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Somaticist in the dance archives: Exploring Jerome Robbins' diaries through somatics

ABSTRACT

In this short piece, I highlight the question of how to bring somatics skills acquired in a somatics class to bear upon other life contexts. I use the example of scholarly work: I show how I use somatic methods as I conduct research in the archives of the choreographer Jerome Robbins (1918–98), housed at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. I suggest that we need to pay more attention to the question of how students and practitioners could bring physical awareness into their various life scenarios and tasks. I propose that if we learn how to transfer our somatic knowledge into different life contexts, our lives can become more embodied and we can tap into the knowledge that emanates from the physical self.

KEYWORDS

somatics
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New books on somatics are being released, and conferences and symposia in movement, dance and interdisciplinary studies are starting to explore and incorporate the potential of somatic practices.¹ Somatic approaches are becoming more noticeable in medical and therapeutic contexts, as well as in choreographic processes, dramaturgy and dance departments' course

1. For example, see Manuela Mischke-Reeds, *Somatic Psychotherapy Toolbox: 125 Worksheets and Exercises to Treat Trauma & Stress* (Eau Claire, WI: PESI

Publishing and Media, 2018), Amanda Blake, *Your Body Is Your Brain* (Trokay Press, 2018), Susan Bauer, *The Embodied Teen: A Somatic Curriculum for Teaching Body-Mind Awareness, Kinesthetic Intelligence, and Social and Emotional Skills* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2018).

offerings. One question that waits to be tackled in greater detail is: How do somatic practices influence our lives outside of the somatic movement classroom? How to keep somatic sensibility and bodily knowledge alive in contexts other than the classroom or workshop setting? What is somatic knowledge and how does it transfer from a somatic movement class to other settings and become a part of life?

I approach these questions as a dance writer, scholar and somatic movement educator. The somatic techniques that I practice and teach include Nia dance, a mind-body movement method developed in the 1980s by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Aya Rosas that helps students increase their awareness of physical sensations and access well-being, joy and self-expression through dancing (Rosas 2005), and BodyLogos®, a practice that brings methods from somatics and meditation to strength training, developed by Broadway dancer and Taoist minister Tammy Wise (Wise 2018). With the help of these practices, I have learnt to bring awareness of embodiment into my work as a writer, scholar and teacher. Examining my embodied experience in the archives of the choreographer Jerome Robbins, I shed light on how somatic training and knowledge can impact a potentially 'non-somatic' endeavour, that is, archival research.

BUILDING SOMATIC KNOWLEDGE

In dance scholarship, the themes of the body as a type of archive and archival resources as a basis for choreography and movement explorations are gaining more attention (e.g. see Albright 2007; Bissell and Haviland 2018; Srinivasan 2012). For example, in her account on Loie Fuller, Ann Cooper Albright describes how she would dance with heavy fabrics to get a physical, sensation-based understanding of what it might have been like for Fuller to dance her compositions (Albright 2007). However, relatively little has been published on the act of bringing somatic knowledge as an accomplice to the work in the archival reading room: academic writing tends to emphasize the study of the object, the subject of the study, or a phenomenon, rather than the subjective or embodied experience of the researcher. That is, a scholar of George Balanchine would write about his choreography, the influences on his work or his collaborations, rather than what the scholar felt or sensed while going through his archival materials. As one scholar, a moderator of the roundtable on the question of what kind of knowledge becomes available as we move, particularly as we dance, pointed out recently, 'It has never occurred to me to think about my body in the archives' (Mora 2019). Accounts in arts-based research and practice-based research are bringing more attention to the role of the researcher's own physical and emotional experience with research and the creative process (see Leavy 2015, 2018).

