

Conversation with Georg Blaschke about the application of the Feldenkrais Method to choreography, movement research and performance

This conversation is part of the Bachelor work of Petr Ochvat, dancer, performer and student at
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As this chapter inquires into the use of the Feldenkrais Method in choreographic practices, it occurs relevant to begin with relating my interview of Vienna based choreographer, dancer and teacher Georg Blaschke. Georg first introduced me to the Feldenkrais Method as a tool to approach and investigate the connection between body and mind during the making process of two pieces of his in which I performed, *Jetzt Bist Du Drau*. (2008) and *In Case Of Loss*. (2010). Both works were premiered in Vienna.

Therefore I experienced somehow directly the way he researches and questions the intertwining of the method with his creative practice and this, from the very beginning of the process, going through the preparation of the body and the establishment of a methodology to devise choreographic material, until the final performance of the work. I asked Georg to talk a little more extensively about his approach. How does he perceive the method in relation to the process of choreographing and performing? His article "*A possible „somatic“ approach to a Performance and Research Practice*" also inspired my questions. It was written as an introduction of his work process to the contemporary dance students of the Konservatorium Wien Privatuniversität.

This interview was recorded on Saturday the 5th of September 2010.

How long have you been practicing the Feldenkrais Method?

I have been practicing Feldenkrais since 2004, so no longer than six years altogether. I had had a first experience of it 17 years ago, but it did not provoke in me much enthusiasm then. I seriously began to get into it when my Feldenkrais partner Sascha Krausneker was studying to become a certified Practitioner. Through him I have started to practice more continuously.

How does the Feldenkrais Method influence the way you create your choreographies?

First of all, it is a simple method, which prepares my body. It helps me to balance the challenges of being a dancer and performer throughout the aging process. So the Feldenkrais Method for me is primarily an approach aimed at my own benefit, my own well-being. At the beginning, my collaboration with Sascha was based on exploring the potential interrelationship between dance and the Feldenkrais Method, there was no real artistic intention *per se*, all that developed progressively over time. We initially were interested in finding out about the possible complex applications that this method may have. In the last couple of years, there have been many different ways in which I was able to apply it. At first it was not so direct, the connection was not so close as it is now. In practice, this means that the performers with whom I worked and myself, took the ATM classes as a preparation for the body, after which we were able to approach tasks that were given by me during the artistic process with more ease and openness. Nowadays the connection between the Feldenkrais Method and how I work with performers and also students is more direct. I really feel the straightforward implications that the method has in the artistic and aesthetic outcome.

On the one hand, what I have been researching a lot and what I have been trying out in my projects is to extend the essential elements of the method such as self-awareness, organisation of the skeleton, mobility, articulation etc. In order to extend these somewhat basic terms, we would connect with the Feldenkrais Method and consecutively ask the performers to go towards a format of representation in space. I am also very interested in how performers enter into contact with one another. The Feldenkrais Method is not only a method aiming at working by your self. It is also a method provoking or motivating contact with other people, not only through the hands, but also through the whole body and through the space and through the ground. All the implications of a moving structure in gravity, negotiating with a surface or with another moving structure really are connected to the method and have an artistic and aesthetic importance to me. I am still researching a lot about this. Recently the partnering issue in dance has become increasingly important to me. How to get in contact with each other as articulated bodies? So I work a lot with the possible influence of the Feldenkrais Method on physical contact, on partnering, on lifting, as well as on rather elaborate complex partner constellations and on the manner in which these are placed in space. On the other hand there is the choreographic issue. Here one could speak generally about this so-called *somatic* approach, we all know that it is a rather vague term, but I use it. It is in a way a common term within certain realms of actual dance practises. Of course there are a few other somatic approaches and traditions, but I mainly practice the Feldenkrais Method beside Body Mind Centering or certain release techniques as they offer approaches that to my opinion come from the inside to the outside. The inner awareness is the main starting point for observing the organisation and the efficiency of movement, in other terms the effortlessness of movement. This "from the inside to the outside" process approached through improvisation or through a group process in space, provokes patterns. For me these are choreographic patterns that occur in a sense as a consequence, as a result because of the traces that bodies have left in space and time.

How would it work the other way around? I mean from the outside to the inside. What would be the difference?

I do not have an answer to this question... However the difference could be, that you would rather start by -I would not say copying- but by learning forms that are given through a certain dance language, or by studying choreography that is given already by its notation. And this would be for me the other end of the spectrum: that you would like to take in something more from the outside. Learning or taking from -which I am not against-, is another approach. However I feel strongly drawn into structuring choreography that prerequisites an inside awareness as a starting point or perhaps a concern in the structure, articulation and in the choreography within one's own body.

