Interview with **HUBERT GODARD**

by Caryn McHose

This interview took place in the forested landscape of British Columbia, Canada, in June 2005, at a residence overlooking Howe Sound, where Hubert Godard was teaching a workshop called "Portals of Perception," about perception and movement. I appreciate Hubert's poetic use of language. As a Frenchman speaking in English, he challenges us to reexamine our learned interpretation of words and associations so we may find a new perspective. Certain terminology, indicated in italics in the interview, is specific to his work. [C.M.]

***Hubert Godard** is a dancer, Rolfer®, movement teacher, and researcher who lives in France and teaches worldwide. The son of a farmer, Godard was an athlete in boarding school and a chemist in college, becoming one of the youngest people to be licensed to perform metallurgy for the recovery of gold in industrial waste. At age 21, he saw a dance performance and became fascinated with the sense of flight he observed in the performers; soon he was dancing very seriously. After injuring his knee, Godard's proclivity for mechanics and problem solving led him to osteopathy and the world of soft tissue and bony manipulation. He trained in osteopathy, Feldenkrais Method®, Alexander Technique, Mézières Method, classical dance, and psychoanalysis. Godard served as dean of the Department of Dance Movement Analysis at the University of Paris (1993–1999) and continues to direct research on movement rehabilitation in Milan, Italy. His theory of Tonic Function focuses on the ways orientation to space and weight predispose perception and movement.*

[above] Hubert Godard teaching at Resources in Movement in New Hampshire, August 2003.

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL SPACE

"I'm in the space and the space is in me."

CARYN MCHOSE *We would like to hear from you about the relationship between body and place, our place on this earth.*

HUBERT GODARD Let me begin with space. Space is a word that we use constantly in our work as dancers and bodyworkers, but it is an ambiguous term. I will use the term *space* when I talk about the imaginary building of our relationship to the world, and I will use *topos* when I am talking about real, geographical, measurable space. When people meet or interact, it is a mix of the two. What I'm calling space, the imaginary building of the phenomenon, is linked to our personal story.

In our history there was possibly some place that was traumatic and some place that was exquisite. There is consistency in the topos—the geography—but space cannot be homogeneous. It is individual, subjective, affected by our history and meaning associations. Already in the first three months, first love—mother, parents—will shape a big part of our subjective space. What is generally called the "kinesphere" is a *gradient of perspective,* or a range of ways I am able to notice the space around my body. For example, I might have a blocked perspective here, a very far away perspective in one direction, and a shortsighted perspective in another direction.

It is natural that I can be moved by a painting one day when its perspective corresponds to my own. The next day it might be another painting, depending on my current gradient of perspective. Many people are touched by *The Landscape in the Winter* by Breughel. Why? Because he is at a place that is delicious for many; he's looking at the city from a little way off, but he is still being in the city. Breughel shows a perspective, a point of view, a way to look at the life of a village. All of a sudden the village becomes sweet—the accident of people living together. Painting is the building of a space. The subjectivity of Breughel meets many subjectivities, so his point of view is touching for many of us.

A second consideration about space is expectation. I'm never looking just at space; I'm already projecting into it. I have expectations, informed by my personal story. When I go to see a performance, even before the dancer enters the stage, there are already people dancing on the empty stage—the dance of my expectation. And these expectations are *dynamizing* (energizing) and *vectoralizing* (shaping) the space. The space is full of the vectors of my expectation, the vectors of my desire.

CARYN *Already, before the dance starts?*

HUBERT Yes. This desire, this vector, is going out of me and comes back partially transformed by the context or situation. The vector of my vision is superimposed with another vector—the vector of my history, where the space is full of my own phantoms or black holes.

If I'm projecting in a space where there is an open place allowed by my history, I can go on; but if in my history there was a black hole—a missing or unperceived space—I will meet a wall. And very often what we are living is a confrontation between expectation, desire, and history.

A third aspect of space involves sociological and geographical context. Every culture has a unique way of using the space. If you were born in Japan, or if you were born in the Midwest, you will have a completely different relationship with space. It's very touching when you are in Japan, for example, that people are packed against each other and still a person can have a huge kinesphere. The topos is constricted but the space is large. You can be in a Midwest city where it will be the opposite: you have a huge topos and a person can have a limited kinesphere.

