

Trager Technique: Rocking Toward Freedom

BY NANCY WOZNY

What is lighter? What is softer? What is freer? These questions launched the Trager Approach, the extraordinary work of Milton Trager, a physician who possessed an uncanny ability to help people move with more freedom and ease. Movement itself is the medicine in Trager's world; it holds the keys to healing, health, and well-being.

You feel like you are partnering with the ocean.

Deeply influenced by Bernarr Macfadden, founder of the physical culture movement of the 1930s (and, as it happens, owner of *The Dance*, the precursor to *Dance Magazine*), Trager trained as a professional boxer, body builder, and acrobatic dancer. He discovered his talent for hands-on healing by accident when he gave a fellow boxer an impromptu rubdown. He spent years experimenting and refining his work before he unleashed it to a small community of body workers at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur in 1975. Already in his late 60s, he spent the later part of his life training people in the U.S. and abroad before his death in 1997.

While Trager's central ideas echo some of the elements of Feldenkrais and Alexander Technique, he developed his own language to describe his work, which he broke down into the following components:

TABLEWORK A Trager practitioner guides the client using passive and gentle movement on a regular massage

table. Rhythmic rocking spreads movement throughout the body. "A typical Trager session involves hundreds of rocking movements, splashing our cells with nutrients," says Judith Fascone, an Ohio-based practitioner who works with young dancers. "Rocking is the integrative force in Trager's work. It's about bringing problems to the surface and helping people move effortlessly." The rhythms feel musical and a bit jazzy; the quality of touch is light and noninvasive. The focus is on pleasure and play—even fun. For Fascone, the rocking is integral to the fluidity of dancing. Compression, elongation, and other forms of tissue manipulation are also used.

MENTASTICS (mental gymnastics): Standing exercises that involve weight-shifting, swinging, and letting go establish a sense of delight and awareness of one's moving self. The idea is to join—not resist—gravity. The question, "What could be freer?" is asked throughout the process. According to Trager, Mentastics is "a short-cut to freedom."

HOOK-UP Trager called a shared energy field—the powerful connection that flows between two bodies—a hook-up. "It's a feeling deeper than relaxation; the feeling is peace," writes Trager in his book, *Movement as a Way to Agelessness*. "Hook-up creates a flow and a rhythm. It's like meditation." The practitioner uses his whole body to cradle and support the client. Hook-up is considered a contagious state: Once you are in it, you can pass it on. "Give a session, get a session" is the mantra.

Rocking and rhythm makes this an appealing somatic choice for dancers.

Martha Partridge, a former dancer/choreographer and teacher, is now a leading Trager practitioner. "Dancers are hard-wired neurologically for healing through movement," says Partridge. "The work has an immediate connection to dancers. You feel like you are partnering with the ocean."

Kathy Jennings, a former dancer and practitioner of both Trager and Continuum, says, "I can tell a Trager dancer from across the room. There's a quality of ease and comfort that's unmistakable."

Kathleen Fisher, who danced with Trisha Brown and Bebe Miller, learned about Trager through Partridge. She sought out the work after experiencing nagging back pain and eventually became a practitioner. "I finally got in contact with my torso and the core of my body," says Fisher. "Everything I knew about movement I could bring to my Trager practice. I think about what's possible at any given moment. Movement became more joyful and I could immediately bring that into my performance."

The Israeli dancer Saar Harari worked with Partridge after suffering a torn meniscus in his knee during one of his fiercely physical performances with his NYC-based company, LeeSaar/The Company. "She knew just what I needed," he remembers about Partridge's intuitive process. He began sessions one week after knee surgery and returned to the stage within six weeks. Both his physical therapist and physician were surprised by his quick recovery. Harari views his time off stage as one of intense learning. "It's not that I am done with it," says Harari, who did the Mentastics homework in between weekly rehab sessions. "I felt change every day. There's something in this process that teaches you a lot."

What Trager teaches is both simple and profound: Movement, joyful and free, is our birthright.

For more information, go to www.trager-us.org.

.....
Nancy Wozny is a Feldenkrais teacher and Houston-based arts writer.