

# **The Integration of Somatics as an Essential Component of Aesthetic Dance Education**

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## **Introduction**

As a central concern of dance education is that of providing authentic aesthetic experience, aesthetic perception needs to be nurtured and developed (Bergmann, 1995; Curl, 2005). This is essentially an education of feeling or emotion since the aesthetic qualities of dance are received as an experience of embodied feelings (McFee, 1994; Smith-Autard, 1994). One way to assist students to achieve such embodiment, and to learn to differentiate between the tone and texture of feelings on a phenomenological level, is to provide somatic education as a feature of dance pedagogy.

Somatic methods are orientated towards general optimum functioning and perceived as developing awareness of bodymind connections (Green, 1999; Jackson, 2005). They can improve dance skills and refine the quality of dance performance by increasing technical skills, improving alignment, maintaining freedom from injury, and enhancing artistic capabilities, such as expanded dynamic and expressive range (Krasnow, Chatfield, Barr, Jensen, & Dufek, 1997). Integrating somatic methods results in a change of consciousness in attitude to persons, moving, performance, and the creation of works (Bannon & Sanderson, 2000; Hämäläinen, 2002). They are often used in conjunction with technique classes, with dance teachers integrating somatic work into their classes in many vocational and academic institutions, to explore different aspects of the neural and motor mechanisms underlying dance skills (Green, 1999; Jackson, 2005).

Somatic practices are wide ranging in their use of imagery and sensation. Somatic knowledge existing in the forms of kinaesthesia involves the sensation of position, movement, and tension derived from skeletal and muscular structures, and awareness of orientation in space, passage of time, and rhythm (Smith, 2002). Emotional somatic forms refer to the inner undercurrent or motivator that drives outward expressive action. Forms of somatic intuition relate to the self-process where perception is independent of

any reasoning process and is sensed within a realm of immediacy. This involves knowing when, how, and why an action takes place. Somatic methods using imagery designed to affect alignment and dance performance on a neurological level, emphasise neuromuscular re-patterning to alter movement habits. In dance, mental imagery evokes the physical characteristics of an absent object or dynamic event (Krasnow et al., 1997). Visual imagery and kinaesthetic imagery are representations of visually comprehended concrete objects or events, or kinaesthetically comprehended movements, which are actively generated and manipulated by the dancer. Direct imagery is a representation of an actual movement, while indirect imagery is a metaphorical image of a desired movement. Internal and external imagery refers to the perspective taken by the dancer in relation to the body. Lines-of-movement imagery designates a specific direction in the relative positions of parts of the skeletal framework, and anatomical imagery refers to images that specify muscle or joint action and skeletal structure. Global imagery involves totality of images and creates an overall state or feeling sense (Krasnow et al., 1997).

The somatic teacher looks for ways to provide verbal, visual, and sensory cues to assist students to construct meaning from their past and present kinaesthetic experience in order to achieve new goals (Fortin, Long, & Lord, 2002). During teacher's presentation of tasks, somatics are incorporated to bring attention to bodily sensation in movement, providing students with a sensori-motor learning goal. When students execute tasks, incorporating somatics enhanced their movement awareness by highlighting different ways to achieve a task, by comparing sensations of slightly different movement initiations, by directing attention to the sensation of movement, by describing skeletal movements while looking for precise sensations, and by using tactile feedback with a partner (Fortin et al., 2002). Students' ownership of learning was supported through making students' learning responsibilities explicit by defining learning goals for themselves, by learning from observing peers' movements, and by solving movement problems. Finally, students were assisted in developing their own movement execution procedures through explicit opportunities to transfer previous sensori-motor learning to present tasks, and through revelation of the teacher's own movement execution procedures. The integration of somatics into dance classes encouraged students to attend to themselves from a first person perspective, facilitating self-fashioning which validated the representational and experiential body, and the inner experience of the dancer.

Furthermore, in somatic training, each dancer has the ideal body for their own dance; potentially freeing them from the limitations of an externally imposed ideal body image (Green, 1999; Jackson, 2005). As soon as dancers release hold of the outside perspective, they let go of image as feedback and can focus on what they feel and what they think conceptually. This allows them to work with, not despite, their bodies, and acknowledge its reality as the carrier of functional information. The integration of somatic methods into dance education presents dancers with the opportunity to achieve knowledge of themselves as moving thinkers, rather than being conditioned into the principles of technique based traditions (Bannon & Sanderson, 2000). It

provides dancers with the opportunity to feel the movements they make as lived-body ones, rather than ones that are merely well-drilled but without feeling (Arnold, 2005). Cultivating somatic practices in dance education can provide dance students with what Green (2001) terms as somatic authority; 'the focus on and affirmation of what goes on inside the body rather than a sole focus on what the body looks like or how it 'should behave' (p. 157).

