

MARC BOIVIN  
THE EDAM TEXT  
Technique



© Ginelle Chagnon

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## INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, in 2000, following a sabbatical year, I decided to write down some thoughts about dance for whenever I would be invited to participate in a workshop or a teaching situation. This document comes out of this need to articulate the experience of dancing as I have discovered it and as I now am drawn to pass it on as a teacher. It simply states the ideas that have and still guide and support me, along with the questioning that remains, whenever I dance and teach.



Marc Boivin, © Sandra Lynn Bélanger

As rich as it may be, dance is, ephemeral by nature. Yet one might say rather un-ephemeral as well when considering how concretely dance can leave imprints in the body and mind. Still, I have known few endeavours to be as rooted in the present moment. It is in answer to this ephemeral nature that I decided to write down these thoughts. It is also because dance belongs to a world of the “non-said” and after letting the body talk for so long there is also a time to find words and the thoughts they carry. There comes with dancing an acute physical sensation of finding meaning where things exist, free of the confinement of definition, one foot in the quest for knowledge (akin to both science and the arts) and the other in the mysteries of the human experience (also akin to both the arts and science). But it is also possible to hide through movement. By accepting and opening up to such an expression of sensitivity as dance is, I find it necessary to measure up to it. While I do love both the steps of the quest for knowledge and the respect of mystery, some questions inevitably deserve attention, what do I rely on when I dance, what guides me consciously and less so, what are my references? By trying to identify these things I hope not to lose the magic of it but rather to go further into it.

I share this text in order to open up a dialogue. In this seminar we will travel together these ideas and concepts that I have identified here and that have become my own references for the teaching contemporary dance. The teaching of dance will always remain a personal synthesis of a multitude of principals and experiences (this is even truer now as techniques evolve and new knowledge is constantly introduced). Dancers must compose themselves the entirety of their training. As a teacher, I pass on what I understand and perceive so that dancers may better choose what is relevant for them.

This document was originally written in French for the finishing class at LADMMI (now L'École de danse contemporaine de Montréal) and it refers to aspects of technical training. A complement to this document was also written for the EDAM summer intensive of 2000, with a focus on interpretation. Since then both documents have been regularly adjusted and rewritten.

I have most often pulled it out and shared it at the EDAM summer intensive, in Vancouver, hence the name that I enjoy using for the document, *The Edam Text*, somewhat in honour of Peter Bingham and Andrew Harwood who supported me while evolving with this work of putting words to dance and reserving time away from the chaos of daily life to do so.

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## 1. TECHNICAL TRAINING

For dancers, I would propose starting with a definition of technique as:

“the appropriation of tools in order to accomplish what we desire, and a moulding of the body and mind, to render a chosen communication with the audience (i.e. a performance).”

As we know, it isn't only what we do that counts but the why and the how, the detail and the intention in the execution; the recognition of what we choose to make present by creating an articulated form for it. Technique is a vehicle; it is the bridge between inspiration and matter.

Through technical work we look to understand and articulate the mechanics of movement within our own physical system. This work has many purposes among which:

- The safety and health of the body as we develop it beyond it's daily use to a higher level of efficiency and expressivity;
- The understanding of our physical system so that we may accept, challenge and develop it;
- The appropriation of a mode of expression in all it's parameters;
- The heightened vitality within the body. When we raise and sense the possibilities of new dynamics it is also our inspiration and our poetry that we generate.

By choosing to develop our technique we also choose a certain path of execution, which makes our dance more complex. Throughout our career, technical training will demand that that dancers maintain the commitment of continuity and sustain the curiosity of new avenues. Whenever we experience a chosen form of training (whether in a short or long term instance), we expose ourselves to more than the movement itself. In each context the movement has evolved in a specific environment involving a perception of the world and chosen rules to help communicate within this perception. In all theatrical settings rules are the parameters that set forth the artistic process, the transformation through form. When we train we aim to integrate the completeness of an aesthetic so that all its components may flow within us. At the same time, we look to decipher these components so as to be able to recreate our own synthesis.

To reinforce ourselves technically is the decision to invest our confidence in a chosen way of moving; to discover our creativity in this challenge. This isn't easy. And perfection is neither a goal nor an ideal. Technical efficiency is a “living phenomenon” meaning that it has a life of its own. It has the habitual aspect: getting used to things gradually and becoming slowly more and more identified with them through exposure. It also has the cycle aspect: the periods of growth and discovery, of apparent plateau, stagnation, even sometimes dysfunction.

As for most human challenges, technical training awakens the quest for excellence yet as for all living phenomenon it also evokes the paradoxes of the opposing forces of chaos and order; of complexity and unity; of presence and vulnerability. From time to time this work does become overwhelming. Perhaps at those times it is best that dancers step back into their solitudes and remember the dance that once and still inspires them. Simultaneously it is energizing to remember that technical training is more an activity in itself than only a means to an end.

The approach, the style and the pedagogical material (the movements and the combinations) that teachers use in are class are the vehicles of the technique. As I have identified these for me, the technique class that I have come to propose uses a structure that is primarily derived from the Limón technique and some tenants of classical ballet.

