**Symmetry and Asymmetry in Dance and Movement training using the Feldenkrais Method®**

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**Abstract**

*This article argues that there is a tendency in movement and dance training to focus on an idealised symmetrically trained body. If this image becomes internalised and dominant, there is the potential for it to overshadow anatomical and acquired asymmetries in all performers and to thereby prevent full awareness of the attributes and potential for learning about movement that these asymmetries can offer. Moshe Feldenkrais' Awareness Through Movement lessons are particularly pertinent in this context since many hundreds of these are deliberately structured to enhance awareness of left/right differences. Through looking closely at examples of these, I suggest that movement-based performers can gain a greater appreciation of their individual asymmetries and that this can lead, paradoxically, to a more nuanced and flexible sense of balance. Through focusing specifically on lateral asymmetries, I further propose that a close understanding of left/right behavioural differences and hand dominance can bring a fresh perspective to the different types of thinking performers employ during performance preparation.*

**Keywords:**

symmetry/asymmetry, balance, Feldenkrais, movement, dance training, left/right handedness

**Introduction**

This article arose in direct response to questions about symmetry/asymmetry generated by participants at ‘The Professional Performer and the Feldenkrais Method®’ symposium that took place in 2010 at Royal Holloway, University of London. It was a subject that spanned different performance disciplines and had resonances beyond the context of performer training, touching on the relationship between beauty and symmetry, the disjunction experienced between performers’ perceptions of inner asymmetry and aesthetic expectations of external symmetry and questions of self-image and its mutability. In this article I argue that there is a tendency in movement and dance training to focus on an idealised symmetrically trained body. If this image becomes internalised and dominant, there is the potential for it to overshadow anatomical and acquired asymmetries in all performers and to thereby prevent full awareness of the attributes and potential for learning about movement that these asymmetries can offer. Moshe Feldenkrais’ Awareness Through Movement (ATM)[[1]](#footnote-1) lessons are particularly pertinent in this context since many hundreds of these are deliberately structured to enhance focus on, and experience of, left/right differences. Through looking closely at examples of these, I suggest that movement-based performers can gain a greater appreciation of their individual asymmetries and that this can lead, paradoxically, to a more nuanced and flexible sense of balance. By focusing specifically on lateral asymmetries, I further propose that a close understanding of left/right behavioural differences and hand dominance can bring a fresh perspective to the different types of thinking performers employ during performance preparation.

**Imposing Symmetry**

It seems highly appropriate that the Royal Ballet School in the UK should be based at White Lodge, with its central building of Classical Palladian style architecture. The White Lodge Museum information boards and timeline remind the viewer of the connection between this architectural style (the original Lodge was commissioned in 1727) and classical ballet, both of which ‘embody the very same ideals, … a rational set of principles which lie at the root of the technique and theory: the idea of beauty, of harmony, of symmetry, of proportion’ (White Lodge Museum, Virtual Tour).[[2]](#footnote-2) Dance scholar Jennifer Nevile, writing on the earliest forms of ballet, makes this link even more explicit.

During the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries dance shared similar design principles with garden design and architecture. Through order and proportion all three arts reflected the numerical order of the cosmos, while the geometric patterns common to all three had divine connotations. (Nevile 2008, p. 308)

The moral and political implications of these artistic styles, as discussed by Nevile, might seem remote in the twenty-first century, but in the following pages I suggest that an element of these outdated ideals linger on in Western theatre dance training. My intention is not to critique classical ballet as a form but to consider how, within ballet and other dance/movement training, the dominance of certain regulatory structures and unspoken beliefs might impede a greater understanding of, for instance, asymmetry in the body and movement. My experience of teaching primarily theatre students, many of whom have considerable background in dance training, is that the mimetic model of dance teaching predominates. This is despite the changes that have taken place in professional dance companies to broaden the range of movement experience included in training (Pilates, Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais for instance). This suggests that the trickle down into amateur and local dance classes is slow. The result is that, when doing independent warm-up or rehearsal, I see students quickly resort to copied forms from ballet or contemporary dance classes and bring this into their choreography, whether or not it is appropriate to their conceptual content.

