

Chapter 6: Chris Lechner

Introduction

Chris Lechner is a dance artist with a unique transnational perspective on dance and movement practices whose body-biography provides the last chapter of this research. Born Christoph Lechner in 1963 in Yangon, Myanmar, and raised in India, Lechner's childhood experiences of international cultural exchange and artistic practice were enriched by being the son of parents working on dance and art curation; both were directors of the Goethe-Institut, a worldwide network of cultural institutions supported by the Federal Republic of Germany.¹ Raised in Kolkata and Delhi, Lechner moved to Salzburg at the age of eight and then two years later to Ulm. He excelled in martial arts—judo and tae-kwon do—before discovering ballet, training at Theater Ulm and the John Cranko Ballet School in Stuttgart. For the next decade and a half, between 1981 and 1995, Lechner worked as a ballet dancer in the Hamburg, Zurich, and Stuttgart Ballets, as a corps de ballet member and soloist

Today Lechner is an agile dancer in his early sixties, living in Bern and working as a contemporary dance artist and yoga teacher. He travels to Southeast Asia as often as possible—every couple of years—when his schedule and health allow. His stories are articulated to me in English, his first language growing up in India and my mother tongue. They reflect our ongoing collaboration and friendship, which has always included elements of mutual life review. Lechner's selection of topics and narrative choices were certainly influenced by our shared ballet literacy and aesthetic positions as contemporary dancers in Europe. Lechner

1 The Goethe-Institut, founded in 1951 by the Federal Republic of Germany, advances cultural and social exchange worldwide, promoting and providing context for Germany and Europe's diversity. This involves language courses, artistic exchange programs, grants for artistic production and presentation, and activities across institutes in nearly a hundred countries. The Goethe-Institut has adapted politically from a vehicle of cultural export to its current role promoting discursive and aesthetic education and critical reflection, participating in the changing discourses of culture and postcolonialism. See Lentz, *Das Goethe-Institut*. For a recent perspective on the role of dance within the context of the Goethe-Institut, see Landwehr, "Open for Everything."

narrates his body-biography with reference to this common ground: looking back upon his life as a dancer, foregrounding contexts with which I am familiar. His narration echoes and ricochets through references to intercultural contacts, cutting-edge bodywork, canonical choreographers, and improvisers and teachers in freelance networks. We hope our readers will share some reflective and critical competencies—from critical dance studies, postcolonialism, and critical race theory—to challenge the dominance of Western hegemonic narratives.² Lechner's stories address—sometimes implicitly, at other moments explicitly—how these societal and theoretical currents have influenced his self-understanding as a White male dancer, traversing cultural contexts and negotiating what is the “contemporary” edge of avant-garde dance.

Lechner's perspective of moving geographically between east and west and his vantage point, which shifts across classical and contemporary dance, give substance to his stories. He has belonged to and defected from ballet, a professional reorientation that cultivated his capacity to describe his subsequent re-education and transformation of aesthetic identity. Taken together, these travels in space, time, and aesthetic registers split open and decenter the White body politics and male gaze that, as Lechner remarks during our conversations, are typically robust in artists within a “ballet bubble.”³ By contrast, Lechner has learned to live and make his body differently—even multiply. One of the key questions that his body-biography raises is therefore how a person's physical body accumulates a sensorimotor history, or habitus, while remaining adaptable and mutable; another is to what extent one's body and self are perceived as coherent. Lechner's life stories highlight instances of rupture and transition—including moments of exciting inspiration, devastating injury, intensive sickness, and profound travel—describing processes shaping his self-identity that reveal his questions, rather than general answers.

Another motor of self-reflection and change in Lechner's life is yoga—a conduit to learning an affiliated cornucopia of bodywork and training practices, within and adjacent to dance.⁴ Beginning in the mid-nineties, Lechner drew upon his cultural and kinesthetic capital as a virtuosic performer to work as a freelance artist

2 For unfamiliar readers, we can recommend the following texts that intersect theoretically with Lechner's body-biography: George, *The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training*; Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*; Dixon Gottschild, “Racing in Place”; McCarthy-Brown, “Dancing with Race”; Morris, “Dance Studies/Cultural Studies”; Prichard, “From Color-Blind to Color-Conscious”; Sarkar Munsri, *Mapping Critical Dance Studies in India*; Raman, “Indian Dance Criticism as Decolonial Post-Performance Performative”; Thurner, *Erinnerungen tanzen*, 223–41.

3 A term Lechner used in our interviews.

4 Lechner's background spanned release technique, Contact Improvisation, osteopathy, GYROTONIC®, windsurfing, fascial weightlifting, Body-Mind Centering, Continuum Movement, and Body in Water/Watsu® inspired therapy.

across production networks in the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, and India. This traveling and interlacing of networks facilitated his career transition from ballet to contemporary dance. His body-biography describes the rewards as well as the precarity of this transition: both financially and in terms of fissions in self-image, belonging, and identity. Lechner creatively juggled roles as a dancer, choreographer, improviser, and teacher. Pursuing work and relationships, he relocated to Birmingham in 1995, to Bern in 1998, then to Brighton in 2000; in 2006 he returned to India, living between Almora, Bangalore, Arambol, Kolkata, and Delhi; he settled in Bern again in 2011. Crafting a life comprised of contiguous projects and workshops, Lechner composited and self-styled his own movement practices in dialogue with practitioners he met along the way—Laurie Booth, Gary Carter, Russell Maliphant, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, and Kirstie Simson, to name but a few. The details of these investigations are brought out more kinesthetically in the text that follows, interweaving my observations of his teaching practices and our biographical conversations.

For the last decade, Lechner has focused his energy locally in Switzerland, teaching contemporary dance and yoga. He also collaborates with his wife, Sunita Asnani, on artistic projects foregrounding politics of diversity and inclusion. My relationship with “Chris” has grown out of friendly contact within the freelance dance community of Bern. In our first conversation, some ten years ago, we compared the different work we had each done with choreographer William Forsythe. Lechner had danced with “Bill” in the early eighties, as had I over twenty years later.⁵ While writing my dissertation in dance studies at the University of Bern, I became a regular within Lechner’s class community, taking his dance classes as well as some private lessons in fascial training. Over the years, we exchanged teaching materials and clients as part of the movement studio Drehpunkt. We also made local performances (see Fig. 1) and hosted movement research sessions with collaborators. This rapport enriched our dialogues for this body-biography.

5 Lechner’s participation in Forsythe’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1980) is elaborated upon during the text that follows. I was a dancer in Ballett Frankfurt (2004) and The Forsythe Company (2005–2012).

Figure 1: Liz Waterhouse and Chris Lechner rehearsing Tangled at Bern Schloss Holligen (2019).



Photo by Sunita Asnani.

Figure 2: Chris Lechner demonstrating during a dance class on Zoom, May 24, 2023.



Screenshot by E. Waterhouse.

Writing Lechner's Body-Biography

The text that follows was given impulse by interviews recorded in Bern and fostered by my observant participation in Lechner's contemporary dance classes.⁶ Lechner was extended an open invitation to collaborate on a process of sharing life stories and reflecting on the bodily aspects of his dance career and biography. The collaborative and open-ended aspects were comfortable for us as movement improvisors, at ease with seeing where the verbal and nonverbal dialogue would go. We also agreed that our life review would work mutually: meaning he could also ask *me* questions. Lechner's dialogues aided my own life-writing presented in the interlude between Part I and Part II.

The audio recordings of our conversations were transcribed word-for-word, including every audible body-thud, breath, and pause. We chose not to make video recordings, because we wished to preserve an open and intimate frame, without the pressure to perform for an "outer eye." Persistently challenging movement's

6 Our recorded interview conversations took place on September 1, 2, and 14, 2022, in Bern at Freiform dance studio—the same space in which I interviewed Christine Kono. For references to the audio recording, transcripts, and metadata, see Lechner, "Body-Biography Interview with Chris Lechner"; Waterhouse, "Metadata Body-Biography Interview Chris Lechner." I attended classes from fall 2022 to winter 2024.

ephemerality, I used my short-term memory after each interview and dance class to generate descriptions interpreting our gestures, movements, touches, and affects.⁷ The studio framework of the life review enabled us to practice bodywork and improvise dancing comfortably.

Lechner's interview transcripts were, however, the most difficult to edit into life-writing of these four case studies. This is not because of any deficit, but rather a result of the extensive layering of our oral conversation with interactive movement practice. Also, Lechner's teaching and movement research were constantly evolving. Through my subsequent notation of vocal attributes and physical interactions, his life stories became a fascinating and complex record: littered with conversational turn-taking that elongated themes across multiple pages. Noticeable gaps of silence also manifested, in which we practiced bodywork or dance, listening to one another with our senses. Suspecting that these augmented transcriptions were too fragmented and specialized for most readers to follow, I deposited these fascinating traces for scholars to encounter in the SAPA archive.⁸ Homing in on one seminal example of embodied narration, the first section of this body-biography, "A Movement Lesson," provides a gateway into Lechner's autobiographical reflection. By enhancing the interview transcript with my memories of our movement interactions and editing extensively for readability, I allow the reader to take part in a physical dancing lesson with Lechner that highlights the influence of partnering in his body-biography: i.e. learning to dance by touching and moving with others.

The subsequent sections of Lechner's "Life Stories" discuss his embodied knowledge from the perspective of the present day, through retrospective reflection on his biography. After studying the interview recordings in depth, I selected and arranged excerpts pertaining to my interests in dance history, somatic practice, and Lechner's experience of his own and others' bodies. While these stories preserve the oral form of an interview, Lechner and I worked together to co-edit them extensively. Lechner's literacy, locality in Bern, and digital competence were invaluable to the publication of these stories. He was quick and clever in editing together, enabling our collaboration to transition into the mediated space of academic writing. Lechner also searched his private archives for photos and video materials, which are referenced here. Last but not least, I reached out to his collaborators, not all of whom are yet part of dance lexicons and encyclopedias, to add their biographies to the footnotes.

7 This was facilitated by the automated transcription software, Sonix, which enabled me to write notes directly into the first draft of the transcript, just hours after the experience. I was also surprised at how well the orality of the interview enabled me to conjure back the memory of complex sequences of both dancing and touch-based bodywork.

8 See footnote 6.

Lechner's Teaching

My participation in Lechner's "Tuesday classes" in Bern provided a common ground of kinesthetic knowledge, impacting our conversations about autobiography and dancing bodies. Much to my surprise, they became a source of biographical research in their own right—on which I report in this section.

The small community of dancers in Bern who avidly take these courses includes both freelance dancers and non-professionals, intermixing harmoniously.⁹ Typically, Lechner commenced these classes with short anatomical lectures—using digital pictures from anatomy books, models of the skeleton (see Fig. 2), and/or images of animals and athletes in motion. These opening principles then launched further warm-up exercises, followed by dynamic movement-research proposals, all with inspiring playlists in the background for ambience. Lechner has never, in my experience, presented choreographic combinations or movement phrases as part of his training, as might often be the case in certain contemporary dance technique classes. Rather, Lechner's courses present impulses for movement improvisation, which he plans and motivates carefully. By providing a context in which each student may explore their own responses to his proposals—adapting them to their bodies and dance experiences—Lechner's classes cultivate embodied awareness, coordination, compositional attunement, and inspiration through play. A key principle is sensing the feeling of one's body moving in dialogue with gravity, and the energetic power of the body to spring and rebound into action. To an onlooker, the class would not look like a "free-for-all" improvisation jam, but a group of persons moving similarly. This implies that his anatomic images shape coordination collectively, and that the norms of Lechner's class build common understanding, rather than exploring divergent movement proposals.