When I plan classes, I have in mind an ensemble of references inspired by some of my teachers. Aside from the Limón technique and ballet, my references of movement are the Pilates Method, Yoga, certain principals of Release techniques (especially the Skinner Releasing Technique™), and the demands I have personally faced in the creation process.

The teachers that still influence me are foremost Risa Steinberg and Peter Boneham, Angélique Willkie, Peggy Baker, Ginelle Chagnon, Nora Reynolds, Joanna Abbott, and Irene Dowd (among others). Elements of their way of moving (which I often admire), of their research and of their philosophy (which inspires or disturbs me) are recurrent in my teaching. Each one of them represents a part of me I wish to cultivate.

I also wish to name two other people. The first is the stage director and scholar Eugenio Barba. Through his workshops, conferences and mainly his writings he has influenced me enormously all the way back to the daily routine of the technique class. His contribution to the theater arts is enormous. I often recommend to young dancers one of his publications, *A dictionary of theater anthropology, The secret art of the performer*. In this book, the author defines in a most inspiring way the notions of balance, dilation and concentration of the body, oppositions, energy as well as many more ideas. Mr. Barba defines the use of the body in theater as “extra-daily”, meaning that in the theater perspective we answer to different rules than we do in everyday life.

The other person is Paule Lebrun. Her work on consciousness has open for me a path that preserves a certain spiritual space in daily training. It is, I believe, impossible to train technically within a daily routine without the connecting thread of spirituality. The spheres of consciousness are private areas I must respect. By mentioning these I merely wish to recognize their importance in each one of us without distracting our focus of attention from the practice of daily technical training. It has always been that dance calls upon the whole being; it is this being which is at play and which is the play (En interprétation l'être entier est en jeu, l'être entier en est l'enjeu). I rely on dancers to inspire themselves from their heart and give this inspiration a tangible form. In my classes, I hope to leave dancers this private space. Yet not step so far from it that our dedication becomes disconnected.

The main dance technique references that I have identified for myself and that dancers will encounter in this class are the Limón technique, ballet, the Pilates Method and some release work.

### **1.1. Limón technique**

Of all the techniques of modern dance, the Limón technique is the one that has inspired me the most. Many of the essential principals of ballet are still integrated and articulated, such as the rotation of the leg in the hip joint and the isometric contraction of the muscles (the strength of lines drawn in space with different parts of the body). However, qualities of breath and use of the torso are pushed further in a stylized vocabulary, which allows us to meet the challenges of sustaining clarity of line, and integration of breathing in off-centre work, momentum and released weight. I will use this pedagogical material most often.

The strengths of the Limón technique as I understand them are: to constantly associate the movement of breathing and the release of weight within the choreographed exercises; to refer to lines of direction in space as a source of a living equilibrium, the concept of suspension; to use the natural action reaction properties of fall and rebound; to perceive the body as a three-dimensional volume, and finally, to create within this volume and these directions dynamic oppositions, physical tensions with dramatic potential.

Why specifically the Limón technique?

The first reason is rather subjective: because I have been able to identify personally and physically to it, Because it inspires me, which means that practising it gives me an access to information that I wouldn't attain without it (the very nature of “inspiration”).

Secondly, I would say because I have had access to a master of this technique. This meeting, I believe, is a crucial factor. It has always been said that it is the student that chooses the master and not the other way around. This is not to say that the master/pupil relationship doesn't come with its own challenges, mainly to find a personal voice within the learned approach without losing the value of the teachings. The question of when to follow and when to question, when to abandon and when to affirm myself, has been a challenge (like for most teachers I assume), and has marked my development as a teacher over the last 25 years (and continues to do so). This path has brought me to understand better the difference and the relationship between the act of teaching and the pedagogical material itself.

Finally, I have chosen this technique because I find that the basic principals of it still resonate true and pertinent in the dancing that I see around me on stage in the XXI century. I also appreciate the reference that young dancers are able to build for themselves between the source of this technique (the "modern dance") and the today's dance, contemporary, actual, new...

This master for me is Risa Steinberg. Other sources as named earlier have of course filtered in my own synthesis but she is my mind reference, especially in regard to teaching the younger dancers.

## **1.2. Ballet**

This technical reference is chosen mainly for its science of the body in motion. I perceive ballet as a technique that has evolved over more than 400 years, growing into and from and approach that was once purely aesthetic but since has become more complex. The structure and the vocabulary of the contemporary dance class are often founded on the principles of classical ballet. Each basic movement (plié, tendu, dégagé, fondu, etc.) refers to a component of the body in dance and to a function of movement (jumping, sustaining a shape, throwing, pushing, turning, etc.). It is important that we make these connections. Technique isn't solely the execution of basic movements but rather their constant application for dynamic potential.

Certain strengths of ballet interest me: the articulation of the body in segments, the speed of the footwork, the height in the jumps and most of all the rotation in the hip joint. This rotation is a way to connect to a deep musculature and an opening of the body. I address these considerations through a contemporary dance approach. In ballet, the aesthetic of training utilizes a verticality inscribed within an entirely codified vocabulary. In this contemporary dance class, verticality is a lengthening exercise of the supporting structure of the body in answer to gravity. It is about unlocking potential to be fully three-dimensional in volume, direction and movement form. Dancers are asked to travel into verticality and away from it with ease and confidence.

