

Anyone feeling the need to loosen up may be interested to learn about Rolfing, a form of bodywork which was developed more than 60 years ago. Here **Debbie Malina** explains the technique, which is also known as Structural Integration, and considers how it can be of help to dancers

# ROLFING



**F**avourably viewed by those dancers, singers and sportspeople who have known about it over the years, Rolfing now seems to be gaining in popularity. Currently Rolfing is used by a wide range of people – dancers included – who see it as providing a useful way to increase their suppleness, while also enhancing their physical and emotional health.

Rolfing is a form of deep tissue manipulation which frees up the body's connective tissue, or fascia, leading to the improvement of posture and giving an overall sense of well-being. The technique provides a system of movement education, aiming to balance the body, so it is better able to deal with the forces of gravity.

Rolfing was developed in the US by Dr Ida Rolf (pictured above, photograph courtesy of the European Rolfing Association), a biochemist, who graduated from Barnard College, New York in 1916, gaining her PhD from Columbia University in 1920. Shortly after graduating, Dr Rolf was kicked by a horse, consequently suffering with health problems resulting from a displaced rib. She was successfully

treated by osteopaths and Dr Rolf's experience led her to believe there is a strong connection between a person's physical structure and their physiological and psychological make-up.

Dr Rolf spent some time in Switzerland during the 1920s and 1930s, where she studied mathematics, physics and homeopathy. On her return to the US she began experimenting with various systems of healing and manipulation, including chiropractic, osteopathy, yoga, the Alexander Technique and Korzybski's work on states of consciousness.

After many years assimilating this information, Dr Rolf felt able to develop the technique which she called Structural Integration. Working from an apartment in New York during the 1940s, she initially treated people who were suffering with chronic disabilities. As news of her technique spread, she also began working with people who were interested in improving their well-being.

During the 1950s, Dr Rolf's reputation spread to the UK, and by the 1960s she was training practitioners in Structural Integration. Interest in Rolfing, as it then became known,

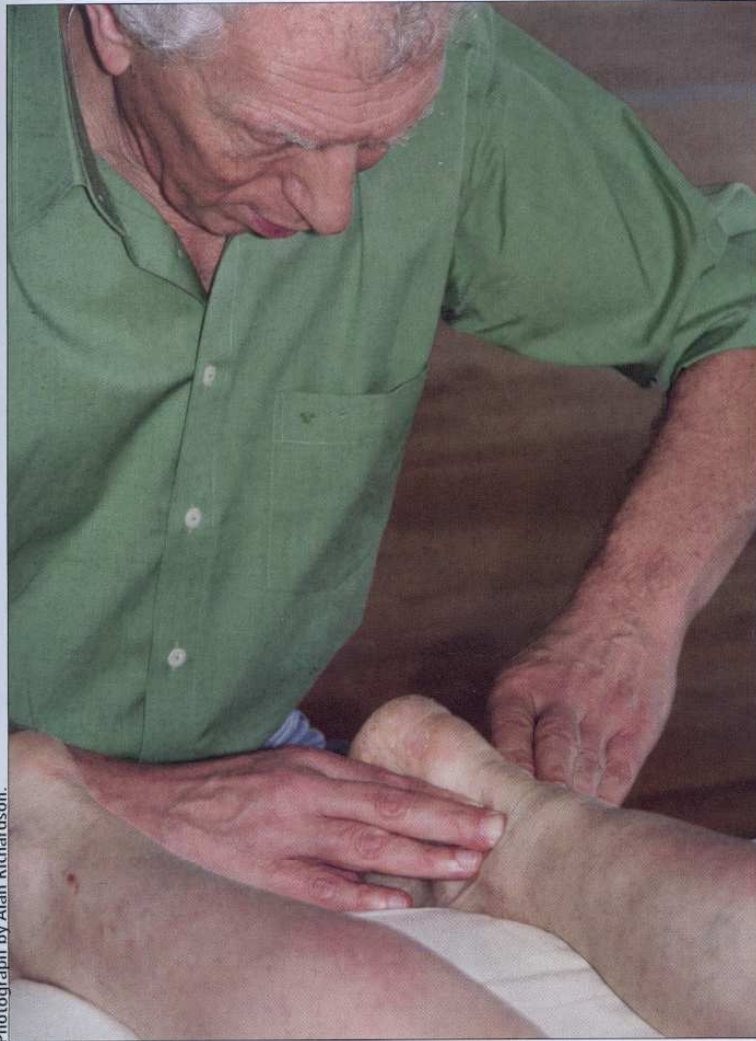
continued to grow, and in 1971 the Rolf Institute was established in Boulder, Colorado, where its headquarters are still based today, now with offices in Australia, Brazil, Europe and Japan.

