

An interview with G. Hoffman Soto

Conducted by Zoi Hall

G Hoffman Soto is a master teacher at the Tamalpa Institute in California, USA, which was set up by Anna Halprin in 1974. For more about Anna, see the article "Working with Anna Halprin – Reflections" in Moving On, Vol 3, No.3 (2004). While Soto is not a dance therapist, his approach to somatic awareness and performance improvisation is deeply rooted in the same earth from which dance therapy has emerged



His essential medium is movement and somatics, which he has used in various fields of expressive arts, training and therapy around the world for many years. His work has extended possibilities for people seeking personal growth in their lives, movement artists, therapists, musicians and performers. He works in Europe annually and has presented workshops for the Gestalt Therapy Institute in Germany for the past 20 years. He runs performance laboratories and offers individual coaching sessions as well as being a fine performing artist himself, performing in Europe and the USA.

During 2004, one of the students at Tamalpa, Zoi Hall, conducted an email conversation with Soto as a series of classes unfolded. The conversation illustrates the nature of the relationship between his work and dance therapy, and gives insight into an experienced teacher at work; holding participants' stories and supporting them to express themselves through movement and voice.

G Hoffman Soto

Zoi: *When you gave us the score of simply speaking a text story, or memory, what was your intention with this?*

Soto: I think that it is important that students begin to get comfortable speaking and using their language as another instrument...so not only is it to get used to speaking but to start to tune into the fact that as you change your speaking voice and patterns you force another part of your brain to open and work...also it presents another part of yourself and the more the merrier in this context...

Also a story, any story, current or past, is just the jumping off point, as you work your story and play with it and improvise with it the story will change and a whole different track can unfold or you can go much deeper into the story...also in NLP they talk a lot about the memory and the event the memory is remembering, and they are not one and the same. It is only the memory of the event not the event...so it is used to heal when you begin to realise you can change the memory consciously (it is changing all the time unconsciously so why not) and make it work for you. Actually a pretty radical idea.....so over time this technique is used as a healing device. It

would also work improvising...giving a topic and asking people to just take off on it, or a word or an image...I do that and will use variations of that as we go along.

Zoi: *Was part of having us switch groups and try to work with new people each time a way to introduce the group to each other?...Do you set specific scores intended for a first class so that the group gets comfortable working with new people?*

Soto: I do specific scores in the beginning and moving people around is a very good technique for people to see who is there and be stimulated by the group. Some people will turn you on and inspire you and push you and take you to new directions and places...everybody's got something to give and in the beginning to see that can be a real turn on.

When the material starts to get more personal and intense it is also safer if you know everyone. It supports an environment where people will begin to take a step further and deeper. It is like energy jumping from one to the next...people coming out, taking risks and so allowing the next to do the same.

Zoi: *While we were switching groups and doing different exercises, what were you doing? Were*

you listening and keeping track that everyone is on the path you intended? Were you watching the group and following our lead to come up with the next score in the moment?

Soto: I'm paying attention to where people are with the given exercise. I'm checking to see where the fear is, where the courage is, who needs extra support...and of course I'm reading the group and seeing where the group needs to go. If it isn't where my follow up is, how can I adjust. If it seems to be flowing then I will take them to the next step. As I see the next step, sometimes something will pop in my head from what I see, or it will shake up a memory or something that has worked before in the situation and I can perhaps adjust it and use it.

Because a big part of the class is improvisation in various degrees of purity I try to improvise as well.

Zoi: *Do you design the entire seven weeks before you begin the classes? Do you have an intention for each night, a list of possible scores you may use on the night or do you just go with the flow?*

Soto: I have ideas but I do not sit down and go over (each class) step by step. This class, because it focuses on solos, I did go over some of my repertoire to review it in my head and get me thinking in that direction...and to help me let go and trust there are a lot of possibilities there.

I both go with the flow and there are things I want to cover that I feel will support my process with the class and work.

Each week I want to see how people are developing and showing up. It is key that people show up for the work. If they show up everything else is down hill. By show up I mean they are there to do the work, are committed and connected and go for it.

Zoi: *Were you tempted to break into people's performances and give feedback or guidance? If so, is there a reason you didn't do so in this class?*

Soto: I am always tempted but I want to let people run and I take notes and then I will begin to get more active with feedback. There is always a fine line between letting people work and directing.

Zoi: *And what made you want to teach a class especially focused on solo work?*

Soto: A change, and I think it is a good idea that people develop some material and resources to work alone because many people have no community to continue. I hope that if they get the

process, they could use it for themselves and maybe, ultimately, with others.

Plus now, next time, I can move into duets, trios and ensembles or only duets. It keeps me stimulated as well.

