line forum. The Trustees welcome hearing from subscribers especially if they are interested in becoming Trustees. Contact us at trustees@labanguildinternational.org.uk

Save the Date

The Trustees of Laban Guild International are very pleased to support this event which is being planned by the Moving Actor Hub and Movement Choir Hub

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF DANCE DRAMA in honour of GERALDINE STEPHENSON and the legacy of RUDOLF LABAN

Sunday June 29th, 10am - 8pm,
at The Place, 17 Duke's Rd, London WC1H 9PY.

There will be workshops to participate in, leading to a combined movement choir. Please express your interest in this event by contacting:
trustees@labanguildinternational.org.uk

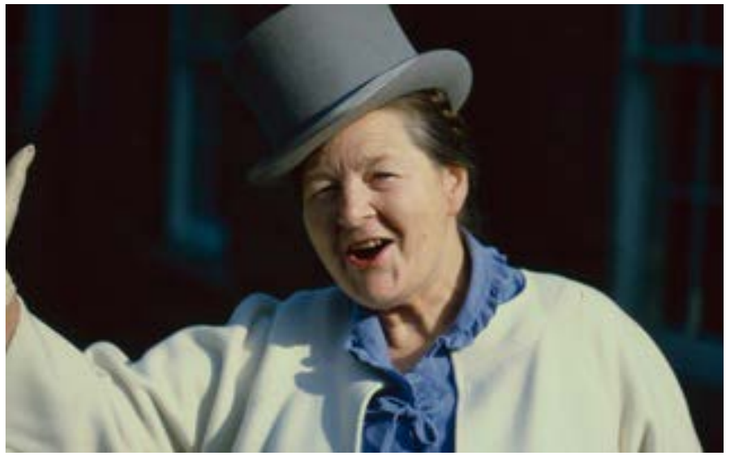
Readers and subscribers may be interested to learn more about Geraldine Stephenson by reading her Laban Lecture (May 1989) available here: https://labanguildinternational.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/LabanMagNo78May1989.pdf

A celebration of her life and work was published in 2018 and is available here: https://labanguildinternational.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/MovementDanceDramaSpring2018Online.pdf

Aspects of Laban's work in Calligraphy and Life Drawing

Ewan Clayton

I am a calligrapher, a member of the Academic Faculty at the Royal Drawing School and professor in Design at the University of Sunderland. For over thirty years I have used aspects of Laban's teaching in my classes both in calligraphy and life drawing. I was introduced to his ideas by my godmother Joy Sinden (1920-1993), a teacher of Drama at the West Midlands College of Education in Walsall, now part of the University of Wolverhampton. Joy had studied with Laban towards the end of his life but exactly how and where I have never been able to find out. I never asked her, or her actor brothers, Leon and Sir Donald Sinden, a fact I regret. She had many enlivening anecdotes about things she remembered Laban saying: wringing was like washing a blanket in a bath and then standing on it as you wrung it out, but dabbing was like brushing a fallen eyelash off a baby's cheek. I am aware my Laban terminology is frozen in the 50s!



Joy Sinden

Joy grew up in Ditchling, Sussex, and lived in the family house there until she died. She introduced my parents to each other and remained a close family friend. She produced and acted in the Ditchling Players, but her speciality was mime with performances at the Edinburgh Festival being one highlight. Looking back on the mimes I realise now they focused on Laban's efforts. There was one about a new soul arriving in heaven and receiving her wings and harp (floating) and another about a cross-channel ferry that opened with her eating her lunch, unwrapping her sandwiches, peeling a banana and then staggering to the side of the ship and throwing up (wringing). Another (dabbing) about getting ready to go out.
(Joy had been introduced to mime by H.D.C. Pepler who, having retired from his St. Dominic's press, returned to his first love of theatre, with plays for puppets and his masterpiece liturgical mimes with which he toured the USA.)

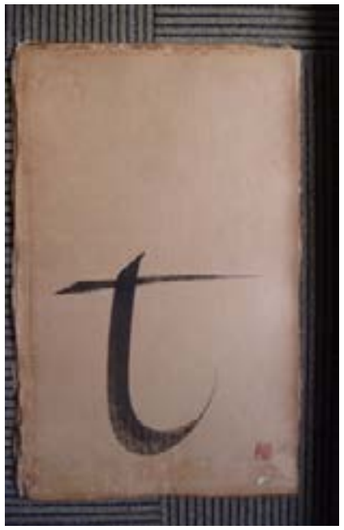
As Joy was growing up in the village her best friend was Bridget Johnston, the eldest daughter of the calligrapher Edward Johnston, famous for his revival of calligraphy in the English-speaking world and his designs for the logo and type for the London Underground. So, when I, the grandson of one of the craftsmen in The Guild of Ss. Joseph and Dominic, founded by Pepler on Ditchling Common, became interested in calligraphy Joy was immensely encouraging.

In the 1990s the big development in calligraphy was towards more expression in mark-making. I was searching for a way to teach this. Most teachers were simply urging their students to feel angry or sad and to make marks inspired by that emotion. But working in Higher Education I felt I did not want to mess with my students' emotions, it all felt too subjective. It was at that point that Joy stepped forward and suggested I might like to know about Laban's efforts. She and I then became a double act, and she came along to my calligraphy classes to teach my students about mime and Laban. Laban's effort theory gave us a neutral approach to exploring a range of gestural movement in terms of force, direction and time. In this way we could explore different line qualities on the page. These classes have been a great success giving students a framework for exploring their own individual way of moving around forms. The student becomes self-directed instead of dependent upon some external visual exemplar - though I often model the approach with demonstrations.