The power of symmetry, and the ideals it supports, over dance design and dance training might rest in part on the long history of the ballet form and associated social dancing (some examples of ballroom and country/folk dance are highly symmetrical). It is dependent for its replication on a pedagogic method that corrects movement and body positioning from the outside with the goal of a pre-set step/position clearly delineated. However, Neurologist Alain Berthoz, when researching brain activity in the movement of animals makes the following observation: ‘the brain also favours symmetry and thus tends to impose symmetry on the world it perceives’ (2000, p. 93). Could the persistence of fascination with symmetry arise therefore, not just from external regulation through cultural forms (and these are by no means restricted to ballet), but also from internal neurological systems designed to support movement by limiting degrees of complexity in the perceived environment?

In pursuing this research there is no attempt to assign a superior value to symmetry or asymmetry in dance performance, although it is clear that certain forms demonstrate clear preferences for one or the other. There are very definite repercussions for training in each instance, with classical ballet, for example, most obviously requiring careful nurturing of muscular development that can support extraordinarily demanding spins, leaps and travelling steps initiated alternately on the left and the right side. Forms such as Contact Improvisation[[3]](#footnote-3) or any of a range of physical theatres can appear to be consistently asymmetric but require equally demanding levels of physical articulacy and strength to respond spontaneously to unpredictable environmental changes. The goal for the ballet dancer might be toward elimination of the natural asymmetries of the body, whilst the Contact Improviser and or performer in a physical theatre company might relish the new opportunities that small or pronounced asymmetries bring to the performance-making process. Far from eradicating left/right differences in the body or more extreme physical differences between dancers, these can be embraced in inclusive performances that celebrate movement range and variety. Therefore, in this article, I raise the question as to whether a more sophisticated awareness of the many subtle asymmetries all performers possess might contribute to dance and movement training whatever the intended performance goal might be.

In the final segment of the article, the focus shifts towards consideration of distinctly different functions that can be exhibited in lateral asymmetry. Everyday experience of using limbs asymmetrically (eating, cleaning, building, playing games etc.) provokes questions of the distinct role each limb takes in a task and how this knowledge might be useful for performers.

**‘The Professional Performer and the Feldenkrais Method’ Symposium**

It is perhaps not surprising that the issues raised above were prominent in discussions arising during this symposium. By intentionally designing the day for professional performers from across arts disciplines, the organisers (Rebecca Meitlis and me) wanted to create a momentary interruption in the typical conversations that flow between artists of one medium, to engage instead with ideas and responses that might at first seem disjunctive. For instance, and since this is the single theme that I follow through from this symposium, it was evident from the start of the day that a musician who is reliant on highly asymmetric use of their body during hours of playing and practice will have developed a strongly contrasting relationship to balance and sense of symmetry, when compared with a ballet dancer.

One of the intentions for the symposium was to create a space in which professional performers (there were 30 participants, including actors, singers, dancers and musicians) could talk with each other about training, rehearsal and pressing performance issues at a level that would be satisfying. The organisers were alert to the difficulty of artists struggling to communicate meaningfully from their highly trained and expert standpoints with those from a different medium. To help mitigate this, four Feldenkrais Method lessons were included. Three of these were Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons for all participants to undertake and one was a Functional Integration (FI) lesson[[4]](#footnote-4) for an individual musician, watched by all. The Feldenkrais Method was deemed valuable in this context because it is not discipline-specific but engages with the much broader issue of human movement relevant to any artist and is in that sense generic. However, each of the ATM lessons was created by Feldenkrais to address ease of functional movement in a manner that was sophisticated and sufficiently unusual to stimulate focus on the process of gradually building up a movement sequence, rather than starting with an image of a fixed goal. As one participant put it: ‘I realised that the instructions in the ATMs were not full stops but question marks. These gave me new questions to work on’ (Anon. Meitlis and Worth 2010, p. 11). The intention therefore was for the lessons themselves, each tailored for a different art form,[[5]](#footnote-5) to create a bedrock of challenging and detailed movement experience from which could emerge shared issues confronting performers arising from their different artistic contexts and individual perspectives.

