

LEAP DANCE SYMPOSIUM

Dancing Heritage, Tracing Lineage



**University of Otago
School of Performing Arts**

15-17 November 2019

ALI

*An agent for change: a legacy of
dance education in Aotearoa*

EAST



The Performing Arts School is committed to encouraging the development of personal creativity and artistic process through the theory and practice of the contemporary dance discipline and its related arts. There is a strong commitment to identifying a contemporary dance form that reflects the social, cultural and geographical environments of Aotearoa, New Zealand. The broad-based holistic education programme is designed to develop a disciplined and sensitive human being and dance artist.

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'The notion of an ecological as opposed to an ego-centered self is one that acknowledges self in relation to others and to the environment' says Ali.

[The program offers] an encounter with elementary movement techniques, one goes back to a natural way of moving, which can be coloured in a later stage, free from prejudices in regard to style or form, aiming to keep in touch with changes, experimentation and the avant-garde in the dance, where students can form their own vision. [There is] no distinction between technical and creative development, between dancer and choreographer, execution and making of dance; in principle this all is the same creative process (Merkx, 1985, p. 47-53; translated by the author).

Moniek Merkx's *Moderne Dans in ontwikkeling* (1985).

‘In this democratic world, adaptation or change can happen instantly or slowly morph through time in the same way that life can be seen as ongoing and evolving, inconclusive and incomplete. The freedom to express change, to allow radical decisions, to work with uncertainty and to change plans in order to better serve the common endeavour (or, the overall performance) suggests an alignment with active democracy.’ *Ali East - Rehearsing democracy: Enhancing community through the interdisciplinary performance improvisation series ‘Shared Agendas.*

How can we develop response(ability) in an environment that has been exhausted by the neo-liberal regime, financially, socially and ecologically?

Presentation Notes:

Ali East ***An agent for change: a legacy of dance education in Aotearoa***

I'm going to set a scene and tell a story that begins over 30 years ago. I tell this on the back of a celebration of 30 years of contemporary dance training in Auckland just this week. The Unitec students Showcase honoured 30 years of resilience and persistence in dance education.

I'm touching lightly on three threads that I identify as both being at the heart of Alison East's own artistic and creative concerns but also that were at the heart of the kaupapa of the Performing Arts School, in its first decade. This is something about the evolution of somatics in dance education in New Zealand through the Performing Arts School specifically and entangled within that a unique connection to the land in dance making in Aotearoa and a democratic approach to learning and creating.

In the late 1980's Alison East had a couple of aha moments that became the impetus to establish a fulltime training school for contemporary dance in Auckland. The first seed was sown by a young student at one of Alison East's rural workshops. Karen Barbour expressed a desire to study dance full time in Auckland. Then Ali recalls watching some young dancers rolling about on the floor in an oceanic dance in Jenny de Leon's studio and this galvanized the desire for a full-time contemporary dance course in Tamaki Makaurau. Ali recognised that and that she also had the skills to apply to this with her training in physical education in dance from Otago University.

It was 1989. There had been a stock market crash. Limbs Dance Company was folding, and independent dance companies were making do with on-one off arts council grants. The only existing training programme at tertiary level was the NZ School of Dance which had no academic or choreographic component. Here, it could be said that dancers were being trained in codified techniques as potential company dancers.

Two performance groups, Limbs Dance Company and Theatre Corporate that had been strongholds in the local performance community at the time ceased teaching community classes. A combined organization was established and named the Public Trust. It offered community based training out of the Orange Ballroom in Newton Gully. Ali suggested that they establish a full-time programme in dance under this umbrella. On May the 29th 1989 the school opened it's doors to a fulltime training that would run until the end of November.

At this point I must add that this programme wasn't conceived in isolation – that Ali worked closely with Raewyn Thorburn (nee Schwabel), Wendy Preston and Felicity Molloy among others to develop a course that considered all of the aspects that might be required to create training specific for contemporary dance and dance making.

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Initially the course emphasized somatics-based practices which strengthen technical capacity, expand expressiveness, reduce incidents of injury, provide a base for personal practice, and with a concern for interdisciplinary awareness and practice.

Ali's thinking was informed first by her previous teacher training in physical education and dance under John Casserly at Otago University. Casserly was known for elevating the field of dance to be considered as a serious art form through his collaborative encouragement and facilitation of projects with recognised artists and poets.

Another significant influence was Easts time studying Skinner Releasing technique in the States which led her to an understanding of non-codified, largely intuitive ways of moving – this is now identified within somatic practice. Joan Skinner's work also introduced ideas such as working quickly and making very short (1 minute) and essential dances.

