In *Secretly Alive*, dance artists **Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová** and **Lizzy Le Quesne** meet as editors to share the questions and discoveries of the three-year artistic research project 'Improvisation as Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'. The editors invited six renowned artists into the studio and conducted in-depth interviews exploring their embodied practices. Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little share their diverging and converging journeys to improvisation, their views on pedagogy and instant composition, and their strategies and experiences of making and performing for the stage. The six interviews are accompanied by essays by each of the three researcher-editors considering dance improvisation's creative value and potential from different angles: as a choreographic process, a discipline of awareness and a site of relational experimentation.

Revealing both histories of improvisation in Western postmodern dance and details of current improvisational practices through the reflections of six major artists, this book will be of use to artist practitioners, students, teachers and audiences of dance improvisation.

Secretly Alive

Embodied Perspectives on Dance Improvisation

Secretly Alive



NAKLADATELSTVÍ
AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH
UMĚNÍ V PRAZE



Edited by Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová, Lizzy Le Quesne


Secretly



Alive

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Embodied Perspectives on Dance Improvisation

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Introduction

The book you are holding in your hands is the result of a four-year exploration: 'Improvisation as Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle.'[1] In 2020, the three practitioners and authors of this book began an adventure of practical research dedicated to dance improvisation in performance, known in the Czech context as 'instant composition' or 'open/free improvisation'. During this project, we set out to introduce this form to the Czech reader through articles published on various platforms,[2] published interviews and, finally, as this volume. Dance improvisation as/in performance is contextualised and approached theoretically for the first time in the Czech environment. To date, there are almost no Czech translations of foreign publications dealing with this phenomenon[3] in English, and there are still very few theoretical reflections on this artistic discipline. Thus, with this publication, we aim to introduce dance improvisation as a creative discipline to the Czech artistic scene through the practices of highly respected international dance makers and to contribute to the wider discourse among professionals, amateurs, theoreticians and practitioners.

This phenomenon has been described in depth by other researchers, both in the past and also quite recently, and is again becoming popular in academic writing.[4] The form of instant composition is defined as the legacy of postmodern dance of the 1960s and 1970s associated with a certain geographical location — the US.[5] In the Czech context, postmodern dance (if we follow Banes's categorisation) did not develop in the same way as in the countries of the West. Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechoslovakia was under the occupying forces of the Soviet Union. There was very little information and few possibilities for artistic dialogue between Czechoslovakian artists and those associated nowadays with the Western postmodern approach.[6] State-sanctioned dance consisted of ballet, modern ballet, black light theatre[7] and folk dance.[8] However, experimentation in movement, non-verbal theatre and dance, including improvisation, did take place, mostly in the form of artistic and political provocation, dissident efforts and the amateur scene, or as part of the underground 'action art' performance scene.[9]

Postmodern ideas, concepts and approaches permeated the Czechoslovak and later Czech borders randomly, in an uncoordinated manner, through individual encounters and experiences. Dancers, choreographers and performers, who often later became pedagogues at various institutions and/or pursued their artistic careers, travelled abroad as soon as it was possible and brought back with them new ways of thinking about movement, dance and performance. They experimented with new material and thoughts in their teaching and performing.

Following the Velvet Revolution, the 1990s and early 2000s were very rich in the exploration of new concepts and formats of improvisation in performance on the Czech and Slovak[10] scenes. However, these developments escaped the attention of mainstream audiences and interest within the newly emerging contemporary dance scene and funding structures.[11] New festivals were established, including Konfrontace, 4+4 Days In Motion, Festival Tanec Praha, ...Next Wave, Czech Dance Platform and ImproEvents Prague. There were also new venues, including Archa Theatre, Studio Alta, Ponec Theatre, NoD, Duncan Centre Theatre, Alfred ve dvoře, Meetfactory and Akropolis, and new dance companies. Artists who were open to experimentation emerged and invited teachers, choreographers and collaborators from abroad.

Encounters with these foreign artists influenced the whole Czech dance scene and the rising generation of artists. Among the artists who visited Prague and Bratislava[12] were Min Tanaka, David Zambrano, Akram Khan, Steve Paxton, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, William Forsythe, Victoria Marks, Susanne Linke, Xavier LeRoy, Nigel Charnock, Meredith Monk, Beatrice Libonati, Jan Minařík, Kirstie Simson, Ruth Zaporah, Stephanie Skura, K. J. Holmes, Lisa Nelson, Jennifer Monson, Daniel Lepkoff, Andrew Morrish, Russell Maliphant and Thomas Hauert, to name only a few.[13] The invited artists came on various occasions to show their work at festivals, give workshops to students and professionals, on private invitation by a company, for an artistic project or to teach at an institution (for example, the Duncan Centre or AMU, the Academy of Performing Arts[14]). Some returned regularly over the years and became well known in the Czech artistic scene and with the wider audiences of the festivals and venues mentioned above.

The 'Wild Nineties', as this decade is called in the Czech Republic, was a unique time for the arts in general. The 1990s saw the establishment of the grant system to provide financial support for the arts and culture and new possibilities for cooperating with foreign institutions and guest pedagogues. The fact that the three authors of this book could meet, work together and share experiences and ideas is a reflection of the fruits of the 1990s. Lizzy came to the Czech Republic for the first time in 1992–1993 and returned in 2000–2005, first as a guest teacher of Release-based technique and improvisation at the Duncan Centre, then as artist in residence at HAMU[15] (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). During this period, she worked with the Czech quarterly dance magazine *Taneční zóna* and the *Prague Post* newspaper, writing and editing on dance and the visual arts. She became deeply involved with the Czech dance scene

as a choreographer, performer, teacher and writer, collaborating with Czech, British and American artists based in Prague. Mirka and Lizzy met in 2001 as colleagues at HAMU, where Mirka was teaching and doing her PhD in choreography — the first Czech PhD in the field of dance improvisation (2002–2007). They collaborated on several artistic, performance, curatorial and pedagogical projects. Mish, then a recently graduated linguist and a singer and theatre student, met Mirka while attending her improvisation classes in 2011 at HAMU, and later worked on a performance with her (*Refresh*, 2016) as a voice performer. From then on, they have collaborated on five productions involving improvisation on stage under Mirka's direction. During these collaborations, Mish moved between being a vocal performer, a dancer and a dramaturg. In 2020, Mirka and Mish started working together as post-doctoral artistic researchers and invited Lizzy to join them in the project.

This project and book emerged from the need to contextualise instant composition in dance as a performative format for the Czech audience. We therefore invited six renowned international artists — Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little, all of them living legends in the fields of performance and teaching worldwide — to give four-day workshops with a focus group of Czech dance improvisers, ourselves and students at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Our intention was to invite expert artists — pioneers of experimental dance and various forms of improvisation in performance — who were either already associated with the Czech dance scene or with us through personal contacts. In this sense, we continue the practice of the 1990s, which reached out to and brought Western artistic influences to the Czech artistic scene via personal connections.[16]

Each of the six workshops was accompanied by an interview intended to provide a closer understanding of the form, individual approaches and use of terminology of the artists. All of the invited artists are active as performers or teachers and all have developed their own practice and approach to improvisation. Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton and Daniel Lepkoff are well known among Czech dancers, having taught here (or in Bratislava) and left a strong impression. Rosalind Crisp, Eva Karczag and Nita Little had not previously taught in Prague but have touched the authors personally through their practices shared in London over the last fifteen years. While a few of the artists have published writings, either on their own or as part of an academic collaboration, all share their expertise primarily through their making and teaching and are examples of profound embodied knowledge, transmitted through

artistic practice and embodied encounter. This is not intended to represent a comprehensive or objective representation of knowledge in the field. Respecting the veracity of embodied experience, the assembly evolved through existing relations to the Czech scene, personal contacts, our embodied experiences and practices, and availabilities.

We worked with the artists in the following order: Rosalind Crisp, Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton, Nita Little, Eva Karczag and Daniel Lepkoff. This chronology is reflected in the order in which the interviews appear in this volume. Originally, we intended to invite all of the artists to work with us in person in Prague. However, the project was sadly affected by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the workshops and interviews therefore took place with the artist online while the focus group, the students and the authors were working in the studio at the Academy in Prague.

The interviews draw out the artists' personal approaches to improvisation in performance from various points of view, reflected in the following sections: dance improvisation as artistic practice; becoming an improviser; the practice and language of teaching; the practice of performance; and political dimensions. For many of the artists, this was their first opportunity to reflect on the early development of their practice and explore why and how they came to improvisation as a core discipline. In reflecting on the interviews, we noticed that they can be approached in various ways: as oral history, cultural ethnography, a mapping of language through individual usage (terminology), pedagogical methodologies, sharing a performer's and creator's expertise, and insights into the broader implications of dance improvisation as political practice. It was interesting to note that all of the artists have different notions of the place of improvisation in their practice. For example, Wendy Houstoun doesn't call herself a 'hardcore improviser'; Daniel Lepkoff prefers to think in terms of open movement research; and Rosalind Crisp highlights simply dancing.

Over the four years of our collaboration, research and conversation, unexpected parallels and connections surfaced. Our questions were first developed in a series of discussions between the three of us and evolved further during the project as we discovered ambiguous and unexpected threads. For example, the issue of terminology came up when we noticed how differently we all understand some words (choreography, score, composition, etc.). Many Czech dancers use English words that have no clear Czech equivalent. For example, the word 'score' is translated and used in Czech studios as 'partiture', 'task', 'structure', 'script', etc. Therefore, we decided to use the untranslated English word 'score'

also in the Czech version of this book. This is not, however, simply a problem of translation from English; even among native English speakers, words are contested and worked with differently. We are excited by the current complexity around the terminology for grasping experience, e.g. body-mind, mind-body, somatic, psychosomatic, psychophysical, (in)corporeal, embodied, which reflects the fact that the field is evolving ahead of the language. In the Czech language, some of the words are not (yet) in use and thus some words in the Czech version of this book might seem unfamiliar. These realisations provoked us to insert more questions about language into the interviews and also propelled Mirka and Mish to write a short additional text, published in a Czech dance journal in both Czech and English, on the language of dance improvisation.[17] Some of the interviews have also been published elsewhere (in full or as excerpts) on various professional and academic platforms.[18] The interviews that appear in the book have been edited in collaboration with the artists owing to the length and focus of our research.

Another discovery was the emergence of a definite picture of the US postmodern influence through Contact Improvisation and releasing dance practices.[19] Steve Paxton and Mary (O'Donnell) Fulkerson appear in the interviews as spectral figures, mentioned by several artists as significant influences and teachers. And some underdocumented history came to light, with Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little speaking of their involvement (among several others) in the emergence of Contact Improvisation. In our discussions with Lepkoff, Karczag and Little, we could sense the atmosphere of New York in the late 1970s and 1980s, while Eva Karczag brands her own work as 'post-Judson'. The threads of this influence can also be traced through the practices of Julyen Hamilton and Rosalind Crisp. At the outset of the project, it is fair to say that we did not fully anticipate the strength of this lineage. Only Wendy Houstoun does not specifically identify this in her practice, which comes through a history of content- or task-based improvisational dance theatre in the UK, in addition to her own connection to the Czech scene through experimental dance theatre. While the immediate link to US postmodernism emerged within our study, researching the broader and longer histories and origins of improvisation — such as the influence of African dance and music forms in the US[20] — is a valuable line of inquiry that lies beyond the scope of this project.

Several other issues, currently discussed in studios and in academia, appeared within the research: dance improvisation as a potential source of political and social change; questions of personal and embodied

agency; embodied consciousness and presence; questions of hierarchy and democracy, both on stage and in relation to the audience; the rich and contradictory use of terminology; and the broad range of approaches to choreography within the form. Many and various understandings of the value and meaning of 'dance improvisation' are revealed to include theatre, dancing, joy, playfulness, performative freshness, making, physical inquiry, relationality, emergence and quality of being.

Being primarily practitioners ourselves, we approached the research as a shared exercise in which we moved and thought together. We participated in the studio work to experience the artists' current approaches in our bodies. We discussed these experiences and asked each other the same questions that the focus group dealt with. We made the decision to pose the questions to the artists as one body, containing all our individual comments, thoughts and research focus — replacing 'I' with 'we'.

To extend the reach of the practical research, we asked our Czech colleagues, experienced performers and teachers who work with improvisation, to join us as a focus group. Helena Arenbergerová, Jiří Lössl, Jana Novorytová and Veronika Šimková participated in the workshops and dialogue with us to assist the study. We invited more Czech and Slovak dancers and artists to join the discussions and workshops and were happy to be joined by Zdena Brungot Svíteková, Kateřina Dietzová, Hana Chmelenská, Rena Milgrom, Marta Poláková, Hana Polanská Turečková and Anna Sedlačková. Over the course of three years, we collected different kinds of data, from written reflections, questionnaires, photographs, videos and personal discussions, and produced a number of texts published in Czech and English.

Alongside our joint research, the three of us each approached the data according to our own current research focuses, and these are developed in three individual studies following the interviews. In her study, Mirka introduces dance improvisation as essential complexity and possibility that increases the joy of dance for both the dancer and the viewer. She deals with choreography and improvisation, and notices changes in how these are understood as interrelated practices in dancing and dance making in the moment. Mish considers the dialogical nature of dance improvisation practice in performance through the lenses of her experience with the Czech experimental discipline of Dialogical Acting.[21] She highlights improvisation as an embodied discipline of awareness that requires ongoing practice. Lizzy considers the active sensory presence cultivated in improvisation in relation to explicit or implicit political inquiry. Reflecting on the historical legacy of political agitation and experimentation within improvisation, she draws out

aspects of the artists' current practices of attention and participation, understood as empowering and emancipatory process.

All of the images in this book (apart from the portrait photos) are from the workshops given by the artists in the frame of this project. They were taken in the dance studios at HAMU[22] by the Prague-based photographers Shoe Bean, Anna Benháková and Michal Hančovský and feature the artists, our focus group, associated professional performers, our pedagogical colleagues, our students and ourselves. The images are grouped and presented in relation to the specific workshop in which they were taken. It is interesting to note, in the images, the differences in atmosphere and flavour of the movement occurring in the workshops led by the different artists, even within the same space and featuring many of the same dancers.

Our title, *Secretly Alive*, is borrowed from Julyen Hamilton's interview, in which he describes the thrill of improvising as a dancer with Rosemary Butcher: '[T]hat was the bit of dancing where it was alive. Something was nearly secretly alive. It kind of asked something of me that was what I wanted to be.' This reflects the way we understand that improvisation enacts a space for a subtle vitality and agency to exist within the body and between bodies — beneath or alongside, within, over and above, or entirely in the place of traditional forms of set choreography.

We also enjoy a resonance with the idea that improvisation itself, as a marginalised art form, has had an insistent life, despite being largely excluded from mainstream arts practice and discourse, especially in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, various forms of dance and theatre improvisation remained 'secretly alive' in Czechoslovakia during the years of authoritarian Soviet rule and through the years of democracy and capitalism since 1989.

Mish, Mirka & Lizzy
Prague and London, June 2024

Notes

1 The project was funded by the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, with the support of the DKR Institutional Endowment (Long-term Conceptual Development of Research Institutes) as provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in 2021.

2 Michaela Raisová and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires: Real-time Choreography in the Czech Context', *ArteActa* 6, no. 2 (2024): 1–24, https://arteacta.cz/from-solitaires-to-solitaires-real-time-choreography-in-the-czech-context/; Michaela Raisová and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'Real-time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem', *Taneční actuality*, special edition 'Dance and Words', September 2023, 116–135; Michaela Raisová and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína', *ArteActa* 6, no. 9 (2023), https://arteacta.cz/okamzita-kompozice-jako-svebytna-umelecka-disciplina.

3 The practical somatic improvisation handbook *Body, Space, Image* by Miranda Tufnell and Chris Crickmay (Dance Books, 1990) was translated into Czech by Tereza Cigánková and Olga Pohl as *Tělo, prostor, představa*, (Prague: NAMU, 2020).

4 For example, most recently, see Nalina Wait, *Improvised Dance: (In)Corporeal Knowledges* (London: Routledge, 2023), or Vida Midgelow (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

5 Burt questions Banes's definition and location, and adds a European perspective; see Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (London: Routledge, 2006), 5–6. Wait highlights the African roots of improvisation in the US; see Wait, *Improvised Dance*.

6 See Rais and Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'.

7 A popular form of puppetry and dance characterised by the use of ultraviolet light ('black lighting') on fluorescent props and costumes on a darkened stage, creating intricate visual illusions.

8 For more information, see Lucie Kocourková, *(Studio) Balet Praha: Nová vlna československé choreografie* (Praha: Balet Praha, 2021); Lucie Kocourková, *Choreograf s duší básníka* (Praha: Balet Praha, 2023); Vladimír Vašut, *Pavel Šmok: na přeskáčku* (Praha: Akropolis, 1997); Daniel Wiesner, *Taneční divadlo aneb vyprávění o Mackbathovi* (Praha: AMU, 2017).

9 For the connection to the Czech visual arts scene, see Pavlína Morganová, Terezie Nekvindová and Dagmar Svatošová, *Výstava jako médium. České umění 1957–1999* (Praha: AVU, 2020), and Pavlína Morganová, *A Walk through Prague: Actions, Performances, Happenings 1949–1989* (Praha: Akademie výtvarných umění, 2014). For an understanding of the Czech amateur dance scene, see Dorota Gremlicová, Jiří Lössl and Elvíra Němečková, *Tanec jako záliba* (Praha: Národní informační a poradenské středisko pro kulturu NIPOS, útvar ARTAMA, 2023).

10 The Czechoslovakian state divided on 1 January 1993.

11 Funding streams and structures emerged and institutions were developed to support the new contemporary dance industry in the Czech Republic. These represented and established some of the major strands in Czech dance. One stream was influenced by US modern and Western contemporary dance: Ivanka Kubicová had trained at The Place and danced in London during the 1970s, and became director of the dance department within the Music and Dance Faculty of HAMU; graduate Yvona Kreuzmannová founded the Tanec Praha festival in 1991 and the Ponec Theatre, modelled on The Place Theatre in London, in 2001. A second stream represented an underground lineage to early modern dance and improvisation in Europe. Eva Blažíčková had taught improvisation to children and amateur adult groups during the communist era and established the Duncan Centre Conservatoire of Contemporary Dance in 1992, honouring a direct lineage to the teaching in Central Europe of Elizabeth and Isadora Duncan in the early 20th century. A third stream was the experimental physical theatre of Ctibor Turba, who founded the Department of Non-verbal Theatre at HAMU. There was, therefore, in Prague in the 1990s, a strengthening and professionalising of lineages to mainstream US dance and experimental European dance and physical theatre but not directly to the American avant-garde.

12 Western artists also came to give workshops in Bratislava, Slovakia, which is geographically closer to Vienna, where many Czech artists encountered these influences.

13 This is loosely in chronological order of their coming to Prague, and Bratislava, which was a vibrant scene for workshops with foreign artists working with improvisation. See Rais and Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'.

14 The Duncan Centre Conservatoire of Contemporary Dance had a programme of year-long guest teachers from abroad. HAMU (Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, or AMU) had existed as the main Czech dance training institution throughout the communist period, training modern-classical dancers and choreographers. DAMU is the Theatre Faculty of AMU. In the 1990s, the Academy began to invite a series of foreign artists and teachers.

15 Supported by the British Council in Prague.

16 After the Velvet Revolution, and the period when we, a post-Soviet Central European state, were still defined

and considered part of the East, we looked largely to the West to 'catch up' with developments and trends in all fields.

17 Raisová and Eliášová, 'Real-time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem'.

18 Lizzy Le Quesne, Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'A Dance Practice of Choreographic Improvisation: An interview with Rosalind Crisp', Independent Dance, 2022, https://independentdance.co.uk/library/choreographic-improvisation-rosalind-crisp/; Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Improvisation as Practicing Trust: An Interview with Julyen Hamilton', *Theatralia* 26, no. 2 (2023): 197–203; Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Improvisation as Performative Freshness: Interview with Wendy Houstoun', *Ústav pro výzkum a studium autorského herectví*, 18 February 2023, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/improvizace-jako-performativni-akt-neotrelosti-rozhovor-s-wendy-houstoun-2022.

19 Cultivating and dancing with a released muscular tone and tissue state within the body was key to the innovations and aesthetic of 1960s postmodern dance. It is a technical aspect of somatic practices, and of improvised dancing for many, as it allows a state of readiness and adaptability in the body. Some of the artists in this project directly reference the teachings of Mary Fulkerson and Barbara Clark as founders of Release Technique. We want to highlight and reference also Joan Skinner, as an early developer of released dancing. Skinner Releasing Technique combines somatic awareness with Ideokinesis and improvised dancing. Skinner was assisted by Marsha Paludan and taught Mary Fulkerson, John Rolland, Nancy Topf and many others at the University of Illinois in the early 1960s, all of whom later went on to develop and teach their own versions of release-based dance techniques. See Manny Emslie (ed.), *Skinner Releasing Technique: A Movement and Dance Practice* (Charmouth: Triarchy Press, 2021), 8.

20 Wait, *Improvised Dance*, 2–3.

21 Developed by Ivan Vyskočil, a Czech actor, director, psychologist, author and pedagogue, from the late 1960s (during the Soviet occupation) until his death in 2023. Dialogical Acting became a key subject of the BA/MA programme at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU), which Vyskočil founded in 1994.

22 Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

Just Dancing

Interview with

Rosalind Crisp



photo: Frank Post and SAAI FREI Festival 2022

Rosalind Crisp is an Australian dance artist and Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. In 1996, she founded Omeo Dance Studio, in Sydney. In 2002, she was invited to Paris by Michel Caserta and was Associate Artist of Atelier de Paris – Carolyn Carlson for ten years. Rosalind has created more than 25 major productions. Her work continues to question dance through a rigorous practice of live composition, in all its certainty and doubt. Her project DIRt (Dance In Regional disasTer zones) expands to site-specific practice in Australia's ravaged forests and woodlands, asking how dance can act meaningfully while we are hell-bent on extinguishing other species.
Having previously conducted projects in Poland, Croatia, Estonia and Lithuania, Rosalind introduced her work to the Czech dance community in 2021 for the first time during this research project.

The interview with Rosalind took place online on 20 September 2021 after a four-day online workshop for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

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Dance Improvisation as Artistic Practice

What is improvisation for you?

I gave the name 'choreographic improvisation' to my practice I suppose because people tend to want a name, or a way of locating it historically, and also in terms of the core of what it's trying to get at. My work is equally choreographic as it is improvised. So I ended up joining those two together. I never talk about it as improvisation when I'm working. I just say it's 'dancing' because it's so complex. And also because the word 'improvisation' has been bandied around – perhaps not in your circles, because the academic institutions have been really quite rigorous about improvisation in a great way – but in the performance community or in the audience communities, it's often considered like, 'Oh, just do whatever. Make it up. Just make it up.' That's very reductive, so I call it 'choreographic improvisation'. But generally I tend to avoid the term 'improvisation' altogether and talk about what it is as 'dance'. It's not a form; it's many forms. And there are some people who are using it as a performance form but it's not that common.

And I think a lot of people use a lot of skills and principles from improvising but don't call it improvisation, because they can't sell their work if they call it improvisation!

I think you have to look at an artist's work, rather than a genre, even though of course in the university, and in the field, people group things together to make sense of them, or to sell them, or to understand them. And there are influences. We're all influenced. And we have lineages, and you can see the threads of history, but I think the real task is to look at an individual's work and see what principles are they working with, and what or how is it particular.

What have you found in your practice that you feel is new, or unique?

I'm constantly surprised when I work. So I suppose you could say that was new. I mean, it happens in a million moments, millions of moments. There is lots of joy, discovering, in surprising myself. And so there's a newness in that.

I think I'm a bit addicted to that. That's probably the same for many people who improvise, that we get addicted to the ride of the feedback of the discovery, as it's happening. I'm fine in moment-to-moment. Newness is what keeps me going, actually. Though I would substitute the word with 'surprise'. I'm surprising myself.

I've developed many strategies to try to surprise myself. So they're not new because they are strategies that I know, but I constantly evolve new ones, discover new ones and name them, and then they become really supportive for the moment-to-moment newness. So there's a shuffling going on, of strategies that I know, that still take me to newness.

But sometimes that becomes too familiar. So I dig deeper and evolve other strategies that take me to 'newer newnesses'. And it goes on like this. And this is a cycle of discovering a new strategy. And it being hard to grasp because it's new, and I haven't identified it or named it, and then gradually it becomes a bit more familiar and I can name it, and then it becomes more familiar and I can use it very easily. And then if I use it too often, it doesn't surprise me any more. So then I have to dig deeper and find another one or combine it with another one that I already know, and that provides a collision that produces another newness. So I would say newness is actually what it's all about! From moment-to-moment newness.

But in terms of the bigger context like my body of work, or the methodology, I think there is a lot in it. I feel strongly about my work, but I also feel humbled about it. Lots of people are discovering things. And I also have a history. I have people who've influenced me, and although that's many, many years ago, and those threads have been totally transformed, that history is really, really important. So I feel connected to a lineage.

But what's coming up in the moment, when I think about the methodology, is: when I was working with the master's students at The Place [London Contemporary Dance School], some years ago, the people who were running the programme said to me, 'Oh, why isn't this taught in the BA? Why are they learning all those exercises and patterns and stuff that they then spend years getting rid of? Why aren't they learning how to guide their own attention to find those things themselves?' And they felt like it was a new methodology that needed to replace this codified language and fixed position and movements from artists such as Cunningham and Graham, etc. Maybe at the point when they discovered those things they weren't fixities; they were like newnesses. And then we get the next generation that disseminates it as a fixed thing that has no mobility. And I think there's really deep and profound issues in that process of learning.

I think that 'secondhand-ness' has kept dance in a very impoverished artistic state. Because really what we're doing is like rote learning rather than being artists. And, of course, many visual artists might study masters and copy before they move on. But the difficulty with dancers is that we often don't move on. And it's such a rigorous training, to have your body so available to so much, so that often performances are familiar, often they are just exercises on stage, they don't pass the exercises-on-stage test. And I say to myself, 'Is it as exciting as watching a racehorse? No, well, then, what are we doing it for? It's sport, it's not art.' So, in terms of methodology, I think there is something new in what I've been doing that is useful for learning.

Regarding the lineage that you recognise, and the influences that have fed into that, can you say what is the new thing that they released in you?

The thing people that I've studied with have given me is permission. And that's permission to move outside of, or to reflect on, my own limitations, and my own assumptions.

Is there a particular limitation or assumption that you're thinking of?

Oh, well, one is riddled with limitations.

Like, for example, this issue often comes up for me: What do I hold on to and what do I let go of? Sometimes I've thought that I hold on quite long, or too tight, but yet I know there's a great support in that, because that's how I integrate. And I've noticed other people maybe let go of things more quickly, and I don't. It's finding the balance for yourself.

When you say 'hold on', do you mean hold on to a certain activity or a certain awareness?

Hold on to a certain task, or a certain strategy, or certain value about how I prepare the body. It's like recognising that 'third person' I was talking about in the workshop [an observing inner eye] recognising 'that's not useful to you any more. Let's move on a bit. Shake that up.'

Becoming an Improviser

What was your journey to improvisation?

I grew up in a very remote area. We had no television and no dance schools, no theatres or anything, right out in the bush. So I actually don't know, I've always wondered where my need to dance came from. I have no idea. Perhaps it came from outer space. I remember even when I was four years old – that was the first notion of myself, that I had to dance.

I went to ballet school, eventually. I pestered my parents to send me to the city to learn ballet. They were totally supportive of me. Even though they were just farmers, they managed to find the money. I left home when I was 12 and went to study in the city, seven hours away. And I studied ballet, because I wanted to be a famous ballet dancer! And then I went on to a tertiary dance study. There weren't universities for dance then. There were schools attached to companies. I was accepted into the Victorian Ballet Company School, which fed the company. It was just ballet. But we did have a bit of improvisation actually, on Saturday morning. And some contemporary work – mostly kind of Graham work and some other mixed stuff that a guy called Arthur Turnbull taught.

But anyway, I left there after one-and-a-half years. I felt stifled by the training, and I dropped out in the middle of the second year. And I started on my own journey.

I just started working. I got a studio and started. I worked with a company for a while, and I started making my own work quite early. I was in Sydney at that time and there weren't that many dancers around. But between us we managed to invite some people from Europe or America to come and nourish the work. Jennifer Monson, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton and people like that came. So they were quite influential on me, I would say. The American postmodern movement was quite influential. Every year, or every second year, someone would come for two weeks. And the rest of the time, myself and others would just work furiously on the things that they left behind for us.

And I was reading. I started to notice connections to Ideokinesis. And way back to the somatic, people like Mabel Todd. The only book I had in the beginning was Doris Humphrey's book, which is just a classic – I still remember the 'diagonal line' and 'avoid the centre'.

I was overseas at the beginning of the 1990s, at the school in Arnhem, the Center for New Dance Development, which doesn't really exist any more.

I mean, it's still there, but it was a really exciting place then, with a lot of those American teachers there. And that was a big influence on me. Again, it was about permission, about not holding too tightly to what I thought I knew. And it took a long time. I remember when I first arrived everybody was lying on the floor, and I thought, 'Oh my God. So boring!' I just had to go in early before the class started and do acrobatics and all these absurd things I thought I needed or I liked doing.

What teachers in Arnhem had the greatest influence on you?

Lisa Nelson was there a little bit. Steve Paxton came. And Wendell Beavers, he was a Body-Mind Centering [BMC] teacher from New York. He was a really big influence. He had such a beautiful way of working with BMC that was kind of like farming. It wasn't all esoteric and feely-touchy, it was just deep, deep underneath support. And I found it really empowering. And Mary Fulkerson, she was wild and mad, and again permission, 'Close your eyes.' Oh, it was like tripping. Amazing! There was a big influence of that stuff. And I think it opened a whole well of things. I was only there for a year as a guest student, but I felt like it opened up so much for me that I would have the next 20 years to explore.

And a lot of even simple things like weight – like feeling, discovering that weight is bottomless, that you never actually understand it. You have to keep going into weight, to feel. It's got to be renewed every day. And the whole centring of the somatic experience as a basis to create from, rather than an idea. That came from there, for sure.



