



LISTAHÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
Iceland University of the Arts

Comfort in discomfort

**The role of Somatic Practices in dance as a means to release
trauma from the body**

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**Final thesis for a BA degree
Icelandic Academy of the Arts
Department of Performing Arts
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Abstract

In this essay, I will analyze the role of somatic practices in dance as a means of releasing trauma from the body. Drawing from my personal journey and exploration during the creation of my individual piece, titled "Comfort in discomfort," which was completed in the third and final year of my Bachelor of Arts in Contemporary Dance Practices at the Iceland University of the Arts. Incorporating principles from somatic practices, tension and trauma-releasing exercises (*TRE*), pleasure activism, and other somatic practices. The thesis explores how somatic techniques can be utilized to navigate and alleviate the effects of trauma. The culmination of this exploration led to a performance where the stage became a canvas for emotional expression, showcasing the raw authenticity of the performers' journeys translated into movement and interaction. This process has provided a powerful platform for healing for me and my performers, resulting in a profound shift in our understanding and connection with our bodies. We now possess a deeper awareness of how our trauma influences our physical being and have developed an effective approach to addressing it. Through this essay, I aim to guide readers through our journey and our exploration of integrating somatic practices into dance as a method of releasing trauma from our bodies, fostering understanding and engagement.

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Introduction

For years, I have felt the urge to explore and work artistically with my own past trauma, yet I struggled to find a clear direction. I knew that if I were to pursue this exploration, I wanted it to be non-dramatic and abstract, allowing the audience to be moved on their own terms rather than being solely influenced by my specific story. Aside from providing a platform for myself to work through my trauma. During my three years of education, I began to delve into the theme of discomfort, but I found myself unable to fully understand why discomfort was significant or how to approach it effectively. I challenged my body's limits, pushing myself physically, but when questioned by mentors and teachers about the purpose and direction of this exploration, I lacked a definitive answer. It was not until midway through this process that I realized I had been attempting to confront my own trauma narrative without directly acknowledging it. The realization marks the beginning of this journey.

In this essay, I investigate the significance of somatic practices within the realm of dance as a method for addressing and releasing trauma stored within the body. Through an exploration of comfort and discomfort, I delve into how somatic techniques can be utilized to navigate and ultimately alleviate the effects of trauma. Drawing from personal experiences and incorporating principles from somatic practices, tension, and trauma-releasing exercises (*TRE*), as well as other theories such as pleasure activism by adrienne maree brown, insights from resources such as "The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma" by Bessel van der Kolk MD and "The Revolutionary Trauma Release Process" by David Bercei. I aim to shed light on the transformative potential of integrating these practices into dance as well as building my own practice that I can rely on in the future.

Using these practices as a foundation in my research, the culmination of the exploration resulted in a performance where the stage transformed into a canvas for us, the performers, to express our emotions through vulnerability. We sought comfort either internally, delving into our own somatic experiences, or through contact with another vulnerable body. This allowed for a deeply embodied expression, where the audience could witness the raw authenticity of our emotional journeys translated into movement and interaction. With this essay, my aim is to guide the reader through our journey and exploration of the significance of somatic practices in dance as a method for releasing trauma from the body, fostering understanding and engagement.

1. Somatic Practices

1.1 TRE Practices

TRE stands for "*Tension and Trauma Releasing Exercises*." It is a therapeutic technique designed to help release deep-seated tension and stress stored in the body as a result of traumatic experiences or prolonged periods of stress. *TRE* was developed by Dr. David Berceci, a social worker and bioenergetic therapist, based on his experiences working in war-torn regions and observing how the body naturally releases tension and trauma.¹ As David Berceci stated in his book called *The Revolutionary Trauma Release Process*: "Much the same as the instinctual tremors in animals, tremors in humans are the natural response of a shocked or disrupted nervous system attempting to restore the body and mind to a state of balance."² He believes that when we experience overwhelming or unresolved stressful events, our body reacts with a neurophysiological response called trauma. This response activates the fight, flight, or freeze mode and releases stress hormones that get trapped in the muscles and tissues, leading to chronic muscle tension and holding patterns. These patterns disrupt the body's natural rhythms and balance. Berceci proposes that techniques like Tension and Trauma Release Exercises (*TRE*) can release trauma from the body. *TRE* involves simple exercises that engage specific muscle groups, such as shaking and trembling, which activate the body's natural healing mechanisms. By discharging excess energy and tension, *TRE* facilitates physical and emotional healing and helps regain state of balance and relaxation.³