Lechner's pedagogical approach brings together creative impulses with learning-by-doing, and each class concludes with time for further reflection and individual questions. Along with his creative teaching tools for conveying images and anatomical principles, Lechner also employs his dancing body to motivate his students. He dances beside them, appearing to share their enjoyment as well as to set an example. He thereby creates motivation for performing highly virtuosic and kinesthetic tasks, space-swelling, gravity-sensing improvisation—rolling, inverting, lunging, twirling, and springing across the studio. Lechner typically speaks about movement while demonstrating his ideas physically, then invites students to "have a play." In response, the students move all together or in small groups—weight-sensing, with loose flow, and changing attitudes towards space

9 Both women and men, predominantly White.

and time—mimicking his body-state without precisely copying his movement.¹⁰ Themes for the 2022–2023 lessons include the springy potential of the forefoot, the pliancy of the “core,” the resilience of “folding” the hip deeply into spiraling motions, the dynamic potential of softening the front ribs to sense gravity in the exhale, changing motion patterns through “undoing,” and, last but not least, the dynamics of twisting the ribs while extending curious, reaching arms.¹¹

After attending his classes, I challenged myself to articulate in words “Chris’s” singular body and his dancing body. On the street, his physique blends in with the crowd. Lechner, as he explains in his interview, is short for a male ballet dancer (at 1.71 m or 5 foot 8 inches). Despite this, what strikes me foremost is the energy his body imparts—to myself and others—when he is wearing athletic clothes and eager to engage in dance transmission. As referred to repeatedly in his life stories, Lechner’s kinesthetic impact on others became a signature of his identity: an awareness of his own performative power and potential as a movement leader. In his constitution, I observe that Lechner’s wise muscles are soft, contractile, and fluidly interlinked. He has—like his gurus William Forsythe and Steve Paxton—three attributes: incredible fast-twitch coordination, a balanced use of strength in the upper and lower limbs, and flexibility (without hypermobility) to make high kicks, twists, deep knee bends, and squats. Dancing barefoot, his toes grip the floor, twitching with alacrity. Lechner usually keeps his ice-blue eyes a bit fuzzy as he dances, following his toppling, or slicing, or springing motions with a gaze suggesting inward listening. His surprising talent for theatrics surfaces only intermittently—when he exaggerates to make students laugh at the kinetic difficulty of his proposals. After demonstrating, you hear Lechner surprisingly more out of breath than his students. His endurance is limited by a prior lung infection and tissue biopsy, also described in the life stories that follow.

My participant observation of Lechner’s teaching revealed that dance teachers may include life stories within their lessons as a means to offer context, explicate their motivation, and engage in reflection about their approach to dancing. While taking class in parallel to our research, I observed Lechner’s teaching responding to our biographical interviews and began to bring a notebook to class. On multiple occasions Lechner introduced or contextualized his proposals with anecdotes about how the practices were important to his self-discovery as a dancer—and would look me in the eye as he did so. He described different colleagues’ influences or seminal exercises; then the class would “have a go,” trying them physically. This suggests that

10 Laban terms for Lechner’s effort would be “resilient” phrasing, shifting between an elastic and a weighty quality. Lechner’s improvisations typically maintain a state of weight-sensing and free flow, while changing efforts in space and time articulately. See Maletic, *Dance Dynamics*, in particular on “resiliency” see p. 73.

11 The citations in this paragraph are all common terms within Lechner’s teaching.

contexts of teaching are rich environments that shape and share body-biographies, between teachers and students.¹²

Through participant observation of these studio laboratories, I studied how Lechner logically interlinked body-practices and recreated discoveries for his students, curating journeys built from his personal body-biography. He narrated associatively, following kinesthetic logics that aimed to teach and transmit technologies of embodiment. I observed Lechner interlinking categories and movement styles: martial arts, dance, yoga, somatics, and myofascial science, all contributing to the purpose of constituting dancing bodies and selves. I saw Lechner's extensive ballet prowess as he added tours en l'air and virtuosic spins to his contemporary classes. His martial arts background I sensed reflected in simple movement studies—kicking, tumbling, walking, retracting—as well as his understanding of a moving body's energetic center and powerhouse: inside the pelvis, beneath the belly button. Excited by these pedagogical narrations of his life stories, as a researcher I attended to them by feeding the information forward into our editing process—bringing content from the classes adjacent to stories from Lechner's life story interviews, and fusing these in the form of our cooperative life-writing.

Describing Lechner's dancing body brought my own embodiment into the analytical process—as Lechner's movement partner, student, and scholarly collaborator. The reader will encounter these impulses in the form of my movement description and questions within the interview dialogue. Moving with Lechner as a “middle-aged” dancer/dance scholar reawakened distant memories of training as an American student in a mélange of “release technique” practices and styles.¹³ Our bodies, though differently trained and styled as male and female, are, in terms of gravity, similarly weighted and scaled—allowing us to connect and counterbalance rather easily. Moreover, our shared references to common training

12 This theoretical argument has also been proposed by dance scholar Yvonne Hardt, who examines teaching as praxeological exchanges. See Hardt, “Grasping Practice,” 108–10.

13 By “release technique” I refer to a collection of Western dance practices in which movements are trained by letting go of excess muscular tension and adjusting habits of postural binding, producing a style of soft virtuosity (in contrast to other techniques emphasizing achievement of bound form and shape, such as classical ballet and dance techniques like Graham and Cunningham). The term circulates around the work of Trisha Brown, Joan Skinner, Barbara Mahler, Susan Klein, and the somatic influence of Body Mind Centering, Alexander Technique, and Feldenkrais. Release techniques are still practiced today and can be traced to developments and frictions between dance styles within American dance networks since the 1970s. In discussion, see issues 18 and 19 of *Movement Research Performance* from 1999. My exploration of release technique occurred in the contexts of the American Dance Festival, my MFA studies at The Ohio State University, and as a freelance artist in New York City between 2001 and 2003. See Bales and Netti-Fiol, *The Body Eclectic*; Wittmann, “Historical Context: Lance Gries. Release and Alignment Oriented Techniques.”

practices allow me to copy Lechner's movement, despite never having quite the same talent to abandon myself, tumbling with gravity, trustfully across the floor. Lechner's movement vocabulary—involving swinging, squatting, rolling, falling, cartwheeling, and hand-standing—is performed with virtuosity, by using all five limbs (arms, legs, and head) to travel dynamically through space. The kinesthetic feeling of Lechner's dancing is very different from the controlled verticality of ballet, as well as the isolated, twisted, and polyrhythmic body I practiced for years as a Forsythe dancer—problem-solving spatial tasks of cognitive and conceptual thinking in motion.¹⁴ Lastly, touch-based partnering and somatic bodywork were vital references in both our body-biographies, as will be explored vividly in the next section. Conducting this life-story research has evolved our comprehension of our tangled dancing bodies, their similarities as well as their different experiences of dance history.

Life Stories

A Movement Lesson

Meeting at a small dance studio in Bern to commence our movement research at the intersection of autobiography and the body, Lechner and I were both eager to engage in mutual life review. We changed quickly into our training clothes, athletic pants and light T-shirts, and I rushed to set up my audio recorder.¹⁵ Unlike a formal oral history interview, typically conducted seated and commencing with the interviewer thanking the narrator and posing the initial question, Lechner had enough rapport with me to start speaking without any performative gesture signaling that “the research” had begun. He started sharing stories as I set up the audio recorder. Then, with the words reproduced below, he enthusiastically took the floor to narrate. I appreciated his decision to use a private lesson format, guiding me to experience some of the physical knowledge that he has learned with my body—between our bodies, both in motion. This reenactment of knowledge provides a portal onto Lechner's embodied history.

Chris Lechner: So, we could just do something very simple today. These are lessons that I remember from my experience as a contemporary dancer that I sometimes revisit in one manner or another. I thought I could string together some of these ideas physically with you. We should remind readers encountering this lesson that

14 Waterhouse, *Processing Choreography*; Siegmund, William Forsythe.

15 This condensed transcript is from the audio recording our of interview on September 2, 2023, at Freiform Atelier in Bern, 0:00 – 0:53. Those looking to study the original language of dance transmission are encouraged to retrieve the word-for-word transcript in the SAPA archive. See footnote 6.

this does not represent the material in my current teaching practice, but I think it shares an example of recent ideas that have been inspiring me, coming from new rehabilitation work.¹⁶ Let's have a go. I'm sure you will bounce off it in some way or other.

Hara is here (he touches his energy center at the base of his belly). And sacrum is opposite. If you let your breath fill your lungs, and maybe contract a little bit here (points to above his pubis) on the exhalation. You're getting a sense of how you can stand, with this whole area filling and emptying but also condensing a little bit.

Now, you can come into one heel while you're doing it—then the whole foot, to even more on the front foot. Change sides and try the other leg. What does it mean to actually go there? Without over-tensing the body? What shifts back? Keep expanding the breath, then contracting slightly.

And then, maybe what we can do with this—just letting the arms hang. And then just half a forward bend with the torso. Just coming forward, a little bit, but still breathing here (Lechner points to where his hands were, on the hara and sacrum). And testing—shifting the body's weight a little further back.

Liz Waterhouse: Is this right? Should I hinge more? Or curl?

Chris Lechner: No curl. But that's right, just sensing that you're almost falling back.

Now, you can start dangling your arms—either in circles, or swinging them—accessing the breath, expanding the lower belly, and gathering it. And you're almost toppling over! It's just to disorient your organization enough that we have something to work with. And you see how there's some grounding needed so that it's possible. Without that you're constantly destabilizing too much.

Very slowly from there, now come back into standing. Keep circling and dangling your arms, as if you have weights in your hands, and they're just pulling everything a little bit down. Keep dangling, dangling the arms.

And now, start giving the arms swing! It's not the navel doing it. It's more like the ribs giving the arms the swing. The ribs have started to massage around the diaphragm a little bit. It's shifting the weight. It's loading the center.¹⁷

Super. Yeah, it's right there (laughs). Now maybe even higher (our arms go higher, faster, becoming freer, looser).

16 For example, Lechner's current teaching explores physical therapist Dave O'Sullivan's exercise of "the soleus slouch," described on his website, <https://thegotophysio.com/the-soleus-slouch-the-best-lower-limb-rehab-exercise-your-patient-is-not-doing/>, last accessed September 26, 2025.

17 Lechner has developed this lesson drawing on ideas from Irish physiotherapist David Grey, who had influenced many of Lechner's teachers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lechner studied Grey's online materials. See Grey's website, <https://www.davidgreyrehab.com/pages/david-grey-rehab>, last accessed September 26, 2025.

From there, just getting a sense of how you could be taken for a ride around your axis, over the heel. It's coming from swinging. (Lechner exclaims delightfully as he swings his arms into a one-legged spin on his heel. His standing foot, spinning on the floor, is flexed and his arms fly out to the side for balance). You don't close in that swinging energy. You let it take its course.

Eventually you're going to come onto other parts of your foot. From here, you're going to probably roll over to the front of the foot. Yeah! (We play, swing, and spin.)

If you go into first position, turning out the legs, you play with the same thing. Take your shoulders around, but not the navel. So, from here, you're reaching (Lechner extends his arms gently, coming out of an arm-swing, almost like an arabesque line of the arms).

Liz Waterhouse: It's like a pirouette!

Chris Lechner: Yeah, it is. So, then there are all these places we can move to. But the navel can stay quieter, more gathered. Whereas the ribs, lungs, diaphragm are getting more interesting, in a way.

Liz Waterhouse: That's new to me. It's not a way I'm familiar with how to use my center.

Chris Lechner (laughs): Yeah! We're so used to kind of articulating a lot here (in the pelvis), no? This is more of a "martial arty" thing right now. But this is a nice way to practice it, simply. And this has to do with what we're going to do next, with partnering.

To begin the next lesson, we stand face to face, Lechner offers me his right hand, and I place my palm onto his. With our elbows bent, our arms together create an "S" shape from an aerial perspective; this handhold is common in martial arts as well as in male-female partnering in ballet, with the man as the leader and the woman as the follower. Lechner has the bottom hand, the leading position, and leads me on a walk. The footsteps are audible on the recording. We practice for a few minutes, then we switch roles and handholds. I take the role of the leader, and we continue walking.

Our movement audibly becomes more varied in tempo: speeding up, slowing down, stopping, resuming walking again, etc. The pauses elongate. We are beginning to change level, to rise and fall, to take advantage of the corners of the studio by running towards them and then curving around.

