

## 1. Reflecting on Axial Anatomy

I find as a dancer that it's so easy to forget about the spine when in motion, despite the fact that the spine is central to everything that the body is able to do. The human spine curves into the middle of the body as well as being the axis off of which the limbs hang and find their support, yet it is only recently that I have begun paying active attention to it while I am dancing. It's a powerful tool in the human body that too often seems to go sorely ignored in dance education. It's true that there is a lot to focus on when dancing, but I think more thought given to the spine and back as well makes movement so much easier.

In Dance Anatomy, Jacqui Greene Haas states "If you can learn to use your entire spine to balance stability and flexibility, you can improve your performance skills and reduce your risk of injury." Further, she tells us that the most important task to finding balanced stability and flexibility is "to create length, or axial elongation within your spine while incorporating stability around the spine for placement and support." For me, learning about how to properly employ the spine through lengthening and strengthening feels especially important because I have what I believe to be some degree of scoliosis. It's been pointed out to me before that my left shoulder rises noticeably above my right shoulder when I'm faced straight-on, and I've seen the way this placement unconsciously influences my movement.

I have three areas of work that I want to focus on to address my scoliosis and shoulder imbalance. I am curious to see over the next few weeks how pursuing body work to respectively relax my shoulder, strengthen my abdominals, and strengthen the muscles in my back will help me utilize my spine more during my dance practice and ease the chronic pain I experience throughout my back body.



I found [these exercises](#) which help with back strength and flexibility, and I would like to incorporate a few of these into my daily stretching routine and see how my back strength improves:

There is also this Yoga for Scoliosis video which I want to begin incorporating into my practice as well: [Yoga For Scoliosis | Yoga With Adriene](#)

Sources and credits:

- Dance Anatomy: Second Edition: Your Illustrated Guide to Improving Flexibility, Reducing Injury, and Enhancing Strength by Jacqui Greene Haas
- IC: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/821977369466120387/>
- Yoga For Scoliosis - Yoga with Adriene (<https://youtu.be/UuifgElXjmM>)

## 2. Reflections on Dance Nutrition: Carbohydrates

I am struck by how much I have feared and avoided carbohydrates throughout my training. Despite better advice I have received in the past, for years I have opted for a high protein, low carbohydrate diet to avoid hypothetical weight gain and the feeling of what I thought was an unhealthy sluggishness I believe came from eating nutritious carbohydrates. Our lecture on nutrition in anatomy studies was a huge wakeup call for me.

After months of high intensity training at the academy, I began to notice that my need for caloric intake had significantly increased. I also realized when it came to my carbohydrate to protein ratio, that I had decided on a rather gym-rat mentality about bulking up on protein without giving carbohydrates the right place in my diet. From personal experience, I now realize this is actually detrimental to all kinds of physical training, especially for dancers who are operating at a high level of intensity. If an appropriate amount of carbs aren't consumed both before and after training - up to 55% of a dancer's daily intake -, there will be huge losses in terms of endurance and brain function. These are both short-term and long-term consequences, as I saw in my reflection and self-study.

In the days following our nutrition discussion, I began to actively take note of times throughout my training day where I felt physically and mentally slow. My instinct previously would be to eat a low-calorie, high-protein snack and down a mug of coffee to mitigate the dip in energy I inevitably experienced during the day. I started replacing this behavior with choosing a properly portioned, nutritious carbohydrate snack and drinking more water throughout the day. Miracle of miracles, I say laughing at myself, I felt loads better and noticed my endurance and mental processing stabilizing throughout my days.

Seeing the short-term effects of actually applying knowledge I've stored away for years was powerful. I felt a greater sense of respect for my body materializing and felt more like I was working with myself instead of against myself. It goes to show the rather immediate power of changing even one habit when it comes to nutrition.

### 3. Partnered evaluations in experiential anatomy

My main takeaways from having a detailed anatomy evaluation by my partner are as follows.

- As was noted in my previous post, I have a noticeable raise to my left shoulder which can be eased with body work to relax the scapula down and back.
- My right hip comes forward in a counter-clockwise way, maybe as a compensation for my left shoulder changing my balance.
- My left foot turns inward, the arch is less pronounced in comparison to the right, and the metatarsal collapses toward the floor. Overall, however, the left foot is in a neutral position since the inversion is slight.
- On my right foot, the metatarsal is lifted and the foot is supinated. I have noticed this difference in my feet in a practical sense. For example, I tend to wear out my right shoes quicker than my left shoes.
- Some other valuable information includes a slight forward positioning of my head, slight hyperextension in my knees, and a flattening of my thoracic spine.