My main reference for the ballet work: Maggie Black.

## **1.3. Functional anatomy inspired by the Pilates Method**

What I have kept of the Pilates Method is the knowledge of the lines of force that compose the human anatomy as well as the proprioceptive connections to this knowledge. Often an approach to movement, which is too theoretical in dance class, for me, will slow down the intuitive intelligence of the dancer while learning movement. However, the contrary can be detrimental to progress. Functional anatomy allows us to create a bridge between the mechanics of movement and the imagery of dance. This connection reinforces two essential abilities: the adequate perception of our own strategy of movement and the appropriate reading of the movement we have before us as we learn it. The importance is to merge the two. The Pilates Method has been my entrance to the applied science of functional anatomy to dance. Since then, the works of Irene Dowd, Joanna Abbott and Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen (the Body Mind Centering technique) have inspired and informed me a great deal and remain active references.

## **1.4. Release work**

There are many release techniques. Most are related, although they each have details that define them as they have been developed through research and experimentation in a personal approach and perspective. Certain concepts and certain exercises have imprinted themselves in me and their impact now makes it impossible to bypass them.

In release work, one of the fundamental principle of the body moving starts with the perception of the body as it is brought to the stage. Where is the natural, the relaxation of the body and of the being in its full creative potential? Release is often the state that precedes the resurgence of physical and creative energy. What is then this presence to the instant moment which allows one the necessary detachment from the constraints of expectations?

Release work isn't in contradiction with more traditional forms of training. It is connected to them with its consideration for efficiency and form. It is the search for a passage, constantly and consciously going through the obstacles of discovering a full and whole movement. However it is acutely concerned with the process of learning and the paths of change along with the release of the extra tensions that block the proprioceptive sense.

As subtle as it may be, the vision that we cultivate of our artistic practice guides us daily. It is on this level that release techniques help defy the notion of productivity, of priority of ideals and the means that we choose to defend our ambitions. It is up to each of us to develop within a healthy body and a healthy mind a creative energy that allows us to play beyond this sanity. Release work defies the ancient and still pertinent theatrical rule of deforming reality in order to better reveal it. Art isn't about ease and comfort. As dancers, the interest is towards all movements of human nature.

My main references : Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Angélique Willkie, Annemiek Mellink and Sanna Myllilathi.

In closing...

Originally, classical ballet depicted a world of illusions through theatre, the dream set on the stage. José Limón, along with his contemporaries and certain predecessors, helped develop techniques, which gave them access to a dynamic body able to translate the human condition. Now, I think dance is more complex than it has ever been; the parameters have exploded. Even the idea of creating a performance situation is constantly questioned. Every quest brings a new hypothesis and each proposition can define new rules. The challenge is only richer.

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## **2. BASIC NOTIONS**

### **2.1. The centre of gravity (an adaptable centre of mass)**

The centre of gravity is situated in the middle of the pelvis slightly below the bellybutton. It is good for us to remind ourselves of this centre in the exercise of dance. By simply bringing our attention to it, even before moving, we awaken our sense of three dimensions, our sense of gravity and our potential for dilating the body.

Sensing an adaptable center of mass refers to the centre of converging forces created by a form and its dynamics of movement. When we can manage to feel this centre, all the directions of the body in motion appear to us consciously. The energy that is generated out from centre is matched by an energy directed inwardly through the form to the centre. This is a sensation that is beneficial to refine; it allows us to be secure in ourselves and consequently to take risks. Having in the center of gravity and adaptable center of mass also means seeing the many changes that alignment can take

in response to form and movement. It also means that every movement in space is foremost a full movement within before it is projected outward.

With the beginning of each day, in class, it is good to cue into these sensations. As we get more and more familiar with the pedagogical material, how can we start by allowing this process to “kick in”? ...Sensing the center of gravity within a changing structure and feeling the dance of the energy traveling to and from the centre of gravity, then maintaining an alignment for optimal potential in all parts of the body

Weight distribution is of the utmost importance as we cultivate the idea of moving from center. The exercise of standing on the "palms" of the feet with lengthened legs and torso and then slowly pouring down the weight into the center of the feet until the heels touch the ground, in a dynamic way, then maintaining a sense of weight in both the palms and the heels helps find this center plumb line. Being in center and moving from center is very much an active state, where front and back and sides of the body are so activated into presence that the center in the lower torso can feel gravity and release down toward the ground. Center is then a place of balance and of awakening, a place where oppositions meet and potential of movement is equally distributed in the body.

Irene Dowd speaks eloquently of the center in the pelvis with the image of the visceral ball. The visceral ball is a concentration of energy that answers and allows lines of force to be active in their optimum potential. This idea is useful to us when developing a perception of our center as something that is constantly adapting to movement and form.

## **Standing on a dynamic triangle**

The triangle underneath the feet goes from the joint of the big toe to the joint of the baby toe to the center of the heel. By sensing a dynamic dispersion of weight between these three points, including activity in the heel and all five toes on the ground, the body awakens. The entire musculature of the body is able to function better as the channel between it and the floor opens up. A clear line of force is drawn between these triangles and the center of gravity. We all have a tendency to favour one point more than another. This subtle adjustment is often reflected all the way up the body in spiralling effects. Starting at the feet helps us settle the weight in a more functional alignment. When doing this exercise we can often unveil different daily tensions that we will have to compose with throughout our day, sometimes moving beyond them and sometimes not.

