

Let There Be Light!

Phillip Light - Interviewed

Jenny Czulak Riley

Phillip Light presents a remarkably clear gaze, as if perhaps his eyes are lit from within, sourced from an inner certainty of the power and healing his search has revealed to him through dance.

A significant point in Phillip's journey came about through an early encounter with drums.



In conversation I put it to him that since we all know that in our ancient beginnings stamping and clapping formed the genesis of dance and that beating and tapping sound patterns formed the genesis of musical expression, we can claim that the action of drumming is a kind of dance?

Phillip: Yes, that's so. But those origins were not my inspiration. Mine was quite specific. Of course we all know that expression through rhythm is fundamental. We carry our own drum within – the beat of our heart!

My first training was a pre-school mothercraft nurse and I learned then that an unborn baby in the womb is soothed by the beating of the mother's heart.

Jenny: So how did it come about for you that a particular type of drum and drumming was the catalyst for you in your exploration of bodily expression?

Phillip: It happened when I was living in Munich in Germany. A friend took me along – just to observe an African dance class being conducted by Mammadou Fall, a choreographer and dancer with the Senegalese National Ballet.

Jenny: Senegal in West Africa? We are in exotica! When was that?

Phillip: Between 1990 and 1994.

Jenny: Surely Munich was an unlikely venue for African dance?

Phillip: Not at all! There was a lot of cultural exchange between European cities and African states at that time as a consequence of earlier colonisation.

Jenny: So what was this Senegalese dancing like?

Phillip: It was mixture between tribal dance and dance choreographed for the ballet. The basic steps utilised the ball of the feet and movement of the chest in and out from the sternum. The whole body was utilised in many of the movements, and also in isolation of various body parts. There was full extension of the arms, like wings, graceful jumps with knees bent and vigorous moving towards and away from each other. And so much more....! There were five or six drummers playing for this dance class. When I heard them I couldn't sit still!

Jenny: And you didn't!

Phillip: No! I was torn at first between the drumming and the dance. Actually though the drumming and the dance are one! One doesn't exist without the other. So finally I decided to focus on the dance.

Jenny: You were already a dancer, after all!

Phillip: Yes! My earliest dance experience was Israeli folk dance.

Jenny: Was that in Israel? What sort of percussion was used for that?

Phillip: It was in St. Kilda in Victoria, and we danced mainly to Israeli folk songs on cassette. But I did go to Israel for a year, in 1979, after which I returned to Melbourne and moved to dance to Reggae music and other live bands. By then I guess

you would have called my dance “freestyle” dance. Lots of reggae. But when I encountered the Senegalese drumming it touched and moved me so much more than anything else.

Jenny: How would you describe the beat? The timbre?

Phillip: Often fast! Dynamic! Crystal clear!

Jenny: Were all the Senegalese drums hand drums?

Phillip: Djembe is a hand drum. Tama is held under one arm and squeezed – played with a stick in one hand as well as with the other hand. Sabar is very different to Tama, but it’s also played with two hands, a stick in one!



Jenny: Two handed drumming. What about the beat?

Phillip: I don’t really have the ability to describe the beat. It’s so complex, I don’t have the language for it! I feel it! It’s an interchange. The body responds to the drum and the drummer takes cues from the dancer.

I found I just couldn’t live without this Senegalese dance! The drum-dance connection was very powerful for me, and since I focused on the dance it was this that became my therapy! So for the next three and a half years in Munich I went to at least one if not two classes a week – even riding my push-bike through the snow to get there! And even when there might be times I thought I didn’t feel like dancing it was that Senegalese drumming that moved me very deeply. I was literally moved by drum to dance! I took part in workshops on drumming but dance was always my focus and still is. Now drumming is one of the tools I use.

Jenny: And your venture into teaching had its naissance in Melbourne?

Phillip: Yes! Back in Melbourne I was invited to a *SPIRITUALITY IN BUSINESS* conference....

Jenny: Praise be!

Phillip: to do a demonstration of African dance accompanied by a drummer. Everybody seemed really interested so they had me run a dance workshop. And that led to my giving regular dance classes.

Jenny: You began to explore and develop a teaching style?

Phillip: I was never a perfectionist in dance. I would show how a step was to be done but at the same time I would always encourage my students towards individual interpretation, utilising whatever they chose, whatever they had. And knowing the benefits it had for me I’d gradually included elements of Qi Gong and Yoga in my classes. But “free” dancing was always part of my sessions. And people used to say what a wonderful experience it was. More than just learning particular steps what I wanted for them was to feel the music (whatever it was) and let the music move them from within as it had done for me. And I was beginning to realise I was seeing elements of authentic dance.

Jenny: Your teaching in Melbourne took on an extra dimension....?

Phillip: As well as giving weekly adult classes I’d started giving classes in schools. The children and teenagers responded very readily to drumming and African dancing.