Practitioners of Rolfing take the view that the vertical line is the ideal the body should approximate. They describe the body as being divided into a series of "blocks"; when misaligned the entire structure is put under strain, but when re-aligned that structure becomes stable. The main aim of the technique is to counter the effects of gravity which, over time, will have pulled the body out of alignment, causing connective tissue to become harder and stiffer.

Rolfing works to re-establish the natural alignment of the body by working with, rather than against, the force of gravity.

Connective tissues are worked on, so the whole body can be released, realigned and balanced. Tight areas in the fascial layers surrounding muscles are loosened and posture is enhanced, giving the patient freedom of movement. Pain and discomfort can be helped, as can injury caused by repetitive action or trauma.

A full course of Rolfing will usually



Photograph by Alan Richardson.

“Practitioners of Roling take the view that the vertical line is the ideal the body should approximate”

involve ten sessions, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. In some instances the practitioner will suggest the patient attends every other week, working on the premise that this time lapse will allow the patient to adapt to any changes, or for new patterns of movement to be established. Each session is aimed at creating a process of change, with one session leading onto the next. If a patient feels unsure about committing themselves to the full number of sessions, it is possible to try a couple, which should be sufficient to gain an idea of what Structural Integration is about.

On first visiting a practitioner you will be asked for details of your medical and personal history; how you sit, stand and walk will also be assessed.

Photographs will be taken from several angles as a record for any changes that may take place during the course of your sessions. Treatment generally takes place on a massage table, sometimes you may be asked to stand or walk.

Hands, fingers, knuckles and elbows will be used by the practitioner, who will apply pressure sensitively to specific areas, reworking the connective tissues until they are pliable. This allows the muscles to lengthen and thereby return to their normal alignment. You may be asked to synchronise your breathing with the manipulation. Working from head to feet and side to side, most areas of the body will be focused on during the sessions.

At times, during a treatment, you may feel intense sensations for a few

moments. If these are painful, it is important to inform the practitioner. Any effects felt following a Roling session will be very individual; there are many factors which can influence how Roling is received – or perceived – by a patient. While Roling is, undoubtedly, a physical experience, people may also find they gain a sense of emotional release after a session; it is thought that energy, which has been blocked in the tissue, is released.

Although many people approach Roling with a specific problem – back and neck pain, migraine or Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) for example, practitioners like to emphasise that Structural Integration aims to help the entire body, rather than focusing on particular parts. Some patients may find just a few sessions of Roling will be sufficient to help with their problems or give them a feeling of well-being, whereas others seek a long-term change, and will benefit from attending all ten sessions.

As the treatment progresses you will learn a new way of moving, which may well entail changing old habits or patterns. Better posture is achieved through encouraging core support to emerge with greater awareness of how to use your body. In all instances, the main goal for any individual is to improve structure and optimise function.

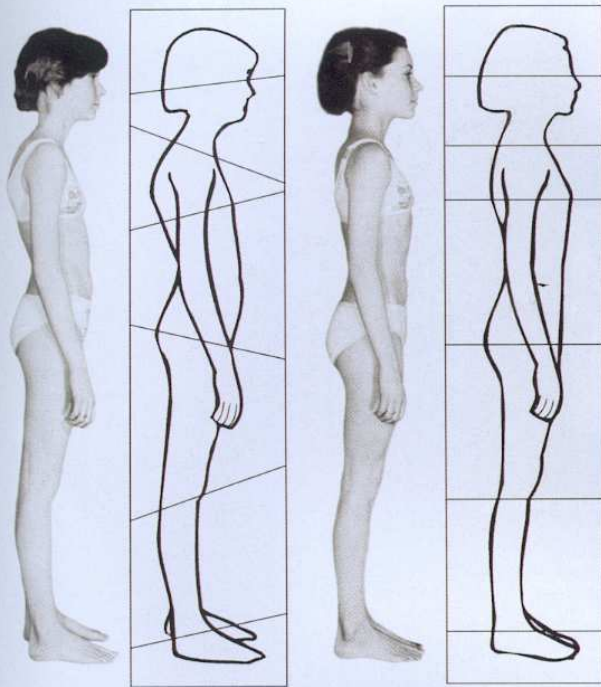
If you suffer from a medical condition or are unwell, it is advisable to visit your GP before undertaking any Roling sessions, as there are some instances where Roling should not be used.

