

**SALLY E. DEAN**

Independent dance/theatre artist

# Somatic costumes™: Traversing multi-sensorial landscapes

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article introduces Sally E. Dean's 'Somatic Movement & Costume Project' by presenting examples of the 'somatic costumes' created and the costume design, choreographic and pedagogic methodologies applied. 'Somatic costumes' aim to facilitate multi-sensorial experiences that change our relationships to ourselves, others and the environment. Although costume has been incorporated in performance for centuries, this project argues for a critical social-cultural paradigm shift: the aesthetic and movement of the performance work comes from the somatic experiences (kinaesthetic and sensorial) of the costume, rather than the costumes being designed to enhance an aesthetic already established in advance. This is also inherent in the costume design process itself: we start with what somatic experiences we would like to enhance or generate as opposed to the visual aesthetic. This approach has the potential to not only instigate new ways of moving, being, perceiving, creating, teaching and performing, but to also foster social-cultural understanding. This project aims to create bridges between somatic practices, costume design, culture and performance.*

## **KEYWORDS**

somatic costume  
somatic movement  
choreography  
kinaesthetic  
performance  
culture



## ONGOING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

*How does what we wear affect how we move and perceive and what we create and perform?*

*How can we create and design costumes that generate specific body–mind experiences and support new and enhanced kinaesthetic awareness?*

*How can these somatic costumes shed new light on socioculturally informed psycho-physical habits, and offer new ways of moving, being and performing?*

Figure 1: ‘Boundary costumes’ during workshop at Jazar Artist Residency, Pamplona, Spain, 2014. Film still by Maddi Barber.

## WHAT IS A SOMATIC COSTUME?

Somatic<sup>1</sup> costumes are embedded with multi-sensorial experiences. They are designed specifically to bring awareness to different areas of and qualities in the body, as well as to support the understanding of certain movement principles in relationship to self, others and the environment. These multi-sensorial experiences are costume specific, person specific and site specific. They aim to access, integrate and reprogramme body schema<sup>2</sup> and body image<sup>3</sup> through sensorial integration.



Figure 2: ‘Somatic costumes’ at the Dance & Somatic Practices Conference, Coventry University, UK, 2011. Participants in picture include: Karen Smith, Karin Rugman, Katherine Tate, Keith Miller, Elisabeth Molle, Emma Meehan, Joff Chafer and Sally E. Dean and more Photo by Christian Kipp.

**Pointy Hat:** Even this short amount of time changed the alignment of my cervical spine. *i [sic]* know rationally but not so much physically about my shortened neck muscle, and subsequently about a no-vertical alignment of my head. however *[sic]*, wearing the hat amplified my perception and guided me back to a verticality. *i [sic]* was in awe on where ‘vertical’ actually is... (really somewhere else than I thought!). the *[sic]* feeling stayed with me for several days... (Participant quote, Kerstin Kussmaul, 2013, from ‘Here and There’ performance event at Coventry University).

## COSTUME DESIGN METHODOLOGY

### **Paired opposites**

Costumes designed as paired opposites around a certain theme of ‘somatic awareness’, focusing on kinaesthetic sensation, in a specific body area.

How do we create a somatic costume to give the pelvis a sense of weight and orientation to the ground?



Figure 3: 'Hoop skirt' costume worn by Bettina Mainz and Usha Mahenthiriligam at the Dance and Somatic Practices Conference, Coventry University, UK, 2011. Photo by Christian Kipp.

How do we create a somatic costume to give the pelvis a sense of lightness and orientation towards space and sky?



Figure 4: 'Bin Bag Skirt' costume worn by Mariana Camiloti at Independent Dance Workshop, Siobhan Davies Dance Studios, London, March 2012, taught by Sally E. Dean. Photo by Sandra Arroniz Lacunza.

How do we create a somatic costume to support the direction of the skull in space as a development of the spine as an axis?



Figure 5: 'Pointy Hat' costume worn by Kate Pyper, Carolina Rieckhof, Shantala Melody Sacco, and Rachel Gildea. Film still from *You're Not Supposed to Be Here 2*, filmed and edited by Sergio M. Villar, directed by Sally E. Dean, with idea and concept in collaboration with Sandra Arroniz Lacunza and Carolina Rieckhof.

How do we create a somatic costume to give the skull the experience of buoyancy and volume?



