

17th November 2008

Dear LUTSF,

Please find enclosed two copies of my report of my project and a CD with the report, covering and short video clip of a piece I choreographed on the course in Seattle. I apologize for the delay but I have had difficulty getting the documents/video copied to CD due to limited access to resources.

My project was broken into two parts:

Falling Wide Easter School, London 7th - 25th April – Skinner Releasing Technique Intensive: Introduction

Skinner Releasing Institute, Seattle 14th- 25th July – Skinner Releasing Technique Summer Intensive: Ongoing Practice

I achieved my aim of increasing my knowledge of, and training in, Skinner Releasing Technique, but unfortunately was unable to go to the Creative Dance Centre in Seattle to research into their method due to a last minute flight reschedule. It is difficult to pick out any one highlight from the Intensives as the experience has altered the way I view dance and dance training considerably, and has influenced and made me question my own practice. It has given me a clear direction to take as I intend to continue my study of this technique and eventually complete the Certified Teacher Training course.

Since returning from Seattle I have led a workshop at Yorkshire Dance based on some of the work I did on the intensive courses and hope to lead more in the future. I have also shared ideas and approaches from the training with colleagues at Northern Ballet Theatre and will be leading two workshops based on the approach for the Yorkshire Young Dancers Classical Strand (CAT scheme) which is run by NBT in Leeds in February.

I would like to thank the Management Committee of LUTSF once again for the award. I feel very privileged to have received it and greatly appreciate the help the Fund has given me to continue my professional development.

Yours sincerely,

Sophie Alder

REPORT

Sophie Alder - Report on Skinner Releasing Intensives in London (Introduction - April 08) and Seattle (Ongoing Practice - July 08)

I was first introduced to Skinner Releasing Technique last July at a three-day festival in Coventry, Summer Dancing. The three lessons had such a powerful affect on me, physically and personally, that I knew I had discovered an approach to dance training that I needed to find out more about. Skinner classes are difficult to find as there are few teachers and even fewer opportunities to study the technique, with the only regular classes in the UK being held in London. As I live in Leeds attending these was not an option, so I looked into intensive courses.

Seattle is the home of Releasing (and Joan Skinner who developed the technique) and every summer there are two intensive courses there, one covering the Introductory classes (3 weeks) and the other the Ongoing Practice (2 weeks). Originally I was hoping to complete both courses in Seattle, but due to a change in the order I completed the Introductory classes at the Falling Wide Easter School in April 2008 in London. In hindsight I am very pleased that I divided my study in this way as it allowed me to meet and work with a greater range of people and gave me space in between courses to process and reflect on the work.

Falling Wide Easter School 7th – 25th April 08

The Falling Wide course consisted of a Skinner Releasing class every morning and Improvisation workshops in the afternoons with Eva Karczag, Henry Montes and Gaby Agis. It has been quite a few years since I have had the luxury of dancing every day for 3 weeks and the experience was intense in every sense!

Skinner Releasing Technique takes you through a process which increases self awareness and enables you to let go of habitual movement patterns, releasing unnecessary tension that hinders efficient movement so that you find your optimal alignment and move with less effort. Through the guided explorations you enter an altered state of consciousness, the Alpha state, which is our most receptive learning state allowing changes to happen most effectively. The body and mind are fully integrated in the training and so has many therapeutic benefits alongside the physical ones and the journey can be quite an emotional one. Many of us on the course reported having strange experiences such as feelings similar to motion sickness, vivid dreams and even falling out of bed during the night. The changes in my body and movement were very apparent. During the Falling Wide intensive the usual tension I hold in my shoulders disappeared, I found much greater range and freedom of movement in my hips, my sense of balance and control improved amazingly and my jaw dropped changing the shape of my face. People commented on how differently I stood and walked and the fluidity and ease of my movement was greatly improved. It also gave me an improved sense of well being and body image as I was discovering and celebrating what my body could do, rather than trying to fit it into a form dictated by someone else like most technical training, which tends to highlight your failings and inadequacies.

The afternoon workshops fed into the Skinner practice, even though each artists approach was very different. This enriched the mornings work and refreshed me as an artist. My improvisation skills developed and I started to see the environment around me, and how I related to it, differently. We worked with internal stimulus (from our organs) external (what we could see, hear etc) both inside the studio and outside around the Whitechapel/Billingsgate Market area. I left the intensive feeling incredibly inspired, but with as many questions as answers...