      The final report on the day, compiled from comments made during an Open Space session and from discussions held directly after a movement lesson, recorded several major subject areas of interest including: creativity and retaining a fresh quality in performance, presence, role development, the potent space, collaboration, communication and symmetry/ asymmetry. For the purposes of this article just the final subject will be addressed. It arose from various artists’ perspectives with frequency and persistence. One participant, Nadine Mortimer, an opera singer, phrased it in the following way:

How can the Feldenkrais Method create equal balance within a performer? My answer came in the second session. The true sense of equal balance is knowing what is going on inside me, that is on the left and the right side of my body and allowing them [the sides] space to adjust by paying attention to what lesson I may need at that precise moment. That in itself creates the balance I need to be at one with [my]self before I enter the stage. (2010, p. 6)

The question of balance was just one aspect that included more broadly how performers might employ the Feldenkrais Method to ‘resolve inner asymmetry with expectations for outer symmetry’ (Anon. in Meitlis and Worth 2010, p. 10).

Within the many hundreds of ATM lessons Feldenkrais created, he chose to design a large proportion to be experienced on one side first, as a learning tool to allow direct comparison before and after a lesson. This is usually followed by exploring how the same sequences are undertaken on the second side. One of the presenters, Caroline Scott, in her lesson focused on dance, flagged up directly her interest in this issue.

For dancers in training there is often an emphasis on finding balance between the two sides which is taken on with somewhat of an internal and often external struggle. In this session participants were given the opportunity to explore for themselves, within the constraints of the lesson, the very particular ways they organise to use the two halves of their shoulder girdle and trunk. (2010, p. 7)

The ‘struggle’ Scott mentions was an issue taken up by musicians and dancers in particular as they experienced the disjunction between formal requirements within exceptionally disciplined performance genres and the type of freedom experienced after doing a Feldenkrais lesson. ‘How do we manage the paradox between repeated movement patterns that become “crystallised” and creative exploration which is evanescent’ (Anon. in Meitlis and Worth 2010, p. 9)? Jennifer Jackson, who teaches at Surrey University and at the Royal Ballet School, noted her interest in a similar field:

I am interested in how Feldenkrais and somatic awareness might be useful in exploring the relationship between the first person experience and disciplinary knowledge of ballet, in developing the dancer and new forms and the aesthetic implications of these approaches. (2010, p. 4).

         Given the brevity of this article, I will focus on dance and movement-based performance training in considering these issues rather than looking more broadly at performance arts as addressed in the symposium. However, the interchange between artists triggered questions and comparisons that might not have arisen in a single discipline event. There was a wide range of dance/movement specialists at the symposium and including for instance founder members of the companies Theatre Ad Infinitum, angels in the architecture, Waving Not Drowning and Little Bulb Theatre, four choreographers working within different dance forms, the education and development coordinator with Candoco Dance Company, Head of Movement at Guildhall, theatre directors and physical theatre performers.[[6]](#footnote-6) Given that every movement/dance form has its own regimen of training rooted in aesthetic priorities that reflect its cultural and political history, it is extremely difficult to make general statements relevant to all. The aim therefore is to examine the generative potential the Feldenkrais Method has to offer in relation to the issues raised by the participants on symmetry and asymmetry.

**Asymmetry and balance**

     The relationship between beauty and symmetry has generated discourse with extensive history across both arts and sciences. In an article addressing the prevalence and meaning behind left cheek/right cheek facing facial images in renaissance paintings, Psychologist and Medical Educationalist Chris McManus summarises as follows:

philosophers and art historians seem generally agreed that although symmetry is indeed attractive, there is also a somewhat sterile rigidity about it, which can make it less attractive than the more dynamic, less predictable beauty associated with asymmetry. (2005, p.157)

Whether beauty is most closely related to symmetry remains hotly contested and I do not propose to enter that particular debate. But I am interested in the reactions such a dispute generates and how these connect with attitudes to performer training, specifically dance and movement training. The choreographer and dancer Doris Humphrey for instance, would have concurred with McManus’ view, as illustrated by the chapter on choreographic design devoted to symmetry and asymmetry in her seminal text: *The Art of Making Dances* (1959). In typically assertive terms Humphrey separates the qualities of symmetrical and asymmetrical dance design into categories that show the importance of functional symmetry in daily living in contrast to its overuse by choreographers which will ‘spell monotony and death for a dance’ (1987, p.51). Using the classical attributes of Apollo and Dionysus she associates symmetry with stability, solidity, security, comfort, repose and balance, whilst asymmetry is linked with stimulation, excitement, adventure, imbalance, the unpredictable and waywardness. Of course the degree of symmetry perceived by a viewer of dance depends on their choice of focus and perspective. Most dance steps begin with an asymmetrical move as the body is taken off balance with one foot leading but this is quickly countered by the next step, so that looking at the dance overall can reveal a symmetry based on matching patterns and balance of parts. Humphrey emphasises the asymmetry of visual positioning in solo and choral dance movements but the aesthetic qualities of imbalance, excitement or waywardness could equally be found through disturbed patterns within sound design, movement rhythms or dynamics and stage design such as to be found in the work of Merce Cunningham.