Figure 6: 'Balloon Hat' costume worn by Sandra Arroniz Lacunza, Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London, April 2012. Photo by Sally E. Dean.

## Cultural

How do costumes, coming from different cultural traditions, create new kinaesthetic awareness in the body and also cultural understanding?

While living in Java in 2007–2008, wearing the traditional Javanese dance costume helped me find an experiential understanding of the feeling state of ‘containment’ inherent in the movement I was seeing around me in Javanese daily life and performances.

## Site-specific

How do we create somatic costumes in response to the environment and as gateways into the environment?



Figure 7: ‘Tree Skirt’ costume worn by Sally E. Dean, Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London, May 2012. Photo by Sandra Arroniz Lacunza.



Figure 8: ‘Net’ costume worn by Sally E. Dean, Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London, May 2012. Photo by Carolina Rieckhof.

## Boundaries

How do we create a costume to bring awareness to ‘the Space In-between’ the body and the costume – termed as ‘Ma’ by Japanese Fashion Designers (Fukai et al. 2010: 16)?



Figure 9: ‘Pointy Hat’ costume worn by Carolina Rieckhof and Sally E. Dean, Middlesex University Artist Residency, Trent Park Campus, London, May 2012. Photo by Sandra Arroniz Lacunza.



Figure 10: ‘Boundary’ costumes at Independent Dance Workshop, Siobhan Davies Dance Studios, London, February 2014, taught by Sally E. Dean. Photo by Sandra Arroniz Lacunza.

## CHOREOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGIES: EXAMPLES

### ***Relationship to others and the environment***

How do we include others and the environment in the process and resulting choreographic material?

In the *Here and There* and *Myth of the Porter's Mess Room* performances, the audience wears Pointy Hats in site-specific environments.

### ***Fact/Fiction'***

Are we starting with the Fact or the Fiction when choreographing?



Figure 11: Somatic costume worn by Sally E. Dean for *Something's in the Living Room* performance, June 2014. Photo by Luna Pérez Visairas.

Following the 'Fact': the costume's sense of weight and texture.



Figure 12: Somatic costume worn by Sally E. Dean for *Something's in the Living Room* performance, June 2014. Photo by Luna Pérez Visairas.

Following the 'Fiction': my associations from the costume as a nineteenth-century Victorian skirt and its 'lava-like' image.

## PEDAGOGIC METHODOLOGIES: EXAMPLES

### ***In flux costume creation exercise***

How do we create and move in relationship to a moving/changing body and a moving/changing costume?'

'Costume designers' create a costume from a moving and 'live' body instead of a 'still body' and/or mannequin.

### ***Invisible costume***

'After removing the costume, move as if it is still there, as if you are moving with an invisible costume'.

### ***Somatics***

Somatic movement exercises are used before, during and after the wearing of the somatic costumes.

### ***Background***

'Somatic costumes' have been designed and created in collaboration with costume designers/visual artists: Sandra Arroniz Lacunza (2011–current), Carolina Rieckhof (2011–current), and more recently with Marta Jiménez Salcedo (2014–current). Over the past three years, this project has delivered a series of workshops,

lecture-demonstrations, performances, published articles, a film, and has designed fourteen proto-type somatic costumes. The key somatic practices that have influenced this project are Skinner Releasing Technique, Suprpto Suryodarmo's Amerta Movement and Scaravelli yoga (as taught by Giovanni Felicioni).

### **SALLY E. DEAN PERFORMANCE WORK WITH SOMATIC COSTUME**

*Something's in the Living Room*: Somatic costume performance in site-specific and traditional theatre spaces. Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah, Theater Arena, Solo, Java (July 2014) and Edinburgh Fringe Festival, UK (August 2014).

*Here and There*: Site-specific, participatory performance indoors and outdoors to include film and costume. Coventry University: Part of the Dance & Somatic Practices Conference, Coventry, UK (July 2013), Counterpulse in San Francisco (June 2014) and IDOCDE teach me (not)! symposium 2014 in Vienna, Austria (July 2014).

*You're Not Supposed To Be Here 2*: Site-specific, costumed performance for film, in response to the outdoor environment at Trent Park, Middlesex University (May 2011).

*Experiential Costume, Movement & Performance*: Middlesex University: Part of the Symposium on Collaboration. Included an artist residency, London, UK (April–May 2012).