Chris Lechner: Now this connection is like an "S." But if you look, it actually is an "S" that emanates here, my center, and stops somewhere there, in your center. So, we're connecting. This is less like an exercise now, and more like something we could

practice in a workshop context extendedly—for multiple hours and with multiple partners. If we have a leader and follower, then what if I could take your center just somewhere else? There's a little bit of energy in here, in our contact. Do you feel that? Even as a follower, it's not quite as passive as it's alert. This belongs more to my past: to the time when I was learning about gravity, informed by Contact Improvisation, in the late nineties and early aughts. (Lechner and I experiment, switching leading and following roles multiple times).

Now, we could try something like this. (Lechner stands in front of me and gestures to show our related centers). Now our centers are almost touching. I'm just gonna come down onto all fours, and your center follows my center. You're just going to use this to fold me (he gestures, touching my hands to his hips to assist). And then I'm following your center back up to standing. So, it's a simple little dance. We do it together. We synchronize with a little touch now from the contact work [Contact Improvisation]. Such a different connector, no? It works beautifully, no? Because we're already so clear about what we're moving together. (We try the exercise repeatedly, shifting roles).

There's a way I could use that for a moment. After we come down, you can move onto my center and then maybe just roll the leg, spiral the leg around, and you swivel out of our connection. (Lechner guides me with his shifting body. Then we shift roles.)

Here, now you're coming onto a clear support, so I can rest down into you. So here, center over center. I could actually take your center with me now again, too. Which again . . .

Liz Waterhouse (peeps with surprise): Oh!

Chris Lechner: There (laughs). Center, center. We could kind of learn all of Contact Improvisation's vocabulary, just by this principle. Just gives a lot of sensation into, or reality, to this place we've been breathing into.

Lechner instructs me to stand directly behind him, my nose right behind the back of his head. The front of my moving body is brushing his. Lechner bends his knees and comes down onto all fours, in a tabletop position. I follow him, descending my body gently to the floor, supported by his back. It reminds me of a young animal riding lazily on a parent's back. I have to use my body in a softly weighted way to join him. Then we retract and ascend back up to the original standing position. Reversing our motion brushes the microphones clipped on our T-shirts.

The way my body is supported upon Lechner's back, table upon table, is an exercise that I remember from lessons in Contact Improvisation when I was a student at the American Dance Festival in 2001/2002, studying modern dance with Lisa Race and David Dorfman. Perhaps I have not made these motions since then: well-over twenty years. They are somehow in my bodily memory but also foreign at the same time. This close proximity to another body—especially

a male body—is rare in my daily life as a dance scholar and dance teacher. I am comfortable with this, but conscious of having switched codes involving touch and proximity, which are very different in artistic and academic contexts.

Teaching the next progression, Lechner stands beside me and again initiates my descent down to the floor, into the tabletop position, supporting his body. From there, Lechner rolls his body, so we are back-to-back, turning so that our spines are resting not directly over one another, but at a ninety-degree angle. In this stance you feel the weight of another person pass through you and push down into the floor. Lechner's body is heavy on top of me, but it is not crushing. He is using his feet to take some of the pressure off, so that we can be gentle and move safely, sharing momentum and weight. I am always surprised by how much of another person's weight my body can bear—also how much weight my body has when I let someone support me in falling through gravity. This give and take of stakes and vulnerability, trusting and being careful to another, I am reminded, are very pleasurable aspects of our training as contemporary dancers.

Lechner begins to play and, by taking me slightly off balance, to exchange positions. His actions surprise me, but are also logical within the repertoire of give-and-take, lead-and-follow in this dance style. We experiment a bit more with different speeds and shifts. With these more advanced exercises, I'm lacking the sensitivity to quickly reposition my body and stay connected—but it is enjoyable nonetheless.

Chris Lechner: So now, we can read each other, also when we come apart now. (Lechner walks away from me, creating a duet with separation and no touch.) Our centers are still related. I could decide to follow your center. (We begin to improvise dancing without contact.) And you could come closer to my center or a little further away. But we've actually started synchronizing. Yeah. That's working so beautifully already.

Now we could just do a little travel, across the studio together. We don't disconnect. You need to read my center, in a way. You're not doing exactly the same movement as I am, but you're organizing the same journey. (We travel together.)

I'll follow you now (laughs). So, the material now starts to unravel in different ways. But the reason, let's say "our secret," is that intention or effort to connect. Anything is possible in that way. We could go deeper into it next time we meet—from partnering work, or from healing work. It could be that one of us is leading. It could be that we don't know who's leading. We're just following each other's centers, no? Probably, at this stage, it's kind of more interesting for the play, no?

This, last thing, also as a game is called "ghosting."¹⁸ One person is leading; the other one is following, but not copying. And we are also going to change levels. So, you are kind of ghosting through the connection of the center—more of the shape

18 Swiss theater and dance maker Thomas Mettler brought this into Lechner's research on male duetting. Lechner believes the principle came from Laurie Booth, for a short biography of whom, see footnote 26.

that you catch, or don't catch, together. I think traveling was important to start this with. And if you do that same thing, constantly changing level, that's what's going to bring the center in. (We explore practicing ghosting, moving with dialogic timing and flow through the room. Lechner more dynamically changes from dancing on his feet, to lowering his body down to the floor, doing traveling motions of floorwork, and then moving through standing again.)

So, what I'm reading now is also that our centers can go further apart comfortably, no? They can move to opposite sides of the room and stay connected. That's a nice moment. I didn't feel that before. It's totally clear now that we can investigate something. That's how we're reading each other, no? And again, a lot of it has that sense that you are always committed. You can, kind of, push, pull—yeah, totally! (Sounds of vocalizing and moving dynamically are interspersed with intermittent laughter, then audible signs that the motion is quietening down.)

And you feel like, you know, there's moments where you kind of come out of it, then you're in it, again. (We have an extended practice, synthesizing.)

There was such a joint action of leaving the space, no? The playfield, it was beautiful. Wow! I mean, it takes a lot of time for it to become *true*, but it's not years or months. It's actually quite fast. The nervous system loves that permission, in a way.

Liz Waterhouse: It's interesting how partnering, starting with exercises for the hands or the back, comes to involve the *whole body*.

Chris Lechner: It is in the end then. That intelligence, all over what we're doing just locally. The brain here [in the head] spreads everywhere [in the body].

Liz Waterhouse: Right. That was a big step from student to . . .

Chris Lechner: (overlapping) . . . kind of advanced.

Liz Waterhouse: (overlapping) . . . professional.

Figure 3: The fascial qualities of the body in a gesture. Chris Lechner performing in Bern (2019).



Photo by Sunita Asnani.

Narrating Life Themes

Lechner reflects here on the deep currents in his life stories, underscoring the theme of embodiment: a lived body honed through physical inquiry and experiential practice. Viewing human bodies as complex living structures, he highlights his understanding of the physical body's myofascial system.

Chris Lechner: As a traveler, you might want to go to the regions furthest away. But I've always felt like wherever I am, moving in the contemporary arts, my vehicle is the body and movement. I try to stay connected to this inquiry of the body. For me what is attractive is where we barely know, or where assumptions are just kind of being formed, or visions are being made, or a new way of seeing things emerges. So that would be one thing, guiding my life.

Then for where I am now: Fascia as a way into the body is at this cutting edge of what we know. It's not necessarily the best way. We've got more reliable ways, like the muscles or the bones, but fascia is at the forefront of what we know of the body, and it's graspable. You can verify these ideas by your experience, and since a few years ago also science has developed the instruments to be able measure them. I think that is so important for me as a dancer: that I can think new ideas and then try the taste of them in my mouth. The taste in the mouth is quite important—the somatic part of it—so they don't just stay ideas. I am very inspired by the work of my friend

Gary Carter. Also, thanks to Tyr Throne who made me feel my fascia for the first time and Russell Maliphant for showing me how to move from within this connection.

Your entire body is filled, enveloped, and permeated with fascia from head to toe, from your skin to every individual cell. Fascia is your third brain and is characterized above all by its fluid nature. Just as our most advanced technology is embedded in a liquid medium such as silicone, our body intelligence is at home in the liquid-viscous medium of the fascia matrix—it communicates and reacts around sixty times faster than the nervous system. This matrix is not an inert tension and pressure system, it is alive, it feels into itself and is constantly in a fluid, gliding movement. With 250 million nerve endings in the fascia matrix, it feels/senses more than our vision and our skin. Everything you may do is greatly enhanced by connecting to them. It also seems to play a huge role in healing and pain management. Fasciae have been around in all times and all cultures, just called different names. We—I mean we Westerners—were the first ones to ignore them and cut them out of the picture.

Yoga is another big current or motor in my life story. Although yoga's been sold as a very ancient system, really the way we're practicing it only emerged some eighty years ago—influenced by British military training. So, it is ancient and evolved from the dawn of time somewhere, but it's also such a *new* practice that is developing rapidly.

Today yoga is at the crossroads, fed by workers in an international network mixing different movement modalities. This is exciting. In contrast, martial arts tend to be more orthodox in their practice. I have to be careful here, because there are new martial arts emerging all the time (e.g., aikido, tae kwon do, new kung fu styles, the list is long). But, based on my experience, tai chi or chi gung change only when they are integrated into another modality. In contrast, yoga is being re-invented within itself, and then of course adapted even more as it is applied or integrated into other forms, like dance. That's why as a form it is contemporary and traditional, all at once.

It makes so much sense to me to bring together the cutting edge of our understanding, which are the fascia, with this dynamic evolving form of yoga. For me, yoga is just up for grabs! It's like all the cards are thrown in the air. It's again, something that has this feeling, this quality of a cutting edge of something that we're just about getting hold of and saying "So, it's this what we're doing now, is it? Is that modern yoga?"

Again and again, while I was performing and dancing, yoga popped up. When I was in a ballet academy, it was just an old record my mother had from a hatha yoga instruction. Something about the letting go into breath made a lot of sense as a kind of relief, or release. Especially because the physical practice of learning ballet was so intense. Then later when I was injured, I went to Monte Carlo and studied with

Marika Besobrasova.¹⁹ Her inspiration really was through yoga work that she would kind of realign and set up a healthy, working, balanced body for ballet. Then later, when I was working mainly in the field of contemporary dance, there was either martial arts, or Feldenkrais, or yoga informing a lot of the movement work. I realized that I was most at home in what yoga did to me. I was very at home also with the “martial-arty” bits of contemporary dance. But the most interesting, juicy bit for me was always when yoga didn’t insist on being linear anymore and still stayed yoga. Then it became movement.

I’ve practiced yoga in many ways. As a ballet dancer, yoga was restorative. Later, for my contemporary dance practice, it evolved into a way to set up the body—but not only the body. Yoga would introduce a change of state in me. And this state would become the dance. It was a manual that informed, say, my joints as much as the person present to the practice. Most of my peers at that time got this experience, this tuning, from martial arts or Feldenkrais-related work. Yoga had a particular energetic signature or flavor that hit closer to home for me.

Liz Waterhouse: I’d love to hear more about your work with Marika Besobrasova.

Chris Lechner: Well, that was very specific. This was around 1987/89. She was working with breath—very simple hatha yoga principles—but then very specifically applied to dancing. You talked about how everything in the body in ballet is kind of a crossover or crossing over. Only then does ballet actually come alive. One of her big things was force croisé. She would teach you through a kind of more linear setup, which was yogic, and then you would start crossing over the sides more and more—so you became dynamic, and it became ballet. It became fifth position, and extending from there, and closing into there (demonstrates). She had this incredible way to take the sting out of ballet, that what would be harmful to you, and make it, I suppose, yogic in the sense that it became healthy.

So, in my case, coming from an injury, she could really teach your ankle. The scar that I had, for instance, around the ankle. I had three ripped tendons, and they operated on it. That the foot just started recovering in such a short amount of time back into just being juicy.

Liz Waterhouse: It was your right ankle?

19 Marika Besobrasova (1918–2020) was born in Yalta and educated in dance in France. She developed her own system of teaching based on the Vaganova method and established her own academy in Monte Carlo in 1974. See Warren, *The Art of Teaching Ballet*, 12–43. For her recounting being given books on yoga by her husband and teaching based on “relaxation” and breathing, see Warren, 31–32.

