

BOOK REVIEW

MINDFUL MOVEMENT: THE EVOLUTION OF THE SOMATIC ARTS AND CONSCIOUS ACTION, MARTHA EDDY (2016)

Bristol: Intellect

ISBN: 9781783205837, h/bk, £51.54

Review by Jamie McHugh, Registered Somatic Movement Therapist (RSMT) and Independent Researcher

Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action is a masterful book that traces the complex spider web of somatic influences on American and European contemporary dance, with a focus on the integration of somatic awareness in higher education. Eddy and her collaborators take the reader on a historical journey, systematically connecting the various generations of somatic educators with trends in dance education in the West and the infusion of non-western disciplines in this larger amalgamation. In 'Part 1: Influences and Development of Somatic Education' she lays the groundwork through identifying a co-mingling between the first generation of somatic education pioneers at the beginning of the twentieth century and early American dance educators. She then globalizes by presenting, first, a chapter on the European Antecedents to Somatic Movement, and then, a chapter on Asian and African Influences. Once this foundation is set in 'Part 2: The Emergence of Somatic Movement Education and Therapy', she launches into an identification of the second and third generation of somatic movement and dance synthesizers, and the application of this work in educational settings. Finally, in 'Part 3: Current Trends in Somatic Thinking and Being' she takes a speculative look at the future of this field as it evolves and branches out to address a variety of far-reaching concerns through an interdisciplinary lens. What is the impact of Somatics on the neuroplasticity of the brain, on health care and social change, and even on our definition of spirituality itself? From her attention to historical detail to these larger conceptual brushstrokes, Eddy covers a lot of terrain. In this sense, this nutrient-rich book could easily expand out into a three-volume series; the bibliography alone is worth the

1. See this overview of the two week residency – <https://dance.wisc.edu/Dance/people/guest-artists/jamie-mchugh>.
2. See this interview with Anna Halprin on her recollections of studying with H'Doubler – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O65G2oB4hgo&t=7s>.
3. Tamalpa Life/Art Process – www.tamalpa.org/about.

price of admission, with the cross-disciplinary citations making this book invaluable to those deeply immersed in this body of knowledge, students of this field and those working in related disciplines. I have known Martha Eddy as a colleague for many years, and of note I am cited throughout the book as a somatic movement pioneer. Yet even though I am an 'insider', the text offered me valuable new insights and many rich details about my place in this historical lineage. I can easily imagine that this volume will become primary and set reading in university dance departments worldwide.

Rather auspiciously I began reading the book prior to starting a two-week residency at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of a 90th-anniversary celebration of the dance department (the first in the nation).¹ My residency in September 2016 was focused on the work of one of the dance department's most prestigious graduates, Anna Halprin. I have been deeply connected with Anna Halprin for the past 30 years in a variety of roles – as a student, colleague and collaborator. Halprin studied from 1938 to 1942 with the department's founder Margaret H'Doubler,² and continued to develop the H'Doubler lineage through her own methodology – the Tamalpa Life/Art Process.³ The department was also where I took my first dance improvisation class in 1977, which consequently changed the trajectory of my life. My continuing education after I left the University (that eventually led me to study with Halprin) included a smorgasbord of movement, dance and somatics familiar to many contemporary dancers – Contact Improvisation, Release Technique, the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais and Butoh. However, before reading the book, I had no idea how many of my teachers (using those somatic approaches) were somehow connected to H'Doubler, and the UW-Madison programme, and indeed, how influential H'Doubler had been on many university dance programmes. Chapter 9 by Rebecca Nettle-Fiol on the University of Illinois-Urbana programme is one example of this lineage, intersecting with Barbara Clark (Mabel Todd's student), Joan Skinner (Release Technique) and Nancy Topf (Topf Technique). Eddy's meticulous scholarship in gathering these various voices revealed many overlapping influences and connections, and made me appreciate even more where I have landed in this history.

