

Covering letter

Residency with Peggy Hackney June 20th - 25th 2011 by Emily Shaw

Title: Integrating Polarities: An Exploration of Laban Movement Analysis in the Studio. Week-long residency led by Peggy Hackney.

Place: Dance Base, 14-16 Grassmarket, Edinburgh, EH1 2JU

Purpose of project:

To gain a deeper understanding of Peggy Hackney's practical application of her work (as developed and described in her book *'Making Connections. Total body integration through Bartenieff fundamentals'*).

I hoped to find new ways of incorporating ideas into my teaching of 'creative-expressive dance' and 'personal growth through movement' groups and my work as a dance/movement therapist.

Was my purpose achieved?

My personal involvement in the course was compromised by my energy levels at the time, but I was able to participate on my own terms and achieve new insights into this work. I have since been able to transfer this newly gained knowledge into both class and workshop situations and have really enjoyed revisiting the work in combination with my own teaching ideas, observing how other people play with the material. It is clear to me that this work evolves the more you practise it and I am confident I will continue to benefit from what I have learned both through my own practice and those I introduce it to. Therefore I regard the project in a positive light – mission accomplished!

The setting

The backdrop to this residency was spectacular with Edinburgh's mysterious light falling on sombre, imposing architecture, providing an almost perfect setting in which to relax and absorb the ideas except that the weather was grim and it rained almost continually! However, as I wandered the streets in the breaks seeing the stern faces and hunched shoulders under umbrellas, homeless people slumped on street corners and women tottering around on high heels, I was able to observe the reality of how people relate to their own bodies and the surroundings, embodying and crystallizing some of the concepts I was attempting to understand.

Suggestions for future awardees

Attending such an intensive course requires a lot of energy both physically and mentally, so I was grateful to the friends I stayed with for their stimulating conversation, my own enormous sleeping space with typical Edinburgh high

ceilings, window shutters and delicious home-cooked meals. These home comforts allowed me to rest and relax fully every evening and switch off in order to return each day replenished and ready to learn. So my main recommendation for attending a similar course would be to ensure enough preparatory research had been carried out to ensure that the accommodation will allow comfort, relaxation and distraction from the long, intensive days.

Plans to share information about my project with others

As already mentioned, the information has already been integrated into my work as a dance practitioner and I will continue to access aspects of the work in future in classes, workshops and in my work as a dance/movement therapist.

The Report

Introduction

Having attended a short workshop with Peggy Hackney five years ago in Holland I was very excited to have the opportunity to work with her again at this 'week-long workshop study on the Laban Movement Analysis/Bartenieff Fundamentals material with particular focus on polarities and use of these ideas in our lives.' As a dance/movement therapist working with people with complex PTSS I had found the resources gained from the previous workshop invaluable and was keen to deepen my understanding. In the past year I have been focusing on bringing my therapeutic knowledge into the arena of personal growth through dance expression and felt ready to refresh and hone my skills in order to inform my facilitation of groups that use movement and dance as a form of self-discovery.

The facilitator

Peggy Hackney is an incredibly inspiring figure and is as sprightly and dynamic as a young child. Her bodily expression belies her years (mid-sixties I believe), embodying and exemplifying the work she has been developing for many years much of which is to be found in her book *Making Connections. Total body integration through bartenieff fundamentals*. Her ability to switch between expressive qualities is phenomenal and her energy levels sometimes dizzying! She is living proof that full connectivity in the body enlivens and enriches the way one communicates. I sincerely hope my own practice of this work will also allow me learn to live so fully and expressively.

The group

It was a large group of approximately twenty participants from diverse movement backgrounds – from dance/movement therapy to professional dancers and dance teachers and from Pilates to physiotherapists. One group had travelled from as far afield as Poland, others like myself from the south of England and only a handful seemed to be based in Edinburgh itself. The different ages, abilities, backgrounds of people together with their widely differing aims – from personal growth to professional interest allowed for interesting exchanges of information and lively discussions during the breaks.