My process with calligraphers has been to introduce the efforts one by one explaining this is an artificial way of describing actions because we rarely find a single movement creating form, but it helps us to spot movement qualities and provides an analytic tool.
We then spend time exploring abstract mark making and then a single letter (from which others can be extrapolated). We go on to explore a variety of tools. Students are often astonished at the creativity they discover within themselves once movement qualities suggest forms rather than externally presented exemplars. I have led these workshops in Finland, Germany, Italy, the USA, Canada, South Africa and Japan. It is always fascinating to follow the discussion as students strive to find equivalent terms for the efforts in their own languages carrying different senses of force and speed.

VOICE - gliding and floating, written with a goose quill

CONTENT - wringing movement written with a Japanese tree root



t- wringing and thrusting, written with a suede pen on handmade Japanese paper

Once familiarised with efforts one can then begin to explore combining movements and contrasting them, we learn also about stroke beginnings and endings, bound and free flow movement.

At the Royal School of Drawing where students have a year to develop their own drawing process we use Laban efforts in Life drawing classes to help discover movement habits and then, because they want to develop their current skills, we use them to push their envelope of movement in drawing. I combine this with relaxation exercises from a Japanese martial art known as Shintaido. The idea is that if students can relax into their embodiment more sensation will become available to them. There are many discoveries to be made, workshop participants have discovered how lifestyle has made certain qualities of movement unsafe for them or those around them. Caring for another person may shape movement away from quickness and force, so can the need to seek safety in an aggressive environment. Another student, who had experienced paralysis, discovered a new way of walking simply by exploring how her pen could move on paper, she had never considered a gliding based movement.

As I moved deeper into my experience of the efforts I saw similarities with traditional ways of thinking about Chinese calligraphy. I will leave you to make your own connections but in traditional Chinese texts, eight brush strokes are thought to characterize a calligrapher's repertoire. In the classic text 'A chart of brush manoeuvres (Bizhen tu)', Lady Wei, a calligrapher in the Western Jin dynasty (265-316 CE), writes:

> The horizontal stroke is described as like
> an open array of clouds that drifts
> slowly across the sky for a thousand miles;
> the dot is like a falling rock, crashing down a
> mountain; the vertical stroke has the growth of
> a strong vine stem; the downward stroke, from
> right to left, is like an ivory tusk in its luminous
> smoothness and curvature; the sweeping
> stroke from left to right should rise and fall with
> the orgiastic energy of an ocean wave or rolling
> thunder; the hook is like an animal's
> claw or a rooted pine; the bent diagonal stroke
> has the energy of an arrow about
> to be released from a sinuous bow.

The point here is that the above strokes are described not in terms of their visual form alone but in terms of movement. A slow, drifting, gentle movement, in the case of the cloud; a surprisingly quick, strong and forceful movement with the hint of a curve in the case of the dot that falls like a bouncing rock. These images combine the visual with the felt. The eighth stroke is the empty stroke of the invisible Tao - felt space.

In the Chinese tradition, this feeling about the forces within the forms goes back to the origins of writing itself, in divination ceremonies held in late Shang China. The cracks in the bones of ritual burnt offerings were read as signs of emerging forces at work in the universe. Over the generations soothsayers came to read the

shape of these ‘answers’ in predictable ways. From the start, characters in East Asian writing systems were likened to the physical signs of nascent realities. This is one amongst many reasons that writing in China was recognised as an expressive medium from the first century CE onwards, and by the eighth century a critical literature around its aesthetics had developed.

I find it is helpful for students to be able to access examples of the effort theory for themselves on the internet, so we have been grateful to see videos of it in use in character development at the National Theatre, in movement in Commedia dell’arte, in the training of conductors, in short films pairing action and music in a variety of ways.

Also, we look at different artists who are drawing from observation like Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Georgia O’Keefe, Hokusai, and many examples of different calligraphic genre. Georgia O’Keefe however is a useful example of an artist who moved into a whole new way of painting after reverting for a time to abstract mark-making with charcoal in the teens of the twentieth century. I also found legitimacy in my approach when I learned that one of the questions that occurred to Laban as he looked at the ground-breaking art coming out of Vienna in the early twentieth century (Schiele, Klimt, Kokoschka) was ‘what is the equivalent to this in movement?’ We are now turning a mirror in the opposite direction.

