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She wondered how it was possible to 'grip, hold on, pull up' ... and breathe? Something prompted her to begin experiments with two mirrors, a barre and a journal - searching for something more organic, a state just below conscious control where the dancer becomes the dance and where creative and technical merge and blend.

**Gaby Agis and Joe Moran** offer a rare insight into the work of Joan Skinner and a system, which is fast becoming mainstream.

Additional contributions from Joan Skinner, Kirsty Alexander, Rebecca Skelton, Michael Weinstock, Brandon LaBelle and Mary-Claire McKenna

# in its purest form

'WE HAD A PERFORMING COMPANY FOR A WHILE WHO TRAINED ONLY in this Technique and we prepared them for a performance by laying them on the floor and by giving them a releasing class. And then they would go on into the space where they would perform and just check it out, move around and check it out and then they would perform. And the performance would be extremely vigorous, at times. High energy, at times. People would run and spring up on each other in a lift they had never done before - this was improvised performance. And we never had an injury.'<sup>1</sup>

Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) offers a radical approach to the body and dance performance. It works from

the simple principle that the body needs to be 'releasing blocks' in order to move more freely and articulately. The Technique often has been misunderstood as relaxation. But actually, when we are releasing blocks in the body, we are releasing power and releasing energy.

The Technique is experiential, and as Joan will always stress, the knowing and understanding is in the practice.

#### **The Technique: Joan Skinner**

Joan Skinner danced with the Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham companies and studied classical ballet throughout the 1950s in New York. All she heard was 'grip, hold, pull up, grip, pull up'. Yet, something prompted her to begin experiments at home - with two mirrors, a barre and a journal - searching for something more organic. She wondered how it was possible to 'grip, hold on, pull up' ... and breathe?

During a gruelling tour of one-night stands, she ruptured a spinal disc, and upon her return to New York, she consulted every conceivable body practitioner. It was at this point that she discovered the Alexander Technique with one of the three teachers then practicing in the USA. She studied Alexander on and off for two years, taking its principles of not holding, not gripping and multi-

directional alignment back into the dance studio.

After leaving New York, she worked alone for three years and was then invited to teach at the University of Illinois where she experimented with the format of a traditional modern dance class. She gave students the basic image of marionette strings, implying suspension. Although this image could be playful and useful she noticed that when students began travelling through space, they lost the experience of the image. She responded by putting them on the floor and gave them the same image. The students became so involved with the image that they did not want to leave the floor. It was at this point Joan found imagery to be a powerful means of conveying a deep kinaesthetic experience.

The profound effect of imagery in the kinaesthetic experience referred Joan to her childhood dance experiences with her teacher Cora Bell Hunter, a student of Mabel E Todd, author of *The Thinking Body*.<sup>2</sup> As a child she was taught interpretative dance. Joan now recognises these early experiences to have been perhaps the greatest influence on the development of the Skinner Releasing Technique.

Joan's work has been likened to the pioneering quality and ideal of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. It has

some of the same objectives as a traditional dance technique, focusing on flexibility, strength, alignment, speed, clarity, and economy of movement. Joan believes these to be the inherent aspects of all-good dancing.

However, the Technique differs dramatically in its process to these objectives. It recognises that every human being has his or her own natural animal grace, and seeks to discover the essence of movement that lies within all dance. In the releasing class poetic guided imagery leads the student into a state just below conscious control. It is in this state that the dancer can merge and blend with the image. The dancer can be taken by the image; the dancer becomes the dance.

Joan clearly distinguishes Skinner Releasing Technique from released-based work and relaxation techniques. Its intention is different. Releasing is an ongoing, continual process; never fixed or released. It aims, not to relax the body, rather to prepare the body to be available to any image or creative idea - releasing imagination.

Joan has been certifying teachers since 1989. In order to maintain the coherence and practice of the Technique in a teaching environment, she is continually evolving it to get at the key principles.