During the process, my two dancers and I began incorporating *TRE* practices into our work and our practices in the studio, drawing from our previous experiences with somatic practices during our education. Our goal was to seamlessly integrate the principles of *TRE* into our creative process, using the rehearsal space as a platform to express our emotions and address unresolved trauma stored within our bodies. We dedicated the first 15 minutes of each rehearsal to individual solo improvisation, drawing from our personal memories. Recording each session allowed us to compare and analyze our movements, leading us to recognize recurring patterns and qualities that ultimately shaped the essence of our piece. More of the improvisation task will be explained in the last chapter.

¹ Berceci, David. *The revolutionary trauma release process*. (Vancouver: NAMASTE PUBLISHING. Inc, 2008), 44-46.

² Berceci, David, *The revolutionary trauma release process*, 46.

³ Berceci, David, *The revolutionary trauma release process*, xv-xvi.

But how did we work from *TRE* principles? As someone who has not engaged in *TRE* practice with a trained instructor or a knowledgeable leader, executing the practice independently can prove challenging. Therefore, I find it essential to name that I can, of course, not definitively ascertain whether *TRE* practices assisted us or if we adhered to them correctly. Given more time, I would have sought further education in *TRE* practices and connected with a qualified instructor. Nonetheless, we successfully integrated the core principles of the practice into our own approach, drawing inspiration from it. From this perspective, I can confidently affirm that it aided us in our journey.

During a technique course in school, a dancer and a teacher named Hannes Egilsson introduced me to a practice that he had been doing for quite some time. It conducted several sessions where we vigorously shook our entire bodies for up to 40 minutes without pause, exerting 100% effort. Initially, I thought Hannes was being overly extreme by encouraging us to engage in this practice, and I doubted its effectiveness for me. However, after participating in the exercise several times and gaining trust in him, I finally understood the appeal and benefits of the practice. I became fully supportive of it and continued to incorporate it into my routine. I introduced this shaking exercise to my dancers, believing it aligned well with the principle of *TRE* developed by David Berceci.

Extended shaking like this enabled my body to transcend pain and fatigue. In my experience, muscles seem to move on their own, leading to a feeling of euphoria. What initially feels like discomfort gradually transforms into a sensation of pleasure and empowerment. It felt as though I was shedding negativity from my body, leaving it behind while retaining positivity, echoing Berceci's insights in his book on *TRE* practices. By shaking so intensely, your muscles get a chance to let go of any tightness, and your mind can start to relax. It is kind of like hitting the reset button for your nervous system.

1.2 *Dreaming body*

The next practice we explored was the *dreaming body*, a concept introduced by Saga Sigurðardóttir, an Icelandic dancer and choreographer deeply immersed in somatic practices since her graduation from ArtEz University in 2007. In my interview with Saga for this essay, she described somatic practices as a kind of "religion" for her, highlighting their profound impact on her work. Saga embarked on her journey with somatic practices through pleasure activism, inspired by the concepts advocated by writer and activist adrienne maree

brown.⁴ Pleasure activism fosters social change through joyful and empowering experiences.⁵ Alongside other somatic practices like release techniques, Saga developed her own approach, naming it the *dreaming body*. The *dreaming body* involves entering a dream-like state and following sensations of pleasure.⁶

During my first year at LHÍ, I crossed paths with Saga, who introduced me to somatic practices during one of our school courses. At that time, bursting with energy and eager to push my body physically, somatic practices seemed dull to me. I did not quite understand the principle of it and felt like it was too spiritual for me. Saga approached the practice with a more laid-back attitude, emphasizing the importance of following pleasure and joy. Initially, I associated following pleasure with delving deeper into a meditative state and focusing more on internal work, which seemed challenging for me at that time. However, I soon realized that my interpretation was not entirely accurate. Pleasure activism, for instance, involves working from within and embarking on a journey of self-healing, with the execution left to individual choice.⁷ But, back then, I did not quite get that and believed I needed something very physical, like the extensive shaking sessions I talked about in the previous chapter, to tap into and release the tensions in my body. But now, I realize that is not necessarily the case.