     Feldenkrais however, does not conceive of symmetry in the form of balance as repose or monotony but as a constantly shifting state made up by movements on a continuum of micro to macro, dependent on the forces operating on the body and the function required at any one time. He is closer in this way to the aesthetic appreciation of symmetry expressed by the poet, William Blake in his poem *The Tyger* (1970, pl. 42) when he imagines animal movement that is empowered with violent potential precisely because of its smooth symmetry. The final phrase of this first verse, ‘fearful symmetry’, repeated at the end of the poem, is troubling in its oppositional force. In a different context it could resonate with Humphrey’s views on deathly symmetry; however, I suggest that within the poem it envisages the tiger’s stealthy movement and attacking pounce that is awe inspiring and dynamic but dependent on perfect balance. In this context, asymmetry can be seen in its usual dictionary definition, literally as lack of symmetry, a falling short of an ideal. Neurologist Alain Berthoz, discusses hunting animals’ necessary movement qualities in more scientific terms but with no less a sense of admiration.

To catch prey that is moving at thirty-six kilometers per hour, that is ten meters per second, a predator must anticipate its position in less than one hundred milliseconds and head for where the prey will be in a moment’s time. It must also prepare the gesture of capture as well as that needed by the muscles to compensate for the weight of the prey and overcome its resistance. (2000, p. 4)

He ends the description by stating that the ‘brain is above all a biological machine for moving quickly while anticipating’ (2000, p. 4) and later in the text, in determining some of the features that allow for this speed and ability, he notes the brain’s need for visual constraints that include ‘continuity and rigidity’ (2000, p. 93) in order to help with coherence.  And, as mentioned earlier in the article, he notes that through favouring symmetry the brain ‘tends to impose symmetry on the world it perceives’ (2000, p. 93).

     This latter statement by Berthoz has implications for cultural meanings associated with symmetry and asymmetry and for movement-based performance training. There is no question that many forms of dance require participants to have a finely tuned sense of balance to respond to the complex, fast and dynamic demands made within a quickly changing environment. There are several problems that arise for dancers in the type of system that attempts to resolve difficulties in balance through strict exercising of muscles on one side and then the other. The first is that physiologically all people are anatomically asymmetrical, with the most obvious example being the smaller left lung to accommodate the position of the heart and other organs. Skeletally performers are born with any number of differences in bone structure or spinal curvature and whether such differences are quite subtle or marked, they will have implications for the development of movement for performance. Over the course of a life it is usual to acquire learnt asymmetries through habitual preferences for one side (right/left handedness or standing leg preference) and many other individual movement habits. The performers quoted earlier make the point that reliance on symmetrical methods of training can cause a disjunction between what is felt and what is required in preparation for performance. However, if, as I argue, the perspective in the studio is shifted towards focusing on the typical asymmetries of the body and how these impact on movement, another route to secure balance could be found with less potential to exclude performers.

   In ‘The Professional Performer and the Feldenkrais Method’ symposium, Louise Coleman, who was at that time pursuing practice-based study at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and who was Learning and Development Coordinator with Candoco Dance Company described her interest in Feldenkrais’ notion of the body as ‘organism’ and how through her practice in site specific performance she invites ‘performers and audience members to become more aware… of how they relate and react to changing environments’(2010, p. 5). This is a useful perspective because if applied to dance training it moves the emphasis from an idealised body construction to a desired physical responsiveness to change and thereby from a static image to a more open view of active agency. This fits with Feldenkrais’ definition of good posture to be found repeatedly in his writing and teaching in direct rejection of more common descriptions or drawings.

