

# Dance – Ideokineses and Alexander Technique

## Conversation with Shona Innes



*These edited excerpts about Shona are from A Conversation with Shona Innes: Interview by Elizabeth Dempster (reference below). They have been used to provide a profile and describe the various influences that underpin the specialised*

*therapeutic work she is involved in at Gardenview House - part of Melbourne Extended Care and Rehabilitation Service, in Parkville. Here, Shona combines her background of dance and performance with “an artistic elaboration of body work (ideokineses and Alexander)”. Shona also runs a successful private practice and teaches movement in a university based performance studies program. In the latter she uses a variety of approaches directed at breaking down movement habits which are constraining for people. These include contact improvisation, hands on work and the Todd Alignment work taught in conjunction with the developmental path material.*

*Employed at Gardenview House as an Allied Health Assistant, Shona works as part of a multidisciplinary healthcare team, providing longer term rehabilitation for about 20 residents. About half the residents are on the program, whilst the others have serious, complex medical needs and are unlikely to leave the unit. The Allied Health team works with all residents, but particularly those undergoing rehabilitation.*

***And why did you go into that field of work?***

There are a few different reasons...having done the Alexander training I find ...it's not possible to survive on the income from teaching...It's really just pocket money and keeping the work alive in

oneself... many of the teachers in Melbourne are probably teaching a handful of people, and that's even teachers who have been teaching for twenty odd years...the circumstances ...have changed quite a lot from the '80s, when a teacher could graduate and maybe be teaching fifteen to twenty lessons a week.

So my main motivation was to find a job where I could be working with individual people and their moving, which would also provide ... a constant income. The university work drops in and out and I've been doing performances and it's just the itinerant situation I've been in for a long time. I just wanted to be where I felt like what I had to offer was being used.... I felt like what I know about movement... wasn't being taken up by people who really needed it. I really enjoy teaching the students... but they don't perceive a need for the work that I do; it's just a new thing... great, fabulous, but they could take it or leave it... The people that I'm working with in the nursing home, they've never heard of ideokineses or Alexander. They don't even know what I'm doing, but I can work with them and it's as if they are just soaking up the whole thing because it's exactly the right thing for them. It's as if they are sponges for what I've got to offer and it's not only just on a physical level, it's an approach and an understanding... about the learning of movement, about perception... I feel that because they're highly sensitised - because of their injuries... you can work with the tiniest, tiniest things because ... a significant number of people can perceive the tiniest sensation or movement or movement intention.

***Could you give an example of this process?***

Well I became interested in one person there because I could see that he could understand everything I was saying to him... at least it appeared as if he could understand everything... So I started working with him... he has tension patterns in his arms, which cause him to flex strongly and so to extend his arm is a major endeavour for him. I thought, well since he can think and since he notices things, maybe it's possible for him to direct his own activity and learn to let go of the spasticity to some extent. I'd seen him spontaneously extend his arm to push a lift button and things like that and I'd talked to his carers and they'd say, “Oh yeah, he can do that when we're out”. If there was a real need, he would unfold his arm and do the action but when he wants to consciously initiate something it's

very difficult. If he voluntarily wants to initiate an action and it's not an automatic response, then that's where the difficulty comes in. So I'm working with his ability to consciously unfold his arm, by releasing and softening.

... because we've been working together for a while now, I'm saying less in terms of talking him through the detail of the action. Because he knows what we are working on now, words tend to get in the way. So I'm... just waiting for his body to respond to a gentle indication through tactile input. What's working well is that I'm asking him to think of a quality of lightness, his arm being light and floating up, and it's just incredible, he just gets it and his body gets it and he unfolds his arm and the whole thing starts to come together. I can feel his arm working as a whole and he gets a release of his breath; he looks at me and his eyes widen and I feel that he's recognised that something has happened. Rather than talking to him about movement mechanics or joints and body parts...it's how he's doing it and how he can initiate it that's becoming the focus I'm learning a lot from working with him.

With another resident, I've been working with her sensing of movement, especially using the touch sensation to inform her of where she is in the movement. She likes to do her own makeup so I've been coaching her through that process and focusing on her sensing the touch of her finger tips or brush on her own face. The movement of bringing her hands towards her face is difficult because of her physical restrictions, but putting her awareness on something other than the mechanics of the movement allows more freedom and ease within her limitations. I've also been working with her on modifying the movement itself; so instead of her moving the lipstick across her lips, we've been working on her keeping the lipstick still while she slides her lips across it, which is really a movement of her head turning.

There has been a lot of learning and letting go of old movement patterns in this process (she has been doing her own makeup for about 50 years) and especially the sense of using less energy, not trying so hard, the 'less is more' sort of approach. It's very involving, very stimulating because I can work at that very minute level with people and I can take the time and my job gives me the time to do it. The nurses don't have that time and quite often the therapists don't have the time either to really slow down.