Was there a moment when you decided that improvisation was your discipline?

Yes, it was in January 2005. In October or November 2004, I was running a lab in Sydney for a large group of people for a month; it was very intensive. And it was set up so that I could also continue to research. I would give them tasks and I would work as well. It was a lot of dancing and a lot of exploring. And the others were watching me and I would be watching them. And then we would try and talk about it. And so it was trying to put words to things. And I felt this thing start to crack open. It was like discovering this key that you put in the lock. I was on the edge of something that would allow me to keep dancing.

I had to work very hard and concentrate very hard to hold that kind of condition to allow all these factors to be operating, and me being able to move between them. And then I was there. I felt it shift.

And then in January 2005 I was in Perth with two Australian artists, Jo Pollitt and Olivia Millard, who invited me to go and work there. They were at the university and we worked there for five weeks on a project. Again, it was a very exploratory situation where we didn't really have to produce a product and we could really explore, and it was in that time that I would say this whole genre of **choreographic improvisation** really landed – where I thought, 'Oh, I know what it is.'

And from then it started. I trained dancers who'd been working with me a lot anyway. And we made a work – a quartet – together that was completely improvised. But 'completely'? – I don't know what that means. It was sitting on tools, like **following one surface of the body at a time** and some of the tools that I shared in the workshop. And the dancers were filled up with them. We were just doing it every day for a year. It was very easy to throw a kind of structure together that allowed us to continue to work.

The first thing I realised was that it couldn't be frontal. Because we were too vulnerable with the work. If you went out there and it stopped 'working', you would feel like shit. So there had to be the situation where you could just get out of the way and not have to walk offstage. So the audience had to be among us. It was a really definite moment in time where I realised, 'Oh, my God, this is a whole world of stuff that is an endless supply of dancing.'

And it was also years of work before that. It wasn't as if I didn't have some of those tools already operating. I'd made the solo where I had choreographed which surfaces of the body would lead for each movement. I remembered the surface of the body that would lead but not the movement. And then I could mess it with the timing, and the effort, and the speed, direction, and things like that. And that **one thing at a time** – that was a dance before it was a tool. It was a piece. So then, it was like, 'You can apply that to anything,' and how endless it becomes.

There's tools that can be applied to anywhere in the body. They self-generate, self-perpetuate, an endless supply of movement, by applying it to anywhere in the body. And I would say that's what cracked open – a tool that you could use in a million places in the body. And then at different speeds, and different efforts, in different directions and different levels.

It cracked open then and never went away. And I kept making. My own company works were always in that practice from then on. They were never set material. They were studied and integrated and very rigorous to practise. And then [we found] structures to '**faire exister**' – I want to speak in French because it all happened in Paris – to 'allow to exist', allow these tools to exist in performance, supportive structures that allowed us to continue to work.

And I never went back. A couple of times, I would say to myself, 'Don't you want to go back to setting?' Because sometimes I would see a set piece and think, 'It's so finely choreographed, you can really make delightful decisions.' But my experience of this improvising was just so much more exciting. Again, it was a sort of addiction to the new, I suppose. I had the pleasure of it, and the experience of it, and the simple adventures. I just loved it.

And a couple of times I had university gigs, making a piece, or for another company, a young company or university or something, but I was not game to work with the tools then. I would work with the tools, but I would get them

to set the material – until about, I don't know, probably 2011 or something. It was at least five or six years before I felt confident enough with the tools that I could kind of – what's the word? – 'invade' their consciousness, their physical consciousness, enough so that they wouldn't be able to do anything else, and that they would feel safe and supported by the tools in performance.

When you say 'cracking open' and this kind of 'delight', it sounds like you tapped into some kind of a stream.

Kind of, you can say that. But I think that stream was a whole lot of threads converging. I had used some of those tools that I discovered to choreograph from, setting material in the studio. When I used to set material, part of the way of remembering it was often almost like a tool. Not just a movement but 'It's a new part of the body', or it's 'Oh, everything squishing together and then one piece goes out' kind of images. What was happening at that moment was a whole lot of those things were converging.

And also I had done quite a bit of Authentic Movement practice. And that was really also very influential. Close your eyes, have someone witness you who's very concentrated and supportive, and do whatever the hell you want. It was just so amazing. And I would find myself in these places – like a sort of world that I could stick with. And so that would have been one of those threads that was kind of converging. So many threads.

And the other thread that was occurring was the fact that I had dropped out of ballet school because it was killing me. It was so rigid. Obviously, from way back was this necessity to free myself up in dance. Why else do we dance? We don't dance just to correct a position, or perfect a move, or satisfy a teacher. We dance because we bloody love it! This was really important for me from the beginning.

And then I think about my father's family – Irish political activists who were exiled to Australia. He said, 'Don't believe what you read. Question!' And so I wasn't going to put up with dance destroying my love of dance, with dance training destroying me!

Another thread was that **third person**, [who is] sort of having this overview of 'Wow, she's having a lot of fun right now! How do you keep that going? What is that? Hold on to that, but let it make you keep doing it? And can someone else take notes?' Like, all this, all of me, trying to grasp it.

And I noticed – looking back at videos – how fast I had to go when I first discovered this work in order not to think, not to think about it, I mean, not to get in the way.

It's definitely a convergence of a whole lot of threads: from different tools I'd already started to develop to make work with, a necessity in myself, perhaps



a skill as a choreographer already. And talking about the rigour of improvisation, it's **choreography plus**! It's a lot more than choreographing. You are choreographing, and you have to digest all that and manage all that, and enjoy all that, and make those decisions, and know when you need to change it. It's choreography plus a lot more, I think. The plus being the strategies to make those decisions in the moment. And the practice of that. So inside that discipline are a whole lot of extra skills and strategies.

How long did it take for you to start teaching choreographic improvisation?

There was a continuity. There were dancers who worked with me before the thing cracked open, and after, so they were there for that whole journey and were integral to it.

And I was teaching already before then. I don't know what I was teaching actually, kind of a mixture of stuff, probably. Things I might have learned. Things I was starting to develop myself. I don't know if anyone would have noticed. They might have.

And what has the journey, the development, been since that cracking open?

Well, the methodology has continued to grow and expand, and become, I suppose, more definite – but at the same time more mobile.

Isabelle Ginot, who I worked with in Paris, was commenting, 'Oh, you're really focused on this or that tool now.' But then the other things don't go away; they

just go back into the tool bank. And those other strategies or approaches or processes, at some time they will possibly come back into the foreground again. So that shuffling has gone on all the time.

But it's also continued to kind of fill out. It's just become everything. And I discover new things all the time. And mostly those things pretty much come out of my own solo practice, on my own. So a lot of time is spent not knowing, and then noticing what it is, then kind of following something, then naming and applying it. It is a process and it takes time. There are no words for it.

So you had to come up with your own terminology – finding names for things – and that has become a structure?

I worked a lot in France with this work, so there were a lot of French words that are intimately connected to the work, which still feel more relevant than English words. Like what I was trying to say before – '**faire exister**' [to make/allow something to emerge] – sort of allows it to come out, does more than allow.

Another word I love in French is '**accueillir**'. In English it means to welcome, or to receive, or to host something – you take it in. It works so well, but in English it doesn't do the same thing. In English I probably use the word 'feedback', to **feel the feedback**, but **accueillir** is to 'receive the sensations'.

When you work deeply in project process, you develop words to mean things – a language develops. The dancers who worked with me in Paris were the same dancers for ten years. And we definitely had a language that allowed us to dive into the work, in French, shared among us. And we knew what we meant.

And the other thing that has shifted the whole thing has been an interaction with academics. So Isabelle Ginot, who wrote a piece about the work, came into my studio one day to watch me and ended up staying for years. And the other person who had an input or connection was Susan Leigh Foster, an American writer and academic. We made a duet together. And there are two PhD students in Australia, Phoebe Robinson and Lizzie Thomson, with whom I have been working intermittently over the last 20 years. That's really exciting. That has shifted it along.

And the collaborations with other artists: there's the dancers who've worked with me, but there's other artists like this rock 'n' roll musician and performer Hansueli Tischhauser. And a photographer I've been working with a lot, outside, in the forest, Lisa Roberts. They've shifted things in the work, I think. And working outside in devastated sites here in Australia. That's really changed the work.[1]

1 For more details about the DIRtywork project, see https://www.omeodance.com/dirt.

And the thing is, it doesn't feel like it's finished. People say, 'Why don't you write a book?' but a book would fix it. Although there's a lot that I can set down, it's mobile. Its nature is mobile. I think it's really important that it doesn't become like one of those fixed second-hand techniques. You know, when I teach, I teach differently for every group; I mean it shifts. So how would you write that down? It's not 'do this, then that will happen, then that will happen'. I mean there is often a chronology that makes sense. But it can be shifted around.

Have your expectations changed since you started codifying your practice?

Well, I didn't set out to do improvisation. I set out to enjoy dancing. If I'm doing improvisation, it's because that led me there. In fact, I never had an idea. It's just come from dancing and from where the greatest joy is.

It is in the play and the rigour. And, as I said before, there's just a lot more fun when I don't know what I'm going to do next. When I do, well, it feels like death. I don't think I ever had an expectation of what I should do. I just kept following my nose with what I really love doing. And that is a hard road because you're going somewhere you haven't been and maybe nobody's been.

For me, it's all about the dancing. But it's not about the moves. And it took me a long time to articulate what that was, but I know that my interest is not in the movements; it's in what produces them. Because, for me, that's what dance in real time is.

I don't have anything against set material, but I think we have to learn complex body awareness if we want to have a big access to the orchestra of the body. It's not an instrument, it's an orchestra, in my opinion. And there's a lot of different parts. Some of them are playing and the others are being ignored. Well, that's a kind of a very slack orchestra. I'm really interested in a sophisticated, complex, intelligent awareness, through the whole body, all the time. And you do get that from really good dance training. It's just that, artistically, you get stuck with the moves.

And I do work with some people who aren't trained. It really is about attention, but attention in every bit of the body – to or with attention.

Where would you say your focus is right now?

It's sort of where the next bucket of joy is. I think it's really around this issue of how much I hold and how much I let go of.

I don't practise my tools as a rule very much, but sometimes I notice that I'm using one of them, like a jazz musician might practise a certain scale. And I notice that the necessity or the support of being kind of scholarly with myself and practising the tool sometimes gives me the permission to abandon them the rest of the time. If I stick with them, I'm not in the exploration, but if I don't practise them, they don't support me in the evolution of the exploration.

And this thing that I really just love at the moment – it's kind of like not holding on to anything. That's the dance I'm doing at the moment – not holding on to anything. But I know that underneath that there's a whole lot of holding on. That interweaving is just fascinating to me.

The things that interest me a lot lately are to do with sensation and weight, and a sort of lightness of being... something about us paling into extinction, where it feels like there's a whole vanishing going on, in Australia. Species are disappearing. Sometimes I just feel this kind of empathy really in my body.

The Practice and Language of Teaching

When you teach your practice, do you have a set methodology?

The **tools** I use are not ideas, they are practices. And I think they take years, actually. I don't tell people that in the workshop, but I think they take years to integrate. And then they can get into your system and have a role in your artistic work.

They're not ideas and they don't work as ideas. You can't just sort of take one off the shelf. It has to really be practised. They are a practice.

Does your teaching influence your creative practice?

It satisfies some part of my brain to kind of put really clear parameters around things. I think teaching makes me be very clear. And that sort of reflects back on my own clarity with myself.

Performing and teaching is not the same as studio practice on my own. With teaching, I have to find what is between what I understand and what you might understand. My partner [Andrew Morrish] always says, 'Just because you're teaching that, it doesn't mean people are learning that. Maybe they're learning something else!' So I keep inquiring into how I communicate across that gap. There's that pedagogic process of dividing things up. I know I'm interested in sharing this with you, but what are the ten steps before this, then? Sometimes that goes on, and then it does give definition to practice in a way. I really enjoy that. But I think I actually really enjoy that organising of myself. It permits me to have more disorganisation, because there's the support there of organisation.

Can you say a little bit about the ten steps before a tool?

If I want to teach you 'follow one part of the body at a time', it's not going to work unless we've had some experience of the whole body and the sensation of the whole body, or the weight, or the breath, or how does one part touch something else, or what happens with the rest of the body? If we haven't gotten the breath

and the weight going, then following one part at a time is not very embodied. It's going to be just a sort of sketchy idea.

And part of the teaching process is what I'm not opening. How do I make it coherent to you in four days? I can't do everything. We just touch the tip of the iceberg... but it needs to be integrated so that you get that sense of the thing having different facets, one bit speaking to the other. It's multifaceted, so I can't start with all of them. I can only start with one. And then they start to kind of line themselves up.

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

I don't think they can be separated in my work any more. Once, I would have equated improvisation with the attention tools to follow what emerges from the body, and to notice what is already changing in the body, and to delay, prolong or interrupt that. Whereas choreography I would have equated with the compositional tools I have developed, for example having access to absolutely any body part at any time, awareness of how and where in the body something begins, the speed, effort and duration of a movement, whether it is one part or many parts that are responding.

But these two practices are completely intertwined now, inseparable. I need to be able to notice a sensation in a part of the body to be able to respond with a compositional tool, and I need to allow movement to occur so that there is something to notice, etc. It is more like a continual, interconnected feedback loop. I don't call my work improvisation or choreography. I call it dancing.

Do you use the word 'choreography'?

In 2005, I made up the term 'choreographic improvisation' to include both of these usually separate models. Now, to speak about the choreographic practice in my work, I use the word 'composition'. I find it cleaner (perhaps because of the accepted heritage it has with music), because the term 'choreography' is currently used to describe different processes for different people. For some people, it is how a work is structured, or set movements, or for others everything can be a choreography, even the clouds in the sky.

Do you use the word 'score'?

No, I don't use the term 'score'. For me, this term is connected to the postmodern American lineage, where scores were used to structure an event in time and space. My tools, by contrast, are about 'structuring' the composition of the solo body in and with itself, by the dancer.

When improvising on stage, do you work with imagery?

Sometimes very potent sensation-images come up in performing. Imagery arises from sensation for me, and the interaction between sensation and imagery is another ongoing feedback loop. Images are always connected to my body: for example, I might notice that my attention to the sensations of my flesh has produced strange lumpy textures, or I might lightly shift a bone and suddenly I have an image-sensation of all my bones flying about in different directions, etc. I am not interested in predetermining images. I find them much more potent when they arise from the dancing. And this way, image is not separate from sensation, so it supports me to stay grounded in-the-body and not disconnect with an abstract image or idea.

The Practice of Performance

Where is your awareness when you are on the stage?

It depends what it is that I'm performing! So I'll talk about the piece that I'm doing at the moment, which is a couple of years old, but it's still mobile. It's called **DIRtywork**. It's from the DIRt (Dance In Regional disasTer zones) project, which is in response to the devastation of the forests here in Australia, particularly in the area that I come from.

So there's things that are changing in the work. And I'm always wanting to kind of ride as close to the edge of that experience as possible, so that it is alive – it's not a piece I made years ago, it's actually a piece I made now.

There are anchors that I know work and that I come to, like there is a journey through these materials. And I probably know what journey – which one I'm going to do first and second, third, and all that – ahead of time. But how I get from one to the other and how long I spend with each one, I'm managing in real time. So I'm managing a lot of stuff, even though some of the elements exist. And what I'm managing is where my dancing is at the moment, that response to my experience with this situation. How is that changing? And there will be little hooks and things that I've articulated to myself that help me to go into that present, with an audience.

Can you share some of those hooks?

How I start dancing is really important. I kind of locate myself, really calmly, with an audience. So what I'm trying to do is set myself up to be as close to the heart of what's really important to me right now.

And of course all the tools and processes that I'm using, they're all there, but I never try to just show them. They support me.

And the other thing I'm busy with is that audience. Who are these people? The spaciousness, particularly at the beginning of dance, is really important. My sense of sensory receptivity to where I am, and who's there, and 'How can I take these people with me?' So there's a sort of empathetic body. It's something about making myself transparent so that the audience is disarmed. I am disarmed and they are disarmed. All those things feel really important to me.

What I do when I'm there with an audience is to consider: How can I meet this audience? And how can I bring the work through my body? Because it's shifting, and I have to be prepared for it to shift. It's not a finished, fixed piece. So there's a lot to ride with.

And then there's the dynamic of the whole – caring for the end. And when's it really good to change? Do they need a shift now? Or, I need a shift. Or, not too soon with the humour. It's riding on those meta things as well as the micro decisions.

Can you say a bit more about feeling the audience?

It feels like being transparent to me. It feels like they can see right through me. I'm sort of naked, completely naked in a way. Because I want them to feel, I suppose. I don't want them to sit back and close off. So I have to disarm myself. I'm not presenting it **at** them. I want to find it **with** them.

I also want them to be surprised. In a way I want them to not realise that they've gone on a journey with me. I feel it's a big concentration, and a thing I've been practising for a long time. And I know I can suck an audience in. I just want to communicate to them. I have to. It's my responsibility to communicate to them. It's not their responsibility to have to work out how to understand what I'm doing, or how to receive what I'm doing.

And that 'becoming transparent' for the audience: Does that take different forms in relation to different audiences?

I suppose so. There's a vulnerability there.

City audiences are different to country audiences. And Eastern European audiences are different to French audiences. I mean, they're just always different. And sometimes straightaway I feel like, 'Oh, this is such a nice audience.' Probably the worst audiences are Parisian audiences. But therefore I did gain a lot of strength from owning my work with French audiences. They are brutal. Critical and brutal, and have opinions.

I can stay in my own world, but my task as a performer is to be with them [the audience]. And to be with them from within my own world. I think that's a practice – the feeling of it is a practice. It comes from practising being with an audience.

What do you do in the moments before you start performing?

I warm up – so that I've got access to my whole body, and my breath, and my imagination.

And I notice before I start that my attention is really big. Really big, and also very inward and outward at the same time. Because it's my responsibility to bring the work to them.

It's an incredibly powerful thing to be on stage. People sit there and watch you. Sometimes I think, 'Oh, my God, they just sit there. I could do anything!' It's amazing that they let us do that. And with that comes a big responsibility. So, it's my responsibility to be fully charged and fully awake, and gentle, and available. I notice that my attention gets all kind of buzzing, all around me. And my sensations are strong. I feel very with myself, I suppose.

One thing that helps me a lot, and which I learned from Andrew [Morrish], is to meet people before I start. To come out and be with people – not to hide out [in] the back, but to break that thing and just be there. It sort of normalises things. We are just here. I'm doing this and you're doing that. It normalises it instead of freaking out about what they might think. No, it's just me doing my thing.

When performing, do you create some kind of distance from what you are doing or feeling? Do you see yourself from the audience's point of view?

Oh, I think with probably about five to seven per cent of my attention.

The rest of it's too busy in the moment-to-moment.

I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm making. I have a sense of 'Yeah, that's communicating.' I want to have a sense that you are getting what I'm saying. That's happening when I'm dancing. 'Are they getting it?' A bit of me wants that. But it's a small bit. I'm too busy, but it's just a very thin layer.

And is that the same thing that you described in the workshop as this third person – 'taking care of the choreographer'?

I think it's something else what I mean about that part guiding myself. But they are probably connected. There's layers of your attention, layers of awareness. What the body feels, where the choreography is going, what else needs to be taken care of.

You said at the beginning that you like being high on the surprise, or the flow. Is that part of the reason to have the distance? Otherwise, one gets high and forgets about the situation or oneself?

I suppose so. If you keep the five per cent you can redirect it.

What do you do when you lose the flow?

Well, one of many strategies, I suppose: rest and breathe; sink down into my sensations; come back to the beginning of something small; leave... I suppose I would tend to come back to my sensations. But that word 'flow' – you used that word 'flow'. I think for me **rupture** is equally as important as **flow**.

Political Dimensions of Improvisation

Do you define your work in terms of a certain kind of aesthetic?

Well, my own aesthetic. I don't have a name for it. I want people to look at the dancing. I think years ago I thought that I have something to say to dance. Like all these funny bits are part of dance. And all the half-finished things, and the weird lumpy bits, and the bits that never end, and the things that never start. You know, everything is something if you give it attention.

I had a really big mission, to tell the dance world what dance could be. And I still kind of feel that. I value anything about dance that has attention. I don't have a preference for a high leg or a low leg. Or a short leg or a long leg. If it's with attention, it's interesting.

But I don't think about that any more. With the environment work, with the work outside in these devastated places here, I have felt like dance needs to say something serious. And I feel like I have something to say to the world now – not just to dance. And that's to do with the mess that we're in, and this human environment disaster. You know, Australia has the second-highest extinction rate in the world. And it's still doing everything to make it worse. And a lot of dance is still kind of feel-good and all that. And well, there's nothing wrong with that, but what I need to do is to use dance to speak to the world.

That's taken me a long time. A lot of visual artists talk about their world view and I think dancers don't talk about it much. It all comes, I suppose, from ballet. I think we – dance people – are really late to become artists. How do I reflect the way I experience the world in dance?

Perhaps I'm just trying to forge links with the way I experience the world. That's really shifted my aesthetic.

Maybe it takes that long for dancers to become artists!

The trouble with dance is we are first in our bodies! Then you learn to just reproduce the forms that you've learned and they get stuck in your body! You have to work against them, though, to find the art.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

I think in terms of the dance methodology it is empowering dancers, artists, to love it... to find the joy in it. That sounds really simple but a lot of dancers don't experience much joy. They just feel like it's a chore, and they've got to measure up, and they've got to fit in, and they've got to make a career, and all this shit. You know, we sort of lose the point of the practice, of the art, and the form. So I feel like it's really important. It's great for me when people enjoy the work and feel like it gives them a motivation to dance – to keep dancing.

Would you say your practice is political?

I think when I started trying to find a way for dance to respond to the state of Australia, and particularly the state the environment – the nature – is in, I didn't know how to make it political. I started sort of trying to collide the processes together: reading a lot about what was happening, and going out into the bush, and then coming back to the studio and dancing. And then going back out again, and writing articles to the newspaper, and then going dancing again. And I started to sort of develop a process for myself. Because it always works like that for me. I have to find the process to make the work. I am still in that, I suppose: How do they [the politics and the dancing] intersect without mimicking, without representing, without being didactic?

I think the body can communicate a lot through dance. And I don't want words to dominate, because they do everywhere. And I think that actually is counter to what I am trying to do. The body is really important. And dance is a really important medium. And we still haven't – she hasn't – really grown up yet. It's still emerging as an art form that can stand on its own two feet, that doesn't have to be explained by story or sort of filled in by some other medium. You go to music, you don't expect someone to get up and describe to you what the music is, or do a dance to explain it! I've always felt that dance should be able to stand on her own. I do come from that kind of purist aesthetic really, so this political work that I'm doing now still has that influence in a way. I don't want to replace the dance with words. That would not work for me. Or politically – because I think it is about the body.







































The Right Word in the Right Line



Interview with

Julyen Hamilton

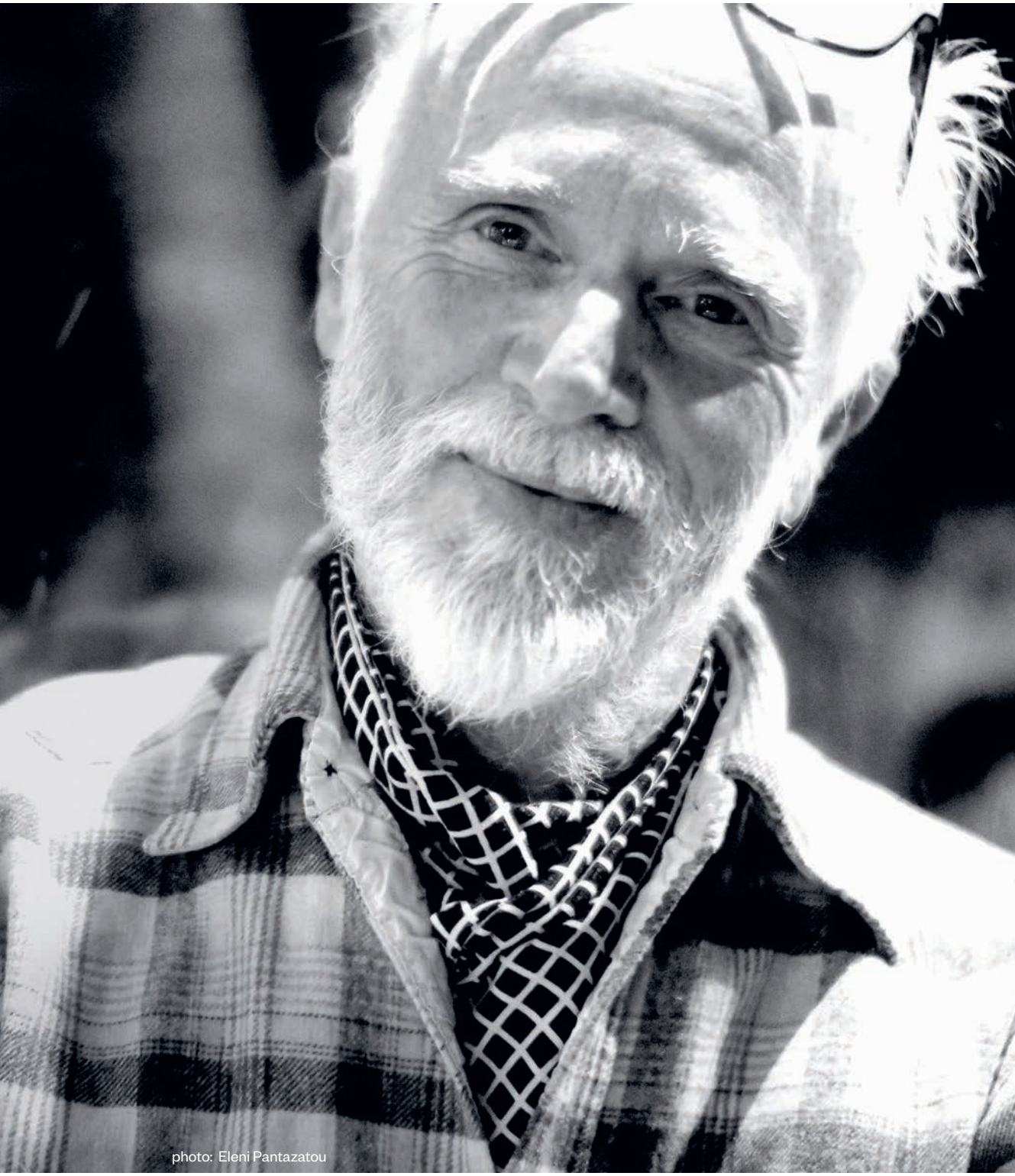


photo: Eleni Pantazatou

Julyen Hamilton, originally from England, is a dancer, poet, musician and teacher now based in Spain and Greece. For nearly 50 years, Hamilton has been engaged in creating pieces on and for the stage, whether as a solo artist or in collaboration with other dancers, musicians and artists from other fields, and as a director of Allen's Line – the Julyen Hamilton Company. He and his company perform regularly, with their latest works being the solo 'Koan' and 'Child of Day – piercing naiveté'.
Julyen Hamilton has a long history of cooperation with the region of Czechia and Slovakia. His first workshop for Czech and Slovak professional dancers took place in Bratislava in the early 1990s. Between 2000 and 2024, he has been invited many times to teach at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. He has also been approached by various collectives (CreWcollective, Studio Alta) and festivals (ImproEvents Prague, VS Interpretation) to perform and teach in Prague.

The interview with Julyen took place in person on 20 February 2022 after a four-day workshop for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

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Dance Improvisation as Artistic Practice

Do you use the term 'improvisation' to describe your practice?

This depends on to whom I'm speaking. I don't often talk a lot about improvising, but I have nothing to hide about it. I prefer, in the world of dancing and performing, that the work is taken for the resonance and the power of what is happening on stage. And how one arrives at that form, those forms, is my own creative concern.

I tend to be a little bit hesitant to mention this. Because, in my experience, focusing on the way in which we make can easily become used as an avoidance of actually having a direct relationship towards what is made.

Having said that, in this context, yes, I improvise. That's what I do. Although I've done it for so long, and it has always seemed so obvious that I did it without even really knowing the term. So it feels a little bit strange to call it that, because we were doing that anyway, of course. In the theatre, it has another term, which every single actor in cinema or theatre uses, which is to ad lib. It just came as a certain surprise at the moment when people said, 'Oh, you're **an improviser**?' I just make pieces. It is my joy to make them like that. And very simply, why do I improvise? Because I make better material when I improvise. And the moment that I would make better material from setting, I would set it.

In the writing of my poetry, most of it's set, because I feel I make better material in this way.

What is improvisation for you?

Well, it's joy. It's a joy of making, every creative moment is improvised. Even if you follow a formula, the moment you make it, it is improvised, because it's action and you've never done that action before. So, in a way, improvising and the moment of creativity are synonymous.

Of course, different people's ways of working seem to celebrate the instantly composed, and certain other ways of working seem to celebrate a long time of reflection and adjustment. One of my favourite poets, the dear Mr [Leonard] Cohen, would spend ten years getting the right word in the right line. But I still maintain that the moment he selected the right word was an improvised moment, even if it took ten years to get there, because that's... it just comes up and it is, and no amount of organising can make that.

It's that joy, whether you wait ten years or whether it just comes out in the immediacy of the first performance. And I think in improvising, when you go into it deeply, certain other areas fall away; certain other wishes to command and organise through a certain mentality just fall away. You have to work at having a modus operandi, which makes your best material.

The superior material that you've made this way, can you say in what way is it superior?

Oh, it's like the quiche Lorraine comes out of the oven and it's like, 'Oh I've made a good one tonight. I made a good one,' and everyone just looks at it and goes, 'Yeah.' There's both lots of little details and the completeness.

When something is working, I think there's a spontaneous release that comes from it. It's engaged you and you've engaged with it. And that's quality. And I don't think it has very much often to do with whether you like it. And that is what's so beautiful about art of a certain quality; it doesn't necessarily attract through the parameters of what you may like. And that is a wonderful moment when you're led beyond those parameters, which we all have, personally, culturally.