Another consideration is the dynamism of the relationship between the toes the ball of the foot and the heel. This “primary dance” will deeply affect everything that we will encounter later. Always maintaining a dynamic sensation (relaxed yet active) underneath the feet in relation with the diaphragm of the pelvic floor (by traveling up through the legs) is at the base of our technical work. The impulse of every movement (plié, tendu, dégagé...) is present within the sole of the foot before it is activated into a perceived action. For dancers this is reference to make sure we are «doing the right thing» and not just «going through the moves».

## **Breathing**

Breathing is one of the deepest tools available to us. We know that the motion of the breath affects each cell of the body (This idea is clearly explained by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen). In all parts of us, there is an exchange of some sort and this movement, sometimes perceptible sometimes less, is ever present. Many awareness techniques, including dance, will direct attention to the breath. In meditation, a heightened moment of awareness is the point of suspension following the exhale, waiting without urgency for the next breath and then sensing the path of the intake of air, its resonance in the body. This moment isn't very far from the Limon suspension, waiting in momentum for the body to respond to the forces of direction that have been set up.



Breathing is connected to listening; it is inner sonar. Breath is present inside us independent of our attention, but when we direct our attention to it, it can become a most useful tool for a variety of purposes. For example, a chaotic breathing pattern energizes the body and the mind, just as a slow lengthened breath calms and creates space within. Different breathing patterns can be used to access emotions or states of awareness, the awareness of our personal and collective experience. Since everything is imprinted in the body it is breath that will undo the rigidity of burying and forgetting those imprints. In dance for the stage, presence can be understood simply as being present. This starts with the breath. Breathing is our best tool for understanding one of our main functions on stage, which is to "support the through line of transformations" (this means that from beginning to end the object of the performance will go through changes and it is our job to translate this in front of an audience). As we concentrate on following our breathing we discover how challenging it is to remain present to the choreographic transformations happening in and around us. As dancers we create these transformations for the audience hence we have the responsibility to remain present to them whether they are in us or around us.

Another perception of presence that is useful in technique class is that of opening up to receive as much as the idea of projecting our experience outward to the audience. Again this is connected to breathing; it is the ebb and flow of air in the body, which support the ongoing state of openness.

In Joan Skinner's Releasing Technique™, breath is a white mist swirling within the inner landscape of the body, traveling to open spaces and initiating movement. For Emilie Conrad Da'Oud, Breath is the movement of wind on water - it becomes the beckoning of our origins. In her Continuum work, she has created a series of breathing motions that vivify the body by breaking down the set codes of habitual, unconscious breathing, a place where there would be no memory and no call for creativity. As dancers it is important to re-create by all means possible this place of healthy chaos, where there is more potential than order.

I remember being told by Marie-Anne Manny, an osteopath, to try changing my breathing habits whenever dancing certain difficult movements in order to access new tools, new perceptions of my possibilities. I have found this to be useful and helpful; it frees us from the tendency to set a breathing pattern in relation to movement. Another thing that it does is to help understand the reflex to stop one's breath in the face of effort, fear or challenge, an automatic response that we can undo.

## **Tension, the creation of oppositions**

At first, tension should be perceived as a positive quality, a dynamic potential. As performers tension is a creative factor, a desired component of our craft. There is tension in the body to generate and support movement, there is tension in dramatic situations, and there is tension in the scenic space just as there is tension in the act of performing itself. In performance most of the tension comes from meeting a set form, it also comes from receiving the attention of an audience. Both these points refer to positive aspects of tension; in this first case it means making oneself honest and vulnerable in the face of challenge, not a small feat. In the second it means learning to cope with the inherent paradox of performance: requesting people's attention (something which is highly sacred) and having to control the ego to leave room for the audience's experience. In all theatre situations, tension is never to be ignored, it is sometimes created and sometimes simply acknowledged, sometimes it will be consciously amplified and at other times it will need to be released.

The dancing body is a metaphor for these situations. As dancers we want to engage in oppositions that generate vitality within. The negative aspect of tension is its misuse or its unconscious constraints on us. These are incidences we need to address. In a positive view, tension relates to tone (in the physical sense this is the muscle tone). In training the body we must decipher the qualities of tensions in our modes of movement. Sometimes we must heighten the tone and at other times we must release the extraneous activity. The middle place will have a sense of active waiting,

of readiness and listening (sometimes feeling like the readiness of the predator... in the dancer's case the prey being the challenge).

The dancer is by nature an alchemist; it is inside her/him that the alchemy of dramatic tensions is at play, as much for stability as for the abandonment of control. Dancers train to gain mastery as much as they train to loose the attachment to control. This is a way to produce within us and in the space that we occupy a state that reveals the nature of a quest more so than a sole display of achievement. Physically there are connections between the vocabulary of technique and this concept.

