



INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HALL

David Hall is a Feldenkrais practitioner (Sydney 1990), Alexander technique teacher (Sydney 1986) and is founding director, along with his wife Wendy, of the Bang Bang Salsa School (1999). I interviewed him at the School for FM Alexander Studies here in Melbourne. He returns to Melbourne soon to present his Awareness Through Salsa workshop on July 26th. RAH

Ralph: Tell us about the workshop you're doing on the 26th.

David: The workshop uses the Feldenkrais method to teach Salsa. It seeks to give everyone who comes an experience of being centred, in time and in tune.

Our take on salsa is a little different to what you may see on television and... well, you could apply what we're doing to any type of dance.. It's all focussed on being in a groove with your partner, yourself and the music... it's the communication, the self-expression and the way you move that we're really interested in.

R: Now you mentioned something about how it's like doing an ATM with two people together, which fascinated me. That's new to me because ATMs, well, you do them by yourself.

D: In partner dancing you have a leader and a follower and both of them communicate directly through the way they organise their bodies relative to each other. The signals are very subtle and are often second-guessed. So you respond spontaneously both to what's happening within the music and to what's happening between you.

There is a really fantastic sensitivity you can develop doing this...so anyway, we are doing an ATM, well two in particular, to enable you to tune into this. We'll be pressing on a hand

and stopping - so you push and then you relax - you feel the process of how you initiate the movement and how you come back to stillness - and we combine that with other movements, such as the way you roll your pelvis...or the way you move a leg...

R: Is this in standing, sitting?

D: Well yes we do some things in standing but the two ATMs I'm speaking of here we do lying on the floor.

R: Like an ATM?

D: Like an ATM...in different orientations with a shifting focus of attention, pushing through the foot or the hand as a means to understand the way your partner moves. It's developing awareness of the global experience through how you come back to stillness and how you initiate movement. The interesting thing is that when you're lying there processing the changes from the movements you've just done, you not only feel it in your own body... you can also sense it in your partner's body. It's a remarkable feeling and, of course, it makes it so much easier to dance and so much easier to move together.

You know, when you are dancing with someone else you often have to adapt the way you move. That may be because one of you is much taller, so you have different leg lengths or your partner may favour one side. You have to adapt to what you are both doing so that you can really move together. And when you are actually doing it together its mind blowing.

R: It sounds a bit like doing FI. In FI you are touching, you are moving someone. I guess in that case the recipient is more passive. Not entirely passive but they are more passive. There's still the issue that when you

are using your hands to move them, you need to sense [yourself and the other person] very well.

D: When it works, its like that moment in FI when you're doing something with a person and you know they can feel what's going on...and you've been through a number of movements and they can tell there is something...that...they want to know more about...and they're waiting for you to do the next movement and then you do it and they savour the experience then have a big breath. So when you're dancing and you're absolutely tuned in - it's got that same sense of listening...And it's that quality of absolute communication with another person when you are dancing to beautiful music that I think is the good thing about dancing.

Anyway, that's the thing that I find is so much fun about the workshop. Through a very simple movement you can get an experience of doing that.

I tend to think dance as a part of everyday life - in that it's an aspect of communication. The gestures we make are a dance. The way people orient themselves to each other is a form of dance. The challenge is that in our culture, and I do think it's to our detriment, dance is not recognised as a fundamental part of life. In many cultures around the globe it enriches daily life.

R: Well dancing is...I think we are rather deprived of dance and song and many arts in our culture. I think we rely on experts to provide the arts for us, and so we listen to recorded music and we...

D: Art is something you consume, rather than something you participate in.

R: Yes, so you're heading in the opposite direction I think

D: Yes, and the dancing we are

doing is really more concerned with the possibilities of relating and self-expression rather than performance.

R: Yes...so how did this get started? You were originally a Feldenkrais and Alexander teacher; how did you get into salsa?