The sociological aspect includes the language we use to name space. Proxemics is a particular branch of semiotics that studies human perception and use of space within the context of culture. American sociologist Edward T. Hall has contributed greatly to this field. If you put a hundred people

within one meter of each other and ask them what the distance is from the other, some will say one centimeter, some will say one kilometer. And this subjectivity is mostly organized by what we talked of before: personal history and expectation but also sociological context. All these factors impact the way we perceive, organize, and deal with space.

Geography is also a consideration. If you put somebody in front of a big mountain, the body will react. It will change the height of people without them noticing; they are activated by the context.

CARYN *So, for example, here we are in front of this grand view of the Cascade Mountains, and you're saying we're being affected in this context right now? The place will re-dimensionalize us?*

HUBERT Yes. If I have spent my life surrounded by mountains and then suddenly I am in flatland with people around, it will feel strange. If I have been with people in a city, my walk will be different; or if I am used to going up and down a mountain, my stride is affected. My perception of space is organized through the habits of our sociology and by the geography.

CARYN *Do you know if there are any dancers or choreographers who have used this consciously in their work?*

HUBERT Yes, the *décor,* or set design, and lighting in dance changes perspective. The dancer will be affected by the light, and the space is also changing because the light is changing. This is felt very strongly by performers and by spectators, who are wrapped in a different kind of space...

CARYN *We dimensionalize the space through the décor and lighting?*

HUBERT Yes. I think the set of the stage is not so much about meaning but about giving a completely different arrangement of perspectives and expectations that change our space.

CARYN *So in a way it's creating a new place for the movement to unfold?*

HUBERT Yes, and if you take personal history and the sociological and geographical context together, that gives you the *latent potential*—what is possible in terms of movement in this particular situation and context. This is what perceptual psychologist James Gibson calls the *affordance.* The space is completely shaped.

When you change something in the body, the concrete body of somebody, you change his or her way of perceiving the space.

I would finish this broad point of view by saying that the space—not the topos—is in fact an imaginary *space of action*. It doesn't exist. There is no contact with space out of time and history. The context and my history give the affordance of what can happen in terms of whole-body gesture and movement. And why that? Because the space in fact doesn't exist; it's a space of action. And this action-space is phenomenological, if you will. The phenomenon of space is sensory based, unique to each person, and time dependent.

That should be the title of this chapter—"Phenomenological Space"—because I'm in the space and the space is in me. There is not a distinction first between "me" and "the space." There is also no distinction between space and time since what vectoralizes (shapes) the space is already *temporalized*, specific to the moment. When you perceive a vector, perception *accelerates* (it builds on itself). Space is not empty. It is a space of action.

What makes me afraid of a space is fearing what can happen in it. What makes me attracted to a space is that I can go into it. In fact, this space of action is my affordance, my potential for movement. This is often limited by all I've spoken of before. But in fact what is also limited is my potential for action and imagination. Because at a very deep level, it's a space where I will be doing something I cannot imagine. And in this potential of action, or subjective space, there are some movements that are completely repressed, some are really there, some are not possible, and some are yet to be evoked. I think the best way to work with people in dance or in therapy about the question of space is to help them understand their potential of action, their subjective space. A big part of my life and research has been spent demonstrating that the way I am building my imaginary space affects my body.

CARYN *I often hear you describe building a space behind the action—working with the implied space behind an action. How does this affect your work with clients?*

HUBERT I find, for example, with many scoliosis clients that the scoliosis [lateral curvature of the spine] is not in the body but in the space. The scoliosis of the space will bring a scoliosis of my body. So I have to reorganize my perception. Because what makes the space is my perception, and if I don't work on the perception, no change will occur. I can make the scoliosis better, but it will keep coming back. Very often we keep working on the body, and we forget to work on the space.

Instead of only manipulating the body, I've had success working only on the space. You address the way the people perceive, and if you are sensitive to that, you can see the kinesphere in people. Sometimes there is a leaking/leaning/looking toward the right and no projection capacity on the left because there was so strong a negative experience in the space—an accident of life—and you have to rebalance this subjective space. We have to work on this subjectivity so that more of the space is available to us so we can move more freely.

It's huge work to rebalance the body—because the space is in the body and the body is in the space. Working on the space, you work on the body. When you change something in the body, the concrete body of somebody, you change his or her way of perceiving the space. So there are two approaches. But my experience is that very often in scoliosis, there is a wound in the space. Not if you are born with scoliosis, but if it occurs later in life—after age eight. The scoliosis is started mainly at the moment when something happened.