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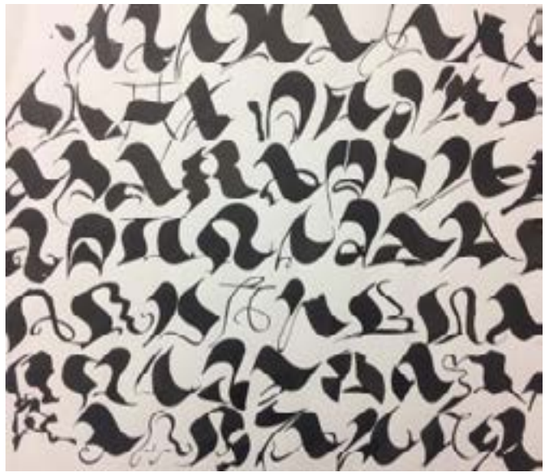
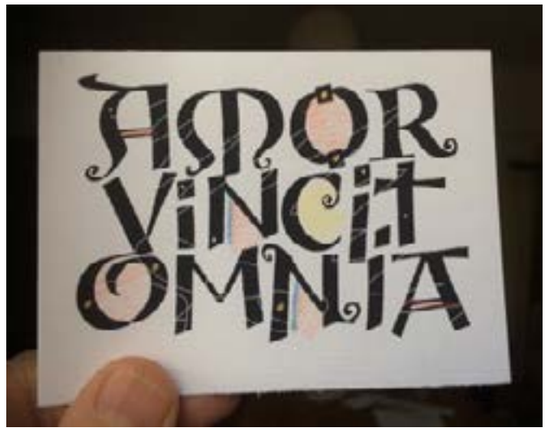
Ewan Clayton is a calligrapher and the author of The Golden Thread: the story of writing *(London: Atlantic Books, 2013). He lives, works and teaches in Brighton, UK, holds a part-time post as Professor in Design at The University of Sunderland and is a core faculty member of the Royal School of Drawing in London. He has also trained as a somatic coach with the Strozzi Institute in California.*
For more information:
see https://www.ewanclayton.co.uk

Editor’s Note: If any readers know more about Joy Sinden, please get in touch.

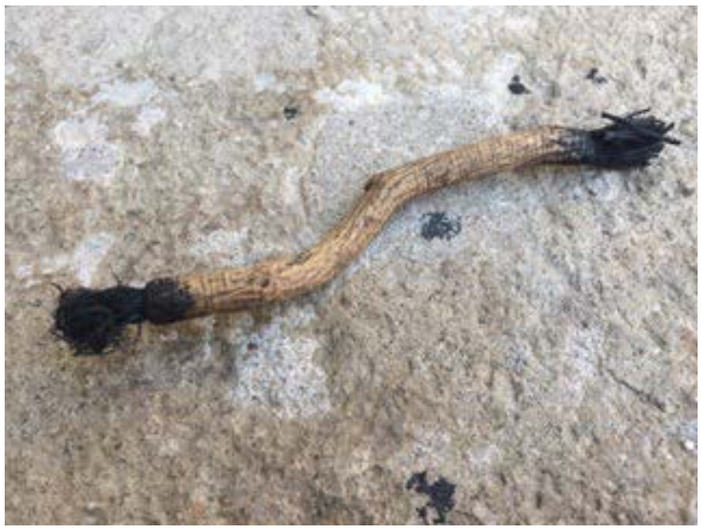
All images by Ewan Clayton



Sketch book page of A’s using wringing movement



Amor Vincit Omnia - pushing and wringing written with metal nibs then scanned



Japanese tree root brush

The Porous Body: Cultivating malleability in traditional dance training

Louis Laberge-Côte

For the past thirty years, the dance field has seen worldwide funding cuts, rendering previously successful dance companies unsustainable. For example, in Canada, ‘for most of the 1990s, as Canadian governments concentrated on reducing their deficits by curbing spending, expenditures on culture declined’ (Harvey 2006). The Canadian Arts Presenting Association notes that since then ‘[m]any [dance] companies have scaled down and others [have been] eliminated’ (Petri 2012: 17). Even though each country has its distinct cultural environment, numerous dance centres around the world have been through comparable transformations in recent decades.

As a result of this new economic climate, full-time company dancers working with one particular choreographer or director have become rarities and have been replaced by freelance dancers. These independent contractors are often involved in several projects at the same time, nomadically moving from one creative environment to the next. New York-based dancer Veronica Dittman describes: ‘Below that very narrow top tier [of employed company dancers], dancers are all working for more than one choreographer and/or holding down outside jobs to fill in the gaps financially’ (2008: 23).

These profound changes in the dance economy also have impacted choreographers. Freelance choreographers working outside of a conventional company structure are becoming the norm. Unaffiliated with traditional dance institutions, these creators with increased mobility collaborate with a wide range of artists – often across disciplines – while developing a flexible artistic mandate, movement vocabulary and choreographic vision.

With the rise of a nomadic freelance system and the multiplication of individualized choreographic styles, professional contemporary dancers must today understand and embody a huge variety of movement approaches and skills. Although exciting and inspiring, this situation creates a real challenge for training institutions all over the world: how should we now train contemporary dance students and how can we best prepare them for this evolution in contemporary dance?

The discussion around these challenges has been occurring for some time already. Many solutions have been proposed and tested. For example, some educators suggested that the idiosyncratic nature of the milieu should be met with broader training curricula so that students become accustomed to the versatility that will be required of them once they enter the professional world. This solution, although logical, comes at a high cost; students who are exposed to an extensive range of methods within the limited time of a training programme (three years on average) do not experience the long-term and rigorous commitment to a particular technique. This situation could result in even greater challenges as we could see the next generations of dancers potentially reverting to a superficial or an imitative approach to movement. Consequently, many specialists worry about this lack of profound physical understanding. As dance artist Jennifer Roche states:

> [I]t is easy to see how dancers operating outside a clear disciplinary history are regarded as lacking the proper markings of a movement signature. Moving freely between forms in a somewhat promiscuous manner, thus not ‘belonging’ to a particular movement style or choreographer, means that points of reference are no longer evident. (2015: 29)

Extended specialized training offers essential ‘points of reference’ to build upon or move away from, but also provides an indispensable element in dance: the profound expressive ‘meanings sewn into the neuromusculature of the body’, as Ann Cooper Albright, (2010: 53), describes it.

