

Reflection: Liljan Espenak's Psychomotor Therapy System

Presented by Nana Koch

This two-day workshop on Espenak's work presented by Nana Koch took place in Melbourne at the Edinburgh Gardens Community Room in North Fitzroy in January 2019. This was the first time that Espenak's renowned Diagnostic Tests and exciting mask work has been presented in Australia. That is, other than through Espenak herself when she visited Australia several times in the 1980's. In writing this I am looking at an old newspaper cutting from the Adelaide Advertiser, dated April 21, 1988. It features a picture of Espenak conducting a workshop in Adelaide with a group of dancers. Prior to this, many of us, mainly from Melbourne and surrounds, remember her visits and going to similar workshops and talks from her organised by Denis Kelynack, when he was a counsellor at Melbourne University.



Nana Koch, the presenter of this two-day event in Melbourne, was mentored by Liljan Espenak and is herself known as a second-generation pioneer in the USA. The second-generation pioneers are DMT's mentored by the first-generation of DMT pioneers and who carry their legacies forward. At the same time, they also carry forward their own developments of the legacies left to them, together with other influences they have come under which result in specialties that are their own. This would be similar to the way that the theories and philosophies of Espenak's work emerged from the strong influences she had from Mary Wigman, Alexandra Adler and Alexander Lowen.

"motion causes emotion to flow and it is this aspect of body/mind or mind/body that has been the focus of her attention"

(Koch, 1981), p. 4).

Espenak (1905–1988) believed in the power of expressive dance as being integral within her system of Psychomotor Therapy which looks at the relationship between mind, body and emotion. In her book *Dance therapy: theory and application*, with forewords by both Adler and Lowen, her work is summarized as being not just about dance but also about "... harnessing the emotions that respond naturally to movement, rhythm, music and improvisation." And it goes on to say that "The author concentrates on the use of techniques that integrate psychology and dance to achieve specific, measurable behavioral changes." (Espenak 1981. Publisher's summary book jacket).

This summary almost provides an overview of the content of the two day event, where we were introduced to the tools used by Espenak which aimed to facilitate integration of the individual. That is to restore the individual to a unified body ego. Espenak's work also focused on making the body as ideal as possible to help to provide the individual with feelings of well-being.



Presenter Nana Koch

The importance Espenak placed on diagnosis and assessment, at that time, was impressive particularly in using just a simple walk as a major diagnostic tool and then building up a

profile for each patient from the application of seven movement tests she used. From the results of these tests she would assess where body blocks existed: where there were problems related to not having an ideal body, and/or where there were areas that displayed weakness or lack of normal movement flow.

It is amazing to me, considering these Diagnostic Tests were developed at least something like sixty years ago, that they are not in greater obvious use today. This is despite the great efforts of Espenak's protégés in carrying the work forward and considering the emphasis on evidence based practice at this time. They could so easily be used much more than they are and, if needed, deserve to be adjusted to be in more common usage for

assessment purposes to measure change over time. Some would only need slight adjustments to bring them into line with what is needed for today.

Espenak's Psychomotor Therapy uses some specific exercises to help patients to express "the four emotions" named as anger, calm, joy and fear and to develop muscle-memory, to lead to catharsis and ultimately, behavioural change. (Koch, 2019, W/S notes)

Movement is used with the purpose of stimulating body activity to release emotions - movement both as exercise and as dance improvisation. Adding masks and music in many different ways also affect emotions and release the unconscious. (Koch, 2019, notes taken at W/S). We played with the masks on the second day in a completely different way to a previous experience that I had with masks (also led by Nana) as well as moving to a selection of beautiful music for the same emotional release purposes – afterwards sharing how the various pieces made us feel.

Jane Guthrie

From Bouthaina Mayall:

Nana is an excellent teacher. This workshop was a tremendous experience for me. To be taken through aspects of Liljan Espenak's work by Nana who had worked so closely with her. I felt a distinctive change in my posture and also in the flexibility of my spine with the diminishment of pain after the workshop. The exercises that Nana took us through were clearly explained in both their use and practical application.