After we talk of the space of personal history, the space of expectation, the sociological space, and the geographical space, we come to a non-space, which is the meaning of *utopia* (Greek: literally "no topos" or "no place"). This is the space of action in which "inside/outside," "me and the space," are the same. There is just one. It is movement, a space with all the movement happening in space. And this is a goal in bodywork and dance—to open the full potential for action.

CARYN *Could a choreographer or improviser build a performance in this way, so that they emphasize either the "potential of action" or the "inhibition of space"?*

HUBERT Exactly. It's a way to see choreography. In performance, a big part is what you don't see; it's what is *not* there. What is avoided or repressed is what is "yelling." A good example is Nijinsky. In many ballets of Nijinsky, there is no potential for aggressive movement. In *Petrushka*, for example, Nijinsky is completely inside the training, afraid of



Hubert Godard teaching at Resources in Movement, New Hampshire, August 2003 (Caryn McHose on left).

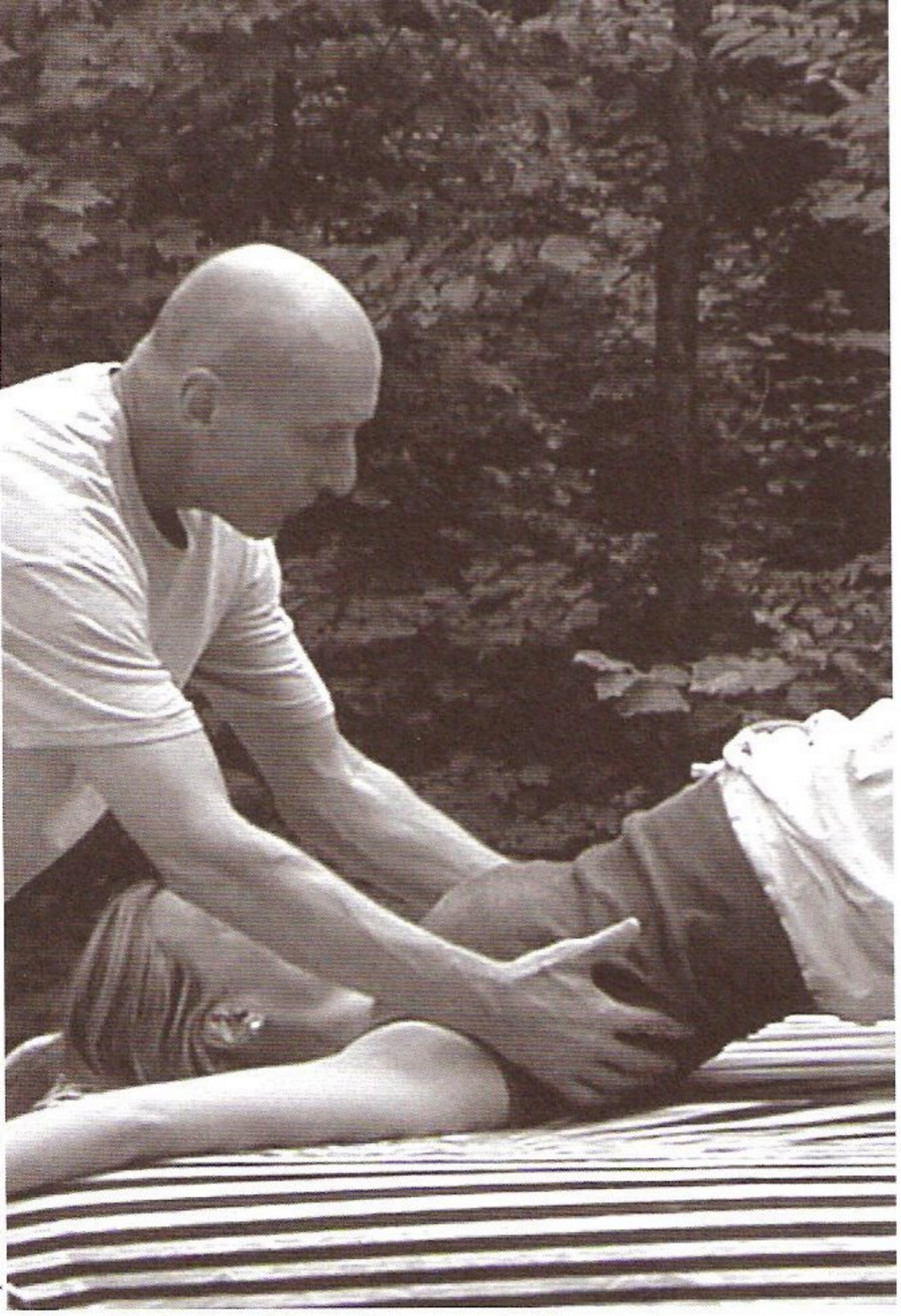
photo © Kevin Frank

the space around and of defending his territory. So in his space of action, there is no capacity for defense against aggression. The audience is touched because even if you don't understand the story, you still grasp this impossibility. And you know that in real life Nijinsky became insane. One day he was invited to perform in a salon for very wealthy people. At a certain moment he said, "Now, I will improvise war." It was just the start of the First World War. He was very worried about the war coming, and when he began to dance the war, he passed out. He never came back from this movement.

What was so evocative about Nijinsky was not his leap but his sweetness—his innocence and vulnerability—which was under his strong capacity to move and jump. And, of course, it is very attractive to meet somebody who is strong and non-aggressive. We understand the fact that there is a missing gesture. When I say "absent or missing," I don't just mean a movement that is not there. You know, I can make the movement, but you also see there is a gesture that I cannot do on another level. What is "yelling" on stage is a repressed gesture.

CARYN *And that creates a curiosity in us?*

HUBERT Yes. And you see the same in a bigger landscape. In nature, you have the space of a lion and the space of a gazelle; the space for a gazelle is not the same space for a lion. It is the same for people. There are some who have the gazelle space; there are some who have more lion space. The reason, for example, that dance contact is so important is because it's a way to renegotiate: first, the distance to other people; then, the vectoralization of space; then, the many levels of perceiving.



Hubert Godard teaching at Resources in Movement.

CARYN *Do you mean Contact Improvisation?*

HUBERT Yes, Contact Improvisation. It's an example of a very direct way to address the space question at a deep level because you are touching the history of each person, and you are touching the taboo of the society.