Beyond the context of archival research, my goal is to inspire more conversations about our ability to notice connections between our embodied physical-mental practices and our lives more broadly. By physical-mental practices I mean any type of movement practice that allows an individual to feel like his/her emotions, the mind, inner world, imagination and perhaps even the soul are involved and alive in the movement experience: the session or class does not focus solely on outer movement and mimicking the instructor's steps. I suggest that by taking note of the potential transfer from the somatic to what is commonly perceived as a 'non-somatic' context, our somatic wisdom can deepen. By 'non-somatic contexts' I refer to life situations where an explicit reference to somatics is absent: In these situations, occurring outside of a

somatic practice session or class, it is up to the individual to decide whether he/she employs tools of somatic awareness. Without an instructor's guidance and outside the context of a movement class, can an individual keep his/her somatic knowledge alive?

Building stronger links between insights gained from somatic practices and lives outside of the dance or yoga studio is one way to make our lives feel more holistic. I propose that somatics educators could build knowledge of transfer in the skillset of their students: they can ask students to pay attention to the ways the somatic skills they learn to use in class can help them in other realms of life. I suggest that by actively using somatic awareness in different life scenarios, our lives become more embodied: we learn to live in closer daily contact with the knowledge that emanates from our physical self.

Somatics offers a wide range of different practices to hone one's physical awareness. The Feldenkrais Method®, the Alexander Technique, Ideokinesis, Continuum, 5Rhythms, Shake Your Soul®, and Soul Motion® are among the many options. Alongside Nia and BodyLogos, my somatic knowledge comes from somatic dance methods such as JourneyDance™, created by Toni Bergins in 1997 (see JourneyDance), SuryaSoul®, developed by Sabine Zweig and Philippe Beaufour (see SuryaSoul), and the Tamalpa Life/Art Process (see Tamalpa), created by performance artist, choreographer and dancer Anna Halprin and her daughter Daria Halprin.² The structure of classes and their underlying philosophy as well as methods used in facilitating sessions in these practices differ: Tamalpa Life/Art Process, for example, employs not only movement but also drawing, writing and performance. JourneyDance includes elements of shamanic dance and can be seen as a dance ritual. SuryaSoul includes 'Soma' and 'Spirit' classes: The former are based on choreographic sequences, and the latter on movement improvisation.

What these different practices share is the belief that dance and movement are accessible by a range of populations and through movement we can tap into bodily knowledge, feel connected to a community and increase our well-being. To have a practice of physical awareness one does not need to be a dancer or have professional connection to movement study. Somatics offers methods of bodily education for people with different experiences with movement and movement ability and at different ages.

Through somatic methods, as well as inspiration from writings on somatics, by authors-movers like Ann Cooper Albright, Sondra Fraleigh and Kimerer LaMothe, among others, I connect to my physical self on a daily basis (see Albright 2018a; Fraleigh 2018; LaMothe 2015). I practice and improvise in a studio on my own, dance to DVDs, attend classes and lead classes, individual sessions and workshops. These practices also help me stay connected to my body and physical sensations as I write.

Somatic practices teach us the wisdom of sensations (see Saumaa 2018). In somatics classes, you train the ability to tune in with your 'felt sense' and track sensations as they arise. By 'felt sense', I refer to the ability to notice physical sensations such as the sensations of tension, warmth, discomfort, pleasure, expansion, opening, tightness, pain and pulsation. The information gathered from sensations counts as one type of knowledge that the body makes available non-verbally.

I start my days by sensing the body. As I move to music or do a dance improvisation to silence, I pay attention to images that arise, language that emerges, and subtle sensations in my muscles, organs, joints, and bones. I tap into the felt sense by asking from the body: What does it feel like to be

2. For more on these practices, see Saumaa, 'Dance therapeutics: Movement as a path towards healing', *Alternative and Complementary Therapies*, 2019, 25: 5, 238–240.

me today? What parts of the body speak to me today? Where do I feel tight, where do I feel loose? How does my heart feel today – peaceful, agitated, torn, heavy, nourished? What do I notice about my vision? My mind – does it feel expansive, tight, cluttered, joyous? How do I sense the space between my temporal lobes? Between the forehead and the occipital bone? Between the crown of the head and the jaw? Beginning my days with somatic movement lays the groundwork for the rest of my day. It is a commitment to live the day in body awareness. I connect with and train my ability to internally perceive movement as I dance, stretch or lift weights in my room, in a studio, at a gym or as I walk to an early morning work appointment.

