

## Hip to toe - a new concept for improvisation and choreography.

"Lets have some free dance time"

This phrase has one of two effects normally - it is either seen as a positive break from the technique driven rest of the class, a chance to put in to practise the new skills or movements they have just covered, or a terrifying end to a class. However, even very competent dancers sometimes feel they are in an improvisational rut, and as I am now inheriting students from teachers who have taught solely by choreography, I have devised my own methodology of teaching and inspiring improvisation.

Improvisation is a vital skill in our dance form. It allows freedom of expression as well as providing an avenue of exploration. You can flick between well rehearsed combinations, new movements and also work on variations on your standard basic moves. As with choreography you do not need to include every single move you have ever learnt to keep the dance fresh and alive - you can do a few simple moves throughout a piece of music and by adding different nuances such as weight placement, arm positions, lines of sight you can make it look different to your audience.

Hip to toe is based on mechanical commonality between movements, which may sound like technical jargon, but I firmly believe that you need to have a solid grounding in the mechanics and understand how your body moves and personal transitions between moves before you feel confident in your ability to improvise. Everyone has their 'safe' move - one that their body goes into automatically. And a lot of students feel that they end up doing this one too much as they can't think how to break out into something new. Hip to toe provides a means of helping the dancer along a more varied improvisational repertoire.

In its simplest form it is based on the change a letter to make a new word game. So we can go from hip-tip-top-toe.

| Concept | Movement           | Area of commonality for me   |
|---------|--------------------|--|
| Hip     | Basic figure eight | At furthest reach of hip, take the hip back  |
| Tip     | Hip rotation       | Into rotation. At front part of rotation, stop by contracting stomach to pull up and start the camel |
| Top     | Camel              | Add a pivoting move perhaps to add variation and then when at the back part of the camel             |
| Toe     | Maya               | push hip out to start the maya action  |

This is based on MY body however - every body is different and your point of transition is likely to be at different points. What hip to toe does is help the flow between the moves so that it appears effortless (no one should see your inner turmoil!).

I feel this is a useful out of classroom concept for students. The fact that improvisation needs to be practised is a fact, but it is hard to do. Mental blocks ('I can't think what to do next', 'I can only do figure eights and hip drops') can make it an insurmountable obstacle to progression. From the beginners stage in my classes students are encouraged to work on transition skills. They have flashcards on which I write a basic smooth, basic sharp and a basic travelling step and they have to dance using only those three to a piece of music. Now some of these movements may not be natural neighbours but by encouraging students to think about different aspects makes them more aware of how to link movements

As you become more practised you can make your concept steps longer. This is also a useful means of helping you to choreograph especially for other dancers. You need to be able to explain your transition points to others and explain how they are all linked.

For example

Hip-hop-cop-cow-tow-toe (6 points)

Hip-dip-die-lie-lid-lad-tad-tod-toe (9 points)

How to start:

No music - have peace and quiet to start. Pick your favourite move. Do it really slowly and think at all points in the move which one you could go into really easily from any position. Next time you get to that point, change the move and repeat the process. You may surprise yourself with how many moves you can add in this way. Plus you can go backwards down the route you have taken, change the tempo, your arms - and hey presto before you know it - you are improvising. Now you just need add the music..... and that is when the fun really begins!!

Emma Pyke.

