

# A Conversation with Gill Clarke

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## **A conversation with Gill Clarke**

**Sara Reed**, Coventry University

### **Abstract**

In this interview with Gill Clarke she discusses her role as a dance artist, her dance training and background and the influence that somatic practice had on her dancing, teaching and advocacy. The interview highlights the significant contribution that Gill made in exposing and sharing the potential and value of somatic informed dance education. I hope that it also adequately highlights the tremendous contribution that Gill's work had on the development of independent dance in the United Kingdom and the organization which grew to support independent dance and dancers.<sup>1</sup> Gill Clarke's discovery of somatic practice changed her whole understanding of the dancing body and dance pedagogy and subsequently her influence on somatic informed dance education in the United Kingdom.

### **Keywords**

Gill Clarke

somatic - education

postmodern/new-dance

This interview and conversation with Gill Clarke (1954–2011) was undertaken in 2002 as part of my ongoing research on somatic informed dance education. The intention was to explore the place, role and value of somatic practice alongside dance training and education in the United Kingdom. The work involved interviewing a number of seminal dance practitioners, who were training during the X6<sup>2</sup> and post-X6

period. The majority of these dance practitioners had experienced a range of training seen as typical of the eclectic style of the late twentieth and, now, twenty-first century and as a direct result of postmodern and New Dance influences. On the whole, these practitioners were studying and training whilst in their 20s and during the mid 1980s at the time that *New Dance* magazine was still being published in the United Kingdom; their dancing identities were therefore considerably shaped by the challenges presented by postmodern/New Dance. The interviews were semi-structured with the same specific questions asked of each practitioner and this structure also allowed for an element of free conversation.

The interview with Gill Clarke took place at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance, in Laurie Grove, New Cross, London [now known as Trinity Laban].<sup>3</sup> The interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author and checked and endorsed by Gill for use in my writing. I am more than thankful for her time and, as always, her enormous generosity.

Gill's work was seminal to the, then, burgeoning interest in and understanding of the pedagogical philosophy behind somatic informed dance education in the United Kingdom. The conversation below, highlights a number of pertinent issues from that time, many of which may still be considered as on-going today. A particular concern was how best to educate and train independent dancers for the twenty-first century and the challenge that this raised in relation to the, then current, dominant approaches to learning and creativity in dance.

Gill Clarke (1954–2011) was, as many will know, a seminal and highly articulate dancer and dance practitioner with an absolute passion for teaching and sharing her practice and knowledge. Gill studied English and Education at University whilst continuing to dance. As a performer, she danced with Janet Smith, Rosemary Butcher, Rosemary Lee and Siobhan Davies. She was a founder member of the Siobhan Davies Dance Company from 1988, where she stayed until 1999. Gill was not only a dancer and teacher but also a choreographer, creative advisor and dance advocate. She made a very significant contribution to the world of independent dance, to which she belonged, through the development of *Independent Dance*, where she was co-director [1996 until 2011] with Fiona Millward. She was appointed MBE in 1998 and received the Jane Attenborough Dance UK industry award in 2011 (*Guardian* newspaper, Gill Clarke Obituary 2011).

During her work with the Siobhan Davies Dance Company, from the 1980s, Gill experienced a range of practices, such as the Alexander Technique, Klein- influenced work and the Feldenkrais method, amongst other bodywork practices. For her, as for many other dancers at that time, the introduction of somatic practices into dance training changed her whole understanding of the dancing body. Most significantly for dance education this area of work drove Gill's absolute commitment to sharing her practice and knowledge with others and thus she was integral to the shaping of somatic informed dance education in the United Kingdom. Alongside these changes in ways of working she also discovered Todd's seminal work *The Thinking Body* (1937) and Sweigard's *Ideokinetic Facilitation* (1974) and, consequently, awareness training had a huge influence on her development as a dancer, dance maker and in particular as a dance pedagogue (Reed 2011). A key part of Gill Clarke's work as a

dance practitioner, was as a teacher and her particular passion for teaching was so very obvious; in the studio, her conversation and her writing. Gill Clarke was a professional dancer, choreographer, teacher, writer and dance advocate.