The impact of somatic modes of movement education on students is that they become engaged and attuned to self through multi-sensory awareness (Smith, 2002). As the ability to abstract movement from literal gestures and ideas becomes easier, students are more risk-taking in their movement choices. They go beyond the daily self, shifting ordinary perceptions of self-identity into other ways of feeling, seeing, believing, and experiencing the world. Transforming themselves into another character reflects their ability to articulate self in a variety of ways, and to consciously attend to the transcendence of self into other. As students embody this heightened sense of self, they can turn their attention to others with similar modalities of engagement. These experiences become transformational. Students become empowered to create their own voice through their unique movement choices.

Dancers' kinaesthetic perception of movements' cultivation and mastery and the sense of embodiment this brings are an aesthetic experience that engages the whole person, rich in sensual and emotional satisfaction. The body becomes the locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning (Shusterman, 2006). This provides the opportunity for the development of the dimension of the aesthetic that is concerned with the person as a sentient bodily being and the different strands of consciousness that can be experienced and cultivated as a result (Arnold, 2005). To accomplish this often promotes profound psychological and emotional experiences of self-awareness and self-discovery, bringing alteration, growth, a sense of self-agency, and self-transformation (Press, 2001).

The present study looks at how the integration of somatic methods into a dance rehearsal process can provide an aesthetic experience that engages the whole person and establishes the concepts of feeling and artistry as integrated components of dance education and performance.

## **Method**

The dance program under investigation, Quantum Leap, ran for six months culminating in a weeklong performance season titled *Eternity*.

### Participants and Measures

The main group of participants comprised 50 dancers who accepted a place in the program. This group contained equal numbers of female and male dancers, with an average age of 16 years 3 months (Standard Deviation = 2 years 5 months). They were invited to participate in the main body of the research and were observed over the length of the program. A sub-group took part in two case study interviews that explored the content and structure of the program to gain an understanding of the values as described by participants. The two Artistic Directors of the program, Ruth Osborne and Mark Gordon,

were also interviewed to understand how the structure of the program had been developed to generate valuable experiences for the dancers.

### Program

The ensemble met once a week for either a half or full day which included classes and rehearsals. Each dancer also worked through two rehearsal intensives during this time, usually scheduled in school holidays, which required 4 full weeks of rehearsals. After 5 months of rehearsal, the ensemble performed a full-length evening work at the Playhouse Theatre in the Canberra Theatre Centre, a fully equipped theatre with an audience capacity of 600. All of the dancers worked the full production week that included blocking/spacing rehearsals, technical rehearsals, dress rehearsals and media calls, and performed in all six shows – four public performances and two school matinees.

The theme for this project was based on an exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, the *Eternity* exhibition, which was developed to capture the human history of Australia (Stell, 2001). It was organised around ten emotions about which Francesca Rendle-Short wrote ten poems; separation, mystery, hope, joy, loneliness, thrill, devotion, fear, chance, and passion. The curators of the *Eternity* exhibition strove to encourage people to place themselves within history and explore the past that is alive in people's minds today. They did this by employing the ten emotions to elicit an empathetic response from the observer. They believed this would allow observers to discover what they have in common with those in history. In this manner, *Eternity* was an intimate history, where people connected through shared emotion. The museum guide spoke about the democratic nature of the exhibition. Each person featured was depicted through one story told in the first person, and one artefact. Utilising this formula ensured that no one got priority over another.

### Performance

*Eternity* was a dance work in two acts to original music consisting of separate sections, each created by one or more choreographers in collaboration with the dancers (The Australian Choreographic Centre, 2004).