CARYN *It seems that it takes a while to reorganize and allow people to recognize the relationship that we have with space.*

HUBERT It's true. Since the Renaissance, there was the tendency to put human beings in the center of nature instead of putting nature in the center of the human being. Now it's changing; movement and bodywork forms in the last forty or fifty years are step-by-step changing our vision.

CARYN *In my recent travels in Bali, I was getting a hint of being in a culture where the split between nature and culture is not so strong; the perception of nature is alive.*

HUBERT Yes, you feel it if you go to Morocco. It's so strong for me because I was born there. There is something in Morocco that forces your gaze, your perception of space, to be peripheral. You are not in cortical vision; you are in a way of looking that is not about naming. And you get a direct melting with the space, something very specific. Matisse changed his life completely after his trip in Morocco; the ground was more important than the figures in his paintings all of a sudden. This means Matisse's vision of space changed, because painting in general is a declaration of space.

CARYN *Can you track the thread of how you arrived at the vision that you have? Were there specific stepping-stones or moments of discovery?*

HUBERT I know that I was shaped by this peripheral seeing. By this I mean a way of looking that is not about naming; I call this a *non-cortical gaze*. This non-cortical gaze allows you to have very easy body reading because you have the capacity to incorporate people in your subjective space; you are in the space, the space is in you.

CARYN *And you became aware of this relationship, this kinesthetic resonance, in your work when you started teaching dance?*

HUBERT I was completely shaped by teaching dance. I noticed that the way you talk, the way you tell the story in a dance studio, will make people dance differently. When I tried to understand how this happens, I first came to the idea that the space is a support. You can vectoralize an "up" or a "horizontal" vector, which can "up" you or "broaden" you. In the history of modern dance, there was some choreography that was completely built from the ground (Martha Graham) and some that was suspended by the chest (Doris Humphrey/José Limón). It became clear to me that there were people on the two sides. With Doris Humphrey, there is always a horizon in front of her; the subjective building of Humphrey's space was the horizon. Whereas Martha Graham was very territorial —authoritarian and territorial. She knew what she wanted, which is a way of building the space in a very strong way.

CARYN *So you started to see the two orientations?*

HUBERT Yes. I see step-by-step the magic of posture, that we need both ground orientation and space orientation for ease of movement. First by psychological experience and then by clinical experience I found that the way I've built my space, the "accident of my life," is directly responsible for contractions and contradictions in my body. This led to the investigation of what I call *Tonic Function*. Tonic Function focuses on *gravity response*—the body's orientation to weight and space—as central to understanding movement.