So here lies the conundrum that challenges our dance schools today; in-depth understanding, technical proficiency, aesthetic specificity and diversity in training all appear to be indispensable, a combination that cannot possibly be inculcated well in only three years. How can we overcome this? How can teachers help as many students as possible gain in-depth technical skills and aesthetic specificity while developing versatility? The key factor here is the cultivation of malleability.

The term *malleability*, a scientific term used to describe the ability of a solid – usually metals – to bend or to be hammered into other shapes without breaking, in a human context is used to describe someone with high adaptive qualities. The concept of malleable intelligence has gained popularity in recent years to describe the processes by which intelligence can be increased through alterations in brain plasticity. My current goal is to incorporate and foster the practice of physical and mental malleability as a way to increase the receptivity and intelligence of both mind and body within the specificity and rigour of traditional technique classes. This approach considers the state of mind in which movement occurs to be just as crucial as the movement itself, and so, too, the class environment in relationship with its content. As Mary Starks Whitehouse, founder of Authentic Movement, said: ‘It was an important day when I discovered that I did not teach Dance, I taught People’ (1999: 59).

If we accept that we do indeed teach people, rather than just dance, then which environmental conditions increase malleability? According to psychologists ‘the belief that intelligence is malleable’ (Blackwell et al., 2007: 246) rather than fixed or frozen is sufficient to result in greater accomplishments. Two studies conducted on seventh-grade students concluded that

‘students who learned about intelligence’s malleability had higher academic motivation, better academic behaviour, and better grades in mathematics’ (American Psychological Association 2003: n.pag.). Dweck also states that praising students for their intelligence can be damaging. She proposes praising them for ‘things they can control, such as effort, rather than things they cannot’ (Dweck, in Glenn 2010).

How does this all translate to dance? How can a teacher nurture a malleability-friendly class environment? Talking to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies is a natural first step. Being conscientious about complimenting students on their effort and progress, as opposed to their talent, facility or beauty, is another. However, beyond the external environment, what state of mind encourages malleability? What tools can students learn to access this mindset? How could the application of these tools become an integral part of one’s pedagogical practice, particularly while teaching codified dance techniques?

While pondering these questions, I developed a philosophical framework that I name ‘The Porous Body’ (Laberge-Côté 2018). I consider it a ‘structure of feeling’ (Turner 2015: n.pag.), that focuses on the practice of an approach to movement, as opposed to the practice of movement itself. Since it is not attached to a specific movement vocabulary, aesthetic or series of exercises, this framework can be incorporated into diverse forms of dance training. The Porous Body (TPB) is inspired by various dance methods and concepts I have encountered, to varying degrees, throughout my dance career, notably: Ohad Naharin’s Gaga (Katan 2016), Anouk van Dijk’s Countertechnique (Siegmund & Dijk 2011), Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen’s Body-Mind Centering (Cohen 2021), Joan Skinner’s Skinner Releasing Technique (Davis 1974), Gill Clarke and Eva Karczag’s conclusions from the Vienna Research Project (2007), Eiko and Koma’s Delicious Movement (n.d.), and Butoh.

TPB’s goal is to nurture the ability to transform willpower into a state of malleability and responsiveness by following four guiding principles: Flow and the loss of self-consciousness; Playfulness and collectivity; Guided mental imagery and metaphor; and Paradox and unknowingness

Flow and the loss of self-consciousness

In which moments did I feel like I danced at my best? What happened in these instances? How did it feel? These fleeting moments of grace all had a surreal quality to them. Space and time were warped. I felt present and in control, and yet I was completely letting go as if something else was making me move. There were no worries, no doubts; there was no pain, no self-consciousness — only energy, intention, and movement taking over. What is this state, often described as *being in the zone*?

Psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls it *flow*, which is primarily characterized by the absolute engrossment in what one does, leading to a feeling of stimulated attention, full participation and gratification. Although flow research in the west became widespread in the 1980s, the concept has been a source of fascination across cultures throughout history. Buddhism and Taoism depict it as *action of inaction* or *doing without doing*. Hindu philosophy and yogic writings also depict a similar state.

What exactly is flow? Jeanne Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi have identified six factors surrounding the flow experience: Intense and focused concentration on what one is doing in the present moment; merging of action and awareness; a loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor); a sense that one can control one’s action; that is, a sense that one can in principle deal with the situation because one knows how to respond to whatever happens next; distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal); experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding, such that often the end goal is just an excuse for the process. (Nakamura and Csíkszentmihályi 2009: 90)

Whitehouse’s description of the ‘core of the movement experience’ shares similarities with flow:

> The core of the movement experience is the sensation of moving and being moved. [Ö] It is a moment of total awareness, the coming together of what I am doing and what is happening to me. It cannot be anticipated, explained, specifically worked for, nor repeated exactly. In order that it may happen, one must have a bodily awareness of movement. (1999: 43)

How can flow be generated? According to Whitehouse, these moments of heightened awareness cannot be ‘specifically worked for’. Indeed, one cannot force flow, but certain conditions can increase the chances of its manifestation. Psychologist Owen Schaffer (2013) puts forward seven flow prerequisites: High perceived challenges; High perceived skills; Knowing what to do; Knowing how to do it; Knowing how well you are doing; Knowing where to go (where navigation is involved); Freedom from distractions.