***In your account of these therapeutic exchanges I can hear traces of your own history of engagement in dancing. You have been involved***

***in dancing since you were a child, and you have thought very rigorously about what kinds of possibilities and limits that early exposure to dance training may have established for you. Later you became involved in modern dance practice, but when did you come across the ideokinetic work?***

It was a big moment...in Sydney...working at Black Wattle Studios... a great studio. Stephanie St Clair taught there and it was a tiny, little group of people, but you know, something was cooking. Anyway, I think Nanette Hassall came and taught a class there one day and she mentioned the book 'The Thinking Body' (Todd 1937/1972). Well you know, just the title nearly blew me over...

***When was that?***

...about 1980/'81... I wanted to work with Russell Dumas...DanceLink had organised workshops ... I remember that studio in Sydney and then Russell went away... They were going to be away for a month tour and Russell said, "Shona just have the studio, just come in", which was perfect for me.

....I had just had a relationship breakup which was just totally devastating to me and all that I seemed to be able to do was this work, do this ideokinetic work and go through Russell's tapes and read the books and roll around on the floor. I devised all these little exercises for myself. Like I'd close my eyes and walk up and down the studio for half an hour just to see what happened and this went on for about a month. The day Russell came back from touring I was in the studio. He was just totally knocked out; he just couldn't believe it. I was standing up in the middle of the room at the time and he said "Shona, you're on your legs" and my whole hip joint balance had changed radically, among other things, and it was huge...

***You were just working in a self-directed way with books, manuals, and tapes?***

Yes, Russell had lots of things there, including tapes of Andre Bernard teaching long ideokinetic sessions... I tried to do one of these at the beginning and end of every day there...I really did it as a discipline just to give myself some structure too, I really needed that. But the work was totally involving and it was a fabulous opportunity to get stuck into something. And so I worked with Russell for the following year and I think I came to Melbourne in March of 1984, because I'd met Anne Thompson in Sydney. She was teaching ideokinesis and other things at the

dance and drama schools at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA). She didn't want to continue in the dance school so she introduced me to Anne Woolliams and it went from there. I taught Ideokinesis and Todd Alignment for three or four hours a week... And I was there for another twelve years doing that.

***You went from this period of intense absorption in what we might call the re-making of your own body into a situation where there was a demand to apply it to dancing and performing. Then in quite a short space of time you have to make sense of it in a teaching context, communicating this new body of knowledge to young dancers. That seems like a lot of change in a very short space of time, with very different demands being made upon your understanding of the ideokinetic work. I'm wondering how you negotiated all that?***

I was so involved in it, I just taught it very purely because I was still learning it myself. And I kept something that Anne Thompson had said about teaching as a constant reminder - which was to teach only what you "know", meaning an embodied sense of knowing...I think I was doing my own practice as well.... I'd go once or twice a week to work in the studio... So I was still working very much with myself, and the teaching was really about me working with myself, as it always is really.

Also at that time there was a teaching course running at the dance school... people training to be teachers of dance. It was a very rigorous course and those students were highly intelligent... and they soaked it up; they were very challenged by it but I got a lot of stimulation and feedback from those people. I gradually got better at being able to communicate things in ways that seemed a little bit more applied, like applied to a dancer's situation, though that's never completely possible with the ideokinetic work...and that's what's not understood really, you can't apply it directly, it's an indirect approach.

***And through all this time you were still involved in performing? Mainly improvisational work?***

Yes. I was still interested in spontaneous composition ....It's an ongoing interest and I was working with people on their projects, which is something I really enjoy. I have done some good things with different people .....Claire Heywood and I did 'About Face' directed by Rinske Ginsberg, which was a culmination of a lot of different personal historical dance things coming

together and 'The Last Gasp' with Rinske Ginsberg and Nancy Black directed by Anne Thompson .....and then Ros Warby's 'Original Home' with Graham Leake. Then ...a project of Cazerine Barry's at the beginning of 2000 and that was the last thing I've done performance wise.

***When and why did you begin the Alexander training?***

The Alexander training I did from 1995-1998... the motivation for that was that the ideokinetic work ... I was completely devoted to it and I had been for years ... but it just wasn't going to put bread and butter on the table. So I thought the only thing that's related to this...recognized by the general public, is the Alexander Technique. Plus I'd had a wonderful experience of it with Jane Refshauge .....She was doing some table work with me, and her teacher John Nichols came in...He put his hand under my scapula to show her something and it was just a totally mind bending experience. I could feel his hand as if it was my own skin and it was an incredible connection and my whole shoulder sort of moved out and away. It was very wonderful .....

The hands on aspect of the Alexander Technique was the thing ... I felt that I could really gain a lot from and it ... wasn't emphasised in the ideokinetic training, though it does naturally go with it,... I've wanted to work with individual people for twenty years and now it's happening and it just feels totally right. That was one of the reasons for the Alexander study too, that if I was going to work with movement and you know, people's being, I really wanted to do it on a one-to-one basis.