I find it encouraging that there is work that can be done to correct issues that either cause chronic pain or cause misalignment in dance. Earlier in the week, I was chatting with a fellow student who also has hyperextended knees and we commiserated about how when we were younger dancers, we thought our hyperextension was something “wrong” with our bodies in comparison to other students. It was not discussed so much at the time that each dancer has a unique physical makeup that can be strengthened or relaxed to move with flexibility and stability.

Having another student who looked at my anatomy objectively and with an aim to bring my awareness to my unique physicality was very helpful. It would be an enlightening practice to integrate into dance education, especially at the pre-professional level, since it helps dancers formulate a clearer picture of their own anatomy and gain skills in constructively evaluating others’.

#### **4. Proprioception, Anxiety, and Dancing**

Recently, I've had increased issues to do with proprioception, sensory processing, and my anxiety disorder. These issues directly affect my ability to feel and use my body during movement; I often feel either disconnected from my own movement output or flooded by too much stimulating input. This mental state can lead to performance issues and potentially to injury if not tended to.

During this week while I was away from the studio, I became especially interested in researching how someone like me with ongoing nervous system issues can manage or improve their condition with physical exercises and self-focusing techniques.

I found there to be significant cross-over between exercises recommended for anxiety and sensory processing dysfunction/deficits, since they seem to be interrelated for a lot of people. What is most often recommended is regularly practiced slow breath work, exercises like tapping that centralize focus on a particular area of the body for self-soothing, and movement disciplines like yoga and pilates that put high emphasis on body awareness. The main thing is finding ways that connect my brain to my body in a very individualized and centering way.

I think there is also a link between studying physical anatomy and knowing how to help myself when it's an especially difficult day for my brain to process what I'm doing. Knowing how human bodies generally, and my body specifically, work in an anatomical sense increases my confidence in being able to dance well even when I feel a bit off kilter. Going slowly through my choreography, for example, with a working memory of what muscle groups I need to activate is almost like pre-setting a machine; so that, even if I am having more trouble on a particular day, the muscle memory will help me through my work.

I've heard it said that those who observe dance can dance, and my individual brain chemistry sometimes makes the observation more difficult than is typical. But that doesn't mean that I can't, over time, form new neural pathways that are more beneficial and help me be the dancer I want to be.

## 5. My dancing doesn't belong to a set of expectations: Reflections on improvisational discovery

In our class on Thursday, we did a movement exercise which focused on body awareness through imagining we were figuring out what our bodies could do for the first time. Our task was to make each sensation the “loudest” one we could feel and to let our attention go throughout the whole body, from the tiniest finger muscles to the largest bones. Then, we slowly started challenging our musculature with weight testing and greater speed, coming all the way to the point of moving too quickly to think hard about what we were doing. This was done mostly with our eyes closed, or cast toward the ground so we could focus on inner sensations instead of outward evaluations. Additionally, keeping our eyes averted was an exercise in trusting our proprioceptive abilities.

Many of my classmates said they were moving in a way they typically wouldn't in an improvisation, because the focus was solely on the internal sensations of muscles and bones moving. I had a similar feeling because the exercise was truly effective at removing the inner critic's voice and refocused all the attention on the body itself.

A couple quotes from the lecture that will stick with me are loosely quoted as:

- Dancers often think of what they haven't achieved instead of what they have: From our earliest developmental stages to learning how to dance in the beginning to the countless neural pathways we've built through our careers as dancers, everyone who dances has done amazing things with their body. It is easy to forget the beauty of being able to lift our heads and look around the room when we focus too much on getting multiple pirouettes. Every movement capability we have is massively precious and our bodies are incredible, no matter what subjective level we're at as dancers.
- My body and my dancing do not belong to a set of expectations: The joy of dancing, and probably the main motivation for everyone who does it for a living, is that feeling you get of jamming to music in your room when no one is watching or making choreography just for yourself. It is easy to lose that sense of autonomy and bold creation when there are many influences that expect certain things from our dancing. But, our movement didn't start with those subjective expectations and nothing can take our dancing away. It is ours to explore, expand, and have joy in.