For example, the way to effectively stretch is to orient to ground and space. Very often the hamstring (which is a muscle on the back of the thigh that many dancers try to

lengthen through daily stretching) doesn't respond. But if you change your perception and orient to the ground and to the sky, I've found that the hamstring will change right away. So the hamstring is a good example of a tonic muscle; it responds reflexively to ground and space. In general, the tonic muscles are the core stabilizing muscles.

CARYN *A tonic muscle responds to the quality of spatial orientation?*

HUBERT Yes. You have a lot of people who are completely "up" people who have no ground, and they will have tension of the knee. People who are the opposite, who are building from the ground, they will have tension in the hip and hamstring, not in the knee. The tonic muscles will respond not to what you do but only to the way you build, or orient to, the space.

Posture is the capacity to go in the two directions. It's very clear that 50 percent of the action needs to start from the floor, like pushing or pulling, and 50 percent needs suspension, like pointing and reaching. The space of action will be affected directly by the way you organize your posture in space.

CARYN *Was this also around the time that you heard about Rolfing?*

HUBERT I was very attracted the first time I read that Rolfing was a way to renegotiate our relationship to gravity.

CARYN *What happens when one of the two directions—ground and space—is missing?*

HUBERT What is missing in my perception of my body corresponds to what is missing in my perception of the space (space here including "ground" and "space"). For example, when I was a dancer, sometimes I had difficulty with my feet because I did not have a good relationship with the ground. I was too suspended in the air and so the feet were showing off what was missing in my experience of the space.

CARYN *We have to keep "re-languaging"—you know, building a language to allow us to embrace these changing concepts of space.*

HUBERT We have talked about perspective. Horizon is somewhere linked to the vanishing point. And the vanishing point has a specific relationship with projection. The vanishing point in front is a sagittal organization, and we come

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from a culture that is outrageously sagittal. Why I say "outrageously" is because in painting we call it *perspectiva legitima*. Alberti set the rules of perspective, and the Latin name is *perspectiva legitima*—as though there is one legitimate perspective. And this will tell you a lot about sociological context because there is a "legitimate perspective" playing like a metaphor for the projected hierarchy of our society. Each culture has its own perspective, and we (in western cultures) declare that there is a legitimate one, which the particular direction of the vanishing point accomplishes. The vanishing point in Japan is very often in the back.

I don't say that the *perspectiva legitima* doesn't exist, but the term *legitima* shows how there is a colonialization of the space. You colonize the space geographically, but we forget that there is a cultural colonization that is so strong. The history of acting/performing/dancing, the history of painting, is affected by where and how we build the horizon.

CARYN *Since you travel and change place so much, how do you make yourself at home?*

HUBERT I have a constant place, my farm in Burgundy, France. I have to have ground somewhere. Actually, you learn that the ground can be everywhere, and you learn by diminishing your expectation. So you give freedom for the space that arises. If you have too much expectation, the space is full already. The reason I was talking about the *space of expectation* is that it is so very often what prevents people from meeting each other; they have to stop having the expectation.

CARYN *How do you let go of expectation?*

HUBERT I'm completely plastic in the way it can happen.

