

Expanding our Range – Plumbing the Self to Share it with the World

Hilary Bryan, Philosophy of Teaching

I am inspired by the myriad selves we keep stored in our bodyminds. And by the visionary work of Laban, Bartenieff and others who help us access these inner selves and unlock our expressive potential. I am continually inspired by the personal breakthroughs my students achieve as I integrate somatic experience into my teaching of technique, improvisation, choreography, history, theory, and movement analysis.

My early training in creative movement, classical ballet, gymnastics and Suzuki violin taught me to honor both dynamic form and personal expression – dual values which have inspired my studies of contemporary dance, improvisation and physical theater. I enrich these deep roots in formal technique with expertise in Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Bartenieff Fundamentals. My technique classes emphasize dynamic and functional alignment for optimal movement efficiency and ease, using improvisation and LMA as a framework to expand expressive range. My teaching is playful, dynamic, incisive.

As students plumb the depths of possibility inside themselves they discover alternative ways of being. They learn to appreciate difference and diversity. Expanding human understanding and serving my community are core values, a teaching agenda which led me to found the Somatic Series of workshops expanding the audience for somatic work and fostering cross-pollination between disciplines (www.somaticseries.org); and The Body At Work Ergonomics bringing dynamic alignment and mind-body integration to the corporate world (www.thebodyatwork.com). I am passionate about expanding both functional and expressive range because of how individual potential serves a dynamic compassion that is ready to intervene on behalf of our community.

My teaching is rooted in historical and theoretical considerations and committed to mind-body integration. Students develop clear and dynamic core strength by learning to sense deeply their own inner architecture, by using it functionally in acrobatic, athletic dancing, and by articulating verbally their newfound connectivity. They write studio response papers which synthesize their progress in the studio and how it applies to everyday life. I give peer-coaching assignments in which students articulate and own their new discoveries by teaching others and writing about that process. We examine a range of movement theories and critical discourse to expand observation and analytical skills along with physical skills. In addition to sharing the pure visceral pleasure of expanding movement vocabulary, I am committed to the intellectual development of the dancer.

In my choreography I aim for visceral communication that plays between dance, theater, mathematics and everyday life; I profoundly enjoy engaging students as partners in this inquiry through discussion, journaling, and collaborative movement invention. My classes and my research examine historical and cultural antecedents for contemporary movement practices and critical discourses. As students locate their unique voice within a cultural context, they learn to appreciate other possibilities that exist, other ways of being and interacting with the world. I nurture the link between realizing the human body in its fullness and realizing that body within its cultural context, between discovering deep connections between a body's multiple parts and connections between a community's multiple human bodies. I seek to develop engaged community as we develop the body.

I see each body as a living document of past experience and intention. When my Texas students expressed their desire 'to step outside their box,' I encouraged them 'to enlarge their box' (perhaps infinitely) with new ideas, experiences and possibilities, rather than simply casting that old box aside, as if scorning personal history. My approach to the body is similar. When I find a movement pattern I wish to "correct," I first ask how it has come to be this way. I seek to unwind and release out-dated compensatory patterns, rather than layer new correctives on top of old. In my experience bodies trained with compassion are deeply grounded and fly with greater ease.

In addition to individual inquiry, I also value community learning through experiences where students engage in active debate with each other and with themselves. At its most effective my teaching includes both my students' agendas and my own: meeting students in their curiosity helps them to trust in mine. Building on this foundation of trust, I take them deeply into themselves and out into the world – dynamically engaged for action.

Photo by Marty Sohl