The first act was *Chance*. Set up to mimic a game show with a host and hostess, it introduced the eight emotions, and a movement game was played to spell eternity. An audience member was then chosen to play the game. *Mystery* was introduced and in this first episode an unopened letter was passed around as the dancers snuck quietly across the stage. They often covered their eyes and placed their fingers over their lips as if to say "shh". Then came *Thrill*; energetic and fast, with lifts and many movements in and out of the floor. In *Separation* the dancers were drawn away from each other and often danced alone. There was a strong sense from the performers that they were alone both physically and emotionally. The *Mystery* letter reappeared briefly as a through way into *Hope*. *Hope* contained sparks of energetic movement and indications of something small and precious. The dancers also helped each other up off the floor, supported each other to reach great heights, and caught each other when they fell. The reappearance of the unopened letter introduced the second interlude of *Mystery*. This time *Mystery*

contained movements that spoke of searching. Dancers revealed and hid each other and often covered their mouths to indicate they were not making a sound. *Loneliness* came next and was an all boys' section. The boys were curled up, appearing both tormented, and thoughtful. Their gaze was often either down and in, or up and out. There was a combination of much running and group patterns that alluded to a lack of connection between the boys. The third *Mystery* was the last section before interval. The letter reappeared and the dancers told secrets, searched for the hidden answer, and hid from sight.

*Eternity* recommenced after interval with another all boys' section, *Fear*. Here the boys were blindfolded and moved in a defensive and intimidated manner. They appeared uncomfortable and on edge. The all girls' section, *Devotion*, followed. The girls moved in a breathing rhythm with a lightness of energy that filled their bodies. Next in line was *Passion*. The movement was energetic but light with a strong flow. A microphone was placed on stage and the dancers spoke about their passions. In the final *Mystery* section, the unopened letter was lowered from above the stage into the theatre as the dancers searched for it below. The final section was *Joy*, another all girl's work. The movement was open with strong messages of fun and games. Whether running, jumping, or moving slowly, the girls were grooving to the music. The finale was a kaleidoscope of movement. All the dancers were on stage drawing on movement from previous sections of *Eternity* and creating huge swirling patterns as they moved around the stage. *Eternity* finished with the dancers spelling the word eternity with their bodies.

## **Results**

Somatic approaches were incorporated into Quantum Leap in three main ways. Firstly, a theme was used as the foundation of the choreographic process; secondly, through direct encouragement from the Artistic Directors and choreographers the dancers could monitor internally and reflect on their experiences; and finally, through the programs design that aimed to ensure success for the young participants. Quotes from the interviewed sub group of participating dancers are anonymous and appear throughout the paper in quotation marks.

### The Theme

Quantum Leap facilitated the embodying of emotions and ideas through the exploration of a theme that was inseparable from and interrelated to the dancing. Within this, the fundamental relationship between meaning and movement was recognised. The thematic component of each project guided all stages through preparation and rehearsal to presentation.

### Preparation

The preparation phase involved group discussions and learning simple movement phrases. The first rehearsal was at the museum where the dancers were guided through the *Eternity* exhibition. The dancers were instructed to interact with the exhibition and consider how the emotions and stories presented related to their own lives. Once in the rehearsal space the Artistic Director created an environment conducive to an open discussion where the dancers were encouraged to analyse the exhibition and explore all the

aspects of an issue in a respectful environment. They were asked questions and their own questions were welcomed, they were encouraged to respond with their own thoughts and to the views of others. Within this, the dancers were taught to uphold expectations concerning diversity, to be prepared to deal with intense emotions, to explore vulnerabilities, and to be accountable.

In rehearsals the movement material was taught in relation to one of the thematic ideas or emotions. Right from the beginning the dancers were involved in the meaning carried in the movement. The instructions for achieving the movement included details on what the body was physically doing, as well as details for intention – what to think and feel. It was in these early sessions that the somatic groundwork for physical tasks was established. The somatic skills that were focused on at this stage were forms of kinaesthesia that encouraged the dancers to be aware of the sensation of position, movement, and tension derived from skeletal and muscular structures to enhance their technical dancing ability and to encourage clarity of form, line, and shape. Emotional somatic information focused on the inner motivator that was to drive outward expressive action. With often no prior knowledge of how to work somatically it was important for the dancers to practice these skills as they would be required to think about movement and performance in this manner throughout the length of the program.

Using an idea as the foundation for the creation of dance enhanced the dancers' understanding of artistic practice. Dance was elevated into an art form that dealt with topics of concern from the real world; the dance, as one performer stated, was 'stronger because you have something to put behind your movements, not just steps.' Interview feedback revealed that the dancers considered the topic to be one of the best features of the program. They believed that the idea gave the program its '*intensity*' as they were telling a story that ultimately related back to them. When they considered the theme and developed feedback the dancers felt, as one interviewee put it, there was 'so much thought and emotion put into the dance you were doing.' This had a profound effect on the young people as, 'once you actually put something into the dance, you can do it so much more, because you actually have somewhere to take it.'

