

# SOME THOUGHTS ON SHARON CHAIKLIN

*Rob Baum*



**Sharon Chaiklin**

(or is it dry?), Sharon will comment that it is a leaf. Of course in dance therapy we are not really talking about leaves, but elements of much more complexity—human beings are, after all, complicated in their “normal” neuroses. Yet Sharon remarks on the humanness, which is something we share, and declares that this would be a good place to start. It’s like that: Sharon has a way of getting right to the crux of the matter, with a statement, a question, an observation, or an exercise. As one who spends far too much time in a modern university, an environment which many colleagues believe is predicated upon making the simplest things utterly opaque, building a wall of language which only the most talented (or persistent) can scale, and conscripting rather than teaching students, I notice the generosity required to find the simplicity in a concept, and share it.

“I always state the obvious,” Sharon said several times during the three-day workshop she facilitated in the Abbotsford Convent. But what does that mean? Clearly it needed to be repeated, as we kept asking the same question—or questions for which there was the same answer—meaning that we didn’t notice that we were, in essence, asking the same question. It seems that what is obvious to Sharon Chaiklin is not obvious to everyone else.

In order to convey my impressions of Sharon Chaiklin this week in Melbourne, I must share a memory. During my last years of study in the United States, I had the privilege of working with Professor Bert O States, one of the world’s leading dramatic theorists. I had read his lovely, lyrical books, and attended his terrific, exciting lectures, and always wondered how he could make everything he came up with seem so easy. One day I felt a sort of anxiety about my ability to learn bubble up in me, so I went to see him in his office. “Bert,” I announced, “you have this amazing gift of making the most profound things sound very simple.” “But Rob,” he protested, “they *are* simple.” To which I blurted, “To you, Bert, to you.” He smiled.

Being with Sharon Chaiklin has the same effect. Sharon offers the most difficult of concepts in simple language, with the air of one who is reclining under an oak tree and noting the fact that it has leaves. That is, while I am grappling with describing the leaf—if I may work this analogy a bit—as green, and expansive, and perhaps fibrous



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And so I asked Sharon a range of questions throughout the conference and subsequent workshop. My first question—the first question of the conference, I’m unhappy to admit—was how Sharon perceived the difference between dance therapy and therapeutic dance. Sharon readily responded that it depends upon how the person is approaching the work, what one brings. I remember grumbling to those near me that I found this answer quite unsatisfactory. I wonder what I was expecting. A treatise on the distinctions we have chosen to create in our own discipline, which serve to divide rather than cohere? Acknowledgement that the innately therapeutic qualities of the dance—on which we in using dance as therapy all depend—are not enough to change people’s lives? I smile, thinking of another of Sharon’s replies (to someone else, thank goodness), that our most basic equipment in this work is our own bodies. This is not that simple either, or it is if we think what that *means*. Because we know that our bodies are sensate, muscular, living, articulate, animal forms, with a range of responses both voluntary and involuntary, sometimes curiously antiquated in their function (like hairs bristling on the back of our necks), sometimes oddly acculturated (why we grow up speaking a local language), wonderfully mysterious (why do we dream? Which was one of Bert States’ questions). So when indicating the potential we carry into a session by having bodies, Sharon is tacitly leading us to recognise that to be in our bodies is, for dance therapists, to be *in* our bodies—bringing a heightened awareness to the experience of being with another being, *in* which a client is nourished, held and also embodied.

In 1969, Erich Hawkins wrote that “The dancing body is a clear place.” I never really understood this statement. Surely a dancing body is trained, cultured, and environmentally shaped, elements that

defy the “clarity” with which we as babies *might* (but only might) be born. But having watched and experienced Sharon Chaiklin at work, I see how someone with great clarity *creates* a clear place, for learning, discovering, dancing and sharing those processes. For Sharon it really is that simple, that obvious, that clear—and this imparts a sense of simplicity, obviousness and clarity that can rest and resonate for others.



**Rob – in conversation with Sharon**

*Dr Rob Baum* is currently completing her Grad Dip in Dance Movement Therapy at the International Dance Therapy Institute of Australia (IDTIA), of which she is currently Convenor. She works with the frail elderly and intellectually disabled performers, is interested in traumatic psych populations. She is Head of the Centre of Drama and Theatre Studies at Monash University, where she teaches dramatic theory, expressive movement and performance theory.