

Post-Modern Dance: Culmination of Systems= Integration for the Contemporary Performer

By Krista DeNio

Within the following pages you will find a sequence of information, a series of investigations that I've undertaken as part of my education here in Naropa's MFA Theater: Contemporary Performance program.

What is Contemporary Performance and what is a well-rounded movement training for such a program and for today's Contemporary Performers?

The truth, for me, lies in the body and so as a somatic practitioner, it is my first resource and ground for research. From the investigations and many movement and theater trainings I had previous to arriving at Naropa University (Modern dance: Graham and Cunningham; Post-modern release technique; Contact Improvisation; Aerial dance; Yoga; Afro-Cuban folk and Salsa; Butoh; Alexander Technique; Creative dance; Authentic Movement; Clowning; Action Theater; Spolin-based Improvisational Theater, Meisner-based Acting work; Method Acting, and more) I came to this program to find the missing links. What could possibly be missing from all of that?

What was missing, is what I now understand to be my foundation: principles of the Body-Mind Centering™ school of work (as distilled through Erika Berland), and the Developmental Movement technique (as translated by Wendell Beavers).

For me, the work of these two individuals, within and through the initial work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, has given me the depth of resource I need, as a human, a mover, an actor, to trust my own investigations, and to take my body where it needs to go.

Hence, and through the great gift of this program, I have had the opportunity to connect the dots for myself between previous trainings and information, all living in my dancer/choreographer/actor/teacher/student body, through working deeply in my own systems, and taking a lot of time and space to do so.

As Wendell Beavers explained in an article titled *Locating Technique* (Movement Research Performance Journal #7, July 2002): the developmental technique work and other "techniques" which were actually tools to investigate the body as I found it, its possibilities, and its basic expressive nature", became for him the 'techniques behind technique'. He thought of these techniques as 'experiential' and Modern dance technique as 'working with the objectified body'. While the challenge in Modern dance class was to live up to a certain aesthetic value, the challenge in the experiential work was to face really inhabiting/being oneself.

For me, this is just the gap I am trying to bridge in the training form I am developing. It is a form that allows us to work with technique, but from an experiential place first, so that the student develops technical skills, while simultaneously developing inner and outer awareness, connectedness, and from that foundation can make aesthetic choice. I have been learning a great deal from my teachers in this program, about how to maintain an inward focus, toward accepting myself as the human I am in the world, while allowing that human to expand outward and share all that I have with the rest of the world.

These are the kinds of humans I am interested in cultivating, as a teacher.

My reflections (within this Contemplative Education System) on where we're headed in the field of Post-Modern Movement training and training for today's Contemporary Performer:

I believe we are in a huge paradigm shift as a culture, in this country and globally. We are training out and away from the former rugged individualism, which has so rigorously marked the American idealism and every way of portraying ourselves.

Within the theater and in our trainings, then, rather than individual as leader/competitor/ star, it is an ensemble mind that we are working to find. We are seeking to move beyond individual egoism to gain a sense of being a part of something much greater than ourselves. We want to recognize and value our interdependence, rather than fight it.

A part of this shift is that the value is not on *the beauty of form*, but rather on the *inner experience as translated to the outer expression via the vehicle of one's own true body-mind*.

To speak further into this shift, we would address the contemplative aspect, which is that we are *placing value on the practice, on the discipline of ritual* and deepening into our practices, *rather than the discipline of physical beauty/form*.

Finally, we are acknowledging the value of working between form and formlessness. We are giving clear structures/form for students to learn from, and then clear boundaries around open space, in which the student can investigate her/his own impulses and learn to trust those instincts. This trust, which the teacher is allowing the student to cultivate, will become the student's ground.

A NEW MOVEMENT TRAINING, FOR THE CONTEMPORARY PERFORMER: created by Krista DeNio

MovingGround:

The overall goal of the course is to give the student a wide range of movement possibilities, with which s/he can make choices as an artist in the world. The training begins with work on/in the floor, teaching the student basic, human, developmental movement patterns as the foundation from which she/he can begin to understand the root (and a common language) from which all other movement expression comes.

From this foundation, and working with the ground/earth underneath the body, as a primary support, the student can begin to identify the supporting surface of the body. From here the student can begin to move into higher levels in space, different orientations to space, find momentum to move through space, find relationship to other bodies, in space and in contact (Contact Improvisation), sequence movement (choreography), and finally the student is encouraged to begin cultivating her/his own movement practice.