Can you describe your improvisation practice? And how do you feel it is unique?

I think everybody's improvisation practice is unique. And that is because everybody's way is unique. The practice changes with the piece. The practice changes obviously with your age, and the years, and the decades. But it also often changes with the piece that you're making.

For a number of years, I worked with Mark Tompkins, an American choreographer who lived in France for many years. He was very able, both in what one could call set choreography and in improvising. His process was very different with each piece.

What I do is, I make. I love to make. I'm always making, and I love that moment, I make CDs, I make vases, I make music. I mean, I love to make. I make classes. And we make interviews! I just love to make, I'm a maker. I understand the urge to make. Make peace, make confusion, make crime. I mean, why do people love the crime? Because it's creative and they're making, you know. So I feel the practice is one of a maker

And, of course, dealing with the parameters of society in which one is making!

Hence the love of improvising is making?

Absolutely. The last few years, I've been very, very busy doing a lot of woodwork. And it's wonderful because there's a huge new breed of people all over the place who are making and sharing how to make. I mean, the YouTube is full of people doing crochet, knitting, doing woodwork, doing metalwork, all sorts – sharing what they know and inspiring others. These are old crafts, new professions, and the knowledge of doing it and the different ways of doing it is being shared instantly. Most of those videos are people doing that thing for the first time, filming it and sharing it. It is an explosion of making. There's a huge fluidity and energy in it, which I see as a wonderful phenomenon. And, of course,

in our time [Covid-19 pandemic], people have suddenly had this enormous field of time in which people become, let's say, sourdough experts, which could now be a metaphor: 'Oh yes, I twist sourdough.' And I think it has allowed people to be both practical and playful again, because a lot of making and doing had to come and is overly serious. I mean, the capitalist world is so overly serious with experts. And then we found we had too many experts, so now all the... many people in a lot of jobs have no idea; they have longer titles, but they have no idea what their responsibilities are. Chronically.

Becoming an Improviser

What was your journey to improvisation?

I was in a school play (I did all the school plays) when I was eight. A lot of text learning. And I had, in that instance, the main part. And the first scene was, one of the teachers played this part, she had to read to me and I fell asleep. She got very nervous before the performance, and went to the toilet and didn't come out. Well she did, but then it was too late. And my friend, André Ptaszynski, who was playing the Frog Footman, came in on stage, because I was supposed to be asleep, and the cue didn't happen. And he bent over and said very quietly something like, 'She's still shitting herself, you better get up and get on with it.' And I suddenly felt that a world had opened up.

And I realised that when you are on stage and you often have to solve something, because somebody gave you a cue that was two scenes too early – there are people who close a bit but manage to solve it. But I went, 'Okay, now you're talking!' I had found my element.

Was there a moment you decided improvisation was your discipline, or tool, or space?

I made a lot of pieces of set material. I used to be very good and very quick at making set material. And I could make it for the early pieces of the company. I would just go in and make it, and I could remember it.

More and more, the proportions of set to improvised material changed until I was preferring to let only the instantly made material constitute the piece. Having trained the ability to set and remember material, I think, is significant. Handling set material over and over again trains senses of composition and phrasing – so useful in the mode of making instantly.

In the late 1970s, I worked with a wonderful choreographer, Rosemary Butcher. And she made her pieces through allowing us immediately to respond to her instructions. And I was completely at ease with that from day one. Totally

trusted it, and she totally trusted me, which is the other 60 per cent of it. Because it gave me confidence. And that was basically when I started dancing, nearly. I was 20. This was early on, and it just felt like that was the bit of dancing where it was alive. Something was nearly secretly alive. It kind of asked something of me that was what I wanted to be.

Was that the moment you started training in this discipline?

I never trained in it. I never took improvisation classes. And I've never done an improvising workshop. I felt it as a talent and a voice, so I went deeply into it as a discipline and a way of making and performing.

It was the same for me becoming a solo performer. You don't become, you don't choose to become a soloist; you either are or not. And being a soloist is... it's not just choreography for one, it's a completely different interest and action. That's why every young dancer should make a solo to find out if they are that, if that interests them or not.

So I think I always knew how to do it. Which is what you should try and find in your life somehow, to do what you were always good at. Of course, you train and it develops; there's a discipline and a dedication over years.

When you realise that you can actually improvise, then you let go of a certain naivety towards it. And you place a demand on it, which is very serious, because you sign the contract with that gut instinct. At that moment, you step over into a sort of professionality. You lose a certain naivety and you advance towards a maturity. And that's a lot of work. These are the steps of an age of innocence, an age of experience, and then the mature state, according to William Blake. And that takes a kind of a bit of a courage because you lose the first state as you go.

I think it's a case of what gets you excited. Making something spontaneously? Or do you get excited by the planning of it, and the details of it, and training to be able to do those details and going over them many times? Fantastic. A different world from mine, but I totally respect it. There's no easy road, in a way.

Maybe I never studied improvising except through many performances with other improvising dancers and musicians – and in my own classes. By teaching, you study. I'm really glad to have been able to like teaching. I've learned and am constantly learning in my classes. So, in that way, that's my study. And I'm not talking about learning from the students; I'm talking about actual revelations that come, because in the face of others who want to know, things can focus deeply, arriving often further along the road of discovery and understanding and ability.

You mentioned 'the laws' a couple of times in the workshop. What are your laws?

I think the laws are just the physical laws, the physical laws of science, the physical laws of how societies, how people tend to be, how they are – gravity, speed, acceleration, the act of touch, the 'now', the quantum laws beneath the Newtonian ones. And I find those more interesting, more severe and yet more generous than rules. Maybe it's my grandfather's telling me that the rules were for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men. I believed him, and I think he was right somehow. They are just a guidance. And if you have a wisdom, it doesn't mean that you can just break all the rules, but they can guide you. But if you can't get to that level, then you just have to follow them. Whereas the laws... one is humble before a law. That's not even a humility that you can have pride over, but it's just something immensely bigger than ourselves. So to give in to gravity is not a great humility. It's what happens. This takes us back to Mr [Steve] Paxton, and the beautiful work of the Contact [Improvisation], and his work before and after Contact, where he has always been busy with dealing with the physical laws. And my teacher, Bob Cohen, he was a scientist and biologist. He had the mind of a scientist who accepts and challenges in order to get closer to the laws of nature. It's an amazing discipline, science. Scientists can be amazing. They dare to imagine other ways of imagining nature, to put it simply.

Is your insistence upon participation very related to the laws?

Absolutely. Firstly, we are in the situation on Earth with its physical laws; then we can choose to be in the theatre situation, and play fully in that situation. Theatre is where everyone is allowed, and everything is allowed to be said, and all feelings and all situations are allowed, like in the world but without the rules that enforce a certain reaction to certain actions. It's amoral and therefore is a big responsibility, a huge possibility to really see what's going on. Because you don't have a moral layer. It's amoral. And I think when you let go of the rules, yes, you start seeing how things are, how they work. And that's of course dynamic and changing, not fixed by static rules.

Is your focus on knowing where the floor is actively participating in the gravitational forces?

Absolutely. And you can see all of these things when you go into the laws, they issue out, into metaphor, into the imagination, into the fantasy. If you don't go in, these things seem separate. There's the imagination. And then there's the laws of nature. But if you go into the laws of nature, you come out with wings on your feet. Where do you think the wings on the feet came from? It's from participation. The dream of that came from participation.

I learned this very early on because of the woman with whom I first started dancing; her husband was a virologist. And he was working with [James] Watson and [Francis] Crick, in the gallery and in the laboratories in Cambridge, to put it simply, discovering DNA, discovering the helix. And, finally, that realisation came from a dream, from allowing not only the participation of the rational but also other senses and perceptual abilities we have. This is also why I go into the laws, because they always work for everyone. The moment we go into them, things flower.

Since that moment when you realised that you are in the realm of improvisation, what has the journey been from then on?

Well, first of all, it was practical. And one of the practicalities was how to get the work out there. And how to let it be seen and how to name it. And how to design a situation where you're not fighting the battles you don't want to fight. One significant moment was with the making of the solo *40 Monologues*. I had done many improvisations in different situations. And at one moment I went, okay, I want to do something with the support of a title, so I'm going to make a piece called *40 Monologues*. And it's going to last me at least ten years because there are going to be 40 performances. And I'm going to call the first monologue 'no. 1'. And the second one 'no. 2', so that even if you only saw one of them, you knew it was a part of 40.

The phone didn't stop ringing. Suddenly I had put a handle on it, not just for myself but also for the programmers. I did them three a night, a 60-minute show. I did them all over the place. And at that moment, that was a significant step, because I was linking the action of improvising with the action of celebrating that these are three pieces that you see at that moment. After a hundred, it got a bit embarrassing because, you know, what's the name of your piece? Well, it's called *40 Monologues*, 'no. 63', 'no. 64' and 'no. 65'. And when I got to *40 Monologues* 'no. 98', 'no. 99' and 'no. 100', I thought, I think I better stop now, I did a hundred of them.

I also gave myself the brief never to feel that I couldn't repeat myself. So if material came up again, I would not censor it. I didn't ask myself to be different each time. I really opened it up and let it be what it was and what it was constantly becoming.

What I found was, when giving myself that freedom, all the pieces became individual, and that really astonished me. I gave myself that freedom and that actually put me in a situation where each one could become unique.

There's a kind of paradox. But I think that naming it was a big step. And I stood for that.

In addition to this, in the programme I actually said 'choreographed by'. That was because I found a definition of choreography in an old French dictionary,

which I still think is marvellous. It was 'the person who takes care of everything that moves on stage'. Takes care of everything that moves. This felt absolutely natural to me, because at the same time in these pieces I was working a lot with decor and objects. And I knew that when we moved an object, this was just as much choreography as when you moved an arm or altered the line of the back, and it didn't talk at all about whether it was improvised or not. It did not place the concepts of set and improvised work against each other, and I felt I could breathe creatively with that distinction. Choreography took care of that which moved on stage.

'Taking care of' is the best and most total of actions, whether you do that in response to the spontaneity of the moment or because you've rehearsed it for three, four or five months.

And how did the decor and objects come to be?

When I finished my training, I went into the studio to choreograph. I felt I wasn't very good at it. It didn't come easily or naturally. I was working with a percussionist, and he knew what to do with his music-making. It was tough because I had done a wonderful training and danced with the most fabulous of dancers. And then I didn't know how to make.

I was very sad. So I went home and made a box. Because I had never made a box. So I made a box, a very beautiful box, remarkably elegant, I still have it. And I went to the rehearsal and I put the box down. And as soon as I put the box down, I knew what to do in the space – in the space close by the box and in the space at a distance from the box! And then a little bit of choreography came, not very much. But then I could go to the box and lift it up, and put it in the other hand, and put it down the other side. And then from there I knew exactly what to do.

It was something in my practical nature that put me in this ordinary situation. And I know exactly how choreography is linked to something ordinary, and my body needed this.

When was this?

1980. And of course that developed, because you put things in a box. And then you open the box and you take them out. And of course I made a little folding chair which I could sit on or not. And I had a little rubber glove that pointed. And a piece of wood, so I could move it in the hand, and suddenly it was very dramatic. And I had a comb shaped like a fish. And so it was evident for me, I could say, 'This is a fish, and the audience could think, 'This is not a fish, it's a comb,' and we'll both be right. So, suddenly, there was a whole event on stage, a whole choreography of mind, of poetry.

And then once that was there, I knew how to get up, and then I knew exactly where to go and what to do. It gave me a spatial orientation, it gave me a ground in the ordinariness and in the absurdity. And the theatre allowed this and fed from it.

Looking at this journey of your practice, where is your focus right now?

I am constantly making solos, and in them there is a development of all the verbal work. I write a lot of poetry and practise making poetry instantly. This means that the verbal poetry and dancing are naturally living together. That's in the solo work. And in the group work, it's to share what I've developed as solo abilities with the members of Allen's Line. After ten or eleven years we've been working, I have a great set of colleagues. Which is wonderful. The members of my company are very fine. They've trained, they've dedicated themselves, and this work being made by us is now growing a lot. A couple of years ago, we got to the point where whatever the show was like, it was always a certain level. And this was a wonderful moment.

Do you dance with your dancers when you prepare a new piece?

Absolutely. I usually have this particular vision or this desire for a new vision to come into concrete form. And we uncover what it is, what the piece is. And then we silently or verbally share little revelations about it. We each take notes. And when we come back again, when they get together again, one will say, 'Oh, Julyen, you said this at the end of the last rehearsal,' or 'Oh, now I see what you mean by this,' and we can just feel whether that comment is like scaffolding to be taken down later in the process, or whether it's a seed to be planted and allowed to grow. And through this, we arrive to the piece. And that's very delicate; we say nearly nothing about it.

I give them notes. And I try to turn the notes into a very practical, technical work. I try to find the technique for each piece, and I'm talking about the physical technique. In one piece, we'll do a lot of work from the back. And I'm just going to the technique of what is in the back, knowing that when that's right, the theatre of the piece will always work. And there's always a part of the body or a way in which the body is being conceived that is pertinent to the expression of that piece.

But it's not a theme. It is an experience and a focus. It's a trusting that if I focus on my back, the theatre of that piece will come out. But it's not about the back. So it's not a score, it's not a theme. You have to go into it and forget that you're doing that, then it works. If you have it as a score, it doesn't work because it starts to be a theme that you might be trying to get yourself back to, rather than go out into through the present and the arriving future.

That's why I personally have difficulty with themes and scores, because they seem the wrong direction. I want something that I can go out from in any direction, not something that is parameters that I have to keep in, or even an idea that I have to keep in my mind.

Even in an improvised solo, you can lose the piece. Jackson Pollock mentioned this. He said, 'When I'm doing the painting, sometimes I lose the painting.' He also subsequently said, 'but it doesn't really matter if I lose it, because you know something about it.' It's like a little angel or devil on your shoulder: it directs. It's the animal, it's the anima of the piece, the spirit, and once we get the anima of the piece, then we can do that piece in that time, in that place. Because we will know how to go into the anima, and the anima will direct the piece.

And then you would work on that piece for some time?

We are able to perform the same piece multiple times. This ability to perform an improvised piece many times started with the solo *Cell*. I never repeated pieces. And one night, I did a piece called *Suite: Cell*. And after the piece, I was very touched by it. I woke up and the piece sort of tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'You have to do me again.' And I said, 'I'm not doing that. No, I'm not going to do that piece again.' And it insisted. So I had to find a way of repeating the same piece, which was an improvisation, without having a score. It took years to develop that technique. So now I can share that with Allen's Line.

Do you define your work in terms of a certain aesthetic? How would you describe it?

Aw, just come along and see. And clap like sugar afterwards! And then buy me a drink!

The Practice and Language of Teaching

When you do and teach your practice, do you have a fixed terminology or methodology?

My interest is not to teach improvisation. I'm an improviser because it's a way of being creative. Personally, it's pertinent. And I noticed it's very pertinent in the world now. So I have nothing to deny. My teaching work has formed itself into certain areas: the overall title is 'Theatre Works' and the sections are: 1) the space issue; 2) working with time; 3) working with objects; 4) voice and text work; 5) working with music and musicians.

My centre of attention is composition and making things. They are all areas, actions, abilities, tools, which help us in our composing, whether that is instant composing or pre-written composing.
I want people to take joyfully and seriously the action of creativity.
That revelatory moment.

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

Both can be seen as the act of deciding movements in form, configuration... and arrangement in space and context. For me, improvising is the act of choreographing in the very moment of action and performance.
Maybe for some, choreography is a set of choices which take a longer time to be made, longer than choices made in the moment, especially in the moment of performance.
When improvising, we are making choices; we are composing or choreographing. It might be that the mind is concerned at moments on the whole overall compositional context of the work... or might be more focused on the micro view of the action second by second. I have trained myself to be focused on both micro and macro awarenesses when improvising.
Choreography for me is the act of taking care of all the elements which move on stage... decor, objects, people dancing, musicians moving.

Do you use the word 'choreography'?

Yes, I do. To signify that someone (the choreographer) is taking full responsibility for the movement performed. And sometimes no. When I wish to say things in a more Saxon and simple way – 'made by'.

Do you use the word 'score'?

I never use the word [for my work] as I don't consider it as a useful concept personally. It seems to be a maybe a good starter but then mostly causes blocks once the creativity has any momentum... and anyway, I have never needed a 'starter' to stimulate my creativity.

When improvising on stage, do you work with imagery, and if so, what kind, and how do you use it?

For me, all actions on stage (be they improvised or preset) are being done and sensed with regard to the imagery which emanates from them. The very action of stepping on stage involves the perception of imagery at its radical and living level. The actor perceives these images and allows the public to sense them as well.



Of course, our business as creative artists involves imagery and the imagination. Both the actor's and the public's.

On stage we train and develop the ability to be aware and to handle imagery; our work is to notice it arriving from and alongside the physical activity of the performance.

I feel there are so many kinds of imagery: sonic, graphic, historic, human, animal, political, literary, verbal, spatial, sensual, kinaesthetic, rhythmic, tonal, communal, personal, geographic, objective, cultural.

Action leads to imagery and images lead to action. And really I have little idea which might come first.

How does your teaching influence your improvising or creating?

When you propose, and you put forward things, to a group of 25 intelligent people, you can see immediately where something is not focused, not clear. I try to make notes, to catch some of the spontaneous jewels which come out. It's constantly evolving. And of course, it's also evolving because of the years, when even more so because with every new generation, they already have certain skills, which are different skills. So there's certain things that I don't teach any more.

Two times, I've let go of about 60 per cent of my teaching tools, because they were not needed any more; I had to reduce it to what was really necessary of essence.

I have always taught how to observe. Observe as a maker and performer and also as an audience.

All theatre action is in the context of the audience perceiving it; no action is on its own, and in being observed the action has a fullness. Which can lead us beyond its simple nature to something deeper, maybe closer to a truth.

A theatre performer is required not only to observe themselves, the society around them, the times and history in which they live, but also to notice and be present in the moments when their work onstage is being observed by the audience. Because audience/observers, along with performers, make what is presented onstage more than simply the actions which are rehearsed and decided upon and presented.

It is demanding to live in the world and to observe. Not simply because observation is difficult but because of what one sees. I get overwhelmed sometimes. And I think we all do. It is our time; it's an overwhelming time.

I feel the luck of being able to teach, that I have a place where I can try to handle something of what is really going on. Not just as artists but as artists who are in this world now.

This is why people love to study things, because you feel you're going somewhere. It's not just that you accumulate knowledge, it's sort of like hope, but I don't think it's hope, it's a forwardness. It's something that just comes alive. And you feel there's a future, not this future or that future or even a better future, just an 'ongoingness' where perhaps life's depths can resound.

It's having a direction.

It's having a direction, it's feeling that even if you can't quite see the direction, the direction will come at the moment you need to step through the fog.

The Practice of Performance

What are you busy with in the moment of improvising on stage? Where is your awareness?

I'm a performer. I love to be on stage; I'm at home on stage. And that is more important to me than if it is improvising or performing set material.

It is a love of a certain disposability, of a certain availability, to listen and to make something, to put something in a realm where more is made from it. To enter

the space where you and the audience are listening through the imagination. And because that is live, one is obliged to improvise with it to some extent. My awareness is working and alert on multiple levels. The second, the phrase, the section of the piece, the whole of the piece, the others on stage... the audience. The main focus moves all the time but is always accompanied by these other secondary foci. And for this, the mind and the body and the feelings are all being used fully all the time.

When performing, do you have a meta-awareness, an external eye through which you observe yourself? How much do you direct yourself when you improvise?

I think you use all of your abilities. At any moment, any of those abilities are ready, and not one of them is more profound than another. And maybe one moment you see yourself in the mirror. Maybe in another moment you space out like a hallucination.

There is such a range of awarenesses and perceptions that my way is just use anything that helps us, anything that helps, and nothing is of no value. Some things are more pertinent to the moment but all is of value.

So how do you gain access to, and use, different tools and awarenesses without disturbing what's going on?

The more you work, the less you are disturbed by things. You can actually sit down and absolutely see yourself in the larger situation... the year, and the week, and you go, 'I'm in Helsinki again. I'm in the middle of a solo. I wonder how Danny is doing.' And you can let yourself go there without it disturbing the piece that's being made. And this is wonderful, but it comes from letting yourself use any of those techniques.

We were taught always in our teaching classes at The Place (LSCD), you could never take a notebook into your classes. I always had a notebook in front of me. But the guiding thing is, does it help you or disturb you from the piece?

How do you warm up or prepare for a performance?

Pertinently. Pertinent to the piece, pertinent to the day, pertinent to the feelings, pertinent to the practicalities.

I will use anything that could connect and engage me deeply. Certain breathing exercises, or it could be taking a walk. There was a whole period where I was writing and would write in the dressing room, notes or a poem or something, maybe nothing to do with the piece, simply the action of writing. Other times, I would love to have a hot shower right before the performance. Anything that felt like that was how to do it tonight.

Do you choose what to perform on the night of the performance?

No, not any more. I just go into this particular place and it's all there. And this is also happening when I'm playing the piano. And it's very strange because I don't practise piano very much, but very often when I come again, after a few months, to play with this bass player, or recently with Maya M. Carroll's husband, Roy Carroll, I hadn't played for weeks. And we had a recording session. And he said after, 'It's good. You've been practising.' And it's not that I haven't been practising on one level. But I notice that doing what you like to do is practice. And there's a moment in the ageing body where it's very important to practise and do what you'd like to do. Because the body doesn't have a double amount of energy or focus. And if you deeply enjoy doing what you're doing, whether it's the washing-up or the garden, or going for a walk in the park, this is constantly informing your body's wisdom, which is what will be used in the performance.

You don't want the muscles too flabby. So there's a few push-ups, maybe a little bit of a sit-up. And that's more for the physical imagination or the actual dexterity.

It's wonderful to arrive at this place. Because I've always felt that it would be possible when I saw the musicians. And it's not that they don't practise, but they have something that they were immediately ready and dexterous. And I just thought this was really a beautiful state.

What do you do in the moments right before you start performing?

My feeling is that there's no time to be ready. Except when you're performing, you don't want to be ready beforehand. In fact, if you feel that you're ready five minutes beforehand, you haven't timed it well enough. If you feel just as the lights go down before performance that you're ready, then you're too early. But as the lights come up, that's the time to be ready, and more and more it's anything that will help that timing. And that's, I think, the time for me; the timing is important. Sometimes at four o'clock, you can feel ready. And that's really dangerous. And with the company, for instance, if we do a little bit of moving together, say at four or five o'clock for an eight o'clock show, and it starts to swing, I have to say, 'Oh okay, turn it off now. Don't blow it now.' Tonight is the time.

What do you do when you lose the flow?

Oh, I just make stuff. If there's anything profound, the doorway to it is often the superficial. Just do something, do a few steps or just do one step and then if it doesn't work, then just do it again, or you do it on the other side. Or you just look at it not being done and then do something as opposed to being retractive, or do nothing, but not retractively.

When I lose the flow? Nothing special to do. You do... nothing... special. Yeah, so don't catch yourself trying to do something special.

Political Dimensions

Do you feel that improvisation is connected to politics?

Yes, I think everything you do with your body is connected to politics. I think the body is the political instrument; it is the house of politics.

And therefore, if you have a philosophy, which allows wisdom to come in, manifest and really go, this is deeply political. If you sense the political as something outside the body that you could never get to, it puts your body out of communication, 'excommunicado', and therefore very vulnerable to politically constructed ideas and ideologies. The act of improvising, of seeing that something is being made right exactly at that moment, and knowing you are participating in it, is political. Not politicised, but political.

It comes with a lot of responsibility, I think. Hopefully it's empowering rather than disempowering.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

A good evening out, a little bit of joy even when there's tragedy, a little bit of ludic playfulness, even while it's deadly serious, a little bit of seeing how high the human spirit can go and how ordinary and muddy and pretty smelly and nothing it is, as well.

But, deeper than this, our theatre allows us collectively to experience beyond what we might experience alone. In the experience being shared in the instant, it grows to larger and clearer dimensions than it might ever do on the page or in rehearsal.

This collective experience of the 'gathered crowd' and performers can transform the larger mind and hearts of all who are present.

And... I think it comes with a lot of trust.

This is one of the deepest things for me in the work, developing what is trust. Not belief. But what is trust? Many years ago, I spoke with Steve [Paxton], and I said, 'What are you doing in your work?' He said, 'We're practising love.' And if somebody said, what are we doing? I think we're practising trust. And we are. At least, I know we can make that trust, and I know we can also break it. But the issue is, nevertheless, how to engender trust and to work with that trust. And this is very active and it's very physiological.

On stage there's no time to hope that it's going to be right; you have to be with the moment, the instant, with trust. The moment you lose that trust, its

power retracts. Its power to extend and resound diminishes. So, I think very often, this is deeply what we're working on. And therefore, politically, it touches much pedagogy, teaching, philosophy, which is often based on a lack of trust, which is based on not trusting the children, which is based on not trusting that things can work out in their own way. Without any trust, regulation enters in order to secure the result, to be sure. And the whole openness closes and enlightenment is reduced.

No, if you don't regulate, then give something of deep, deep, deep worth. But you have to trust that, and that's not hope. And I've seen it again and again and again. When the trust is broken, wonderful philosophy and even fantastic ideas of great worth are turned into dogma. Rubbish turning to dogma doesn't really matter in one sense, but worthy stuff being turned into dogma through a lack of active trust... that's pretty tragic. But it's a work to keep fresh to that. To keep fresh within all the situations.

































Not A Purist



Interview with

Wendy Houstoun



Wendy Houstoun is an independent British artist who has been making work for theatre, dance and performance since 1980. For the last 42 years, she has been creating pieces both as a member of a collective (for example, DV8 Physical Theatre) and as a solo author. She is also a theatre director and teacher. As a solo author and performer, Houstoun has developed a unique style combining movement with text and meaning with humour. Wendy Houstoun has a rich history of performing in the post-Soviet regions since 1989, and in Central Europe, including the Czech scene. She has performed several times in Prague. For example, her solo performances were presented as part of the 4+4 Days in Motion Festival (2002) and Tanec Praha Festival (2012), and she has been invited several times to teach at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (2013) and the ImproEvents Prague festival (2012).

The interview with Wendy took place online on 28 October 2021 before the four-day workshop for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (which took place in March 2022).

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Improvisation as Artistic Practice

Do you use the term 'improvisation' to describe your practice?

I usually say it's a part of my practice. It's a route to making, as opposed to a performative result. I use the term, but I don't describe myself as a hardcore improviser, as in people that go on stage and say they're improvising.

What is the approach to improvisation in your practice?

It's become clear when I'm teaching that I use improvisation with a view towards settling the material, with a view to making. The endeavour of playing with ideas, throwing things up in the air, seeing where they land, is there to provoke material that you discuss and evolve into a pattern – and that you think is useful and repeatable to a degree. It very much depends on what you fix.

Among improvisers, it feels as if there's an aversion to fixing, some suspicion about fixing, as if it's sort of fascist. But you can fix cues in and out of something. The degrees of flexibility within the settling are quite wide but [you're] still trying to articulate shape, rhythm, arcs of material, phrasing – journeys towards something and away from it, or letting things grow and diminish. [It is] sort of evolving shapes that contain you, something that will contain as opposed to a continuous avenue. I tend to think of it as a route to really attend to things. As a performer, I'm not a fan of going on stage not knowing anything, because my mind is in the wrong place.

What is improvisation to you?

Such a wide range really. People are very obsessed with the question, 'Were you making that up at the time?'

The present-tense nature of improvisation is sort of there in every performance, whether or not the material is fixed. The obsession with whether it's arriving to you in that moment, and to what degree it's arriving to you in that moment, is the quality of improvisation to me.

Generally, when people talk about improvisation, I feel like they're talking about just going on [stage] and making it up: 'I didn't know what was gonna happen, I went on stage and everything just happened, I didn't know what it was going to be.'

For me, it's much more of a performative thing about freshness, aliveness. You could have incredible structure, for example ballet, and that can be improvised in the sense of your attack into the movement, that it is daring, a brand-new thing, and that's in very tight movement. Or it can be, 'Okay, go on stage. See what happens.' Or a set of structures, usually hidden rules. I mean, everyone has rules. Even the last couple of weeks making a new work, it's improvising, it is just

making something up. Just make it up, and then look at it and decide if you like it or not.

I do tend to always assume things are moving towards a performance. I am quite traditional and old-fashioned in my idea of what performance is, which is generally proscenium arch. Or it could be a film, but, you know, it's dealing with [the] audience in a very traditional sense because it's for communication purposes, as opposed to all about my experience. While within movement there's an experiential quality for me, everything that I do is generally gearing up towards how it can communicate most effectively. So it kind of tends to have that drive, which is why I say I tend to use improvisation towards settling material and towards this really quite traditional performative place.

It's ultimately about how you can give the impression of making something up, of it being very live. There's a level of fakery that I'm quite interested in. Or you can analyse what decision-making is and recreate the rhythm of decision-making as an improvised structure. So it looks like the performer is making a choice on stage. It looks like it's about improvisation, but it's an analysed quality that you can reconstruct. There's probably some kind of analysis of what constitutes the moment you decide to do something, and the moment it grows as an idea, and the moment it's done, as dealing with a lot of internal private space with [the] public. The ways things shift from having an idea to do it, to doing it, to getting bored with it – when things fade away, when they drop. In a way, it's kind of looking at maybe experiential movement, kinds of improvisations, but analysing what the constituents are and constructing them as a kind of artifice.

You can play out having an idea. Doing it, getting it wrong, failing, going back and having another go. So that becomes slightly play-acted, I guess, but still, it is not about the drive becoming a really fixed and known and tight place, but how you can let the qualities of improvisation feed into a relatively secure performance that can be playful at failing and achieving and having a go and looking silly and colliding with someone or making an error. All of those function within, but, as I say, that is generally within quite a traditional stage picture.

When I work with people in a certain group, people sit out [in] the front, if they're not participating, so it's an exchange, or people move from audience into the stage picture and back again and sort of become really quite practised at it. What does this picture need or want or, actually, actively do? What doesn't it need? Kind of being quite gymnastic between a watcher and a doer position.