### Rehearsal

Rehearsal was designed to offer a dance experience beyond the execution of steps that encompassed thematic and personal material. This was achieved with a rehearsal structure that integrated the movement and the theme in a process that built material with the dancers' input. The ideas that arose from the preparatory discussion formed the basis of tasks aimed at engaging the dancers in movement generation. Tasks included creating movement phrases that mirrored word phrases, solving a physical puzzle, or exploring an emotional feeling through movement.

In rehearsal, forms of kinaesthesia and emotional somatic forms continued to be used. In addition, the somatic tasks in rehearsals were focused on helping the dancers abstract movement from ideas and create their own unique movement choices. The creative process taught somatic intuition where

dancers were encouraged to consider when, how, and why movement took place and to make choices in relation to this. This was achieved through the collaborative nature of the choreographic process which encouraged the dancers to contribute, affording them multiple opportunities to express ideas, ask questions, and present challenges.

Each choreographer's role was to compose a section of *Eternity* as related to one of the emotions. There were seven choreographers, Vivienne Rogis, Darren Green, Jodie Farrugia, Anton, Solon Ulbrich, Paul Zivkovich, and the Artistic Director Ruth Osborne. Although each choreographer had their own method of movement generation and stylistic preference, all of them taught small amounts of dance material before setting tasks and engaging the dancers in discussion to elicit their own ideas. The dancers' ideas were then incorporated into the piece either directly or through tasks to explore the new idea. Darren Green, one of the choreographers, wrote of his process (The Australian Choreographic Centre, 2004):

The process began with activities that looked at the nature of fear. It was about the physical reaction, how the body reacted in response to being frightened, shocked or surprised. The participants played with the idea of being blind – walking through the space with a guide and trusting that this outside eye was going to allow them to see.... The core of the choreography came from this: how the fearful body reacted to the blindness, the fear of colliding, the unknown space and the limitations in movement when the body is given this handicap.

The choreographer Jodie Farrugia took her dancers 'through a process that allows them to make connections to times in their own lives where hope was hard to hang onto', while Anton 'explored choreographic ideas inspired by the Quantum Leapers' passions, whether it's for their dance or other personal passions'.

The integration of somatic methods into rehearsals allowed the dancers to link internal feelings and thoughts with movement and transform themselves into another character or way of being, as well as accepting this transformation in their peers. One interviewee encapsulated the feeling of her peers in commenting that the dancers believed 'having something to do during the dancing, it has made it so much more like expression ... and it makes you feel differently and you can really get into whatever you are doing.'

Having to explore themes through the choreographic process made the dancers feel that their minds had been opened up to the world in a previously unrealised way. Through working with ideas in the creative process, they began to consider how these ideas impacted on their own lives. They found they could relate the ideas across domains in their lives; from Quantum Leap, to school, home, and thoughts on how they might be in the future. One dancer explained that the relationship between Quantum Leap and other parts of his life was 'sort of like little pressure pumps going through both the bubbles, sort of feeding information from both and pulling it back in. So with our assignment, I can use real life examples now and I can incorporate whatever I am doing into that dance project and into school and vice versa.'

### Presentation

The recognition of the fundamental relationship between meaning and movement was carried to the conclusion of the project. The dancers were encouraged to think technically, conceptually and emotionally about performing. Throughout production week, and during the performances, the cast was brought together in *meaning meetings* with the Artistic Director. The purpose of these was to keep the intention of the work as the primary driver of the aesthetic experience, even as all the other production elements arrived. The dancers were taught that what they embodied in the movement, and how they travelled through the work, would directly impact on audiences' perception. The dancers were facilitated in understanding that embodied feeling was one of the communicative tools of dance.

While still maintaining kinaesthesia, somatic intuition and emotional somatic information, the dancers now developed mental imagery to prepare them for performing. They evoked the performance in their minds, visualising individual movements and entire sections until the whole performance was represented in their minds as they wished to perform. This visual and kinaesthetic imagery was actively generated and manipulated by the dancers to place a picture of the desired movement in their minds.

The dancers felt the difference in shows that took place after a *meaning meeting*. As one dancer explained:

When you go into the theatre ... you actually focus less on the meaning behind it, you are more worried about lighting, and spacing, and falling off the edge of the stage, and everything like that, so ... we had to have a couple of meetings where we had to revisit the meanings because it was just lost. ... The show after we had the meaning meetings, it was definitely there.