Chris Lechner: Both actually (laughs). A few years later the other side too. They operated at that time still. Nowadays, they wouldn't operate anymore. The first one was in Zurich Opera House. It was towards the end of the season. I was *super* tired, and I had a just unbelievably technical solo in the third act of *Sleeping Beauty*. Just something so wacko. I think it was just a moment when I was just too exhausted. I was in the air and didn't quite gauge where I would land. I just went over the foot, landing, and heard this loud snap. I tried to get up from there and realized, "Oh, I'm not getting up." I just kind of hobbled off stage. Thankfully it was not painful in the moment. There was so much adrenaline. Then an ice pack and I rushed to the hospital and was operated on that same night.

I was lucky that when I was trying to reconnect to movement, that I came across a few people, like Marika Besobrasova and later Russell Maliphant, who helped me shift the paradigm I was used to moving in. I took workshops with Russell in the late nineties. He would take us through sun salutations in a way that it would take ninety minutes to get through just one repetition—pausing, deepening, hanging out with the breath and gravity, undoing patterns, and opening up connections. All this created a fertile ground for coming into movement from there.²⁰

I was in that phase where I had just finished being—or calling myself—a ballet dancer. And that yogic approach was just so familiar and yet new to me. First of all, that the body could be *really* respected. Differently than in ballet, where you had to override pain, discomfort, etc. In yoga you could allow the body to have a strong voice. It becomes a dialogue with the body, in a different way than in ballet. And if you do that, respect the body, the body would still be available in that way, would surprisingly *still* go to the limits. Because it's one thing to stop dancing by saying: "No. You moved one way for a while in your life. Now you can find a much more reduced but healthy way, maybe more around pedestrian movements." While new dance, with its emphasis on pedestrian movement as the source for dance, was a welcome and healing antidote to ballet, a profound relearning that literally any movement might be the dance, I never lost interest in the extreme range of motion that is explored in ballet and yoga. I just have too much love for any and all kinds

20 Russell Maliphant (b. 1961 in Ottawa, based in London) is a dancer and choreographer working in the United Kingdom. He trained at the Royal Ballet School and performed with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet (1982–88), DV8 Physical Theatre, Laurie Booth Company, Rosemary Butcher, and Michael Clark Company. Supplementing his income as a freelance artist, he became a Roling practitioner in 1994. In 1996 he opened The Russell Maliphant Dance Company, working with his long-term collaborator, lighting designer Michael Hulls, on works positioned in "modern dance," drawing on research into ballet, yoga, and martial arts. See Craine and Mackrell, "Maliphant, Russell"; see also the biography of Maliphant currently on his company website, <http://www.rmcompany.co.uk>, last accessed November 8, 2024. Related to my arguments here, see Hardt's praxeological analysis of a lecture by Maliphant: Hardt, "Grasping Practice," 116–17.

of movement! I don't want to put the restriction on myself "I'm not supposed to go there." So yoga offered me a way to go there.

Childhood Memories: From Martial Arts to Ballet

Liz Waterhouse: Could you tell me about your memories of dancing, before your work as a professional ballet dancer? And any kinesthetic memories of your childhood?

Chris Lechner: There was actually no dance before I started ballet. There was a whole lot of sport. After we moved away from India, the sports class was where I started kind of getting noticed. The teachers were encouraging my mother to send me to a place where they would train me more to be an athlete, because it was a mathematical school. That was the first moment where I kind of realized, well, people notice me when I do something with my body.

Similarly, I noticed then a few years later, when I started martial arts training—tae kwon do—that I quickly received affirmation. They called me, “the best horse in their stable.” Soon after I started training, the main honcho guy from Tae Kwon Do Germany came and spotted me, and said I should train for the national team. I didn't even have a black belt yet at that time. That year, just before he had spotted me, I had done my examination and then was called again back. I thought, “Oh shit, I must have messed something up.” But they said, “Please, do the routine of the next belt, because we know you know it.” So, I did it, and they said, “Yeah, you have the next belt. You skipped a belt today.” Which was also yet another pointer that I would be noticed and appreciated via movement.

I was playing music at the same time. I played the classical guitar and did drumming. I was nowhere near as talented in those as whatever I would try with my body. Then one summer I was visiting my father, who was working in Montreal, and he was married to an Indian dancer, Sonal Mansingh. They were writing an article for the *FAZ* [*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*]: “Ten Questions about Western Dance.” So, they had all these dance books and magazines lying around. I started leafing through some of the pages. In one book, I saw Mikhail Baryshnikov who had just defected.²¹ And it was the first photos of this body *leaping* into space. And I just went like, “*What* is this body doing? I want to do that.” Then I found out, “Okay, he's a classical dancer. He's one of the best.” At the end of the summer holiday, I announced to both of my parents, first my father in Montreal and then coming back to Germany, “I think I need to do ballet as a complementary training to tae kwon do.”

So, the dancing came, strangely enough, through my father. Both my parents were in the Goethe-Institut. They had no problems when I told them, “You know,

21 Baryshnikov defected in Toronto in 1974. Craine and Mackrell, “Baryshnikov, Mikhail.”

I'm gonna be a dancer. I'm not gonna go and study." I didn't have any problems with them. The only thing my father said was, "Well, you're not gonna earn much. And what do you feel about other men liking you, because that's going to happen in that world?" I was like, "Whatever." (Laughs.) I was so naïve, no? But my father was totally supportive.

So I started with ballet at the theater in Ulm. The theater was a good experience. I went through the doors, passed the *Pförtner* [porter], looked around and went, "Oh, everybody's like me! We're all crazy." (Exhales.) What a relief! Because I was living in Southern Swabian, Germany. Can you imagine coming from India, through Austria where I was beaten up because I didn't speak Austrian—kind of mobbed and beaten every day, or snowballs. I had no idea why. I mean, my main language was English. What was their big issue? So, there was first sports, then martial arts, and then I did my first ballet classes. But it was huge, because just as I became interested, that day in the newspaper, there was an announcement that the Theater Ulm was starting a boy's group for ballet. Because I think that would have been off-putting for me, if I had come into a class and there would have been a lot of pink. I was really just a dude, and I was doing my martial arts black belt training.

I did the training and the class, and I loved it. We did turnouts, and then jumps, half-tours, and demi-tours, some stuff at the barre, and it just felt fantastic. Then, the teacher who was the choreographer and director of Ulm theater said, "Please, come to my office." There he put the *Schläppchen* [ballet slippers] on the table. Then he pulled out a *Suspensorium* [a dance belt] and a schedule. He said, "You come whenever you can, but please, wear this and this whenever you come." (Laughs.) I didn't need to pay for anything. I could go any day, any time there was a ballet class in Ulm theater. So, that was again reaffirming that when I did something physical, I would be noticed. I would get so much back—which at that age I was also so hungry for—being an outsider and always different.

A year and a half later, we were doing RAD [Royal Academy of Dance] syllabus. We had somebody come from the Royal Ballet School to take the examination. After my examination, he said, "Please come to the Royal Ballet School." It was one of those really big moments. I was, I think, fourteen or fifteen. I kind of went, "Oh, that's what you're going to do with your life." Because it was so clear. My parents were highly accomplished intellectuals.²² I was, of course, going to go and finish school, and study. That was just implied. That was our family. The moment this examiner said, "Please, come to Royal Ballet to study. There'll be no problem. There'll be auditions, but I can guarantee that you'll be accepted. Please, consider this." I was like, "I'm not

22 Lechner's father, Georg Lechner, and mother, Hannelore Werlé, both studied philosophy with Ernst Bloch. His father received his doctorate in English and Romance Studies from the University of Munich, his mother the equivalent of a master's degree from the University of Leipzig.

gonna be staying in this small town in southern Germany, I'm going to be part of the world again, where I come from. And this is going to be the vehicle." Not in so many words, but it was as if thunder had struck, or something.

Just a day or two afterwards, I spoke with the ballet director and told him that had been suggested. He kind of went, "No, not Royal Ballet School. You're going to go to a museum. There's nothing creative there. You're probably not even so tall, in the end. You're just going to be a frustrated little puck, or something in a museum! Go to Stuttgart. All the choreographers come there. Go to the school. You're going to get in the company eventually, and you'll be so much happier." So, thank God for him, no? And that's what I did. I auditioned for the John Cranko School. Got accepted and started there.

Recently I had a reunion with some of my classmates from that time from Ulm—now after forty years or more. In meeting them, I realized, "My God, they're just such decent people." A young boy—thirteen, fourteen—that starts ballet in a small town. If it had been in Austria, I would have been in so much trouble. Instead, they were just curious. Then later, they would write to me and said, "You know, I read the newspaper, the *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, it seems like you did well with that role. It's so nice to hear from you." Now and then, I would get little messages, letters and stuff from them, but I never saw them anymore. But they would be constantly kind of happy that a boy would do ballet, you know? Or at least, it was incredible to realize that those people were around at a time where I could have also just kind of went, "No, this is too much. I'm not gonna do this. This is too embarrassing. I'll just do my black belt."

Figure 4: A grainy photocopy of Chris Lechner leaping (1982). Hamburg Ballet, Fourth Mahler by John Neumeier.



Photographer Holger Badekow.

Career Trajectory as a Ballet Dancer

Chris Lechner: At the end of the second school year, William Forsythe approaches me and says, “I’m doing this production in Copenhagen, and I would like I would like you to dance with us.” Boy! I mean, that was just incredible, that moment. I was seventeen. For this drama, *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1981), there was the son, and Bill needed a young dancer to play this role. We did it in Copenhagen and we then did it a few months later in Stuttgart, when he had announced that he was leaving Stuttgart. That was one of the last things he did with the Stuttgart Ballet.²³

So, by the end of my time in the ballet academy, Bill had taken me under his wings, and I had just performed. The whole company [Stuttgart Ballet] was going, “Of course, you’re gonna be one of us.” I was hanging out with them in the canteen and partying with them. But at the end of my academy training, the director, Marcia Haydée, talked to me and said, “I’m not taking you into the company,” which was devastating. But she said, “You wouldn’t dance. Look at the other guys in my company. They’re all tall. What would you do? That would be such a waste. Go and learn to dance and then we’ll talk again.” So that’s how I started at the Hamburg Ballet.

Liz Waterhouse: Was your height an issue there?

23 Nugent, “William Forsythe and the Lost Stuttgart Ballets.”

Chris Lechner: With [John] Neumeier, not at all. It was 170 performances a year, and within like two months solo roles. I enjoyed it immensely. I was just—swimming free, swimming into the world. That's what gave me enough experience that it was possible a few years later to return to Stuttgart. I remember, a few years later, I met Marcia in Spoleto on a strictly ballet tour. I sat down, and the sun was going down in this amphitheater, and I was like, "Marcia, I think I'm ready." She was like, "Yeah, I've got a contract, too." She then took me into the company.

Between working in Hamburg and Stuttgart, and later the Zurich Ballet—there was a good nine/ten years where my "ballet bubble" was completely intact. There was the ladder within that hierarchy: the bigger and better roles, becoming a soloist. There's a whole trajectory which works so well.

What we haven't spoken about, but I feel that it's been very much part of that chapter of my life, is that there's so much privilege that comes with being a male dancer in the ballet world. If you have a just a little bit of talent, you've got a job and you're in a good company. You don't need to worry much. In Hamburg Ballet, I would just flash my opera pass and be in every nightclub, every place where the "in-people" go. I was part of the in-crowd. We were on tours, and it was just all embassies, and five-star hotels, and grand theaters. So, after that there was a whole retraining a self when I became an independent choreographer, dancer, performer. All of a sudden, I had nothing. And I was still doing what I loved, which was moving and dancing, but nobody wanted to see this version in a way.

It's kind of like this whole "prince syndrome": being part of a family of high status in India, where I was growing up, where we had a mansion, and servants. I was a blue-eyed White boy, which is beautiful to Indians. If it had been China, I would have been the ugliest duckling, actually. (Laughs.) But in India, I got so much affection, just by my skin color. So, today there's so much shame in me, too. You know, just kind of going, "My God, this privilege!" What I took for granted, you know? So, that needed to be eroded later in life. I was welcoming that too—being kind of a penniless, but very happy independent artist just learning about art. Because I'd been spoon-fed a version of art as a ballet dancer. But then, I realized, "My God, art is so big and it goes so deep! And I will probably never be that choreographer that I am as a performer, or mover, but it's my world." It became my world.