We live in a time where many people claim that their work is 'somatic'. Notably Eddy clearly defines useful parameters for what a somatic approach to movement education is – and is not – (see Chapter 7, for example). Prescribed forms of movement without personal enquiry, exploration and adaptation cannot truly be considered somatic. Pilates, Yoga and even dance, for example, are not in and of themselves somatic arts, even though they can be. It is the unique, often subtle methodologies, and the values that inform the sensitive transmission of the somatic arts that truly make the difference. Yet how do we reconcile every individual finding their own dance and being the choreographer of their own lives within the hierarchical tradition of dance? The values of inclusion and diversity seemingly collide with the stereotypical uniformity of dance as many people know and practice it: everyone doing the same thing at the same time. This highlights one of many important challenges for the field. Can our dance pedagogy be more inclusive and less exclusive, more cooperative and less competitive? Can it bring the 'body in its wholeness' front and centre? My two-week residency in a public university gave me time and a concentrated focus to consider these educational questions within a larger social context: what is the role of dance in culture? What makes dance a useful endeavour of study? And in these days of belt-tightening, austerity measures, how can degrees in dance survive in universities?

REFLECTIONS ON MY MASTERCLASS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

I walk into the sacred temple of the dance studio, with its massive windows and high ceilings, to facilitate my last master class, a combination of advanced-level dance majors, beginning dance-elective students and a handful of faculty members. As I observe the students stream in and separate out into their separate camps, I sense their trepidation about this new class configuration, and imagine inner narratives revolving around competition, inadequacy and anxiety. I feel a strong responsibility to immediately provide this group with a shared thematic focus to get them all on board. I ask everyone to gather close together on the floor, introduce myself and then begin to talk:

All of you here have grown up in the shadow of 9/11. Your whole life has been defined in various degrees by the threat of terrorism and endless war, perhaps becoming background music you don't even hear anymore. But the cumulative effect of ongoing exposure to low doses of fear begins to train the body and mind to be hypervigilant, suspicious and maybe even paranoid, making it difficult for the self to relax and regenerate. Running on adrenaline and a sympathetic nervous system overdrive, we acclimate to becoming anxious, agitated and irritable, making it harder to focus, settle and be at home in ourselves. All of this becomes the norm – and since we are living in a technological age with nonstop input, it is so easy to be distracted and unaware of what is going on in the background. The good news is we have an advantage because we are dancers. We participate in the life of our bodies to make art, and because we are bringing awareness to our physical selves, giving ourselves freedom to explore what is possible, and developing greater degrees of mastery, we are at the same time mitigating the physiological residue of fear.

I continue:

One of the primary trauma researchers, Bessel van der Kolk, has discovered how the social engagement system is essential for healing (Van der Kolk 2014). Eye contact and touch, as well as moving, drumming and singing together – all these resources bring people out of themselves and into the present moment. Clearly, this was a fact of life for indigenous people. The challenges (and rewards) of existing so close to the rawness of life, with constant physical and emotional trauma embedded in daily living, made these 'art practices' invaluable as a form of community medicine. So our work today is to let go of the mind in the ordinary way we approach dance – counting phrases of movement and duplicating what we see, and instead, turn to the sensate mind of interoception and proprioception, the feeling of sensation, in order to renew, regenerate and celebrate the life of the individual body as well as the collective one we all share.

We begin the class by diving into the inner reality of our bodies: giving over to gravity, stretching and breathing on the floor, using self-contact to focus awareness and nourish ourselves with sensation, releasing our exhale as sound and returning time and again to stillness as a home base. This internal encounter is a reset, working out the various stresses and strains that have accumulated during any absence from ourselves. Then we gradually find our way to standing upright by repeating the intrinsic developmental pathway of

all human beings: rocking side to side, being on the hands and knees, creeping and crawling, squatting and rising. In this transition, we internalize the support and ease from the floor so that we can stand on two feet and have more mobility. We connect the inward-turning focus of the breath rhythm to the outward-expanding rhythm of the heart beat, and move out into the room, joining up with others and sharing the spontaneous dance and song that arises while creating universal forms and patterns in space. Implicit in this open process of discovery within this rich environment of other people, live music and expansive space is an expressed value: *there is no right way to do this type of dance*. This is the *spirit* of the dance: attuning to ourselves from the inside out, and then expanding our expression through the social engagement system, or in other words, sharing the unique dance that we find in ourselves with others by making eye contact/physical contact, and synchronizing breath, voice and heartbeat together in a variety of rhythms and forms.