Seattle Institute – Ongoing Intensive 14th – 25th July 08

After some complications with my passport while checking in for my flight to Seattle, I finally arrived 3 days later than planned with a brand new passport and a large credit card bill for a new plane ticket. I was still in plenty of time to start the course but it meant that I could not make the meeting I had arranged with Anne Gilbert, Director of the Creative Dance Centre, Seattle. I was hoping to talk to her about the method to dance training she had developed which is linked to Brain Gym and Developmental Movement and observe some classes. Unfortunately, though, I could not rearrange another meeting as I was flying back to the UK as soon as the Skinner course finished.

The Ongoing course continued where the Introductory left off. The images became more sophisticated and daily “rituals” to help maintain the work after the course were introduced. Again, morning classes, taught by Robert Davidson and Sally Metcalf, were supplemented by Improvisation workshops led again by Robert and Kris Wheeler, which developed new skills and introduced new approaches to feed movement material. The importance of the use of imagination and how this affects movement became very apparent to me. We played “imagination games” whilst improvising to feed our dancing which highlighted to me the impact the imagination has on a persons movement. The imagination/mind shapes the body and has an amazing ability to change physicality and form instantly. This is visible to the mover and witness, yet most dance techniques concentrate on copying shape and form to find an aesthetic. They start from the outside, then working inwards to find the accompanying “feel” of a correct line or movement. Skinner and the improvisation sessions turned this “traditional” approach on its head as use of imagination was integral to the approach. This in turn made me feel more creative and inspired to choreograph work.

Another component of the Ongoing Intensive was to create short pieces of choreography based on Rumi. This provided a refreshing opportunity to create work myself on a group of dancers and to be choreographed on. Having the time and space to do this was, again, a luxury as my day today work is focused on facilitating other peoples creativity. Due to the nature of the work we had been doing I found ideas came to me quickly and produced a 3 minute piece with 3 dancers in an hour and a half! This has awakened a desire in me to produce more work based on carefully structured improvisation and is definitely something I wish to take further.

Outcomes

Studying Skinner Releasing Technique has had a profound affect on me. The journey it took me on was full of discovery and brought up as many, if not more questions than answers. It has made me realise how we separate the mind and body in most technical training so how can I integrate them more in my own teaching, along with greater use of imagery?

In Seattle we had a discussion as a group about dance education in schools in America and the Skinner for Children's programme that has been developed. This made me realise just how far ahead, in some ways, we are in the UK in regards to dance education in schools. I was struck by how revolutionary the work I do in schools was perceived to be and it made me realise how developed we are in the UK in our approach to delivering dance in schools compared with some other countries. There were similarities between the Skinner approach to teaching dance to children the kind of creative dance that is delivered in schools by teachers and outside artists. However, it has made me question what I teach and how I deliver it. I now have a much clearer idea of how I can develop my own approach, exploring how I can incorporate principles from Skinner Releasing Technique but adapting them to suit the situation and age group

On both courses the other participants ranged in age from people in their 20s to 70s, some of whom still performed regularly. This in itself was an enriching experience and made me realise dancing does not have to stop when you hit 40 and that I have the rest of my life to continue developing my practice. Why shouldn't I still be dancing in my 70s? Why have I felt that I have to achieve “everything” by a certain age? I think we, in the UK if not the rest of the world, still view dance artists over the age of 50 as exceptions rather than the norm so it was very reassuring, and enlightening, to dance with a group of people with a great variety of ages, backgrounds and experience.

Due the nature of Skinner it is a technique that is accessible to people of all abilities. The participant “differentiates” the class themselves as the interpretation of the image and how they choose to work with it is completely up to them. This means physical ability does not need to be a limitation so has made me examine how this approach could be used with a group with special needs or an integrated group.

The experience has re-ignited my enthusiasm for dance improvisation and for finding opportunities to develop this, through workshops, performances etc in Leeds. An improvisation group has now been set up at Yorkshire Dance, which I am part of, so hopefully this is an area of dance activity that will continue to grow as the group becomes more established.

I will definitely continue to study Skinner and a long term aim of mine is to become certified to teach the technique. This will take some time as still feel I am only just coming to grips with the technique and a requirement of the Teacher Certificate Course is the completion of a certain number of classes. But, as I have realised, I have many years of dancing left ahead of me!

Sophie Alder