

Irmgard Bartenieff

We are preceding Remembering Irmgard by Betsy Kagan (P.9) with this short piece about Irmgard. Although her name is well known to our local community familiar with the major part she played in the history of dance therapy and in particular, familiar with her book "Body Movement Coping with the Environment" (a must have text) many of our readers will still appreciate some contextual framework. The short piece, following the quote, is from Betsy's recent conference presentation in Melbourne, 2004.

"We see light etched by shadows, feel joy emerging from sorrow; the present hovers between the past and the future. Between all these opposites, there is a sense of movement that renews the clarity of each experience. Even in apparent stillness movement variables are active".

Bartenieff with Lewis (1980 p.xii)*

"Irmgard Bartenieff (1900-1981), whom I was privileged to have as my teacher, was one of the world's leading authorities on movement. Like Laban, her research and teaching spanned the fields of kinesiology, psychology, anthropology, dance, martial arts and more. A student of Laban, dancer and choreographer, she was largely responsible for bringing Laban's work to the U.S. When she escaped Germany in 1936 and came to the U.S., she became a physical therapist. As Chief Physical therapist for Polio services at a hospital in New York City, her pioneering work with polio victims during the epidemic in the 1950's led to her approach to movement repatterning now known as Bartenieff Fundamentals. That her name is not as familiar to the public as other movement innovators is only a reflection of her modesty – she was not a

great self-promoter. Yet her work attracted the interest of notable people in many different fields.

The Laban/Bartenieff approach to movement analysis provides a systematic way of analyzing and notating human movement from a behavioural standpoint. It presents a holistic, comprehensive model of movement function and expression in terms that reflect the experience of the mover".

Betsy Kagan (2004 p.2)*

***References:**

Bartenieff, I. & Lewis, D. (1980). *Body Movement Coping with the Environment*, Gordon and Breach, Science Pub. Inc. N.Y.

Kagan, B. (2004). *Workshop Paper. 'Looking Beyond the Muscles at the Movement' 5th Interdisciplinariy Conference presentation. Low Back and Pelvic Pain. Melbourne.*

Remembering Irmgard

Betsy Kagan

Betsy, MFA, CMA, taught by Irmgard Bartenieff, studied with Cecily Dell, worked with Martha Davis, Marion North, Warren Lamb, and Forrestine Paulay and danced with the Jean Erdman Theater of Dance and New Haven Dance Ensemble. Using Labanotation, she reconstructed several dances for performance and undertook the first comparative dance style analysis using LMA (CORD Dance Research Annual IX: 75-92, 1978.)

She worked with Joseph Pilates, Eve Gentry, and Andre Bernard, performed and presented her own choreography in numerous concerts and received an NEA fellowship. She has taught at LIMS, in Certificate Programs at many Universities, and has served on the LIMS Board of Directors. She has presented at numerous LMA conferences, was

author of the 1976 Coding Sheet for Dance Style Analysis, and has co-authored several LMA-based articles. Personal health problems led her to connect with the healing potential of Irmgard's work and she has directed herself towards teaching, and writing in relation to bridging the gap between the medical model and the movement knowledge available through LMA, developing a BF/LMA-based hands-on approach to movement therapy and rehabilitation. (Information on Betsy mainly from LIMS website - Betsy Kagan - CMA of the Month - For March and April 2004. See Quarterly Vol 3, No 3. p.21)

I'm old enough that jokes about memory loss are no longer jokes. But as I began to write this, I was overwhelmed by my numerous and vivid memories of Irmgard - the personal and the community - all intertwined.



In my mind's eye I have an image of myself as a student in her classes, standing slightly behind and to the right of her, as if that's where I routinely placed myself. In reality,

normally I probably stood or sat in front of her. But the image persists because I think I learned from her mainly by "osmosis" – ready to absorb whatever she offered and to sort it out later, since she was not likely to provide a point

by point, linear presentation of a subject. Indeed, her indirectness and lightness (yes, she was often a "Floater") were legendary and, as her student, I believe I learned best by "floating" around her myself!