IN THE ARCHIVES

Special collections archives at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library present an altogether different context. Long heavy wooden tables fill the room. To preserve the precious materials, there are no windows, no natural light in the space, and the temperature is kept at a particular measure. You relinquish your personal items as you enter the room. Only a laptop and mobile phone are allowed. There is no talking. Scholars and researchers lean over the archival materials, laid out on special reading cushions. They use special ropes as paper weights and special paper knives to turn pages. They can only use papers and pencils provided by the library, not their own notebooks. A reference librarian is always present to make sure the rare materials are being handled with care. Even if the subject matter is dance – figures of dance history, dance magazines, and dance photography – scholars and researchers approach it first and foremost with the cognitive abilities of discernment, analysis, critical thinking, awareness of details, and comprehension of historical contexts and lineage. This is the Dance Division, but to stand up and stretch, let alone dance, would feel out of place.

How do I enter this space as a somaticist? How do I connect to this environment – so different from a dance or yoga studio – with my physical sensations and my kinetic imagination? Is it possible to stay connected to my somatic knowledge as I look through archival boxes of Robbins' illustrated diaries, newspaper clips, travel notes, photos, poems, his last will, medical documents, and love letters? Would this bodily connection aid me in my work or would it lead me astray?

As I sit in the special collections reading room and wait for my requested archival boxes to arrive, I use my somatic tools – activities I do on a regular basis in my movement sessions – to bring my physical, mental and emotional awareness fully into the room, into the present moment. These somatic tools include self-guided questions and the commitment to taking time to notice what is happening in the body. I turn my focus inward and ask, like I do in my movement sessions: What does it feel like to be me? Are there particular body parts that feel more alive somehow? That speak to me and invite attention? How do my senses respond to the room? Do I sense my feet on the ground, how does my spine feel, do I feel the support of my abdominal muscles, is my chest relaxed and my heart centre open to receive? What is going on in my mental realm? I take a few moments to write about these sensations. As I write, I sense my fingertips and my hands moving on the keyboard. I become aware of the rhythm of my breathing. I soften the gaze of my eyes. I relax the muscles in my face.

As I write about my sensations, I translate my physical sensations into verbal language. I use language to talk about physical sensations and feelings. Building the link between the body and language – transferring physical information into verbal – is not necessarily an easy step. Working with my students, I often see that it takes time to develop the skills of putting felt sensations into words (see Saumaa 2017). One benefit of writing about physical sensations is that it can help connect one's felt sense and the task of archival research, a primarily mental task of looking through documents. After sensing and writing about my sensations, I feel like my attention to the documents in front of me and my written notes about them are more embodied: I am not only 'in my head' as I write, forgetting about the body. Rather, I feel connected to my entire body. My words emanate from my physicality.

3. <http://archives.nypl.org/dan/19855>

This somatic centring, through attending to sensations and writing about them, is important for several reasons. Non-digitized archival materials do not usually travel outside of the library. One must physically go to them. Many digitized collections also necessitate going to the archives. My relationship to these materials is by necessity different from my connection to materials that I can access where and when it is convenient, such as books that circulate widely or articles available online. In case of the materials of Jerome Robbins, a special permission, granted by the Jerome Robbins Foundation and Trust, is needed to access the materials. Another permission is required for photocopying. Taking photos of some of the materials, such as Robbins' fascinating diaries from the 1970s and early 1980s, filled with his illustrations, pressed leaves and flowers, feathers and pieces of wood and thin metal, and collages of ticket stubs and photos, is prohibited (see Figures 1 and 2). Some of these materials I might see once in my life. These steps of acquiring permission make the time spent *in* the archives, in the presence of the materials, even more precious. If my mind is cluttered and attention distracted, I will miss important information.