The only way I would be noticed in art, too, was: I would have to move and dance. All good! I would only have to say, "Well, I'm former soloist of Stuttgart Ballet." I had a residency. I had a grant from the British Council. You know, I didn't have to earn anything.

Liz Waterhouse: So as a freelancer you were quite well supported, because of that history?

Chris Lechner: I think that transition will never be so easy, unless you know, “I’m marrying the doctor (laughs) and I’m gonna have two kids in three years.” Or, “I’m studying law, because I’m gonna help refugees.” Or, “I’m going to be an *Inspizient* [stage manager] and the theater’s paying my education.” You know, there’s certain pathways where you don’t need to need to do much homework, really. And you’ll get a lot of help.

If you want to stay in the field then, as a ballet dancer, you either become a choreographer, or it’s three steps down: You only become a ballet master, or a rehearsal master, or something like that. But in the contemporary world, it was very much, “If you move and you have your practice, you also do your own work.” As I mentioned, I realized quite early on that my choreographic work was never going to be the same kind of quality that I had as a performer. Everything about me as a dancer had become very skillful at that stage in my life. My work as a choreographer showed promise but could in no way be compared to the level that I could offer as a performer. At one point, I had to consciously embrace and also to communicate, “I am perhaps simply a dancer. I’ve been in the trenches for fifteen, twenty years. This is what you’re gonna get. And I’m good at this.”

I think that’s what I picked up when we were talking earlier and you said that your time as a freelancer after leaving The Forsythe Company was difficult. Actually, you could have used your cards to receive choreographic residencies, but it would have meant that you would have to actually also stand behind it and have a direction yourself as a choreographer. After my transition out of ballet, I in fact was working pretty fluidly between improvisation, performing, creating and choreographing—and crossing dance and somatic research. But when residencies came, they wanted to label me either as an “improviser” or a “choreographer.” I had some doubts—because somehow working between these seemed more important than any one trajectory or market.

Becoming a Contemporary Dancer: Reshaping Identity

This life-writing presents a central narrative in Lechner’s body-biography: his shift in aesthetic practice from ballet to contemporary dance. Lechner discusses both the changes in his aesthetic practice and physical body, as well as his shifting experiences of social relationships, class mobility, and self-understanding.

Chris Lechner: I think I’ve done something that very few ballet dancers have done, which is to become a contemporary dancer. Now, what does that mean is for me the big question. But I know it has happened, and I know it has happened on so many more levels than simply physically approaching something slightly different, or maybe fundamentally different.

Originally, I started out training as a ballet dancer, and we've discussed also the whole mental, visionary—everything—outlook, worldview, that's tied into that, especially at the time when we learned. There's a whole worldview that comes into play. There's a huge thing that needs to happen, I think, and very few of us actually go down that route—I don't know why—to retrain, and what that means. For example, if somebody who has an opera training, who does things that only the fewest of us could ever dream of with his voice, but then when he doesn't want to do opera anymore, always sounds like this (Lechner imitates the voice of singer, with a constricted larynx, higher pitch than his speaking voice). That is something that we're left with as ballet dancers. (Switches back to natural voice.) We're always in a ballet body. What would happen if that operatic voice would become his voice again? So, that was one of the biggest things for me: if I could reclaim my body again.

There's a context, which I can kind of give it, which is: I became a contemporary mover, dancer, creator, teacher. I think that's kind of a big signature in my body-biography.

Liz Waterhouse: You described reclaiming the voice, or your body after ballet. Did contemporary dance for you also create a body that was trained, that was different than your body?

Chris Lechner: Yes and no. It depended where I went with it. But I think because gravity showed up as such a big common thread of the teachers that I was working with. I realized that the body that I dropped into was a body that I would recognize when I was teaching in India, or wherever, or in Thailand, or in America. It seemed to be, kind of, a language that our bodies have in common once we enter gravity. It's not a style, but it becomes something that you recognize. I know that was the thing that helped me probably to land in this new paradigm. In the first one or two years I found myself in the studio crying, maybe grieving, but quite often just out of sheer relief. Then slowly, something started feeling. It wasn't like: I was a Pilates practitioner and now I do GYROTONIC®.²⁴ They are similar and yet I can tell the difference. You know, it wasn't that. It was kind of a stripping away, or stripping down, which happened in the first—at least—three or four years, I would say. And then slowly, aesthetic questions emerged for me.

But I would say that—it's interesting, it's the first time I've ever spoken it out that way—that I think it was, first of all: How do you undo ballet training? It is so tenacious. It creeps so deep into your, almost, DNA. Very much like an opera training, or like a lot of classical trainings, I suppose, would kind of become very much part of you.

24 For readability, subsequent references to the methodology of GYROTONIC® in this chapter use ordinary capitalization and are made without the registered trademark symbol.

I have some encounters with Indian dancers—Bharatanatyam dancers—that said the very same thing: that it took them forever to feel something underneath that they could claim as a natural movement, or body. For me, it was more like, I wanted Chris's body back. What if I hadn't trained in ballet all those years? What would my body have been? How would it make love? How would it enjoy itself? How would it suffer? How would it (laughs) walk up and down the stairs?

Another thread that comes with the whole subject of being trained in a certain way and then leaving that paradigm. The re-education of thinking: about what I'm doing or viewing what I do. I mean, the most obvious kind of changes. You go from a proscenium stage playing to one to four thousand people in ballet, to dancing for smaller kinds of audience, fifty to maybe two hundred people. No elevated stage. And more and more, actually leaving that stage. So what happens there?

When I was ballet-trained and part of a company with reputation, like Stuttgart Ballet: I had an apartment, a sports car, money, nice clothes. Five years later, I was in Brighton, in London. At the end of the month, I didn't know if I had enough money to fill the fridge—if I could even eat. In both circumstances, I was so fulfilled. I was fulfilled as a ballet dancer for a long time, until it didn't quite fit anymore—the gold surface started rubbing off. During the times, where I felt really, almost like poor [in financial terms], I felt so rich, and curious, and excited about each day actually. But, when it comes from, let's say the encouragement of the world outside of me—from others—I was celebrated for the choice of being a ballet dancer. And I was absolutely dropped by the choice to become a contemporary dancer. You know, who wants you to make contemporary work? Nobody wants you to do that. There must be something in you that really needs to do it. Otherwise really nobody has the need for somebody who's not in the either entertainment business, or the high arts, or sports, I suppose.

That's the kind of niche where the physical transformation was hugely important. There are several other colleagues of mine around that time when I was living mostly in the UK—that completely went with their, let's say, ballet aesthetic, and training, and understanding of the body, and changed it into a postmodern view. That was such a valid thing, no? Because they would get such wonderful dance material or dancers, at that time. Still in the 1990s, it was still kind of very hit or miss on how good—well, if that's the right word?—or how skilled, or whatever you were as a contemporary dancer. You had a lot of givens, and then you made the shift in your thinking, I suppose. So, coming back to it, I've seen very few people who've done not only the shift—as a way of looking at their dancing, or what they're presenting—but also morphing or changing into this creature that is a contemporary dancer.

Because with most friends that I had at that time, I have nothing to talk about anymore. The moment I start speaking about what I would be doing just now, or maybe ten years ago, they just get glassy eyes. They have no clue what I'm talking about. I'm just one of those people that don't stretch their feet. There's a very clear kind of crystal palace around this kind of ballet training. And I'm not talking about

the generation that is trained in both, and doesn't necessarily have to go one or the other route. I'm really talking about more the family that I came from, and in a lot of ways left, but not consciously.

I remember also, at one point: my last season was over but there was a very fluid change. I was already working in England. The Stuttgart Ballet needed me for some things still, for about another half year. They couldn't replace me right away or didn't want to. So, you would think, well, all that time I would at least do some kind of like training, a ballet barre, or some kind of preparation that I would have always done to perform those roles. I didn't. I don't even know when was my last ballet class? I just dropped it like a hot potato and didn't need any of that ever again, ever. I think in 2008 I did a Feldenkrais session and was inspired to teach a ballet barre to the Indian students from Feldenkrais principles. It just came out of the moment, but it was the only one incident in thirty years where I felt, "Oh, I want to use this that way and want to train myself this way." It was so absolutely overdue.

So that kind of also hid from me. It really took Steve Paxton to kind of point out, "Wait a minute! But isn't that part of your deal, too?" I remember Steve musing one evening in Brighton, how all great ballet dancers kind of transcend the form. Maybe it was his way of inviting me to realize in my movement and dance that paradox—that which transcends ballet and yet is ballet?

Transformative Collaborations and Conversations

Lechner's life stories were brimming with references and anecdotes about the key artists and body workers that had inspired him significantly. This writing brings together some of these stories, referencing the contributions of dance artists Steve Paxton, Laurie Booth, and Kirstie Simson.

Chris Lechner: Steve Paxton had this heart-to-heart talk with me once at a time where I was trying to break away from dance altogether.²⁵ That was the time where I was delving into very muddy waters. Steve Paxton came to Brighton—this was around 2000. I was not even sure if I even wanted to dance again. I was working with an osteopath, and it felt very, very far away from everything. I saw Steve give a lecture. Afterwards, we were at a friend's place, where we were all sitting together and having dinner. So, I got to talk to him and tell him that one performance that I

25 Steve Paxton (1939–2024) was an American dancer, choreographer, and improviser known for his central role in developing the dance form Contact Improvisation from 1972. He danced in the companies of choreographers José Limón and Merce Cunningham, was a founding member of Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union, and danced with the group Freelance Dance. He was a close collaborator of Lisa Nelson (see footnote 27). Seibert, "Steve Paxton, Who Found Avant-Garde Dance in the Everyday, Dies at 85."

saw some years ago actually shifted everything for me. It was his *Some English Suites* (1991), and I saw it in Bern. That was (laughs) a big moment to actually tell the person, “No, you’ve actually really done something very important to me. It really impacted me a lot.”

We started talking about what you love in dance, and he started sharing his love for Greek dances, and Greek rituals: that there was a warmth and humanity in there that he misses in contemporary work, but a formality at the same time, without needing to express anything. A step to the right and two steps to the left. A step to the right, two steps to the left, for the next three days. He said: “That took them into a state of non-affect.” You’re not animated by your personality or social reality. Another self emerges through doing dances that simple. All this was kind of just quite beautiful. Then he asked, “Well, so how are you making use of your past in ballet?” And I kind of went, (deepens voice) “No, I don’t do that at all anymore. You know, I’m doing this and that.” He started looking at me with such a sad expression. He went, “Well, you did that how many years of your life? Your cells were put through this. How many hours and years? And how much *love* was in there?” I kinda went, “Yeah well, fifteen, twenty years.” And he kept looking at me and going, “And you’re not using that?” He looked at me with such sad eyes, and then I started welling up too. And was like, (inhales) “Oh, God, what have I done?” And he said, “It’s not like that you have to be a ballet dancer forevermore. But I mean, you would not be you if you were not in some way including—using—if that weren’t part of you. If you didn’t let it be part of what you show of yourself.”

Then the next day, I remember going with Laurie Booth into the studio and first position [from ballet] came to me.²⁶ From there our improvisation started and I started crying all over again because it was like, “But that’s what I love so much. But I don’t need to buy into the package anymore.” I suppose I am exaggerating here, I tend to be a little “Indian” when I’m telling stories—by which I mean more expressive, even over the top in emotion—but I was at least misty eyed. And lastly, Lisa Nelson’s work also did something like that to me.²⁷ That first position could emerge any time it wanted to. You know? I mean, it kind of created the hybrid

26 Laurie Booth (b. 1954 in London, based in Brighton) is a dancer, choreographer, bodyworker, and Gyrotonic instructor. Continuously researching the practices of movement training, he is currently formulating his system of “Triple Body Integration.” He performed Steve Paxton’s *Suspect Terrain* in 1989 and, like Lechner, has been inspired by myofascial science. Biography developed through correspondence with the author on November 8, 2024. See also Bolt, “Fascial Recognition: An Interview with Laurie Booth.”