Not that she was always elusive. There were moments when – out of nowhere – she would suddenly turn and focus all her attention on one person – incredibly direct, strong, and (I think) sustained, "pressing" a point with unexpected attention and precision. I will never forget the moments when I was the ONE. I felt a combination of privilege (she's speaking to me!), guilt (why me?), a tinge of fear (do I understand what she's saying?), but mainly, the fortunate "chosen" recipient of an undoubtedly brilliant insight. I also still remember what she said. She told me – no, make it she told ME - that "there must always be an element of (free) flow in the crystallization of Strong Weight Effort." That must have been in around 1969. I'm still mulling it over.

Watching Irmgard teach a group of dance therapists, I recall seeing her bringing the same sort of deep attention to a woman she was partnering. This was not merely a moment in which she was demonstrating a therapeutic technique: I know I was witnessing instead, a profoundly transforming event for that woman, whose demeanor for the rest of the class was completely changed.

In the late '60s (I'm horrified at how "historical" this sounds!), I was a graduate student at the brand new NYU School of the Arts (before it became Tisch), with Jean Erdman as the first dean of the dance department. Jean brought in many notable guest teachers, one of whom was Irmgard. Already certified in Labanotation, I was teaching it there as graduate assistant. My classmate, Cecily Dell, had been studying "Effort/Shape." Together, out of curiosity, we explored what the two Laban systems

could teach us about human movement. I was fascinated by the way E/S, unlike Labanotation, illuminated aspects of human behavior and emotion. Amazed by the richness of knowledge that Irmgard represented, I began to follow her path. I feel so lucky to have been around at that incredible time when Irmgard was stirring up a whole new consciousness, and pioneering all kinds of studies, from dance therapy to anthropology to observations of psychiatric patients, or martial artists, or Ghanaian dancing - you name it. And she was working at that time with inspiring people such as Martha Davis, Kayla Zalk, Allison Jablonko, Forrestine Paulay, and others.

To say that learning Bartenieff Fundamentals ("Correctives") from Irmgard herself was difficult is an understatement! I think others would agree that BF *then* could be incomprehensible. I clearly remember crouching low and scurrying feet first, squeezing my body between my hands to end sitting with legs extended in front of me, and then as quickly as possible, reversing the whole process, without a clue as to why I was doing this torturous exercise. I taught LMA for years before I felt ready to teach BF. By now it has become my entire worldview!

In Space Harmony, I remember this small, slight, frail looking, elderly, very-indulging-Efforts type lady, demonstrating the A-scale with all the delicacy and grace anyone could express, a twinkle in her eye. Then she would haul off and perform the B-Scale with the most voracious, aggressive power you could imagine – proving, once and for all, while she was at it, that Strength is a qualitative, not a quantitative issue! As she swept from back-low to right-forward-middle to left-side-high, she cut a swath that would kill you if you were in her way. And when she went from right-back-middle to left-side-low to forward-high, she would make a fist and gleefully come at you with a mockingly fierce gleam in her eye.

I recall how she would accompany herself vocally with a hearty "Dee-yah!" when she wanted to emphasize the accent of an impactful phrase. This was especially charming when she was demonstrating how, in the hand-scapula connection, each finger engaged different locations on the scapula. She would repeatedly scoop her hand down, gathering the space below her and carrying it up on the (more or less) Glide diagonal, each finger leading in turn, starting with the thumb and saying "dee-yah" with every scoop. It was when she got to that all-important, axial third finger (to which she gave special emphasis,) that my memory is fixed forever – a moment when Irmgard, unknowingly, was conveying a concept of extreme importance

with a gesture of extreme obscenity! (Does anyone else remember that?)

In 1978, when a group of us had arranged for Irmgard to come to Berkeley to teach a workshop, she stayed at my home. My baby, Elsie, was almost a year, and I had just finished changing her. We had a little routine in which I stood her up on her wobbly legs on the changing table, and she would then fall, giggling, into my arms. I had not noticed Irmgard standing in the doorway until I turned around with Elsie in my arms. Witnessing me with my baby, Irmgard had an unforgettable expression on her face – a sweet, angelic smile that bonded all three of us in that moment - though we never spoke about it subsequently. I doubt I would otherwise even remember playing that game with Elsie.