The dancers '*psyched*' themselves up to portray their emotion when performing. They had to sit down and think about the performance before they went on stage. Although this process was difficult to engage with initially, because they had to prepare themselves mentally as well as physically, they agreed that the hard work was worth it. When they prepared themselves to embody the emotions they felt that they were dancing for a reason. For the parts of the show that were particularly emotionally demanding, the dancers reported thinking of a memory or personal experience that related to the particular emotion. They then helped each other to get into a '*zone*' on side stage by quietly talking about the emotions they had to portray. The dancers believed this process facilitated their performance because, as one explained, they had '*images in their heads*' that meant they could '*give something to the audience*'. They then enjoyed the sense of performing, and the projection of the ideas they had been talking about throughout the project.

### Internal monitoring

The dancers were assisted to monitor internally through the applied use of somatic methods throughout the program. The dancers attention was brought to their physical bodies, to their emotions and those of their peers, and to the surrounding environment with a focus on how they reacted to it and



contributed to it. They were challenged with the knowledge that their engagement allowed for multiple outcomes through their ability to influence the process by actively participating. The dancers were taught to be critical during practice and evaluation, learning to assess work to improve the outcome. The artistic directors motivated the dancers towards perpetual self-monitoring of process and refinement of product. The directors wanted the dancers to be aware of the power and importance of participating and communicating.

The dancers spoke about the hard work, discipline, focus, reflection, and maturity required to motivate themselves throughout the program. When speaking about how they had matured in Quantum Leap, the dancers referred to emotional growth, building good relationships, and identifying further paths. For many of the dancers, as one remarked, the 'biggest thing you take away is within yourself ... this incredible feeling that you had during Quantum and what stays with you the most then is the effect that it had on you as a person.' When asked to explain what this meant one dancer described how she 'learned to best operate as an individual in the process.' For many of them reaching the end of the project they realised that 'the impact it has on you as a person stays with you.'

Participation in the Quantum Leap process developed the dancers on a personal level. It changed how they felt about themselves, their attitude to interacting with others, and their understanding of the world around them. They felt a change to their level of confidence and found an ability to be self-disciplined, understanding the relationship between these two. As one dancer summed up, 'Coping physically and emotionally, they're probably the strongest points of Quantum that I love. Quantum does challenge you so much, like, not physically as much, but emotionally, heaps.'

### Coaching for Future Success

Quantum Leap set high aspirations and expectations for the dancers but was planned by the artistic directors to encourage success on the dancers' part; even in the face of the high risk inherent in live performance. The artistic directors assisted the dancers to practice looking ahead, to conceptualise what preparations were needed in the present, to lay the path for future success. The dancers were coached through trial and error processes in rehearsal and challenged with the knowledge that there were no right or wrong answers. The dancers' ownership of learning was supported through making students' learning responsibilities explicit by defining learning goals for themselves, by learning from observing peers' movements, and by solving movement problems. In this manner, the journey of self-discovery that was a feature of the program was made explicit. The artistic director encouraged the dancers to recognise the distance they had travelled in relation to skills, achievements, and personal growth.

On all the available indicators the dancers appeared to understand how each level of the program was part of a developing sequence; they were able to perceive something of their trajectory of improvement as their skills built over time. When they reached the theatre they knew how far they had come and

how much they had improved. They had a raft of skills at their disposal to attend to themselves in first person and successfully focus on performing as movement execution procedures had been developed through explicit opportunities to transfer previous sensori-motor learning to present tasks. This was highlighted in interviews where dancers had been a part of the program in previous years, 'it makes the whole thing even more exciting, doing it again'.

## Conclusions

An array of somatic methods can be employed throughout the various stages of a rehearsal process and into a performance season to cultivate talents and dispositions for aesthetic experiences in young dancers. Quantum Leap provided an experience that engaged the whole person and established the concepts of feeling and artistry as integrated components of dance education by coaching the students through a number of somatic processes aimed at identifying and exploring the body, emotions, movement generation and learning methods. The critical reflection involved in the extended rehearsal period challenged the dancers' attitudes to themselves, others, the creation of dance works, and performance.

Future research into the area of integration of somatics in dance performance for young people could focus on the specific mechanisms that underpin enhanced performance. Are some somatic methods more effective than others? Or does this depend on the type or style of dance required by the choreographer for the performance? To ascertain if there are specific somatic methods that inform and improve specific performance outcomes would greatly benefit dancers, choreographers and educators. The application of somatic practice for dance has wide-ranging benefits when employed in dance programs for young people. Further discussion to elucidate the most effective somatic methods for working with this age group could serve to heighten young peoples enjoyment and understanding of dance.

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## Biographical statement

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