Wendy Preston and Maggie Eyre became the new school's artistic directors, co-managing a fulltime dance programme alongside Alison East and Raewyn Thorburn. The two-year programme began its days in Newton Lodge in Upper Queen St, just down the road from the community classes in the old Orange Ballroom in nearby Newton Rd.

With no government funding, the course's viability was precarious, but by 1991 NZQA approval had been granted, and the qualification became a National Diploma of Contemporary Dance. The course then ran from February to November, with government subsidies, including student fees and allowances, and new premises in a former TV studio in Hargreaves Street.

Eventually the course was designated a Private Training Establishment at Levels 5 and 6 or equivalent to a diploma at University level. NZQA were just being established at the same time.

Ali's personal vision for the school was that it would provide eclectic and relevant contemporary dance training for the time. That the focus would be on educating innovative choreographers who had a strong sense of identity with self, the socio-cultural community and the Landscape of Aotearoa.

The industry at the time was in a state of flux. The kind of dance that was happening at the time was really physical, very technical, largely expressionistic says Ali. The main influences were coming from the States and the UK - Cunningham, Taylor, Limon, Newson. Choreography took form in large companies, there was strong thematic content – largely socio-political. Sometimes the work was more frivolous, using NZ pop music for instance – which was perhaps a residual influence from Limbs. Ali was very focused on bringing live music to the course in all of the classes – a luxury students don't experience today. The conversation between the dancers and the musician added something unique to the choreographic work at the time.

They team developed a pedagogy based on the perceived needs of this new generation of dancer, and also utilizing the strengths of local teachers. 'It was important to us' says Ali 'that students were versatile - could work with any of the current choreographers - and that they each developed their own unique choreographic voice and style'.

Ali was also strongly influenced by her own eco-political agenda - of introducing students to the concept of being in relationship with the broader socio-cultural and artistic community, and the whenua of Aotearoa.

‘The notion of an ecological as opposed to an ego-centered self is one that acknowledges self in relation to others and to the environment’ says Ali.

According to Ira Shor, critically reflective teaching and learning brings students towards consciousness of their connection with the world and better integration of a sense of self in relation to other. Ali suggests this relationship building is a fundamental concept within an eco-choreography pedagogy.

Ali often used natural imagery, and working outside in nature as a choreographic and inspirational source for movement in her teaching. This approach was not isolated. If we look to the work of Irene Dowd, Doris Humphrey, Andrea Olsen, Joan Skinner and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen we see the circulatory system described in terms of rivers, waterfalls or leaf veins. Dowd imagines the human body in geographical and geological terms – describing the terrain of the body as a natural landscape, the skin and fascia as analogous to the topography of the earth. Other teachers at the school also drew from the work of these practitioners, particularly Felicity Molloy in experiential anatomy and movement fundamentals and Raewyn Thorburn in releasing technique. I’ll come back to somatics in a little while.

Unique to our position in Aotearoa we might also say that this connection to our landscape comes from the roots of our indigenous language. In te reo we come to understand land differently. ‘Land’, in te reo¹ is whenua² which also means ‘ground’, ‘placenta’ and ‘together’ (Mead, 2013, p. 15). A Māori world view might dismantle the borders of land and body, also undoing a binary construction of our relationship to the world. In my view, this opens a discussion towards democracy – but I will explore this in a little while. Let’s go back to the land.

Ali is drawn to French theorist Guy Debord’s term psychogeography for its ‘blending of the human mind/psyche with the land.’ Perhaps as Ali also recognises, it was her experience of growing up in rural New Zealand as a 4th generation sheep farmers daughter on a deforested landscape that shaped her deep concern for the ecology of the places we inhabit. It certainly generated an innate and athletic vocabulary of running, climbing, jumping, chasing, dodging and carrying loads as she grew up in rural New Zealand. Ali’s concern for our relationship with land is persistent and is relentless in her choreographic and movement enquiries.

This was embedded in the curriculum during her time at the Performing Arts School. We engaged in site-specific works, we drew from natural imagery, and I remember often taking our studio work outside onto the grass and under the trees. The course drew from a variety of holistic practices, adapted American and Japanese somatic practices such as Skinner Releasing Technique, Body Mind Centering, Contact Improvisation and Min Tinaka’s Body Weather. All of these practices drew from images from the land and the natural world.