Foundational Principles:

- Awareness of breath as the foundation
- Awareness of sound (of voice/sound of teacher as directive, of sound (including voice, for all) as important mode of expression in the room, while training movement)
- Alignment through yogic principles
- Finding and Releasing into the Supporting Surface; accessing systems of the body as resources via the principles of Body-Mind Centering™
- Understanding options for different initiation points in the body
- Using support of ground, to way up and down
- Working with levels in space
- Directionality (bringing space into the dance; moving the dance into space)
- Changing body's orientation to space (upside down; sideways; supine; prone; upright)
- Changing spatial relationship (facing front/flat; diagonal; side; back; circular)
- Working in the corridor between internal and external awareness (includes awareness in eyes/face)
- Working between form-based and experiential learning; learning and repeating forms/phrasing; improvising within structures/ guidance, and from one's own sources (self-sourcing)
- Meeting other bodies (in space; in contact); Relationship
- Creating an attention/ intention within one's own movement practice

Krista DeNio
Naropa MFA Theater: Contemporary Performance
Choreographic Section: Thesis Presentation
April, 28 2006

Post-Modern dance: Culmination of Systems = Integration for the Contemporary Body

Investigation Led by Krista DeNio

Workshop participants: Joan Bruemmer, Shana Cordon, Meredith Crosley, Debra Disbrow, Remi Lahaussais, Hadley Mays, Colleen Mylott, Kevin Poole, Elizabeth Watt,
*and Ashley Hughes, who joined us for the first 2 sessions, and contributed to our choreographic process.

Thank you for joining us in this visceral exploration.

We will not be in verbal dialogue for the first 40 minutes. Please enjoy taking in what you take in, noticing what you notice, feeling what you feel. Because of the way we have been working, I may be interacting with the dancers at times, and the work should be viewed as an investigation, not a performance.

Presentation Format (not too tight, not too loose...but we will end on time.)

- 2:45-3:15** Audience witnesses dancers in guided warm-up / or feel free to warm-up yourself, in the space provided (downstage of dancers). You will not be guided however, so please take responsibility for you own well-being.
- 3:15-3:25** Dancers present choreography developed in the workshop
- 3:25-3:33** Structured Improvisation
*Use of visual stimuli for movement creation: Allowing the projected images, textures, shapes to affect systems/ senses, explore movement that arises from this. Also allowing other movers, qualities, states in the space to affect you.
- 3:33-3:40** Water break/ transition to discussion
- 3:40-4:15** Discussion led by Wendell Beavers, and Erika Berland with Krista DeNio

The Investigation

This portion of my investigation has consisted of going from big to small, from detailed to expansive, from goal-driven to curious, in other words, a true body-mind centering exploration. I've given up a lot (of ideas) to see something bigger. The something bigger is about constantly returning to the something minute, the detail of the present moment, so that the body and mind can be in sync, and so that a deeper exploration can actually take place.

A note about my approach: This has been most primarily a hands-on exploration, in the studio, with hunches and ideas. I wanted to work more experientially first, before doing lots of research about history and context (which I will do next). In this way, my own curiosities, and past knowledge intersecting with new information, can unfold as something new and brilliant to me (before I do my research, to discover that maybe someone else has already done the same thing, in their own way). The explorations began in Contact Improvisation classes taught here in the program, and continued into this choreography laboratory.

My proposal, is that through the integration of the systems work, from Body Mind Centering, with other movement technologies, we are simply grounding the knowledge of our movement expression (external) to its root source (internal).

The curiosity has been in the crossroads between other ways of sourcing movement landscapes/ choreography (ie: emotion, story, sound/aural, imagery/ visual) and the BMC/Systems approach.

My belief is that with the BMC/Systems approach as a ground/foundation, every other movement training/ choreographic exploration can become truly embodied at a greater level of depth, than one can achieve alone. Understanding our internal workings more completely can give us access to many layers of ourselves for both inner and outer expression.

