

## A Negotiation of Freedom and Form

Abigail Yager

As a former member of the Trisha Brown Company, my teaching is often labeled *Release Technique*. For years I recoiled from what I feel is simply a buzzword often used loosely with little meaning attached and taken to mean indulgent and formless noodling. This description couldn't be less accurate. Those who understand Trisha Brown's choreography see beneath its silken fluidity to the meticulously detailed architectural structure that forms the underpinning of the work. The inevitable association with *Release Technique* has forced me to articulate exactly how *release* relates to what I am teaching. Though I still avoid labeling my class *Release Technique*, per se, I do readily use the term *release* in class, though do so only with careful explanation.

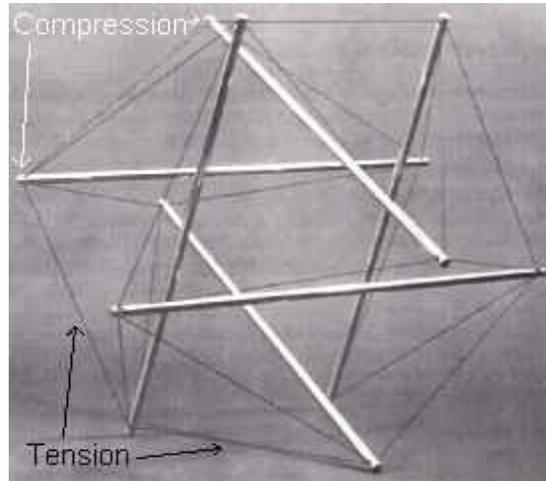
What do I mean by *release* and how does it differ from *relax* or worse, *collapse*? Release can be thought of as spray or, release *out* into omni-direction. On the most basic level, muscular holding blocks movement. The muscular system, in partnership with connective tissue, ligaments and tendons, both knits us together and propels us through space. Yet, muscular holding simultaneously restricts the passage of weight, energy and neurological signal, or impulse. So, though we need our muscular system to initiate movement, paradoxically, the more we engage, the more we impede movement. Conversely, the reduction of muscular holding, allows our bones to articulate at the joints. Imagine Big Bang occurring in your body. It is an evocative, if somewhat imperfect model where the bones, like celestial matter, fall away from each other, and the web of soft tissue, like gravitational force, keeps us from falling apart. Infinite oppositional pulls form the basis of both support and power, enabling us to minimize muscular effort thus maximizing movement potential. Though counter intuitive, *release* as opposed to *collapse*, maximizes both volume and mobility. The result is three-dimensional expansion *outward*, rather than collapse *inward*.

Though we typically equate effort with force, *release* can also help us to find power. A body without blockage is an open conduit for forces to pass through. The clear and efficient passage of weight and energy dropping down through our bodies into the floor is met by counterforce that rises up, launching us through space. The challenge is to harness these forces, to use gravity to our advantage, and to generate then direct momentum without creating unnecessary blockage in an effort to replicate the form.

One common misperception of the work is that it is not muscular. I always chuckle when a student comments that she feels her legs working and wonders if she is doing something wrong. There would be no movement without muscular effort. How then do we organize all of this freedom so that we don't dance like overcooked noodles? The practice is not one of all or nothing, but rather *how much, when* and *where* in the body, and *for what purpose*.