JEROME ROBBINS' ARCHIVES

Both my mind and my body need to be ready and sensitive to embark on the research process. Entering an archival collection might feel like opening a treasure trove but one can get lost in them, especially if the collections are large. Robbins' archives are voluminous. His Personal Papers collection alone includes 171 archival boxes.³ There is a separate collection of materials relating to the production of his Broadway shows, ballets, his years of experimental work at the American Theater Lab, and his work as a movie director – 578 boxes! Another collection exists of his drawings and photography. Yet another of his interviews and rehearsal recordings. This abundance of materials can easily become overwhelming. Bodily intuition and bodily sensations can help navigate this vast amount of disparate materials.

One of my first encounters with Robbins' writings was a journal entry he wrote on 5 July 1987. He was sitting in a little market square in Spoleto, Italy, having breakfast and looking at a constant flow of people passing by. All of a sudden, he had a vision of his friends and colleagues who had recently died. He wrote:

At first, as I craned my head around, it flashed on me, without a moment's rational thought, that it was Edith, who could be there, very simply, alive again, in this town at this moment, passing thru. And that there was, on consideration, not a thing odd, wrong, or unreal about it.



Figure 1: Jerome Robbins diaries, 1971–1984, Volume 16, 1976. *The Jerome Robbins Personal Papers*, (S) *MGZMD 228, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Rights Trust/ The Jerome Robbins Foundation, Inc.

There, in Spoleto, I would easily be visited by all who had passed on, and there wouldn't be anything extraordinary about it. As I thought that, I could see Nora coming down that hill street, all glowing with humor & delight at bumping into me; I could see Tommy walk by & say Hi & talk a little & nothing would be forced or portentous. David Herton, Tudor, Ronnie Bates, Michael Bennet, Joe Dulle ... -- But it was all with a safe security, without fuss or dream or psychic phenomena that this very visitation to a heaven came about. I knew this moment would pass – but there, under a cage outdoor umbrella, sipping tea, watching the world pass by, came a special time which, like a current of different temperature water in a moving stream, woven into the current and out again, came this special and real visit from those who had died.

(Jerome Robbins Personal Papers, Box 22, Folder 'Ives, etc')

The naturalness and ordinariness of this moment left Robbins stunned. 'And I thought – maybe this is what Paradise is like – the place one goes to see all one's loved ones again', he reflected in the same entry on 5 July 1987 (Jerome