To promote flow in the context of a class, the teacher must then be clear as to what needs to be achieved and how it should be done. The class environment must also be focused and without any disturbance. Since flow is more likely to take place ‘when above-average challenges are matched to skills’ (Csíkszentmihályi 2000: 34), the teacher must push students beyond their comfort zone, while giving them faith in their ability to handle the task at hand. Since the experience of the activity should feel intrinsically rewarding, the teacher should also communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class, which brings us to the second guiding principle of TPB.

Playfulness and collectivity

At its most basic level, a dance life is just plain hard. Physical exertion, the constant risk of injury and the continuous reaching for ideals, combined with the lack of professional opportunities, often result in aspiring dancers who are exhausted, pessimistic, overly ambitious or self-conscious. These qualities can have severely detrimental effects on a dancer’s evolution. Einav Katan states:

> [...] the mood of a dancer, and the internal emotions that evolve, can be either supportive of or obstructive to perceptual processes. When a dancer places too much ambition in a movement direction, the process ceases, as it does when a dancer gives up. (2016: 91)

‘Connect effort into pleasure’ is one of the principles of Gaga, a contemporary movement language emphasizing the somatic experience. As explained by Ohad Naharin, its originator, this concept not only allows dancers to embody sensuality but, more importantly, it reminds them, despite the inevitable struggle, of their love of dance, a point reiterated by Dweck: ‘The students who thrive are not necessarily the ones who come in with the perfect scores. It’s the ones who love what they’re doing and go at it vigorously’ (Dweck, in Glenn 2010).

Morgan O’Neill-Sharp, a former student of mine at the University of Calgary, felt her dancing transform with the incorporation of playfulness:

> In class we did one pass of this exercise thinking about dancing to please yourself. I covered much more space than I ever have before in that exercise and felt a sense of ease in my movement. My body knows much more than I give it credit for, and allowing my body to move freely gave my movement depth and purpose. We all dance because we love it, yet somehow I forget to allow myself to enjoy class. The joy of movement is what makes it beautiful. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

What can a teacher do to incorporate more playfulness within the struggle associated with dance training? Informing and reminding students about Naharin’s ‘connect effort into pleasure’ concept while meeting Schaffer’s flow conditions is a good strategy. Dance has often been used as a social activity. However, conservatory-style training, although usually practiced in groups, has been mainly focused on the individual, often leading to feelings of isolation and competitiveness in the studio and beyond. As a remedy to this, there should be a stronger focus on building a sense of collectivity among classmates. Feeling part of a collective not only helps self-consciousness subside, but it also brings a joyful sense of belonging. Consequently, I often have students work in pairs or small groups, watching each other’s dancing, giving and receiving oral and tactile feedback, and making conscious eye contact. Also, the incorporation of humour can do wonders. However, the most successful factor in bringing a sense of playfulness to class is encouraging students to connect with their creativity through the use of their imagination. This element brings us to the third guiding principle of TPB.

Guided mental imagery and metaphor

The *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* describes mental imagery as a ‘quasi-perceptual experience [that] resembles perceptual experience, but occurs in the absence of the appropriate external stimuli’ (Thomas 2017). The addition of the word *guided* refers to mental imagery consciously directed and sustained for a period, as opposed to being completely random. This mental imagery is not limited to an internal visual mode but includes other cues such as auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory, haptic and so forth.

Guided mental imagery has been used in dance for quite some time. Butoh’s form and expression have been, since its conception, steeped in the embodiment of profound mental visualizations. In the west, its use gained popularity amongst dancers and health professionals in the 1930s through Ideokinesis, a form of somatic education conceived by Mabel Elsworth Todd, Barbara Clark and Lulu Sweigard. Since then, Ideokinesis has inspired an extensive list of artists and movement specialists, which has led to the development of numerous physical practices such as the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, Gyrokinesis, Contact-Improvisation, Body–Mind Centering, Skinner Releasing Technique and Gaga, among many others.

Mental imagery not only ‘improve[s] skeletal alignment and posture through the re-patterning of neuromuscular pathways’ (Pavlik and Nordin-Bates 2016: 56), but also taps into our creative selves by propelling our movement into the poetic and infinite realm of metaphors. According to renowned Ideokinesis practitioner Irene Dowd, ‘Metaphor can be the fist that breaks through the dark glass between what is already known and what is still mystery. Through the vehicle of metaphor, we can participate in that movement from what is to what can be’ (1995: 69).

O’Neill-Sharpe discovered a new way of inhabiting her movement through guided mental imagery:

> Overall, working with Louis has emphasized for me the power of imagery. A simple thought can make all the difference, allowing an exercise to become a dance. I have perhaps made this realization, at least in part, in choreography but there is no doubt that it enhances movement in a technique class as well. I have felt a change in my dancing and the way that my inner self lives while I am dancing. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

Working with imagery requires energy and attention. For a mental representation to impact one’s movement, state or alignment, attention must be directed and sustained. This process requires mental stamina, which in turn entails practice. The ability to use and embody mental imagery effectively is an essential skill for today’s contemporary dancers. Therefore, I

always include visualization exercises in my technique classes and consider this element of training to be as fundamental as the practice of movement itself. Just as it is primordial to cover a range of variations in the movement material of the class, I make sure the guided mental imagery practice also contains differentiated instruction: sometimes done with movement or in stillness, with eyes open or closed, lying down or standing, in silence or with sounds, with or without touch, individually or in groups. Through guided mental imagery, I aim to practice not only efficient movement, but also creativity, focus, enjoyment, connectedness and empathy.