As an example, the plié allows the body to fold and acquire mobility, the tendu builds the power of pushing against the floor, the dégagé "disengages" from this tension, using it to propel the body into space, the fondu musically "melts" the lengthening of the line in space with the lengthening of the line into the floor, etc. How the dancer approaches each technical concern is a reflection of his artistry. I remember watching Benjamin Harkarvy teach at Julliard and say after a barre exercise that much of the dancer's finesse of movement is in the use of the metatarsals of the feet and the toes. Another great teacher, Alfredo Corvino, would talk of the motions of jumping and "grand déplacement" when relating a simple exercise from the beginning of class, pointing out the need to use the tension of a tendu to a demi-plié so as not to loose the dynamic potential that would later be used in a combination across the floor. Both of these examples indicate a capacity to be creative with the use of tension, of tone.

In Ginelle Chagnon's class I've enjoyed playing with the idea of separating the elbows and the knees and since then I have found this idea most useful. The basic concept is to focus on a dynamic opposition between the two knees and the two elbows. We use this opposition to vivify the sense of balance. The game has one basic rule: to engage these four points away from center as a means to initiate movement, whether the form opens or closes. This idea allows us to open the body in both a relaxed and dynamic way. Using the midpoint of the elbows and the knees in each of the four limbs stimulates both the inward movement between the limb and the center of the body and the outward movement from the elbows and the knees to the extremities, which still needs to be engaged. The elbows and the knees become movement sensors for the whole body.

## **Musicality**

Musicality in movement is an amalgamation of rhythm, of dynamic textures and of intention in the transformation of forms. Everything in dance is a transformation whether it is hidden or exposed, abrupt or flowing. In our work, transformation is always the change from one state to another, one sensation to another. As interpreters, we aim to maintain the thread of our physical perceptions in these transformations... and therefore our possibility of choices. Musicality is at the root of dancing and is one of the foundations of training. We must from the beginning of each daily class verify our capacity to become the music and as Risa Steinberg explains to conduct it. This "checking in" will often unveil a challenge that could too easily be bypassed by not being musical and by being too voluntary. Music gathers together the implication of the whole being and the physical challenges.

Musicality also implies the work of organizing our body for efficient technical work. In every subdivision of time there is a moment to be in a shape and a moment to prepare for the next shape without loosing the clarity of the previous shape. Organizing the body for a movement happens inside us, within the lines that are already active in space. We create the new lines of direction before using them as we sustain a previous movement; this work is "hidden" in the music. This kind of preparation involves three aspects: alignment, intention and dynamics. It is the clarity of these three aspects that are prepared before creating a new movement. The musicality of a dancer expresses how her/his presence is integrated through this process. Aiming to refine this process is often as vulnerable an expression of the self as would be a high emotional content.

Another important aspect of music is its relationship to emotional states. Music like all sounds enters the body through the ears and infiltrates our whole system (an idea well developed by Odile Rouquet - Conservatoire National de Danse de Paris). This is a tool, more than an end in itself. Musicality is an awareness that movement can be connected to an emotional reference. As dancers we can choose this connection (of movement, music and emotion) as an expression and a way to make an experience complete.

## **2.2. The rotation of the femur in the hip joint**

The rotation within the hip joint is much less a position or an aesthetic than a mode of movement. It is a way to constantly link the push from the floor through a deep musculature. As we develop this mode of movement (often referred to as turn-out), it is important to search for both the muscle activity that activates the rotation and the one that relaxes the body to allow it to happen. I have found that these go hand in hand, that a functional rotation is always in motion. It is important for us to learn to activate this rotation as a mode of movement. There is a fine line between always wanting more turnout as an aesthetic (and applying a value judgment on the body in this aesthetic) and simply connecting to the power that resides in using the outward rotation from the head of the femur, through the whole leg all the way to the ankles and feet. At first, using the rotation within the hip joint to initiate movement can feel precarious but, as the structure of the body adapts to it, we can reach a higher level of efficiency.

This is one of the main strengths inherent to the science of ballet. The challenge of the rotation brings the body into a higher state of presence, one that is balanced inwardly through proprioception and outwardly through projection into space. Everything is affected along with this state from the stance to the nervous system. As Eugenio Barba explains, the performer's body is placed in a state of "precarious balance" hence heightening its creative potential.

A useful image of this rotation is the spiral of the DNA, a spiralling movement up the leg bones that transform the activity of pushing against the floor into openness in the pelvis, in the centre of gravity. Traveling up the body this openness reaches every joint. This way the rotation is still most challenging in the pelvic region but it is incorporated all the way from floor to full body. When well integrated, a good rotation will resonate all the way up the torso through the back all the way up to the skull and out through the arms.

## **The static alignment, the dynamic alignment and the strategies of movement**

Inside a dynamic body, we can notice a progression of perception between the idea of alignment in a static position, the anatomical position, and the idea of alignment in movement. This difference, I find, challenges the reference we may construct for ourselves about ideal alignment, especially in terms of "placement". We each have developed, from birth, strategies of movement (the work of identifying these movement patterns and their expression in our lives has been well researched and articulated by movement analysts. One of these researchers who have successfully articulated the development of motion in the human body is Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen through her patented system of movement therapy Body-Mind Centering™).