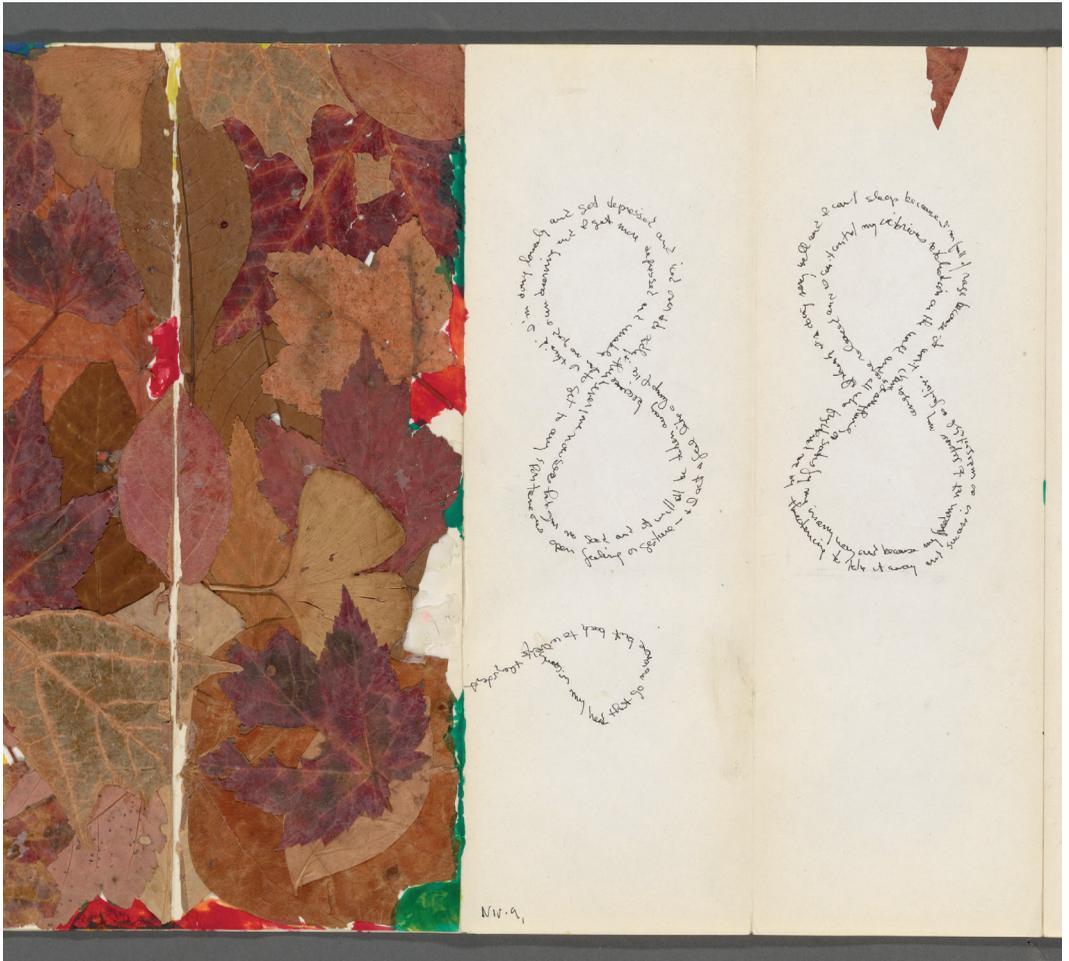


Figure 2: Jerome Robbins diaries, 1971–1984. Volume 20, 1978. *The Jerome Robbins Personal Papers*, (S) *MGZMD 228, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Courtesy of the Jerome Robbins Rights Trust/ The Jerome Robbins Foundation, Inc.

Robbins Personal Papers, Box 22, Folder 'Ives, etc'). In the following entries, he wrote how he talked about this incident at Nora Kaye's memorial service and could not stop holding back tears for days.

Reading this experience of an angelic visitation moved me emotionally and physically. I felt a physical sensation of stirring, softening and a small ache in the middle of my chest. I knew – my body knew – that I wanted to return to this journal entry. I wanted to write about it. I understood at that moment that one reason I am drawn to Robbins' writings is that they connect me to my heart, not just metaphorically but on the level of the actual physical organ. His writings evoke heartfulness in me – a combination of the physical sensation of stirring and aliveness in my chest and emotions of empathy with his humanity and his honesty about his feelings. This effect of heartfulness solidified my intent to pursue writing about his creativity in multiple expressive genres.

The felt connection between Robbins' writings from decades ago and me researching them in the twenty-first century enlivens my imagination, helps

me through several years of research, writing and publication hurdles, and prevents me from abandoning the project. Theorist Michel Foucault talked about kinetic, physical experiences in the archives in terms of ‘resonance’: ‘I admit that these accounts, which have suddenly leapt across two and a half centuries of silence, have resonated with something deep inside of me, more than what we ordinarily call literature’ (Foucault 1977: 13). This approach to resonance is akin to my somatic experience with Robbins’ archives, similarly a deep bodily and emotional response to the materials, many of which were composed before my birth. Historian Arlette Farge writes that during these moments, the past reaches into the present: ‘When exploring these sources you can find yourself thinking that you are no longer working with the dead – although history remains first and foremost an encounter with death. The material is so vivid that it calls both for emotional engagement and for reflection’ (Farge 2013: 8). Ann Cooper Albright writes about ‘touching history’ and being touched by it in return. ‘To be touched by history directs the research process into a perceptual experience, the measure of which cannot easily be quantified in terms of facts or dates,’ she notes (Albright 2018b: 73).