Alan Richardson (below, photograph by Leonora Richardson) practises Roling at The Hale Clinic, Regents Park, London. Since gaining his certification in 1998 from the Rolf Institute at Boulder, Colorado, Alan has also qualified in a number of other related therapies, including Cranio-Sacral Therapy, Reiki, Roling Movement, Advanced Training for Rolfers, Tai Massage as well as completing Pilates teacher training.

“I believe there is more awareness of Roling today than there has been previously. When I first started as a Rolfer



I was one of only eight practitioners in the UK, now there are 23 of us. While we are by no means mainstream, a lot of dancers have heard about Roling, and in the dance



Photograph by Alan Richardson.

world there is a growing knowledge of what can be gained from it.

"Having worked with a number of dancers over the years, I can see that Roling does allow them to express themselves more clearly. From a practitioner's point of view, there is no real difference between a classically trained dancer compared to one who works with modern dance. However, in my experience, ballet dancers seem to work very hard, their bodies really need the treatment when they come. Nevertheless, all dancers appreciate – and enjoy – Roling. Most dancers are interested in understanding their own bodies and this treatment continues with that process.

"Dancers tend to see Roling as a journey of exploration, not only do they feel their bodies have been touched, but there is a depth and quality in that touch. Above all, they are receiving feedback, and getting to know their body even better; this is true for all Roling patients. When working with dancers, it is interesting to see that, usually, there is no initial barrier of physical awareness to work through. With many other patients it may take several sessions before reaching this level. However, everyone who comes in does leave with a greater sense of body awareness. Consequently, they are better prepared to spot old postural habits and deal with them more easily.

"I have also given Roling to dance teachers, all of whom have been very enthusiastic about their

treatment. Many comment they feel inspired as a result of their sessions.

"Roling classes in the UK usually cost between £70 and £80 per hourly session, although this may sometimes be a little more in London. Most of the dancers I see sign on for the full series, although I emphasise there is no pressure to do so. I offer a small discount for dancers and students over ten sessions. While I am willing to give a few maintenance sessions to sort out odd niggles or injuries, you do not gain the maximum benefit by only doing this. When undertaking all ten sessions you will notice a change. By going through all the sessions you are investing in yourself. However, it is important to approach Roling only when you feel ready to do so.

"While I often treat dancers who are suffering with chronic health problems, initially, acute injuries are generally best treated by a physiotherapist, before thinking about undertaking any Roling. It is also important to be aware there are a few conditions which are unsuitable for this form of bodywork. Anyone with cancer, for example, or somebody who is pregnant, should consult their GP prior to starting a Roling course. A good practitioner will know their limitations. We have our integrity to maintain and want each patient to get the best from their body.

"When looking for a Rolfer in this country, I would suggest searching the Roling UK list rather than anywhere else; everyone listed there is a qualified Rolfer, and will have met certain standards. All

will be able to take you through the ten sessions. An Advanced Certified Rolfer will have completed an extra stage in their training; this does not mean the other Rolfers are inadequately qualified, rather that the Advanced Rolfer is a good gauge of quality – in fact there are only five such Rolfers in the UK. Should you come across somebody not listed, ring Roling UK to check their credentials.

"For anyone embarking on a course of Roling, the main potential is for a personal growth experience; it will get your body into a much better place, which will act as a catalyst for personal growth. Roling can complement and stimulate the person, it is an individual journey which can be a very positive experience." ■

**Above left, a demonstration of posture before and after Roling. Photograph courtesy of the European Roling Association.**

## Contacts

Only those practitioners who hold the title of Certified Rolfer are considered to be qualified. They will have been trained and certified by the Rolf Institute in Colorado, or Munich, or will have trained with accredited teachers elsewhere. Information on where to find certified Rolfers in this country is available from Roling UK (rolfinguk.co.uk, telephone 01983 862004). Further information is also available from: The European Roling Association (rolfing.org), email info@rolfing.org; and also The Rolf Institute (rolf.org), email info@rolf.org.