### **Interview transcript**

Date of interview: 22 March 2002 conducted by Sara Reed

*Sara Reed (SR): Can you tell me about your background, dance education and training and whether somatics has had a particular influence on your training and education?*

**Gill Clarke (GC):** Well it didn't, although I have always been curious and interested in the level of sensation of movement as well as form and shape. I never thought about the inside and the structure of the body at all! I'd think about weight and flow, but it was a door I couldn't wait to have opened. I used to go to performances at X6 and places like that and I'd go to see improvisation and think, there are qualities here that we 'technical people' haven't got a grasp on and yet there is an articulation that we have that these people have no interest in and it seemed to me that the exciting place was somewhere in the middle and somehow those things should draw on each other; there were layers of knowledge that were important for a dancer. So, really the door opened for me when I started working for Siobhan [Sue] Davies and that was because of what she had just done in that year she had in America.

*SR: Was that the Wyoming trip?*

**GC:** Yes, exactly. Unfortunately, I came into the process just four days before the show, so I missed all of that exploration and ‘rolling around on the floor’ as Sue called it, but then it was just this door that I was ready to rush through, not that one would have seen it very quickly in my dancing. So that was an opportunity to work with Scott Clark (who was just doing his Feldenkrais training) which was fabulous and we had a few sessions with an Alexander teacher, who I then kept contact with. The other person was Jeremy Nelson from New York who had worked a lot with Susan Klein. Working with Scott was about sensation, but also about perception and the active engagement of body and mind. I had sensed movement through my body before, but I’d just never thought into my body and about my own connected moving structure. So, to work with Scott, the movements and the complex coordinations like jigsaw puzzles for the mind and body; and then the ‘one to one’ sessions where he would send messages and questions through the body were exciting and wonderfully affirmative and helped me begin a process of re-patterning and integration. The radically different thing with Jeremy was that he started by talking about the skeleton, and gave very clear directions to move from the bones, rather than a sense of shape or musculature. And that, as I sensed it, changed my body and my movement in the two weeks that he taught us class. Because also I think I was really, as we all are, quite asymmetrical, I had an unbalanced pelvis and my body just didn’t often feel like an open channel for movement (not that I would have expressed it like that at that time). By just taking my mind’s eye to directing the body’s structure rather than maybe trying to ‘fix’ the bits, then I had the power to put that all back together.

**SR:** *Do you think, you simply didn’t know that your body wasn’t in the place where you wanted it to be?*

**GC:** I probably thought about musculature you know. I saw my body in bits and would get some of them ‘clicked out’ every now and then at the osteopath; not that I had any major problems but touring was hard back then with concrete floors, cold, driving and loading the van!

But to get back to the exploration, it went on also through my reading and my own reflection; just realizing that we do all this repetition and practise and we think we’re going to improve but actually until we think differently we’re never going to improve, we have to address the message we are sending from the brain to the muscles. So, I immediately got off on Mabel Todd’s *The Thinking Body*, which became a bible, I had to keep going back to it because it was so dense. The penny really dropped about the importance of the nervous system in movement with Lulu Sweigard’s book and that idea that actually you could change things by doing nothing, by just thinking and imagining and this linked back to Mabel Todd and the Ideokinetic heritage.

In a way that is what happened in the work with Jeremy; instead of just reinforcing my same old habits I had taken my mind into the structure to move it differently, so then I was off on a journey that went every which way it could really. For example, I went to the Susan Klein studio, certainly Alexander, certainly continuing with Scott Clark (Feldenkrais). Those strands really remained the strongest for me. I then really got off on exploring things about structure for myself but not in a dry analytical or abstract way but starting from experience, finding what made sense and what new questions were raised, and then going back to the books to try and understand more about it and then back to the practice. My teaching has always been a learning place

because it's a time for you to explore but also you get so much visual feedback that makes you think about how you could approach things differently, what language and activity seems to work, and what could I say in different words – finding other words. And I think through teaching, which is a sort of passion of mine, I more and more realize that it is not what I do but it's what I say that makes a difference; how I say it may be, how to come at the same idea differently or how not to do everything all at once, to have patience, at least to be simpler, clearer, about the instruction to refine the quality of attention and therefore the benefit and change.

*SR: Do you use visual images at all?*

**GC:** Yes, I do. When I teach intensive courses, I take a journey through the body and I do that with the help of pictures and so far, I have found that more useful than having a skeleton to demonstrate on. I found this surprising: I once did use a skeleton which was very stiff and immobile and so, I don't know, the image it was putting into my head was not useful not conducive to movement or articulation somehow. But also (pondered) maybe we're used to seeing a skeleton and we think 'oh yes that's how it is' but when you see a two-dimensional picture you have to make the translation and engage with it more actively, or maybe you simply take a snapshot and keep a mental picture in your memory. I retain that image in my head whereas the image of the skeleton is more complicated and it has all the background noise around it, it's very hard to take a simple snapshot.