On the same visit I was also exposed to a more somber side of Irmgard. I received a flyer in the mail about a conference occurring in Los Angeles which featured Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Milton Trager and other “big names.” I still cringe with embarrassment when I think about how I should have anticipated her reaction, but with all good intentions, I showed her the flyer. Wordlessly she turned away, her expression fleetingly pained and bitter. In an instant I realized that I had inadvertently confronted her with the reality of her own lack of recognition. Of course *she* should have been presented at that conference, not only *among* the best of them, but *as* the best of them. I regard Irmgard’s modesty and lack of self-promotion as the downside of her legacy. Not that I blame her, but I have personally suffered greatly from this over the years as I have tried to develop, teach or disseminate her work, especially in areas where it is so sorely needed. Confronted by a market filled with often far less deserving, but well-known names, I get frustrated and discouraged. I’d much rather be “doing” her work than having to explain or promote it.

I’ve never stopped learning from Irmgard. In some ways I’ve learned even more from her since she died than when I was studying with her. During the years following a disabling, pregnancy-related back injury, I had numerous imaginary dialogues with Irmgard “in heaven”. I kept questioning her theories in ways that I probably could never have done while she was alive. I was testing the validity of BF in the most urgent and meaningful way possible – through the process of my own recovery and gradual return to dancing, as well as through my subsequent teaching, and, especially, my work with the elderly. For the last four years, coping again with new complications, I’m still talking to Irmgard, in awe of what she has taught me, trusting that she’ll get me out of this one too.

As one in the “growing” minority of those who actually studied with her, I count myself deeply privileged to have within me the richness of this history and the personal experience of Irmgard, who unquestionably shaped my life. In recent years I have been exploring some current research being done on “body level” issues of injury rehabilitation and so forth, and so far I find that very little still seems to be known about *movement*. Irmgard left us with an incredible gift – an understanding of human movement functioning that is profound and significant. It is a precious legacy that compels me to bring it into the world because the world really needs her vision.

There is a famous story about Irmgard, which may have other variations, but this is how I heard it. She was working with an institutionalized woman who, sitting in a chair, was extremely depressed, unresponsive, and difficult to reach. Others, and I believe Irmgard herself, had made many attempts to interact with her, or simply evoke a response. Finally Irmgard centered herself and said to the woman with a firm, decisive voice, “GET UP!!!” with which the woman emerged from her state of passivity, rose from her chair, and for the first time in who knows how long, made eye contact with another person.

In June, on the way to the Motus Humanus conference, I visited my 88 year old aunt who has been succumbing to Alzheimer’s. Over many years of working with the elderly myself, I have become concerned about how attitudes and assumptions derived from the medical model have a pervasive and pernicious impact on care and treatment of the elderly. A formerly spirited, energetic, and active woman, my aunt is now confined to a wheelchair to keep her from injuring herself by falling, and to secure her safety. It also makes it much easier to take care of her and, in a larger sense, to “control” her. She is taught when it is necessary to get up to pull herself with her arms, which by now are too weak to enable her to do so without help. And, of course, her legs no longer have strength to support her standing. During my visit I tried to help her come to standing by planting her feet and activating her weight, while using a great deal of positive encouragement and cheerleading. Although on a conscious level she not only had forgotten how to stand, but was virtually being trained by her caretakers to remain passive, I was hoping to reawaken her instincts and “muscle memory.” As I worked with her, she actually became energized, but was also extremely resistant, so finally, in an all out attempt to give her enough motivation, I centered myself and said in a firm, decisive voice, ‘GET UP!!!’and she did! – as grins broke out on both of our faces. Talk about “embodied

learning.” I’d come full circle. I found myself embodying Irmgard!

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make this available to the Australian DT community because of our interest in Irmgard, many of us also met Betsy when she was here in November 2004. (See: ‘A Reflection: Looking Beyond the Muscles at the Movement’ below and ‘Visitors to Australia’ in the Aus moves section in this edition)