*The Myth Of The Porter's Mess Room*: Battersea Arts Centre (BAC): Site-specific, costume and participatory performance, part of 'Freshly Scratched', London, UK (October 2011).

*The Clan Of The Tall Pointy Hat People*: Coventry University: Improvisational, participatory and costumed performance, part of the 'Dance & Somatic Practices Conference', Coventry, UK (July 2011); supported by the Rebecca Skelton Fund. Siobhan Davies Dance Studio: Part of 'Stranger Than Fiction', London, UK (May 2011). The Centre for Creative Collaboration: Part of the Participatory Research & Learning in the Performing Arts – Symposium, London, UK (May 2011).

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Dean, S. E. (2014), 'Somatic costumes<sup>TM</sup>: Traversing multi-sensorial landscapes', *Scene*, 2: 1+2, pp. 81–87, doi: [10.1386/scene.2.1-2.81\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/scene.2.1-2.81_1)

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sally E. Dean has been a performer, performance maker and teacher for over fourteen years – in university, professional and community settings. Informed by somatic-based practices, Sally's work interlinks the fields of health, movement, expression, culture and performance. She is a certified teacher of Skinner Releasing Technique, an Amerta Movement practitioner (trained with Suprpto Suryodarmo from Java), and is a British Wheel of Yoga certified Scaravelli teacher. She also has a background in butoh, physical theatre, improvisation and playwriting. Sally's ethos is interdisciplinary and trans-cultural collaboration. Her teaching and performance work integrate site, object, nature and costume. She also is the director of the 'Kolaborasi Project', which facilitates performance and teaching collaborations among American, European and Asian artists ([www.kolaborasi.org](http://www.kolaborasi.org)), with recent projects in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. She has been supported by the Arts Council England and the British Council. [www.sallyedean.com](http://www.sallyedean.com)

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## NOTES

1. I use the term 'somatic', following Thomas Hanna (Hanna 1988), to refer to bodily practices and perspectives on embodiment that give attention and value to the subjective experiencing of the whole self and its perceptions, and emphasize the role of the body in that experiencing.
2. Body image is the psychological construct that includes learned attitudes, expectations, assumptions and beliefs about yourself, your body, others, the environment and the world (Blakeslee 2007: 42). Body image is also highly influenced by the social and cultural context from which you came: 'It is about your attitudes toward those traits in yourself, your emotional response to how you experience your body, including how you dress, pose, move, and believe others see you' (Blakeslee 2007: 39).
3. Body schema is the physiological construct that your brain creates 'from the interaction of touch, vision, proprioception, balance and hearing. It even extends it out into the space around your body. You use it to help locate objects in space or on your body' (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2007: 32). The costumes become part of your body and body schema: 'your body schema expands with the clothes you wear' (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2007: 36). By wearing a Tall Pointy Hat, over time, you will unconsciously begin to develop an awareness of how tall and wide it is, and your body will bend and adapt when going through doorways and other environments as if it is part of you: 'you act as if it [the hat] were a part of your head. As far as your body schema is concerned, it is part of your body' (Blakeslee and Blakeslee 2007: 36–37).
4. Fact/Fiction (also referred to as Reality World and Dream World) are terms and a methodology from Amerta Movement practice. When working with costume, we can consider both its Facts (the function, colours, texture, orientation, location, weight, shape, etc.) as well as its Fictions (associations, meanings, metaphors, feelings, characters, etc.) (Dean 2014: 121–122).



## The Audience Experience

### *A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts*

*Edited by Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow, and Katya Johanson*

ISBN 978-1-84150-713-2 | 160pp  
£45.00, \$60.00 | 2013  
Hardback | 230x170mm  
eBook available

*The Audience Experience* identifies a momentous change in what it means to be part of an audience for a live arts performance. New communication technologies and new kinds of audiences have transformed the expectations of performance, and *The Audience Experience* explores key trends in the contemporary presentation of performing arts. The book also presents case studies of audience engagement and methodology, reviewing both conventional and innovative ways of collecting and using audience feedback data. Directed at performing-arts companies, sponsors, stakeholders, and scholars, this collection of essays moves beyond the conventional arts-marketing paradigm to offer new knowledge about how audiences experience the performing arts.

*Jennifer Radbourne is former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University, Australia, where Hilary Glow is associate professor in the School of Management and Marketing, and Katya Johanson is a senior lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts.*



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