## 6. Presentation of Shoulder and Scoliosis Exploration

Since I was young, I've been noticing a sense of imbalance in my body. I could always tell that my hips and ribcage didn't line up exactly when I stood facing a mirror, or I would see a funny lean to my walk that I was not sure how to correct.

I knew that my mother has a touch of scoliosis - which is an abnormal, sideways curvature of the spine which is typically diagnosed in childhood. But despite noticing my own unusual posture and noticing it affecting my balance, it didn't occur to me that scoliosis could be affecting me as well - a medical opinion was never sought when I was a child.

However, these last two semesters, my classmates were pointing out to me that my left shoulder rides higher than my right. In our partnered body analysis a few weeks ago, it was even pointed out that my right hip comes farther forward than my left, and the same goes for my right shoulder, almost as a corrective posture to compensate for the imbalance between my shoulders. As a result, there is a noticeable sway to my walk and I tend to sit into my left hip more often than my right.

My solution for attempting to correct this misalignment has included:

- Incorporating regular back strengthening exercises
- Relaxing my left shoulder down into my back through yoga and self-massage
- Developing a daily core strengthening exercise to provide support for my back and ease tension

Through the body analysis we have conducted in this class, as well as regularly performing these exercises, I feel that my awareness has been brought to the issue - and that awareness is half the battle. You can see in this [choreography clip](#) that my left shoulder is noticeably higher than the right.

Now to be fair, as can be seen in the following [postural clip](#), I don't feel that the exercises have yet significantly impacted my daily walking around posture. But, I am going to continue with my daily exercises and keep looking into movements that help those with scoliosis and related issues.

### Sources and credits:

- <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/scoliosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20350716>

## 7. LMA Cube Improv Analysis

In the past, it was easy for me to consider the Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) cube to be a restrictive, reductive way of looking at and creating movement. Because it doesn't meet my personal definition of choreographic inspiration, I have tended to dismiss it as an outdated mode of making dances. In my previous studies of the cube, I always felt stuck in a box rather than feeling like it was a useful framework for generating movement.

After trying my own improvisation work and utilizing LMA with my colleagues, I am starting to see ways in which its framework could influence and inform my practice. Though I am not so much interested in using the cube for my own choreographic work on balance, I have found it helpful for analyzing and categorizing dances I watch and find it provides a basis for understanding how the body is capable of occupying various planes in multiple ways.

For instance, my [LMA improvisation video](#) was based on a sequence I pre-set during one of our course lectures (0:45 - 0:55). At first that material felt rather restrictive, but I noticed how the sequence of six movements gained a feeling of power and energy from repetition when I was working on them in class, and that material became the inspiration for more varied kinds of movement shown here. I made it a point to try and think of the cube with more variety in mind. Though, LMA seems to inspire me to stay rather upright nonetheless and I would be interested in exploring more improvisational material in this vein where I actively work with changing levels and utilizing the planes at the same time. In addition, it can be hard to maintain thinking about the cube, having varied kinds of movement, and not tending toward single-limb isolation and stilted repetition. I find myself thinking too hard while using the cube, overanalyzing rather than letting movement flow more naturally. Given, it is a good challenge to think in a different way but also puts me off using it on main in my practice.

All of this is why, with my cursory studies of the LMA cube under my belt thus far, I consider it a methodology that can be appreciated and tweaked for my own edification. I do not find it to be a potential main source of creative inspiration, but appreciate the mental exercise of crafting and analyzing movement with LMA principles in mind.



## 8. LMA and Improvisation

We spoke about how, when LMA technique is used as a choreographic tool, it allows the dancer to experience their movement in a concrete, intentional way. A choreographer can use the points on the cube or another imagined geometric shape as the impetus for their movement, to give structure to their sequence, and move the body through space with a specific aim.

As I have written previously, I do not use LMA as a choreographic tool regularly. But, I am interested in it as a tool for an improvisational jump-start. It's proven helpful in breaking me out of a movement rut and helping with generating material efficiently, as I find choreographic constraints to do in general.

