

## UNDERWATER MASSAGE BALLET

Exploring the muscle reprogramming potential of Watsu.

I'm often intrigued by the way clients describe what it feels like to receive a massage. The sensation felt when working slowly up from the Achilles tendon along the deep fibres of the soleus muscle towards the knee, was likened by one lady to squeezing toothpaste out of tube. Another said her back felt "all warm and squidgy, like porridge or custard" after her treatment – rather than the "brittle, grey plastic guttering" that was lodged in her shoulder blades beforehand. Yet, it was the similarity to "ironing creases out of a tea-towel" which recently got me thinking more about the role of functional, flowing movement and trust during therapy in helping clients stay relieved of unnecessary tension, and aid recovery and proprioceptive reprogramming.

When we treat clients with standard techniques such as effleurage, petrissage or friction in a linear, uniform way – perhaps lying still and prone on a couch - the 'tea-towel' comparison ideally describes the local smoothing effect of massage on a specific part of their body. Yet a whole person is much more interesting than a flat, piece of cloth that spends half it's life in a kitchen drawer! As soon as they jump off the couch our client's bodies twist and stretch using complex patterns of movement that require a phenomenal amount of whole-body coordination, muscle memory and spatial awareness in three dimensions. One of the hardest jobs for a therapist is to make sure that the one-hour's worth of 'ironing' done on the couch is integrated by the client into the twenty-three hours of living off the couch in the real world, and that they avoid resorting to damaging patterns of muscle recruitment and build-up of tension in other soft tissues.

So, to upgrade the tea-towel analogy we might like to think about the fabric of our clients' bodies more like a fashion designer or tailor would when designing a ball gown: appreciating the role that the properties of cloth – such as drape and absorbency – play in the overall performance of the garment, or in our case the performance of the client's body.

I was made acutely aware of how much our ability to move gracefully and pain-free depends on our body's connective fabric (our fascia's) ability to 'flow' freely, when I experienced a deeply relaxing and powerful water-based massage treatment called WATSU, which involves elements of dance and stretching in three dimensions. During the one-hour session I was lead around a spa pool by the supportive and light touch of Lanzarote-based therapist, Stef Cerf, who after training in many types of bodywork now chooses WATSU as his main therapy for clients because it marries his life-long passion for water with massage. Not knowing exactly what to expect from the treatment I was soon astonished by how thoroughly absorbing it was – and within minutes I was left feeling like an autumn leaf dancing in the wind.

Afterwards I was curious to find out more from Stef about the elegant movements used during the session. "I work with archetypal shapes such as the figure of eight, vortex, circle and sinusoidal wave when steering clients through the water," explained Stef. "There is a force behind shapes and these resonate with us somehow." This left me wondering if his treatment could help align a body with the universal forms, shapes and patterns which are so commonly observed in nature.

I certainly felt the resonance that Stef referred to whilst I was steered around the pool along these classically-shaped paths. I noticed different forms reverberate with different fascial trains: as my limbs flowed freely in sweeping arches with the water, I felt a rushing sensation that ran from head-to-toe, helping me sense the subtle interconnectedness of distant body parts. I became extra-sensitive to mild stretches in patches of skin and tissue where blockages or restrictions existed. Later in the session, as Stef rhythmically rotated my shoulders, to my surprise, my legs automatically peddled in the opposing direction making me suddenly more conscious of the gyroscopic way our bodies balance movement in all directions. As Stef returned to using faster, dance-like movements – incorporating manipulation and stretch, I could feel tension melt away and awareness return to a ‘blind spot’ around my left shoulder blade that wasn’t moving freely and had been responding poorly to couch massage and stretches for several months previously.

WATSU, a name that is derived from WATER shiatSU- was developed 30 years ago by Harold Dull a renaissance poet who also headed-up a massage and shiatsu school. Dull began to apply stretches and massage on his clients and students whilst floating in warm water. WATSU is now practiced by over a thousand therapists around the world and has evolved alongside similar aquatic treatments such as Water Dance and Healing Dance, all of which incorporate dynamic stretches and dance-like elements. Stef explained to me how powerful water can be as a medium for practicing positional release: “Working with clients in the spa pool eliminates gravity and helps them to move with the least amount of effort. To get the most benefit it is crucial for the client to feel safe and to trust the therapist – if they do then water is the best place for letting go of chronic tension”.

Indeed, as any massage therapist will know, the more that a client trusts the person they’re working with, the easier it is for them to let go of tension during a treatment. To me, this relationship was even more intense when submerged in water. “It takes a while for some people to melt into a comfortable natural shape in water,” explained Stef, “but once people let themselves become at one with the water, the whole body can be made harmonious and graceful again.” To me, once the trust barrier has been overcome, it seems WATSU has the potential to go further than just release tension: through whole-body movement in all directions it can really reprogramme long-held, non-beneficial muscle recruitment patterns and rebalance fascia tension. Having said that, after being treated to this underwater massage-ballet I’ll be keen to incorporate more dance-like movements in the in the therapy room and test Stef’s theory that “You can do everything in water that you can do on land and vice versa.”

### **Further information**

Watsu – [www.watsuwatsu.org](http://www.watsuwatsu.org)