

# Somatics 101

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Why do some dancers fully inhabit their bodies, creating a seamless whole between the dancer and the dance? Can we attribute this to a kind of somatic intelligence? Dancers have heard the term somatics tossed around for three decades, but few know the exact origins of the practice. And yet, dancers have been a driving force in the field.

The somatic movement was already well under way when the philosopher Thomas Hanna coined the term in 1976. Somatics derives from the Greek word for the living body, soma, and is the study of the body experienced from within. The roots of somatics can be traced back to the late 19th-century European Gymnastik movement, which used breath, movement, and touch to direct awareness. Francois Delsarte, Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, and Bess Mensendieck encouraged a kind of inside-out expression that questioned the traditional nature of movement training. They seemed to be saying, "The body is the person," thus joining mind and body in a celebration of the human form.

American somatic thinkers also made significant contributions. Mabel Elsworth Todd's classic text, *The Thinking Body*, introduced dancers to the role of the mind in dance training in 1937. Her student, Lulu Sweigard (who later taught at Juilliard), developed "ideokinesis," a process of activating the imagination to affect movement. Somatic pioneers Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (Body-Mind Centering), Emily Conrad (Continuum), Joan Skinner (Skinner Releasing), Elaine Summers (Kinetic Awareness), Susan Klein (Klein Technique), and Judith Aston (Aston-Patterning), all hail from the dance world.

What makes a movement experience somatic? Glenna Batson, who teaches Alexander Technique in the Hollins University/MFA program at American Dance Festival, highlights five components of a somatic discipline: using sensory feedback, slowing down and paying attention, learning through internal experience rather than imitation, applying a rhythm of doing and resting, and exploring movement rather than simply completing exercises.

Martha Myers, Dean Emerita of ADF, was a key figure in integrating somatics into dance. Her seminal collection of articles in *Dance Magazine*, "Dance and the Body Therapies" (March, April, May, July 1980), introduced the work of Alexander, Feldenkrais, Irmgard Bartenieff, and Irene Dowd to readers. "Each comes at the work differently," says Myers. "But somatics always involves awakening the sensate self."

*Many somatics teachers combine various approaches. Martha Eddy, director of MovingOnCenter in California, combines Laban Movement Analysis, Bartenieff work, and Body-Mind Centering to create SOMAction Movement Therapy. Dance historian Sondra Horton Fraleigh created a hybrid form after studying Feldenkrais, Craniosacral Therapy, Myofascial Release, yoga, and Zen meditation. Klein acknowledges influences from Bartenieff, Bainbridge Cohen, and Barbara Mahler.*

Somatics gained momentum in the dance world as a means to prevent injury. We become more prone to injury when we're on autopilot. Whether it's the gentle touch of an Alexander teacher's hand at the back of your neck or going through the mental inventory of sensations in a Feldenkrais scan, it's about paying attention to what's already going on in our bodies.

Somatics classes are offered at many dance training centers, including Juilliard, ADF, and the Bates Summer Dance Festival. Ray Schwartz, of University of Texas at Austin, uses Feldenkrais to jump-start improvisation sessions. "This is a very democratic way of working," says Schwartz. "The dancers develop movement phrases from their own sensations rather than through imitating the choreographer."

Somatics has influenced many choreographers, from Anna Halprin and Trisha Brown to Jennifer Monson, DD Dorvillier, and Daniel Burkholder. Each has created a unique style with attention to a more sensory-based compass.

Whether we want to heal from an injury, shake up the creative process, or dance like we are fully at home in our own skin, somatics will continue to inform the dance terrain, and dancers will be instrumental in moving somatics into the future.

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