Zoi: *Are there ways, especially in the beginnings of a new group, that you try to develop a sense of safety?*

Soto: That is a good question, and to be quite honest I don't consciously think about that issue. Somehow it seems to be in my vibe that the large majority get some vibe from me and go for it. It seems more of an issue at Tamalpa. I think that is because there is so much work on the emotional body there, which is a good thing. Sometimes it leads people to think that the emotional body is somehow more important, or prized than the rest of us.

I try to take the attitude that all of us is prized and the emotions are just another player on the team...and somehow it works. For example, this summer I taught in Paris for the first time. I knew no one and yet they immediately opened up and went for it. I think a big part of it is my awareness work I do with them and the atmosphere that creates.

Of course at Tamalpa people are used to working with their emotions and so they are primed to go with that and most trust me already or they wouldn't be there.

Zoi: *As a participant I am very clear on what I want my theme to be...exploring all angles of this health crisis I'm in at the moment. What's your opinion, should I drop the story I worked on last week or stay with it and see if it fits into my theme somehow?*

Soto: If I were you, which I'm not, I would take some of the movements and power the story offered you and weave them into your body/pain issues. I think you can abstract your theme a bit and in the end be more powerful and productive with it Also I would think in the direction that your piece is; not only for your personal healing and information but that it is a universal theme, and you are going to shed some light on the issue that will shine on all of us...and it was incredibly powerful, that is you are incredibly powerful.

Zoi: *What was your intention in having us work with one partner most of the class? Did it have any connection to it being our third class?*

Soto: I wanted people to make a connection and develop a bit of a bond to feel more comfortable working in a duet for the performance at the end of class. It helps to build up a repertoire...I am not

focusing on duets, trios and ensembles but I think it is good for solo development as well.

Zoi: *Do you ever participate in class or do you usually stay separate from the group as a witness/observer?*

Soto: I try not to participate. I used to give models and sometimes if really stretched I will, but I prefer to remove myself from that and be a witness. I don't have a set rule for every time, always. Sometimes if there is an odd number I will participate by necessity.

Zoi: *I notice that you don't ask people to verbally check in with each other after an exercise. Is this the nature of this specific class or because it's not your style, not a high priority to always check in out loud with each other.*

Soto: I am not so much interested in students talking about the work as in doing the work. I realise it is debatable that it is important in their integration to have feedback time...I will do that...and I feel pushed for time. I do want people to get a certain amount of work in. And I feel very strongly that understanding intellectually and putting everything in intellectual terms is the predominant manner in which we are in daily life and I think the experience of both seeing and doing doesn't always have to be spoken about.

And of course it has its place. Remember I talked about doing voice or movement and witnessing reaches another part of the brain that needs to be developed too.

Zoi: *In your experience, do you find it generally more challenging for your students to make sounds (no text) or text (no sounds)?*

Soto: Everybody is different and most groups are different and that is part of the pull of doing this work. Generally people are more easily seduced by voice, where they can shout and babble and booble. It somehow frees people up and they can actually do it pretty easily and quickly...in general.

We are much more attached and identify with the spoken word; with how we talk, our rhythms and patterns. On some level there is a bit of an ego death for some people when they start speaking and bringing forth their stories. That is scary. Fear is a big part of people having so much difficulty. It is not easy to begin to change our stories and memories when we identify so much with them. In the other group I am running now, it is amazing how much fear some of them have about the idea of telling a story and how good they are at sabotaging themselves. It is quite painful for me to witness that. So, in general I would say voice is quickly freeing for people and speaking, messing

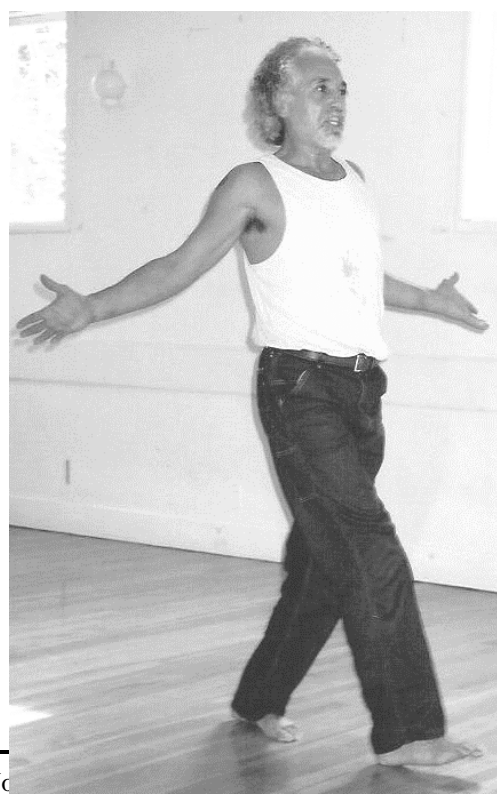
with the speech patterns, letting go of stories having to be as remembered and playing with memories can be a big risk.