Archival research is about touch in both abstract and physical sense. Working with archival materials is not only visual – in terms of the researcher seeing, reading, and looking at texts and other materials – but also haptic. As I touch Robbins’ diaries from the 1970s to the early 1980s, covered in a cotton fabric in patterns of squares, triangles or and circles, in blues, whites, reds, greens and orange, figuring out where the beginning and end are can be a challenge and takes some manipulation. Having no spine, they unfold like accordions. I turn one volume upside down, start reading from one cover, only to realize that this is chronologically the end of the diary. Robbins’ handwritten words, in yellow, pink, red, blue, black and green ink, are placed horizontally, diagonally, in coiling spirals, in waves, or in vertical block formations. I have to move the diary and/or move my reading body. As I slide my fingers over his handwriting, I feel like I know something about the rhythm of his thoughts. Gliding my hand over a blanket of red and brown pressed leaves, glued on top of one another across two journal pages, and sensing their ‘veins’ under my fingers, I feel like I know something about the way in which he looked at and loved nature.

This knowledge that I gain through touch and the movements of my own body in relation to the diaries is tacit and subconscious, kinetic and embodied. Many of the archival materials are being digitized. Researchers do not necessarily need to travel to the archives but can access a lot of the materials at home. The digitization of archival materials can make the research processes quicker and more efficient – for example, one can do a focused search for key words or dates and save time. However, as dance scholar Lynn Matluck Brooks has pointed out, the absence of direct contact with the original, singular document which was touched, owned or created by the figure one studies, can feel like a loss for the researcher (Brooks 2019). With digital materials, we see the documents, on the screen, with our eyes only. We cannot touch or hold them or feel how these materials could impact us as embodied beings. In the archives, however, we have a chance to know the materials with the different senses that are available to us.

CONCLUSION

The somatic approach to research, where the researcher constantly tunes into his/her physical sensations, can appear by necessity subjective and idiosyncratic, as it emanates from the researcher’s embodied experience. The

researcher's process of conducting research could be aided by paying attention to what is happening in the body and in the subtle physical sensations as the researcher is connecting to the materials. I do not suggest that the entire research and writing process should stem from physical observations. However, a somatic approach can serve as a guide, a compass. The aliveness of physical sensations in response to the materials can signal potent starting points. For those struggling with the blank page syndrome or lack of inspiration or the feeling of being 'blocked', physically grounded writing and research can provide a helpful flow to start and stay connected to the creative process.

My ability to be aware of physical sensations as I work in the archives is linked to dance because I would not be able to be aware of these sensations if I did not dance. Through somatic dance and somatic strength training, I am constantly aware of my physical, embodied self. The somatic skills honed in the classroom and the studio enable me to tap into the knowledge of the body in other contexts. As I have discussed in this article and in reference to my experience in archival research, I bring my somatic skills of noticing physical sensations into my work as a researcher. I consult with my physical, embodied knowledge as I choose the topic and the materials and keep tapping into physical knowledge as I move through the processes of gathering and synthesizing research and writing. Even though I cannot physically dance in the archives, my body remembers the traces of the dance I did in the morning or the day before. I feel how the body is alive, awake and aware. Somatics teachers can draw their students' attention to whether and how their somatic knowledge can transfer to other contexts: they can ask students to step into their seemingly 'non-somatic' life situations with somatic tools and reflect upon the outcomes. Somatics training in inner awareness and physical sensations can make the skills of how to transfer somatic knowledge available to a wide audience – beyond dancers and choreographers – and enable somatic practitioners make stronger connections between their movement practices and other pursuits in life. By adopting a somatic approach to conducting research, writing, creating art, or engaging in another profession, we become more alive to what touches us and how our work and presence can touch others.

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