

# A brief history of somatic practices.

*excerpts from:*

*A brief history of somatic practices and dance:  
historical development of the field of somatic education  
and it's relationship to dance.*

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## **Defining the Field: Coining 'Somatics' and 'Somatic Movement Education & Therapy'**

In the 1970s Hanna coined the term 'somatics' to describe and unify these processes under one rubric. Philosophers and scholars in the late twentieth century helped to forge the new field of Somatic Education. Mangione (1993) describes how the global communication explosion, and the cultural shifts of the 1970s, spurred a veritable boom in 'somatics'. In 2004, I identified that there are three branches of the somatic world – *somatic psychology*, *somatic bodywork*, and *somatic movement* (Eddy 2004). I contend that dance professionals have especially driven the development of *somatic movement* and the field of Somatic Movement Education and Therapy (SME&T). SME&T involves 'listening to the body' and responding to these sensations by consciously altering movement habits and movement choices. In large part, this article addresses the development of recognized training programmes in somatic movement<sup>6</sup> and the role of a second generation of somatic pioneers, who were predominantly dancers, in this evolution.

Professional practitioners of somatic movement disciplines use a variety of skills and tools, including diverse qualities of touch, empathic verbal exchange, and both subtle and complex movement experiences. This

trium process helps a person discover the natural movement or flow of life activity within the body. If a student or client is uncomfortable with any of these modalities the practitioner will adjust the tools being used, as somatic work is, by definition, a creative interplay. The goal of the somatic movement professional is to heighten both sensory and motor awareness to facilitate a student-client's own self-organization, self-healing, or self-knowing. Movement includes the subtler movements of the breath, the voice, the face, and the postural muscles, as well as any large movement task, event, or expression. Somatic lessons often use touch to amplify sensory experience through the skin, the body's largest organ, and therefore more quickly awaken awareness. Touch is a primary tool, however it is only a tool and is not always used in every somatic movement session or class.

While many of the individual somatic movement disciplines (most notably the ones that have been in existence for at least fifty years) have their own standards and scope of practice, one professional association, 'The International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association' (ISMETA), worked to shape the commonalities of somatic movement disciplines. They provided a definition of the type and range of work that is engaged in by a somatic movement professional, and a 'scope of practice' for the field of SME&T. The original scope of practice for somatic movement educators and therapists, as defined by the International Somatic Movement Education and Therapy Association, stated:

The professional field of somatic movement education and therapy spans holistic education and complementary and alternative medicine. The field contains distinct disciplines each with its own educational and/or therapeutic emphases, principles, methods, and techniques.

Practices of somatic movement education and therapy encompass postural and movement evaluation, communication and guidance through touch and words, experiential anatomy and imagery, and the patterning of new movement choices – also referred to as movement patterning, movement re-education or movement re-patterning. These practices are applied to everyday and specialized activities for persons in all stages of health and development. Continued practice of specific movements at home or work, with conscious awareness, is also often suggested.

The purpose of somatic movement education and therapy is to enhance human processes of psychophysical awareness and functioning through movement learning. Practices provide the learning conditions to:

- Focus on the body both as an objective physical process and as a subjective process of lived consciousness;
- Refine perceptual, kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and interoceptive sensitivity that supports homeostasis and self regulation;
- Recognize habitual patterns of perceptual, postural and movement interaction with one's environment;
- Improve movement coordination that supports structural, functional and expressive integration;
- Experience an embodied sense of vitality and extended capacities for living.

(ISMETA 2003)

### ***Life Stories of the Somatic Pioneers: A brief history***

Based on common lore, oral tradition, and written treatises such as those edited by Don Hanlon Johnson (1995), I have identified F.M. Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, Mabel Todd, Irmgard Bartenieff, Charlotte Selver, Milton Trager, Gerda Alexander, and Ida Rolf as 'the somatic pioneers'. Please see the schematic on page 24 depicting each of them in bold letters. It also attempts to give you information about who they were influenced by and who they have influenced to create somatic movement trainings including the 'second generation'. These somatic dance professionals who founded training programs are also highlighted in bold: Anna Halprin, Nancy Topf, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Sondra Fraleigh, Emilie Conrad, Joan Skinner, Elaine Summers, and Judith Aston.

### ***The First Generation***

**Frederick Matthias Alexander** (1869–1955) was an actor with laryngitis who began to question deeply the cause of his vocal problems and wondered if they might have something to do with how he was using his vocal apparatus and his body (Alexander 1932). Through intensive periods of personal exploration he found a method for 'changing and controlling reaction', which he then taught in Melbourne and in Sydney. He also returned to performing and teaching in Australia and New Zealand. Next he moved to London, and finally to the United States. While not much is written about how F. M. Alexander may have been influenced by his childhood in Tasmania, or his experiences in New Zealand, these were influences replete with exposure to non-western values and concepts. Learning through global travel or study was notable amongst other somatic movement leaders as well. As with Laban, one can speculate that being an outsider in a new place might intensify one's powers of observation and self-reflection.

