

# Energy and Expression: Tracing the influence of Wilhelm Reich in the development of a dance therapist

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## Who is Wilhelm Reich?

He was a primary pioneer in the field of body based psychotherapy. Wilhelm Reich was born in 1897 and died in 1957. The sixty years of his life were distinguished by his questing mind and spirit and his intellectual genius. He lived in a time of ferment in Europe and his life and work are a testament to the times and paradoxically, have transcended them.

To highlight the potential interest his work may hold for dance therapists more specifically, he pioneered the study and understanding of the body as expressive of psycho-emotional-energetic states, from which bioenergetics and other forms of somatic therapy are derived. Though this barely hints at the scope of his work, of which a scant summary follows.

In the 1920's Reich was a figure of stature in the early psychoanalytic movement. Freud was his mentor and colleague and some of Reich's enduring inspiration can be traced to an interest in developing Freud's libido theories, the energy component, which Freud later abandoned. He was also influenced by 'vitalist' ideas about human existence prevalent at the time, was involved in revolutionary socialist politics, radical social activism such as free medical clinics with a particular focus on the provision of access to information about sexuality, contraception and abortion. He was an early champion of the rights of women and sustained a lifelong belief in the importance of emotionally 'contactful' care of babies and education of children.

A major development of his early work as a psychoanalyst was known as Character Analysis, which was a method of working therapeutically with the body, acknowledging the energy/emotion 'frozen' in what he termed the 'armour' of 'held' musculature. He also developed a theory about the function of energy flow in the human organism and its relationship to the health of the psyche and emotional integration with a particular focus on the expression of sexual energy; its function in the most holistic sense of that word. One of the most well

known of his many published works is 'The Function of the Orgasm', first published in 1927.

Reich was throughout his life, concerned to link his scientific, theoretical and therapeutic work to the wider social, political and cultural context. His work ranged through medicine, psychiatry, biology, physics, sociology, education and more and led him to the discovery of what he termed Orgone energy and to the development of a unique field of scientific inquiry, Orgonomy. More familiarly termed life energy, chi or prana, such ideas in the pre and post second world war era were controversial, provocative and widely misunderstood. Reich was regarded as eccentric, if not psychotic, for his commitment to these concepts though throughout his life, he sustained strong belief in the 'core decency' of human beings, which he believed was grounded in the deep bodily experience of pulsating life energy or orgone.

In the times he lived, Reich was both revered and reviled. In 1957, he died in prison in the United States, where he fled in the early 1940's, believing it to be truly 'the land of the free'. He was mistaken.

During the eighties I was fortunate to experience intensive Reichian therapy. At the same time I was engaged in dance therapy studies and the creative development of my work as dancer/teacher/therapist. The therapeutic experience was profoundly transformative and influenced my work in dance on many levels, as it does to this day.

Though these days, the particulars are very much integrated into my work along with other influences life has generously presented, Reich's work, or rather the experience of it, remains the defining influence and as life evolves I realise anew the potency of his legacy.

**To follow up on Reich, there are many books written about him and by him, some of which are available. The definitive biography is 'Fury on Earth' by Myron Sharaf, published by Hutchison in 1984. Also, 'Wilhelm Reich: the Evolution of His work', by David Boadella, published by Henry Renery Co., 1974, is highly regarded and provides a very helpful overview of the complexity, coherence and breadth of Reich's work.**