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***SKINNER RELEASING TECHNIQUE: A MOVEMENT AND DANCE PRACTICE, MANNY A. EMSLIE (ED.) (2021)***

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*Reviewed by Penny Collinson, Somatic Movement Educator and Therapist*

*Skinner Releasing Technique: A Movement and Dance Practice*, edited by Manny A. Emslie, is a response to questions and curiosities about the origins and development of Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT). There are relatively few books on SRT and a strength of this one is that the 21 chapters are written by practitioners who share their experiences of SRT and how it has influenced their work and lives. The book covers a wide range of themes from the nature of learning to poetic imagery. It is also a deeply respectful book full of love for Joan Skinner and her work, and made more timely given her recent death in 2021.

In Emslie's introduction, we learn about Joan's life and career. Affectionately described as 'petite and delicate in stature yet huge in presence', she is remembered for her tactile demonstrations, her use of teaching aids (such as a feather duster and toy snake) and the ways she approached her teaching practice that 'presented a lightness, a hint of fun and good humour' (Emslie 2021: 1). Emslie describes how Joan (as she is named throughout the book) guided and corrected participants with 'integrity, skill, assurance and precision' (2021: 2), ensuring the next generation of teachers would be fully embodied and teach from a position of direct experience. Joan is recognized as empathic and compassionate having 'enormous dignity and grace yet was humble and never sought out recognition or accolades' (Emslie 2021: 2). We read that after performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and later having a spinal injury, Joan became deeply engaged in the Alexander Technique, which enabled her to experience posture and alignment, let go of muscular tension and find freer movement of the joints. Integrating Alexander Technique with movement required slowing

down, holding and shifting attention, and moving skeletally rather than muscularly. This approach invited her to move with more freedom and less effort, principles that were to profoundly influence SRT. Early in its evolution SRT established its pedagogy and scripted classes with terms given to specific activities, and the book has a glossary to support the reader's understanding.

The use of imagery to support kinaesthetic awareness is central to SRT. Throughout the book, this imagery is explored through embodiment, choreography, theatre and costume making. Imagery in SRT pedagogy is drawn from nature, and scripted in succinct poetic phrases Joan referred to as 'haikus', which are intended to be embodied whilst either resting in stillness or being expressed in movement. In Chapter 13, 'A journey towards materiality' (2021: 160–176), Sally Dean writes how '[t]he poetic image acts as a portal, interweaving the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, reality and imaginary', and goes on to describe how the poetic image 'is a threshold, a place of transformation' (Dean 2021: 162).

The diverse viewpoints presented in the chapters indicate that SRT operates on many levels – physical, physiological, psychological, emotional and intellectual. SRT is described as a dance technique, and through the writing we appreciate how the 'principles' and 'components' (terms used within SRT to denote specific activities) prepare and support a material felt sense of the body through releasing, alignment, awareness and imagery. It seems to me that this level of bodily awareness is important to the dancer as they begin to work deeply with imagery and enter more sensory, imaginative and potentially transcendent realms.

Each activity, over time, aims to support participants in letting go of habitual and formulaic ways of generating movement. Lizzie Le Quesne's chapter, 'Manifesting dance' (2021: 94–107), considers how the process of SRT can develop kinaesthetic awareness as a tool for sensing, transforming and vitalizing embodied states of being (95), and writes of immersive processes that bring imagination, language, place and memory to felt experience (96). She describes one particularly significant class in which her body arrived into a twisted, contorted position that felt 'vividly, uncannily familiar' (Le Quesne 2021: 97). Going on Le Quesne explains, 'I stayed there sometime, consciously getting to know the form and feeling' and, although unable to understand more at the time, she writes of unearthing 'a visceral truth embedded within my system and my history' (2021: 97). The physiological and emotional resonance of the bodily position and movements that had occurred stayed powerfully with Le Quesne and through reflective processes of drawing, writing, speaking and moving, she was able to piece together more consciously the root and personal meaning the experience held. Though disorientating at the time, she writes that this profound and invaluable process informed her 'experiential place in the world and in [her] physicality' (98). I am struck by Le Quesne's phenomenological accounts of embodiment and the visceral experiences of moving which capture her lived experience, and the playful, sensorial and spiritual effects of SRT. For Le Quesne (and others in the book), SRT both enriches and transmutes the act and the meaning of dance 'because the soma is

awoken to its own desires, [...] the fluent initiative of the body takes over' and 'felt textures stir the tissues of the physical body in ways that conscious intention cannot' (Le Quesne 2021: 99).

I equally appreciated Stephanie Skura's chapter, 'A non-linear approach to being alive' (2021: 31–39), that presents SRT as a revolutionary approach to learning that acknowledges an individual's innate creativity and intuitive abilities. Contrary to Skura's earlier dance training, in SRT, 'the complexity of consciousness did not need to be ignored' (Skura 2021: 36). For Skura, SRT is not just about dance or a focus on outer reality but on realms of consciousness and interconnectivity with the world in which 'the self is part of something much larger' (36). I have run a master's degree in somatic movement education for the past decade, and recognize the hunger in students for training and research to include intuition, felt sense and the presence of the unconscious in all processes. Skura concludes, 'there seems no doubt [SRT] foresaw the big ideas of the 21st Century: the web-like nature of reality, a broad acceptance of the subconscious as another plane of reality; the inter-connectedness of all things' (2021: 35).

I am also interested in facilitation and Julie Nathmaniesz's chapter, 'Attending to details of difference' (2021: 81–93), focuses on her work with mixed-ability dance. Her reflections on authority, roles, leadership and facilitation in SRT, and how they dialogue with Dance Movement Therapy, improvisation and somatic practices is fascinating. She draws connections between SRT and polyvagal theory and neuroceptive processes such as guiding dancers to stillness, rest and full-bodied dancing. SRT experiments with ways of cultivating safety and containment for participants through vocal tone, stress and rhythm and the light dynamic of the voice. Furthermore, in SRT, emotions, feelings and affect states are implicit and dancers are encouraged to observe and consciously track these channels in themselves. Interestingly, Nathmaniesz points out there is no expectation that the dancer in SRT should do anything with what they observe other than be in relationship to it. The dancer has 'permission to linger and to be sensing and feeling without disclosure' (2021: 85). It seems to me that the pedagogy of SRT provides a strong frame within which personal experiences can be explored safely, without SRT explicitly being a therapy.

Sally Metcalf's chapter 'How to disappear completely' (2021: 17–30) and Theresa Moriarty's 'My time with Joan' (2021: 267–78) both stress the rigour of Skinner's Teacher Training Programme and the primary responsibility that teachers hold to embody the techniques themselves. Emslie's chapter 'Dancing the world with an ethical compass' (2021: 236–49) reinforces the premise that one's understanding of the practice can only be reached through direct experience and connecting with one's inner state. Emslie suggests that SRT is an 'emworlding' and ethical practice (2021: 244). Some of the authors describe how they have cultivated their own teaching methods and training programmes, influenced by SRT and Joan's vision of the *psychophysical self* not as fixed or resistant but rather as adaptive, changeable, empathic and committed to guiding participants towards the realization of their freedom.

At a time when people globally are experiencing physical, relational challenges, and seeking ways to sustain creative communities, this book is inspiring. It shares the knowledge these seasoned practitioners hold and I was left invigorated, compelled through a sense of urgency to keep dance and imagination at the centre of my life.

### **Contributor details**

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