*SR: What sort of images do you use with people that you are teaching?*

**GC:** I'm always looking through anatomy books to try and find good pictures, often they're too gruesome and not appropriate or they're too drawn and two-dimensional. The best ones I have found are the seventeenth century etchings, which just have a sense of volume and real humanity about them! So, I keep trying to add to that collection because it feels important to have a range of pictures of any aspect of the body, just as a reminder that none of them is us and that we are all different. Especially if I go back and teach people again and I apologize that I haven't found any others images or the right one.

***SR:** Before you came across all of these different ways of thinking about how you were moving, did you have a traditional type of dance training?*

**GC:** I did ballet as a child and performed quite a lot, I didn't have a three-year dance training at all but I studied a bit of Graham and a bit of Cunningham and a bit of Hawkins and I was influenced then by the people I was working with. Sometimes I think that maybe the plus side of that was, apart from the ballet as a child, my body didn't get ingrained with one technique. I did come back to ballet from a particular perspective at one stage but I was really aware that I had to leave it because that sense of coordination, arms and legs together and spiral and top of the body, was what my body came out with, it was the only language it knew how to speak in a way, it was ingrained deep in my muscle-memory and I needed to try and get away from it.

***SR:** I think what I'm quite interested in as well is, going back a little bit, to where you talked about finding the midway place. That is, the very technical approach to dancing and then the complete opposite of the spectrum with a lot of floor work and*

*little 'technical' input – in the more traditional sense. With the sort of students that you are working with, students who are coming to train as dancers, what place do you start with them when quite often they come, as you were saying, with that one language that they can relate to; so, where do you start?*

**CG:** That's a really interesting question, let me say first of all that what really excited me about this way of working was, that I felt I became more technically able and more articulate. I was more aware of what my body was doing. I couldn't believe that somehow, I had been performing for that many years and I wasn't as clear as I had imagined about what my whole body was doing. So that's what I think is really exciting about this work, I mean it's not new at all but it is still new to some dancers who have been dancing technically for a long time. Quite often I teach people who are just tasting this approach for the first time but have been contemporary or classical dancers for ages and then interesting debates often take place about that idea that release is confused with relaxed and if I am not pulling up, how can I be supported and in control? Some people ask, 'well this is very interesting work but what do you do for strength, do you go to the gym?' And I say 'no, actually, this work for me is about strength, and connection is about strength and integration'.

So then with the revised BA course<sup>4</sup> that I have been involved with, and which we have only started this year, we have five weeks called Fundamental Skills. It was almost like a mini foundation course and we gave the students, to begin with, three hours a day of what we called 'experiential anatomy into contemporary technique'. Those issues you mention are quite right, how to introduce this way of working to dance students at the point where it feels to me most beneficial. Because it can be the

tools that they need to go forward and build on strong foundations of better movement patterning.

But for some their sense of dancing is ‘steps’, so by having that period of time it was very challenging for them and some of them found it difficult but there would always be a technique class included as well, as a reference point in a way. But there was also bodywork and I think that they felt that the information and exploration, and the knowledge that they gained about themselves, was going to be useful to them allowing them to question things they had just taken for granted before.

If anything, some of the teaching staff who had them afterwards said that they were almost too questioning, sometimes they just have to be told to try it and find out! I taught them and also a colleague who starts from a Laban and BMC<sup>5</sup> perspective so we were teaching from a different stance. Observation in other institutions as well has reinforced for me that the important thing in gaining this embodied understanding is time and you can’t short-change that. The value is not in concepts or terminology, it’s something that has to be experienced to be of subsequent use and you can’t do that without time. That investment will then be richly rewarded. Recently I watched a technique teacher/colleague who I really respect because she has been questioning how she teaches and wants to address different qualities with students. I saw her, just as a reminder to the students, wanting to try and get them into a ‘sensing’ state before they started her class, and that was really valid. However, I thought that actually these students really need to have had an experience that they can then remember and tap into, so until something has actually got beyond the head and actually sunk into the body it only remains abstract and an attempt to imitate the look of a sensation.