¹ Te Reo Māori is the indigenous language of Aotearoa, New Zealand

² Whenua is the Māori word for land. It also means placenta, ‘All life is seen as being born from the womb of Papatūānuku, under the sea’ (Royal, 2007).

Many of our teachers and artists were influenced by these forms. For example choreographer and dance artist Lynne Pringle who also trained in Body Weather with Min Tanaka speaks of her relationship with the land in her work in response to Ali. Lynne writes of her sense of turangawaewae (place to stand, and sense of belonging and connection to the land):

I have been shaped so strongly by the landscape here—physically, emotionally, mentally and artistically. The land is the life-blood and the older I get the more important it becomes.

I recall performing in *Druids in Gumboots* [Play video](#) for Lynne in the early 1990's as part of her community class. We performed outside in a field, celebrating if I recall correctly the re-opening of the park adjacent to her house. Here's a short excerpt from *Druids* which was performed by the students at the Performing Arts School around the same time.

In a journal article for *Dance Research Aotearoa* *Dancing Aotearoa: Connections with Land, Identity and Ecology* surveys a wide variety of older and younger Māori, Pacific, Asian and Pākehā dancer/choreographers. She asks them to describe a generic New Zealand dancer. Here are some of the responses:

Key words included “strong”, “earthy”, and “gutsy, physical”. “ambitious”, “fearless, warrior spirited”, “multi-talented” and “grounded”, “a grounded sense of lightness”, “a robust physique, “strength and agility”, “hardworking”, “awesome”, “unrelenting”, “dedicated”, “intelligent”, “open”, “diverse”, “well-trained”, “cultured ... aware of culture”, “emotional”, “expressive”, and “passionate”

I muse as to whether this sense of physicality and connection with the land has evolved out of the training programme that East was so instrumental in developing a kaupapa for, or if rather, it is the pull of the forces of our landscape in Aotearoa or both.

However, Ali suggests that ‘Arguably more than the other arts...the dance artist experiences the world sensuously, emotionally and physically. S/he is attuned through a dancer’s embodiment to be able to respond to the shapes, forms and energies of place by matching, morphing, shaping and re-shaping the space. His/her rhythms derive from an internal pulse and from the visual and felt rhythms of the landscape.’

In these bodily links to land, the borders between body and land disintegrate and in an age of the anthropocene through dance practice and education we cultivate an attention towards a political ecology of things. As Jane Bennett calls for the cultivation of ‘a patient, sensory attentiveness to non-human forces operating outside and inside the human body (2010, p. viii). In attending to the idea of conative bodies, with a faith that ‘everything is of the same substance’ (2010, p. xiii) vibrant matter becomes a condition that does not return us to individualistic ego-centred instrumentalism (Bennett, 2010). Bennett’s thinking resonates here with Ali’s ecological and democratic thinking towards the self as always in relation to others and the environment. This also resonates with early ideas of somatic practice such as Glenda Batson suggests Somatic practices share this notion of an ‘ecological body’, whereby the body is always in relationship with the environment (Batson, 2009, p. 5).

Through Bennett’s and Ali’s thinking we move towards ideas and processes of coming together as Ali speaks of her own methodologies as ‘co-operative, liberatory processes’ with

a 'shift in emphasis from product to process and from separateness to 'network'. She suggests that the 'simultaneous fostering of interdependence and co-operation combined with independence and individuality offer 'sustainable' skills and knowledge that 'are relevant to everyday life.

Ali's intuitive rationale for liberatory learning in those early days brought together philosophies that attend to place, to culture, and that lean towards democracy and non-binary thinking.

In the founding years of developing the programme that eventually became part of Unitec, and advanced from a Diploma in Contemporary Dance to a Degree, I have a sense that the curriculum evolved intuitively. The practitioners and artists who were shaping the curriculum were responding to the environment – I see this as the demographic of students, the socio-cultural-ecological landscape and the industry both locally and internationally. New ways of approaching the mechanics of the body and movement were emerging out of the United State predominantly and these ideas naturally began to inform people working in dance and movement related practices in Aotearoa.