D: Well, I still am! However, I love the music and I was lucky enough to have a honeymoon in Cuba. We were deeply impressed with the way the music and dance were part of the fabric of daily life...and...a capacity we found in Cuba for the people to... find that expression of joy...in this open hearted, exuberant way...you know, that just made life good. It was a really good mood in Cuba despite the fact that, you know, there was so much repression. There were policemen on every corner in Havana.

R: Very poor, a totalitarian state...

D: Well it was not like Stalinist Russia. Everyone ate. There is a library in every town. However it was very poor...there was not much food and nothing to buy...but despite that, the actual mood of the streets is optimistic and happy and I think a fundamental part of that was the way music and dance were woven into the fabric of everyday life.

R: Is salsa a particularly Cuban thing or is it South American in general...?

D: Salsa is actually a name devised by a Latino record company in New York during the 1970s...The dance and the music well and truly predate that. Really it was born of a marriage between a West African approach to music, dance and religious practice with Spanish cultural influences. What we call salsa now has been greatly influenced by Cuban music, but really if you travel over Latin America you find local expressions of this dance everywhere.

R: So salsa in Cuba...what happened next?

D: Well, we met this remarkable Brazilian man named Jose Prates. He was 75 years old and a master of cross-cultural communication. He had a beautiful open heart and a genuine love for people and was

able to really communicate easily something essential about the spirit of Latin American culture. He became a mentor and really a part of the family. After about a year...I was doing a personal growth course, and one of the things we had to do was start a community event that involved at least 20 people and so I started salsa classes in my area. I thought, you know, I already do that so it shouldn't be too hard...Anyway, we had 80 people turn up on the 1st night for a 10 week course.

R: Wow!

D: So I bought a PA and made each night a social event. In the first year we were getting 100 people a week coming. Jose and a few other people were teaching, and then after a year my partner Wendy and I started teaching and it just went on from there. Of course it wasn't long before all these other schools appeared in the area so we became much smaller but we've continued teaching and it's just developed and been a fantastic thing.

R: So nowadays, if people come to your school, they're coming to learn salsa? Or they're coming to learn Feldenkrais, Alexander or...?

D: Well...we have 3 classes on a Thursday night, plus casual workshops, and the odd party...and we've got a very definite approach to teaching. For me, I had to really... there's a difference between what you see on television in terms of salsa and what you see a Cuban doing, or what you see people in Latin America doing. They'll dance a lot more simply, there's not as many complicated moves, or dips or turns. But it's how they actually approach the rhythm. They're dancing to a thing called the Clave. It's a compelling thing and it's fascinated me for the past 10 years.

R: What's the clave?

D: It's the key of the rhythm, an underlying rhythmic pulse...The practitioners of the Afro Cuban religion Santeria think about the clave in the same way the Hindus think about Aum. It's the universal vibration from which everything is formed.

For Santeria practitioners, music and dance are also the prime means of communication between god and man. Each of the saints in that religion have their own rhythm and dance! The movements have meaning. It's very grounded, and you know, there's a real, wholeness to the way they move and it's not something you can just learn...and it's one of the things that makes it so fantastic to watch Cuban or African dancers. You know, I have been so fascinated with how you actually get yourself into a state where you are so absorbed in the music, not dancing to it so much as being a part of it. And that's, in my practice, what I have been seeking to learn, and that's what I try to communicate in the classes that we're running.

R: ...just moving with the music. Spontaneous. Going with the flow.

D: Yeah absolutely, and the depth of perception available through the Feldenkrais Method is another way of getting there. It's been along term interest of mine. I began teaching Alexander and Feldenkrais to actors. I've always worked with self expression and communication which has assisted with what we're doing... Somebody once characterised my work as helping people to get rid of their inhibitions without having to deal with them...you just give the person an experience of doing it and you make an environment very safe, so they don't actually feel they do have to anything out of the ordinary to express themselves.

R: Yes, hmmm. So, coming back to you as a practitioner of Feldenkrais and a teacher of Alexander, what's your working routine now? Or are you just doing the salsa school entirely?