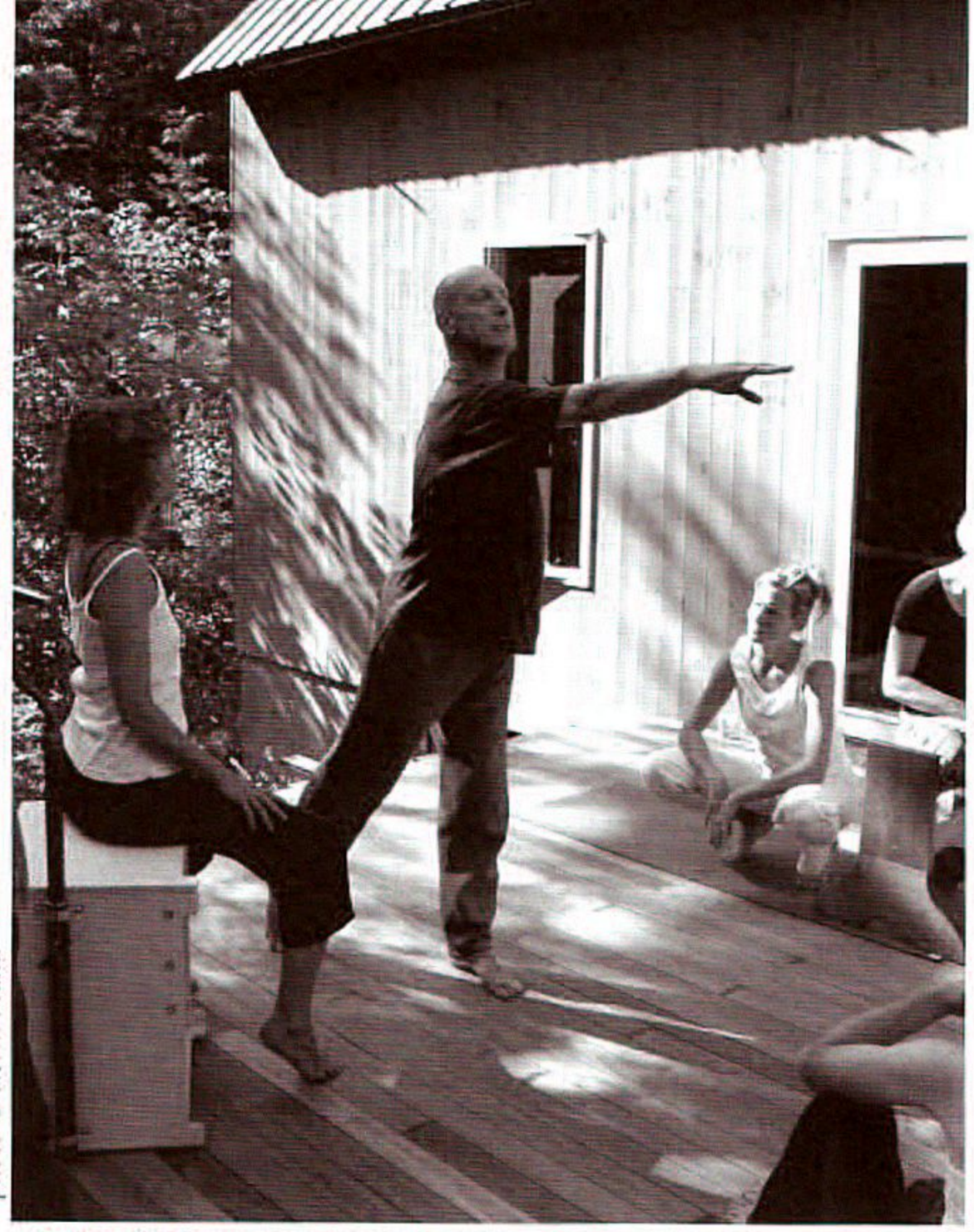

photo © Kevin Frank

Hubert Godard teaching at Resources in Movement.

I have a studio, a program. I know what I want to do, but I know it will have to be responsive to the people. I'm not hanging on to my program, I'm not hanging on to the way it should be, and I'm not keeping distance. I see what I want to do, like on a horizon—but I don't build all the space between me and the horizon. It's a continuum, so I can meet people where they are. I don't lose my thread, but I stay open.

CARYN *Being in your classes, I sense that there's much that you bring in, but then you let yourself be touched by the physical space and by the people. Perhaps that's how you can be home anywhere.*

HUBERT Yes, I get pleasure from the unexpected. It's the only way to learn. I'm learning more while teaching than when I'm thinking about my teaching because I'm constantly having to meet people. Our difference creates a current, a *difference of potential*. This difference of potential between what I expect and what the other expects is the definition of dynamic. The difference of potential creates movement.

CARYN *So that's the pleasure of coming into a place where something unexpected happens. Is there also the pleasure of having quiet time alone?*

HUBERT Yes. Actually, I learn a lot about how to be alone in the group. When I was first teaching, I was exhausted every time because I was "out." I was never coming back to my farm, my feet. Often when you teach, you are in compression. Sometimes you see thirty people in a group, eight hours a day for fifteen days, so you can imagine the compression. The only way is to go back and forth, which is to have an imaginary space.

CARYN *And that's a way that you can bring rest and decompression to yourself, to build your imaginary farm?*

HUBERT Yes. My farm in France is a specific space that I can transport with me. Each person has to find their space; it could be a garden, a house, whatever. For me it's a farm because many things can happen there and I can be active in that space. I can shape the space by planting a tree here, etc. It is a tremendous playground.

CARYN *In terms of engaging the place and the people that you are with, how do you maintain the creative moments for your work to unfold?*

HUBERT All the building of my theory starts from some concrete situation. Before I'm with the people, I think: I don't know which way to go. Once we begin, something is created in the space.

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