Actually, there's a piece we performed called *Stupid Women*, which was [working] on that premise. The performers were at the front. It started off with tasks and it is very task-based. Performers would go in and out and I would live-direct it: bang on light, sound; go in and interfere with them; encourage something, because I wanted to show how directors don't always help. You're

all stabbing around in the dark and then you see the director making something worse, and there's elements of control or encouragement. I mean, any teaching has that, and to show that, [to] have that included in the picture, as opposed to have all of that information hidden, stuff which normally happens before the thing becomes public.

When we did the piece, the general public liked it but the reviewers didn't. It's kind of interesting. I prefer that way around. It's got a high ratio of rubbish to good bits, but it's what you get.

Becoming an Improviser

What was your journey to your practice and how did you become an improviser?

I gained formal training at the London College of Dance and Drama, which doesn't exist any more in the same form. The school was part of Dartford College of Physical Education and my training was focused on pedagogy. Most of the people studied tap dance, ballet, jazz, ballroom dance, and so on. I went through all that and additionally studied pedagogy for state school drama and dance, which were at that time part of the sports department.

So, my education is kind of strange. After the school, I cooperated with Ludus Dance, which brought dance into schools. It was a dance company that created performances with theatre directors and worked as a collective, which was politically radical.

As a general journey, I think probably a lot of influences come because I've always worked half with theatre companies and half with movement practitioners. The very first works were with theatre directors who devised material with dancers. And that process was probably my first seven years of working – with the theatre director constructing a theatre piece and me working primarily as a mover within those structures. There was no language to talk about movement. The way that those pieces were constructed is probably still there in my thinking somewhere because it's my first experience – they tend to last.

How did the experience of working with theatre directors influence you?

Theatre directors are kind of more going for structure, for logic, for dramatic arcs, for a narrative, no matter how loose. They talk about a narrative, there's a sense of storytelling there, even if it's very abstract, so I think that that relationship between being a mover and finding moving models inside these quite structural formats has probably remained.

I would say Lloyd Newson's DV8 Physical Theatre is probably the most movement-focused company I've worked with. It works on a fairly narrative basis; even the early works are probably more image-based. But they still sprang from a psychological representation, or they were embodying an emotional state. It was probably around the task era, where the tasks were very succinct. For me, the early pieces were very good at identifying tasks that contained the meaning in them. That's probably the most movement-like structure I've worked in.

I've always followed a movement practice. The sort of experiential things of BMC [Body-Mind Centering®] or a ballet class. I'm quite gymnastic about what I move through in movement. I'm not a purist, that's for sure. But I still remain fascinated and still do a daily practice. For example, it might sound bizarre, but I do a physical warm-up before I write. The movement is my continuous life. And then how it finds shape and gets expressed might not even have movement, anywhere near the form. It's the principle of it.

It's kind of interesting. When I teach, it tends to be groups of people, but my making is generally solo. I mean, *Stupid Women* was quite exceptional for me. When I work with companies, it is a group work, and so my own solo making practice is really quite different and unshareable because on your own you can defer decisions.

It's almost impossible to analyse, but you're deferring a lot of decision-making till very late, because you don't have to share information. You can live with very half-baked ideas that you just have hunches about, and they can emerge at the last minute, so you're working right to the wire, really, even beyond, just because you can. So that's the solo model, which is really what I think of as my making mode. I struggle to analyse it, because it feels very tortuous and chaotic and I wouldn't like to share it with anyone, anywhere. [It] wouldn't be fair.

What about your journey from group towards solo? How did that occur?

I used to use solo work as a processing tool after working with different directors and companies. In the 1980s, I worked for a company called Lumiere & Son, then I'd spend a month just working in the studio on my own, just to know what I found out working with them. I would probably structure something. I did the same following DV8. You're influenced by the directors that you work with. They sort of surface, and you want to absorb them in your own way and that really has continued. I think in the early bit of working that process was quite frequent.

Forced Entertainment is the other company that, having worked with them, the process of working with Tim Etchells's direction, was really influential. You could see it as the polar opposite of DV8. With Forced Entertainment there is a sense there's a lot more freedom. Tim seems to put his rigour about three steps back

from the thing that you're doing. It feels like it's more in the thought processes; in a funny way, it's less free.

I'm always suspicious when people think of improvisation as free, because there's always a rule there somewhere, and it's just buried in a different place. There's always a way of getting it wrong, that's for sure. You can always look wrong in an improvisation, which lets you know there's something at play.

When you talk about working on your own as a way of absorbing and owning something that begins, is it a process of seeking rules? Or is it just owning it in the body?

I think it's just having a bit more time with it. Especially in companies, there's probably eight of you in a group, so on any given day you're going to have an hour a day on something, as opposed to on your own when you have all day to do something. And I'm just very slow to absorb things. I like to doodle about and push around the edges of things, and then come back. It's really about taking more time with something for me. It's not trying to identify something but just to recognise, notice it, enjoy it, really take a bit more time enjoying whatever you've just experienced, because things sort of sit. When they affect you, and they change you, your body enjoys doing them.

Speaking of creating and performing a solo, are you absorbing both of those positions – the director's role and the performer's?

Yeah, you are a bit split. In this last piece, *60 Acts*, I have actually created an assistant that is me. It was great to check in with myself and see where I'm going; it's really quite handy. I don't know why I haven't thought of it before, to be honest. I've worked with Matteo Fargion quite a bit and his compositional approach has been really impactful. I don't think I'm intrinsically a 'form' person, but I've always been curious about the forms other people use and how and where I can meet them and what can be of use. Not 'use', because that's not quite the right word. There's another piece I made, *50 Acts*: I had just worked with Matteo and so ended up working with things more musically than logically. It really liberated my choices and yet the piece might look more logical than previous pieces.

I'm curious about these different structuring formats and tools that go between having very little choice to very wide choice. But on your own, on a solo, you don't want too much choice, because it's hard. For instance, if you're in a tired, slow mood, you need something that's going to not let that take you over. I've ended up making structures where the momentum of them keeps me moving, drags me forward. Often, using video tracks really helps because you have to keep up with them. It's great, it propels you, in a way that's impossible if you've got all the choice.

Was there a specific moment when you realised that improvisation was an essential form of creative expression for you?

Well, I think it always was, in terms of making work. It was my route. It was the first thing I did, actually. In fact, this piece I just did is about memories. I spent a long time talking about the very first piece that we made with Ludus Dance company that went around schools. The piece was the Karen Silkwood story, about safety in the nuclear power industry. The first thing I had to do was, 'Okay, you are inspecting nuclear fuel rods, off you go. In dance.'

Was there a moment when you decided that was the way to do things?

Oh, I don't think there was any decision. It was just what we were doing: people came in and made dances with us in different ways. Probably only twice in my life have I worked with people that come in with a prepared thing, teach it to you and you have to do it. And I'm really crap at it. I'm enormously slow to learn things. I'm also very slow to forget, to be honest. So everything I've ever been taught, I can still do, just because it took me so bloody long to learn. But something about the etching into certainty, approximating, refining, becoming familiar, finding detail – making, that's what I've always known, really.

I just try it out, and maybe I'll miss, you know. You can tell when things are, as I call, written on the floor, you know. They're not on the page; they evolve through doing. And you build up the text. Even in a written form, you're building up the text on the same principle of finding a few things and then, through the etching and re-sketching of it, building it up and riffing around it, finding more things. It can have an organic but rhythmic feel to it so that you're not coming in with a 'right idea'-like thing.

What have you been primarily concerned with in the making of this last piece, *60 Acts*?

Well, it was something scheduled for last year and got pushed back [due to the Covid-19 pandemic]. It was meant to mark forty years of working, so it was straining to do this kind of arc. It's quite complex, actually. It seems to dwell quite heavily in the 80s and probably mid-90s, late 90s. And then it disappears into a haze of marketing-speak.

It's political as well; a lot was about Eastern Europe. I think because DV8 used to do its early production weeks in Budapest and Prague, there was a lot of that period of time coming up for me in that late 80s, early 90s way. And perestroika, so it's a lot about East–West, which somehow was tied together with movement.

This is kind of interesting, but it's been hard to construct. I stood on a chair with a sign saying, '41 years'. It's a little bit like being at school, and a sort of accusation of some shame, dunce's cap on. There was something interesting

about this sort of arc of movement, and the essence, flavour of the movement, and how the dynamics possibly related to the times. In one piece in the early 90s I used to run and kind of splat onto this wall, so the text ended up saying, 'I used to do run and jump at walls in cities where outside they were falling.' So just through one sentence, you're kind of tying these images together. There's something rich about it – quite complicated, I have to say, to construct.

The Practice and Language of Teaching

When you teach your practice, do you have a fixed methodology?

I think it probably has got quite fixed. When I was looking back, partly because this project was looking back, to lots of notebooks from when I was teaching twenty years ago, I realised that the structure of the class is pretty similar. I need to refresh my teaching, I thought.

Do you have a fixed terminology that you use?

I think that the things I'm aware of are the things that I tend to attribute to other people. I'm sure there's something I'm doing myself, but I just don't know what that is. Like yesterday when I was performing; afterwards I said some notes – it's a bit of a process. Then I said, no, no, it's really very you, but I don't think [about] what that bit is. And I'm quite clear.

A fair bit of terminology has evolved from Tim Etchells because Forced Entertainment discussed so much. There was a language for things. I like to credit things when I'm teaching, so that there's routes that lead to people, that I can guide them back to. Do you know Guy Dartnell? I shared teaching a workshop with him at the Jerwood Centre and I found his approach to vocal/physical work really transformative as a bodily thing. Again, not that I would ever perform it, but it extended your range; it was very much about an improvisation practice that extended your vocal range. The expressive range really joined up quite a lot things for me, so I'll use a lot of his exercises, quote, you know, source them.

At the time, because Guy worked with Improbable, he was pushing people much more towards an 'actorly' place. Since then, I've tried to push my students much more towards a 'dancerly' place. It just moves something that no amount of analysis or concentration does.

In talking about work, I often combine the stricter format that I connect with DV8 and a vocal area that I would attribute to Guy, and mix in Forced Entertainment – which can seem chaos. The mixture of approaches can hold a vast quantity of difference in the room. I'm very interested in people not



being coerced into a style. Within a room, you might have someone that's a tap dancer and whatever. I mean that people aren't trying to find a consensus of path, expression. I've got a few themes, and how they happen is a bit based on who's there in the room. So I will always talk to students a lot to begin with. They kind of define the direction, somehow. Just the stage they're at, you know; it's not a big psychological thing at all. If you've got a question on your mind, that could be useful.

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

In my quite limited experience of working with other people, it can vary: using improvisation around a theme to arrive at nuggets of good ideas, which become part of a very fixed set of actions. Or [improvisation] remains an integral part of a final presentation with cue points that are like anchors to steer through a looser kind of movement script/score.

I use improvisation as a mix. One that aims to become fixed, but fixing the thinking processes and choice-making that would come from getting the idea at the moment you are doing it. A kind of faux spontaneity – but one that remains open to inspiration and live events that need to be acknowledged (accidents, audience responses, etc.).

Do you use the word 'choreography'?

Not really. I think I imagine choreography to be a very specific skill with movement only, and I think I always move in relation to speech and rhythmic constructions.

And the word 'score'?

No. I think of 'score' being a musical thing. I think of 'scripts' more. Probably because I use speech and dramatic ideas more.

Do you work with imagery, and if so, what kind, and how do you use it?

Again, not very much. Imagery is way too poetic for me. I rarely imagine how things 'look'... but rather how they weave their way through time.

Is there something in your teaching practice you come back to regularly?

I often try to encourage people not to be interesting. The Forced Entertainment language is a lot about something that's officially happening on stage as something that's unofficially happening. This gives you these gradations between two positions: something/someone holding the space and someone pissing about or doing things that you think are not meant to be seen on stage. So, in a way, often I am trying to encourage gradations of action between these two kinds of energy use.

I think for dance, even in a sort of experiential thing, people are in one of two modes, you know. People kind of work on their own light-switch systems – they function on ten and then they switch off. I'm encouraging people that you can play with it both in yourself and in relation to others. Encouraging notions that you can cross-fade your energy with someone else, that you can be doing the same action but in kind of a way that is not competing with or fighting but supporting someone, or is maybe helpfully inappropriate, because it wants to upstage. So you're kind of playing with energy use in relation to each other, as another thing to play with.

Does your teaching influence your creative practice?

I'm trying to think of the last time I taught. It's been a while. Teaching terrifies me, absolutely terrifies me. But then I have realised everything does. But teaching especially. It looms up in the weeks before, like a trauma of some sort. And then the minute it's over I'm like, 'Oh, you know, that was great, must do it again.' I've got a feeling it might be similar for the students, actually. The last day comes with a relief that allows us all to claim that we'd love another week.

I'm always amazed at how willing people are to have a go at stuff. I do love dancers for that. It's an empty room and people are always starting from nothing, compared to actors that have so much to bring in, like a play. So my

respect for the act – that in itself is so enormous. Every response to it. My memory for people in workshops is amazing. My image of each workshop is quite thorough, when I go back. And then I don't even know if it's the stuff they're doing. The people themselves are so much part of the work somehow, or I'm part of it.

The Practice of Performance

What are you busy with in the moment you are on stage? Where is your awareness?

Well, at the moment it's trying to remember the bloody material, but because I've got this assistant, I thought, 'Oh, great, if I get blank, if I'm blank for a little bit too long, I can just call out, "Prompt", and my assistant (who is me) can help.' I think performing occupies a place between you and a place you don't know. It feels like it's a very movable place, and the attention really is in a middle space. I think that is the communication thing. You're possibly deeply in yourself but also attending to how the group of people are feeling. The attention is in some third element.

When performing, do you have a meta-awareness, or an external eye, observing yourself, or some kind of distance from what you're doing, feeling?

I think the construction contains the action, which is what allows me to perform. Otherwise, I am busy going, 'What am I doing? What are they thinking about what I'm doing? Oh, right, I forgot.' I just think if I haven't paid attention to the construction, then the performance, which is not the same as the construction, is not going to work. The performance can only be as good as the construction. It's like the construction can liberate a performance or not. That's why finding the detail and finding the arcs and shapes and rhythm that can sense 'This is going on a long time' on purpose, or 'This has just taken too long and is flagging.' Those rhythmic things and the emptying out and picking it up again. It's moving the attention around in the right proportions.

And you are doing those things in the moment of performance?

No, the construction is doing that, and you just have to do what the construction is. I say you just have to meet it. If the construction isn't going to do it, then it's quite hard to salvage something from that.

What do you do in the moments right before you start performing?

It's as if you're waiting for a cue, so I suppose I listen very attentively. [I] go strangely still. And then just go.

And what do you do when you lose the flow when you're performing?

Generally, because you want to get on, unless something really actively stops you, you're just noticing it in a super-aware way. If I get distracted by noise, it's worse if I am doing text. You have to repeat it or go back or something, or react. There is an approach I got off Nigel Charnock where you're kind of dragging in anything that happens because your brain is moving that speedily. I think it even happened yesterday. A woman sneezed, and I was in the middle of something and I went, 'Yeah. Bless you.' Actually, that was really inappropriate because the text wasn't the kind of text where I should have noticed that she was sneezing. I think that's probably what happens: you comment and absorb it either silently or an out-loud kind of thing.

Do you define your work in terms of a certain aesthetic?

I've always said I'm not a purist. 'Rough and ready,' but that slightly undermines the attention that I do put to it.

There's an atmosphere around what I do that looks casual. It gives off a casualness or an irreverence that really belies a great deal of work.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

I don't know, I wonder sometimes... In terms of teaching or performing. With teaching, I think there's something great about building up a vocabulary or ways that people can be with each other in a room, doing stuff that can absorb their own interests, absorb their own impulses, their own subject, but can do it in a way that I guess has a bit of protection around it. Certainly, in my early bits of improvising with content there was such a blurriness, especially around emotional stuff. I'm not talking about DV8. I am talking about early Ludus, where things often got driven towards conflict. Where you had drama and movement, there were always people being angry and quite nasty to each other.

The different modes and ideas I offer can help people that want to go into dramatic territories but sort of keep them playful. Keep a lightness to them, keep respect. Interestingly, Forced Entertainment were incredibly polite with each other, which is why they've lasted so long, I think. While the works might feel chaotic, there is always the formality. Even though it's wild and improvised, there still is a protection to that.

And then, performance-wise, I think it's the people. I'm always stunned when someone comes and is like, 'Oh, I really loved it, it's great.' And they're not people that go always to the theatre. I think the value of what I do now is a fair

bit about age, actually, and just generationally I was trying to articulate and question what you do with your own past if it's not something that's wanted in the world. Because it doesn't help you bloody age. Ageing is already difficult, and I wonder how you can deal with it? Quite a few people try to deal with it, either in the workplace or just in their mind, but many people very practically in the workplace. It strikes me they're actually having to shut up.
[I think the audience see the value in] just trying to be as truthful as you can. It's not about accuracy, retaliation, or anything, but just, 'What is this?' So that seems to be a sort of service. It was mostly women coming up afterwards, so I know there's a sort of gratitude for a presence. Maybe the value is just carrying on with a bit of presence.































You’re Never the Same



Interview with

Nita Little



photo: Leighann Kowalsky

Nita Little is an American dance researcher, theorist, artist, teacher and one of the founding developers of Contact Improvisation (CI). During CI's first year, she became curious about the relationship of the (physical) mind and relational events while moving. Now she investigates the ecological actions of embodied attention, particularly with respect to somatic communication between humans and between humans and the non-human.

Nita received her PhD in Performance Studies with a focus on the articulation of presence and creative actions of attention (2014). Her practice centres on mind-body training, performing, composing improvisational works and researching and writing about the ethics, politics and entanglement of somatic relations as realised in life and dance improvisation.

This research project was Nita's first experience in teaching for the Czech community.

The interview with Nita took place online on 28 August 2022 after a four-day hybrid workshop for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

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Dance Improvisation as Artistic Practice

Do you use the term 'improvisation' to describe your practice?

I do use the term 'improvisation', because it's culturally understood to mean something happening within an immediate moment, not predetermined. Although I do have a very strong scoring practice. So, scoring improvisation has been very important to me.

What is improvisation for you?

It is being in this moment – the moment may be conditioned, by a score or other predetermined elements, but how it's going to come out absolutely is not. But I'm constantly at play with a much larger world than simply myself alone because I'm making choices relationally.

And I'm not interested in solely expressing myself; I'm not interested in actions that are expressing solely conditions of Nita. The improvisation that interests me is a relational practice arising through the physicality of attention as actions of the body as a mind engaging with, or *as*, other body-minds, human and other than human, sentient and beyond, including spaces and places. Improvisation is a co-creative practice of bringing the world of relations to life through actions of recognition and play.

Can you describe your improvisation practice?

My improvisation practice comes out of training and conditioning the bodymind, the body that is a mind, towards an ability to be responsive, to be in a state of readiness, ready to change and conditioned towards lightness of being – so that I'm easily influenced, able to be in relations of communion, communication and responsivity with what's going on, including other dancers, including environments.

It's unique because to build that form that is so important to me, I must allow myself, my sense of myself, to be multiple, not to be a singular self. I do not think of myself as singular always. I do at times, but I am conditioned in my training to be able to function, in a sense, as multiple. And that as a multiplicity, I mean, in terms of the scale of my experiential body, I'm constantly experiencing selfhood on multiple levels. So I experience the self that is many. Even if you simply let yourself feel weight fall to the underside you can feel it. If I do that [demonstrates], and then I move the underside, I change what the underside is. I will feel this falling of many; this is what I would call 'small falls'. It's a cascade of little body beings in their relations to the earth. When I think of attention and action and that responsivity, I'm thinking as the many that I also am.

But I am also many on other scales of being – the many that I am as this environment, for instance. I come and go as a dancer from being a singular

to being a multiplicity. When I'm moving with people, that's true as well. And how I do that is with actions of attention. Now, I don't know other dancers, necessarily, that are speaking improvisation this way, or that work with it necessarily this way other than those that I have trained, but I've been dancing and working for 50 years. So, a lot of this now is in the culture because I've been talking about this multiplicity for at least 20 years.

I'm an activist. I'm very interested in educating culture towards being far more responsive. And how do I educate culture? I do it through dancers. Why through dancers? Because dancers are the smartest people I know. And when I say that, I mean dancers have the possibility of opening to the sensate world that is not only intelligent from a top-down orientation, but that intelligence is peripheral as well. It is here [touches body]; it's a hugely different orientation that I have. And that takes bodily training. It takes attention training. It takes play. And a will and an imagination that is willing to imagine this, the human, differently.

Is it possible to find something new in improvisation?

I'm constantly finding new. Do you mean new material? Do you mean new actions? When 'yourself' is not just your skin, there's always something new; you're never the same. How could it be? There's always an orientation. But even in Contact Improvisation, if I'm doing CI, and it happens all the time, I will find myself in actions that I have never in my lifetime done before, and I wonder, "How on earth did that happen?" You know, after 50 years dancing with bodies! And I'm 71 now!

Actually, I'm dancing less and less these days. Covid changed a lot in my CI. I'm playing it safe now (physically). You know, to get to those places where something new arises, you cannot play safe. And I do not play safe in my dance life now creatively. I never did play safe in my dance life. I'm not interested in that. That playing safe in my dance life was to reproduce culture. And that was against my purpose. I'm not interested in being identifiable. I want people to have to work when they're watching. I'm not interested in offering an audience something that they can just sit back and enjoy.

Becoming an Improviser

What was your journey to improvisation?

I was one of those little girls that danced all the time in the living room. You know, put on music and I'm dancing. And so I got sent to dance classes. Ballet with Madame Katrina, who had a stick, and performance was overly exciting.

Oh, my God! And then when I was in high school, I went to the American Dance Festival, which in the United States is one of the big dance festivals. I moved from ballet into modern dance technique. I was doing Graham Technique before going to the American Dance Festival, and there I was introduced to the Limón Technique. I was in the student performing company, so I got to work with José [Limón] directly, and with his lead dancers: Louis Falco, Sarah Stackhouse and Jennifer Muller. When it came time to go to college, I decided I wanted to go to Juilliard [The Juilliard School], where Limón was.
My father was a physicist and he thought that the education at Juilliard was going to be really ridiculous – because it came second to dancing. So I applied to Bennington [College]. I left high school early and went to the University of Utah because they had an extraordinary modern dance department. And then I went to interview at a bunch of schools. And at Bennington, they just said, why don't you come now? I went to Bennington for four years. At Bennington, in my junior year, Steve Paxton came.

What years were you there at Bennington?

1969 to 1973. I graduated in '73. Steve came in '72, in my junior year, in March. Bennington's second term starts in March, because it has a non-resident term. And during that non-resident term period, he was with the Grand Union at Oberlin doing *Magnesium*. And *Magnesium* was a dance of men throwing themselves at each other, hitting the floor, getting up and doing it again. He was interested in reaction time, reflexes. How do the reflexes support action? And people say that's the beginning of Contact [Improvisation]. But actually, it wasn't. I mean, that was the beginning of an interest of Steve's in how you teach people to do stuff without giving them specific action.
But that was not the sole orientation or the action of Contact Improvisation. That was not the score. At Bennington, we met and really worked on conditioning movement together by staying in touch, staying physically in touch. My first class with Steve was his first composition class. He asked everyone to bring something in. I had just come from teaching in Massachusetts over my non-resident term and doing a piece called *No Trumpets and No Horns*. There was a section in which two people crawled on the floor towards each other, met and had to negotiate who would end up on the other person's shoulders while they stood. It was a score, an improvisation. So they had to come from the floor, keep negotiating weight until one person was standing and the other was on their shoulders. And I brought that into Steve's class; I showed it with a kid by the name of Leon Felder, who was a new dancer. I was getting bruised. It was slightly painful to do that section. And Steve said, 'Let me take you into a studio and I'll show you how not to get hurt.' And we worked, the three of us, on more than that score until what we did turned into what became CI.

Basically, what happened, we didn't really work with that score so much, but it got us staying in touch. We worked with materials that taught us about how to move together because he [Steve] had aikido training. We started with aikido modes, but it was improvisational. And we were working on staying together, not on manipulating one another, and then we became concerned about 'Let's have no manipulation. Let's not do anything we know we're going to do. If you've done it once, don't do it again.' 'We are not practising moves, we're doing this ongoing movement, and let the movement teach you.' That's where *Magnesium* showed up. 'Let the movement teach you.' Steve had a pedagogic interest in not teaching – in not being *the* teacher and in letting movement teach.

So now I'm doing Contact Improv. We do a performance in New York. And then we start. The next year we're touring. Steve and I did a piece together at Bennington College, which was my senior thesis – and that was called *Benn Mutual*. It was a pun (the joke is [It's] Been Mutual or Bennington [the town it took place in] Mutual). It was a series of scores, of which Contact was the core. And then we went touring.

I moved to the West Coast and continued working with teaching Contact on tours. We toured and we all taught. It was mainly me, Nancy [Stark Smith], Curt Siddall and Steve Paxton initially touring. And then I think Danny [Daniel] Lepkoff and Lisa Nelson came on one of the tours. Then they (the other dancers) were East Coast-based and I became West Coast-based. We all kept continuing to develop Contact Improv. And yes, there was a thing that came up about what happens when we let other people teach it. But eventually, we agreed that we would not try to limit other people from teaching Contact. That was a hard one to get through, I have to say, emotionally, because it felt like my baby and all of a sudden other people were taking my baby as theirs.

You never did one of those official certification processes?

It was very hard for me. It was painful, you know. Steve was critical to it, of course. It felt like ours (all of ours), not just mine. It was a very personal relationship I had to Contact. So, when other people started doing it, they didn't even ask my permission! Letting it go took growing. I have seen Contact go from three people in a studio to a whole world.

I have to say, a great deal of the success of all of that was the *Contact Quarterly*. I think that Nancy [Stark Smith] and Lisa Nelson did a remarkable job of producing a body of work, a publication, that oriented everyone and allowed them to come together. I chose to stay out of that. I built my own world without it.

And I didn't do just Contact at Bennington; I worked with Judith Dunn [from 1969]. Her former husband, Robert Dunn, taught the Judson Church movement; he was a musician that John Cage and [Merce] Cunningham

suggested teach composition to dancers and artists. He brought visual artists and dance artists and music artists together to talk about composition. And Robert was the person who made that happen and set the conversation, created the conversation. He was really brilliant. And so was Judy. She too had been a dancer in the Cunningham company with Steve [Paxton]. And I assume that's how Steve ended up at Bennington College. Judith Dunn was my counsellor. And improvisation was her baby as well. But it was improvisation that was oriented around Black music. Her boyfriend was a Black musician who practised and taught Black music. So I studied dance improvisation before Contact Improvisation.

Was there any moment you decided that improvisation was your discipline?

Almost immediately. My first piece at Bennington was choreographed fully. And it had aerial work in it; I hung ropes and had dancers moving on the ropes as well as on the floor. But almost immediately with dance improvisation, I just stepped fully in; it was where I wanted to go. Everything I did from then on started to be scored.

And from that moment, did you consciously start training and developing this discipline?

Absolutely. I was in improv classes, probably all four years with Judith [Dunn]. Her classes [at Bennington] were all improvisation. In my freshman year, I went and studied at the Graham Studios. I was still interested in Graham Technique and Cunningham Technique. I was still doing a lot of technique. Because Judith's work was very gestural, it was nothing like CI. Highly gestured, highly looking at a phrase of movement in the way jazz musicians might be working with a phrase of music. The work I do builds on these two [improv forms] so that they come together.

Initially, they were so different. I couldn't even imagine how they could possibly be the same thing. So I did Contact separately from dance improvisation, but I adored both. The first ten years, I was more interested in building and developing CI. Modern dance and modern dance action existed; Contact action and Contact mind did not exist. I was interested in being on the ground floor with that, building what that could be. But I was still figuring out how it is that I could go from this mind to that mind, because in Judy Dunn's work, for instance, we would point our toes. I'm giving you a tiny example. In CI, a pointed toe was to be thinking visually, it was not inside the felt physics of what we're doing. You have to be in that physics. That's a very different mind!

In the 1980s I did a solo concert. When I stopped doing Contact constantly, I put together a solo concert. And that solo concert, in a theatre in Santa Barbara (California), was a series of improv scores. And in that, I had to figure out the

problem, 'What is the body that I am when I'm moving alone?' And initially what I did was that I would move and imagine I could feel the presence of someone else. I would move with myself, I would create an action. And then I would do an action that was myself dancing with the dancer that had done that initial action. I was constantly dancing with myself. The wake, I would call it now. I was dancing with my wake. What is my impression that I'm leaving in the space? And from that wake, I realised [that] for some of these actions I'm imprinting the space. I'm doing a hard imprint [on the space], so that anybody that's viewing this – and myself – feels it. I feel my presence is still there. As I'm moving with myself, I can still feel me. And I had to do that within its initial making.

So I started to learn all this material about attention as a physical presence. And a lot of the work that we're doing now comes from there. I was [saying to myself], 'Holy mackerel, I understand that presence is attentional.' It actually took years for these thoughts and experiences to find language that adequately expresses the phenomenon of marking space, as I have just done. Realising this level of dance action was astounding, though.

What has the journey been, or what has it contained, since the moment of that realisation?

Since then I also had to work on how Contact Improvisation – which was not just a different aesthetic, it was a different attentional mode – and dance improvisation, coming out of contemporary or modern dance, could work and be together in the same dance. How do I do both of these at the same time? And to do that, I had to study how the mind is embodied. I had to bring these two things into one. And, in doing that, I radically changed what I understood as contemporary movement and how the contemporary body moves, or the modern dance body moves, or the dance body moves.

So when I taught modern dance from then on (and I was teaching in various colleges by then), I would teach it from this embodied-mind place. What is the state of the body-mind? What's the state of the body-mind that is needed in order to accomplish this act? And what is it that a pointed foot is doing? I had to bring function into modern dance. What is the foot doing if it's pointing? Why? It's not just an aesthetic. I was interested in moving well beyond an aesthetic and getting into function. And that interest in what it is doing was there, in my score-making. CI is a function-based movement form. I put my hand out to touch you, not to make a gesture solely, but that doesn't mean that the gesture doesn't also belong. The gesture is doing something. If I do a gesture, what's it accomplishing? I started to be really interested in the functional aspect of gesture.

