What is Release Technique?
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June 1999 Published in: Movement Research Performance Journal
Fall/Winter 1999 #19

In the summer of 1999 Movement Research was planning an issue of "The Performance Journal" focusing on Release Technique. Release Technique has significantly shaped my viewpoint and path as a dancer. My initial orientation and entry into dance was with Mary Fulkerson and others, who in the early 1970's were researching, mapping, and defining this new work. As time would have it, this original work has mutated, being adapted and incorporated into more current dance class formats. I had a strong desire to contribute something that would share my understanding of the seminal ideas and original intention of the work I did with Mary Fulkerson in the early 70's.

Daniel Lepkoff
My understanding of Release Technique originates from my experiences as a student of Mary Fulkerson, with whom I studied intensively between the years of 1970 - 1974. Mary Fulkerson referred to her work as "Anatomical Release Technique". During these early years I also studied with John Rolland and Marsha Paludan, I worked with Nancy Topf and Pamela Matt, and I visited Barbara Clark.

Mary's view was that in order to change habitual movement patterns one needed to address the functioning of the whole organism, the mind as well as the body. The basic method of effecting change in the body was designed with the following idea in mind: by the time an intention has become realized in a physical action, it is too late to alter how this action is played out. The seed of an action is embedded somewhere between the forming of an intention and the subsequent launch into action. This seed is the body's "image" for the action. For example, if you are sitting in a chair and the telephone rings from across the room, your body, before it can actually stand up and answer the phone needs to ready itself. The details of this preparation are based upon the body's expectation of what will be required to fulfill the ensuing task. These details may include re-aligning the skeleton, stabilizing certain body parts and freeing others, shifting the body's center of weight, as well as changes in the body's chemistry, and more. This physical preparation is what I understand as the body's image. Release work attempts to bring consciousness to bear on the subtle process of how we bring ourselves into motion. Anatomical observations were used to construct and propose verbal or pictorial images for physical actions.

In Mary's classes we worked with developmental movement as the source of a basic vocabulary. We studied and practiced rolling, crawling, walking, running, falling, and the transitions between these patterns. Mary had a system of anatomically based images that mapped out functional pathways through the architecture of the body. Up the front of the spine to the base of the neck, through the spine and up the back of the skull, down the face,
through the spine again and down the back to the sacrum, around the outside of both halves of the pelvis, down the outside of the legs, down the top and outside of the feet, up the inside of the feet, up the inside of the legs, through the hips joint, up the front of the spine, and so on. These pathways indicated structurally sound lines of compression and support, and channels of sequential flow of action at work in the underlying developmental patterns. These images were considered to be ever more refinable once we were ready to perceive in finer detail.

An important aim of the technical work in Mary's Release classes was to draw the body closer to channeling its action along these pathways. This would both re-align the body so that weight was supported through the center of the bones as well as re-pattern the flow of energy so that action was initialed by the muscles closest to the bodies center. This shift would release the outer muscles of the body from holding weight and free them for what they were meant to do, namely move the body. This was one reason the work is called "Release Technique"

The Constructive Rest Position was used as one of the prime positions for receiving and responding to new physical images. In the constructive rest position it is possible to release most muscular activity and not fall. This physical state of near-total release is thought to be one relatively free of preconceived images and thus a state in which the body is most receptive to the suggestion of alternate physical images. An action can be imagined and not executed, thus stimulating and consciously re-patterning the body's response to an intention to move. Releasing is not simply release of excess muscular tension but releasing deep physical pre-conceptions as well.

The practical subtleties of imagining an action and not doing it, of allowing an image to move you rather than moving yourself, were both physically and conceptually challenging. The concept of "not-doing" as an activity that one could "do!" was new, fascinating, and sometimes confusion. How to use ones energy when the act of "doing" would initiate the very response one was trying to alter was sometimes frustrating and disorienting. However, these physical practices nurtured in me a remarkably fine tuned ability to listen to my body and to my mind. I also experienced how the specific physical images I was integrating into the overall sense of my body translated into a facility to move in new ways. I still remember the thrill of learning to spin, to leap and turn without falling over. The key was the image of "the center line" and viewing spinning as an extension of the underlying action of walking.
AfterimmersingmyselfinMary'sworkforaboutoneyearIencountered
StevePaxton'sworkwithContactImprovisation.Thisgavemean
alternateviewonmyworkwithanatomicalimages.
Steve'sworkalsoaddressedthepresenceofmindinthebodywitha
subtleyetimportantdifference.InContactImprovisationthemindisused
asalenandiscultivatedforitspowersofalertnessandobservation.
Steve'sexercisesandverbalimagesfocusedmyattentiondirectlyon
physicalsensationratherthanassociativeconceptsofferalizationsof
physicalactions.Irememberremarkabletimesofunleashedexpressionof
energyinmyReleasethreeases,however,ContactImprovisationregularly
exposedmybodytohigherlevelsofphysicalstimulation.WhileReleasethree
escilesslikeafinemealofcarefullychosenmorsels,Contact
Improvisationwasoftenlikeabacchanalianfeast.

StevePaxton'sworkwith
ContactImprovisation
gavemeenewinsightsinto
myinternalprocessof
workingwithanimagein
Releasethreeesandexposed
somepotentialpitfalls.
Theanatomicalimages
Maryused(“upthefront,
downtheback”, “swing
thelegsfromhighinthe
sternum”)servedasmapsforseekingandinterpretingphysicalactions.
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sensationsIcouldinساسence"brainwash"mybody.Inmydesireto
succeedinalloowinganimagetomovemeandinthefacedoftheadunting
subtletiesofthistask,IcouldconvincemyselfthatIwasindeedfeeling
"myheadleadmyspine",forexample,wheninfactIwasnot.Theimage
couldactuallycomewithmeandmybody,a disembodiedimage.

TheflipsideofmyawarenessthatIcouldfoolmyselfintheprocessof
workingwithanimagewasagrowingrecognitionofwhatitreallydidfeellke
to "feel" mybody. Iwasrecalibratingmyscales;expandingmy
abilities to sense;widening my notions ofwhat a physicalsensationcould
be. I realized that the technique of "not-doing" was onlyaploy to coax me
to look for what I could not see (yet!), to listen for what I could not hear
(yet!). I realized that the words used to describe a physical image were
often too gross, that the body's concepts are more sophisticated and
detailed thanthose oftheEnglishlanguage. Oneneededasenseofplay
toavoidholdingtofixedinterpretationsofverbalimagesandthuslimiting
onesphysicalexperience.Sensoryfeedbackfromthebodywasessentiat
toopen to new images.

ThephysicaldemandsofaContactImprovisationduet, theintensityof
weight, force, and need for instantaneous response also exposed
limitations in the loose jointed soft quality I had developed through my
release work. While my released softness made me particularly receptive
to the streaming flow of sensations in a Contact duet, it did not set me up
to harness the power, strength, and speed I needed to play freely with a full
range. In my own work I've realized that "release" as a physical principle
is only one part of a more complete description of the functioning of the
body.

My early work with Release Technique did more than help develop an
integrated, intelligent, and healthy body. I developed an appetite for
focusing on physical sensation, an ability to teach myself, and a love for
the renegade, mysterious, and insightful interplay of the imagination,
mind, and the act of dancing.