Understanding the strategies of movement that we use in a habitual way helps us develop a working rapport with our alignment. For me kinesiologists Irene Dowd and Joanna Abbott were keys in understanding and integrating this concept of working with my own system strategies. It is best to start by understanding these strategies and accepting them as expressions of ourselves. I often remember hearing Irene Dowd state "why change what is functional". The idea of working on one's strategies is to open up to a broader range of artistic possibilities by expanding to new choices. It is also about injury prevention. The image of the standard alignment as we know it is a guideline on which we apply the understanding of our own specific details. From there, as we learn new

movements, we are asked to become creative using that knowledge. Meanwhile, technique also requires that we test and adapt certain rules of and habits for efficiency. These are precise points that we will identify in class.

## **Carving the body**

One of the beneficial functions of technical training is the habitual notion of sculpting the body into form. This implies that every angle and volume of a shape is an expressive detail. Of course, the sculpting of a shape remains a musical notion and within this sense of time the sculpture takes a fullness of its own. Carving the body into living sculptures helps give it dynamics in a most focused time frame. This attention brings together the concepts of musicality, of dynamic oppositions and of the center of gravity. When the shape is clearly engaged we sense in the body the full potential of a movement, we are supported everywhere and it is easier to prepare for the next movement accordingly, and therefore link the transformation. In interpretation, the moment of carving becomes a whole in itself yet related to the complete dance and informing it. This process also relates to coming into the joints, a soft awareness of the connective tissues... or... an awareness of their softness.

## **Three stages of movement**

Often, we can perceive three stages in a movement, the initiation or impulse, the momentum and the apex, the place where it changes quality or direction. Often this apex is a place of stretch, of lengthening, especially in the context of physical training. In choreography it is played with and can be the source of very fine nuances (ex: using momentum until a suspension arrives and then applying tension instead of release, this greatly changes the musicality or the intention of the movement). It is useful to recognize the generalization that these three stages are always occurring in movement since often understanding a complex movement requires that we articulate each of these components. The impulse must travel according to the momentum and then the momentum must likewise reach its apex (and not go beyond it) before transforming to another impulse. Often a problem will come from not reaching the apex thus exerting too much force or by going beyond the apex and losing the dynamic potential and the power of the alignment. A good way to work or decipher this idea in movement is in the 3/4 swing of the leg. It is easy to see what each component is and how it transfers into the next. Then the notion can be applied whenever necessary. In working on speed some dancers might want to skip over one of these stages when in actual fact all three are still in action but at a very high speed. Vice versa, in the adage, we can still release some momentum and gain quality in the phrasing even though some dancers would tend to sustain in a "slow motion" mode the initiation thus rendering a bland expression of the music.

## **2.3. Dividing the body in halves**

It is possible to use dynamic forces in the body by dividing the body in halves, in four perspectives, depending on the technical challenge of a specific movement.

One way to divide the body is on a horizontal plane, between up and down. This distinction can be useful to give weight and to lighten the movement, to raise a core support and to drop a centre of gravity that is disengaged. In general, as dancers, this dividing plane is not a one line divide precisely situated in the middle of the body; it is a complex flow throughout the body like the shadings of gray between black and white. The most intense activity of this separation tends to be where the diaphragms are situated, underneath the pelvis, at the solar plexus and underneath the skull. These diaphragms relate to the major weights of the pelvis, the shoulder girdle area and the head. Since there is actual movement in these diaphragms we can use our connection to them to articulate the sensation of weight and lengthening into openness. The diaphragms are facilitators of breathing and

the poetic sense of breathing through moving in the whole body. The fact that they are situated in the most strategic places in the body is also a great tool. They are underneath two of our most important weights: the pelvis and the shoulder girdle (pelvic floor and rib cage). Then the head diaphragm being above the brain inside the skull relates directly to the breathing and openness of the crown.

Another medial line can be drawn between the right and the left sides. This separation of each side is useful for turns. One side chases the other, giving both a direction that produces a spin deep within the body and in the outer form. It is also useful in the transfer of force between the gesture side and the standing side (which is a perpetual dance!). The idea of division is a way to unify the body through clear and articulated purposes or functions of movement.

Another division is the frontal plane (a vertical line between front and back). This allows us to develop an “extra-daily” sense of importance between the two sides (to borrow the words of Eugenio Barba once more). As humans we are prominently driven forward yet dancers have to develop a balanced awareness between front and back. While this awareness may not be equal (at 50%) both sides must always be present for high efficiency (not to mention the three-dimensionality of stage work).

Finally another way to divide the body which is a bit different is related to what Risa Steinberg calls foreground and background. It is important for us to choose the nuances of our physical intention in a movement, meaning which is the foreground of the intention and which is the background. This allows us to remain centered throughout complex propositions. One of the interesting uses of this plane is the idea of drawing in the body a distinction between the canvas of the movement and the action, something that is constantly at play in choreography. We learn to orient the audience’s focus by choosing that which the canvas is and that which is the action in us. This is one of the important artistic contributions of the dancer.

## **Leaving traces**

The stage and the studio can be perceived as canvases on which movement will be inscribed. For dancers movement is calligraphy in space. Every form and every movement will sink into the space. By focusing on this process as we dance the movement itself changes. The intention of the performer inhabits the entire volume of her/his body. It is a way to put ourselves to the service of the movement being present.