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#### **Skinner Releasing Technique in Education: Kirsty Alexander (Laban Centre London) and Rebecca Skelton (Chichester and Middlesex Universities) certified SRT teachers**

Teachers have found that the Technique can answer unique training needs. The dancer can discover an awareness that the creative and technical are no longer separate. It encourages the learning of core principles through personal movement explorations - 'moving in your own mode'. The dancer is not told what to do; there are no demonstrations and no exercises - thus fostering self-reliance - a skill so fundamental for the independent dance artist.

Experience is the essence of the Technique. It is not about theory or trying to apply a theory. Students are encouraged to keep journals, and seminars and tutorials are always available. However, the engagement with the work comes to the students in their own time. And as teachers, an engagement needs to be cultivated in continual, ongoing releasing.

The Technique is complete as a comprehensive training, with introductory, ongoing and advanced levels and it can become an important support for the dance student in other dance forms. All the physical experiences and core principles can be taken through into wider learning and go into all other practices ... We can discover the imagination in our classical ballet classes.

Laban Centre London and Chichester and Middlesex Universities have recognised the value of the Technique by integrating it as a core

subject. This interest is also reflected by a diverse range of institutions beginning to engage with the work, for example the Architectural Association at Goldsmiths University.

#### **Skinner Releasing Technique in Performance: Gaby Agis (dance), Michael Weinstock (architecture) and Brandon LaBelle (sound), collaborators on Touch UN SITE**

The Technique continues to influence the choreography of leading dance practitioners Gaby Agis (London), Ishmael Huston Jones, Jennifer Monson, Jennifer Lacey and DD Dorvillier (New York). Its influence is present not only in the dancer, but in the process and choreography itself. The use of image in choreography is perhaps the most striking influence. One can call on the expertise of the dancers with this training to merge, blend, access and create material using an image. Having this as a resource is invaluable.

The other most direct connection to making work is the ongoingness and evolvement of the performance. An unusual way of making work transpires which is about allowing the emergence of the work, rather than a product that is committed and delivered to a specific order and timeframe. The material can be discovered as it unfolds. This process is one that is ideal when collaborating with artists from other fields.

#### **Architecture**

Architects express a fascination with dance. The interest constellates around the body in space, in motion through

architecture, within the urban landscape. The first possible connection between architecture and dance seems to be the understanding of the city as fluid, always in motion. The figure within landscape is of continual reference to both forms.

The architect Lynch in the book *Images of the City* studied the internal, imagistic relationship people have to the city in which they live.<sup>3</sup> He found the images we hold are often very fragmented, provisional, and subject to change. This seems to articulate the depth of integration of internal images within our bodies and imagination.

A fundamental difference for architects is that they need to build in static materials - heavy, strong stuff. The choreographer may build also in light and space, and constant re-changing is available to them.

#### **Sound**

The resonance of the image is carried in the sound. Joan considers sound to be a kinaesthetic dimension of releasing - the body being almost like a musical instrument. Sounds can resonate along the bones and tissues of the body, and the skull is like an acoustic dome.

And this too can be extended to the architecture of sound. The space is an instrument; the sound source is not just the effect that produces the sound.

As a dancer, using these awarenesses in performance, the reality expands. The audience, witnessing this process, becomes as important as the performance itself. They too can be taken by the dance.



**Joan Skinner**

Picture courtesy: Joan Skinner

**Joe Moran and Gaby Agis, co-founders, East Performance Workshop.**  
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#### **References**

1. Skinner, J. In Its Purest Form Conference, London, Sept 2001
2. Todd, M. E., *The Thinking Body*. Princeton, Dance Horizons, 1937
3. Lynch, K., *Images of the City*, MIT Press, 1960

**In Its Purest Form: A Joan Skinner Residency** was a collaboration between East Performance Workshop and Greenwich Dance Agency. The week included ten classes, performances and the first-ever conference on the Skinner Releasing Technique.