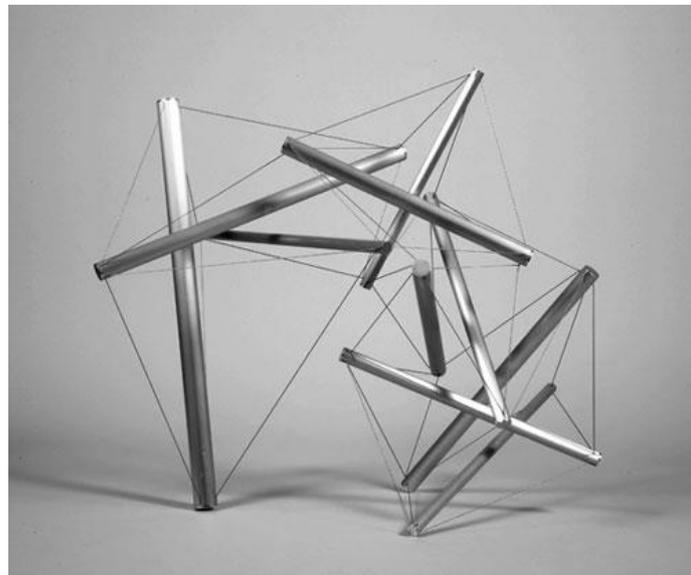
My understanding of *release* comes from my studies of the Alexander Technique, Klein Technique, Qi Gong, Yoga and Contact Improvisation and through limited exposure to the Ilan Lev and Feldenkrais Methods. Though the techniques themselves differ quite drastically from each other, they share underlying principles and a conception of the self as an integrated whole through which movement (physical or energetic) travels unless blocked. Each provides different points of entry, frames of reference, and language to describe similar phenomena.

Alongside these physical practices, I am informed by my study of Tensegrity, a term coined by Buckminster Fuller to describe structural systems of continuous pull and discontinuous compression. Tensegrity, short for 'tension + integrity', relates to how structures behave, whether they are mechanical, natural or social. It explains why bridges don't collapse, why an isolated cell is spherical and how the solar system organizes itself. Take a look at the images below.



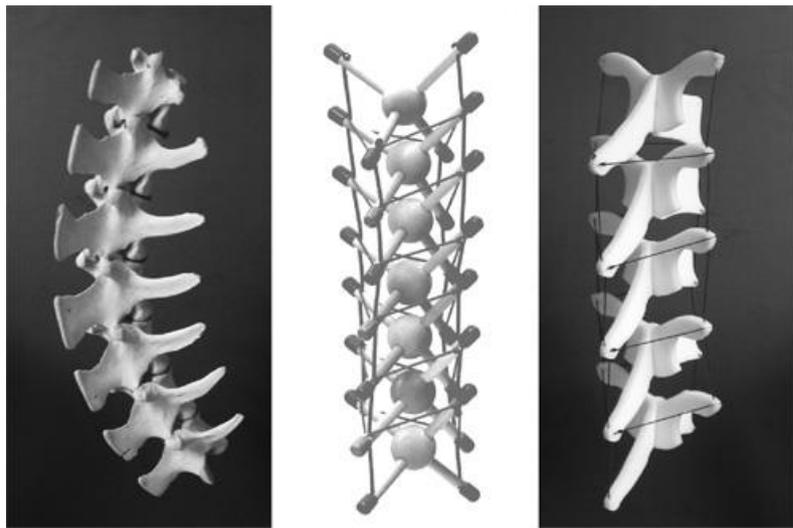
*Tetrahedron: Basic Tensegrity Model*

In the context of the dancing body, Tensegrity suggests that the muscular skeletal system is not a series of stacking levers, but rather, a system of bones floating in a sea of soft tissue (fascia). We are a dynamic balance of order and chaos, a resilient system that re-organizes and self-stabilizes when acted upon by external forces.



*Kenneth Snelson: Audrey*

Standing beside one of Kenneth Snelson's Tensegrity sculptures, where none of the dowels touch, one might wonder: How the heck is that thing standing?



*From Geometry of Anatomy [www.intensiondesigns.com](http://www.intensiondesigns.com)*

The implications of Tensegrity on our dancing are profound. Even a rudimentary understanding has the power to alter how we experience movement in our bodies and therefore change how we move through space. In technique class, I look for simple images and exercises that can give just enough information to provide this basic level of understanding and find that metaphors are powerful tools that transport students in a realm of new possibility without getting bogged down in theory. Imagine for example, the game of tetherball - elegant line, circular pathway, conical volume, all a function of the simple interaction between weight and an external force. Like each of these, we too are balancing acts of freedom and form.