Much of what happened in that two-hour class described above was antithetical to the dominant culture at large. We honoured the life of our bodies and allowed them to take precedence over the mind. We temporarily suspended the competitive ego to play cooperatively and equally – the difference between professional dancers, faculty members and elective students disappeared in the mix. Also, we allowed the magic of the present moment to be primary, and the joy of mutual exploration to be paramount, instead of trying to control or determine a presentable outcome.

In my work, I think of the body in three stages: (1) the ordinary body; (2) the performing body; and (3) the extraordinary body. The ordinary body is the commonly termed realm of 'pedestrian movement'; we walk, sit, lie down, stand, etc. In and of itself, the ordinary body is already quite extraordinary in how we are able to function, move and express ourselves automatically and unconsciously. The next stage is the 'performing body', the body trained in specialized motor tasks for performance. Whether it is in the service of dance, music or sports, this is the realm of body learning and being adept with a specific movement vocabulary. The third stage is 'the extraordinary body', the realm of mystery, possibility and evolving sensibilities. Somatic pioneers, due to necessity and often injury and personal crisis, have consistently gone beyond the norm and gifted us with their discoveries. What is the human body actually capable of? How does the body interface with consciousness to create an impact on the material world, whether it is our own tissue or our relationship with the environment? How can explorations with this extraordinary body uncover new inner capacities that can contribute to health, education, culture and even spirituality?

Similarly, Eddy sticks her toes into a pool of possibilities in the final chapters. With technologies rapidly transforming life on the planet in such a dizzying fashion, we clearly need to keep pace with this change by exploring and utilizing our inner technologies. The ancient reptilian brain needs the reassurance of nurturing touch and gentle movement to soothe the anxiety and calm the nerves of the modern body. This same brain needs space and regeneration to keep up with the increasing demands of information processing. We are in the midst of a rapidly evolving process that can enlarge our consciousness and steer us towards greater maturity if we equally participate with the body and the brain more mindfully and intelligently - instead of relegating the body to the back room.

For the past twenty years, I have allied myself with a relatively small field – 'somatic movement education and therapy'.⁴ Reading this book

reminded me how I also belong to a larger stream – the tradition of dance and, in particular, improvisation. Eddy has done an invaluable service to our emerging field by connecting its values and methods to the field of contemporary dance. Besides offering new approaches to transcendence and sensate beauty, somatically informed dance can also give dancers more sustainable skills for physiological self-regulation and emotional resilience. Dance is the one movement discipline where we are actually expected to do unusual things with our bodies, making it a useful departure point for our explorations. We have cultural permission to temporarily leave behind ordinary movement behaviour to experiment with what is possible, which is incredibly freeing. In the final analysis, this intersection of dance, improvisation and somatic enquiry is fertile ground for mind-body integration and the development of consciousness. Dance in higher education can certainly lead the way as an incubator of such innovation as we broaden its purview with this infusion of the somatic arts.

I finished reading this book feeling deeply grateful for my dance lineage, stretching far back in time to the ancient shamans of the tribe who led the communal dance and culminating in the last 100 years with the expressive dance practitioners and somatic researchers who have brought us to this point. This is the perennial dance underlying rituals and ceremonies, of medicine and magic, seeking resurgence in the body politic today. How can Laban's movement choirs, for example, be re-imagined and enacted for street protests? How can we effectively train a new generation of dancers to be empowered community animators of heart and spirit, and not simply marginalized players for the entertainment of the wealthy 1 per cent of the population? How can we rediscover the sacred role of dance in these turbulent times? Hopefully the wiggling, winding, spiralling trail that Eddy has blazed in this scholarly treatise will be followed by many more researchers, as we continue to move the art, science and philosophy of dance forward – within the individual body, the social body and even the planetary one.

REFERENCE

Van der Kolk, Bessel (2014), *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, New York: Viking Books.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jamie McHugh, RSMT is a registered somatic movement therapist, dancer and artist. He is the creator of Somatic Expression® - Body Wisdom for Modern Minds, an integrative approach to the art and craft of embodiment. Jamie has been teaching movement-based work for the past 35 years and offers individual sessions, workshops and trainings in the somatic-expressive arts worldwide. His primary teachers have been Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Emile Conrad, Anna Halprin and Thich Nhat Hanh.

E-mail: naturebeingart@gmail.com

Web address: www.somaticexpression.com; www.naturebeingart.org