**Moshe Feldenkrais**, Ph.D. (1904–1984) also traveled through and lived in different countries and continents, studied in France, and was pushed to new levels of awareness during World War II. He was born in

Russia and emigrated to Palestine at the age of thirteen, traveling by caravan with his family. Feldenkrais studied engineering and earned his doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne. It was in Paris that he excelled in the martial art of jujitsu. He became one of the first westerners to earn a black belt in Judo (1936), and subsequently taught, following the footsteps of his teacher Professor Kano, the originator of Judo.

Feldenkrais first injured his knee playing soccer, and again while working with anti-submarine research in England during the war. His knee could not be healed, even with the help of surgery. Feldenkrais was motivated to explore his own body to find out what caused his inability to walk. This inward road of exploring the body grew, in part, out of his interest in auto-suggestion, self-imagery and the workings of the unconscious mind. During the process of self-exploration, he incorporated principles from physics, Judo and human development in his two strands – ‘Awareness through Movement’ and ‘Functional Integration’. He developed his methods by working with all kinds of people with a wide range of learning needs, from infants with Cerebral Palsy to leading theatrical and musical performers.

Like Alexander and Feldenkrais, **Mabel Todd**, author of *The Thinking Body* (1937) and *The Hidden You* (1953), was also interested in improving her health since she had to contend with bodily limitations. She had a paralyzing accident and was told she would not walk again. Unwilling to give up, Todd used thinking processes to heal herself, including how to return to walking, by developing imagery about the anatomically balanced use of the body. She speculated that vocal problems were often due to bad posture and that a psycho-physical or psycho-physiological approach might be of help. With this hypothesis, Todd began to study the mechanics of the skeletal structure, and she applied her discoveries in her studios of ‘Natural Posture’ in New York and Boston. Personally, her imagery resulted in a walk that was an improvement over her pre-accident gait; professionally she created a system that became central to many movement educators. She joined the faculty of the Department of Physical Education at Teachers College, Columbia University where she taught anatomy, posture, and neuromuscular awareness to physical education and dance professionals. At Teachers College, her work was further developed by her protégé, Lulu Sweigard (1974), author of *Human Movement Potential*.

Born in Germany, in the same year as Feldenkrais, **Gerda Alexander** (1904–1994) also founded a somatic discipline – ‘Eutony’ (Eutonie), now referred to as Gerda Alexander Eutony (GAE). In GAE, students are invited to sense their muscles, skin, or bones – literally any part of the body and to connect it to their feelings. On a physical level, GAE strives to bring balance to the muscular tone of the body. She taught that tonus changes occur not only with different kinds of effort, but with emotional shifts whether they be deep depression with a low tonus or happiness with a high tonus. This function is referred to as psycho-tonus. “Flexibility in tonus change is also the basis for all artistic creation and experience....What you do not experience in your whole body will remain merely intellectual information without life or spiritual reality”. (Bersin in Johnson 1995: 260)

Unlike the other somatic educators cited above, G. Alexander’s protégés take a Eurocentric stance, and they make the following explicit statement about her work and its influences: ‘The method developed completely from

10. It is interesting to note that GAE was the first somatic discipline to be accepted by the World Health Organization (in 1987) as a type of alternative health care (now referred to as Complementary and Alternative Medicine – CAM). (Chrisman, 1).

the western culture area.’ Alexander’s work reveals a strong European lineage (ASEGA 2003). She was a dance and gymnastic teacher who studied and worked with Jacques Dalcroze; she then integrated her interest in the creative self-discovery of each person’s body-mind tonus into a holistic approach used in diverse educational settings. Eutony teaches deep internal awareness that also helps one sense the outer environment fully.<sup>10</sup>

**Charlotte Selver** helped shape the work of her ‘gymnastik’ teacher, Elsa Gindler. Charlotte Selver, (1901–2003) was the person, together with her husband Charles Brooks, who gave the work an English name, focusing it more on sensation and consciousness: ‘Sensory Awareness’. Selver cites Gindler as her primary teacher, yet she also refers to the importance of learning from other scholars. She had the opportunity to learn in person from various great thinkers from east and west, Suzuki Roshi (Zen master), Suzuki Daishetz (scholar), Korzybski (General Semantics) and Ram Dass (yogi) (Laeng-Gilliatt n.d.). She explored in depth the realms of consciousness, as well as awareness while moving, and taught these processes until she died at the age of 102.