For me, hearing and sharing experiences and opinions was crucial to my own personal process of absorbing and making sense of the many new ideas encountered in the workshop setting. As the week progressed and I connected both verbally and experientially with more and more people and I felt much safer within the group enabling me to participate more fully. Personally, I would have appreciated a more direct facilitation of the group formation during the first few days, spending more time allowing people to 'meet' each other non-verbally in order to increase trust and sense of belonging. I believe this would have created a more open and intimate environment encouraging a higher level of active involvement. However, I appreciate this was a personal need informed by my therapeutic background and may not have been important to everyone.

The experience

The week proved to be incredibly challenging as I struggled to keep up with Peggy's fast pace and lively mind. It seemed as if she was trying to teach us everything she knew and I experienced a few moments of frustration when I realized I was unable to absorb all the information presented. Each day seemed to introduce yet more new concepts and, although I had studied with Peggy before, I had moments of panic when it felt as if my previous understandings were invalid and I would need to relearn and reprocess the material. It was only in hindsight, when I came home exhausted but with a full notebook and many great memories, that I was able to feel gratitude for her generosity in providing us all with so many new ideas and resources for future work.

The performance

On the last day we presented some of the ideas we had been exploring during the week to an outside audience. The mood was light-hearted and playful, and the whole group seemed to rise to the occasion, enjoying dancing together and witnessing each other for the last time. I was amazed at how quickly Peggy was able to direct the composition/rehearsal (half an hour!), from brainstorming the group's favourite movement explorations of the week to ordering them into an improvisational structure that allowed people to pick and choose which bits they would become involved with. It was an

inspirational process that demonstrated to me how easy it is to co-create a performance piece with a group drawing on people's strengths and preferences.

The outcomes

Since the course I have incorporated aspects of the work into two groups I run, a creative-expressive class for over 50s and a class for elderly women. I have been adapting the six fundamental elements of connectivity for use during warm-ups and also focusing upon one particular element at a time as improvisational themes. During a four-hour workshop *Bridging Bodies-movement and dance for personal growth*, I worked more directly with the six fundamentals introducing them within dance structures through which participants discovered their own connections to the work. Some of the group members had never explored improvisational dance at all and most of them had never investigated dance as tool for self-discovery. The results were amazing.

'This dancing reaches parts other dance cannot reach' was one of the comments. One woman who had seemed timid in my ballet classes found a whole new way to express herself, discovering the joy of yielding and pushing into the ground to feel her power, reaching and pulling and to meet her needs, ending with a triumphant stamp and shout of her name as she proclaimed her strength and stood her ground. For another participant the discovery of two different aspects of himself during 'body-halves' exploration allowed him to reconnect with his long-lost creativity that had been squashed along with his left-handedness as a child. So combining my learning from the course with my own knowledge of groups has proved to be an incredibly rich and exciting process and I am sure will continue to reap interesting and beneficial results for myself and my students/clients long into the future.

Conclusions

On a personal level I gained a clearer understanding of the anatomical underpinnings of the six different bodily connections, in particular that of upper-lower connection. Through repeated practice of different exploratory exercises I realized that one of the reasons that I have been experiencing so much back pain recently is that I have been 'tucking' habitually for years, probably since I was very young training in classical ballet. This misalignment of my pelvis in relationship to my spine and legs means I am not able to access the full connectivity through my core abdominal muscles which in turn means I am not able to truly feel and express my power. Interestingly enough, although I arrived with back pain, within a few days of the workshop I realized it had almost totally disappeared and, since the residency (three weeks ago), I have had very little pain at all.

Furthermore, I gained a vast array of new tools for my resource 'rucksack' that I can draw from as and when needed. These range from practical ideas for choreographic structures, to ideas for movement explorations that can be used within both dance improvisational and therapeutic settings.

Lastly, I gained a deeper insight into the potential and complexity of the Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analysis system and this experience has inspired me to believe I may well at some point in the future endeavour to study it in more depth.