D: Nononono. That's a hobby, it's something that's grown, well, it's part of my Feldenkrais and Alexander work, it's just part of the ongoing question of, you know... what is?...You know, about paying attention to what's going on...So, I teach 6 days a week, or whenever it comes. Monday to Saturday I will have lessons. I've got a lovely set of

rooms in Avalon near where I live. And I run Feldenkrais ATM classes in the recreation centre where I am, occasionally workshops as well. The first FI session goes for 2 hours usually, and sessions after that go for an hour.

R: Why do you take 2 hours to do the 1st session?

D: My interest has always been in how we embody our experience of life, so I want to hear people's story. In the first session, I'll find out what's going on. I listen to what concerns them, and what they're interested in developing, and then sense what they are doing, and then...look at that in the context of how they use the body and what is actually happening.

I find that many people seem to be cut off from their experience of their body. They pay attention to an idea of their body that is related to an orientation to the world – or perhaps the physical response to their thoughts and feelings. And so it's hard for them to pay attention (to their body). They're too busy.

I often find that people imagine their body as being smaller than it is, you know, their centre of gravity will be in a different place to where it actually is...and so helping them feel the difference between the way they are sensing themselves and what's actually there...makes it easier for them to pay attention to what is going on as a question rather than a fixed reality. So I do look on the work as an educational process rather than something that actually fixes people's problems. I train people to do the work themselves.

R: That sounds good. In my practice I tell people that the first session will be an hour and a quarter, because, as you say, I'm hearing their story, and interested in helping them in their learning to use themselves well, and generally it ends up going for an hour and a half anyway. Maybe I should just say, come for a 2 hour session!

D: Well, I tend to do a bit of counselling as well. I mean, people are coming to me to tell me their

problems and something comes up and I'll work with that. I'm just getting them to pay attention to what's going on. Without trying to change it...just trying to observe it, and see things not just from the perspective of their current circumstance.

R: I think I know what you are getting at, can you give me an example?

D: Yes. Many people I find are...afraid of the emotional sensations that they feel...Sensations of emotion can become a trigger into some kind of evasive action. They may relate to experiences that were traumatic when they happened, but would not be as traumatic now, because they have more resources.

So while I am working with someone on the table, they may tell me that they feel something. And I will just assist them to be conscious of it, and to feel, how its embodied and how it changes. It's really giving people permission to feel that it's safe to feel...and watching it go from beginning to end enables it to pass on.

R: Yeah it depends on each specific case. I imagine a good practitioner here is like a dancer- you sort of have to dance with the person...advancing, receding. And it will be different with each person.

D: I also use EFT (emotional freedom technique)...And I do actually work with people in different ways. But essentially the idea is getting people to sense...well, if you didn't have the problems what would you be doing? I assist them to consider their concept of living successfully...and I help them organise themselves so they can put it into action...One obvious example of helpful organization would be to assist a person who leans backwards to be aligned. You know, if a person stands with all their weight on their heels...their centre is artificially raised up to their chest...there's a very good likelihood that they will also be very tense in their upper belly and throat, and will have amongst other things, trouble asserting themselves. 'Cos they're already falling over. That person is very easy to say 'no' to

because they are already, you know, backing off. And getting a person to feel that and to feel the possibility of doing it another way can make a big difference. You know, sometimes I will imitate a person's posture or the way they are standing, and then I'll ask for a raise, assuming they're the boss and I'm the client. And I'll do it in that way of standing, almost falling backward...and then say the same thing just standing upright. So they can feel the difference.

R: You give a demonstration of that. So this is teaching.

D: Exactly, when you see the context...when a person is ready...

TO BE CONTINUED: Part 2 of this interview will be in the next issue.

David has a book of short stories that is a project of his at the moment (fiction) that tries to give the reader an experience of their bodies through the stories. Keep your eyes open for that!

David has an 8 CD set on walking, The Heavenly Gait and other Earthly Pleasures. It can be obtained from his website www.bodylogic.net.au

For Awareness Through Salsa workshop information and bookings contact the School for FM Alexander Studies. Call 03 9486 5900 or www.alexanderschool.edu.au.