The body should be so organized that it can start any movement – forward, backward, right, left, down, up or turning right and left – without previous arrangement of the segments of the body, without any sudden change in the rhythm of breathing, without clenching the lower jaw or tensing the tongue, and without a perceptible tensing of the neck muscles or fixation of the eyes. When the body is organized in this way, the head is not held fixedly but is free to move gently in all directions without previous notice. (2010, p. 42 – 43)

In these terms posture is seen as a constant flow of micro-movements that enables each person to sustain their stance within gravitational pull.

**Finding balance by increasing lopsidedness**

Feldenkrais’ ATM lessons offer a means by which the individual can develop greater sensitivity to asymmetries of movement, in particular the ways that movement tasks are undertaken by the left or the right side. This might involve overcoming a somewhat established self-image, or as Berthoz suggests, a preference for symmetry that is projected onto the world. The importance for the performer is twofold, first to prevent injury of the type noted by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen[[7]](#footnote-7) from her extensive experience of working with dancers from a wide range of performance forms. She became aware of common problems that arose for dancers in their back, hips, knees and ankles:

These supporting structures develop problems primarily because dancers use all of their bodies in wide ranges of movement and highly asymmetrical spatial postures with varying rhythms and dynamics. If the coordination of their total muscular responses are not balanced so that the weight transfers the body falls along the axis of the bones, shearing forces will occur in key areas or joints. (2003, p. 18)

Secondly, the performer can use this method to generate greater choice of movement that arises from heightened awareness derived from detailed experiential learning rather than effortful attempts to fit an external image.

     Bainbridge Cohen draws attention to the way that imbalances can derive from very early development if babies are encouraged or forced into movement stages for which they are not ready.

They develop a more positional, or goal orientation, rather than a process or transitioning sense. The first is more planal in transitions, and the latter more spirallic.[[8]](#footnote-8) Also, it is important to notice if the baby always sits on the same side, or brings itself to standing on the same leg, because, as an adult their pelvis will be rotated to one side and perhaps cause stress to the spine, knee or ankle. (2003, p. 112)

Rather than attempting to change this pattern in adults through repetitious muscle building exercises, the Feldenkrais ATMs offer experiences of movement targeted at very specific functions to stimulate the nervous system with sensations of movement that might seem quite unfamiliar but that offer new movement pathways to be learnt. To provide an idea of the range and detail of these lessons it is worth referring to a collection that is readily available to Feldenkrais practitioners but not easily publicly accessible.[[9]](#footnote-9) It has become known as the Alexander Yanai collection, named after the street in Tel Aviv where Feldenkrais taught eight public ATMs per week, refining each lesson through a process of recording and re-recording in response to the groups undertaking it. The introduction to each volume elaborates on this method: ‘He continued this process until he felt that he had the lesson exactly as he wanted it. Over a period of twenty-five years, Moshe recorded close to 600 ATM lessons in this manner and covered an astounding range of possible human functions’ (Soloway (ed), 1995, npn).

    In any lesson participants might have their attention drawn to differences they note between their left and right side but there are certain lessons that pursue this comparison through deliberately increasing a sense of unevenness. One of these that I have consistently found valuable for its potential to heighten awareness of left/right differences is based on a helpfully simple image of movement that requires delicacy and great attention to detail to fulfil. It is done lying comfortably on the back on a mat/blanket with breaks taken at intervals to allow assimilation of the movement sensations whilst pausing.

      The primary task is to roll an imaginary marble in the palm of the hand, allowing it to travel to different points in the hand and progressively along each of the fingers. There is no clear outcome in such a task and this lack of obvious goal is important within Feldenkrais’ work, since it frees up the attention to observe in detail what is experienced throughout the person in the course of slowly following the instructions. These experiences might differ extensively between people, but what usually becomes apparent is that there are ranges of ways of doing the activity where one might have assumed there to be only one. Each slight variation in the way selected will generate contrasting sensations. Within this process one way of moving might be felt to be most familiar, in all probability the first option selected, yet as the repetitions of the movement proceed another might feel easier and more pleasant. By choosing the easier and more pleasant route, typically, the quality of the movement will also seem to improve. The most obvious repercussion arises as participants become aware of the subtle but distinct connections in movement from the distal point of the hand to the proximal of the shoulder blades on the floor and the whole of the back responding. Related lessons on the hand reaching extends this sense of connectivity right down to the feet revealing how a movement that seems to take place primarily in the hand in fact is powered by the pressing contact of the foot into the floor.