27 Lisa Nelson (b. 1949 in New York City) is a dancer, choreographer, video artist, and international teacher of improvisation. Nelson’s “Tuning Scores,” collect materials developed from her research exploring sensory perception through videography, movement, and performance. She was a longtime collaborator of Steve Paxton and co-editor of *Contact Quarterly* from 1976. An anthology of oral history interviews and writings from and about

of training that I'm doing now. Because it doesn't exclude, but it includes that particular past—the particular past, or body-biography that each dancer has. I mean, it's always allowed to be part of it.

I also need to share more about Laurie Booth! In 1996 I went to see a performance at the Elisabeth Hall in London. It was *Storm Garden* performed by Laurie Booth and Gary Lambert, followed by his newest creation. On the huge empty stage appeared a larger-than-life figure, Laurie, his hands describing a tai chi-like figure eight in an endless loop. Similarly to when I saw Steve Paxton perform, I felt I was witnessing my future: what I might become as a dancer. Two months later I spotted him in a restaurant in Bern, where he was giving a workshop which I then attended. Eventually I moved to Brighton to work with him. Laurie has been probably the greatest inspiration and influence in my process of transitioning towards contemporary dance. The scope of his vision was breathtaking. One of his ideas is perhaps close to the idea of a body-biography. Laurie Booth was interested in the way you are building a myth, your own myth, through your body. Something that points beyond a narrative. So not just what appears of you in a specific production or dance style, but in the writing of your body—a myth that you are creating by a life lived in movement.

Another person who has influenced me profoundly was the dancer Kirstie Simson, who I worked with around 2000 to 2006, and who I began to collaborate with again this year [2024].²⁸ I remember that she would propose, “Just lie down and wait for whatever movement will come.” Obviously in her workshops, she was preparing us the entire morning over three hours, taking us very slowly into movement. That was already a retraining, no? That I could take time. That I could slow down. That I didn't need to train my body like I would train a horse, for instance—old school style. I could wait for responses.

Lisa Nelson are available on the website, <http://oralsite.be/pages/Anthology-Lisa-Nelson>, last accessed November 8, 2024.

28 Dancer Kirstie Simson (b. 1958 in Kenya, based in Wales) is an international performer and teacher of improvisation. She trained at the Laban Center, and her research has explored dance improvisation, Contact Improvisation, aikido, meditation, Alexander Technique, and approaches to healing. She was a professor of dance at the University of Illinois (2008–2020) and is currently performing *Subterranéa* (2024) and teaching workshops responding to her cancer journey (“Practices that Promote Well-being and Resilience in Challenging Times”). Biography developed through email correspondence with the author on November 9, 2024. See Simson, “Revelations of Life as a Dance Improviser,” <https://kirstiesimson.com/revelations-of-life-as-a-dance-improviser/>, last accessed November 9, 2024. See also Simson's artist website, <https://www.kirstiesimson.com>, last accessed November 9, 2024. For documentation of Lechner dancing with Simson in July 2006, see the bonus materials for the dance film by video-dance makers Katrina McPherson and Simon Fildes, *Force of Nature*. <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/forceofnature/2851084>, last accessed November 10, 2024.

She was very good at it, just how she introduced, “Well, just let’s lie down together, after lunch. We’re tired anyway, aren’t we?” There would be a way how she would just introduce some sounds or to speak to us about something. So that at one point in your kind of leaden body, something emerged, and it felt light and easy. Then forty-five minutes later, we were all in this dancing orgy. Just absolutely *ripping* through space. Coming from, “Lie down and let go of even, ever wanting to move again.”

That was so close to yoga too, no? That it would just start with, “Well, just lay your limbs down and connect to your breath. Sense where gravity is, and everything will emerge.” After that, what will emerge is not a collapse, but rather the voice—your love for dance will not be kind of edited out of the picture that way. So, that was a clue. Because at that time, I was still almost crippled from all those years of ballet. But I got more and more moments, and hours, and events. Where, yes, I was going right to that place where—yeah—there’s a thrill there. There’s an edge. There’s something so beyond the ordinary body. And it’s wonderful to hang out there. But the strategy was kind of through—the buzzword at that time was “undoing.”

Undoing is not simply letting go or releasing, which were also a big suggestion of that time. But I think simply “releasing” needed to evolve into something more practical, where we wouldn’t get injured because we were releasing so much. (Laughs.) So the undoing is more energetic. It’s a way that when you’re addressing the body, you get to that place where you’re needing to give a little more into it. Not only because it’s going to be looser then, but because it’s going to have more rebound and more spring. That is the reflex that we want to foster, in a critical moment, through undoing.

Liz Waterhouse: Can you talk me through an example?

Chris Lechner: What I meant is: You go to a specific location in the body. Say, for example, the psoas muscle, which is a very deep muscle. On the cow it’s the filet mignon. The psoas originates in the lower back and traverses through the hips down to the top of the leg. If you kneel with one knee on the ground, and the other foot standing, your felt sense connects with it—with the psoas. With undoing, you’re not stretching anything. You’re simply “hanging out” there and connecting to gravity. The psoas of the kneeling leg responds by softening/undoing and loading/charging all at the same time. Afterwards, you can ride this package of sensation into movement. There is a letting go and a tensioning happening that gives you the potential to move into/with it. The slowness of it, the giving into time, I think is also important.

So that sense of undoing and letting the body unravel into its dance or movement was a huge help to me at that time—not only physically, but also because it gave me so much permission to also wait and not feel guilty about it. “I’m doing nothing.

What am I doing here?” As a former ballet dancer, that was very foreign to me—to let things emerge.

Nowadays, this undoing or tuning has a very similar progression most of the time when I’m working with it. Like you start scanning your body. This is not something that I do frequently in my practice, but it has a value and sometimes I incorporate it into my teaching. Very slowly you scan from your toes, to your lower limbs, to your upper limbs. Following the surface of your body, from the base up to the skull. It takes time. But after you do this in a few classes, then the moment the map is there with you, you’re scanning more like in those science fiction movies. Like signals moving from the tip of your fingers into your body at great speed. Then your body-awareness changes into something which is then quite global—all over the body, at once—not only local and very slow. Then at one point, after practicing maybe for another hour or so, the scan is just present. You’re not becoming a vegetable and staying a vegetable, but you’re kind of just allowing a little more space and time to get a lot more thrill and performance in the end. It’s something which is so nice that when you actually get that sense of scanning or presence, that time slows down a little bit for you, like a race car driver at high speed. Or as a pedestrian, you actually see the car coming at you on the street and you move out of the way elegantly, as opposed to startling. There’s a slowing down, which is crazy when that happens, no? That we can stretch or bend time that way.

Liz Waterhouse: Did you have a similar practice as a ballet dancer?

Chris Lechner: No. I had my own practices for preparing to dance. I had the yoga, which was kind of a tuning into my joints in a way that the ballet training didn’t suggest. Is scanning perhaps more methodical? I had these very simple principles from Marika Besobrasova: that I would start my day turning in my joints, since I would spend most of the day then turned out as a ballet dancer. Then find the breath through it. A little bit of asana work. I also had some restorative practices, such as using shiatsu on my foot and lower leg. That was the start of every day, which also sorted out the body from being battered from the last night’s performance or whatever. Then a hot bath. Then training. But these kinds of self-care practices really made the difference: resetting the body every time.

It wasn’t a kind of an awareness moment, like scanning probably would be more of. But it was a tuning into: “Where am I, just now today, before everything starts going again and I’m supposed to function in a certain way, and I expect myself to do this and that? Truly, how am I now? Well, my calf doesn’t feel so great. But yeah, it’s easing out now. Okay. And then I’ll need to take care of the shoulder. Will do. Will do.” And at the same time, I’m feeling the breath entering my body and the joints opening, giving a little more space. With it comes just that curious thing—in yoga, or martial arts or somatic practices—that you kind of get something that helps you

survive the day in a much, much better way. But all this was more restorative for me, to return to and perform ballet, rather than as a means to change my body entirely, as a form of contemporary dance research. Later these practices were the core of my body journey, as a contemporary dancer, not a means to an end.

I remember also with yoga, in my first years of practice: You would do asanas—a little dog pose, and a little this, and whatever—and then you go into a resting place and put your head on the ground. That is the kind of crucial moment where you're putting the head on the ground and the nervous system assimilates the challenge. "Ahh-huhh!" Something opens up and the next time you repeat those movements, it's changed. Most of hatha yoga uses this strategy. In vinyasa-style, the rest lasts for not more than five breaths. In hatha, you can give this moment more time. I started looking for this as a way to enter into my dance practice.

And then yoga was also a big help in relearning what would it mean for this body to become a contemporary dancer. It wasn't so much my martial art background then. Rather, again and again, I was really inspired by yoga. I mean also Vanda Scaravelli's particular approach to yoga, which I came across then around 1997, which had a lot to do with gravity.²⁹ Something that I'd really not considered much as a ballet dancer.

Discovering "Released" Bodies and "Instant Composition"

Dancers' memories of changing dance techniques and styles reflect their singular professional paths. Narrations of these embodied experiences may challenge models of periodization and simple turning points of innovation in dance historiography.³⁰ In this section, Lechner and I compare our respective encounters with release techniques, improvisation, and contemporary dance—Lechner in the United Kingdom in the late 90s and me in the United States and then Germany in the early 2000s.

Liz Waterhouse: Did you train also in modern dance, or in release technique?

Chris Lechner: I discovered release technique in the mid-nineties during a mentored residency that I was invited to in Birmingham, England. By that time, I had started embracing a completely new movement vocabulary. I was there as a choreographer. Peter Bonham, who started Le Groupe Dance Lab Ottawa was there, mentoring European choreographers. At that time, he was working with Sasha Waltz, Russell Maliphant, and Wayne McGregor. They were kind of like the new

29 Vanda Scaravelli (1908–1999, born in Florence) was an influential practitioner of yoga, narrating it for a readership in the West. Scaravelli, *Awakening the Spine*.

30 See also Carter, "Reshaping Dance Through Time."

generation of choreographers. For some reason, he wanted to work with me at that time too.

Through Peter's very persistent and annoying questions, I started choreographing movements that were completely new to me, but somehow were the right thing for me at that time. I asked myself, "So what does my body need, and who do my dancers need, so that they could do this?" In other words, how could we prepare for this way of moving, since warming up at a barre like a ballet dancer would have not been so helpful.

While visiting Bern, a dancer in the company there introduced me to a release-based forward bend. I remember coming onto all fours and coming back and then recovering to the vertical. I was completely flashed by it. I thought, "Okay, yeah, that's the information we'll need." Probably there's much more to it. But we trained doing the forward bend the whole week and then whatever you wanted to take on board from there, from the sensations that came about. That was my introduction to released work.

Only then did I realize that quite a few people that I was talking about were saying, "Yeah, so. She's a ballet dancer, but she's also released. And that's why I'm interested in working with her." From my ballet bubble, from dancing in the Stuttgart Ballet, I had no clue that was even part of what dancers were training in or taking on board. I realized that all the really good dancers that I really love to watch, they have release in their body. They transcend the box of effort. There's something more, and it's quite released, even in ballet. Because there's such a lyrical side to ballet too, I suppose. It became the most interesting part of starting to look out for something new, training the body.

You know it's interesting that before the internet, that just to learn a forward bend in a released way, you had to have the good luck that somebody in the right situation teaches you that. Then you catch, "Oh, there's a whole *world* happening around this!"

Liz Waterhouse: Do you remember what type of release training it was?

Chris Lechner: Susan Klein Technique. Very clearly. Though later I trained also in other ways of forward bending, too. Over the years this evolved into a much more spring-loaded tensioned approach which I still like to take on board today. But at that time, in a rather tensed ballet body, I found release super helpful. Something about the kind of recovery to standing from being bent over: how much something needed to kind of pull forward through the knees to make you recover finally. It was very intense. I almost injured myself trying it.

Liz Waterhouse: What sensations and concepts did you work with? Was fascia already in play, or did you focus on the feeling of bones?