Jenny: But still you were seeking something further?

Phillip: I’d always wanted to find out more about the Australian aboriginal culture. So one day I left Melbourne in my combie-van and headed north. Eventually I found myself in the Northern Territory – in Katherine, and I applied for a permit to enter north eastern Arnhem Land. After a drive of 730k’s on a four-wheel drive track in my combie I arrived at the Yirkalla community. That’s where the Yothu Yindi band’s family and clans live. At first I was invited to run a disco for the kids which I did every Sunday.

Jenny: Phillip I believe that led to your running African dance workshops in even more remote indigenous communities?

Phillip: Well word had got around that I was this “deadly” dancer and that led to an invitation to perform at the Milingimbi Cultural Festival. I was the only non-aboriginal performer!

Jenny: Milingimbi?

Phillip: It’s an island in the Arafura Sea. That made me quite famous throughout Arnhem Land. Then I was invited to another island, Elcho Island, to do a week of African dance workshops for indigenous school children – every class in the school. And that culminated in a school performance. I hadn’t dreamt these children would be so interested. But then I began to realise that through watching TV the children learned that some of my workshop material, perhaps particularly the pelvic movement was similar to what they saw on black American music video clips on Australian TV.

Jenny: Fascinating! A black community being taught by a white man a language of dance that had originated in Africa – another black culture!

Phillip: Yes, and after a couple of years right in Arnhemland I drove to Alice Springs and ran workshops there and in a community in the central Australian desert.

Jenny: It must have been a fulfilling and to some extent revelatory time?

Phillip: It was! And then I was invited back to Europe to teach my kind of African dance in the Austrian Alps I began to sense that by reaching into that inner energy I helped take people into deeper parts of themselves. I could feel it! I could sense it! My students would come back each week, and each week they would seem to be freer in body and spirit – happier people!

Jenny: Authentic dance had taken on yet another dimension for you?

Phillip: Yes, and back in Melbourne I was finding that some participants in my classes were coming to me years later to thank me for this, as they described it, “freeing up” of parts of their body, in particular the pelvic region. And of course by freeing up in that area we free up a lot on a psychological level.

Jenny: So was it this sort of response that led you to the study of dance as therapy?

Phillip: It happened when I was taking part in one of Gabrielle Roth’s “Five Rhythms” workshops. I told the facilitator, Christine Demmler, I was feeling unsure about the next direction for my life and she said to me very confidently that from her observations of me during her workshop I should study dance therapy. I told her I’d been considering creative arts therapy but she said “No! No! You are a dancer!” So I enrolled in the IDTIA Certificate course.

Jenny: So how do you use percussion tools in your dance therapy practice?

Phillip: With elderly people (with or without dementia) and with physically and intellectually disabled children and teenagers I quite often use a drum or clapsticks to introduce a session (generally based on the Leventhal five part programme of Warm up, Release, Theme derived from clients, Centering and Closure). And my introduction flows into the Warm up as I sense the atmosphere and the mood of the group. So what I had pre-planned I don’t necessarily do!

Each week I use a different “prop” in the introduction. I might use the djembe. That’s the one I’m holding in the photo, or clapsticks from the Tjabukai. They are aboriginal people living in the Kuranda area in Northern Queensland.



Or I might start quite differently, maybe offering a feather boa, suggesting they use it to express how they might be feeling today. Percussion is stimulating particularly for older people, and some in my groups are not very verbal. With percussion everyone has an opportunity for expression, even if it is only through a hand action onto the drum as a gesture of response. Usually though when I take a drum around the group everyone “uses” it. There is no right or wrong way. I call this my time for

intuiting and sensing. I also use drumming as a greeting – encouraging individuals to introduce themselves in what could be a dramatic or a low-key way slapping, smoothing, scratching, punching and so on.



And now that I'm also working with (ABI) acquired brain injury clients I am finding that drumming is actually initiating movements which haven't previously been observed in this clinical setting.

Jenny: Another new direction for you to follow! You are reminding us that drumming is a primal and potent expressive activity. And there is a timely corroboration. The latest issue of the American

Journal of Public Health includes a study saying that drumming produces a heightened state of awareness, reduces depression and improves mental health. I guess you know that don't you Phillip?

Phillip: Well what I do know and what I make sure of is that by the end of any session I do, most of us have achieved increased energy levels, and are smiling!

Jenny: And smiles are so healing! Thank you Phillip!

“Dance Is My Therapy Music My Medicine And Movement My Healer”

Photography – Ciska Burrie

Quotation – Phillip Light)

Note: **Jenny Czulak Riley**, Grad. Dip. Movement & Dance (University of Melbourne), Grad Cert. Dance Therapy (University of Melbourne) is an Australian DMT pioneer, founding member of the DTAA and author of *Growing Older, Dancing On*. She is an experienced dance group leader for older adults, and continues to be very active in the DTAA.