***Given that you were steeped in the ideokinetic practices and principles, were there conflicts or tensions in how bodies and moving are conceived and practiced in those two disciplines?***

When I was doing the Alexander training I didn't think about the relationship between the two disciplines very much at all. I felt that in order to enter fully into the ... training and get the most out of it, I needed to (for a while at least) really let go of what I knew and what I thought I knew in order to experience the Technique as freshly as possible.

... the way that I had worked with ideokinetic work was that I tended to work with parts of the body and I didn't work enough with integrating all of those thoughts. But that was part of my take on it, and not necessarily how the work is presented. What the Alexander work did was talk

more generally. It doesn't talk about specifics, even though it may sound like it does because it's got these 'directions' – "let your head go forward and up, so that your back can lengthen and widen" etc. These thoughts are very general thoughts and there are not many of them, so that released me from thinking about my bits, my parts, my-this-relating-to-that. It became more about getting myself to a point where I could allow the natural wisdom of the wholeness of myself to manifest. The Technique really does that very well, so I found it a very integrating experience... it brought me together, it connected everything up without me having to think about it too much. It was a sensory experience.

Now when I look back at John Rolland's book (Inside Motion: An Ideokinetic Basis for Movement Education), I see that it's all there; he's asking you to think, he never asks you to think of one thing, you always bring it back to a more holistic sense, but it is still another thought. There's a series of thoughts, you know, spine is lengthening, while something else is happening, whereas in Alexander you're not really thinking of that sort of specific kind of anatomical detail. You might just let your back soften because of the feeling of the teacher's hand there; you can just feel your way through it really, and a lot of people learn that way and they're fantastic, easy to work with as well.

I think the process of ideokinesis can work for anyone, but for some people it will involve major immersion in the process (and a lot of time) before any significant change happens. And there is always that question of how the transition from imaging to moving is to be made.

Yes, it's an experience of equilibrium and among other things that's what you're looking for. With the Alexander Technique it happens often when people lie on the table and they just don't want to get up. I work with them for ten or fifteen minutes on the table and they never want to leave. The same sometimes happens when people are doing the movement classes here at university. There's an activity we do where one person stands, their partner gently 'kneads' their body from top to toe, then brushes down over all of their skin surface and at the end of that they look like they could stand there for two hours, no problems. Many of the students feel like they just can't move and they've almost forgotten how to walk. But then, you know, that's only a tiny window for them to see into a whole world of bodily experience. They want that experience to continue and they don't know how they can possibly have that experience when they're

moving about. Because it seems that once you start moving then you've lost it, but you know, it takes a bit of work and repeated exposure to understand some of what's going on here.

***We began by talking about the specialised therapeutic work you're doing in the nursing home and how in that context you maintain a connection with an artistic elaboration of body work (ideokinesis and Alexander) and with dancing. I imagine that your work is effective partly because your perspective is a distinctive one, formed by another history and environment. I get the impression that you don't particularly share the frameworks and definitions (medical, therapeutic whatever...) of others working within the nursing home/rehabilitation context and it is your difference from them which makes your interventions effective.***

Yes, I think that's happened. I have a good rapport with the Gardenview physiotherapist... We work very well together.... It's largely because she's very open-minded and has been really happy to have a new input on the work we're doing....She has said, "It's great to have someone to come in and see things really differently".

I did try dancing with a woman there. We were doing tangos and things up and down, which requires a lot of complex co-ordination and for someone who's had a brain injury to turn their body and turn their head in another direction .....But she was doing it a lot more easily because we were doing a dance...we did some balancing ..and some mirroring ... and just movements that didn't mean anything in particular, but she was really enjoying them .... We were doing this elbow swinging ...exercise from contact improvisation and she said, "Oh I like this, I like this, it's like a washing machine."

I run what they call an exercise group once a week....Once it gets over about three or four people, it just turns into physical jerks ....I really see people getting a lot more out of what I'm doing when there's fewer of them and I can just direct them and suggest things. It's like they actually get to meet it, something in themselves encounters what I'm offering and sometimes there's a real meeting there, rather than them being moved around or having something done to them. It's a different orientation.

What I'm doing isn't spectacular, but I feel like I'm moving towards a different way of working with the residents, which involves more respect and more just looking. I think that's probably

what I've brought to it; I can see things in people that other people can't see. The potential of their attention, their consciousness, the potential to move - I can either feel it if I've got my hands on them or I can just sense it. And my sensing of people is different from other staff ... So I think that's making a qualitative difference in how I relate to them and that's maybe influencing how other people are relating to them too a little.

**This is an edited version of the interview which appeared in Writings on Dance #22, Inheriting Ideokinesis, Summer 2003/04 p 49 - 56. The journal retails at \$15 plus GST. It can be purchased through Dancehouse or from Writings on Dance, at PO Box 106, Malvern, Vic. 3144 or email to [writingsondance@writingsondance.com](mailto:writingsondance@writingsondance.com)**

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