Chris Lechner: Yeah bones, absolutely. Because bones are the first big thing to feel beyond just your muscles. If you don't feel your muscles, you don't know who you are and where you are: If you're relaxed or not, if you're tired or not. So already, just to feel bone within that muscle awareness is huge. And then even just give away a little more and a little more of that muscular voice, and it becomes a bone voice. That's why I think Feldenkrais had such a huge influence in the contemporary scene as a way into how you work with movement.

When I started taking workshops on contemporary dance and making dance, it was so good to hear a different language—not to hear “choreography,” but “composition.” What does that mean to compose what you're doing? For me it required me to take so much more on board—not just to be dancing in a way that I was familiar with, which is kind of upright and on my feet. In these workshops, I would get the questions: “So, take it through different levels. How low and how high can you go with that?” It's just a complete way of taking your mind, but also your body, to completely new places. With everything that you're used to doing, but the paradigm changes then.

One of the terms for that was “instant composition.” While you're improvising, you are kind of choreographing or making something worth being watched. That's very different than the kind of improvisation of absolutely not knowing the next moment. It's a different practice. For me, [William] Forsythe's approach is instant composition. That's what is so beautiful, I find, about Bill Forsythe's work, because he found a way to make the body compose instantly, in the moment. You're allowed to kind of break all the rules that you set up, or simply keep the machine oiled in a manner of speaking. But in the end, all the decisions are geared towards a very particular vision, or outcome, or intent.

Liz Waterhouse: Sure. I do not use that term, but I agree with what you are saying. With students I emphasize Forsythe's work as performance of improvisation and choreography of improvisation—also to distinguish it from an “anything goes” spontaneity. You and I like to improvise together and seem to share ideas, whatever we call them.

Chris Lechner: Right! I find, we who have met each other and like to hang out with each other and are interested in our journeys, also through dance—not entirely only needing choreography as a vessel—we are interested in instant composition.

Liz Waterhouse: As well as in “movement research.” Within your classes, there is space for both. For me, the movement research part is when I'm not thinking about crafting my performance for an outer eye. I'm not consciously thinking about composing or framing myself in space and time. I'm figuring it out for me, exploring or prioritizing my pleasure/interests. Then, with instant composition, we travel

through the space together, or work on designing movement more precisely—with and for others. I suppose, one thing that was special about Forsythe's work was the way that structure and not-knowing managed to coexist.

Chris Lechner: Yeah. If you're improvising, you have to accept that, to a great extent, you do not know the next moment. If you don't do that, you're not improvising. Then you're playing with choreographical building blocks, or elements. It's more doodling. It's not improvising, really.

Liz Waterhouse: What about Lisa Nelson's work for you?

Chris Lechner: Lisa is very interesting. It can use material which is very personal. (Laughs.) You know, strange things that happen to you somatically, but she finds the right way to use it as a performing game. So simply to start something, and then pause it, and then reverse it, will kind of make something out of it, which is very watchable, all of a sudden again. It's instant composition.

What was so wonderful for me about Bill's work, too, is that it embraces you in a bigger way. So, it was totally okay in Lisa's approach. Like, if I wanted to do just do a ballet pas de cheval. That was my beginning. If that popped up, that was okay. It wasn't excluded because it wasn't contemporary, you know? It was so inclusive. That it was the most liberating thing that (laughs) happened to me at that time—where I was kind of like so confused and going, “Am I an improviser or not?” And finally, it was like, “No. But I'm interested in composition. And I can use all materials—including everything that has been shaped and formed in a particular way about me as a dancer.”

You could ask, at this moment in time, what would a dancer need to take on board to have a rounded training? And in the 1990s, I suppose ballet was enough, or release was enough in itself. I don't think it's that simple anymore. Definitely with ballet I felt at one point it was like a coat that didn't fit anymore. It felt so intimate and so worn and good; and at the same time, so wrong. And it was very confusing to live with these feelings.

Injury and Self-Discovery

Lechner's resilience in the face of injury, along with his encounters with experimental healers and bodyworkers, forms another strong narrative current within his life stories. Wishing to convey this embodied knowledge physically, we break into practice for Lechner to transmit these ideas through our bodies using touch. This leaves a large gap of silence in the transcript that is filled with embodied contact.

Liz Waterhouse: When and how does fascial work appear in your life story?

Chris Lechner: I was catapulted into fascial work because I had a neck injury that nobody could help me with. I had a slipped disk in my neck, and the doctors were afraid that I would be paralyzed if I moved a little bit too much in the wrong way from the neck down. And I was (laughs) a ballet dancer! I was twenty-seven, I think, so around 1990. I came back from a few months of not really getting anywhere. I mean, Stuttgart Ballet had fantastic doctors and connections, but nobody quite could figure out what would be the right physiotherapy for it. Then, every year I went to Zurich after the summer holiday to train with David Howard.³¹ He would give a summer course in Zurich, and he had somebody with him from New York—Tyr Throne.³² David said, “You know, this guy, just book a session with him. He’ll teach you what to do.” He was so confident about it.

So, I booked a session with Tyr Throne. He showed, *from my feet!* He showed me how my feet—through my fascia and my breath—could start communicating to my neck. So, my neck, wherever I would be, whatever I would do, would be supported through this fascial matrix. It took him about three and a half hours. We had booked for half an hour. At that time, you know, probably just as soloist with Stuttgart Ballet, it was your ticket into special treatments. But he probably also noticed that I was really soaking this up. I walked out of there just almost crying. Well, I didn’t know if I was crying or laughing? This feeling in my body. I kind of went, “That cannot be. Not in your wildest dreams.”

I felt amazing. My neck felt as if it could just heal completely or be pain free. Then three days later, I didn’t know what happened, but I could visit those progressions or exercises almost and reawaken it every day, again and again and again. Until I had gotten to know it well enough that I went, “Okay, so I guess I’m awakening my fascia that way.” Like you can awaken your craniosacral awareness, or your bones.

It really worked very well together with the yoga exercises that I had learned previously from Marika Bresobrasova. So, my morning practice just became a little more extended. Ten minutes more, fifteen minutes more, but I was in my fascial body. I think I discovered the bones truly only when I started release work in my

31 See Warren, *The Art of Teaching Ballet*, 110–39.

32 Tyr Throne (b. 1954 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin and based in New York City) is the creator of Somalogy™. Drawing inspiration from his early years as a dancer, Throne began Somalogy over fifty years ago when he saw the possibility of integrating physical, psychological, and theatrical therapies while studying pre-medicine, psychology, dance, and theater at the University of California in Santa Cruz. After working internationally as a ballet dancer, Throne directed Throne Dance Theatre/the Tribe, founded in 1979 in New York. He is a longstanding practitioner of martial arts, yoga, and meditation, with professional certification in multiple bodywork modalities (Structural Integration, Feldenkrais, neuro-linguistic programming, craniosacral therapy, and acupuncture). Biography developed in correspondence with the author on November 22, 2024. Further information is available on Throne’s website, <https://somalogy.net>, last accessed November 14, 2024. Dunning, “Tyr Throne Company.”

transition after being a ballet dancer. But by that time, I was so immersed in fascial work that, when I heard that there was someone in Brighton that was training with Tom Myers and was kind of like the new star on Tom Myers' horizon.³³ I totally wanted to meet him. So, we had Gyrotonic sessions where he would teach me how Gyrotonic worked as a soft-tissue practice. And then he went, "Well, I'm doing yoga, too." And so I came and started doing his yoga work, and that just blew my mind then.

His name is Gary Carter.³⁴ And he is, to this day, one of my closest and most cherished friends. He has a profound understanding of movement and anatomy. He comes more from sport: cycling; big injuries, starting with weightlifting work. His work then was called Natural Body. So, without steroids or anything you could sculpt your body. Then he discovered shiatsu, healing, then fitness work and the fascia. He was teaching me bodybuilding then, too. So, working with weights as a way of connecting to gravity. And then gravity's response, because weight was just adding to gravity a little more. It was such a catalyst.

Did I ever touch into your thigh? I did that once with you in a Gyrotonic lesson, I think?

Liz Waterhouse: Yes, I think so. But please, you can do it again.

Chris Lechner: This is something Gary showed me! If you just relax your leg. I think what we've been talking about is, for instance, with Body-Mind Centering, you could say skin, then you have muscle, I can now address the bone. There's something else that points towards the center and gets the bone.

33 Tom Myers (b. 1959) is an American bodywork practitioner trained in Structural Integration with Ida Rolf. He is also an author and international teacher of Anatomy Trains®. See Myers, *Anatomy Trains*. See also, the biography of Gary Carter in the next footnote.

34 Gary Carter (b. 1962 in North London, based in Brighton) has a background in athletics, competitive cycling, bodybuilding, martial arts, yoga, and fascial research. He founded Natural Bodies in Brighton in 1991, where he offers "Myofascial Movement Trainings," as well as anatomy movement courses and dissection labs for manual therapists and movement professionals. Gary Carter hosted Tom Myers for the first Anatomy Trains® courses in the UK (1998–2003); he graduated from the KMI school of Structural Integration in 2001 and co-taught Anatomy Trains courses in the UK and USA. Carter's work brings together this knowledge with yoga, shiatsu, chi kung & chi ne tsang, Pilates, Gyrotonic, and craniosacral therapy. As part of the Fascial Net Plastination Project, Carter collaborated with Gunter von Hagens' team to create the world's first plastinated fascial human models, showcased at the World Fascia Research Congress (2018, 2021). Biography developed through personal correspondence with the author on November 15, 2024. See also Carter's professional website, <https://www.naturalbodies.co.uk>, last accessed November 15, 2024.

With fascia, the touch is a little more like—I wonder if I can just do it spontaneously—but let me just tune into that. There. And now, they're inviting me in. And if I listen, they're actually also starting to . . .

Liz Waterhouse: There.

Chris Lechner: Yeah. Suggest, recruit, directions.

But it's like from the first moment here, I have the fascia. I'm just kind of sinking in. Yes, I have skin, bones, everything. Blood, in this touch. But it's a kind of matrix that connects it all. I have your heart. Just now on my touch. Your neck. Some toes. So, anywhere, where you go in—you're in the fascia.

Everything is swimming in this matrix. No? So, it's like a metaverse. And the change is already the way I see you moving the leg now. Because it's all of a sudden like . . .

Liz Waterhouse: . . . connected.

Chris Lechner: Yeah.

Liz Waterhouse: How to explain that to our readers?

Chris Lechner: That's such a conundrum, isn't it? Perhaps through imagery?

I remember workshops with Russell Maliphant.³⁵ It was kind of like: Okay, you're sitting there, with your legs a little bit apart. You want to help your partner kind of get a little more weighted here where the top of the upper thigh ends by the pelvis. Then there was this image from the film *The Piano*. At the end of that movie, a piano is dropped from a boat and sinks to the bottom of the ocean. It's the piano sinking to the bottom of the ocean that you're applying. Then you can also put your foot on top of your thigh. Rather than being kind of intrusive, the foot becomes the piano sinking, through your tissue to the bottom of the ocean. Also, Laurie Booth introduced this image: the abdomen is a zodiac around which the fascia is connected as if in a star system

You asked me earlier, "How did I get to know something beyond my own body?" It was implied through our ballet training—there was partnering. So, you knew about another nervous system, acting with yours and in concert. But it was so specific, the (laughs) connection beyond yourself that happens. But the partnership that comes about, if you dance with someone again and again, I think it's something we've taken on board anyway by being trained the way we are.

35 See the biography in footnote 20.

Then, through the fascial work, I got so interested that I did a training with Tyr [Throne]. He had broken down his approach into ten different workshops. I got up to level four. It had covered most of the body already. There weren't organs yet in there. They weren't very deep places, but I think that already started opening something that was beyond just being a dancer and partnering someone. You wanted to listen into somebody else's state and what the body might need. This particular listening, as you just felt, it lets you in. It takes you in such a different way.

Then, I started working more with partnering, because of the Contact [Improvisation] work. A lot of the workshop sessions would start with giving each other bodywork: just doing some good to the other body. Not just stroking it and not just manipulating it, but bringing some healing and listening into the mix, made moving from there a very beautiful experience. Again and again, I felt, "Oh, my God, that's wonderful." We only massaged the feet a little bit and held the leg. But what a way into moving. It was so completely opposed to anything else that I knew from getting the body ready to function, no? And I think from that time, because it was quite a while from, I would say '96 to 2009. I was really working as much with the solo body as with just partner work. That's a lot of time.