**Ida Rolf** (1896–1979) was born in New York City. The inspiration for her work springs from exposure to eastern practices, and to great thinkers (Pierre Bernard, Fritz Perls, Sam Fulkerson and Korzybski), as well as the serendipity of being able to work as a woman at Rockefeller Institute. She also had the intent to heal not just the symptoms but also the causes; she saw causes as multiple and related to ‘the circular process that do not act in the body but are the body’ (Johnson 1995: 174). Her work grew out of the sciences and alternative approaches to healing. She obtained her Ph.D. in biological chemistry. During World War II, she was hired to work at Rockefeller Institute, beginning in the department of chemotherapy. As a scientist investigating the body and health, she was exposed to osteopathy and homeopathy, and she developed an interest in yoga. From yoga she understood that one could work with the body to improve all aspects of the human being, and, for the most part, this was done through lengthening the body to create more space in the joints (Feitis in Johnson 1995: 157). She learned from the Hindu philosophy that ‘when morals are built from the body’s behavior you get a moral structure and behavior which respect the rights and privileges of other individuals. (Rolf in Johnson 1995: 174)’ She wrote *Rolfing: The Integration of Human Structures* in 1977. Dr. Rolf continued to study movement throughout her life including yoga and taking classes in the Alexander Technique; she learned from osteopaths and about homeopathy, and always related the physical body to the energy fields around us, most especially the gravitational pull.

**Milton Trager**, MD (1909–1997) also lived in the United States and was the founder of Psychophysical Integration. Like F. M. Alexander, he had to deal with physical weakness and illness at the outset of his life. He was born with a congenital spinal deformity. Through steadfast physical application he became an athlete and a dancer. He made his first somatic discoveries at the age of eighteen when he traded roles with his athletic trainer one day and touched him powerfully. The trainer took immediate notice and remarked on the effectiveness of Trager’s touch in alleviating his physical discomfort. This was the beginning of the somatic research that led Trager to the development of the Trager Approach to Psychophysical

Integration. When he was in his mid-forties he chose to go to medical school to become a doctor. He continued to give daily sessions in his unique somatic discipline in addition to maintaining a regular medical practice. As part of his approach, Trager developed a bodywork system as well a system of movement education called Mentastics. Trager's work emphasizes moving "lighter, freer." After 50 years of developing his work, in the mid-1970s, he was invited to the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. His work was received with excitement and spread rapidly, he was known to have a "gift as a healer". He insisted that he was not a healer and that anyone could learn these skills. (Trager Organization n.d.: 1)

Following in the footsteps of her teacher, Rudolf Laban, **Irmgard Bartenieff** (1900–1981) was a dancer who helped to pioneer several new fields – dance therapy, dance anthropology, Laban Movement Analysis, and her own somatic system called 'Bartenieff Fundamentals of Movement'. She was born in Berlin, studied dance and movement analysis with Laban, and performed dance with her husband, Igor Bartenieff. While in Germany, Bartenieff studied 'Bindewebebegung Massage', known in the United States as 'Connective Tissue Therapy.' Bartenieff experienced an abrupt dislocation from her home in 1936 when, because her husband Igor was Jewish, she and her husband caught one of the last boats out of Nazi Germany. Upon arrival in the United States, they did not feel welcome in the dance community, which was then dominated by Martha Graham.<sup>11</sup> This lack of work in dance opened another door, and both Igor and Irmgard Bartenieff studied to become physical therapists. In time Irmgard found her way back into the world of dance in New York by teaching dancers, as well as other professionals, the 'Effort/Shape' concepts of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) at the Dance Notation Bureau. She also taught classes in 'correctives' that evolved into the Bartenieff Fundamentals of Movement. Although the term 'corrective' reflected her intent to find correct posture and movement efficiency, Irmgard always taught through improvisational exploration and somatic inquiry, emphasizing attention to breath and developmental processes.

These pioneering individuals, born near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lived through much adversity and historical change. They discovered ways to cope with diverse stressors by being present and active in their unified body-mind experience. They also used systematic reflection and organizational skills to create tools to share with others, as well as methods by which to teach them, and in this way are still helping new generations to cope with the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And there are other somatic movement practitioners, including those who developed their own somatic movement systems, many of whom are students of the progenitors. Indeed there are over 37 different somatic movement certification programmes today. Francoise Mezieres and Marion Rosen are two other important early pioneers. Each of these women were students of the human body and were motivated to explore how to work with touch and movement to heal. Rosen developed a movement system referred to as 'Rosen Movement' (Knaster 1996). Mezieres' work was taught in universities and also influenced her student, Therese Bertherat to develop "The Anti-exercise Method". While some dancers have trained to do Mezieres, Trager and Rosen's work, they have yet to have a strong impact in dance curricula. More of their stories will be told in the future no doubt, in large part because of protégés such as Therese Bertherat, Martha Partridge, and Linda Chrisman.

11. Agnes de Mille would later make a point of stating that Graham was not influenced by Laban in her explorations into self-expression through new approaches to dance (Graham Co Programme notes 1998).