Movement Technologies Used

Working through the lens of particular system/ organ:

*Hatha Yoga- Integration of all systems, and Introduction of foundation—breath; circle formation, facing into group; opening heart to begin work together

*Floor work/ Release: use of gravity, weight, momentum; Different orientations to space; six limbs

*Developmental patterns; use of supporting surface; different initiation points in body

*BMC: Systems Imagery and qualities; container/ contents;

*Contact Improvisation: Orienting to another body in space, and in contact/connection; deeper listening to all systems as a result of dealing with a whole other set of systems; three dimensional understanding of the body

The Process (Explorations for the Lab)

Session #1 (April 10): HEART

Music: Jeff Buckley

➤ **qualities/ ideas:**

Circulation and relationship;

*“The heart has the mediating function in this meeting of our earthly and heavenly natures. Through it, love and compassion---for ourselves and others, and for life itself---are felt and expressed. Most of us feel the pain of old wounds and brokenness surrounding this inner core, and the layers of defense we have created in order to protect ourselves from what we experience as the fear and vulnerability of our soft and sensitive heart (Linda Hartley, *Wisdom of the Body Speaking*, 202).”*

➤ **approach to choreo:** inner (heart choreography, developed by dancers out of systems work, inside-out)

➤ **hands-on exploration** (with partner, supporting heart, working with structures surrounding heart, trust, leading with heart)

Session #2 (April 17): LUNGS

Music: Carla Kihlstedt

➤ **qualities/ ideas:**

Taking in and giving out; lightness; buoyancy; suffering loss of life (grief); celebrating abundance of life (joy); inspiration, action filtered through lightness of air.

Breath links inner and outer environments; “The breath is thought to carry prana, or ch’l or vital energy. It is also thought to carry the stream of thought....Breath is also a gateway between conscious and unconscious processes (Hartley).”

➤ **approach to choreo:** outer (lung choreography, phrase taught by me, outside- in)

➤ **Use of language/ description/ guided imagery** (lung work, via cellular breathing, into imagery of actual organs and surrounding structures)

➤ **working with shape, flow of movement, understanding phrasing, momentum**

➤ **teaching choreography, in and out of system of focus ; learning choreo in and out of system of focus**

Session #3 (April 24): Container and Contents-- Pouring Weight/ Finding Flight

Music: Krishna Das, Susheela Raman, Radiohead

➤ **qualities/ideas:** allowing weight of contents to shift and move the body in space, while still finding lightness through lungs, suspension through heart

➤ **upside down work** (pouring weight over, shifting from feet to hands/ lower to upper)

➤ **inner and outer working in contact with another):** pouring weight; re-orienting to space; finding flight; Contact

➤ **coming back into choreographic structure,** out of intensive exploration/ dis orientation

Questions:

- How does the tone of voice and choice of words (of the teacher/choreographer) affect the 'mind of the room' and the state of the dancers, and therefore the state of the choreography/ movement exploration, etc.?
- Amount of time needed to be in the system before moving into skills work/ choreography?
- Appropriate balance of these different movement technologies, as a comprehensive (3-D) movement training.
- How to develop choreography while still working in a system (without it all becoming about the nervous system- organization, structure, decision-making, control)?
- How to teach the choreography from within the system (as opposed to harking back to the visceral experience from outside of it, while verbally instructing)?
- How to teach students to teach, themselves and others, from within the system & otherwise... translation of choreography? (Maintaining the 'mind' of the system)
- Learning others choreography, versus creating your own...Difference of experience (a discussion): How do we translate our movement (inner and outer) to another? (ie: Showing only, non-verbal; verbal description of anatomical details; verbal description of imagery behind movement creation; Or the semi-standard approach:
 - *demonstrate first
 - *explain it while demonstrating/ guiding –in sections
 - *explain further details, after complete phrase has been learned.
- Sound choice and how it works with the system / emotional body, to create movement from, or as a way to bring movers into a state from which to work.
- How to stay in a dialogue with the bodies/hearts/ minds you're working with, while also maintaining the container of the overall exploration.
- If : "Systems work is the real articulation of the kinesthetic Viewpoint." (Wendell Beavers), then the kinesthetic work integrates into training in that way, and the other viewpoints need their own place within the training---discussion?
- Working in a system (other than the nervous system), and maintaining any sense of time...Is it possible?

POST THESIS DISCUSSION: CHOREOGRAPHY PRESENTATION 4/28/06

**MODERATOR: WENDELL BEAVERS
WITH KRISTA DENIO**

What is your organizing principle?