*SR: She was just talking about sensation?*

**GC:** No, she was giving them a bodywork experience but it was very brief and it just got me thinking about how important time is at some point, and maybe that is the beginning point of their training. For instance, I visited another institution and we did a whole two-hour session that was really just getting the students breathing and sensing their spines. If anyone had looked through the door they would have thought that we were doing nothing much but if it hadn't taken time they wouldn't have had a sensation to work from. The feedback from them was that they had felt something differently at rest and in their dancing which they could then articulate, more or less well, and now it was something that was theirs to use. It's not the information per se that's useful that is here in a book for example; it is only a tool to you once you've experienced it through the body-mind. This sounds horribly exclusive and elusive – it's not – it just requires the time of the body and not just the mind.

*SR: What stage were those students at, the ones you were just talking about, that you did the spine and breathing work with?*

**GC:** That was interesting, they were third and then first year and I felt that, for third-year, it was almost a different issue and it was something about how to be able to get through the muscle to the bone, even though they had an intellectual maturity. With the first-year it might have been just a little bit more of a willingness to go to a strange place. Actually, they were a very open group but there is, sometimes, which is the initial response of that idea, that this just isn't dance. But I think therefore one

needs to give them experiences where they are their own feedback. At this point, it's not about saying to the students 'good' because it's about the correct execution of form but it is about quality of the sensation. I think that it just requires time and I think that's hard and, certainly, I think there are people who really question its value; probably because they have watched sessions where they cannot see a lot of action because all the processing is happening internally.

*SR: Students or colleagues?*

**GC:** I was thinking of colleagues, who have just taught in a very different way and feel that it's not teaching the students any vocabulary – or three years is so short one needs to be getting there already – to some finished place.

*SR: I think what is interesting is why can't it make a difference to those people (students) much earlier on in their lives, why do they have to wait so long?*

**GC:** I think people sometimes say 'isn't this something that one needs to come to later?'. I think they are saying that because what they see out there is dancers who have come to this work later but that is only because it wasn't around before (in their training). But if we have got knowledge and information then we should pass it on to our students as soon as we possibly can. The problem is more that these young students come to training with a different sense of what dance is. What we need to do is feed the information in there, but accept where they are, because as children we have that embodied intelligence and as we grow we lose it.

I did a lot of watching last year and I watched third-years with visiting choreographers and I felt that they didn't have a body intelligence that they could take to whatever was given to them. I sensed there were patterns in their bodies or habits in their bodies that they should have learnt more about by now, so that they could adapt to new and different situations because if they don't learn now there is no future opportunity like this.

*SR: Three-years intensive dance training and education?*

**GC:** Exactly and if you don't reconnect, integrate the body early on what you are doing is reinforcing bad habits intensively for three years.

*SR: Do you talk to them about that?*

**GC:** Yes, I do at the beginning.

*SR: And they understand it?*

**GC:** Yes, I think so and it was a new experience for me to teach undergraduates so intensively, so it was a learning curve for me as well and I think that I would do it better next time. I did do more straightforward technique classes than I would have done if I had not have been doing the bodywork. I felt that they needed a balance of activity, and they need to be able to feel that this can feed into 'proper dancing' in their terms, and in a way that is the freedom that time gave them because if I had just

had a slightly extended class I maybe wouldn't have done either thing well. In this way, they did the 'dancing' as well which is important.

*SR: Does there need to be the right influence throughout the faculty?*

**GC:** I think so.

*SR: For this ethos to run throughout the curriculum?*

**CG:** I think so. One thing that we find is that there is never enough time to get to the bottom of these issues but there were really interesting discussions with colleagues when we started trying to feed into workshops with each other. There are so many things about language and how we use terminology, not that we should all be teaching the same thing at all to the students. We should try to help them to make sense of things that appear contradictory, for example if they have been told to 'pull up and hold', how can we explain that to them when the terminology is different in different classes? We can try to help them see that sometimes those language things are short cuts because you can't say in one count 'send the floor away and send your head out' and sometimes the classes are about different aesthetics and the student has to be able to find their own perspective. I think letting faculty staff share and exchange practice is important. We've done this a bit and hope to do it much more: share experiences but again give each other experiences because, as I say, it's not about a concept that has any value other than a physical experience.