On a philosophical level, leaving traces reflects the beauty of the art form in its ephemeral nature of constant change. In the belief system of the aboriginal people of North America there is a recommendation to the passerby to "leave the ground on where he passes as if he hadn't been there; to erase the traces of his passage". The idea is to respect nature. Underneath this lies a confrontation of the human mind with the need to leave a mark in time, to realize oneself by changing the environment, wishing for a form of immortality. As dancers it is possible for us to imprint our movement in space and in the audience's consciousness of time passing through this space without physically permanently changing the environment. Hopefully the environments that are changed are the personal and the collective consciousnesses of the people present, the performers and the audience members.

Leaving traces can also be used in another way, a more technical way. It can be a good tool for centering ourselves. By maintaining the memory of a starting position, as we leave it, it is easier to return to it and meet instantly the dynamic lines of force that support it. Hence, we return to a breathing place right away. This can be noticed easily in the exercises at the beginning of class where we have simple weight shifts involving the torso.

## **Three images of self: small within, the actual form of the body and the infinite**

This idea was given to me by dancer-choreographer Louise Bédard and I have since used it often. It is a technical cue that carries much inspiration for me on an interpretation level. The basic idea is to imagine three images of our body and self. The smallest image is a condensed version of us transposed inside the core of our body. It is this minuscule self that will be the source of the movement that will later be perceived by the outside eye; this is a proprioceptive self. The second image is our actual body and our self that responds to the small first image; this is the path of the communication with the outside world. The last image is in the infinite and can best be described as the drawing of a multitude of lines of directions from the first image through the second out into space; this last image implies respecting the unknown and opening to it.

This game creates room between the source of movement, the surface and the outward resonance. Physically this can be a very concrete exercise: the best way to discover it is to play with an improvisation using these images as a score. On an interpretation level, I have always appreciated what this exercise evokes. The self is concentrated for the purpose of giving clarity to intention and impulses of movement, then, room is made within the body to soften the shell and to allow the spectator to come into the moving experience, the communication. Finally, the outcome remains an uncontrollable reading. We can be as clear as possible about our directions and our dance but the perception of it remains in the audience's eye. The dancing body is a passageway between a concentrated self and an infinite image as we let ourselves be watched.

## **Moving from the spine and moving from the extremities**

These two approaches to initiating movement are quite useful to us. Movement that is generated by the spine can travel through the body in a continuous sequence. This is a good way to address the strategies of movement. Often, by moving from the spine we discover our habits of movement. Moving from the spine is also a way to open the body, to feel that essential connection to the floor as an impulse for movement.

The head to coccyx line can be perceived as a fifth limb (like the fifth limb of the starfish integrated within the spine and behind the bellybutton). Listening with perseverance to the dance between the head and the coccyx as an initiation for movement is also a great way to learn about our strategies of movement. We often choose to contract a part of this dynamic opposition in order to push against another body part; this then closes a part of the body and inhibits the movement from traveling totally through us.

Activating from the extremities brings to the dance a set of contrasting qualities and possibilities to moving from the spine. Often the extremities have the capacity to slice the air, to send a direction in space even before the centre appears to be engaged in that direction. There is a lot of momentum to this power, useful in turns or quick changes of direction or in awkward and complex forms where there appears to be no connection to the ground as an initiation for impulse. Moving from the extremities is present in ballet as well as in the release work. In ballet we often see the strength of the feet used to move off the ground or the use of the arms in the impulse for a turn. In Joan Skinner's Releasing Technique "gossamer threads" can be attached to the middle fingers, to the knees or to the top of the head as connections for impulses into space. In these different approaches the resemblance is in the choice of the extremity as an intention and an initiation for movement.

Another extremity is the eye focus. Considering the spine as a limb the focus is like fingertips for the spine, an extremity that touches (another idea that I received from Ginelle Chagnon). This way the eyes touch what they see and it is possible to move quite quickly and with full intention by using the strength and the clarity of the focus.

In playing with these different ways to start and support a movement we need to investigate the best mode of impulse and choose accordingly between all possibilities for the effect we wish to create.

## **Geometries drawn on the body**

These geometries, like the triangles drawn underneath the feet are visualizations of lines of forces within a part of the body. The triangle has been useful to me primarily because of its presence underneath the feet and around the pelvis. These geometric visualizations are basic and primary guides for a living and changing alignment. They are most often special drawings on the body projected either towards the floor and out in a set of given directions.

What I enjoy the most through this idea is the sense of balance that is generated through these moving guidelines as opposed to alignment being a rigid organization; it includes the concept of oppositions and isometric contractions. Often, they can be used to indicate a weak use of opposition which, when activated, gives the appropriate support to a difficult movement (ex: the line of force drawn from the shoulder to the hip joint and then a specific part of the foot to support a turning shape). This geometric form is used to give a dynamic presence to the different parts of the body. By opposing and unifying these parts we can maintain a physical coherence in a complex system. I often think of the triangle because it is the second most basic shape (after the straight line).