The organizing principle of this work is developing an understanding of fundamental human movement from the ground up. With this understanding comes a relationship with space and with other, which is a simultaneously developed awareness. From these three levels of awareness (from ground, to space, to other) the student can further develop movement/ choreographic skills.

What are outcomes for students?

The intended outcomes of this training include: a more confident human being, who is able to move more comfortably in her/his body and with a fuller range of motion. Also, an immediate result is the student's ability to tune inward and listen to the inner landscape (physical, emotional, spiritual) as a resource (not separated from) to improve the outer (coordination) movement abilities. Students will become more alert and focused through levels of concentration and listening required in order to do the skills work. In addition, students will develop basic movement ability, which can then act as a foundation for any kind of movement or acting work that they wish to train in. A more grounded human being, who better understands and lives in relationship to her/his own body, is the ultimate result of this training, but in the meantime some students will flourish into beautiful dancers.

What is this training developing for performers?

For performers this training develops a heightened sense of spatial awareness, and a stronger sense of self-reliance, but within the context of ensemble mind (understanding interdependence). The performer develops a stronger sense of rooted-ness to the ground (grounding), and a greater mental clarity and the body-mind becomes more aligned. Many fundamental and more developed movement skills will be learned (moving through space at different levels; use of momentum; use of directionality; partnering skills; choreographic choices and skills), so that the performer can make choices from a wide palette, rather than being limited to a learned vocabulary or to someone else's choices.

Working between experiential and form-focus/ technique.

-in training (form in space, and open space)

-in choreography (following form/ creating form, and working within structured improvisation)

It is absolutely essential in movement training today, to enable the student to learn from others and from self, as well as, to teach others. First the student learns to rely on herself/himself as the training ground, by understanding better how her/his body actually works. Secondly, the student is learning to follow the form of the teacher, which is fundamental movement coordination, and necessary for any student who is/will become a professional dancer or actor / performing artist who moves through space. Thirdly, to have a full range of communicative ability as a mover in space, the student should have the ability to teach her/his movements/ideas to others. If these are the results we want for students then the training must include: form, open space (for improvisational work); and choreographic opportunities (to learn and to teach).

Choreography:

It is follow-through of sequence, and timing, and breath, then what?

Choreographic choices can stem from many different sources. I believe that training the student in the choreographic process needs to be a multi-sided process. The student needs to learn how to watch and listen (with all cells of the body), in order to translate someone else's movement. Also a student needs to find different ways of communication to teach her/his own movement to others (whether verbal, or simply by repetition of movement, use of imagery, etc.). Also the student needs to work with a variety of sources to develop choreography from (ie: **internal**: emotion, body systems, imagery/ **external**: music, architecture of space, site-specific, imagery). Once fundamental choreographic skills are developed then the student can begin to make more choices with relationship to the sequence of movement (timing, dynamics/qualities of movement, spatial relationship, etc.).

Contact Improvisation can be part of the vocabulary, but is it an essential part of the on-going (daily/weekly) training class, or just part of the curricula, which gets introduced at some point (if desired)?

Fundamental principles of CI introduce the fundamentals of relationship: partnering work, trust (essential to ensemble building), and a much wider range of movement vocabulary (understanding the three-dimensional body). This information is useful and in some cases essential for the mover/actor. Beyond the skills and the deep work of listening and developing trust (physically and metaphorically), the work develops the improvisational skills and risk-taking ability/ spontaneity of the performer, which on the most basic level is about the performer developing core levels of trust in her/himself. The training in CI can certainly be held as one block/segment of a semester or full-program training, but can also be introduced over time as part of the daily/weekly, fundamental skill training, adding a greater level of depth and practical understanding to all of the other training.

Use of voice- "My voice could be your voice", was one way Wendell Beavers said he thought of the way he used his voice as a teacher over the years:

The way the voice is used in the room directly effects the learning environment. From much experimentation, I believe that the way I use my voice (soft/ hard; focused/ indirect; high or low volume) directly influences the quality of movement in the room, and the perception /way the students receive information. In addition to how I affect the vibrations vocally, whether the students are allowed to make sound or not, directly affects their ability to feel freedom of expression. When students are encouraged to make sound (first, often by mimicking sounds I make) they begin to find more integration in their movement experience, as the connection to and use of breath often brings about additional sound, which I believe, helps the student fully express movement.

Hence, the voice is integrally involved in this training.