When I am trying to choreograph a piece, I usually have a piece of music in mind already and will improvise to that tune until the movement sequence begins to formulate. Since I am always trying to create something new, not simply make echoes of my previous work, putting a specific constraint or goal on my movement proves helpful in keeping my choreographic language alive. In addition, I have found it helpful in character work where I am supposed to embody something/someone very different from myself.

I unconsciously used LMA technique recently in this kind of work. I was tasked with creating a character-based choreography in about five minutes' time that would be part of an ensemble piece. At first, because of the nature of the prompt, I didn't quite know where to begin. But I decided for the first couple of minutes to improvise with arm movements on the [horizontal and frontal planes](#) that would direct my attention and move me through space. Once I settled on a couple gestures that felt right, the rest of the piece flowed easily from there.

Usually, I generate material rather easily through the feeling of the music, a story I want to tell, or imagery that I want to abstract into movement. But, it is helpful to have various frameworks under my belt that force my hand a little bit when I need to generate material efficiently or when I am generally stuck for ideas.

## 9. No Limits: Reflections on Effort, Part One

In our first class on effort - an evaluative look at the time, weight, and flow of movement - there was mention made of the difference between

- metric movement - that is, dancing to a musical beat, metronome, or heartbeat - and
- non-metric movement - dancing that is driven by the dancer's own internal rhythm, lyrically based, and/or influenced by gravity and weight.

After an exercise exploring the differences between heavy + light, fast + slow, free + bound movement prompts, we were asked to consider what type of movement we prefer as dancers and choreographers, and that got me thinking about my journey as a choreographer overall.

When I first began making my own dances, I must admit that I believed certain movements were not allowed to me. As an adolescent dancer, I received very specific messaging about my body type and the roles or functions that my instructors at the time believed I could fulfill in dance. Through dint of old modes of thinking about dancing, I was placed into a category and believed that's all I was as a mover. It took a few years of growing my own practice and technical training to become more certain of my ability to portray all types of movement. I now believe that I truly don't have any limiting preferences on what type of movement I allow myself to explore.

That being said, though it's not a limiting categorical absolute, one would look at my choreography and say that it tends toward weighted, non-metrical, lyrically-driven movement (examples [here](#), [here](#), & [here!](#)). In recent months, however, my studies at the Irish World Academy have led me to explore different kinds of musical rhythms and create dances that tend toward quicker, metrical steps. I wanted to challenge myself intellectually by choreographing in different ways than I had previously (examples [here](#), [here](#), & [here!](#)), and as a result my style has developed a new character that I am very pleased with.

I would clarify that, though it was a creative challenge to break out of my usual style, that does not entail a physical challenge to do so. Throughout my career thus far, I have seen dancers negatively categorized, have limits put on them, and consequently limit themselves due to negative body-type messaging. Outdated ideas still exist that your body type necessarily dictates your movement type, and I want to advocate that anybody can dance with a range of skills and modes of expression, no matter their physical makeup.

## 10. Ease: Reflections on Effort, Part Two

One of the most valuable techniques I've further developed this year has been the use of ease in my dancing. When I cast my mind back to my high school dance training, I remember there being an inherent idea that if you're really dancing, it will require a lot of expenditure of physical energy and one should be exhausted by the end of a piece if quality work has been put into the movement. When I discovered this whole philosophy within contemporary dance that ease in movement can actually make your dancing better and prevent injury, I was hooked immediately.

One understanding of ease is "skill, dexterity, facility," and another understanding is "to alleviate, assuage, or lessen (pain)." This has become my goal in dancing because, ultimately, I feel more powerful when I allow movement to flow from me without force or strain. This doesn't mean that the movement lacks power or impact, it actually means that one's technical training can lead to an intimacy with how to move that allows for incredible skill without inherent exhaustion.

I believe we see this in the example of [Lil Buck's Swan](#). He is performing movements that are technically very difficult, but it's clear that he has found a way to move efficiently so that the dance flows like water and his enjoyment of the piece is clear. His technical ability, combined with flowing efficiency, allows space for him to perform emotively and interact with the audience. Any performing artist knows this is a vital combination that takes a lot of care and attention to develop, and a lot of love for what you do. As well, finding ease in your movement requires a lot of self-knowledge and attention to what the body is saying.