## Methodology

My challenge is to help students to work with increased specificity without making them feel straightjacketed by detail. Metaphors are powerful tools that collapse a thousand details into a single, immediately graspable image. Yet the embodiment of detail is not about cloning style, but instead is a crucial part of cultivating awareness that leads to facility and versatility. In class, I aim to identify movement principles that may be available as choices to draw from when appropriate. I encourage students to consider when and how these principles might be of use in all of their dancing despite obvious technical and stylistic differences they initially perceive.

The goal of the course is embodied understanding as opposed to masterful imitation. Those “aha” moments, where a student makes a discovery for *him* or *herself*, are essential. I remember one such epiphany. “I found it!” a student exclaimed at full volume in class referring to the sit bone to heel connection. I believe that those moments of revelation when things suddenly crystalize, and the sense of empowerment that accompanies such discovery, are what fuel growth.

I find that the key to guiding students towards discovery is to differentiate between providing *access* to and *application* of detail. Providing *access* is done by creating that space, messy as it might be, where students play with an idea seeing what sense they can make of it for themselves. Providing *application* means creating an exercise where they can practice that principle in the context of an externally defined form. To address this, I have begun incorporating more highly structured improvisation into the beginning of class, cultivating awareness of a given principles from *within* through individualized exploration so as to heighten proprioceptive awareness. I find that once students gain *access* to the principles that underlie the detail, they can then *apply* this understanding far more easily to patterned exercises or phrase material they encounter later in class or in rehearsal. Ironically, this more individualized approach leads to less idiosyncratic, more refined, articulate and specific dancing. The process is counter-intuitive.

## Class Structure

Classes follow a clear progression: We begin on the floor chipping away at blockage, finding freedom and fold in the joints to allow for weight to pour through the body into the floor. This is done in a variety of ways: rocking, sloshing, rolling, sending waves of movement through the body etc. This work is intentionally un-dancy in order to avoid habits and associations of how students think they ought to move as dancers, and to focus instead on what we are actually doing. We then scaffold this movement by cultivating and awareness of energetic pathways that run through and beyond our bodies into space. Special attention is given to the central axis (top of skull to center of floor of pelvis) and to the alignment through the legs and feet. These become neutral base lines. What begins as open and non-linear, gradually finds organization and structure in patterned exercises. The purpose of building this scaffolding while still on the floor is to form new associations, to experience the possibility of clear lines running through our body, coupled with ease, rather than force. We can in fact be geometrically specific, while being calm, open and free. The challenge is not to let one happen at the expense of the other. While still on the floor, we begin to explore how to generate movement from pushing into the floor, focusing on the direction of the push, and the pathway of movement that results.

Gradually, we come up out of the floor working through mid-level, taking time for the transition so that we carry newfound sensations with us once we return to the more familiar terrain of standing. Again, the exercises vary from being more exploratory to counted frames giving the students the chance to discover and practice movement ideas before applying them to choreographic form. For example: Can you find a true fall of weight? Now, can you manipulate that fall to land on the count of 3? What about the count of 5? When you adjust to fall slower, are you still *truly* falling or are you manufacturing (i.e. skillfully faking) the effect of falling?

Ultimately, we end in phrase material that is rhythmically specific, yet rarely counted. This requires students work with heightened sensitivity to the internal song of the movement mechanics and to develop the skill of reading each other's weight and manipulating one's own weight in order to create unison rather than relying on music as an external crutch.

## Relevancy

Why does dancing matter? What are the broader implications for us as Human Beings? These are questions I ask my students to consider as we draw parallels between what we do on the micro level in the studio with what we do on a macro level in the theater and beyond. The study of the moving body not only propels towards the accomplishment of our professional aspirations to perform on the stage, but also enriches our understanding of the world we live in. The nature of balance, power, resilience, acceptance, weight, grounded-ness etc.- examined in terms of pure movement, hold metaphoric lessons of immeasurable worth that extend far beyond the dance itself. Through the practice and refinement of our artistry, we simultaneously learn about Human dynamics, cultural values, and the politics of expression. We experience the interrelationship between what we practice in the studio or perform on the stage, and the living of our lives and come to understand the fact that it is impossible to divorce the two.