*SR: Yes, that is one of the things that I am trying to get to as well, which is why I think the only way I can get to it is by talking to people and talking to students – what is the value of this area of work with the body?*

**GC:** I think that there are some more philosophical pedagogical issues with it as well. I think some students have more trouble with it and sometimes this can be an issue. Some of them, whatever their age, have a maturity to really be dying to learn, to take ownership of that, to be their own dancer and others are really just waiting for someone to say ‘do this and one and two and’.

*SR: Yes, teach me, I’ll listen, I’ll copy but I don’t want to have to work this out for myself.*

**GC:** Yes; and those people have had more trouble, they feel the need for more individual feedback and want to have somebody driving them.

*SR: And can be quite resistant?*

**GC:** Yes. There’s another discussion going on simultaneously throughout the faculty as, in a way, we’re trying to see how, as a higher education institution, we can empower these learners and I think that that is not traditionally the way that dance is being taught. But personally, that doesn’t really go along with my notion of how dancers should be and behave. One thing that I have perceived through teaching professionals and recent graduates is that they find it hard to adjust into a world in which they require initiative when they are going to be freelance, if they have always

had somebody shouting at them and without that framework, they don't know what to do.

*SR: Without a director?*

**GC:** Yes. The real issue is about which way one should go, should one start by being very authoritarian and then lead them to take more responsibility or should one be trying to encourage that from the beginning? My personal view is that you have got to try to encourage that from the beginning but I think I believe that it will have good results in the end and it just might be that they are slightly less obedient students which isn't necessarily the most comfortable to teach.

*SR: This is a good thing, certainly in terms of people who do things and question and find out and go on and do more?*

**GC:** Yes.

*SR: When you hear that word somatics or somatic practice, what do you think of / what does it mean to you?*

**GC:** To me it means about – it's my sensation and it's coming from the inside rather than from imitation, so it's about *my* experience and *my* body moving – as the term might imply as an adjective – more about the 'how' than the 'what'.

*SR: Which practices would you put under the umbrella of somatic practices?*

**GC:** I would put all of those things like Alexander and Feldenkrais and BMC and probably things like martial arts and Yoga, and even Pilates, depending always on how they are taught. Even Graham and Cunningham can be taught somatically.

***SR:** Are they two different things, technique and Somatic Practice? If you look at what you said about your way of teaching?*

**GC:** They can be delivered separately but I feel that one is absolutely a tool for the other and they should therefore be put together. What is technique for? It's not an end in itself, it's trying to make your body available to you as an instrument and, surely, it's about your body moving because, thinking about undergraduates, there isn't one vocabulary that you are teaching them that they are going to go out and use. Traditional technique class was always the teaching of language and form as a way of teaching skills, of course we also used to think, as we taught ballet for example, we are teaching them the steps and getting the movements more and more complex and the coordinations and the terminology and knowing the terminology and concepts – so that they can use them per se – in different combinations and contexts.

***SR:** You think they shouldn't be separate?*

**GC:** We think that they shouldn't be. But that's about shared experience, one can't suddenly force everybody to use a certain language or think about the movements that way. I believe this work can be used – I happen to use it for a particular style of dancing but I believe that it can be useful and appropriate to any style. So, one

wouldn't suddenly want to have students that could only move in a certain way, that's not the point, but to try and empower them with an embodied movement intelligence.

*SR: That's why trying to get first years involved is so important really.*

**GC:** I think so – it makes me feel very old but my sense of myself going to university was that I was adult and I had to take responsibility in this experience, I didn't expect to be spoon fed and I think because of how we sometimes treat dancers as children we are not prepared for that. Surely, as an art form, we should expect that we get to the point where dance can be a serious discipline that it is appropriate to be at university level where students are meant to engage in it in an adult and intelligent way. So, part of what makes it sometimes problematic is what their experience has been to date.

*SR: And why they have come to be dancers?*

**GC:** Yes.

*SR: Why are they here?*

**GC:** I think that's what is interesting with first years, few of them said, after the first term, 'I'm not quite sure now whether maybe I only want to go to class and enjoy dancing and that's all'. So, there was something that they appreciated, maybe really early on, I'm not saying that they wouldn't have felt the same with any content that they had but, 'wow this is serious isn't it and I've got to work hard'. Whereas this wasn't their image of what dance was.