Is the space or mindset that you're now in different in any way from your expectations or assumptions regarding improvisation?

Contact had to change, and dance improvisation had to change within me as an embodied state. They had to change in me for them to come together. I had to learn about embodiment, and learning about embodiment meant I had to understand attention. And learning about attention meant I had to understand that the body was the mind. And I had to start to work with the body-mind. That's why I went back to get a PhD eventually, because I learned so much; I knew so much now about embodiment that nobody was talking about in the world. And I wanted to know what else, what is it that people are knowing? How are they doing this? How are they understanding [the body-mind of] embodiment?

Can you say what the modern dance lineage and functionality brought to Contact Improvisation in your body? What was its contribution?

It allowed me to delight in the gesture. You know, like, this arm just sliding across somebody's shoulder. That would be not just a function but the gestural element of that. What it spoke on the level of communication became really important. And that did not require that I'd be in skin-level touch. I could do that as much from a distance. Then, you have to understand, I had already started to realise I don't have to be dancing up close to be 'in touch' because my understanding of presence came from learning to dance by myself. Together, with myself, learning about the impact of attention on space, of presence on space. I mean, the impact of presence on space! That skill set was for me like, 'Oh, my God, space is tactile and it's not empty, and it's doing this incredible thing!' There is this vitality that is profound. And that realisation has only grown and grown, as you now know.

Covid, and having to teach people who were living in their homes alone, really pushed me to make a decision whether I wanted people to live in a dead world or an alive one. What am I doing? My attention is the way that I know the world. The way that I engage with the world. Engaging with the world is not just me doing something at it. It's not even me doing something with it. It's doing something that is it.

The Practice and Language of Teaching

When you teach your practice, do you have a fixed methodology and terminology?

Definitely I have a terminology. I don't have a set methodology, but I do have practices or teaching scores I return to. When I teach, as you can imagine, I'm teaching in relation to others. So the people I'm working with are really critical to what happens. How they do stuff, how they're embodying what they're understanding, matters to me because everything flows from that embodiment. Everything they can do comes because of the embodiment that they are. When I'm watching someone move, it's as if I'm there inside their body. I'm watching the physicality of their attention.

How does your teaching influence your improvising or creative practice?

I can only do what people can understand. That's why I have turned to developing this Institute for the Study of Somatic Communication (ISSC). So that dancers themselves will be researching these levels of embodiment in moving together. The ISSC is a network of dance ensembles. And each ensemble is a co-laboratory, a laboratory to study what it is we are doing when we engage with the physicality of our attention so that when I'm dancing '*as* you', I'm moved by you. I get moved in an immediate sense and not as a delayed response by you. What is that? What is peripheral intelligence? What happens when you move me? And how would I know? It wasn't my eyes and it was too immediate for me to be responding. What is it that's moving me? How do I understand that? How does that come about?

Then you start to question what can a human be if a human is not limited to the skin sack. We're working on a level of communication that is pretty profound, and I don't know where that goes. I have no idea. I feel as if I'm at just the very baby beginning of this. I should say, 'we' are just at the baby beginning of this. But I want to see this thing flourish. I want to see humanity go further in its relations, not just with the human but also with the non-human. Because we're living in a suffering world. We better get this right.

Do you use the word 'choreography'?

I use 'compose' more readily than 'choreography'. Because 'compose' assumes many elements. If something is more set, I might call it choreography. I might say I'm a choreographer, because to say I'm a composer, people are going to think I'm a musician. But in my mind, and in my heart, I'm a composer.

And if I'm training composition, I teach composing emergence. I'm interested in emergent properties. How do you create those circumstances so that emergence will appear? I'm interested in composition that does something,

again, that isn't *about* something – don't show me, don't do a piece *about* some problem. Don't do a piece *about* trauma, for instance. Do a piece that is in its own practice – healing trauma, or getting inside the nature of trauma. Don't do it *about*; about is representation. I'm not interested in representation in that way. I'm interested in the world that is direct, not mediated and indirect, as direct as I can get it, that's where I want it. Mediation gets in the way. I want to be in direct communication with you. I don't want to be mediated through my eyes and my representation of what you're doing. Eyes will so easily go into representation, but touch is unmediated.

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and composition, since you use that word?

Composition in its root assumes that everything dances. So I will start there. That interest in emergence is basically saying everything is composed of relationships. When everything is relational, get your relations right. And you will start to see emergence. When things come into relations, emergence happens. You don't have to make it happen.

Why do you use the word 'score'?

Because it has a history of ways of organising and representing, and here representation is appropriate. Creating, I do written scores as well as verbal scores. A score is a set of propositions.

Is improvisation on stage a choreography or composition for you?

I've done lots of different kinds of composition. I don't have one kind of composition. I've done things that are narrative. And realised it through writing. And then the movement that takes place is scored more tightly, or more loosely, but scored. Why scored? Because I like the immediacy of performance when people don't know how to do it and don't do it the same way twice. I like to see minds in motion. When I see something being reproduced, I get bored. I don't like being bored. I like mistakes. Why? Because somebody has to wake up. Right in front of me. I love that. How awake can a person be? I love it! It excites me.

Do you work with imagery?

Yes, I do. I have to use imagery because I work on many scales of being, not just one scale of being (e.g. the human scale or the social scale).

Do you use imagery in performance?

Within myself likely... I'm never working with sensory monism. I'm always working across the senses. And some of that will be imaged. Always, on some level.

Do you score with imagery?
Not necessarily. I tend to work more functionally. Rather than weight the expression of something, I expect the expression will come, it will be there, I know it will be there. I'm not going to drive the expression with a dancer. I'm going to drive the function that will produce that.

The Practice of Performance

What are you busy with in the moment you improvise on stage?
Fulfilling the instant now. Being present to its possibilities, and to its taste, and to what it's doing.

And where is your attention?
It's always physical. It's always going to be embodied. But it can be in all the senses, I mean, all my senses are vital. Where is my attention? It's in what's happening. It's in what's there in my world at this moment. And to the degree that I need to know what's coming next, I'll be oscillating.
I will be holding the moment like this: like a baby bird that's about to fly. It's gonna fly, you're right there with it. You're holding it lightly, not gripping it. You're not going to toss it. You're going to allow it to take its moment. A lot of allowance.

Do you have a meta-awareness when you're performing? Like an external eye observing yourself, creating some kind of distance?
If I were training you to be a performer, I would train you in three perceptual positions. I would train you to be able to embody yourself, and that self is either limited to the skin sack or extended. I would train you to be able to engage in a state of relational practice with an 'other', whether that was an object or a being, and to take the other's position. The skill of being able to be looking out through the other guy's eyes, to be empathetic, so to speak. And I would also be training you in the third perceptual position, which is to be able to be the fly on the wall, watching the whole thing.
So, from that, I might be in any one of those positions. I might be in the second position with my dancing partner, but I might also be in the second position with the audience. I'm probably going to be in the first position with the whole dance floor.
The perceptual position that interests me the most, though, is the extended 'I' position in which I am no longer bound by my own flesh and I easily co-compose with/*as* others, spaces and things.

How much do you direct yourself when you improvise?

That totally depends upon the composition that I'm in, and what's important to me. But if it's an audience and I'm concerned, then I will be including them in the composition in a sense. 'What are they seeing in this moment?' Or, 'What are they hearing?' 'What are they smelling?' 'What are they doing?' 'What's happening to them?'

How do you warm up or prepare for a performance?

You're talking to someone who hasn't performed in quite a while. I've prepared other people to perform. I begin with the heart: I make sure that I'm okay. And then I work on making sure I'm functioning as a mind-body. Not just a mind over a body. So that requires that I be awake. And that means that I require being physically awake; I need to be able to be responsive.

I tend to warm up fast. For me, a physical warm-up requires that I get to the level of the very small. I tend to throw myself around so that I can feel the dance of the small, then I can feel the earth in my action – the earth is absolutely critical to me. I need to be able to feel the weight of *that* – the elbow, so I can toss it. So an action can come from any place in my body. Any place in my body can speak. That's what I need. And any place in my body can listen. That's what I need.

Do you prepare the score in advance?

That would be a yes/no. I mean that I can step into a space and immediately start to move. I don't need a score, but I am very aware of whether I'm doing one move after another one, after another one, or whether I'm composing in a more direct way and thinking, 'Okay, I've just put this information into the composition.' Now I'm moving around that which I've just put into the soup. Or whether I am in constant reference to something I set up at the beginning. How we compose it, how we just get up and move, it's always composed, it's just one methodology or another. Knowing what methodology you actually are stepping into is important. So, skilfulness means that if you don't have a score and you step into moving, you have the creative capacity to know how are you coming up with what's happening. 'Who are you asking to move you?' Especially if you are going to be so profoundly aware of this moment 'now'. If that (presence) and those relations are important to you.

What do you do in the moments right before you are performing?

I dance. I'm dancing before I go on stage. And I dance on lots and lots of levels and scales. I don't have to have the whole thing. I can do a dance that you can hardly see.

What do you do when you lose the flow?

For me, dance is like a meditative practice. Interruption is a part of it. I mean, I practise meditation as well, inconsistently. I'm inconsistent about everything. Yet I'm very consistent about returning to practice. I don't believe in repetition. I really work against repetition. I don't think it's good for bodies. And yet, I will do my brushes.[1] But I might do my brushes but not all at one time; I might do a dance on the floor in which brushes are present. And it's not the same brush over and over again. Unless there's some reason I have to do repetition, e.g. because I'm trying to restore a skill – if I've lost some strength or flexibility, for example, or if I'm trying to increase some sensitivity. ... But I love training. I like trained bodies. I really love bodies that have abilities. It excites me to see that. I love working with dancers. But I like to see those skills shake up. I work and really think deeply about both time and space. So time matters. And again, when I'm training dancers for improv, for performance or for compositions, I have to train dancers to understand time. To shift and change their ability to experience time. And I'm not speaking about mechanical time, obviously.

Political Dimensions

Do you define your work in terms of a certain aesthetic? And how would you describe that?

If you wanted to do a piece about forgetting, I would not want to see you pretend to forget. I would want to see you actually studying and creating a composition in which you would forget, and forgetting would be absolutely right there, something happening. What's happening? Forgetting is happening. I don't want to see you pretend. I will be totally bored. Because where your attention is going is not interesting. It's going into representation. It's not going into anything that's real.

Now, do I work with pretend? Absolutely. I work with pretend when extending. You know, I might pretend that I'm a really big person until I am able to accomplish bigness – until I understand what bigness is. But in performance I want to see bigness. I don't want to see you pretend to be big.

1 Translator's note: Nita uses the word 'brushes' in the sense of the brushing of the feet against the floor, which is an exercise used in several modern dance techniques. The French equivalent of the word is 'tendu'.

Do you feel that improvisation as a form is connected to politics? And how?

Absolutely everything is connected to politics. We live in a world of politics. I would ask you to define it and you probably will define it in terms of power. Where's the power? I'm very invested in the awakening of culture towards relations of distributed power. I'm not interested in hierarchical power. Distributed power requires conversation, communion, communication, agreements. And letting go of agreements, not just making agreements and agreements and agreements, you have to let them go. And return to distribution. Hierarchies are power that has never been let go. It's organised so somebody ends up on top or something ends up on top and stays there. That's problematic for movement. That does not create movement. I'm interested in motion; motion requires distribution of power.

A great deal of dance is hierarchical. Dance holds a great deal of relevant knowledge to politics because it requires a great deal of embodiment.

But a great deal of dance is hierarchical, and it's trained hierarchically. Even improvisation is trained hierarchically. And a lot of composition is hierarchical. And it's okay for a moment to arise in a moment in which power takes a certain shape. But then it needs to be let go, and something new needs to be able to come. Power, I mean, will shape. We don't want powerlessness. Rather, we need power to come and go.

Contact Improv is my model there. Sometimes one person's on top, sometimes it's the other. Sometimes it's nobody.

CI is an ethics.

Does your work have a political dimension?

My work is driven by politics, and Contact Improvisation was also driven by politics. So it has been political not as an end result but throughout the whole of my life. And I thank Steve Paxton for that. Contact happened during the Vietnam War and it was definitely a move against hierarchy. And he understood that in a sense and pointed it out. And I got it right at the beginning and that is why I was so profoundly invested in it.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

Well, I'm working on the big picture. I think people get value on all scales on the level of the individual. We get enough relationships right and emergence will happen. Emergence is unpredictable; you don't know what it will be. But from right relationships, you get one kind of emergence, from 'wrong' relationships (i.e. disrespectful relationships), you get another.

And I'm working on the biggest picture I can work on. Both in terms of going, 'Wow, people can communicate in lots of ways, and not just verbally,' and knowing there's a certain level of communication that dancers have the

possibility of developing and getting into and discovering. And we're almost at ground zero on that. But we've figured out that this can happen. And we're not talking on the scale of body language, guys. Right? That's not communication. We're talking on another scale. Communicating on the 'body language' scale is chunky, obvious. We're interested in something far more articulate and immediate.

What happens when communication happens simultaneously? At the same moment you both get it? And maybe it emerged from one person, but both got it. That's emergence. So I'm interested in that.

And I'm interested in emergence on another scale altogether, which is what happens when enough of us start to get our relations right. By 'right', it sounds like I'm saying right and wrong. I mean 'right relations' as the Native American population might use that term. And right relations means being aligned. Being in alignment with, alignment *as*, being together. And that takes learning lots of skills. Listening skills is maybe a beginning place. Listening skills are about on the level of body language for me. It's kind of gross. And yet they are critical. You've got to have listening skills. Still, there are deeper skills in listening to be found that I have no word for.

You're talking about touch skills?

Yeah, and in a larger sense, what touches me? Touch that is attentional. I think we don't know what touch is; we don't know what touch can do. And that's a political thing.































Direction is a Constant



Interview with

Eva Karczag



photo: Sarah Damminga

Eva Karczag, born in Hungary, is an independent dance artist, dance maker, teacher (Anatomical Release Technique-based movement classes, ACAT-certified Alexander Technique teacher) and movement explorer. She performs collaborative and solo work. Her collaborations connect disciplines such as dance, writing, video, music and visual art. Eva danced with leading groups in the field of experimental dance, such as the Trisha Brown Dance Company (1979–1985). The impact of the New York Judson dance revolution of the 1960s and 1970s is present in all aspects of her work.
Eva's first contact with the Czech dance community was in 2022 during this research project. Czech audiences had their first chance to meet her on stage and in a studio in 2024 when she presented a collaborative lecture/performance (with Bettina Neuhaus), 'Along the Lines', at Studio Hrdinů in Prague (produced by CreWcollective).

The interview with Eva took place online on 23 October 2022 after a four-day online workshop for the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

www.alongthelines.net/eva-karczag



Dance Improvisation as Artistic Practice

Do you use the term 'improvisation' to describe your practice?

Yeah, I do. And I feel, for me, it's very important to put that out into the world. Originally, I came from a traditional background, but then I shifted away from mainstream dance. In my current work, I'm influenced by people like Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Lisa Nelson and Danny Lepkoff. By a number of people who think about improvisation as performance.

It's interesting that, after being in New York during the mid-1970s, when I began to really get interested in improvisation, I ended up dancing with Trisha Brown. All of her pieces were set. However, the process was a series of improvised steps. I'm talking about the time when I worked with Trisha, which is the late 70s, first half of the 80s. The pieces that were made during that time form her *Unstable Molecular Cycle* and all of them are memorised improvisations. She developed her movement phrases through improvisation. Then she taught us these phrases, and then we improvised with the set material to arrive at the final piece.

Everything begins from being open to possibility. Creating a framework that contains the material that's being explored also forces the body to move into places that are unusual. One really good example of that is Trisha's piece *Locus*, which happens in an imaginary cube.

How did she set material? Did you use a video?

Oh, no. When I started working with Trisha, using video was at a very early stage. I started working with her in 1979. At that time, generally, video wasn't used as a remembering tool. It was used as a recording tool. So when I worked with Trisha, she would teach us material that she had made. But then she would open it up and present us with a structure; for instance, in *Set and Reset*, one of the instructions is 'travel the outside edges of the space'. We would then improvise using Trisha's phrases while staying close to the edges as we travelled. And each person was making their own choices about which part of the material to use and how to splice it together. The process was, we would all begin to improvise with the material she had taught us, and then anyone who felt they couldn't remember any more of the improvisation would say 'stop'. We would go back and repeat what we had done, repeating many times, until everyone could remember and replay that short section. Eventually, we added it to what we had made up till then. What was really fascinating about it was that we might not have remembered everything we did – because even though we would work in small chunks, one can't take in and remember every detail – but someone would say, 'Oh, but your hand passed here in front of me,' or 'Your foot was….' That was the process of reconstruction and building.

There were other processes that Trisha used, like in *Glacial Decoy*. I wasn't in the making of that; Lisa Kraus and Nina Lundborg were the two main people. There, Trisha would improvise and throw out some movement, and Lisa and Nina would catch whatever they could remember. There were similarities and there were differences in what they caught and remembered. The main central duet was built from remembered, caught material.

What is improvisation for you?

First of all, it's fun. It gives me great joy to improvise. To be in that place of discovery, of constant discovery, the discovery that just keeps unfolding itself from moment to moment. I've learned a lot of set material and reproduced it. But the greatest joy I have is in improvising and in really being in the moment of discovery, in my curiosity, my imagination, the way it filters through my body and opens up a beautiful world that I can access. It's all a process. It wasn't always as easy. 'Easy' is a strange term, because there's loads of work behind the ease and the joy of it.

I was coming out of a very traditional background and beginning to work differently. My first immersion in the kind of work that I do now was through the taiji [tai chi], and, as well as the way it asks the body to be and to move, the listening quality of it. Then I met up with Release Technique through Mary O'Donnell (Fulkerson). And my mind opened further. I was dancing with Strider – the first Strider – at the time. We would go to Dartington College to perform and teach, which is where Mary was teaching. She invited many guests to teach the students, and they would not only teach but also perform.

The first time I met Steve Paxton, he was teaching and performing there. For his performance, he came into the space, the big Dartington Studio. It's beautiful. And he began to move. And he continued moving... and he continued moving... and he continued moving... and then he left after probably, I don't know, 40 minutes, an hour, or whatever it was. It was so mind-blowing for me to see this. And it was only afterwards that I found out that it was all improvised. This was improvisation and it was a performance. This improvisation wasn't just for researching movement and then setting it. It was of the moment, in the moment. And for me, it was so compelling. After that, my interest just grew as I continued to explore improvisation within performance.

Can you articulate what that revelation was?

Well, I think presence was one thing – Steve's presence. I didn't have the words for it at that time. There was some kind of immediacy that was happening, that I didn't know how to read, or I didn't know how to articulate, to put it into words. His humanness, the fact that he was so real. I was coming from a ballet background where people pretend all the time. And they want to connect with

the audience and work so hard to do that. And there are tensions that invariably go into the body when it has to work that hard. I don't know, what hit me immediately was that he wasn't outwardly focused. I mean, he wasn't inwardly focused either. He was in a space where he took in everything and everyone, and yet he was so in himself.

Then I went to New York and began to see a lot of other work, and that's the attitude that I began to see in many performers. In Strider, too, what we were striving for wasn't the selling to the audience kind of work, or needing the audience to understand a story. It was such a relief for me to get to pure movement, whatever that is. Trisha has a really beautiful, very short article called 'Pure Movement'. It's about just being in your body. It was so interesting for me to see some of the people who came to the Prague workshop from a more theatrical background, who need theatricality in order to be able to move their bodies, and yet the body moves without having to have stories or emotions... When you look at the basic physics, and chemistry, I suppose, of the body moving, there's so much to notice, so much to explore. Those of us inspired by what emerged out of Judson Dance Theater were coming from the place where you explore the body and you discover what it brings forth, and that creates its stories. It's not that I don't have my stories, but your stories could be very different to mine. And that's okay. This is a particular aesthetic. Not that one is right or the other is wrong, but it's different. A different approach. Maybe a different discipline, I don't know.

Can you describe your improvisation practice? And are there any ways in which you feel it's unique?

I think it's as unique as I am a unique human being. I have my own history, and I've had my own contacts with certain people who have inspired me. My particular way of working? It's not that I want to do one technique, or be like one person, although I really wanted to dance like Trisha. And I wanted to dance like Steve, and I wanted to, you know... I mean, I draw inspiration from people I see, things that I touch, things that I read or do. So, in that way, my improvisation practice is very unique. But it's also part of a tradition. I think it's very much rooted in this particular post-Judson mentality, a way of thinking and looking and making.

I think one of the other things is, I'm rooted in both Europe and England, and also in the United States, specifically New York. I think that some of the ways that Release work – I'm talking about Anatomical Release and Skinner Releasing, where the imagination is brought into the process of training or tuning the body – is perhaps more widespread in Europe than it had been in New York, in the 1970s and 80s. It took a while for it to begin to be more available there, maybe because Joan Skinner was based in Seattle, on the West Coast. There

were New York based dancers – Jennifer Monson and Yvonne Meier, Stephanie Skura, of course – who later developed Open Source Forms. But on the East Coast, the work was much more conceptual.

My deep interest in the body and in exploring it to the degree that I've worked with it, I think probably comes from the Release work. And around the time when I met up with Release Technique I also met up with the Alexander Technique. At that time there were hardly any dancers doing the Alexander Technique; it was actors or musicians. The idea of use and how you move, the abstractness, and that you can put this information into whatever you do, interested and continues to interest me.

Is there anything that maybe you would single out as really recognisably yours in improvisation?

When I teach, and when I perform, I suppose, people talk about the sense of time, this sense of timing I have.

Was there one particular moment when you decided that improvisation was your thing?

I don't think there was one moment. There were many things, many moments. I talk about that performance of Steve Paxton's. But at that time, in Strider, we were working with different choreographers who were invited to make work. The group was a kind of collaborative, cooperative situation, where Richard Alston was the instigator of the whole thing and the main choreographer, but people who danced in the group also choreographed and made work. One of the guests who was invited and made work was Mary O'Donnell. She made two pieces. In both pieces, she gave us tasks that we performed. Pretty much all of them were based on normal pedestrian movement activities. And I remember how wonderful it felt to just be working with a task and movement that was already in my body. I think that fed into it. Seeing Steve but also Danny Lepkoff was very inspirational for me; I remember seeing many performances with him. One of the times he performed in New York, and performed the piece three times in a row, I made sure to go to all three, because I knew that each of them was a unique performance, and that really excited my imagination. To be able to dance the same piece using the same ideas or structures and three different things came out.

Could you tell us about your training in dance?

I trained in ballet a bit in Hungary but most of my early training happened in Australia. I was six when we left Hungary, very young. We went to Sydney and arrived as refugees. Because I had done a little bit of ballet before we left, I wanted to be a ballerina. That was my vision, as many little girls do have

that vision. And then, once we got to Australia, I started taking ballet classes, but they didn't have a full-time dance school for young children, like they do in many European countries. I was 16 when I began to work daily at the ballet school where I was studying. But I did do a foray to Hungary when I was 13, where I tasted what it was like to be dancing every day. It was wonderful to be doing that. I was still busy with ballet when I left Australia. I was 19 and went to London. And then got into London Festival Ballet [today English Festival Ballet]. It was a big company. And we toured, which was great because I saw parts of the world I probably would not have seen: Japan and Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong. We went to Spain. I toured around England. Dancing in all kinds of things from *Swan Lake* to *Sleeping Beauty* to some Fokine and Balanchine pieces.

What were your favorites to dance?

Well, probably my favourite was *Scheherazade* because we did a lot of what felt like freer movement. But I loved being a swan for a while. Dancing to incredible music and the big orchestra. For a while, it was a dream come true. I was living in London and seeing a lot of new things, things that I hadn't even conceived of. They showed me that there are other possibilities, other ways of moving and different kinds of freedoms. It was thrilling to see performances at The Place that were Graham-based, and dancers who took their shoes off and danced barefoot, and the costumes that were not horrible, tight tights and leotards, and heavy headdresses. The stories of these pieces were somewhat more contemporary. Even though now I look and I think, 'Oh, gosh.'

Did you go from London Festival Ballet to New York, to Strider, right away?

No, from London Festival Ballet I did a short stint with Bat-Dor, a modern ballet company in Israel. It wasn't the kind of work I was interested in by then, but I toured with them and went to South America. Lots of countries and seeing many places and people and languages. It was quite phenomenal in that way. That was '73, when war broke out there. And I questioned whether I should go back or not. The degree of hierarchy that existed in Bat-Dor made me as unhappy as I had been with the hierarchy in Festival Ballet. The way roles were given and taken from dancers, the competitiveness, and also the boredom of dancing pieces until the lifeblood, the freshness and excitement were worn away. It wasn't that I was complaining. I had been given small soloist roles in both companies after a very short amount of time – but the atmosphere and what it made me feel internally was not something I wanted. And by that time, I was aware of a different kind of dance.

I was heading back to Israel through London, and Strider was looking for a female dancer, because someone had left, so they asked whether I could take

this dancer's place for two weeks. When I started dancing with Strider I thought, 'Gosh, this is what I've been looking for.' And when they asked whether I wanted to stay beyond the two weeks, that's what I chose to do. It was a small group. There was, of course, like everywhere, some degree of hierarchy, but it was a lot less so. And the material, the pieces were pieces that I had already been interested in, even before I went to Israel. Again, there was a lot of searching. I didn't find it immediately. When I talk to young dancers, I always tell them that it takes time to figure out what you want and then to find the situations that fulfil some of your needs.

So I was dancing with Strider. It was an Arts Council-supported, small, independent, experimental dance group. I worked with Strider for three years, or something like that. By that time we felt that we weren't getting any more new input in England and needed to go somewhere where there was more to nourish us. So Richard Alston and I went to New York. Richard stayed at the Cunningham Studio. We both went thinking we'd take Cunningham classes, but, you know, I was already much more interested in work that was inspired by Judson. And once I got there, I left the Cunningham Studio very quickly and began to take classes in downtown NY, where people like Nancy Topf were teaching. I remember taking workshops with Simone (Forti). There were Contact Improv jams. Interesting body awareness stuff. Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen was developing her work. My first introduction to BMC [Body-Mind Centering] happened through Beth Goren. I was also taking classes with André Bernard, the Ideokinesis work. And, you know, all of this began to come together. Then, when I saw Trisha dance for the first time, I thought, wow, this is the kind of dancing that I hadn't even been able to imagine. It brought together all of these practices that I was busy with. I was still doing taiji. That's an ongoing practice, and qigong, and different kinds of yoga.

When did you start doing those practices?

Well, I met up with the taiji not too long after I had left Festival Ballet. Gerda Geddes was teaching taiji at The Place. It was very strange because The Place was the home of the Graham Technique. Gerda Geddes (we called her Pytt) was this tiny woman who, through the taiji, taught us how to release the body and move with more ease and less stress and tension. There are a couple of really nice books – about her and by her – if you want to find out more about her life. Again, non-dance. She totally upended the way I had imagined dancing could be. I knew that I wasn't happy with what I was doing, but there wasn't a lot of dance that was radically different from what I was seeing at that time. And here was a technique, a movement technique, that actually offered me the possibility of being good to my body, moving in a way that acknowledged my unique body.

Becoming an Improviser

Was there a particular moment when you started consciously training and developing your improvisation practice?

Well, yes and no. I was drawn to particular people, I began to work using techniques or ideas that they opened up for me. And I definitely began to train using taiji and different kinds of yoga. Now I do something developed by Shizuto Masunaga, his Meridian Exercises. I started taking Alexander lessons around the time I met up with Release Technique, I really got involved in that... It was more about actually submerging myself in improvisation itself, rather than any one specific practice. I was also both taking classes in and then teaching Anatomical Release Technique.

How has your creative practice developed since then?

I worked with Trisha for about six years. And then I left because Trisha was becoming too successful.

I felt myself being swept back into the kinds of situations that I had actively chosen to leave. You know, she was starting to perform in large, well-known venues where I was separated from the audience by an orchestra pit, and the feeling of it was no longer the intimacy that I felt when I first came across this other way of working. It was wonderful and exciting, but part of me kept thinking, this isn't the direction I want to go in, I don't want to be pulled back into this. I think for Trisha it was super-exciting to be accepted and fêted by the world. So I realised, after struggling with it for a while, that as much as I loved her dances, and as much as I loved dancing her work, it really wasn't the direction I wanted to go in. It wasn't my company, and if I wanted to fulfil my own desires I needed to leave.

I had been doing bits and pieces of my own work and working with other dancers and musicians by that point, in NY, and earlier, in Strider, and then with the Australian group Dance Exchange. There were things I wanted to explore. For instance, in the Release work, there's a lot of use of the floor. And in Contact Improv, a very particular way of working with the body. Trisha's work, at that time, didn't use a lot of floor work. She wasn't utilising that layer. Being close to the floor has always intrigued me and still intrigues me. I feel there's so much to be learned there.

And I had other role models too. Simone [Forti] was performing and teaching in NY, and Steve [Paxton] was living up on the farm in the north of Vermont. And by that time I knew that there were other ways of being able to train, and also perform, than having to work in a company. Having to fulfil the needs of audiences and venues has its huge problems. But if you're small, you don't get funded quite so much. So that led me into, well, how do I make my living in



order to be able to do the work I want to do? This was one reason for doing the Alexander Technique teacher training. I asked myself the question, what can I do that's very closely related to my dancing and that I love, and that would also feed my own work while providing me with an income?

Have you basically worked independently since you left Trisha Brown?

Oh, yes and no. I left Trisha in maybe '85. And then, in 1990, I was invited to join the faculty at the new school that was just starting up, the European Dance Development Center (EDDC), in Arnhem, the Netherlands. So, I went there, and taught there for 12 years. And, you know, I didn't have to worry about money, the way one does when one is a freelance artist. The school was part of one of the major art schools in the Netherlands. Basically, I was paid by the government.

Were you performing through that time as well?