The philosophical dimensions of metaphor and imagery resonated with Elizabeth Burney, another student at the University of Calgary:

> [N]ever before has philosophical styled thought been such a large component of my training as it has been in Louis' class. I have always been taught through the utilization of analogies, and found them exceptionally helpful, but Louis' approach to his work pushes past the boundaries of conventional analogies. This technique and style of thought force you to really visualize and feel the movement; and through the use of association to extreme circumstances and images, Louis is able to take our bodies and movement to where his imagery has taken our minds. (2016: personal communication by e-mail)

The primary challenge with mental imagery is that sometimes, the images can become either static, lacking in life, predictable or one-dimensional. How can we make sure that an image stays alive, organically morphing, surprising and multi-layered? This brings us to TPB's fourth and final guiding principle.

Paradox and unknowingness

The positive effects of paradox are three-fold: embracing paradox takes away the rigidity of absolute beliefs, dissipates the desire to overly control and allows us to reveal ourselves genuinely. As philosopher David Appelbaum states: 'The force of contradiction alone provides the tonic against hiddenness' (1990: xii).

Emily Hobbes, a Toronto-based freelance dancer, experienced the freedom that can arise from dealing with impossibility:

> Sometimes it was about exploring the impossible; becoming so invested in multiple tasks at once that you are able to shut off the 'thinking' portion of your brain and sink into the 'experiencing' side. As a person who tends to overthink everything to the point where I paralyze myself with thought (and often doubt/insecurity), these are my favourite types of explorations. (2017: personal communication by e-mail)

As with mental imagery, paradox has been used in dance for a long time. Butoh is, once again, a good example. Countertechnique, a relatively new contemporary dance technique developed by Anouk van Dijk, uses paradoxical opposition as a fundamental movement concept: 'The heightened alertness that is typical for dancers trained in Countertechnique stems from the need and ability to be in at least two places at the same time, both mentally and physically. Dancers have to think and focus on direction as well as counter-direction, thus dividing their attention.' (Siegmund and Van Dijk 2011: 76)

I myself have been part of several choreographic works built on paradoxical tasks and ideas, and found these works particularly rich and fascinating. However, as a young student, I rarely experienced a technique class using paradoxes within the context of my training programmes. Indeed, codified dance techniques can often be instructed in predetermined, inflexible ways, which can be highly damaging since this suggests that there is an absolute set truth about movement. Not only can forms contradict each other, demonstrating that truth is ever-changing and relative, but movement principles are filled with paradoxes within themselves. For example, for years, I was genuinely confused by the use of the hamstring muscles in relationship to pelvic alignment. Some teachers kept telling me that the only way to think about this was to push the floor away with the back of my legs so that the hamstrings remain engaged. Others swore that the answer was in lifting these same muscles away from the floor so that they could support the pelvis without gripping. Still others told me that ultimately the hamstrings must be relaxed and therefore the only sound strategy was to think of them as loose or noodly. I grew increasingly more confused as I kept being thrown from one direction to the next, often being told that my approach was wrong or misguided. Years later, I realized that each of these options had equal truth to them and that the answer I was looking for was within the impossibility of the paradox itself. I started thinking about reaching down and up at the same time, while both engaging and relaxing, holding on and letting go, floating and melting, oscillating between these seemingly contradictory ideas. From then on, my alignment, musculature, movement quality and overall mood improved noticeably. If only this concept had been explained to me earlier, or if my teachers had spoken to me in relative terms, my approach would have been much more malleable, which would have probably saved me years of mental, emotional and physical stiffness. Since then, working with paradox and impossibility has become an important aspect of my pedagogical practice, and I consciously direct my classes with a sense of relativism within specificity.

While performing 'edged' (Laberge-Côté 2016), a work choreographed while following TPB's guiding principles, freelance dancer Jordana Deveau went through a deep experiential process while facing impossibility:

> I had to do so many things [...] so many things at once. And I like to be busy, and to be challenged, but I also like to get things right, and to be 'the best' and to strive for 'perfect' especially when I perform. Louis created a situation that was both joyfully, and frustratingly impossible for me. There was actually no way that I could prepare or practice what it was that I was supposed to achieve. I could rehearse. I could keep working at the tasks [...] but I could not practice doing all of that in performance, while also not performing but just being myself doing all of those things. I had to go through something, while observing myself going through it, without judgment, but with an awareness of being true to myself without putting on a performance – the layers of consciousness and awareness became dizzying. (2016: personal communication by e- mail)

The focus required to navigate through endless contradictions often leads to a meditative flow state, which ideally results in a return to TPB's first guiding principle and creates a positive sense of circularity in experiencing each of its components: concentration, pleasure, imagination and wonder.