*SR: That is that dance is just fun, something I have done in my spare time?*

**GC:** Yes.

*SR: If you were designing the perfect curriculum over three years, how would you integrate Somatic Practice?*

**GC:** This is really interesting, I think that it is partly reliant on the context. In a large institution, with a wide breadth of students, one has a responsibility to nurture students who have a great versatility. So, maybe if one had an intake of twenty, one would want to do something really specialist, but I think a larger institution has to be broad and give many choices. I think in my curriculum Somatic Practice would continue to be what they do first, as a foundation, as tools and then it would drip feed through and maybe have an intensive input again at the beginning of the second year and drip feed through and again at the beginning of the third year. Gradually I think I would give the students more choice as much as that were possible, not straightaway because there would be a tendency to only do what you were good at, but by the third year you think that they should be able to know the kind of dancing they want to be doing.

One thing we do is that one of my colleagues, who teaches experiential anatomy, gives an 'intervention' within the first-year ballet class, because somatic-based work is first met within contemporary dance class and we wanted to try and make sure that it also connected to ballet. Students have found that really helpful and we would like

it a little bit more often but logistically that means overlaps of teachers and it is not so easy. I think it would be useful, but again it is a logistics problem of timetable etc., to have a day's intensive now and again. It is not just about how much time one has in terms of days and weeks but it is about time within an individual session and, personally, I find it really hard to teach in an hour and a half, I can't feel that I am teaching.

*SR: You cut off at a point where you feel that you are just about to get going?*

**GC:** Either I don't go deep enough and slow enough or I don't get through to moving enough, it is one or the other.

*SR: Does that mean that we have to think differently about how we teach dance at this level? It's hard within a modular system, in relation to learning and teaching.*

**GC:** I remember when we were just beginning to go into that system, thinking how are we going to do this – ah!

I was just going to say, in terms of thinking about different ways that we can teach; there are more ways that we can do something really valuable in an hour and a half. Sometimes we are really stuck in an idea about, say within technique, having to do A-Z every class and if we were to open that up a little bit too. Since we now know that we don't learn through repetition but we obviously learn from practice but actually it's about thinking differently isn't it? We could work on one theme for whatever period of time. But that is only possible somehow once you've built your foundation.

*SR: Maybe some people just come to it later because there just isn't, or wasn't, the opportunity.*

**GC:** Absolutely but, given everything we've talked about, why go through three years reinforcing bad habits, somehow it has got to be sorted. I know I've had professionals; experienced professionals come and say, 'why didn't I know this before?' People would say, 'yeah, but they're professionals and they're mature, they can say that'. But certainly, some things [...] just simple things like, I used to do balances on one leg through sheer willpower and how easy it became, relatively, when I thought, well actually this is physics and I've got to balance this over that, and, this is my body, not some abstract ideal, so surely that's a tool.

*SR: Very much so, it isn't just that. I think there is often the belief, by people that don't know about that sort of bodywork, that it is some sort of – adjunct to – it's all a bit 'wishy-washy'. I also think this is important for students to understand from the word go, that is, that in doing this work it helps to make their bodies stronger, less likely to be injured etc., etc. For them to be able to dance better, dance longer and all the rest of it. And that is a hugely important thing.*

**GC:** Because it seemed like a tool for us, in some of those ways.

I find, that I am never tongue-tied in a studio, when talking about this work, at all, but I found last year when I was needing to communicate to people to whom this was very unfamiliar, to find the right language that didn't just sound 'wafty', was quite hard and, maybe we really need to find a language to make a bridge between analytical, conceptual language and one of experience and intuition, it's all – it's not

tangible; there are things in dance science that one can measure but there are very different ways of researching. I haven't done enough research myself – all of those issues about multiple intelligence, that one is approaching experience with a different kind of value system.

*SR: Yes, it's being able to explain it and express it, in a way that is accessible and articulate.*

**GC:** And that doesn't sound like therapy. I think that is what people often think it is and that's a sort of barrier that is put up. I also think there are some arguments that are really educational arguments, which are about helping student autonomy; it's about handing the power to them, to help them learn.

*SR: Absolutely, it's about self-esteem, it's about empowering.*

**GC:** Exactly.

The interview ended quite abruptly here because Gill suddenly realized that she was supposed to be in a meeting elsewhere.

