

SOMATIC TEACHER/SAGE

Sondra Fraleigh

By Sue Cheesman

Sondra Fraleigh is an American academic, accomplished writer and well-renowned teacher of dance, particularly in the field of somatics. In January this year, Sondra accepted an invitation from the Soul Centre in Auckland to visit New Zealand.

SONDRA FRALEIGH PHOTO: SUE CHEESMAN

At Soul Sondra ran a series of somatic workshops and training. A prolific writer, she is the author of six books on dance covering subjects such as dance research, Japanese Butoh, somatic practices and dance theory. In her academic career she attained the status of Professor and chaired the Department of Dance at the State University of New York College at Brockport for many years. Two strong intertwining threads - of personal practice and writing - have been powerful drivers in her life. Her yoga and Zen mediation practices span many years and provide strong foundations for extending and deepening her somatic studies. "They complement each other, feed each other and I have learnt through both". She holds certification in the Feldenkrais Method (a western movement system) and Craniosacral Therapy (a healing technique).

Sondra speaks in lilted tones frequently punctuating her conversation with laughter. "Currently the three hats I wear are mother and wife, a writer and a teacher of somatic practices especially as they relate to dance. I write about my practice, particularly in my recent book *Land to Water Yoga: Shin Somatics Moving*," she adds.

In this book Sondra provides a guide, through description and explanation, to her newly developed form of yoga called Shin Somatics. Described in the recent workshop advertising as "based on five movement stages of infant development and progresses backward from the most complex movement in terms of balance to the least: from walking to floating providing the opportunity to retrace our personal human development back to its watery source."

Providing some background to the development of Shin Somatics, Sondra explained "Shin in Japan has many meanings - body, mind, spirit, centre, core and tree trunk and from my Zen teacher 'is the patience of not starting'." She chuckles, exclaiming "that would be a lot of patience."

Although Sondra says she was familiar with this word in her practice, it was some time later that she realised that Shin was the term that best characterised her work. Drawing the threads together of her somatic studies for this development she realised she is inspired by Eastern influences. Her philosophy and practice is also underpinned by Buddhism and Daoism, Butoh experiences and western somatic practices such as Dance Movement Therapy, Movement Imagery, and Effective Communication. Shin Somatics is part of the *Eastwest* somatics training certification programme created by Sondra. The first two modules were offered at Soul this year.

"Eastwest is the rubic that covers a lot of territory and that was my original idea in creating the training". Laughing, she says "I know that Eastwest is a cliché but hey nobody can trademark it!"



She says *Eastwest* created an interesting bridge to cross between dance practices and somatic practices although she acknowledges that it is not unique. When spanning this bridge Sondra found the following questions and challenges: How do you bring somatic practices into the dance world and vice versa? How do you choreograph dance experiences for people that will not be about theatre performance? How do you bring somatic practices into choreography? "Improvisation is important for me to draw into the somatic world," she says.

Sondra has honed her teaching skills over many years. "Life is unfolding for me in teaching - I love to teach. Theory and practice are integrated and that is the fun and the challenge." In her academic career she says "all the teaching is bound in the class structure I was handed - there was a format for it but I still understood that my job was not simply to feed information. Teaching does not occur in a vacuum."

She acknowledges the alchemist in herself who "likes to have a mix which is unpredictable in the sense of what can arise from the whole and I approach my teaching without creating a structure which has a known outcome".

A pivotal experience for Sondra was her first encounter with Butch in 1985 at Festival for New Dance in Montreal. She saw a Butch performance of *Niwa*, referring to garden as archetype. This solo portrayed the various stages of a woman's life from infancy to old age, death and transformations into a goddess. The performance, Sondra exclaims "it changed my life; I thought my very soul was on stage and you do not see that often!"

She understands that the heart of Butoh is transformation and believes that all wonderful theatre is a healing experience. Her exposure to Butoh, through taking classes and watching performances globally over the past 23 years, has been the catalyst for the writing of three books. Her latest book on Butch is a series of 20 essays on Butch dancers globally. "I am fascinated with what makes it Butch and how we recognise it". She laughs "Butoh follows me around, it is after me, won't let me go!"

Recently she shifted back to Utah where she was born and comments that the town of St George at the mouth of Zion canyon is attracting a lot of healers making it a powerful place. She says "the colours are incredible, burnt orange to beautiful spreading rose, creamy pinks, and the deep reds found on the cliffs. It feeds my soul and feels right for me now." +