Feldenkrais practitioner Richard Cave describes the following variant on this lesson with an example of successful application when working with someone with a broken arm.

Myriam Pfeffer[[10]](#footnote-10) used to teach this in terms of painting the hands, finger by finger with an imaginary brush, while lying on the back with the arms extended by the sides, and then lying on the side with the underarm stretched out comfortably as the one being painted. With a student recovering from a broken arm/shoulder I had some success with this idea of painting, but (seated, because lying was difficult for her) she explored painting the one finger with its complementary finger on the other hand (index to index, for example). Interestingly she began by painting in straight strokes from the base of the finger to the tip, then started moving up to the tip and continuing over and down to the palm, before finally experimenting with painting in circles around the finger and spiralling up from the base to the tip, which of course required subtler and subtler engagement of the whole arm and shoulder that was acting as the ‘brush’. This taught acceptance of the fact that after the break it probably wasn’t going to be easy or comfortable to be symmetrical but that the damaged arm/hand had its own range of potentials. Both arms steadily became more and more capable of ranges of gently controlled, ‘soft’ movement. I got the idea for this by combining the Pfeffer lesson with the one called ‘Surgeon’s Hands’ in Frank Wildman’s *Busy Person’s Guide to Easier Movement*.

(Personal Interview, 2014)

Feldenkrais’ emphasis on awareness rather than practising is critical, as this is one of the ways in which his lessons are distinguished from skill training aimed primarily at automation. By ‘making available the full range of functioning in all planes’ Feldenkrais asserts that the technique supports spontaneity, because ‘all action is spontaneous when it is not compulsive’ (1985: 153). One of the most useful aspects of a typical ATM lesson is that its structure is based on deconstruction of familiar movement sequences with subsequent re-assemblage based on less accustomed routes. For instance, the action of reaching upwards could begin with the participant seated and noting the movement of the pelvis and shoulders in relation to pressure from one foot into the floor. The switch from goal orientation to focus on an unfamiliar route taken to arrive at a specific movement function can help to open new patterns of movement that break with the habitual. Such routes might involve surprising points of initiation, separation of parts that might normally move together (eyes and head for instance) or attention drawn to the way a movement in one part of the person resonates and connects with the whole. Difficulties encountered in carrying out the instructions can reveal a range of ways to the participant in which they are not well organised, one of the most important being habitual reliance on single functional response to stimuli that include interfering parasitic movement. Feldenkrais distinguishes the lessons he developed from more familiar forms of exercising as follows: ‘We do not achieve the full range of play of each articulation by repetition, muscle exercising, or increasing speed and force, but by widening and refining the cerebral control of the muscular range’ (1985: 155).

     In this specific lesson the imaginary rolling of marbles is initially experienced as taking place in the palm and along the fingers. However, gradually, the lesson asks for attention to be spread to the arm, shoulder and torso whilst repeating the same actions. This emphasises the connection between extending focus widely through the body and the generation of fluidity and ease in rolling the ‘marbles’ precisely between palm and fingertips. Similarly, noticing breathing flows, interruptions and effort will yield further information about the way the movement task is being undertaken. This is the very opposite of the type of isolation movement exercises seen in many movement/dance classes that treat the body as separate parts to be ‘warmed up’ with no sense of the connections between the whole. Even though this is an ATM beginning with movements of palm and fingers, by the end of the lesson, if done with awareness and not carelessly or automatically, the likelihood is that when the participant stands, the whole of one side feels very different. Students occasionally laugh aloud when they see the unevenness so obviously visible in each other’s positioning of shoulder girdle, leg and ribcage - an imbalance that can even extend into facial muscles.

     At first glance this might not seem a productive means to improve balance but by taking time to move freely through the studio, in this uneven state, students have a window of opportunity to access and compare two very different qualities of movement. On repeating the lesson on the other side, it is possible to make similar improvements. However, it is noteworthy that Feldenkrais reminds students to come to each side with a sense of innocence, that is, without anticipating that one side will move in the same way as the other or that each side will encounter an equal degree of difficulty.