At other times this concept of geometries drawn on the body can be used to discover personal tendencies that we can at first accept and slowly learn to work with and transform. This relates to the idea previously explored of personal strategies of movement and how some of these are functional and others less so.

I have found useful two triangles in the pelvis. The first is traced between the pubic bone and the two ischiams. We can imagine it as a light shining down from the bottom surface of the pelvis to the middle of our stance on the floor, in the parallel position or in the first position (an idea I received from Peggy Baker). Along with giving a dynamic direction to the line of gravity falling through the body, this triangle also refers to the “breathing dance of the pelvic floor”. This is an area where it is easy to constrict the movement in fear of falling. Opening the strength in the pelvic floor and upper thigh area is most important. It is often in this area that dancers begin to choose to move out into space or to retain themselves in toward center. A real concentration of center is one that is a response to an opening outward (with risk of movement, with awareness, with intention). This is very clear in all basic vocabulary of technique, pliés, tendus, dégagés, etc. A less productive use of this area would be a constriction of the pelvic floor.

Another triangle is on the front of the pelvis drawn from the pubic bone to the two iliac crests. Sensing dynamics lines through these points allows us to get in touch with the alignment of the pelvis, extending clear lines of direction from the standing hip through the pelvis to a chosen form. Eventually we can extend this triangle down to the stance, back through a chosen point on the pelvis and somewhere out to a strategic part of a shape (often a shoulder, an arm of a side of the torso). Both the abdominal muscles and the rotators follow through on these clear directions. In this way, the use of the muscle activity is always in response to the movement of a direction, within and out from a shape.

Another example of the geometries is the triangle in the hands. It is the exact transposition of the one in our feet. Visualizing it helps us relate our hands and feet and gives our movement a spatial range like the Da Vinci drawing of Man in a circle. The triangle in the hands also helps us feel the extension of the movement of the spine out through the arms, through the hand and through the fingers (especially in the horizontal second position, touching the air like the toes contact the floor). It also helps us engage the shoulder girdle, which is essential to the well being of the torso.

## 2.4. I have found some images from Yoga useful

These ideas are directly applicable to dance.

- Begin with the idea that things are as they are. The first principal is to open up to grace. In fact we will remember this constantly, from class, to creation, to rehearsal, all the way to the performances.
- Hug the bones! Relaxation means that the muscles are not passive they are gently hugging the bones, actively drawing energy in and then out toward the form. This is an action of bringing things towards us, changing it and then redirecting it out in a transformed way.
- Aim at softening the frontiers of the body.
- There are two movements of spirals in each leg, each resembling the DNA molecule. One is internal and the other is external; we search for the balance between the two. In dance this is related to the open rotated legs position and the parallel position. Both positions have the essence of both spirals (in each position, one spiral is more active than the other). The inner spiral helps relieve extra tension at the front of the hip joints and the outer spiral helps scoop the center of gravity forward into presence.
- Offer the form. When we offer what we create we imitate nature, a pulse of integration and realization. This brings us into unison with the whole. In dance, we can offer the details of our work, in a small measure of time, as well of offering the whole picture. It is the process that is offered, our presence in the working situation.
- Perceive and feel the expression of self as the movement of the centre toward the outside through form. That movement is in itself an expression of our being.
- Always the breathing and in all its possibilities, the air in the lungs, the oxygen in the blood and the resonance of the perpetual ebb and flow.

## The cycles of learning

Dancing for the stage is a great challenge. Meeting choreography is also a considerable undertaking. As mentioned earlier about dancing "en interprétation l'être entier est en jeu, l'être entier en est l'enjeu. This means that as dancers we work at major transformations within us. This requires patience and nurturing. It is difficult to change what we don't accept. This is why the learning process in dance is one of cycles. There are times when we feel great, accomplishing new tasks in movement and then there are times of feeling like nothing is advancing or even of regression. Often these times are periods of deep transformations or of rest after such a transformation. Often we need to loose something to gain something new and whatever was useful in that thing we lost will return to us. Whatever wasn't useful will be lost for good. It is important to allow these cycles to be, to be patient sometimes and, at other times, as much as possible to adequately evaluate where we are at.

This being said, by the end of the week I would like to give the classes a particular exigency. On those days we will allow the dancing to be without interruption. The aim is to dance for ourselves and not always for the acknowledgment of the exterior eye, the teacher, the choreographer, and the spectator. It is also to give you the time needed to follow your own physical progression in the class after having worked on the material for a few days. Finally, it will also allow us to focus on a cardiovascular workout.



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## CONCLUSION

I hope that you will find inspiration in this document and that it will be useful to you inside and outside of class. There is much to say about dance and the ideas brought up in this text are like a hand skimming the surface of ocean waves. I have written this as a compte-rendu of my own experience, a sort of journal of the things that guide me. Use this as you wish and at your own pace. I've often been guided by the idea that we each can only learn what we really need to learn at any given time. We follow our dance (and teaching) and answer to it.

I suggest that this course becomes an open forum, a place where experiences are shared, as we strive to let our intelligence and our sensitivity be articulated physically. For dancers, being able to name things and to identify ourselves with the spoken word is important. It can prevent us from hiding in movement, consequently renewing our engagement to the dance.

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