I used to believe effort meant you had to work really hard in order to prove something to observers. But now I think of effort as the spirit you put into your movement, as well as it being the evaluative terminology used in LMA to describe movement. The effort you put into your movement can always come from a place of ease and the quality of work speaks for itself, without having to force it.

## 11. Peru: Self-Analysis with LMA

[Peru](#) is the first piece I choreographed after returning to the Academy from winter break this year. This piece of music was used in one of our contemporary technique classes and I was inspired to go into the studio after class and work with different rhythmic ideas than I had in my previous choreographic work.

My usual style is lyrically-driven and previously I tended to always pick tunes that are firmly within the alternative genre with subtle acoustic guitar or piano instrumentation and poetic, sometimes rather ponderous lyrics. This music naturally lends itself to movement that is weighted, sustained, and smooth. The piece of music, *Peru* by Fireboy DML and Ed Sheeran, has what I would call Afro-Latin influenced rhythm and has very clear beat delineations. This tune makes me think of sharp, quick movements and I was inspired to use a combination of floor- and footwork as well as gestures to emphasize these beats.

The piece begins with a gesture of my arms crossed in a T-shape over my chest that moves across my body on the frontal plane. The movement is a combination of sharp and logatto that leads into a sagittal arm movement which takes me to the floor. From there, I lower myself with a sustained plank to the floor, twist to face the audience's downstage right, and there is a quick change of my feet. From there, I take a quick shunt across the floor that takes me into a backward roll. There is an elongated rising to my feet, then a quick changing of hands from my left hip to my right hip and an oppositional switch between the left foot and right foot. This turns me to face upstage left where an exclamation in the music prompts a light arabesque into a slowed attitude turn. This turn is the impetus for another quick turn to face downstage left, I run in that direction and take an arched back on relevé facing away from the camera. Another jumping shunt down into the floor leads me into a stretching side arch into the ground. The final pose is what I like to call "mermaid" pose on the ground which brings the piece to stillness.

This particular type of movement has become standard for me now, and I am pleased that it didn't take long for my choreographic language to expand. This piece was definitely a breakthrough in movement practice for me and I am happy to see the attention I gave to contrasting types of movement, playing with the beat of the music to have sharper, sometimes faster and more delicate movement, while also utilizing my main strengths of sustained, powerful poses.

## 12. Presentation of Discoveries with LMA

*“Existence is movement. Action is movement. Existence is defined by the rhythm of forces in natural balance. (...) It is our appreciation for dance that allows us to see clearly the rhythms of nature and to take natural rhythm to a plane of well-organised art and culture.”*

*- Rudolf von Laban*

### Introduction:

The most important thing for me as a dancer is the movement, what it does and what it says to me and an audience. Though I tend to create from a more intuitive place, I know that understanding movement and creating from a technical and intellectual angle is just as important a skill as creating from an artistic and intuitive standpoint. Both are important for the viewer and performer to experience. Though I feel that art can come from a place of chaotic inspiration, I recognize the importance Laban talks about in this quote of having an organized way of approaching movement.

In my time of studying Laban Movement Analysis, I have come to an understanding of how the technique can make a variety of movement more accessible and immediately understandable to me when I am creating and analyzing. That being said, I also recognize that though it is a tool for me to use, it is not a main source of inspiration for my work. I want to explore, however, my evaluation of LMA, how I do use it in my practice on occasion, and how I situate my style as a dancer with the terms of LMA.

### My evaluation of LMA:

I was homeschooled throughout high school, and so was highly motivated to study subjects that interested me. And one thing I really wanted to know for myself was how choreographers recorded dances so they could be captured, remembered, and used again if needed.

My first encounter with LMA, funny enough, was a beat up copy of *Labanotation* by Ann Hutchinson Guest I found when I was poking around a charity shop. At the time, I was probably about fifteen years old and was really keen to start my choreographic practice, but there was a disconnect for me. I would watch my teachers come into the studio with notebooks where they had used descriptive words to record their movements, and they'd be able to translate that into movement rather easily. But I figured there had to be a technical way that all big-time professionals used to notate movement in a way others could understand and would provoke their memory for an exact movement or phrase. I didn't know at the time that, especially in contemporary dance, there are arguably as many methods for recording choreography as there are choreographers, when it comes down to it.