Felicity Molloy's reflects on the Dance major's approach to incorporating these new ideas in learning dance practice within the curriculum. She says in her PhD research,

'Whilst introducing stand-alone dance practice papers, Ali East, who was at the time Head of Dance, and our colleague, Raewyn Thorburn, co-developed an early version of a somatics programme. Some students had prior cultural dance experiences and an articulation of movement in other forms. East requested that the ballet technique class, which already incorporated applied approaches to physiology and biomechanics informed by my practice as a bodywork therapist, change its title to Movement Fundamentals.²⁶ We started by writing down the experience of dancing. (Memory-in-research process) By incorporating recent histories of dance merging with the scholarly realm, I reveal relevant emphases on the extent to which dancers reconstructed the subject through their embodied knowing of dance (Phelan, 1993). Wrapped by the term 'fundamental' and inspired by somatic study, PAS (which is now the early New Zealand Unitec undergraduate degree programme), re-established a more general dance practice. This was arguably an innovation that fit well with neo-liberal edicts of student-centred approaches, inclusivity and academic praxes.

Ali who has gone on to further develop working with improvisation, eco-politics and collaborative and interdisciplinary exchanges in her many years in dance education articulates that through dialogue we can develop 'critical consciousness, democracy and awareness'. This is practiced in fluid and evolving studio conversations that are explored through often cross-disciplinary improvisational frameworks. A practice that had a firm place within the curriculum at the Auckland Performing Arts School while she was there.

From the discussions I've had as well as the varied and many stories of the early evolution of the Performing Arts School there was clearly a collaborative and intuitive effort to create a holistic programme that as it turns out was relatively radical and forward thinking at the time. Another school in the Netherlands, the School for New Dance Development in Amsterdam had a very similar pedagogy and kaupapa. You can trace its roots also back to the US and so while this seems slightly uncanny – there was a common lineage.

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avant-garde in the dance, where students can form their own vision. [There is] no distinction between technical and creative development, between dancer and choreographer, execution and making of dance; in principle this all is the same creative process (Merkx, 1985, p. 47-53; translated by the author).

Moniek Merkx's *Moderne Dans in ontwikkeling* (1985).

A Short History of the Beginnings: A School for the Creative Dancer

That was my inspiration... a school for dancers who are creative and also equipped and they don't have to kill the creativity through being so harsh and authoritarian (De Groot, 1989).

The Performing Arts School's curriculum looked something like this.

We always had a morning technique class in ballet or contemporary. [Video Technique class 1.17 – 2.15](#)

We also did blocks of other movement methodologies such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Skinner Releasing, Yoga and contact improvisation. We also did classes in music, voice and theatre, anatomy, dance theory, capoeira, Maori and Pacific dance. We collaborated with students or artists from other art forms. [Play Releasing Video'](#)

We had international guests such as Butoh artist Joan Laage, Nancy Stark Smith and expats such as Carol Brown, Jeremy Nelson and Sue Healey. We worked in blocks with local choreographers such as Douglas Wright, Michael Parmenter, Lynne Pringle, Ann Dewey, Shona McCullagh, Sean Curham, Warwick Long, Brian Carbee and Catherine Chappell among others.

Projects in choreography took the form of Site specific works, Video Dance, Interdisciplinary choreography, Solos and group works. We also had guest choreographers work with us and often they were also our technique teachers during that creative block. In the first year we engaged with small short and fast choreographic tasks such as working with haiku and the animal studies. [Play haiku video \(Maaka\)](#) We regularly had improvisation classes. [Play improvisation video](#) These later project classes were held in the afternoon. I look back and wonder how on earth this was all incorporated in the times and within budget. And on top of that we had live musicians for most of our classes. Things have changed. The challenges of being entangled in a massive institution has streamlined teaching hours and has had to make cost cutting measures.

30 years on from the first stages of what is now a truly institutionalised and resilient dance programme I question what is it that our students need today. How does dance fit in the new tertiary landscape? How can we develop response ability in an environment that has been exhausted by the neo-liberal regime, financially, socially and ecologically?

It seems to me, that Ali's vision of eco-political responsibility in dance education seems more relevant and important than ever. I ask how we might we reinvigorate these notions in an environment that has become more driven by as Larry Lavendar suggests "a Commodity culture, an entertainment culture". How we might continue to question how we understand what dance is.

Susan Leigh Foster identifies the recent industrialisation of dance performance in the manufacturing of media and performance through the screen – primarily through music videos and in televised dance competitions. With expanding popularity I believe that this largely contributes to a very different culture and awareness in the youth who are entering our dance education programmes. With an assimilation as Foster suggests of many 'local

styles and flavours of dance into a homogeneous affirmation of youth and heterosexuality'. In light of these observations around the expansion of commodified and codified trends in dance as well as the largely neoliberal style of institutions I argue for the relevance of East's vital discourse for somatically influenced pedagogies that are 'always in relationship with the environment', and that act as 'potent agent(s) of change' today (Eddy, 2009, p. 10, Batson, 2009, p. 2).