What is for you fascinating about the Feldenkrais Method?

Everything I have said until now. What is fascinating about it, is that the Feldenkrais Method is not about movement itself as far as I know it. I consider myself to be a student. I am not a Feldenkrais Practitioner, in fact I have never had a formal education, so strictly speaking I practice it as a curious learner and as an interested artist. The fascinating thing is that it is a method from which can be drawn general principles about learning processes. As a matter of fact it extends also into life itself because the comprehensiveness of its fundamentals is such that it can have a great number of applications, which do not have to be exclusively focused on the body, or on art practice or on whatever... It can be applied broadly in different ways: on human behaviour, on human evolution, on the animal evolution... This establishes a system, which remains always open. It is not a system with fixed rules. Feldenkrais Practitioners always say that there are no

exercises. There is not really something one should rehearse and exercise. It is much more about self-awareness. The method, I think could be used rather like a fundament for other movement and dance techniques. It is for me a tool that can be used in order to develop technique, and that is quite fascinating.

In "A possible „somatic“ approach to a Performance and Research Practice“ you wrote: The point of stillness after complexity, which has been gone through...

What exactly do you mean by the term "complexity"?

So first of all I am interested in the stillness of movement and in what it could mean... What echo or resonance can the body have when it moves and comes to stillness? This interests me. This is why I would say that I am interested in movement, but also in the moment when movement ends and why and how it ends. The question I have, concerns the decipherment of movements, of systems or of complex combinations of movements, which have actually been carried through until the point where stillness has been reached. It is interesting to me to observe, but also to experience processes and their complexity. To my eyes every movement is complex. It is sometimes enough to observe how the articulation of a little finger can have a high impact on the rest of the body. As we notice it from the practice of the Feldenkrais Method, everything is connected. It can have a really deep and very complex resonance in the entire anatomical architecture of the body that would be visible from the outside. As I look at it with a choreographer's eye, movement itself might appear simple but can have a very complex implication or context. Through this approach I feel especially when it comes to partnering, that the mind and the understanding of the self, of a performer's shifts, or of a system extended to two or more bodies is highly complex. It gets then even more complex. The connection between the mind and the body that we are talking about here engenders a special kind of presence. I would say this: it is complex but not complicated. "Complex" is for me a much richer word. I feel as an observer, when I hear the leaves, I can absorb and also enjoy a complex situation of life. Moving in space includes sound, light, smell etc... If sometimes there is stillness it has a resonance, a recollection of what took place previously. And then I can more accurately understand, in a deeper sense the complexity of it. There lies for me the connection to the stillness once again. If movement was only going on and on and on without interruption, maybe I would not be able to worship the moment when a complex situation comes up.

How does the Feldenkrais Method influence the way you are performing?

As I said in the beginning, I practice for myself and for my body, for my own understanding and my own awareness of myself, Georg, throughout the years. It has become a method or a tool to integrate the body in its own process of aging, of going through pain, of recovering from pain, of coping with stress and with my motivations to do something new. It is also for me a tool to integrate what we are doing as dancers, for example stretching, extending joints and all the things we have been training... So I want to integrate those memories and re-new them or re-define them as a personal equipment in my own life. It helped me a lot to stay flexible and also to keep regenerating and being interested in exploring new movements, in reinvesting myself in dance over and over.

What is the connection between the Feldenkrais Method and the act of performing in itself for you? I mean, what happens on stage, in front of the people? What is happening inside...?

The main issue concerns presence. When we embrace more bodily the general question of performing, this topic of presence rejoins the truly big issue tied to the core of Feldenkrais. It influenced me in this way, I would say... I like to approach the possibility of an open presence where the mind can shift from the inside to the outside and invites both states. It does not exclude anything. This is also considerably connected with vision and listening. You can listen and look inwardly, you can listen and watch outwardly and this concerns the space that surrounds you, the partners with whom you perform and also the audience members. The outside space becomes potentially a half-transparent space. To play with the states of awareness, to notice where the eyes wander, to invite your presence to perceive and to accept as well as to give back is for me what the Feldenkrais Method essentially is in relation to dance and performance.

How do you understand the term "Efficient Movement"?