To return to balance and the original questions raised by participants of the symposium, ATM lessons that are structured around increasing asymmetric experience of movement as described above provide an ideal opportunity to sense and explore structural and acquired differences between the left and right sides. For dancers, the emphasis on slow, small movements repeated many times over can initially seem frustrating but the types of questions Feldenkrais proposes and the non-judgemental attitude to what is discovered by each person can gradually embed an acceptance and curiosity in this form of subjective learning. In another lesson for the dominant hand, completed whilst lying, and beginning with lifting the lower arm and letting the hand hang down and lift up, Feldenkrais instructs:

Pay attention to how [you] need to lengthen the spine. This means it [the spine] should stop contracting. Try so the hand can lift more and more lightly. What do [you] need to do with the breathing and shoulder blades for the movement to be lighter and lighter, so it truly will resemble floating, as if someone lifts it? (1995, p. 824)

One of the areas of interest for Feldenkrais in this lesson is that ‘the active [dominant] hand of everyone is too strained – everyone without exception. With everyone, it interferes with the breathing. With everyone, it shortens the spine’ (1995, p.823). Small degrees of tension, inefficiencies or interferences in movements can have a magnified impact on dancers’ wellbeing for the reasons suggested by Bainbridge Cohen above. For Feldenkrais, Bainbridge Cohen and other somatic practitioners, the idea of balanced movement therefore arises not from a set image of what a person should look like but how well each person is able to move in response to forces acting on them. The type of ease and lightness that Feldenkrais invokes in the lesson example given is dependent on the whole organism moving with optimal functional efficiency. This in turn allows dancers to fall and re-find balance with confidence born from their own investigation into their decidedly asymmetric bodies.

**Asymmetries and hidden potentials**

The Feldenkrais Method has the potential to increase choice in spontaneous and creative action through nurturing a greater range of possible movements that become available when participants gradually explore full articulation within ‘cerebral control’. It is perhaps obvious how this might contribute to dance and vocal training, although even here there are potential conflicts in attitudes to training, or rigidity of performance style desired, which can make the introduction of Feldenkrais’ work challenging. Berthoz emphasises the intricacy of the relationship between the brain and movement in his analysis of perception, which he suggests is ‘more than just the interpretation of sensory messages. Perception is constrained by action; it is an internal simulation of action. It is judgment and decision making and it is anticipation of the consequences of action’ (2000: 9). One of Feldenkrais’ contributions to the study of the interaction between the sensorimotor system and the brain was to draw attention to the ‘delay between a thought process and its translation into action [that] is long enough to make it possible to inhibit it’ (1980: 45). This ability to create ‘the image of an action and delay its execution’, he asserts, ‘is the basis of imagination and intellectual judgement’ (1980: 45). It is this delay between thought and action that he notes as the point at which awareness is possible and with awareness comes the potential to act differently from unconscious habitual patterns.

     The inclusion of Feldenkrais lessons in dance/movement training has the potential to shift the focus of participants from pursuing a set exercise regime towards becoming researchers into their own movement potential. In addition to the value this can offer for avoiding injury,

treating injury and sustaining longevity as a dancer, opportunities open up for the performer to re-evaluate differences they experience in lateral asymmetry. How can the experiences noted in moving on one side influence or change the movement on the other? What information is gained through observing contrasting ways of tackling an activity? How might this be valuable in responding to rapidly changing environments including contact with other performers? The neurologist Frank R. Wilson in his text *The Hand: How its use shapes the brain, language, and human culture*, addresses similar questions in considering the history of handedness and implications for human functioning. He proposes several hypotheses for the highly unusual and specialized way that human beings, over the course of their history, have come to rely on one-hand dominance. These cannot be proven but issues raised in the study include rejection of the common association across many cultures of the dominant hand as ‘quick, strong, dextrous’ and the non-dominant hand as ‘slow, weak, clumsy’ (1999, p. 150). Even without the typical left/right polarisations that bring a wider range of social myths and beliefs into play, there is a clear distinction being asserted between the abilities of the hands. Wilson suggests that rather than accept this formulation it is worth considering that each hand is differently skilled and these differences are essential in humans’ engagement with their environment.