Through our collaborative process for our piece, I learned that regardless of the activity, whether it is somatic practices or any other form of self-exploration, the goal is to work from within and embark on a journey of inner healing tailored to your own needs. Learning to work from within, where one can remain attuned to oneself, delve inward, and truly heed the body's signals, proved invaluable in this process. Engaging in Saga's *dreaming body* which offered the freedom to explore without constraints, was a revelation for me. It played a significant role in our success. I came to accept that I do not always need to display physicality and allowed myself moments of non-physical expressions.

Some days, we found solace in simply lying down and confronting our traumas from a place of stillness, while other days, we felt compelled to, for example, vigorously shake our bodies for an extended amount of time. The approach can and will vary, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Ultimately, listening to your own needs and responding

⁴ Saga Sigurðardóttir, interviewed by the author, (Reykjavík, March 5, 2024).

⁵ brown, adrienne mariee, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 3.

⁶ Saga Sigurðardóttir, interviewed by the author.

⁷ brown, adrienne mariee, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, 3.

accordingly is key, and what works for you may be entirely different from what works for someone else.

As Audre Lorde eloquently stated in the chapter titled "Uses of the erotic" from the book *Pleasure Activism, The Politics of Feeling Good*:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power in honor and self-respect, we can require no less of ourselves.⁸

This sentiment resonates deeply with our journey in somatic practices, where we have discovered the transformative potential of embracing pleasure and honoring our strongest emotions as a pathway to self-discovery and healing.

In moments of deep introspection during our somatic sessions, we found that connecting with our sense of pleasure and acknowledging our deepest emotions allowed us to access layers of self-awareness and understanding that we had not previously tapped into. By embracing pleasure as a guiding principle in our somatic exploration, we opened ourselves up to new possibilities for growth and healing, leading to profound shifts in our perception of self and the world around us.

As someone who has regularly seen a therapist and sought treatment through a mental hospital, I found that participating in somatic sessions brought about remarkably similar feelings. In fact, the experience often felt akin to a successful therapy session, with the added benefit of being able to work through it independently while discovering myself and my body. When I asked Saga if she had ever felt that same feeling of a productive somatic session resembling a rewarding therapy session, her response surprised me but also resonated deeply. Saga explained that she had never sought any traditional therapy with a therapist, relying instead on somatic practices as her primary method of healing. She explained how she had never had the need to meet a therapist after she discovered somatic practices. For her, a somatic session serves as her therapist. It reminds her of a rejuvenating steam bath or experiencing great sex, emphasizing the sensation of emerging clean and refreshed afterward. Moreover, Saga expressed her belief in the importance of allowing ourselves to be moved by our feelings and highlighted how engaging in creative expression can help navigate emotions and thoughts.⁹

⁸ brown, adrienne mariee, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, 29.

⁹ Saga Sigurðardóttir, interviewed by the author.

Drawing from the wisdom of one of her mentors, Saga highlighted that it is not always necessary to understand why we are experiencing certain emotions or sensations. Simply acknowledging them and working through them can lead to positive transformations. Sometimes, it is about releasing control and allowing the body to heal without fully comprehending the process.¹⁰

This perspective deeply resonates with me, as I have experienced profound personal growth through my own journey, even if I cannot always articulate precisely what has changed. While I know where I began addressing my trauma and understand it intimately, I struggle to discern how it manifests in my body and how I was able to work from it. Questions swirl in my mind: Where does the trauma go? Am I merely moving it to another place, or is it physically releasing from my body? Does it still linger, albeit in a less pronounced form? Is it a big black hole within me, or does it take on a different appearance?

Despite these uncertainties, I have come to accept that I may never find a definitive answer. Perhaps there is a reason for this ambiguity. Maybe I need to acknowledge the trauma's presence and allow it to coexist within me, relinquishing the control I have tried to exert over it. Perhaps, as Saga's mentor suggested, I need to trust the body's innate ability to comprehend the healing process on its own terms. Indeed, I believe that I have truly learned this valuable lesson throughout the course of this process.