I would say, when the muscular effort is as little as necessary. Movement is efficient when the skeleton is used properly, in a connected way in order to articulate, also to stabilize the posture, and when this connectedness and alignment can successfully be maintained in complex situations including lifts, partnering work and more dynamic phrases. It includes the importance of understanding of how the effect of gravity through the skeleton is being noticed and balanced. I think, it is about awareness, because right now I do not know any rules that could define what an efficient movement is or is not. I would say that moving as much as possible free in the context of your own body and of the reality of your own limits is efficiency. This is also a very important idea coming from the Feldenkrais Method into the dance, this notion about constraint or restriction of movement. We have always some limitations. We have the limitation gravity implies, and therefore we have the limitations of space and architecture. We have our own joints and constraints given by them referring to the articulation of our gestures. When I was younger, I confronted these boundaries with willpower and discipline in order to overcome them, to engage the will to be stronger or better in the process. Now, through the method, through the application of pleasure, comfort and effortlessness, I have learned a lot about how to approach effortlessness and efficiency. More importantly how do I practice it with people, students, colleagues? Why should we lose the notion of pleasure along the way?

Is there, according to you, something like an "Efficient Mind"?

Maybe when you synchronize it with the body, it might be efficient ...

In the context of the body, it is clear when we say that we do not need to exceedingly tense our muscles, but what does efficiency mean in the context of the mind? What is unnecessary for the mind while we are moving/dancing?

This is a good question. For me the mind and body are not - it is also a spiritual question maybe - disconnected from each other. I believe that if the mind allows the body to be efficient then it understates that the mind is already efficient too. The method operates through the means of worldly suggestions. This method does not show movements. It is about the words, the brain and how the mind then approaches movement. This implies already the mind-body connection and the efficiency or synchronicity of mind and body. I personally think that to approach awareness through movement is one possibility, but that we can maybe also approach awareness through the analysis of our thoughts and of how they do

function. This is also a way in which, we can work with the Feldenkrais Method. How can mind, thoughts and brain, work together towards initiating an action? It is possible that if there is no gap between thought and action, then it might be efficient ...

You keep exploring movement on stage live, during the performance, why is this important for you?

It is simply pleasant and it keeps the form that we have alive. I am interested in choreography as well and that implies the existence of an outside form that establishes the piece, the product. Researching and improvising on stage is for me very important because it allows me to feel the form in which, we find ourselves, in its liveliness and with the inclusion of our daily existence even with the inclusion of the moment of the performance, of the spirit and presence of the public as well as the colours of space and smells... This is an enormous source of inspiration, but also a set of rather complex discoveries that we have at our disposal, even within the form, there is already structure or choreography or pattern. This is about life, about joy and about giving permission to the mind to be set free as much as possible through movement.

Does the Feldenkrais Method enable you to say what you want to say in your performances?

I don't know. I leave this to the audience to judge. I hope so. I think so, but we are not for ourselves, we exist in an open system of representation and perception. Therefore it is always relative. The way we feel helps us in our approach to convince ourselves but how the public perceives and interprets our work escapes our control. I strongly believe in that connection and this influence, if not, it would not keep me on with so much inspiration. In a way there are complex results, which do not only concern me but also other people and students I work with. It is being proved through the work itself. Such an open system invites different points of view to discuss, to engage, to explore. For all these reasons, I think it works for me.

Has the Feldenkrais Method influenced the way you work with time and space?

Yes. Everything influences how you work with time and space.

Can you mention any concrete example?

I think, through processes that sensitize our awareness, both inwardly and outwardly, both of these articulations of presence, if the listening/seeing takes place both ways – performers and audience -, then naturally time and space will change. I do not practice in order to change this relationship but it changes by itself along the process.

Does the Feldenkrais Method support your motivation and curiosity? How is it possible that you are not bored yet?

Yes, because as we said, it is such an open system of learning. It is not fixed on physical practice or technique. It is about learning and self-reflection of learning itself. How do we learn to learn? Is it applicable to all the processes we go through in life? It is based on movement, but not on the body itself. There is a fascination of the brain in connection to action and in connection to discovering which capacities, which volumes remain to be used. What is your own potential for creativity, for maintaining curiosity? I am not afraid of being bored because maybe through that method I am able to open my senses, thus to facilitate new inspiration to come innately so to speak. So it is like some kind of a universal connection to life if you wish. It is almost similar to a spiritual approach that would spontaneously open new doors, for

new inspiration and new resources to be taken into account and brought along for the next step of our development. And this is precisely the reason why it is impossible in this mindset to get bored.

Georg Blaschke lives in Vienna and works as a freelance performer, choreographer and dance lecturer. He has been dancing and performing with great passion over the past twenty years for contemporary dance, theatre and performance productions of different aesthetic and expressive approaches. His artistic engagement reflects the continuous transformation of the body and its image.

His performances both as a dancer for other artists as well as a creator of his own works have led him to numerous festivals, theatres and schools throughout Austria and abroad.

His actual works are focused on applying a somatic approach on choreographic understanding and principles of biographical reconstruction and memory of a moving body.

His artistic practice at the present time is strongly influenced by the Feldenkrais Method and especially concerns movement research, partnering work and reflections on the presence of the performer in space.