I found some of the questions around Contact Improvisation so interesting. What does it do to you? Maybe you could play soccer, then do contact work, and play soccer again. And after thirty minutes of contact work, you were so good at whatever your resources were in soccer. Much better than the thirty minutes before—before the thirty minutes of dancing. You could try almost anything: fixing your bike, baking a cake, playing golf, and you would do it better, more intelligently. I think that is something which is still quite untapped. I mean, it's so far away from me, contact work, for about ten, twelve years now. But I know that that was something that got me very curious and excited.

In Sickness and in Health

Injury and sickness are topics that spiral through these body-biographies. After undergoing lung surgery, Lechner adapted his labor as a dance artist considerably. His new experiences of his ailing body create a friction that coexists with his earlier sense of self—one grounded in being most fully present when moving. The larger theme of self-discovery through movement and stillness crisscrosses his narratives and helps to cohere these multiple and divergent experiences of embodiment.

Liz Waterhouse: What is your rhythm of work? Could you tell me about a typical week or workday?

Chris Lechner: It comes about just by my teaching schedule. Everything's changed since my lung operation, because I'm basically living life with so much less battery.

Now it's all about how much energy will I have to do this, this, and this before I collapse. That's why I got so drawn to Lisa Nelson's work. Her main interest is "What is movement and what is stillness?"

I think I had this theme in my life, that unless I move, I don't feel myself. Early on, I got noticed. I got attention and affection. Later on, I got jobs. But I think something rubbed off by growing up in India. There was this affinity to stillness that I would catch myself asking those kinds of questions. "So, what is meditation? Or contemplation?" It was more about just what in me could become very, very still. And, now when I work, it's mostly something to do with physicality—with either sharing my thoughts about fascia through the yoga lens or doing a movement training. It kind of structures my time and my week.

I can function most days until about one o'clock or two o'clock. But if there is a workshop or something I want to do in the afternoon, I need to keep that wide open rather than make a prior time commitment. So if I'm teaching in the morning, giving a session and then, let's see at 12:31, how low is my low? Maybe with a little bit of willpower, I can attend a lot of that workshop, or maybe I'll have to go home to rest. So, that rhythm is just given by the fact that I only have one functioning lung now.

Also, when I was living in India, my rhythm changed. There's a really precious time in India where finally everything is quiet. Finally, there's no dog barking or . . . (Laughs.) And it's kind of between three and maybe five thirty in the morning. So, that was a big time for me, to just wake up around three and then just become very still. Everything else kind of unfolded, and India just kind of picks you up and takes you into motion. India is really like a washing machine. So, how did I do that in the West? I think I was very happy as a ballet dancer, just by always having worked in companies that had a morning schedule, afternoon off, evening rehearsal or performance, and then the night off. And that stuck with me. So, my biorhythm really works even today that way. I can function well in the morning. I need to kind of drop somewhere in the afternoon, and then towards the evening most days I can make it again.

Liz Waterhouse: Would you feel comfortable to share more about your lung surgery? I don't know what actually happened.

Chris Lechner: I don't really know either! It really came out of the blue. I mean, I understand more now, just through being in conversation with so many doctors and therapists. They look always at your whole life, your trends and all that. Now I see more how that might have been possible—that it was just at one point an overload and it happened.

Basically, what took place was that I had taken a few months off with my wife, Sunita Asnani, who is Swiss and of Indian heritage, to explore what would it mean

for us both to be artists in India.³⁶ This was in 2012. Because I'd lived there for seven, eight years: from 2006 to 2011, between Almora, Bangalore, Arambol, Kolkata, Delhi. I had a network. Everything was just there for us. If we felt comfortable as artists working there, why not at least spend a good time of the year there—teaching, making work, collaborating with all the wonderful people that I knew there—and then maybe summers in Bern. Something like that.

We arrived and we were invited to a contemporary dance festival in Delhi called Ignite—one of the very few relevant festivals at that time in India. A few days later, I caught a cold, which was quite common for me to experience in India. I mean, I was riding the new subway in Delhi. I'm pretty sure it happened right there. So, I was not feeling well, but this time something was different, I just didn't recover. The cough got worse and worse. I felt weaker and weaker. There was a doctor there that helped me by giving me Voltaren [painkiller]. I didn't feel much. So, I could function. We could do the festival. And afterwards I realized, "Oh my God! The moment I stop with Voltaren, something's not good." Had it checked out in Delhi, but it just seemed quite obvious. Delhi had an unprecedented smog—weeks of smog because of wildfires and a typhoon. We were just under this intense dark bubble of smog. That didn't help my lungs. So, we decided, "Okay, we'll take on a project in Thailand: an art project in Bangkok and Chiang Mai."

On the last day before leaving India, I had a meal that gave me Giardia, a parasite in the stomach. We arrived in Thailand, and I was just going downhill. Every week was getting worse. I was getting thinner and thinner. I pretty much just about managed that art project. We had two or three performances in art galleries. Then the question was, will we go back to India? I kind of went, "I'm really not fit to go back. India is much too intense. At least we're in Thailand where it's so easy peasy, and you're a tourist." So, I just thought, "Go to a hospital and get checked out."

In the hospital, they found first the Giardia. I got antibiotics and then I started getting fever in the night. The next examination showed, "Okay, there's a dark spot on your lung. You probably have cancer—stage three, or probably four. You have a few weeks left. Maybe you want to write the letters to your dear ones. You're probably not going to make it back to Europe, but we can take care of you here." So, that's where the whole thing with the lung emerged, out of nowhere. It was hiding behind

36 Sunita Asnani (b. 1979 in Luzern, based in Bern) is a Swiss-Indian dancer and also a coach and facilitator for cultural equity and inclusion. She gained her master's degree in the sociology of religion from the University of Zurich. Her practices include ballet and kathak, then tango, Contact Improvisation, and contemporary dance. Creating the organization "bend-it" together with Chris Lechner, since 2017 Asnani has created performance installations, offered transcultural workshops, and practiced arts-based facilitation individually and in collaboration with her husband. Biography developed through email correspondence with the author on November 10, 2024. See also the "bend-it" website, <https://en.bend-it.ch/about>, last accessed November 10, 2024.

Giardia, behind not feeling so well. And then the doctors saying that I was in the last stages of lung cancer.

Thank God, there was a very good American doctor there. He worked half a year in America and half a year in Bangkok. He was in Chiang Mai at that time, and he saw me, and he said, "That's debatable if that's cancer. It could be other things." Thank God he said that because he could at least put in doubt what was a death sentence. I had lost about thirty-five, forty pounds. So, I was not fit to fly at that time. He brought me back to a point just where I could make the decision, and I could take a flight back to Europe. In Europe, there was a surgeon that looked at my stuff too, and said, "I absolutely agree with this doctor. I've been doing lung operations for twenty years. What you have there is something different. That's not cancer. But we can find out tomorrow if you let me operate on you." I had nothing to lose because all the other doctors said, "You have to go on radiation, and you maybe have a few weeks left." That was the whole eight months of having a few weeks of life left, no?

So, that doctor then operated on me the next morning, and had to remove most of my right lung, and send it to the laboratory. With *all* that tissue—three kilograms of lung tissue—they could without any doubt confirm it wasn't cancer. It had been an infection. The body builds scar tissue around infection. And it looked like, on the images, like a dark spot—like cancer, obviously. So, then the next years were just slowly making my way back. I think I'm still on my way back, in a way. It'll never be like before, but . . .

Then, even *then*, the only thing that got me a job, was that I taught a *Probeklasse* [test class] at a dance studio in Bern called akarStudios. I was very upfront about my condition and said, "I'm looking to find work again. I'm going to be living in Bern. I can commit." While I was in the worst stage, I mean, that was a time when I couldn't get out of bed anymore.

Before that, my wife was trying to find food that would be healing for my lung in Bangkok. So, hours of that for Sunita, coming back, cooking for me. And just then, the grant that I had applied to before going to India came through, at Theater Kampnagel in Hamburg. That was my ticket back into life—a future that was waiting behind and beyond the dark tunnel of cancer. There was an identity there: I was going to be someone who would make work in Kampnagel! A year later I also had a job teaching dance, and it was, again, just because I move. That was when I was literally reduced to nothing. It was really ironical. I remember in the first three or four years, the only times when I was completely myself—all of me—no compromise, not the specter of Chris from before, that I lived all the rest of the hours of the day—was when I taught my akar class, and I was completely, one-hundred-percent Chris. Moving into the material, sharing the research. And every time a price to be paid. Three days of even less energy. But for the price of being completely, one-hundred-percent alive. For that moment, was worth the whole week.

Liz Waterhouse: Thank you, Chris, for sharing that. How mysterious and how unusual. I need some time to process all this. Were you frightened?

Chris Lechner: Yeah, very much so. I think the interesting thing is that I had just met my wife not so long ago, and was so much in love, and felt it was so unfair that we couldn't live our love. I think that was the biggest motor why I survived eight months of severe sickness. I mean, there were two or three times where it was over—hanging by the finest thread. I was just looking into her eyes, and I stayed here. So, that was the one thing. But the other part was that I remember again and again speaking with my wife at that time. I said, "It's good. I've done wonderful stuff! Everything's good. If that's the end of it now, it's good. I even met you! It's all good." But when the doctor rushed into my hospital room with the results of the lab, beaming all over his face and said, "It's *not* what you thought it was! You're going to live, Mr. Lechner!" There I realized what fear had been in my body, what despair, no?

Liz Waterhouse: I can only imagine. Thank you. I don't think I have the words to . . .

Chris Lechner: Very personal! I don't know if that's what you are looking for? But that's part of the body-biography, in a way.

Liz Waterhouse: I think so. All the dancers that I have interviewed here have in different parts of their lives various injuries and health crises. From small to large. Christine Kono has battled cancer twice. Hilary Cartwright had a back injury as a young woman, multiple abdominal surgeries and two hips replaced. Marcus Schulkind had multiple knee surgeries, and more recently a heart attack and cataract surgery. I think in sickness and in health, we are dancers.

"When Am I a Dancer?"

Chris Lechner: Classical practices demand daily practice. Music demands that from you, too: that you either practice or what you want to express will not quite happen. You're always, to put it bluntly, not good enough, (laughs) not nimble enough, not whatever enough. Classical music, opera, ballet. It takes so much maintenance. Indian classical dance as well. I think it's not just a Western problem.

I remember a quite liberating moment: Around 1999/2000, I spent a few months traveling through India, and I had a Roling session just before, a few weeks before we left. I had taken with me the idea of the forward bends and just a few very simple things. I felt there was something, a kind of body story, that traveled with me for about nine months at that time through India. I didn't do dance classes; I didn't train. Whenever there was a chance that there was somebody who was a dancer or studio, I would engage in movement. But as a ballet dancer, I mean, after a few days of not

moving, I would feel less and less in touch with my dancing self or moving self. And at that time, and I think it was just a very particular place in my life, I felt myself coming more and more alive by deliberately *not* training but staying in that Roling body. The change that Roling was giving me around my ribs and shoulders and neck, at that time—even into my feet—was incredible. And dancing my travels that way. Dancing through nine months that way.

It's not so metaphorical. It's really the whole notion of: When am I a dancer? When am I engaged? What am I practicing? This started opening up hugely around that time—both for me personally as well as in my dance community. Because I was feeling better and better, more and more together. Being in India and traveling around that time meant just doing a Himalayan trek—you know, 5,000-meter mountains, for a week or two. I mean, it was just no joke what I was going through physically. Plus, Indian cities and the schedules and the physical madness of traveling through India. It was full on. But I didn't need my push-ups or all the things that I relied on before to be *very* resilient, strong, connected. So, did I need to still train regularly? Did it show years later that I didn't train those nine months? I actually believe it didn't, because until this day, bio-mechanically, I am quite fit, knock on wood.

Liz Waterhouse: On that good note, thank you, Chris, for teaching me so much and sharing your life stories for this collection.