2. Artistic expression for healing

When I feel unsettled, the most effective remedy is retreating to the studio alone, listening to music, and simply letting myself dance. With nothing but the rhythm of the music, I relinquish control and allow my body to move freely, guided solely by instinct and emotion. Each step, each gesture, becomes a brushstroke on the canvas of my innermost thoughts and feelings, painting a vivid portrait of my inner world.

Within this sacred space, there are no expectations or judgments but only the pure, unfiltered expression of my being. As I dance, I am liberated from the weight of the world and transported to a realm where time stands still, and the only reality is the present moment. This ritual of self-expression becomes a therapeutic session itself. And amidst it all, I am aware that I am not alone. For this intimate dance between body and soul, I am both a

¹⁰ Saga Sigurðardóttir, interviewed by the author.

performer and an audience, bearing witness to the raw beauty of my own vulnerability and strength.

Recognizing my desire to stage these intimate sessions utilizing somatic practices, I understood the necessity for authenticity, void of pretense or contrivance aimed at entertaining the audience. We had to be completely honest and vulnerable on stage, allowing our true selves to shine through and allowing whatever emotions we felt to arise naturally. We had to devise a method to ensure that the audience would not interrupt our personal journey. This authenticity was crucial for the effectiveness of our performance but also posed a significant challenge.

Initially, I questioned whether it was even possible to translate somatic practices onto the stage without it feeling staged or contrived. I feared that the audience might perceive our expressions as mere acting rather than genuine reflections of our emotions. Despite these doubts, I chose to take the risk and trust that we could maintain sincerity in our performance, a decision which I am immensely grateful for.

As we delved deeper into the process and performed with an audience during rehearsals, I came to realize that staging somatic practices could indeed be both possible and profoundly impactful. We discovered the perfect balance that worked for us, but it required striking a delicate balance between choreography and improvisation.

To address this challenge, we adopted an approach that prioritized process over product. Instead of aiming for a polished and rehearsed performance, we focused on the journey of exploration and discovery. We engaged in somatic exercises and improvisational techniques, allowing our movements to emerge organically from our bodily experiences. This approach gave our performance a sense of authenticity and purpose, with every chapter and step rooted in our personal journey. By embracing this approach, we were able to capture the rawness and authenticity of embodied expression on stage. Our performance became less about presenting a spectacle and more about inviting the audience to engage actively with us in our own journey.

For me, having an audience had a profound impact, albeit not necessarily negative. Knowing that my loved ones and other people sitting in the auditorium were there with me on this journey gave me the strength to delve deeper into the emotional core of the piece. Their support empowered me to push through and showcase my pure authenticity. However, I ponder what might have occurred if I had not known anyone in the audience. Would I still feel their presence on this journey, or would I feel compelled to perform instead of embracing authenticity? Perhaps it could be easier, as exposing oneself in front of close acquaintances

can be more challenging. Performing in front of strangers, perhaps in a different country, would offer an intriguing exploration into whether the composition of the audience influences the performance experience.

In the end, our decision to prioritize authenticity in our exploration of somatic practices on stage proved to be incredibly rewarding. By embracing vulnerability and honesty, we created a performance that was not only therapeutic for us as performers but also deeply impactful for our audience. Our journey demonstrates the transformative power of somatic practices in dance and underscores the importance of authenticity in artistic expression.

3. Our Practice

Encouraged by Berceles's insights, Saga's *dreaming body*, and other somatic practices, we embarked on a personal journey of exploration, hoping to glean insights that could serve us in the future. Our journey commenced with five weeks of 15-minute improvisation sessions, where we deliberately sought discomfort in our movements, positions, thoughts, and scenarios. Following these exercises, we engaged in vulnerable discussions, sharing our experiences and any triggered memories from the improvisations. It became apparent to all of us that unsettling memories or past trauma surfaced during these exchanges, prompting us to confront and address them.