Continual metamorphosis

The contemporary dance world is in perpetual mutation. Considering the current state of flux and nomadic nature of the professional dance scene, how should training institutions best prepare students for their future careers? I have not ultimately found an answer to this question as there are systemic changes that are beyond my present understanding of institutionalized dance education. However, I think formal codified training is still relevant and necessary in our current context, although to be entirely pertinent, it should be taught with a strong focus on cultivating physical and mental malleability. It is my hope that TPB, a structure of feeling that I recently started developing to help dancers achieve a state of responsiveness, openness and vulnerability in different dance contexts – including traditional training classes – will help fill this gap. Of course, I need to spend more time refining this approach through continuous practice and experimentation. However, at this point, I continue to work with my four guiding principles, which are the current foundation of TPB. While this system at this point is in its infancy, I have already identified some rules for teachers through my research thus far:

- Consider the state of mind in which movement occurs to be just as crucial as the movement itself.
- Consider class environment to be just as critical as class content.
- Talk to students about the non-fixity of their minds and bodies.
- Praise students only for things they can directly control, such as effort and commitment.
- Be clear about what needs to be achieved and how it should be done.
- Make sure that the class environment is focused and without disturbance.
- Push students beyond their comfort zone, while giving them faith in their ability to handle the task at hand.
- Communicate a sense of satisfaction to the class.
- Build a sense of collectivity among classmates.
- Work with humour.
- Encourage students to connect with their creativity through the use of their imaginations.
- Make working with guided mental imagery, and building mental stamina for it, an essential part of daily training.
- Foster the ability to work with paradox, unknowingness, discomfort and impossibility.
- Offer a range of approaches and purposes in the practice.
- Describe the work as an explorative process, as opposed to a goal-oriented procedure.
- Remind the dancers to keep looking for pleasure, sensuality, curiosity, and empowerment within the practice.

The combination of flow, playfulness, imagery and paradox offers multiple bi-poles between which move the energetics of metamorphosis. The daily practice of embodied transformation paired with a clear sense of self-awareness within community are probably some of the most valuable tools that professional training programmes can offer its students today. Not only do they effectively prepare students for a freelance career, but they also teach them about themselves and their value to one another. After all, dance training is not just about dance, but about teaching people.

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Endnotes

Note

Butoh is a Japanese dance form that includes a broad range of techniques and exercises. Most Butoh exercises use guided mental imagery in a variety of ways. In many cases, the body is perceived as 'being moved' rather than consciously moving on its own accord (Baird and Candelario 2019).

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Laban in the Metaverse: Moving virtually, artificially and with augmented reality

Laban Guild International Online Forum, Sunday 15 December 2024

Clare Lidbury

The Laban approach has always allowed an assimilation of new ideas, which continues to produce different styles and aesthetics to suit the current moment. **Laban in the Metaverse: Moving virtually, artificially and with augmented reality** was a symposium to discuss the terminology and the development of physical training in new computer-generated environments and to consider how technology can use the ideas of Laban for new software developments, giving new participatory experiences and physical interactions. The keynote speaker was Cora Gasporetti, a choreographer and performer based in Rome, who specialises in new technologies and who has been developing various programmes with links to the traditional ideas of Laban analysis and creative movement.

Darren Royston welcomed everyone to the event reminding us that online connections continue to bring those interested in Laban's work together from across the globe. He introduced Gasporetti who told us about her explorations in Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality (in which a new space is created for dancers to experiment in) and Augmented Reality (where the performance space is unaltered, but the audience creates a new environment, by wearing programmed glasses for example, in which to view the dancers). She also spoke about 'Creative Movement Hacking' where hacking refers not to computer science but more generally to any situation where it is necessary to use creativity and imagination in solving a problem. She is adapting Laban's ideas on creativity and imagination in the field of new technological digital dance training, choreography and performance. We saw videos of her work and heard feedback from participants about how interesting and valuable the work had been.

The symposium was not well attended but questions in the Q and A session showed how attendees were thinking about how these new technological innovations might work in their own varied practices. Darren concluded the event by thanking Gasporetti for her talk and for provoking interest in these new technologies for dance. The symposium may be viewed here:

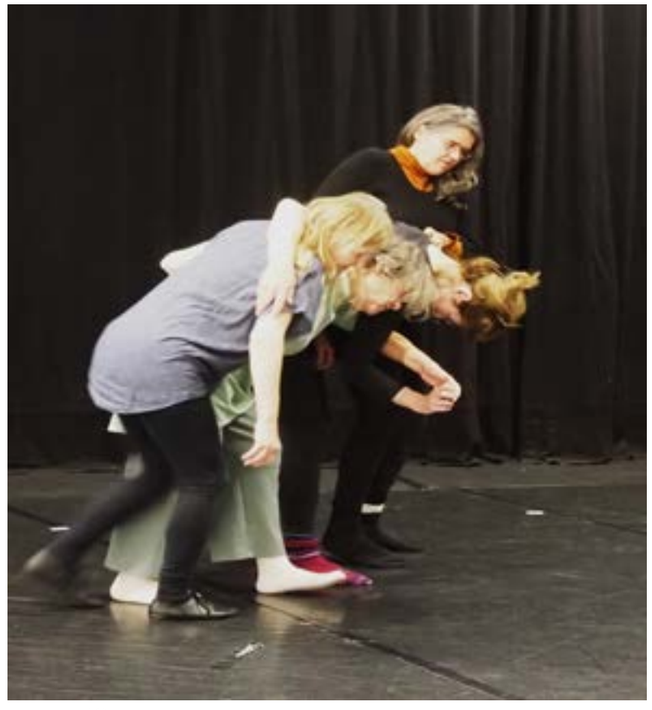
https://youtu.be/77_FYwZZdP0?si=S6Eet-IkBtKHztMx

Choral Movement Practice Workshop

Vis a Vis Tanztheater, Salzburg 14th - 17th February 2025

Anneliese Monika Koch and Susi Thornton

As spring shows its first signs, nature shifts from winter's darkness to light. This change often mirrors what happens within us. In the stillness of winter, many of us feel weighed down, but with the arrival of spring comes a rise in energy, reminding us of how much we rely on light.
It was during this time, on the edge of winter and spring, that Susi Thornton shared with us the moving poem *The Journey of the Magi* by T.S. Eliot. The poem, about the Three Kings travelling to Palestine to see the newborn Jesus, sparked a powerful Choral Movement Practice workshop. A wonderful group of dance friends brought enthusiasm and energy to the dance. Susi guided the group through many challenges and encouraged a powerful sense of ensemble energy.