And from behind the mask:

Initially I tried to imagine what that particular expression on the mask depicted about a person's demeanor and tried to embody that. It was interesting to explore the constraints of that personality. At times I would forget about trying to be that person and responded to how others were behaving towards me, with interactions arising in which I became engrossed. I was attracted to some masked



Exploring the personality

individuals but not others, some were irritating or cold, others inviting.

Debriefing I realised how profound that experience was, not just for myself, but how profoundly others were impacted. The mask had freed us to behave and relate in ways that we would not usually allow ourselves to do.

From Beatrice Lucas:

The interactions wearing masks is a surprising aspect of Liljan Espenak's work and Nana Koch's



Finding new ways of interacting

workshop exemplified it perfectly. It opened up ways of interacting and moving for me that would not have been triggered had I remained in my identity. It's a fabulous opportunity to explore an imagined person's movement range and to be open for unpredictable interactions and emotions. This session alone was well worth my attendance at this excellent 2-day workshop.

From Maeve Larkin:

After I had chosen my mask and put it on I was surprised when I looked in the mirror. I had expected to see power and strength but when I moved my head the tiger face seemed quizzical and timid, not quite sure of where it belonged. This impression influenced my movement and the way I approached other people in the space so I was then doubly surprised when the first person I approached seemed to be afraid. This reaction



Making different approaches

produced conflicted feelings about how I should approach people as I didn't want to be scaring them away. As the exploration continued and I met new people different qualities emerged. At times I was playful and mischievous, caring and submissive. I had never used masks in that way before and felt self conscious in the beginning but as I relaxed into the play I found it to be great fun. I thoroughly enjoyed this new experience.

From Ben Assan:

This mask invited me to explore strength and power. I felt totally embodied with it. I was surprised by the difficulty in expanding my movements beyond vertical with small sustained travel - I was totally grounded. Travelling through the space for interactions was a challenge. Finding softness in power is a challenge, worth exploring.



Exploring strength and power

And from Elizabeth Mackenzie:

Looking at my own face and then at my masked face was a good transition to a persona of the mask that I consciously 'put on'.

Then I could explore interactions through this particular persona with curiosity and freedom. The mask personified 'innocence and naivety for me. It let me approach the personas of others more directly and closer in space than I usually would. As, from my persona, I knew nothing, each encounter was fresh and interesting. I could 'butt in' and see what happened. Some people took my persona to be 'the joker' because of this, I was enchanted to encounter power, danger and deep sorrow or regret in the masked personas of some people I recognised, far from familiar interactions with them and wonderful to dance with and explore.

In photos of the experience, I see that I am holding a rather fixed, stylised gesture and posture - another time I would like to explore the dance movements of my masked persona as well as looking at it., to embody it.

The presenter

Nana Koch, Ed. D, BC-DMT, LCAT, NCC, LPC, CMA, is a former coordinator of the Hunter College Dance/Movement Therapy Masters Program; former Chair of the ADTA Sub-Committee for Approval of Alternate Route Courses; former chair of ADTA's Credentials Committee; member of the Approval Committee and creative arts therapist, as well as educator. She was a student in one of Espenak's earliest courses at Flower and Fifth Avenue Hospital/ Mental Retardation Clinic. She teaches Espenak's work at Kinnections in Rochester, NY, runs courses in Costa Rica, Mainland China, Hong Kong and India. She also specialises in teaching courses in group process in DMT. In January 2019, when here, Nana was on a sabbatical from Long Island University, where she was an Associate Professor and newly retired Chairperson of the Department of Health, Physical Education and Movement Science.

****Nana is due to return to Melbourne in January 2020. Be sure not to miss more about this approach to DMT.**

References for the introduction

Koch, N. (1981). An interview with Liljan Espenak. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*. 4(2) 4-20

Espenak, L, (1981). *Dance therapy: theory and application*; with forewords by Alexandra Adler and Alexander Lowen. Springfield. IL Charles. C. Thomas.



Nana with the masked group