It is rather hard to summarize such a rich conversation but there are some very clear themes that emerge from this exchange with Gill Clarke, which have gone on to inform many of us as dance educators and practitioners and subsequently those whom we teach. The empowerment of learners; the importance of a shared pedagogical understanding across a faculty of staff; a somatic sensibility/approach that can be

applied to any dance style; refining the quality of attention; the layering of knowledge; re-patterning and integration; learning about the body through the body; experiential learning; reconnecting; integrating and more. Gill talks about 'having the patience to be simpler and clearer, how to come to the same idea differently and how not to do everything all at once'. She talks of this way of learning, not as something new, but of 'something that is new to some dancers' as it was for her as well. For Gill, somatic informed dance is about connection which is about strength and integration and if this reconnection and integration is not learnt early on in a dance education then we, as dance educators, are merely 'reinforcing bad habits intensively for three years'.

A somatic informed dance curriculum should certainly not preclude dance techniques, as Gill Clarke has suggested above, but attention does need to be paid to the balance of all these practices both dance and somatic. The connection that Gill found between her dancing, somatic practice and her teaching has greatly influenced those she taught and worked with. Her pedagogical approach and holistic philosophy was highly influential in relation to those courses she developed and co-developed, alongside others who held the same values. Examples of courses include undergraduate curriculum at the Laban Centre London [now Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance] and, significantly, the initial development of the MA/MFA Creative Practice, delivered jointly by Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Independent Dance and Siobhan Davies Dance.

In the conversation above, Gill points out how she became much more aware, through the process of intertwining a somatic approach with all that she did, and how, through the exploration of different body practices, she became 'more technically able and

more articulate. I was more aware of what my body was doing'. Through her work, she has shown that a somatic informed approach allows the richness of the body to be fully explored in a way that is very different from engagement with dance techniques alone. She showed how the opportunity to work in-depth through integrating the inner/outer limits of the body through a range of clearly taught somatic practices alongside dance technique allows dance students to develop holistically through the bodymind, that is; physically, intellectually and creatively. Somatic informed dance education can be seen to draw from all of the best qualities of what has gone before and yet also embrace those that are needed to exist in the current professional independent dance world. The eclectic route of a somatic informed dance curriculum and practice can lead to a more creative bodymind, through experience of different practices and ways of knowing, seeing and being. It is about creating those states of being that extend the dancing body psycho-physically and intellectually. As Gill has shown, the thoughtful inclusion of somatic practice within dance higher education and training and the balance of a somatics informed dance curriculum can provide for the development of a curious, knowledgeable, creative, strong, intelligent and technically able dance practitioner (Reed 2011).

In this interview, Gill gives us a clear sense of her approach as a dance artist and educator. Her convictions were strong and she went quietly and persistently about the business of helping others to learn and explore as well as continuing to do so herself. I know that her words and her practice helped me to believe in what I was doing at the time of our conversation, and beyond. I believe that these same words will help others to more fully understand the role and value of a somatic informed dance education and how this has developed in the United Kingdom.

It is now some years since I had the conversation shown here and, sadly, some years since Gill Clarke died, far too young and with so much more work to do, and she is still greatly missed. Gill's legacy will continue to shape and influence the role and development of somatic practice within dance education and training, performance and teaching and we have so much to thank her for.

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### **Contributor details**

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the organization Independent Dance see,

<http://www.independentdance.co.uk/>.

<sup>2</sup> The British dance collective known as X6 existed for just five years from 1976 and consisted of five artists; Jacky Lansley, Fergus Early, Maedee Dupres, Mary Prestige and Emilyn **Claid** (Claid 2006). These five dance artists and those that joined them at X6 in London were part of a network of experimental artists, including musicians and filmmakers, working in the capital at that time. X6 had a hugely significant influence on the direction of UK professional contemporary dance and subsequently dance training and education from the mid 1970s onwards; the results of which can be seen in many performance companies, management contexts and performance teaching today (Claid 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see the Laban Library and Archive at Trinity Laban,

<https://labanlibrary.wordpress.com/2016/07/22/the-laban-centre-for-movement-and-dance-at-laurie-grove/>.

<sup>4</sup> Gill was teaching at the Laban Centre at the time and working on revising the BA as part of her commitment to a somatics-based approach.

<sup>5</sup> BMC – Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen was an occupational therapist and a dancer with the Erick Hawkins dance company. She created the School of Body-Mind Centering

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and a method of bodywork which ‘directs awareness’ of the inner body, organs, systems and body fluids (Hanlon-Johnson 1995).