Zoi: *I realised that, because we have a performance at the end of our sessions, I feel pressure during class to be further along with my story/material/piece than I am. I'm curious how you deal with this concept – as a person and as a teacher – with the pressure of preparing for a performance while still enjoying right where you are in the process of it – and helping your students do the same.*

Soto: Well, there is what is. What is, is that we are all in process and the class becomes a metaphor for that. What also is, is that every so often we have to "perform". Now the question is, what can we perform other than what we are, where we are? Sometimes we have a theme or a topic and still we are performing where we are with the theme at this moment and it will be different next time. It helps for each of us remembering and reminding each other.

Zoi: *Do you look forward to coming to classes you teach? Or do you hit a wall of resistance before you get there and then work your way into the joy of it?*

Soto: Some days I get tired and wonder where the energy will come from to keep the class going. Sometimes I am not exactly sure what I want, can or will do. Sometimes I just don't feel like it...but in the end I try to remember how blessed I am to be doing this work and to be working with the people I do who bless me with their creativity, vision and love. Then I get excited about going



and letting things unfold.

“The artist must attune herself to that which wants to reveal itself and to permit the process to reveal itself through her” Martin Heidegger* (the teacher too).

Zoi: *In the last class we were flowing with our movements and then found an interesting place to repeat a movement and then used a body part/rhythm to transform the repetition into something else. Can you explain what this was exercising in us?*

Soto: Transformation is a very creative place where we can learn to take our manure and make flowers and vegetables. Where we can change shit to good earth. Where we can take our hurts, our mistakes, our evilness, and make song, dance, poetry heal and serve each other. So, what I am attempting to do is to help make that more conscious for people. Movement theatre can rub off and affect us in our life. We can begin to see that the power to be who we want is inside us and available to us through a transformational process. Through practice, commitment and intention.

On a more down to earth note, it is a good technique to use in theatre, dance or therapy to get out of places you would like to get out of. For example, if I am doing some heavily sad work and I don't see an exit sign, if I can pay attention to what my feet or hands or lips or eyes or thoughts or breath is doing, I can use that awareness to lead me out of the darkness into some light. Like being able to listen to the voices inside me that are reminding me that everything is alright...I just have to listen.

Zoi: *Do you notice that a certain type of person will have a harder time with expanding their vision into the group awareness or is it something that has more to do with awareness?*

Soto: I think it is both. Some people will have more trouble expanding their vision and perspective beyond one or two others. Some naturally have a wider scope of perspective and intention. I also think that a lot of it comes down to ego. The key for me is giving up one's wants and desires and going with the group, just responding no matter if you like it or not.

In today's world people want to do their own thing. Not be part of the group, but to express themselves about who they are. Which is important and comes once you can really be in the group. Then you begin to be an individual inside the context of the ensemble. So, I see it as a process. First to accept the reality of being in the “flock” or “herd” and then finding your individuality in the flock. That takes time and a

lot of people aren't willing to put in the work and wait.

Also it takes practice. It is asking for abilities that most people don't have, in an open and improvised situation. So, yes, practice is crucial and hard.

Zoi: *I wonder if once cultivated in a performance arena, how this skill would bleed into daily life. Do you have any thoughts or experiences with this?*

Soto: A lot of the developing of ensemble skills is repetition and from there it begins to open. Hopefully everything we practice in the studio has some impact outside in daily life. I like to think that the studio is just a rehearsal for the bigger show which is our life. Now sometimes the effect may be more obvious than others but ultimately it will carry over.

Zoi: *Do you combine your somatic body work with improv work?*

Soto: Yes. Of course. I think they go together. Awareness is the key to most practices and this work is a practice. The model I have most developed in Europe in my training is that we do awareness and movement work in the morning and performance lab work in the evening.

Zoi: *Why do you advise us to pick a story/theme and stick with it rather than work with whatever is up for us each week?*

Soto: I have done both over the years. I think the familiarity you can develop through repetition is an important part of performance. Coming back to the topic again and again allows us to see new aspects of the story; to see nuances and to develop it. Often in improvisation the person develops but the themes never get developed. I am interested in both facets of performance. Also you can improvise inside a story that is repeated. I certainly do and I know of good improvisers who do. Both are important in performance development.

Zoi: *Do you find group conflict in your improv classes?*

Soto: There is always going to be conflict for that is the nature of the human being I just don't have time for it in the performance class context. Nor am I interested in working with it in this context. Consequentially it doesn't come up as an issue. I think people are pretty clear why they come to the classes.

Zoi: *What did you learn from this class?*

Soto: It's not so much that I learned anything new. It's more about seeing certain things

manifest again and again in classes. How people develop and evolve, in what situation people come out and in what situation they don't, and always, how much people take away from the work.

***Martin Heidegger** - "Being and Time" 1927.

****Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP)** is based on the early original work of its co-creators, John Grinder and Richard Bandler. It focuses on the discovery and patterns of human behaviour which distinguish excellent performance from average performance in any human endeavour.

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