The two sides of the brain function as a coordinated whole and that whatever differences there may be in their specific functions, they are complementary; it is a true marriage with a division of labor between left and right. Perhaps the same is true of the two hands. (1999, p. 156)

This is an under-researched area but Wilson points to developing scholarship that suggests hand dominance is not as clear-cut as it might seem but operates on a continuum with the hands working in a partnership of complementary skills. For instance, in handwriting and sewing he suggests that the non-dominant hand ‘sets and confines the spatial context in which the “skilled” movement will take place’ (1999, p.160) and in an action such as dart throwing ‘the passive hand and arm are probably crucial in counterbalancing the move of the active arm and hand’ (1999, p. 159).

     The types of lessons developed by Feldenkrais are possible ways to examine this movement potential further. For dance/movement performers this is a terrain that could open up new understandings about individual reactions to their training and new possibilities for making dance that gives asymmetry fresh validation beyond the design structures advocated by Humphrey, arising from the subtle and manifold lateral asymmetries and their attributes with which we are all born.

There are no definitive answers to the questions raised by participants at ‘The Professional Performer and the Feldenkrais Method’ symposium as to the ways that asymmetries in each person impact on movement and, as reflected in Wilson’s writing, on thinking. It is a subject that remains puzzling. As stated at the start of this article, nor is there any agreement on the relationship between beauty and symmetry or asymmetry. However, Blake’s poetic image of the tiger’s ‘fearful symmetry’, Berthoz’ scientific analysis of the tiger’s pounce and Feldenkrais’ observation of the delay between a thought process and its enaction all signal the dynamic and complex processes at work in each movement. I have argued that a detailed study by dancers of their own specific physical asymmetries and how these are implicated in the way that they dance, their safety and their movement-making is beneficial to their training and creative potential. The tensions that can exist between forms of learning such as the Feldenkrais Method and strictly routinised movement training are evident, but not unsurmountable. It becomes a matter of choice as to how such learning about subtle lateral asymmetries for example is addressed. The ballet dancer might strive to eliminate them; the Humphrey dancer or the Contact Improviser might embrace and exaggerate them. However, there are repercussions beyond individual development if such studies are recorded and can form the basis of a better understanding of how performers choose to develop themselves in accord with a performance aesthetic. For this reason, although I have focused on dancers and movement artists in this article, there are strong grounds to encourage cross disciplinary performance training dialogues. For instance, the practices and insights brought from musicianship to dance and vice versa could provoke greater curiosity in how to develop ease and fluidity of movement by looking beneath the habits of training undertaken in each discipline.

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1. Awareness Through Movement (ATM) lessons are given by a Feldenkrais practitioner through a series of verbal instructions for repetitions of small movements that gradually build up to a familiar function (lying to sitting, rolling over to one side, reaching up etc.). The lesson can be for one or more and typically begins in lying with the emphasis on increasing awareness of individual function as the participant observes how they respond to the instructions individually, without reference to copying the practitioner or referring to the rest of the group. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The virtual tour of The White Lodge Museum is available at http://www.royalballetschool.org.uk/the-school/museum/virtual-tour/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is a dance form that can be undertaken in duets or with larger groups in which participants stay in physical contact most of the time and generate movement through giving and receiving weight. It requires heightened awareness of the dance partner to respond spontaneously with rolls, lifts, jumps and slides etc. in free flowing sequences. Steve Paxton (USA) was the originator of this form (1972) bringing together his martial art training and his interest in dance and improvisation in performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Functional Integration (FI) lesson is given one to one with the practitioner using touch to give movement stimulation to the student. Typically a table is used for this and the focus on awareness of what is experienced during lesson is similar to that in an ATM. The one to one form allows for detail and subtlety in communication through touch. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Feldenkrais lesson leaders were: Richard Cave on voice, Caroline Scott on dance, Maggy Burrowes on singing and Günther Bisges on musical instrument playing. Garet Newell gave a talk on the history of Feldenkrais’ work in the UK and with performers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Participants defined themselves as ‘physical theatre performers’, clearly a very broad category. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen is a movement educator who developed a somatic approach to movement analysis and re-education called Body-Mind Centering. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I interpret this to mean that movements based on the whole torso moving as a block and on basic flexion are given preference over a more varied range of movements arising from spirals or rotations through the spine and of the pelvis. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The International *Feldenkrais* Federation was given the rights to publish these lessons with Anat Baniel as translator. Baniel is a practitioner who worked closely with Feldenkrais for many years. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Myriam Pfeffer was a highly experienced and admired practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method based in Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)