Not as much as I would have liked to. I had a young son. He was almost three when I started teaching at EDDC. And although I had a three-quarter-time job, you know, one always works a lot more. So I didn't have a lot of time. But any possibility that I could grab, I would grab to perform, which happened mostly in New York.

I often collaborated with musicians, and also with visual artist Chris Crickmay. During certain periods, musicians were very much part of the group of people I worked with. I did a lot of improvised work during the time I was at EDDC, partly because I was interested in it, but also partly because I didn't really have all that much time to work on pieces, to make pieces. I think I would have tried harder had I not had that interest in improvisation. It fulfilled the love that I had for performing improv.

Is your way of thinking about improvisation now different from what it was when you started?

Well, it's very different because I understand more layers of possibilities that are contained within an improvisational moment. And so that's how it's different. I had the expectation that I would get involved in it and would dance in a way that would be supported by the improvisational mind. But I don't know that I had been working towards any particular goal. Then, you know, the excitement, the curiosity is still with me.

In terms of your creative practice, performance, do you have a current focus that you're working with?

I work with quite a few people at the same time, which is really exciting. And mostly all of these things feed each other. I love to collaborate. I find it so rich, and it opens up so many possibilities, plus collaborating gives me courage, because when I'm working with someone else I don't have to only believe in my own processes and interests. My collaborator, or my collaborators, actively support the vision that we're building together. I would love to perform more, but somehow, as a freelancer, it's not quite so easy to find the situations. And then, family needs sometimes limit the freedom that I might have, otherwise, to do all that I would want to do. Another exciting thing about collaborating is it brings me in contact with both dance artists and non-dance artists. The collaborative work that I've done with Chris Crickmay has really nourished my way of looking at space and object in relation to movement.

During the lockdowns, I actually quite embraced Zoom. And I've been working via Zoom with a number of people. One project is with Jude Walton and Claire Filmon. Jude is mostly based in Australia, and Claire is living in Paris. Claire has done a lot of work with Simone [Forti].

Can you speak about any of the focuses that you're working on with those people at the moment?

A big interest is, how do we use the Zoom screen? I think it's been quite exciting for all three of us to find out about ways that we can utilise it, from framing to interacting with each other to performing... About the project itself, the three

of us were going to meet in Paris in May of 2020, but the lockdown happened. Only Claire, who lives there, was there. So Jude proposed the idea of embarking on a process of sending each other something, anything, every first of the month. So, on the first of every month, emails would go out with material that included writings, drawings, photos, songs and short videos that we had developed or created during the month. After we sent out the first emails, they were responses to the different material that began arriving in our inboxes. Two years on, this past June [2022], Jude went to Paris. But I still wasn't able to get there. So Jude and Claire were in one space together, and I was still joining via Zoom. The question there was, how do we work with Jude and Claire together, live, and me online? We were curious to see how the collection of materials we had accumulated would fit together, and ended up combining some of the material that we had sent each other, with some material that we had recorded during previous Zoom meetings, when we would improvise with scores and ideas with what we were recording at the time. We combined these into a 20-minute-long video, and added some live interaction when we performed it via Zoom for small groups of audience who were invited to join us. It was a really interesting way of bringing together material from two years of work and 'performing' it.

There were so many layers in it. This is something we want to continue to explore. Eventually, hopefully, all three of us will end up in one place, and we will have had all of this history to put into what will happen then. I think, as an improviser, I feel that it may have been easier for me than for an average person to enter with excitement into the lockdowns and into all the possibilities Zoom opened up and keeps opening up for us.

The Practice and Language of Teaching

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

I think some people would call improvisation choreography.

Do you?

Totally. When I'm improvising, I'm really aware of many things. At the same time as I'm allowing what needs to happen, to happen, I'm also guiding what's happening, so there's a really beautiful play between allowing and guiding. For a long time, I would not call what I did choreography. We were dance makers. We were composing, not choreographing. But then I read quite a beautiful description of choreography on the DAS Choreography [Academy

of Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University of the Arts] website. It's a low-residential master's programme at the Amsterdam University of the Arts. Their description of choreography is great: that it's diverse and evolving, that it can be seen as 'an open cluster of tools that can be used in a generic capacity for both analysis and production'. This fulfils a lot of things. When I think 'choreography', I tend to think of quite a closed system. It takes me back to traditional ways of making dance pieces. This other, different way of describing it is something I understand.

Which makes me think of when I began to shift from mainstream dance into this other dance world. When people would say, 'What do you do?' I would not tell them that I was a dancer. I would say I'm a mover, because dancer had so many connotations that I wanted to leave behind me. For some time now, I don't mind saying I'm a dancer. Maybe that's because the kind of work I'm involved in, although it's still on the periphery of mainstream dance, is more known. Many ideas and practices that we use have infiltrated mainstream dance, and although often not acknowledged, and often not practised in a rigorous way, they still influence the ways dancers move, and are able to move, as well as the ways they conceive of working with a choreographer and being part of the creative process of making work.

Do you use the word 'choreography' now?

No, I don't tend to. Usually, I say I make work.

What is the difference for you between choreography and composition?

When I read that particular description of choreography, it made me think more about the way I think about composing, where I'm bringing ingredients together in order to create something. It's semantics. In my mind, composing is creating through gathering ideas, gathering things together that will then form something that can then be performed. Maybe I might change that tomorrow. Today, it seems okay that I make work.

Do you use the word 'score'?

Yeah, absolutely. A score is a container that delineates a particular improvisation or a particular piece. It gives me both anchor and boundary to be able to be clear about what it is that I'm working with. I mean, a score could actually be extremely open, when I'm allowing anything to happen, perhaps within a specific time or space limitation, or it can be very defined and precise in what it allows.

When improvising on stage, do you work with imagery, and if so, what kind, and how do you use it?

Yes, coming from Ideokinesis, I work with imagery. Being an Alexander Technique teacher, I'm sort of a black sheep, because very often in an Alexander context, they say, 'Don't use images.' That's a question for me. I consider the Alexander 'head forward and up', for instance, to also be an image. I mean, image or the imagination is a very big part of what I'm interested in.

And what kind of imagery do you use?

Anything. It could be anatomical; it could be anatomy linked to something else. It could be inspired by nature, or sensation, or feeling... things I see, or touch, or smell, or conjure up, or... whatever.

When you teach, do you have your own fixed methodology and terminology?

Yes, I do. Part of that is that no two classes should be the same. Or no two classes will ever be the same. If I teach a number of classes, I like to start them in different ways, getting people to begin to engage in different ways. So I think part of my methodology is that I don't want to get stuck, and I don't want people to think that this is what it always is.

However, having said that, there are elements that I do use, and probably, even in just four classes, you would have picked up that I'll always have some kind of slowing down, resting and deepening. I'll bring in a lot of anatomical information, however it happens. Part of the Release class process is that one is teaching people to begin to make choices and be able to fulfil tasks. I also do a lot of work with developmental movement, from rolling, crawling, gradually building up into being upright.

And I always get people moving. Really just fulfilling the possibilities that suddenly are made available for them. When you work in this particular body-mind awareness way, you know, things begin to open physically but also imaginatively, intellectually.

Have you developed a language for your teaching?

I say 'soften', 'deepen', 'widen', 'lengthen', 'streaming', 'energy', 'observe', 'listen'. These tend to be words that I will use often. And I use '-ing' words. Spreading, falling. These are all part of the vocabulary of this kind of work. I'm sure I've developed my own ways of using them, my own ways of putting them together. And also my timing. I say 'breath' and 'breathing' a lot. 'Weight' and 'wait' – weight as opposed to lightness, and wait, to listen rather than rushing off.

Does your teaching influence your creative practice?

Yes, in lots of different ways. But I think one very direct way is in engaging with others. It's a collaborative process. I'm learning as I'm teaching. I also watch. I have the good fortune to be able to watch lots of people improvising for me: I'm watching people solve tasks in a multitude of ways, infinite number of ways. It really feeds my own imagination, and feeds possibilities that I can imagine.

The Practice of Performance

What are you concerned with in the moment that you're performing? Where's your awareness?

I think my mind is on the task at hand. And I am sort of assuming that, simply by being present, there is a connection that's being made between myself and the audience. I'm not trying to catch people, in that *wanting-to-make-you-understand-that-I'm-performing* kind of way. It's more the question of: Can I be open and available enough for you to become interested in what I'm doing and be moved by what's happening? On all different levels.

I have to know what I'm doing, to be clear enough to be able to be present. I'm really interested in presence. I love Deborah Hay's work for that. I think that, for me, a lot of the great improvisers like Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson, Danny Lepkoff, Simone Forti have a presence that draws me. It doesn't draw everyone. But for me it's endlessly fascinating.

How much do you direct yourself when you improvise, when you perform?

As much as all of life is directing ourselves, we're constantly directing ourselves. I get up in the morning. I know I need to go into the bathroom and wash my face, brush my teeth. I know I have to eat. Directing ourselves is a part of life process. Of course I direct myself. I will have a score, an idea. And I also have compositional concerns, I'm looking to fulfil certain things. The answer is yes and no.

How do you prepare for a performance?

Well, different ways for different performances. I really like to have time to be able to just drop into my body. I like to spend some time maybe resting. I love to roll; it gives me a lot of movement options. I like to dance. Because I think that we can actually warm up to dance and perform by dancing and imagining performing. When my son was very young, I sometimes breastfed him before performing and thought about that as being my warm-up. I like to jump up and

down sometimes. I like to tell stupid jokes to people I'm with – laughing warms us up really well.

Sometimes I work with balls – I've studied Kinetic Awareness with Elaine Summers. Working with balls is something we always did with Trisha before a performance.

With Trisha, we would often run phrases from the piece we were about to perform, or maybe sections of the piece. As an improviser, I don't run set material but I will improvise, dance.

Sometimes, I do qigong, sometimes I just sit...

Do you decide what you're working with on the day of the performance? Do you prepare a score beforehand?

It depends, sometimes I take a long time to make work. When I'm working on an idea and I'm developing it, I'd probably have a score that will lead me through a particular path from beginning to end. But sometimes, if I come together with someone I'm improvising with for a one-off, maybe we'll make a score on the day of the performance. Sometimes the process involves performing along the way, as is happening with Jude and Claire now, working towards a live performance. There isn't one way.

What do you do in the moments right before you start performing?

Breathe.

What do you do if you lose the flow during performing?

I think, as an improviser, one learns that there is no such moment. Each moment is a stimulus for the next thing. Of course, there are times when I might feel more engaged or less engaged. But I think that's also the process. I guess with some performances, I feel, 'Wow, that was incredible – one long flow of connectedness.' But I think improvisation for me also holds the possibility of disconnectedness. One is working towards being present for what comes. But isn't that what we're doing in life too? It comes and goes. Or in a class. It comes and goes.

Political Dimensions

Do you define your work in terms of a certain aesthetic?

Yes, post-Judson.

Do you feel that improvisation as a form itself is political?

Yes, I've been thinking of that a lot. Recently, very much. So much of the world seems to be turning right-wing and authoritarian. I feel that the way we work, those of us who are working within this particular small world of dance, we're working with ways of existing in the world that are anti-authoritarian and that are really supporting people to be able to be self-reliant, empowered human beings actively involved in their engagement with life and others.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

I think bringing people back to trusting themselves, and through trusting themselves, trusting others and, hopefully, spreading it on, through their presence, through their teaching, through their performing, through the ways they interact.

In the workshop, you were saying that it's not about dance or theatre, but it's about the humanity or being human.

I say that and, at the same time, I also feel it's very much about dance and theatre and performing. I don't lose sight of that. I'm not a therapist. My focus is on making work and performing it.




















EXIST











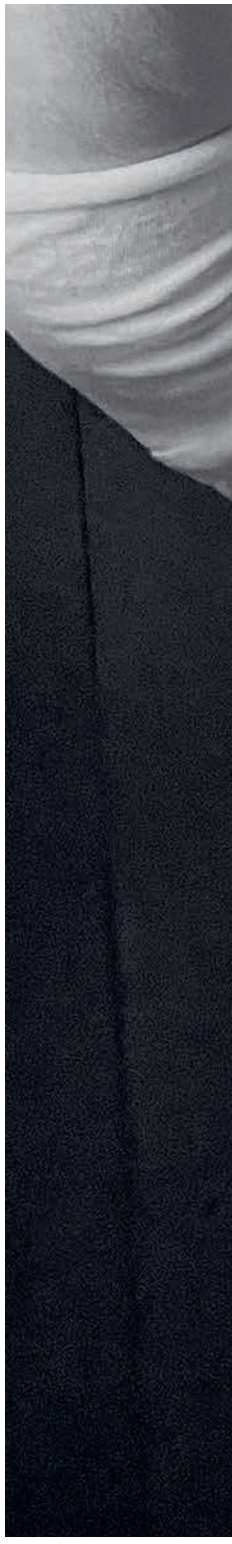








My Body is a Lens that Looks at Everything



Interview with

Daniel Lepkoff



Daniel Lepkoff is an American dancer, performer, movement explorer and teacher. During the early 1970s and into the mid-1980s, he played a central role in the development of both Release Technique with Mary Fulkerson and Contact Improvisation with Steve Paxton. Over the course of more than five decades, he has looked closely at the interweaving of sensation, perception and action arising in the body's ever-present interactions with its environment and has developed dance techniques for bringing this material into the body and onto the stage. He is one of the founders of Movement Research in New York.
Daniel introduced his work during a workshop for Czech and Slovak audiences in Bratislava in 2002, then in Prague at ImproEvents Festival in 2012. In 2023, he gave a four-day workshop as part of the project for the Academy of Performing Arts, and in 2024 he gave a workshop, produced by CreWcollective, that resulted in a collaborative performance piece.

The interview with Daniel took place online on 6 November 2022, before the four-day workshop in Prague. During the interview, Daniel was in Vermont; Mish and Mirka were in Prague; and Lizzy was in London.

daniellepkoff.com



Improvisation as Artistic Practice

Do you use the term 'improvisation'?

Yes, but I have to qualify that. Basically, I think of my work as movement research. Research, in that I don't make up the results, I ask questions and discover something that's there. So, a little bit like physics; the phenomenon of gravity is there, the researcher asks questions and gravity provides the answers. That's a more accurate model in terms of how I describe my work. I've used the word 'improvisation' because it's been used on me, and I have had to address that term and correct it. Some artists may present their work as 'improvisation' and have an identifiable framework that provides specific methods and forms for spontaneous composition. I do not have a fixed framework. I ask questions. My questions have changed over time and this caused my work to change

My work is very much related to the body. Is your heartbeat improvised? Is breath improvised? Are the movements of your eyes improvised? It's gonna happen anyway. Maybe it's improvised, maybe it's not. That is not a relevant question. My interest lies in the details of what is actually happening.

Can you describe your practice of improvisation?

The essential nature of functional behaviour is improvised; it's always a real-time response to the environment.

Walking is something we learn when we are little; as adults we know how to walk. But if you're walking on a frozen lake, and it's not so cold, and you're not sure if the ice will hold you, you don't walk in the same way. You hesitate, you touch the ice with your foot and see if it's going to hold you, and then step and find out if it's okay. My practice considers the ground as a frozen lake, always to be questioned. So, in that sense, walking is improvised because it's obviously responding to the environment in real time. That's the way I use improvisation. It's hard to say you do something when you never *don't* do it. So, in the way that I study movement, improvising is a given, it's not something I have to do or add. I think, basically, my dance practice is posing questions. If you ask yourself the question, 'Where is down?' right now, that question will cause some kind of a change in what you're paying attention to. What should I pay attention to that might show me where is down?

But one can't learn the kind of work I am teaching only by going to workshops or in the studio. In a workshop or in a studio, the questions come first, the work proposes a question, and you try to organise yourself to address that question. Do you discover something? Do you get new information? Outside the studio, if you hold those questions somewhere in the back of your mind, in your unconscious, the answer may come first, and then you realise, 'Oh, that's the answer to that

question!' So when you're not consciously trying to manufacture an answer to a specific question, an answer can appear spontaneously. That's very important, because we do not want only to learn what we already know. It's tricky to do this kind of research because we are both the tool for learning and the subject of what we are learning about. The act of asking a question changes the subject.

A major aspect in doing this kind of work is to develop strategies for receiving knowledge rather than manufacturing answers. A person may have the ability to perceive an answer to a particular question about the nature of the body's response to the environment but cannot access that perception or does not know the way there. The conscious mind does not know, but the body knows it. Maybe it's hidden or covered up. If you have had some intense physical training, your training may filter and override your access to indigenous[1] experience. But that is the idea: a perception does exist, and the body does know, even if the conscious mind has no access. Okay, so in a class, questions come first and the work follows. Outside the studio, living proceeds and perceptions are matched to questions posed. So that is the way to practise.

My own physical life outside the studio has been really important to me as a dancer. As a child I was physical, running around, in the city and in the country, climbing on things, playing games. As an adult I've done a lot of physical work: I built my own house, I cut my own firewood. Those experiences brought new perceptions about how to use weight and force, about where down is, for example.

The evolution of myself as an artist has been a gradual cultivation of my body as a camera, as a lens, a lens that doesn't look in particular at dance, doesn't look for beautiful dance or pretty movement, a lens that looks at everything. That is the nature of awareness, of attention. One can't be really paying attention if you're only paying attention to what you want to find, otherwise you're missing what is happening because you're filtering, and that's not real observation.

Becoming an Improviser

How did you become an improviser, or, as you say, a movement researcher?

You know, in retrospect I was doing movement research when I was a child, but I didn't know it. Children are researchers. When I was in college, I was rather unhappy and had no idea of what I wanted to do. I went to Cooper Union in New

1 Daniel's comment on the word 'indigenous': I really do mean indigenous and this is important. Indigenous does not refer to Native American. The meaning is: intrinsic, innate, originating and growing from or living in an environment. I am referring exactly to that kind of knowledge of indigenous people, in that it arises from their direct contact with their environment. The opposite of book learning.

York City and studied physics, and then I went to the University of Rochester in upstate New York, about 700 or 800 miles from New York City and majored in mathematics, which I liked.

I grew up with artist people. My mother's a photographer. My father was involved in all kinds of crafts and art: painting, furniture making, pottery, jewellery, house building.

So I took a dance class. I wasn't majoring in dance. The first semester the class was Jazz Dance. The next semester another teacher came, Mary Fulkerson. She had just graduated from the University of Illinois; this was her first job, and when she arrived she launched into teaching Anatomical Release Technique. We read Mabel Todd's *The Thinking Body*. We also had some books by a woman named Barbara Clark, an American woman from Vermont, who was a physical therapist. Barbara Clark's books (*How to Live in Your Axis, Body Proportion Needs Depth*) were working manuals filled with anatomical diagrams of flows of energy in the body – sort of stick figures with arrows. Those books were required reading.

We learned to use our own awareness and were given information about anatomy and the architecture of forces that move through the body. We practised releasing in the anatomical rest position in almost every class. I could say a lot about Mary's work.[2] Mary had her own language. The work was very experimental. She made up classes for the very first time; she was inventing Release Technique. As a student, I was also helping to create this new approach to dance.

Mary was influenced by experimental musicians and the work of John Cage. She was also very interested in the artists involved in the Judson Dance Theater and invited many of them to come. Her invitation was: 'You can come, stay as long or as short as you want and do whatever you want; you can teach, not teach; come for an afternoon, do a performance or you teach classes for half a year.' So a string of people came, and I met Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, The Natural History of the American Dancer (Barbara Dilley, Carmen Beuchat, Cynthia Hedstrom, Judy Padow, Mary Overlie, Rachel Lew, Suzanne Harris). Judy Padow also came on her own as a soloist; Carmen Beuchat, a dancer from Chile at that time living in NY, also came again to share her own work; and Richard Nonas, a sculptor. Each of these artists influenced me and became examples of possible ways to be a dancer.

At that time, there was what you could call a *genre*, a subculture of dancers who were looking at functional movement. I fell into that community.

Steve Paxton came more than once. On one visit he led a 24-hour class. Around that time, Steve's work and Mary's work were very similar yet different in some very important ways. They were both doing movement research: looking at

2 See Daniel Lepkoff, 'What is Release?', June 1999, https://daniellepkoff.com/writings/What is Release.php.

how the body functions, at developmental movement and the reflexes. Their approaches emphasised awareness and meditation. Mary's work was my base. Steve's work was complementary. It used much more strength and speed.[3]
I had tried a few dance classes before, in New York City, but I wasn't taken by dance until I encountered Mary's work. I didn't have any kind of training, except for my natural boyish physicality, I was 20, and so I didn't have any dance training to unlearn. The only movement I really knew was developmental movement. Mary's work was about developmental movement, so I felt very at home.
Her work was very helpful to me; it showed me that the games I played as a child, the imaginative games and the physical games, could continue in my adult life. At that time in my life I was not succeeding very well, socially, as an adult. Inside Mary's classes, when I would interact physically with others, I experienced myself as capable, as strong, as able to communicate and to be compassionate. I didn't experience myself that way in most social interactions. So that's probably why that work became very important to me at that point. Because it was a survival thing. It was a healing, survival thing for me.

What was your journey to dance improvisation?

Steve Paxton became very important to me both as an artist and as a friend. He invited me to be in the first performance of Contact Improvisation in 1972 at the John Weber Gallery in NYC, and that swept me up and led to opportunity after opportunity after opportunity, to perform and teach Contact in the States, Europe and South America.
I don't think Steve thought of himself as a teacher, but I was learning a lot from watching and dancing with him. He brought me into situations I would never have otherwise found myself. In retrospect, I think when Steve and I were dancing together, he didn't think of me as a student. He was learning from me and I was learning from him. I was also challenging him physically, with ideas that were mine. I didn't know that then.
Because both Mary and Steve were inventing new systems, as a student I was also helping to create these new systems. I became interested, at first, in their questions. I then had many questions of my own. My questions took me on and on through my life as a dancer. What is a movement? 'What is a movement?' became a question. I knew how to move. I knew how to fall, and run, and get disoriented. I never thought that moving could be divided up into a sequence of movements. I tried to answer that question for myself in workshops. This question arose from watching Trisha Brown's work and dancing with friends

3 See Daniel Lepkoff, 'Contact Improvisation: A Question', 2011, https://contactquarterly.com/cq/article-gallery/view/contact-improvisation-a-question.

from her company and realising they were doing something different and foreign to what I understood.

How did you create working opportunities for yourself?

I had an intense desire to find ways to continue dancing. At one point my friend Lisa Nelson suggested that I go to New York and teach Contact Improvisation. I put up flyers on the street – this was before computers – and rented a studio in SoHo. In fact, the studio where I did those first classes is right upstairs from where I am sitting right now. Thirty to forty people came three times a week; at $3 a class I was making enough money to live on. I didn't expect that. I was only going to teach a month-long series of classes, but I did not see a reason to stop. I didn't know how to teach Contact Improvisation. All my knowledge was experiential, and so my classes were very simple. I simply asked people to lie on the floor, feel their weight, feel their breath, start to move, find a partner and dance. I thought I should know more exercises but in fact that simple format was good, everyone could teach themselves, which is the whole point of Contact Improvisation.

In the years following John Weber Gallery in 1972, Steve invited me to several more performances of Contact Improvisation. In 1973, we performed Contact at L'Attico Gallery in Rome, in 1975 at The Kitchen in NYC and then in 1978–1980 in Europe with Freelance Dance (myself, Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith and Christina Svane). One thing led to another and invitations came to lead workshops in other places in the world.

There was a period of time when I got into trouble with my teaching of Contact. For example, I had a realisation that stillness was really important for learning Contact Improvisation – just stillness. So I led a Contact class about stillness. The students who came complained, 'This is not Contact Improvisation.' They were angry. The problem was not the material but their expectations, so I created a class called 'The Activity of Doing Nothing', then students could get angry if we did too much!

Eventually, I decided to stop teaching Contact Improvisation. I felt if I continued I would never have time to work on anything else. I stopped receiving invitations to teach. Around that time, in the 80s, I had a lot of anxiety around making money. How could I ask for money when I had so many questions? I stopped teaching and got a job doing computer programming at night, and that took the money pressure off my dancing. I had that job for maybe five years.

During that time [the 1980s and 1990s], I was a part of the downtown dance community in NY; I made my own work, collaborated with other NY dancers and was involved in starting Movement Research. Also, I was a part of Channel Z, an improvisational performance ensemble including myself, Paul Langland, Diane Madden, Nina Martin, Randy Warshaw and, for a while, Stephen Petronio

and Robin Feld. Each of us had danced Contact Improvisation but were also working with other choreographers, as well as making our own work: Paul worked with Meredith Monk; Nina worked with David Gordon; Randy, Diane and Stephen worked with Trisha Brown; I worked with Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson. Channel Z tried to integrate all aspects of live theatre into our shared understanding of 'dancing together'.

What was it that dried up for you about Contact Improvisation?

My introduction to dance gave me a wide range of questions and experiences. Contact Improvisation is fantastic but it's a very particular filter. For example, it does not look directly at narrative, space, sound, beginnings and endings. I craved to explore all my interests. I was too young and did not know enough about myself as a solo dancer to limit myself to a very specific duet movement form. Also, I had relationships and friendships with artists whose work fascinated me: Simone Forti, Lisa Nelson, Trisha Brown and artists I met through my travels in Europe and South America. I wanted to go fully in collaborating.

How did your artistic practice develop from then on?

Over the years, my work changed yet remained rooted in real-time composition, playing with the body's real-time response to the environment. I was interested in all the senses. I had learned how to learn and had a desire to use this facility to explore new forms.

I tried a lot of different things. Some were just one-off pieces. I made a solo piece about infinity, using my background in mathematics, called *Studies on Infinity*, where I actually taught the audience a proof that there are different orders of infinity. I worked with sound, both vocal sound and mixing recorded sound. I made vocal duets with Lisa Nelson and also later with Paul Langland.[4] We approached vocal sound as physical sensation and used the same techniques as working with movement. I experimented with words and the sound of words. Steve and I created a duet about Einstein's theory of relativity.[5] I experimented with touching and moving objects and built very large objects for several performances. I worked with a group focusing on gesture and single image. Gradually, a few key concepts emerged as central in my teaching and understanding of movement: sensation, perception, the movement of attention, moving and being moved. In recent years my explorations have become more and more centred around movement.

4 *Jungle Breath*, 1988. Performance Space 122, New York, https://vimeo.com/55409842.

5 *Conventions in Space*, 1986. Saint Ann's Church, New York.

Is there something distinctively yours in your improvisation practice, like a recognisable style?

I think that would be for somebody else to answer. I am not making decisions about style. I don't feel fettered by adhering to a certain style.

In my own life as an artist, I've been curious about all kinds of things and different movement qualities I wanted to explore: fast, slow, tense, very tense or very released, relaxed. Cultivating my body as a camera, as a lens, that looks at everything is the nature of my research, or the nature of awareness or attention. You have to pay attention without an agenda, otherwise you're missing things because you're filtering them, and that's not real observation.

When I look around at the people on the streets of New York, or the streets of Prague, old people or young people, or animals, or trees, or rocks, or water, I see all kinds of qualities. Listening to sound, to noise, to experimental music, to beautiful classical music, to carpenters working, power tools, cars, water. As an observer, these sensations can become material for my dancing.

I can't say that I have a style because I've been fascinated with many different things at different times. When I identified a particular question, I could dwell on that for sometimes a year or two years, and then when I felt finished, I would move on.

Perhaps my training is unique in that I never studied any traditional dance, never studied ballet, modern or contemporary dance. Gravity has been my teacher and I have no significant other influences. That may give my movement a unique look and particular presence.

The Practice and Language of Teaching

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

I don't really see that choreography and improvisation are two different poles. I could tell you a joke: 'A choreographer aspires to make what they want. An improviser needs to want what they make.'

Do you use the word 'choreography'?

In terms of my own work, if choreography means setting movement, then no. If choreography means creating frameworks or framing questions that limit, filter or shape our movement, then yes.

Do you use the word 'score'?

I think of a score as a word that comes from music, and that a score is written in music. It's been used in dance to describe some kind of structure.

Do you work with imagery? And if so, what kind? And how do you use it, either in your work, when you teach or when you're on stage?

'Image' was a word that was commonly used when I was studying with Mary. At first, I found it difficult to understand the meaning of the word 'image' in the context of dancing. I thought of it as meaning a visual representation of something, while my dance was so sensual and often did not emphasise the eyes. Gradually, I realised that image was related to the concept of perception. For me, image is not fantasy. Our perception of the world is related to our imagination. This is a kind of functional imagination. I think of the mind as a lens – transparent. Images or perceptions are received rather than made up. This is a subtle but important distinction. It is possible to perceive our environment in more than one way. This is also an empowering realisation.

When you teach, do you have a fixed methodology or terminology?

Some of the ideas that I'm trying to articulate here about the movement of attention, sensation, perception, have become central in my teaching. I use developmental movement patterns as a base and invent exercises drawing directly from my own dancing. I don't have a pedagogy. I try to share my own research in a way that allows students to do their own research. The movement of attention is a key and this is related to stillness. Our perceptions form extremely rapidly; they are there before we have any awareness of what has happened. We don't usually have an opportunity to alter our perceptions and see things in a new way. One of my key strategies is to change the speed at which we move through the world, so that the movement of our attention can be faster than the flow of new information. This is the purpose of stillness as a learning tool.

How does your teaching influence your improvisation or creative practice?

Through the need to communicate with students, I found language to frame explorations that, until then, were purely physical experiences. I think of my work as a collection of techniques and strategies for doing movement research. Students can use these tools to make whatever kind of work they want.

Where is your focus right now?

It's not so easy to say exactly. I've been dealing with some changes in my body. I have arthritis in my spine – not severe, but I have pain. These last few weeks



I've been doing a lot of physical construction work, so my body's stiff and tight, and that's become interesting. Small movements are really important. I'm learning to gradually let some part of my body that's resisting movement slowly warm up. It's so different from when I was younger.
Since Covid, I've been actually dancing more every day because I'm dancing at home. I'm about to do a performance in two weeks in this space where I'm staying – Cathy Weis's studio. Cathy hosts a nice series of free performances on Sundays called 'Sundays on Broadway'. It is one of the last remaining venues in New York that's not a business. I'll be dancing with Sakura, my partner, who's younger than me and originally from Japan.
My current work is my own movement, my own dancing. My years of practice have embedded certain understandings in my body. They are there if I just turn my mind in that direction: when something begins, when something ends, where is my centre, feeling possibilities for a next movement in my body. I've been needing and wanting to keep my body mobile, to have a body that's not just an upper body sitting on top of a lower body, but one. And I'm 72 years old.