Before each improvisational session, we took moments to intentionally immerse ourselves in the memories or events that had emerged, entering a vulnerable state of mind. This deliberate prelude profoundly influenced our subsequent improvisations, altering our movement quality and intensifying our longing for togetherness and comfort from one another. As we went, we found ourselves going into a specific movement quality that we continued working on. I found myself tensing my muscles for extended periods, experiencing both exhaustion and a peculiar sense of relief. Meanwhile, the other dancer felt an urge to push against the floor or another body, and the other felt like going from the quality of pulling. Pulling a body towards herself, seeking intimacy and closeness. We ended up using these qualities as our main tool for movement. Seeing how they were working together and maybe exploring more where they were actually coming from. Despite these individualized experiences, our collective goal remained the same.

Experiencing the piece was an incredible emotional rollercoaster as we constructed it in a manner that transformed it into a ritual or journey, allowing us to navigate through every aspect of our exploration. The "crazy chapter," as we affectionately termed it, or the final 10 minutes of the piece, consistently proved to be the most challenging part, as it marked the climax of our emotions. It ultimately never concluded in the same manner, as we opted to keep it open-ended and refrain from choreographing the final segment. This decision enabled us to express ourselves and let the journey shape its conclusion authentically. At times, it evoked tears, laughter, and even a sense of emptiness. Despite its distinctiveness, completing a performance always left us feeling numb, stirred, and exhausted, signifying the significant physical and mental effort involved. In a sense, it felt like a genuine workout for both the body and mind. While being so physically and mentally demanding, it also provided a sense of refreshment, leaving a sense of empowerment.

While it may appear that everything proceeded as intended, it is crucial to recognize that we did not consistently attain the mindset required to address our trauma effectively every time. There were times when we struggled to engage in the practice fully and even felt resistant to doing it at all. On those days, we tried to listen to our bodies and honor their needs. Sometimes, our bodies needed more rest between sessions or additional time to process what had transpired during the previous session. Sometimes, even the most beneficial thing we could do was simply talk and rest together.

These moments turned out to be incredibly significant in our journey, as they allowed us to be our most vulnerable selves. But it took us some time to embrace the idea of being tired and allowing ourselves to do absolutely nothing. However, as we attempted to push through without inspiration, we realized that we needed to pause and reevaluate why we were engaging in this practice and how we could achieve the best results.

That is when we recognized the most crucial principle we had sought from our experience of somatic practices: to listen to the body and its needs. It became evident that we had not been prioritizing that aspect and had just been pushing it. So, we shifted our focus to truly tuning into our bodies and their signals. And that is when the magic truly began to unfold. Vulnerability emerged, and we started to acknowledge and process our feelings in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Through this process, I can confidently say that I have experienced a significant difference. Being able to openly express myself in front of others, allowing myself to be vulnerable and revisit past events, has been transformative. It has allowed me to accept what

happened, to understand it, and to realize that while the trauma is a part of me, it does not define who I am.

This journey has been both challenging and incredibly rewarding. It has provided us with a profound understanding of ourselves and our bodies. It has enabled us to navigate our experiences with greater insight and compassion, fostering personal growth and transformation.

While I am immensely proud of myself for stepping out of my comfort zone and standing on stage, exposing myself and my vulnerabilities, I also admit to feeling a sense of fear. However, as Nelson Mandela wisely stated, "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."¹¹ This quote will forever stay in my heart, as it reminds me that bravery is not about being fearless but rather about facing and overcoming fear. Through this process, I have confronted my fears and emerged not only brave but also empowered.

Conclusion

In this process of writing the essay, as well as going through the process of my piece, I have embarked on a journey of self-exploration, seeking to understand the role of somatic practices in addressing and releasing trauma from the body. Through the exploration of somatic practices such as *TRE* and other somatic practices, I have unearthed a new depth of understanding about myself and my body. I have learned to listen to my body's signals, honor its needs, and embrace vulnerability as a pathway to healing. This journey has not only allowed me to confront and process my past trauma, but it has also empowered me to redefine my relationship with my body and my experiences. The transformative power of creative expression as a tool for healing has been undeniable. By creating a safe and supportive space for emotional exploration and growth, I have been able to harness the power of dance to release trauma from the body and nurture a sense of comfort and resilience. Now, I possess a practice that I can carry with me, drawing inspiration from various theories that have deeply resonated with me. The practice I discovered in this process now serves as my personal therapist, always accessible whenever I need it.

¹¹ „15 Nelson Mandela Quotes,“ Amy McKenna, accessed March 5, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/list/nelson-mandela-quotes>.

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