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Eric Franklin

Transforming technique through science-based imagery

Eric Franklin helps dancers to improve their technique by applying scientific principles, anatomical understanding, and the power of the imagination. The Swiss-born movement educator teaches workshops around the world, both at Pilates studios and at major dance institutions like the Juilliard School, the Royal Danish Ballet, and Guangzhou's Guangdong Dance Company. He is the author of Dynamic Alignment Through Imagery and Dance Imagery for Technique and Performance, both in their sixth printings. His 17-year-old institute is based in Switzerland. Rachel Straus recently spoke to Franklin about what makes his work so useful for dancers.

What is the Franklin Method? My method aims to improve a dancer's technique rapidly and efficiently. When dancers have difficulty performing a movement, they are often told by their teachers to do something differently. Sometimes this helps. Often it does not. The brain needs to receive information on technique in a very specific language in order to control the body in the way that you want. This language is imagery. Imagery is not just pictures in your mind—it is how a movement feels, the rhythm and the mood of it.

How do you begin helping a dancer? The Franklin Method has three steps: Define the technical challenge, create imagery based on scientific knowledge of anatomy, help the dancer to experience this imagery. This allows the brain to provide the body with the best possible movement organization. With the proper image, a dancer can improve his flexibility and balance in minutes. Sounds like magic? Yes and no. Dancers need to be trained to use imagery that is science-based and not just coincidental or random.

Tell me more about science-based imagery. In the sports world, they've developed something called the IFM Principle (which stands for image, feeling, meaning). The theory is that for imagery to be effective, you need an accurate picture of what you're doing and a positive feeling-response. For example, imagine your feet are spreading on the floor like buttermilk. You could tell someone that and they would say, "Are you crazy!" But if you say to a dancer, "If you want to have a deeper and more relaxed plié, imagine your feet spreading like warm buttermilk as you move downward," that's different. In



Franklin: "If you want to change your body, first change your mind."

this statement, I gave meaning: developing a better plié. I gave feeling: spreading your feet as you move downward. I gave positive imagery: warm buttermilk.

For a movement to have benefit, the thought, the picture, and the emotion must be positive and it must make anatomical sense. There is an immense amount of scientific research on the connection between emotional state and performance. In dance all the research is going past us. Dancers think if their body hurts, they are making progress. I'm sorry, but that's a bunch of baloney.

Why did you gravitate from dance performance to somatic work? After my first dance training, everything was hurting: my knees, my lower back. I thought dancing was supposed to be healthy and fun but it was making me feel unhealthy. I went to a variety of doctors who had all kinds of things they wanted to do to me. I said, "I have to find a new way." Luckily I was in New York, which is the mecca of body therapy. I studied everything that was available: shiatsu to every type of imagery.

André Benard, who was influenced by Erick Hawkins, introduced me to imagery. I had the key experience in his class of doing constructive rest, where you lie on your back with your knees up and your feet flat on the floor. In this position my back released just through imaging. "What?" I thought to myself. "I did nothing but imagine something, and my back released like never before. Oh my God this stuff really works."

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I realized. Until then I thought imaging was sheer fantasy. That's one of the main problems: People think it's fantasy, even though there is more research done on imagery than surgery.

What else should dancers embrace? Sports psychology has shown that you're better off if you spend less time training and more time doing mental work. No athlete who wins anything these days is always training—it's suicide. But dancers are. A 1930 study on basketball players by E. Jacobson demonstrated the best way to work is to spend one-third of the time training mentally and two-thirds training physically. We are not doing this in dance. It is well-known that dancers are weaker and less flexible at the end of a season. You should get stronger by being in a dance company. There is something called periodization in sports. Athletes have downtime and preparation time that's carefully calibrated so that they're playing when they are at their peak.

How can dancers change their technique? There is only one fundamental way and it sounds radical: having a new set of proprioceptions—that is, a new set of sensations in the body. You can't fully reproduce a movement if you've never felt it before. Instead you keep reproducing movement you've already felt—even if it's inefficient. The key is to use new imagery to create a new sensation in order to move more efficiently. Unless that new information gets into your body, nothing will change. So many dancers take class day in and day out, but they don't improve. They don't change because their thinking doesn't change.

What are some of your favorite mottos? If you want to change your body, first change your mind. If something is not working, make a different choice. Embodying function improves function. Don't solve problems; experience solutions. How do you make your movement interesting? By being interested in your movement.

Go to www.franklinmethod.com for more information.

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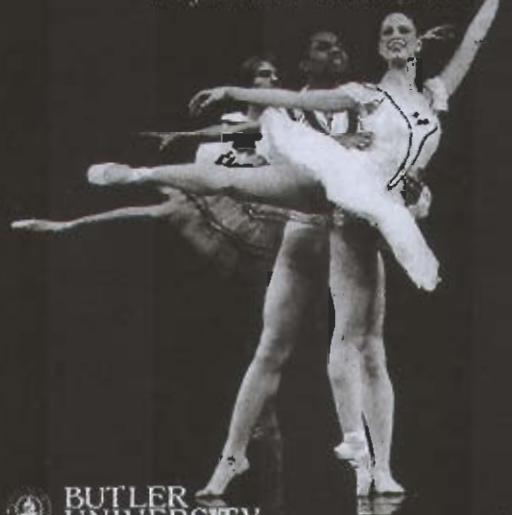
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