Sakura and I are not making a piece about something. I don't need to know, we can simply offer our presence and practice and allow the performance space to relax.

The Practice of Performance

What are you busy with in the moment you improvise, when you're on stage? Where is your awareness?

The moment is a moment: it goes away and another one comes, and my attention moves.

I have a feeling about performing, and I don't mean necessarily on the stage. Even when dancing alone in a studio or walking on the road, I can be saying something to the space even though there's no audience.

For the past two years, since Covid, I've been doing short two- or three-minute solos with a small group of friends on Zoom, with Sakura Shimada, Joshua Bisset, Melinda Buckwalter, Laura Quattrochi. When I start, something happens, my awareness of the space and time coalesces. And then I realise that I am the centre of the flow of events. Whatever I choose to do has some importance, whether it's reaching to the side, turning my head, looking this way, reaching up or just staring into the distance. I have a feeling of holding the whole space. Dancers learn how to move their arms, move their legs and spine, but don't often understand space as a part of their body. I have learned how to move space. When I enter a performance space, the space is a part of my body. It is a perceptual space and that includes the audience space as well. The first row of the audience is not the end of my space.

When performing, do you have an external eye observing yourself or creating some kind of distance from what you're doing or feeling?

I think that there can be some understanding of another's point of view, in a gross way: if you're far away you're smaller; if you're closer you're bigger, in the eyes of the audience; if you leave the space, you're gone; if you stand behind something, you know, to the right, to the left, that kind of awareness of using a space, a little bit of awareness of what an audience member might be seeing. However, one of my basic ideas is that a performer does not make the performance that the audience sees. That is very important. I don't have the responsibility to make their dance. The work I do is about attention and perception, and recognises that each person is a perceiver who has their own point of view, their own images and their own way of perceiving. I have come to understand that and give the audience that space, that respect.

I realised that the eye's job is to see, just see. An interesting exercise I've done in workshops and performances is to ask the performers to stand in a line facing the audience. I'll tell them, 'Look at the people in the audience. Look at the spaces between people, look at their faces, look at their eyes, look at their clothes. Just notice what you notice.' And I'll tell the audience, 'Look at the performers, look at their clothes, look at their faces. Just move your vision.' And then the performers, in a line, will come a little closer and keep moving their visual attention until they're standing right in front of the audience. And everyone's just still looking at each other. The reason I do that is so that the space of the audience is not something to avoid. I'm not asking performers to interact with the audience, simply to establish that audience and performers are perceivers both doing the same thing together. The theatre is a perceptual space.

When working with people, improvising, in an ensemble, I realised that other people can have a really different sense of time, for example. So it's good to learn how to accept things that are not necessarily immediately acceptable. To open up my frame and keep moving my attention. Whether something is too long or too short has to do with one's own judgement, and not something that can be correct.

Do you choose what you're working with on the night or day of the performance? Is it open improvisation or do you use a score?

Every performance work is different. I make pieces. The few 'open improvisations' I have been involved in are predictably very disappointing. It is a big delusion that 'open' is 'free'. Open forms are full of unconscious conventions.

I don't make one kind of performance. The dance that I'm going to do next week is a duet. It'll be a conversation with Sakura. As a performer, I need to know what I'm doing. There are so many ways to know. I've made all kinds of different structures for performances. I made a vocal piece with a friend of mine, Paul Langland. The piece was 20 minutes long. It was improvised but very scripted. We had a series of vocal sections. The order was set, yet in each section we were listening to each other and responding. We didn't need to improvise in terms of finding material, but we had these little improvisational forms one after the other that we needed to embody.

What do you do in the moments right before you start performing?

I like to enter the state of mind that I need to be in before the performance starts. That's a strategy I finally discovered after years of experience. Then I'm not doing something else and suddenly need to start when I walk into the performance space.

And what do you do if/when your attention drops during the performance?

The answer lies in knowing how to move my attention and having a kind of repertoire of practised available channels. I have been studying nervous energy, so when I feel nervous I have already practised being in that state and know that I can keep my attention moving. Knowing how to feel my breath and be nervous, feel my weight and be nervous. This is key to being physical. It took me a while to learn that.

Practising the movement of attention is surprisingly challenging. In the safety and privacy of your own studio, the psychic space can more or less be one's own. In a performance, the psychic space is crowded with the energy of each person in the audience. This can be greatly disturbing. It is a special skill, and very powerful, to be able to project into the audience space the psychic environment and rhythm of one's own movement of attention.

There is a subtle underlying reality operating in the shared perceptual space of the theatre. In my work, what I bring to the moment of performance are my questions. I do not own my material but rather transmit an opportunity to ask questions. My ability to ask questions has everything to do with my ability to move my attention.

I want to support the audience to create their own images. They are also living in their body, and so we have something very basic in common. I need to give the audience the space and respect to move their own attention. For this reason, I do not want to tell the audience what they are looking at.

If I see someone looking at the floor or yawning, and I think they are bored, and this creates some doubt, that doubt is a physical sensation. At that moment I need to know how to move my attention to stay physical. If I am not able to do that, I lose my position as the transmitter of questions; I am no longer making the performance. I do not want to ask the audience to take care of me.

It is a relief to understand that I am not creating what the audience sees. I am simply their environment because they are looking at me.

Political Dimensions

Do you define your work in terms of a certain aesthetic?

If it's performance that we're talking about, I really aspire to make performance events where the audience has the space to make their own images. I arrived to this consciously over the years.

I used to get really upset if I had a feeling that the audience was not with me. I'd think, 'They're not seeing anything, they're not getting anything.' A feeling of emptiness and embarrassment would come over me. This was very painful.

At one point, to counteract that, I said to myself: 'Okay, if I could do a performance where not one single person in the audience could understand anything that I did, that would be a masterpiece.' I was giving myself the permission to be impossible to understand. Not in an aggressive way. To take the pressure off myself and give the audience the full responsibility to make their own images, so that if something beautiful happened in the theatre, it was not created by me; rather, there was a resonance created by everybody's presence together that created what you might say was beautiful.

I want to be able to fail. There's no chance to really succeed, there's no chance for something to be beautiful to happen, if there is also no chance to fail. If you don't give anything, you don't get anything. And that goes for everyone who's in the space. This work does not work like capitalism.

Do you feel that improvisation as a form is connected to politics?

Right now, politics is so ugly. I feel that the work I do assumes people are intelligent, assumes people have the ability to know things, not because they repeat what someone told them, or they read it in a book, but have knowledge directly from their own physical experience. The work cultivates respect for one's own indigenous knowledge, and not to immediately believe what we are told, but to question.

A lot of our culture and our society disempowers people by manipulating us with images, advertising. My work supports disorientation and reframes not knowing as refreshing and energising. Everyone – dancers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians – knows things because they've just figured it out for themselves. They've touched and interacted with their environment; they know how to do something special because of their experience. That kind of knowledge is not esoteric.

Unfortunately, dancers are often trained only to follow instructions, and no one asks them what they think, and so they lose the ability to know what they think. As a teacher, offering the experience of being in a room with a group of people, with senses open, and with no one telling participants what to do, or what to think, or what to feel, and people can experience the movement of their own attention – perhaps that is a political act.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

If people can experience their environment directly, through their senses, there's a little hope that they'll care about it. And be sad when it goes away. That is a hopeful thought.
























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Improvisation as Choreographing the Moment

Mirka Eliášová

How does one intellectually capture dance, with its inherently ephemeral nature? This poses a significant challenge when analysing dance through writing. The choreography strives to preserve the fleeting essence of dance, yet its interpretation and significance remain in a perpetual state of evolution and transformation.

The concept of improvisation straddles a paradoxical line. On the one hand, we encounter improvisation as an intrinsic part of our routine activities; on the other, it is perceived as a desirable artistic skill, an esteemed ability to respond spontaneously without advance preparation.[1] Often described as spontaneous action[2] or a form of freedom, improvisation is associated with playfulness, spontaneity and the capacity to react to the present moment.[3] It manifests itself in myriad forms, motivations, intentions and functions.[4] Improvisation is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, as we instinctively improvise through physical responses to ever-changing environments and conditions in the moment.[5]

While improvisation has been an enduring component of dance, it is only recently that dance theory, in the global context, has begun to critically examine it. A number of publications exploring the nuances of improvisation and improvised performances from various perspectives have appeared over the past two decades.[6]

Although improvisation on stage is a topical subject within the Czech dance community, both the theoretical understanding and the terminological anchoring of this discipline remain insufficient. Until recently, improvisation was primarily understood as a tool of the choreographic process, and the use of this term to describe a stage form evoked scepticism. This perception is currently undergoing a shift. However, we are still in the nascent stages of this transition. A lack of theoretical reflection persists, and an appropriate terminology has yet to be established.

Our three-year research project[7] was motivated by the pressing need to explore, both theoretically and practically, the terminology and comprehension of this form, and to do so through dialogue with artists who have dedicated years of their lives to dance improvisation. In collaboration with Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, we examined various approaches to improvisation as a stage form, organised and participated in workshops and conducted interviews with six prominent figures in this discipline. We mapped existing theoretical texts and other available resources. For individual workshops, we assembled a focus group of dancers, pedagogues and choreographers — individuals continuously engaged in this form of dance.[8] Collectively, we explored terminology, compared experiences and endeavoured to name the various aspects of stage improvisation.

Personally, I embarked on this project with a question: at what point does improvisation become choreography?

During the research, this inquiry lost its relevance for me, and I became intrigued by the tools, methods and strategies that individual artists emphasise, the approaches they have discovered and how they describe them. Can these be generalised, or are they specific to a particular personality and work process?

During this exploration of the phenomenon of improvisation, we published several texts that helped historically situate and highlight this stage form. In a study for *ArteActa*, we contextualise the development of improvisation and the emergence of the form of instant composition.[9] In a second study for *ArteActa*, we relate this development to the evolution of contemporary dance in the Czech Republic and to the understanding of the discipline of instant composition in the Czech context.[10] In a study for a special edition of *Taneční actuality* (Dance Context), we address the terms 'improvisation' and 'choreography', their meanings and how they are defined.[11]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IMPROVISED PERFORMANCES

In the United States, improvisation in performances began to emerge during the 1960s and 1970s, and the artists who employed it are often identified as part of the American postmodern movement. In Europe, this phenomenon surfaced intermittently from the 1980s, experiencing significant growth during the 1990s. Within the Czech dance community, this performance form found its footing only after the turn of the millennium. However, years later, it is still regarded as a niche interest, misunderstood by Czech critics and lacking an established terminology.

To comprehend this situation, it is crucial to acknowledge that dance in the Czech Republic underwent turbulent changes following the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Given the historical development of the decades preceding the 1990s, the Czech dance scene could not seamlessly align with contemporary developments and trends in the broader dance world, as it drew primarily upon the tradition of modern dance, its approaches and choreographic methods.[12] Improvisation was predominantly understood as a tool for creating material during the process of choreographing. As a stage form, improvisation only gradually gained respect and acceptance, being predominantly utilised in the realm of experimental art outside the Czech dance mainstream.

As a performance form, improvisation was perceived as less valuable, suspect, a response to a momentary flaw in performance — as something that does not require extensive 'training'. The aim of our research was to initiate a discussion

of stage improvisation, render it visible, contextualise it and theoretically reflect on it through practical experience.

In the Czech context, the inadequate terminology, predominantly borrowed from English, sometimes leads to paradoxes in the naming conventions of improvised performances. For instance, the common term 'instant composition' is translated as *instantní kompozice*. This translation is linguistically inadequate, as the Czech word has a different connotation from what this form signifies in English (namely, temporality — 'instant' meaning immediate). In Czech, *instantní* is understood as something hastily made, something with a 'boil in the bag' quality (i.e. instant soup or instant noodles). The use of this translation reflects how the form is viewed within the Czech environment. This type of performance has been (or until recently was) perceived, in the Czech context, as something inferior, quickly created, unfinished and unprepared. Such a conception of the name simply fails to emphasise what the discipline of stage improvisation entails and requires: profound, physically ingrained knowledge of one's body and its reactions; knowledge of compositional tools and methods, and exploration of the principles employed in performance; the ability to make split-second decisions in front of a live audience; the capacity to work with the tension of one's own consciousness and attention; and the long training process of observation, exploration, discovery, testing and analysis. A more fitting translation might be *okamžitá kompozice* (immediate composition), although this term is not without its own issues ('instant' also connotes something momentary or ephemeral).

Inspiration can be found abroad, and it is possible that certain terms will gradually become established within the Czech context. However, during our interviews with individual practitioners, it emerged that, even internationally, labelling this type of performance is not straightforward. As Rosalind Crisp states: 'I just say it's "dancing" because it's so complex. And also because the word "improvisation" has been bandied around [...] it's often considered like, "Oh, just do whatever. Make it up. Just make it up." That's very reductive, so, I call it "choreographic improvisation". But generally, I tend to avoid the term "improvisation" altogether and talk about what it is as "dance".'[13]

Stage improvisation is referred to by various names abroad: improvised choreography,[14] choreographic improvisation,[15] real-time choreography,[16] real-time composition, instant composition, open-form performance, indeterminate choreography, open choreography, situation-response composition, *in situ* composition, spontaneous determination.[17] Bojana Cvejić notes that, in the late 1990s, terms like 'total' or 'open' improvisation became more established.[18] Cvejić ultimately employs the term 'improvised dance movement'[19] to denote the discipline of instant composition, but she problematises the perception of transcending the flow of time in the moment of real-time

choreography, a perspective offered by Steve Paxton ('choreography ex tempore', 'out of time').[20]

Not all artists feel compelled to specifically label this form. Julyen Hamilton and Eva Karczag stated in our interviews that they simply create dance pieces.[21]

IMPROVISED CHOREOGRAPHY OR CHOREOGRAPHED IMPROVISATION

Improvisation and choreography are often understood as opposing concepts.[22] However, as Annie Kloppenberg notes, they 'are not mutually exclusive: many skilled improvisers carefully apply choreographic devices in performance, and many choreographers include improvised passages in their "finished" works'.[23]

Using improvisation to explore and generate movement material is a common choreographic practice. From my own experience, very few choreographers nowadays arrive with a fully predetermined movement vocabulary to transmit to dancers. Improvisation is typically employed collaboratively with performers to organically develop original movement, to initially investigate and 'feel out' the thematic premise, or when a suitable expressive mode remains elusive.[24] This approach has evolved since the first generation of modern dancers. Improvisation unfolds 'in the moment', while choreography, a term etymologically encompassing both 'to write' and 'to dance', implies a certain mode of codification: repeatable sequences and predetermined arrangements.[25]

The incorporation of improvisation as a performance mode (whether partially within a preset choreography or constituting the entire performance) began to emerge only after World War II, primarily in the US and later in Europe.

Improvisation has been termed 'choreography without an eraser',[26] whereas preplanned choreography allows for corrections and repetition. The interplay between control, spontaneity, predetermined material and chance is intriguing. For instance, Daniel Nagrin refers to choreography as 'an attempt to recapture what has been lost'.[27]

We also inquired about the relationship between improvisation and choreography during the interviews. Wendy Houstoun views improvisation as a source for creation.[28] Rosalind Crisp considers the two approaches inseparable.[29] Daniel Lepkoff does not perceive improvisation and choreography as direct opposites.[30] Julyen Hamilton aptly states: 'Both can be seen as the act of deciding movements in form, configuration… and arrangement in space and context. For me, improvising is the act of choreographing in the very moment of action and performance.'[31]

From other interviews conducted across the focus group and with other Czech and Slovak dancers,[32] educators and choreographers engaged in improvisation, it emerged that, in the Czech environment, these two terms are still perceived quite separately, with discussions of differing authenticity[33] and varying layers, organisation and outlines of preplanned versus improvised performances.[34]

Where, then, lies the boundary between the two terms? Can it even be established?

The individual methods influence and interpenetrate each other; even within preplanned choreography, there is room for immediate responsiveness, as predetermined material is danced and shaped by the present moment, and every performance contains slight deviations. Conversely, there is a natural necessity to prepare for an open-form performance. A completely improvised performance is not merely a spontaneous action; it is often carefully planned and structured. Tools for planning or framing improvised performances have been developed since the era of American postmodernism, when such performances first emerged.

As dance evolves, individual artists develop their methods into distinct systems upon which they create or teach. For example, Rosalind Crisp terms her approach 'choreographic improvisation'; Julyen Hamilton refers to 'theatre works'; Nita Little refers to 'structured improvisations'; and Daniel Lepkoff calls his work 'movement research'.

The development of methods by creators emerging from American postmodernism is also noteworthy. These include Tuning Scores by Lisa Nelson, Scores Technique by Yvonne Meier, Choreographic Improvisation by Richard Bull, Compositional Improvisation by Judith Dunn, Logomotion by Simone Forti and Underscore by Nancy Stark Smith, among others.

THE TOOLS FOR CREATING IMPROVISED PERFORMANCES

How does one prepare for an improvised performance? Can improvisation be choreographed? Is it necessary to structure the performance? Is it sufficient for dancers to possess empathy and the ability to make swift decisions and rapid reactions? Does advance planning enhance or diminish improvisation?[35]

The range of possibilities for improvised performance is vast, spanning purely improvised pieces to forms where improvisation is integrated into preset

material, while crucially maintaining the awareness of the present moment (which is also intrinsic to prescribed performances).

Anna Halprin was among the first to work with improvisation within her performances. Initially, she incorporated certain improvised sections into her choreographies and later transitioned to fully improvised pieces. At first, her approach to improvisation was spontaneous and unstructured, but as her exploration deepened, she sought to channel improvisation towards specific themes,[36] coining the term 'dance exploration'[37] to allow for particular prompts and tasks.[38] This opened avenues for directing, structuring and focusing improvisation, even enabling its repetition within set parameters.

Another pivotal shift in understanding improvisation arose from the choreographic workshops of Robert Ellis Dunn. His unique pedagogical approach to choreography profoundly influenced an entire generation of creators later identified as American postmodernists. Dunn, a musician and student of John Cage, guided his students to experiment with various non-dance methods, for instance by exploring time scores of contemporary composers (Cage, Stockhausen, Boulez, among others) and by employing the methods of indeterminacy, chance, various game rules and graphic notation.[39]

Interdisciplinarity was also a major inspiration — deriving choreographic structures from other artistic realms (music, painting, sculpture, literature, happenings, film, etc.). Many methods still used today originated in this period, such as repetition, use of stillness, minimalism, juxtaposition, collage, appropriation of non-dance structures as scores, citation of other works, incorporation of everyday movements, Dadaist and Surrealist techniques, improvisation or working with objects and technologies.[40]

A crucial element of Dunn's pedagogy was the verbal analysis of seen pieces, positioning the creative process itself as more compelling than movement invention or originality. By integrating random operations and indeterminacy into choreographic methods, space was created for dancers' invention and autonomy, rendering them partners with the choreographer. This engendered a new choreographer–performer relationship,[41] redistributing control over the creative process. These novel ideas and experiences catalysed a redefinition of dance and choreography, with the core tenets being democracy and non-hierarchy.[42] This approach unlocked new possibilities for creation, influencing many artists.

The 1970s saw the formation of Grand Union,[43] arguably the most significant American postmodern improvisation collective. The group presented purely improvised performances, driving the evolution of improvisation as a performance mode. The early 1970s also marked the emergence of Contact Improvisation, in which dance is spontaneously created before the audience, often situated in non-theatrical spaces such as gymnasiums or even outdoors.[44]

Improvised performances were born in the 1960s and experienced a surge in the following decade, gaining popularity with audiences and sometimes evoking an atmosphere akin to a sporting event.[45] Another surge of interest in improvised performances occurred in the 1990s,[46] when a new generation of creators, groups and collectives emerged,[47] discovering value in spontaneous choreography.[48] Additionally, the economic recession in the US made improvised performances less financially demanding compared to large-scale productions and ensembles.[49]

Since the 1970s, individual artists have travelled to Europe to teach and perform, with some beginning to create and consistently teach there (e.g. Katie Duck, David Zambrano, Mark Tompkins, Meg Stuart, among others). They work at universities (e.g. Eva Karczag), lead workshops and appear at festivals.[50]

Improvised forms also appeared within traditional large ensembles. An important figure in this regard was the American choreographer and dancer William Forsythe, who led Ballet Frankfurt in Germany for over two decades and subsequently continued his work with The Forsythe Company. He transformed the traditional Frankfurt ensemble into a progressive company of creatives, with whom he created improvised performances grounded in classical dance techniques. In the 1990s, he introduced and codified a system of movement principles applicable to any movement vocabulary.[51] Forsythe approaches improvised performance from a different perspective to the American postmodern creators, who drew from somatic disciplines. Forsythe bases his work on the principles of classical dance technique and formal choreographic methods. He generates choreography using movement algorithms and articulates it in these terms.[52]

The tools for improvised performances build upon American postmodernism and continue to evolve. As Eva Karczag mentions in our interview: 'Many ideas and practices that we use have infiltrated mainstream dance, and although often not acknowledged, and often not practised in a rigorous way.'[53]

However, a fundamental question remains: how to approach the composition of time and space in the present moment? How to react appropriately and make decisions?

THE THRILL OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

In his workshops, Julyen Hamilton often emphasises the importance of executing the right movement at the precise moment.[54] And Wendy Houstoun says, 'The aspect of the present moment is somehow inherent in every performance,

whether the material is fixed or improvised. The degree to which it comes to you in that moment is, in my opinion, a defining quality of improvisation.'[55]

Improvised performance forms contain, among other elements, a crucial component that the audience typically perceives — the thrill of the unknown. The audience senses and feels that if the performance is prepared, constructed and stabilised, it is 'out of danger'. However, when it enters the realm of an open performance, the audience is confronted more directly with the instability of unexpected developments, with the fact that what they are witnessing is being created (and is also disappearing) in the present moment. That moment of instability, uncertainty and unpreparedness is thrilling; it is akin to watching a sporting event where we know the rules, and have a sense of what they entail, but no one knows in advance what will transpire, how individuals will react in the present moment.[56] It is not rehearsed and resolved beforehand; the outcome is unknown and only the plan, outline, rules and framework are given. And the audience watches what emerges from the confrontation with these rules in the present moment.[57]

Perhaps this is why it is so thrilling to watch an improvised performance. From my own experience, I know that witnessing a successful improvised performance evokes greater excitement than a well-constructed choreography. I experienced this during a Ballet Frankfurt performance at the Tanec Praha festival, where two performances were given on two consecutive days, and I had the opportunity to attend both.[58] On the first day, the programme consisted of two 'classical' pieces (*workwithinwork* and *Quartette*) and a new piece (*One Flat Thing*, *reproduced*). The Prague audience reacted rather timidly on the first evening, likely unprepared for this type of abstract postmodern dance. On the second day, William Forsythe decided to replace the middle choreography with a directed improvisation. Since I was seated in the third row, I occasionally had the opportunity to hear how he directly guided his dancers through earpieces during the dance. It was fascinating to observe how the audience's attention and engagement was transformed.

When creating an improvised performance, the strategy employed in its preparation is of paramount importance: determining the conditions to be set; the design of the performance space; the positioning of the audience and performers; the means of drawing the audience into the experience; the level of specificity or ambiguity regarding the structure; the delineation or limitation of rules; the areas left entirely open; the layers that will constitute the performance; the elements that will unify or, conversely, separate it; which components will be open and which predetermined; and so forth.

We progress from selecting a strategy to planning or consciously choosing not to plan.[59] The choice of these options fundamentally shapes the improvised work itself, engaging both the principle of chance and the creation of structure and

form for the performance, thereby composing time-space and, in a certain sense, choreographing.[60]

Sometimes creators opt for the strategy of involving the audience in the process by familiarising them with the rules and limitations. The audience then has the opportunity to comprehend the challenges the performers on stage are grappling with. At other times, only the creators are privy to these rules, and the audience simply observes the dance as it unfolds in the present moment.

Although there is no universal approach or handbook to creating an improvised performance, in my experience there is always a necessity to structure improvisation — whether consciously or unconsciously. As Steve Paxton observed, we are surrounded by structures, and we ourselves are a structure on multiple levels.[61] From this reflection, it follows that we do not decide whether to structure or not but rather how we will direct the structure.[62]

Nita Little mentions in an interview: 'I don't have one kind of composition. I've done things that are narrative. And realised it through writing. And then the movement that takes place is scored more tightly, or more loosely, but scored. Why scored? Because I like the immediacy of performance when people don't know how to do it and don't do it the same way twice.'[63]

Structuring or planning an improvised performance pertains to the degree of control over the emerging material. For the purposes of defining and guiding (especially initially) group improvisation, the term 'score' came into use.

STRUCTURING AN IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

The score takes on various forms. As Stephanie Skura notes, a score can consist of instructions that each person interprets and performs in their unique way: 'Containing images, drawings and/or words; it might be a description of potent aspects of an improvisation, or the score itself might be the improvisation. Scores can be tools for accessing, developing, and clarifying subconscious meaning. They can help us find specificity by homing in on qualities, images, and even processes — rather than always repeating exact outer form.'[64]

In choreography and composition, the score acquires many different meanings. One of the two primary meanings is as a record that represents this discipline, related to its notation system, which has existed since the era of historical dances. Dance notation primarily captures the pathway of movement and the vertical spatial relationships in dance, functioning like a musical score.

In the second meaning, the score serves as a documentation of the structure in the performance, its limitations, ideas, thoughts and concepts — whether it

was created in advance, before the actual performance, or as a subsequent record. This creates the possibility of repeating an improvised performance (although not in all parameters). The ability to repeat is often an argument against considering an improvised performance as choreography.

The term 'score' is difficult to translate into Czech and is not commonly used in the Czech dance milieu. The literal translation of the word is *partitura* or *notový zápis*, Czech words used in music, but these do not evoke associations with dance. As an equivalent, the term *struktura* (structure) is often used in Czech, but even this lacks precision and accuracy.

As previously mentioned, score appears in connection with the recording/documentation of dance. The creation of dance notation has a relatively rich history: attempts to record dance and create a unified notation system can be traced back to the Renaissance and Baroque periods. At the beginning of the 20th century, Rudolf Laban and Rudolf Benesh devoted themselves to creating notation systems. The systems created are quite complex for choreography creation, and their subsequent reading is impractical for implementation. Nevertheless, they have their place in dance theory, and some dances can be recorded with them.

The second possibility of using the score — as a preparation or record of the created performance — is related to American postmodernism and the overall redefinition of dance and choreography. The idea of using a record as performance preparation is not new, but it gained new significance in connection with the use of graphic notation in contemporary music.[65] In the second half of the 20th century, there was a need in music for new forms of notation that would reflect the demands of a different approach to composition and the meaning of scores.[66] A key role in this process was played by the composer and experimenter John Cage. Cage was also significant for dance, as he collaborated closely with Merce Cunningham, who (inspired by Cage) prepared and recorded his choreographies using a system of symbols he created. In the 1990s, Cunningham developed the notation system further and created a computer program that allowed for the composition of the dancer's body. The program was called Life Forms, and through it he created the first computer-assisted choreography.[67]

Cage also influenced the development of dance by inviting Robert Ellis Dunn to lead choreographic workshops. In these workshops, Dunn encouraged students to prepare and create their dances through notation before physically performing them. This notation could take various forms — pictorial, symbolic, verbal or structures not intended for dance (e.g. a city map), etc.[68] As Ruth Emerson notes, writing scores as preparation for choreography was purely practical: 'It was well understood by everybody that most people didn't

have a studio of their own. But in another week, you were expected to come with something. [Scores were] the only practical way to convey information.'[69]

To complement the historical development of scores, it is essential to mention Anna Halprin again. Halprin developed scores as a tool for fully developing movement material and opening up other possible directions. Her system included scaling the delineation and assignment of the structure. She worked on a scale from one to ten, where one is fully open, with minimal delineation/structure/action/movement (e.g. only the beginning and end specified), and ten is closed, with maximum delineation/structure/action and movement text (set choreography).[70] Here too she envisioned the possibility of the dancer entering set choreography while dancing in the present moment.

Wendy Houstoun shares this view in our interview: 'The present-tense nature of improvisation is sort of there in every performance, whether or not the material is fixed. The obsession with whether it's arriving to you in that moment, and to what degree it's arriving to you in that moment, is the quality of improvisation to me.'[71]

The Motion Bank project, initiated by William Forsythe, contributed to the development of scores as a principle of creation. From 2010 to 2014, the project was part of The Forsythe Company and primarily focused on creating online scores. Forsythe invited creators Deborah Hay, Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, and Bebe Miller and Thomas Hauert, to collaborate on four projects. The results of this phase are publicly accessible as Online Scores.[72] This ongoing interdisciplinary project deals primarily with how dance can be captured and digitally stored. It also includes the development of software that allows for notation.[73]

From our interviews with international creators, it emerged that not all of them use the term 'score', and its usage primarily stems from the previous history and current pedagogical methods and creative styles of each creator. Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton and Wendy Houstoun do not use the term, unlike Eva Karczag and Nita Little. Danny Lepkoff perceives 'score' as 'a word that comes from music, and that a score is written in music. It's been used in dance to describe some kind of structure.'[74]

As confirmed by our focus group, a precise translation of the word 'score' in the Czech dance environment does not exist, and the term itself is described in other ways.[75] The most commonly used words are structure, structuring, delineation, planning, assignment, situation, targeting, task, framework or image (respectively, *struktura*, *strukturování*, *vymezení*, *plánování*, *zadání*, *situace*, *zacílení*, *úkol*, *rámec nebo obraz*).

The Czech dance scene largely missed the influence of American postmodernism. The development of Czech dance in the 1990s was tumultuous, and the

penetration of contemporary dance influences was more dependent on individuals.[76] This stage is also not yet sufficiently reflected in theoretical work.[77]

CONCLUSION

Improvised performances have now become a conventional component of the dance world. Within the Czech context, they remain somewhat peripheral to the mainstream, yet they maintain their own circle of creators and audiences.