Themes from the poem were explored through improvisations, using Laban Movement Principles to help the dancers connect with the emotions and ideas on a deeper level. The central theme was the image of a journey—a spiritual quest full of challenges and a sense of powerlessness in a changing world—culminating in the phrase, "I would do it again, even after facing hardships." Our movement

journey became a profound opportunity for physical and emotional growth, creating a rich and layered dance experience.

One of my strongest impressions was the scene of the earthquake. It felt like an inner storm, a force that shattered something profound within. The desolate landscape we found ourselves in was filled with a sense of loss and disorientation. Yet, in that very moment, the image of light whispered to us, urging us to continue. Light, our guiding force, so beautifully hopeful, reminded us that even in the darkest times, there is movement—a force greater than ourselves—leading us forward on our creative path. It became an uplifting experience for all, a true coming together that carried with it a deep sense of healing and transformation. Many thanks to Susi and the Group

Susi Thornton

As I arrived at Salzburg airport, Monika warmly welcomed me and took me to a charming hotel in the heart of the old town. I felt confident everything would go smoothly and it did - an excellent collaboration awaited us that would encourage the group´s confidence. Monika's improvisations warmed us up, activating the cells in our bodies and making us eager to dance with an aware body. We began our creative journey with our movements inspired by the imagery of the poem reflecting on hardships of travel and past memories. A captivating scene of dancing girls and disgruntled men emerged, trying to support each other toward a shared destination. And yes, there was joy during the dress rehearsal, when we had the chance to 'take the journey' again. The group was highly receptive, curious, energized, and collaborative and it was a joy to work with them all: Laban's inspiration was in the room.

Some members of the group had travelled quite a distance to attend the weekend, and they had the chance to explore Salzburg, with its charming old town, the Cathedral, churches, the monks' bakery, and sites where Mozart's influence is still felt. I remembered how, during my last visit to Salzburg, Sam and I went on a musical tour through the city.

Thank you, dearest Monika, for arranging this wonderful weekend for all of us. As the snow descended on Sunday evening, the landscape - a city surrounded by mountains - became magical.

Some reflections from participants:

Our entire dance journey was a deeply moving and meaningful experience for me. I felt well-guided in a supportive environment The emotional depth of the earthquake scene reminded me of a Kandinsky painting. I found myself moving through a landscape of shifting colours, each carrying its own emotional vibration. The colours coexisted and contrasted with one another, yet together they created a sense of harmony. When the colour of my movement was red, I experienced it differently in relation to blue and green, but it was still red, with its own unique energy. *Anna Kohlhoff, Germany*

What impressed me most was how we came together as strangers to create something meaningful, and how effortlessly it all flowed. I felt that the theme of the 'creative journey,' with all its ups and downs, culminating in 'I would do it again,' was deeply moving and life-affirming. Thank you for a wonderful weekend. *Dagmar Both Greil, Germany*

A smile accompanies my thoughts. The image of the enchanted forest still lingers with me. It was truly a joyful experience to move and create in an ensemble, and it made me more aware of my movements. The challenge of staying true to myself while syncing with the group was made easier by the support I received whenever I lost rhythm. I could dance the journey all over again. The clarity of the instructions and the repetition of the movements have etched the journey into my memory. The movements are imprinted within me. A heartfelt thank you to Susi and Monika for these extraordinary experiences. *Waltraud Papenberg, Germany*

A beautiful atmosphere was created during our workshop among the participants, transforming it into an enriching and precious journey. I felt that the guided improvisations and our dance training were empowering me to engage deeply with myself and with others with newfound confidence. I left feeling inspired, with a renewed and strengthened trust in my artistic and pedagogical work. *Jeany Seitz, Germany*

Our dance journey was a completely new experience—one that touched me physically, emotionally, and mentally. The greatest challenge I faced was surrendering to my weight and learning to find support in the group as I let go. This experience was deeply healing.

Though I arrived with inhibitions and the weight of past struggles, I left feeling lighter, freer, and happier, thanks to the sensitive guidance of Susi and Monika and the nurturing energy of the group. I am truly grateful for this unique experience. *Vitalina Lukovkina, Ukraine*

Susi and Monika complemented each other wonderfully as leaders, guiding us along the path between structure and improvisation, playfulness and precision, from one image to the next. Immersing oneself in this process means being at one with yourself, yet always in relation to your fellow dancers. It's about being creative in your own expression, while allowing yourself to be inspired and carried along by others. This fosters closeness in a respectful, boundary-preserving way — much like traveling you meet, discover new lands together, and, at the end of the journey, everyone continues on their own path. It would be very nice if there could be a continuation soon. *Waltraud Ster, Salzburg*

Photos by Regina Rieders

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