I also didn't know that this book would not be the key to my own personal choreographic journey. I brought it home with me, but on flipping through it, I found the information I was presented with to be unintuitive and I quickly realized that if I was going to make dances for myself, I'd have to find another way. I figured it was helpful for some, but was definitely not for me.

When I again encountered work to do with LMA, it was during my first time in dance college. I was in a choreography and contemporary class with the same teacher who found the technique to be an enhancing way of improvising, so we used it quite a bit. We worked with the cube in our dancing, and at first, it was a journey for me to figure out how to embody the cube for myself. The more I worked with the physicality of it, however, the more I realized it was not a method I found helpful or interesting. The same went for when we were assigned the task of evaluating dance performances using the cube. It just didn't spark very much for me at the time.

I have to say that my feelings about LMA technique in general, from what I've gained through two college-level studies of it, has evolved and I do find ways to integrate it into my practice now. Overall, I still find it to be a restrictive way of evaluating and making dances. But I also recognize the importance of at times using a framework for being able to talk about and embody dance in a methodized, specific way.

#### How LMA comes into my practice:

I've found LMA holds potential for my practice in a few ways:

- *An improvisational jumpstart:* If I need to generate material quickly, am stuck for ideas on how to start a piece, or am in a rut when it comes to generating material, I know I can utilize the specificity of the planes to create a jumping off point for myself to continue creating. In this [short video](#), I made a point to take material I worked on in class and use the planes, different levels, and repetition to explore the cube with a bit more variety in my movement. Yet, I found as has been my experience with the cube previously, upright, gestural movement with my arms and torso were still the main mode of movement provoked in me. In this [second video](#), however, I work a little bit more with levels and am not so restricted to one mode of movement.
- *Technical evaluation:* Since I want to be a professional choreographer and company director, I know a huge part of my work will be evaluating my work on myself and other dancers, and evaluating others' work as well. LMA technique provides a straightforward approach to doing this that makes it easy to talk about the work in an objective way. I find that very valuable.
- *Use of energy:* Actively thinking about the different qualities of effort that can be employed in movement helps me create with more variety. For example, if I am working with music that doesn't provide specific rhythmic cues, intentionally creating my own oppositions between fast

and slow, bound and free, weighted and light movement, etc. means that my work won't be one-note. Since dances are like sentences, the different types of effort I employ are like punctuation and inflection. They help me tell a more interesting story.

### What kind of dancer I am:

One of the most important things for me in the kind of dance culture I want to facilitate is that labels aren't used as a way of boxing anyone in or excluding anyone. I try really hard to make my practice about exploration and flexibility, trying new things and embracing different styles as a way to expand myself.

So a part of me bristles at the notion of myself or anyone else putting labels on my work, the type of dancer I am, or the type of body I have. I strongly believe that any dancer can learn any type of movement, no matter their previous training or physicality, if there is a will to learn. I think knowing our strengths so they can be utilized effectively is one thing, but labeling dancers can ultimately lead to creating mental blocks and limitations and issues like body-shaming.

All of that being said, I see the value in knowing where one works the best and it can be liberating to effectively recognize your strengths. I know where my strengths lie and I utilize them in my dancing: I am physically very strong, especially in my lower body, and that means my choreography can often be defined by movement that is weighted, sustained, lyrically-driven, and non-metric. That means that contact improv, partnering, floor work, and emotionally-driven or dramatic pieces are places where I thrive.

I also recognize where I want to grow so I can become a multifaceted mover. So, as a contrast to my usual style, I have challenged myself by participating in dance styles like tap, hip hop, and Irish dance which all require a lot of quick footwork, loads of jumping, and keeping in time with a beat. As I've trained in these styles, I've come to really love them and enjoy the experience of welcoming new ways of moving into my practice. As a result, I've seen a massive shift in my facility as a dancer and in my choreographic style.

### Conclusion:

In everything I do, I want to better understand how movement works. I want my movement vocabulary to be large and to have immense facility for saying new things every time I choreograph. I want to be able to look at a performance and see the technical side as well as the artistic side. I want to dance with different kinds of energy and style so that I never run out of things to explore in my movement. Through this course, I've experienced ways that LMA can be a stepping stone in these directions.

**Sources and credits:**

- <https://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/8368-rudolf-von-laban>