She wondered how it was possible to 'grip, hold on, pull up'... and breathe? Something prompted her to begin experiments with two mirrors, a barre and a journal - searching for something more organic, a state just below conscious control where the dancer becomes the dance and where creative and technical merge and blend.

_Gaby Agis_ and _Joe Moran_ offer a rare insight into the work of _Joan Skinner_ and a system, which is fast becoming mainstream.

_Additional contributions from Joan Skinner, Kirsty Alexander, Rebecca Skelton, Michael Weinstock, Brandon LaBelle and Mary-Clare McKenna_

_in its purest form_

“We had a performing company for a while who trained only in this Technique and we prepared them for a performance by laying them on the floor and by giving them a releasing class. And then they would go on into the space where they would perform and just check it out, move around and check it out and then they would perform. And the performance would be extremely vigorous, at times. High energy, at times. People would run and spring up on each other in a lift they had never done before - this was an improvised performance. And we never had an injury.”

_Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) offers a radical approach to the body and dance performance. It works from the simple principle that the body needs to be 'releasing blocks' in order to move more freely and artistically. The Technique is non-linear and calculated. It works from imagination to the body and dance performance._

_The Technique: Joan Skinner_

_Joan Skinner_ danced with the Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham companies and studied classical ballet throughout the 1950s in New York. All the while she was intrigued by the Alexander Technique and the idea of releasing energy, at times. People would run and spring up on each other in a lift they had never done before - this was an improvised performance and was then inspired to teach at the University of Illinois where she experimented with the form of a traditional modern dance class. She gave students the basic image of marionette strings, implying suspension. Although this image could be playful and useful it was noticed that when students began travelling throughspace, they lost the experience of the image. She responded by putting them on the floor and gave them the same image. The students became so involved with the image that they did not want to leave the floor. It was at this point Joan found imagery to be a powerful means of conveying a deep kinaesthetic experience.

_The profound effect of imagery in the kinaesthetic experience referred Joan to her childhood dance experiences with her teacher Cora Bell Hunter, a student of Mabel E Todd, author of _The Thinking Body_. As a child she was taught interpretative dance. Joan now recognises these early experiences to have been perhaps the greatest influence on the development of the Skinner Releasing Technique._

_Joan’s work has been likened to the pioneering quality and ideal of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. It has some of the same objectives as a traditional dance technique, focusing on flexibility, strength, alignment, speed, clarity, and economy of movement. Joan believes these to be the inherent aspects of all good dancing._

_However, the Technique differs dramatically in its process to these objectives. It recognises that every human being has his or her own natural animal grace and seeks to discover the essence of movement that lies within all dance. In the releasing class poetic guided imagery leads the student into a state just below conscious control. It is in this state that the dancer can merge and blend with the image. The dancer can be taken by the image, the dancer becomes the dance._

_Joan clearly distinguishes Skinner Releasing Technique from released-based work and relaxation techniques. Its intention is different. Releasing is an ongoing, continual process; never fixed or released. It aims, not to relax the body, rather to prepare the body to be available to any image or creative idea - releasing imagination._

_Joan has been certifying teachers since 1989, in order to maintain the coherence and practice of the Technique in a teaching environment, she is continually evolving it to get at the key principles._

© Ewan Lister
transcending boundaries

Leon Robinson describes himself not as an academic, just an artist - a dancer, choreographer, filmmaker, director, archivist, researcher, writer and radio presenter with an insatiable appetite for black art history and culture. Here he speaks about fulfilling a life's dream to visit the Schomburg Centre for Research Black Culture in New York where he unexpectedly found himself guest of honour.

My work is about legacy and hope. I draw from what I know and what I see. I always felt it is much safer to work with nature than against it, to remain in harmony with life. As a child, I would collect war newspapers and go off bottle digging. I am sure that people perceived me as an anomaly. Yeah... I am proud of being seen as an anomaly because I once had a traditional blue one and tooled.

Bathing of Jamaican pataches. I am aware of how my culture has been viewed in society. Of how black achievements have been airbrushed out of the history books. I have been fortunate to witness people of all nationalities embrace the umbrella of multiculturalism. The umbrellas are becoming important. The other most direct connection I have had with artists is with the schomburg centre.

The architecture of the schomburg centre is complete as a multiculturalism. Without the assistance of the schomburg centre I would have not had what I have now.

The Choreographer may build also in the sound, as an instrument. Sounds can articulate the depth of integration of internal images within our bodies and imagination.

A fundamental difference for the artists is that they need to build in static materials - heavy, strong stuff. The choreographer may build also in the sound of space and space and space and space and space

The use of image in choreography is perhaps the most striking influence. One can see the importance of the dancers with this training to merge, blend, access and create material using an image. Having this as a resource is invaluable.

The other most direct connection to making work is the on-goingness and evolution of the performance. An unusual way of making work to be a kinesthetic - dimension of releasing - the body being almost like a musical instrument. Sounds can resonate along the bones and tissues of the body, and the skull is like an acoustic dome.

And this too can be extended to the architecture of sound. The space is an instrument. The sound is the architecture of performance, the reality expands. The audience, witnessing this process, becomes as important as the performance itself. They too can be taken by the dance.

Skinner Releasing Technique in Performance: Gaby Agis (dance), Michael Weinstock (architecture) and Brandon Lollis (sound), collaborators on TouchSkin SITE.

The technique continues to influence the choreography of leading dance practitioners Gaby Agis (London), Ishmail Goffin Jones, Jennifer Monier, Jennifer Lucy and D.O. Donullifer (New York). Its influence is present not only in the dancer, but in the process and choreography itself. The use of image in choreography is perhaps the most striking influence. One can see the importance of the dancers with this training to merge, blend, access and create material using an image. Having this as a resource is invaluable.

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