Over the course of this research, I came to realise that this discipline can be continuously developed, and that an improviser is not constrained by age in the same manner as a dancer in conventional practice. The ability to compose in the present moment and cultivate one's attentiveness can be honed throughout one's life. A profoundly impactful experience for me was witnessing performances by improvisers over 50 years of age — creators who had dedicated themselves to the practice of stage improvisation over an extended period.

I regard stage improvisation as the apex of dance. It is a multifaceted experience, both for the viewer and for the creator. Capturing the present moment through movement, composing the various layers of the performance, and shared lived experience engender a pure sense of joy.

I wholeheartedly align with Julyen Hamilton's perspective: '[V]ery simply, why do I improvise? Because I make better material when I improvise.'[78]

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1 Michaela Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'Real-Time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem', *Taneční aktuality* – special edition 'Dance and Words' (9/2023): 123.
2 Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding and James McGuirk (eds.), *Philosophy of Improvisation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 11.
3 Ravn, Høffding and McGuirk (eds.), *Philosophy of Improvisation*, 1.
4 Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (eds.), *Taken By Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 27.
5 Melinda Buckwalter, *Composing While Dancing: An Improviser's Companion* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 7.
6 For example, from practitioner perspectives (Buckwalter, *Composing While Dancing*; De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*; Tufnell and Crickmay, *Body, Space, Image* and others); theoretical essays (Albright and Gere, *Taken By Surprise*; Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems* and others); texts on development and emergence (Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*; Dils and Cooper Albright, *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*); publications on Judson Dance Theater (Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*; Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*; Perron, *The Grand Union*; and many others); and philosophical perspectives (Ravn, Høffding and McGuirk, *Philosophy of Improvisation*; Montero, *Thought in Action*).
7 Research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle' (Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais, and Lizzy Le Quesne, supported by a research grant from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, 2021–2023).
8 The focus group included Helena Arenbergerová, Jana Novorytová, Veronika Šimková and Jiří Lössl.
9 Michaela Raisová and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína', *ArteActa* 6, no. 9 (2023), https://arteacta.cz/pdfs/ara/2023/01/01.pdf.
10 Michaela Raisová and Bohumíra Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires: Real-Time Choreography in the Czech Context', *ArteActa* 6, no. 10 (2024), https://arteacta.cz/from-solitaires-to-solitaires-real-time-choreography-in-the-czech-context/.
11 Rais and Eliášová, 'Real-Time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem'.
12 Andrea Opavská recognises the objective consequence of the long-term isolation and detachment of the Czech environment, and thus the logical disconnection from developments in contemporary art, specifically contemporary dance. Andrea Opavská, 'Český současný tanec v devadesátých letech 20. století' (PhD dissertation, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague [HAMU], 2015), 115.
13 Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial, and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová, and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2021.
14 The term is used by Richard Bull. See Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 24.
15 The term is used by Rosalind Crisp. See Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
16 Dita Dvořáková (ed.), *Tanec, prostor a světlo: Antologie současné německojazyčné taneční vědy*, trans. Petr Pytlík and Markéta Polochová (Brno: Janáčkova akademie múzických umění, 2017), 172.
17 Dvořáková (ed.), *Tanec, prostor a světlo*, 130.
18 Dvořáková (ed.), *Tanec, prostor a světlo*, 132.
19 Dvořáková (ed.), *Tanec, prostor a světlo*, 130.
20 See also Raisová and Eliášová, 'Okamžitá kompozice'.
21 Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.
22 Katya Davisson, 'Improvisation as a Method of Composition: Reconciling the Dichotomy', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 62, no. 3 (2022): 373.
23 Annie Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process: "Post-control" Choreography', *Dance Chronicle* 33, no. 2 (2010): 181.
24 Larry Lavender, 'The Emancipation of Improvisation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, ed. Vida L. Midgelow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 275.
25 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 181.
26 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 189.
27 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 188.
28 'The endeavour of playing with ideas, throwing things up in the air, seeing where they land, is there to provoke material that you discuss and evolve into a pattern – and that you think is useful and repeatable to a degree. It very much depends on what you fix.' Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Wendy

Houstoun' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová, and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.
Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová, and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.

29 'But these two practices are completely intertwined now, inseparable.' See Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

30 'I don't really see that choreography and improvisation are two different poles. I could tell you a joke: "A choreographer aspires to make what they want. An improviser needs to want what they make."' Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová, and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.

31 See Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.

32 These interviews were conducted while writing the study Raisová and Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'.

33 'Improvised material sets and often carries the risk that the authenticity of the movement expression will "fade" over time.' Jiří Lössl, written reflection on 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová.

34 'It depends on what I see there, the layering of things and organisation; an improvised performance has softer outlines, and choreography has a higher degree of precision.' Zdenka Brungot Sviteková, responses to research questions for 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2022, personal archive of Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová.

35 Raul Hakli, 'Improvisation as Online Planning', in *Philosophy of Improvisation*, ed. Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding and James McGuirk, 32.

36 She understands improvisation as an almost uncontrolled action: 'It almost comes from an automatic system. There definitely cannot be any mental intervention. And it must move so fast that you have no idea what you will do until it happens. And then you don't even have time to develop your reaction because something else is already happening.' Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, ed. Rachel Kaplan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 193.

37 Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 191.

38 'Task' is an established term.

39 Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England/ Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 212.

40 Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 214–215.

41 'Chance undermines the choreographer's control by subverting personal choice.' Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 354.

42 Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 214.

43 Dils and Albright, *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, 359. Grand Union existed from 1970 to 1976.

44 This format still exists and is called 'Round Robin'.

45 Cynthia Jean Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 72. 'It was almost like watching an exciting basketball game'; see Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

46 Dils and Albright, *Moving History/Dancing Cultures*, 47.

47 'During that time [the 1980s and 1990s], I was a part of the downtown dance community in NY; I made my own work, collaborated with other NY dancers and was involved in starting Movement Research. Also, I was a part of Channel Z, an improvisational performance ensemble including myself, Paul Langland, Diane Madden, Nina Martin, Randy Warshaw and, for a while, Stephen Petronio and Robin Feld'; see Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

48 Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 341.

49 Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 347.

50 The ImPuls Tanz festival in Vienna played a significant role in the Czech context. See Opavská, 'Český současný tanec v devadesátých letech 20. století', 195.

51 See his CD-ROM *Improvisation Technologies. A Tool for the Analytical Dance Eye*, released in 1999. More at https://zkm.de/en/project/william-forsythe-improvisation-technologies-the-website-project.

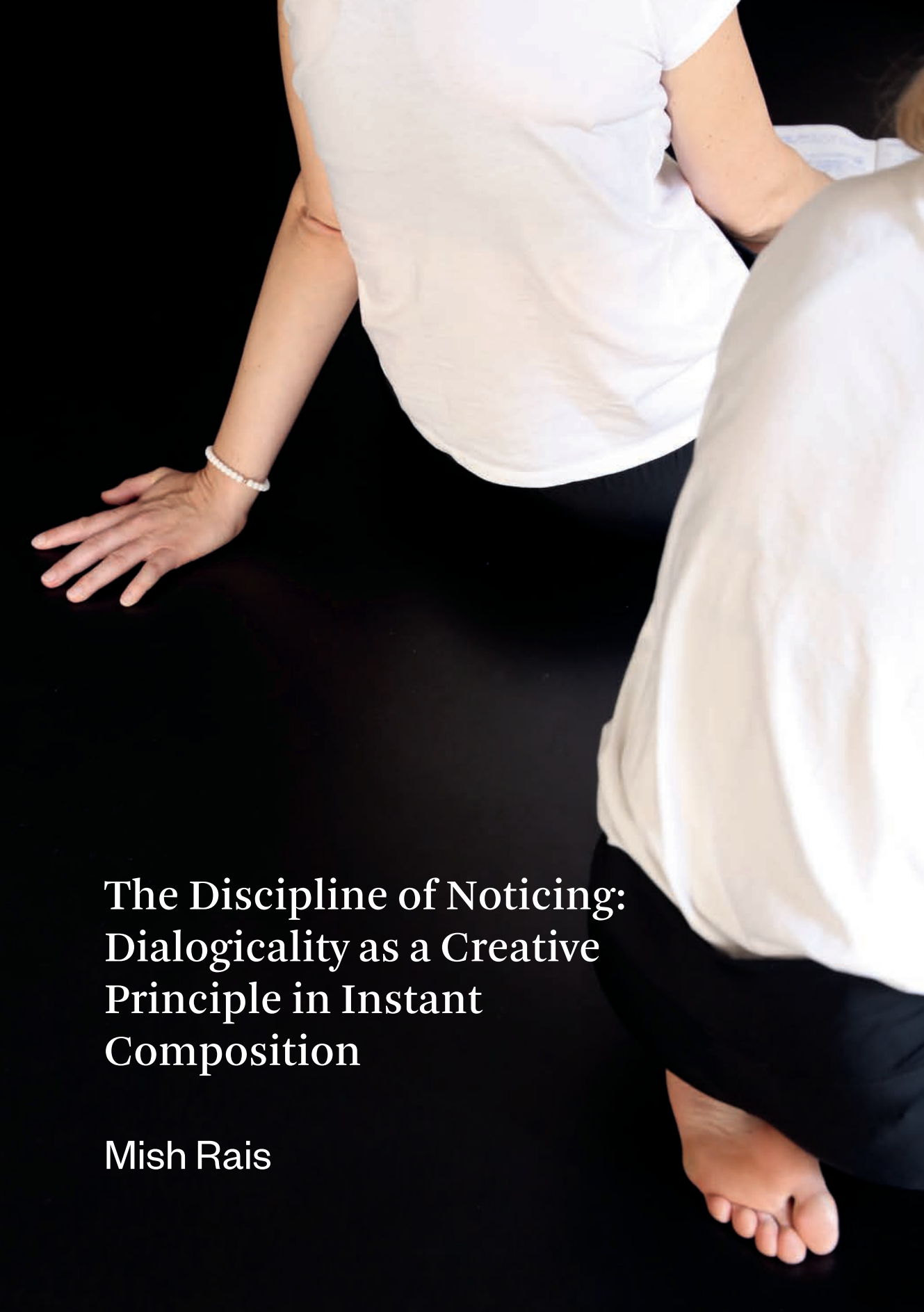
52 Bohumíra Eliášová, *Improvizační postupy v současném tanci* (Praha: NAMU, 2013).

53 Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

54 Bohumíra Eliášová, notes from Julyen Hamilton's workshops 2014–2023, personal archive.

55 Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.

56 Maura Keefe, 'What's the Score?', in Albright and Gere (eds.), *Taken By Surprise*, 234.
57 Hakli, 'Improvisation as Online Planning', 37.
58 Tanec Praha 2000, 25–26 June, performed at the State Opera in Prague.
59 Hakli, 'Improvisation as Online Planning', 37.
60 The term 'choreography' is currently understood quite broadly as the structuring of movement, not necessarily for the movement of human beings. See Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).
61 Kent De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 158.
62 De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*, 158.
63 Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little' [for 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.
64 Stephanie Skura, 'Intention and Surrender', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, ed. Vida L. Midgelow, 394.
65 Here the word 'score' is translated, and the term 'graphic notation' is described and theoretically reflected upon in music theory and in the context of visual art. See, for example, Petr Kofroň and Smolka Martin, *Grafické partitury a koncepty* (Olomouc: Votobia, 1996); Karel Srb (ed.), *Partitury: Grafická hudba, fónická poezie, akce, parafráze, interpretace* (Praha: Svaz hudebníků, 1980); Denisa Kujelová, 'Institucionální vs. alternativní: Formy prezentace neoficiálního umění konceptuálních a konceptových tendencí v Československu 1968–1982', in *Čs. koncept 70. let*. (Praha: Fait Gallery, 2021); Jitka Hlaváčková, 'Grafické partitury jako cesta ke skutečnosti. Ukázka „komplexního realismu" v tvorbě československých umělců 60. a 70. let 20. století v kontextu mezinárodního hnutí experimentální tvorby' (PhD dissertation, Charles University, Prague, 2015). The use of this term documents the fact that dance in the Czech context did not go through much of a postmodern phase, unlike other artistic fields.
66 '[G]raphic scores work with three types of visual elements, namely symbol, sign, and association, and their realisation takes place either with preparation or improvisation'; see Kujelová, 'Institucionální vs. alternativní', 35.
67 Carrie Noland, *Merce Cunningham: After the Arbitrary* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 58.
68 This method was later applied by William Forsythe, where architectural plans by Daniel Libeskind were a source for his choreography.
69 Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, 213.
70 Halprin, *Moving Toward Life*, 199.
71 Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.
72 See https://www-archive.motionbank.org/en.html.
73 Ibid.
74 Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.
75 Helena Arenbergerová: 'It seems the term "score" is not used much in the Czech Republic; it is rather paraphrased'; response to 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2022–2323, personal archive of Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová. Or Anka Sedlačková: 'I do not use the term, I rather use the word theme'; responses to the same project, 2022, personal archive of Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová.
76 Raisová and Eliášová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'.
77 Only Andrea Opavská and Viktor Čech have engaged in deeper analysis of this topic. See Opavská, 'Český současný tanec v devadesátých letech 20. století', and Viktor Čech, *Choreografický moment v současném umění* (Ústí nad Labem: Fakulta umění a designu Univerzity Jana Evangelisty Purkyně, 2018).
78 See Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.



The Discipline of Noticing: Dialogicality as a Creative Principle in Instant Composition

Mish Rais

When describing the discipline of instant composition (dance improvisation),[1] seasoned improvisers use terms such as 'decision-making', 'composing', 'searching for answers', 'attuning to' and 'feeling' that which is emerging in the radically altered time frame of an intense situation in front of a live audience.[2] To have the ability or the agency to notice involves specific work with attention. Different improvisers highlight different aspects that they notice, which change not only according to their previous experience, area of interest, conceptualisation and understanding of improvisation, but also based on their current mood, embodied experience, personal aesthetic preferences and a myriad of other factors. Their ways for actualising the decision-making process are equally unique and idiosyncratic.

In any case, improvised dance performance works with the conscious concentration of the performer's attention. Approaches to improvisation exist on a scale from passive to active actions, or, in other words, from purely reactive, intuitive action, an immersion in the 'drift to a precise concentration of attention, a conscious action of the body'.[3] However, in all cases, the viewer might perceive the action as random and without any internal logic,[4] which is why the discipline is difficult to assess from the point of view of dance criticism.[5] This text sees improvisation as a manifestation of the psychosomatic condition[6] – the experience and mastery of the performers' control over their stage presence. This is because the moment of improvised composition requires the improviser to be wholly present, capable of making instant decisions, perceiving all that is occurring, capable of reacting to impulses and developing them while using the tools in their current repertoire. And the key to this is the ability to notice, a specific mental process that occurs during an ongoing action.[7]

Noticing necessitates a certain *someone* and *something*. This text suggests viewing attention during instant composition as a dialogical quality and the use of the term *dialogue* – or, even better, *dialogical principle* – to describe this specific creative process. Academic writing on dance improvisation has not yet addressed the dialogical principle as such, although some authors have dealt with the dialogical quality of improvisation. The importance of dialogue as part of the improvisation process is mentioned by, for example, Fiona Bannon in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*,[8] and the core of the term is implicit in the reflections of many dance improvisers.[9] As Annie Kloppenberg notes, 'the making, performing and watching of dance is a dialogue.'[10] During improvisation, the performer[11] is part of a dialogue with the audience, their partners on stage and all media in play. However, one aspect that is neglected in the contemporary debate is the idea that the performer on stage primarily enters into a dialogue with themselves and with the piece that emerges in the moment of improvisation. The performer reacts to various impulses: they work with imagination and imagery, and with memory and their sensory

perceptions. This text proposes the idea that the creative principles of improvised dance performance are based not only on the ability to maintain a dialogue with external partners (other performers in the space, along with light, music and other media) but also on the ability to initiate and develop a dialogue with oneself.

The decision-making and creative processes of any given improviser are idiosyncratic, unique and transparent in the format of improvised dance performance. It is therefore a dialogue of multiple positions, roles and impulses and their development or conscious denial. I have already mentioned that seasoned artists agree that this process is conscious,[12] and that, since improvised dance performance uses the body as a medium, as a gesture, it also involves the concentration of attention on multiple levels. When talking about dance improvisation, we can use terms such as 'embodied cognition',[13] 'embodied experience or knowledge', 'embodied understanding'[14] or 'embodied consciousness'.[15] An improviser on stage acts right in front of a live audience and reveals all their compositional strategies, making themselves vulnerable, available, open.[16]

The term 'noticing' also appears as part of the terminology of 'Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner',[17] an experimental discipline developed by Ivan Vyskočil.[18] In the context of dance improvisation, 'noticing' is used by, for example, Sally Doughty.[19] This text develops her thoughts and expands them by applying the critical vocabulary of Dialogical Acting and Vyskočil's terminology, which he devised as part of his study of stage improvisation, called 'Subject: Stage Improvisation'.[20] For Vyskočil, the improviser in the moment of action represents the triunity of author, actor and viewer.[21] The word 'actor' obviously refers to a traditional view of stage action in the context of a theatrical performance. With respect to improvisation, it points to improvisational theatre, which has a foundation, history and tradition different to that of dance improvisation. However, if we replace the word 'actor' with 'performer',[22] we can move towards a discussion in the context of the discipline of improvised dance performance.

WHAT I DID AND HOW: POINT OF VIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This study is largely based on my own experience with Dialogical Acting and (dance) improvisation in the format of improvised (dance) performance. Both improvised dance performance and Dialogical Acting are disciplines that

resist a single, clear definition.[23] My intention is not to compare these disciplines, especially as Dialogical Acting is not intended for public display. I do believe, however, that Vyskočil's terminology, which he uses to describe Dialogical Acting and stage improvisation, offers a clear and comprehensive view of the experience of both the performer and the viewer of improvised dance performance.

This text arose out of various sets of data: reflections on practice-based research;[24] reflections on embodied experience; theoretical research using available sources; interviews with Czech and international dance professionals;[25] and the reflections of a focus group that was part of the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle' (Eliášová, Rais, Le Quesne, 2021–2023, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) and the questionnaires prepared for this group.[26]

The work is naturally beholden to my personal reflection on many years of experience with Dialogical Acting and instant composition.[27] This experience allows me to see clear links between the two disciplines. I view them as manifestations (and developments) of the psychosomatic condition, the ability of the performer to maintain a dialogue with themselves, with impulses and with that which emerges in the moment. When practising Dialogical Acting, the practitioner enters a situation of 'public solitude'[28] to initiate a dialogue with themselves, or rather to notice that they are always part of a dialogue.[29] I have also recognised that my experience of Dialogical Acting has major similarities to my experience (whether as a performer or a viewer) of improvised dance performance. Furthermore, I was a part of the three-year international research project titled 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', which confirmed the existence of a conscious dialogical quality as a core creative principle in improvised dance performance through workshops and interviews with Czech and international artists who do stage improvisation.

These findings are developed using a large body of research accumulated as part of the above-mentioned project, which examined dance improvisation from different positions. The first position is that of the performer — one with experience in both improvised dance performance and Dialogical Acting. This being my personal cultural context (cultural baggage, context, landscape),[30] it necessarily finds its way into everything I do, as do all my other personal experiences and training. This is particularly relevant for my experience as a performer during improvised dance performance. I also examine this phenomenon from the position of the viewer. This is far from unique, as it is common for improvisers, who often encounter each other on stage, to become the audience for one another's performances.

Since I am a long-standing researcher of improvised dance performance on three levels — viewer, author, performer — and I have been involved with Dialogical

Acting both as a student and as an assistant,[31] I include my personal experience in the analysis of the data while entering a dialogue with my dance colleagues.

POSTMODERN ORIGINS AND THE STATE OF THE FIELD

During the 1960s, the New York avant-garde scene witnessed the arrival of a group of artists with a novel, innovative and highly experimental approach to stage performance. Gradually, a body of writing was created that reflected on this so-called postmodern dance,[32] primarily from the personal perspective of the performers and their experiences. This initial interest set the language and the register with which the field has been described and examined ever since.[33] These texts are, first and foremost, personal accounts and represent internal observations of artists and university-educated intellectuals[34] trying to grasp and reflect on the phenomenon of (dance) improvisation on stage.[35] The small number of theoretical texts on the phenomenon of live improvisation from an angle different to the personal one are all relatively recent and emanate from outside the Czech context. Generally, the theoretical discourse of the discipline has only recently seen a rise in the number of academic papers on the topic[36] and in university-backed research projects into dance improvisation.[37] In many cases, these projects and papers employ the point of view of another field (such as phenomenology[38]).

New trends in dance and improvisation found their way into the Czech context in a highly particular manner, at first through specific individuals and events, and then, following the Soviet occupation in 1968, in secret, away from the prying eyes of the state.[39] It was only after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that the free exchange of ideas resumed and a plethora of international influences came to Czechoslovakia, or rather to the Czech and Slovak republics, following their separation. Dance improvisation, both as a creative process and as a pedagogical tool, is often viewed as a legacy of modernity, but Czech audiences had few opportunities to encounter it on stage, and if they did, it was exclusively through rare events by individual artists and at alternative venues.[40]

The Czech discourse within the field of dance theory and criticism essentially lacks any original academic texts on improvised dance performance or the context of postmodern dance, and there is no dialogue with international developments and research in this field. In fact, this was the motivation behind this research project, the outcome of which is this publication, along with the articles and interviews that arose from the research process and have since

been published separately on various platforms.[41] These efforts represent the first opportunity for Czech audiences to acquaint themselves with this phenomenon in a historical context and from the point of view of practice-based research. Equally, there are few Czech texts that describe the phenomenon of dance improvisation from a practical point of view. In the West, until recently, this was the dominant standpoint both in the academic sphere (texts by dance professionals and teachers) and in the professional sphere (interviews, reflections, personal accounts of performers), and also in public circles (in terms of casual interest in dance improvisation).[42]

As I have already noted, different artists have different ideas about what dance improvisation actually is.[43] In fact, in the very early stages of the discipline, it was sometimes the case that an outsider's reaction prompted the pioneers to start labelling their art as 'instant composition' or 'dance improvisation' and to identify it as a unique artistic expression, a new form of creative language.[44] As such, the terminology of this discipline has been disjointed and shifting from the start.[45] It is usually updated and specified via interviews with experts in the field (it should be noted that the interviewers and researchers are generally also practitioners of the discipline[46]). One of the goals of this text is to join this trend, to expand it, to open new possibilities for the language of, and reflections on, this discipline, all by using interviews with notable Czech and international artists with long-standing experience in the field of dance improvisation.

The structure of the text follows this trajectory: in addition to observing specific phenomena in two distinct cultural contexts, I focus on describing both disciplines (Dialogical Acting and improvised dance performance) and finding their intersections. I then narrow the focus following Vyskočil's terminological arc of performer-viewer-author and examine these phenomena individually and in greater depth. This is facilitated primarily by the processing of the various data sets mentioned above.

EXPERIMENT AS A RESEARCH INTEREST AND ARTISTIC STRATEGY

Right from the start, a typical feature of open improvisation performance was the way it allowed other artistic disciplines — primarily contemporary music and visual arts — to enter into its experimental dialogues and actions.

When it comes to the origins of postmodern dance, especially in the case of improvised dance performance, the inception is traditionally linked to the avant-garde

scene on the East Coast of the US, particularly New York.[47] However, dance critic and historian Ramsay Burt objects to both the label 'postmodern dance' and the geographical identification of this stream as a purely (North) American affair,[48] a characterisation that Sally Banes has long presented in her published work. According to Burt, similar tendencies and developments in dance can be observed in Europe, although they have different starting points. Moreover, according to improviser and academic researcher I-Ying Wu,

> *[e]ven in the same culture, improvisation may develop in diverse forms or ways based on different conceptions that might be chosen or adapted according to personal experiences or backgrounds. What cannot be ignored is the fact that different cultures might generate concepts of improvisation that appear similar because their cultural elements and thoughts have penetrated, mixed, and merged into each other or just somehow coincided; there might be certain subtle differences between them. For instance, American and European improvisation practices informed by somatic practices have similar inclinations to Asian meditative practices and thoughts, but it is possible to note that their ideas imply concepts of integration of the body-mind, in-between, and wholeness that are grounded on different epistemic framings.*[49]

It can be said that experimentation and performance have always thrived in Czechoslovakia and its successor states, despite political upheavals and the rise of communist dictatorship, which isolated the country for decades. This is evidenced by various events that were organised covertly in defiance of the regime.[50]

The avant-garde has a strong tradition in Czechoslovakia,[51] with avant-garde experiments spanning multiple disciplines and artistic fields. However, after 1968, specific similarities can be seen between the performative aspects of improvised dance performance — its approaches, realisations and ideas — and Czechoslovak conceptual fine arts.[52] After all, even in the US there was a close connection between fine and visual artists and postmodern dance pioneers: the collaboration of artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Morris and Andy Warhol with the Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union and other related groups comes to mind.[53]

For quite some time, because of the oppressive social environment created by the totalitarian regime, it was not possible to develop a dialogue with the international scene or even across artistic fields within Czechoslovakia.[54] However, there was a foundation of experimental and conceptual thinking about performing arts to build upon and develop, even after 1968 when the cultural climate changed owing to the Soviet occupation.[55]

When it came to stage experiments, specific theatre artists in the former Czechoslovakia engaged in both practical and theoretical forms. One such figure was Ivan Vyskočil, the spiritual father of Czech postmodernity, who is associated, among others, with the Czechoslovak theatre of 'small stage forms' (*Divadla malých forem*). In his text 'Subject: Stage Improvisation' Vyskočil introduces the dialogical principle for cultivating the psychosomatic condition via the discipline of Dialogical Acting and stage improvisation.

To understand the terminology that Vyskočil uses to describe 'his' discipline, it should be noted that he was trained in both drama and psychology. It is also noteworthy that he first introduced the discipline at a psychology conference rather than one relating to the theatre (although it intersected with the dramatic arts through the influence of Roy Hart).[56]

The format of improvised stage (dance) performance and the 'non-theatre'[57] of Ivan Vyskočil and 'small stage forms' theatre emerged in the specific social context of the 1960s on opposite sides of the globe. The cultural context seems to have created a suitable climate for certain intellectual and artistic impulses,[58] despite vastly different traditions and socio-political situations. Improvisational approaches were used as creative strategies in all artistic disciplines throughout the 20th century.[59]

In his text on stage improvisation, Vyskočil explains that, in the moment of live improvisation, the performer engages in open play and takes on three positions, or roles, that they can assume, or, rather, that they can act upon. These positions are author, actor and viewer, all of them 'organic parts of play'.[60] Because I view the dialogical principle in improvised dance performance through the prism of Dialogical Acting, its terminology and my own experience with the discipline, let us take a closer look at it.

EXPERIMENTAL DISCIPLINE OF DIALOGICAL ACTING (WITH THE INNER PARTNER)

Vyskočil developed the discipline of Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner at the end of the 1960s at the Lidová škola umění (People's Art School). In the early 1990s, he continued his work at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.[61] Dialogical Acting hones the performer's ability to notice impulses in real time and to develop them creatively by engaging in a dialogue with oneself and everything that emerges out of the moment. Perhaps I should be more specific and say, using Vyskočil's words, that this is what the discipline *could be about*.[62] It is a psychosomatic discipline that builds on

the simple premise of relating back to oneself. However, this dialogue does not necessarily take the form of a conventional conversation (a dialogue with myself in which I embody the role of, for example, a critic or a supporter, a narrator, a commentator, especially when commenting on something I have done well/poorly, which is how we are used to talking to ourselves). Rather, it is held with the so-called inner partner, who is manifested by a noticeable change in the body tension of the practitioner.[63]

The practice of Dialogical Acting has a relatively set format:

> *An appropriate space is an ordinary classroom (rehearsal room) with a high ceiling. If possible, the room should be well-lit and empty, apart from the appropriate number of seats (chairs). After an introduction, in which the leader (teacher) evokes and discusses the familiar experience of 'talking to oneself' with the participants (students), for example commonly occurring instances of such actions, they then emphasise the necessity of 'going out of oneself' and 'coming back to oneself' as well as 'going into oneself' through voice and speech. They emphasise that it is necessary that the voice and speech, that vocal and spoken expression, be a conscious act. They also emphasise that Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner is only about experimenting, searching, learning and finding. In other words, that it is not in the least about performing any kind of art. Then the leader asks if any of the participants, who are sitting on chairs next to one another in a line facing the space like an audience, would like to go in the space and try it. This is in essence the only instruction as to 'what to do'. What then follows are merely observations and comments on what each person was doing, how they were doing it, and what they accomplished, usually focusing on what was helpful and what was not, what did not turn out well and why, and what to do about it. How to approach it for it to be it.*
>
> *Each person is 'in the space' a reasonable time (two to five minutes), alone in the others' field of attention, in this 'energy field', without any aids (like music, props, costume for example).*[64]

I have already mentioned that inner viewership is manifested in the change in body tension of the practitioner of Dialogical Acting. This is often in reaction to a question posed by the practitioner themself. The response of the inner partner to such an impulse can take the form of any gesture, whether vocal or physical. In this sense, the experience can also be understood as a cultivation of the ability to consciously notice the creative process that arises out of emptiness, a form of acting without a preset topic/action. The core of this action evokes the situation of improvised dance performance, in which the performer

composes without a predetermined theme or score, without any set material, and right in front of the audience. Although Dialogical Acting is a discipline designed for private performances only, not for the public, it is practised in the situation of public solitude (Stanislavski).[65] This condition, cultivated by regular and repeated practice of Dialogical Acting, can be quite useful when improvising in front of a live audience.

CULTIVATING PLAYFUL ATTENTION

There have already been attempts, even in the academic context, to name and clarify the techniques that performers employ during improvisation. These attempts seek to capture in words the elusive decision-making process and real-time action on the stage. The experience of switching positions during improvisation and the quality of attention required for creative decisions in the process have been examined by Susanne Ravn,[66] who approaches dance improvisation from a phenomenological standpoint. Kent De Spain[67] and Sally Doughty have also engaged with this topic in their methodologies. Doughty, for example, conducted an experiment using the instructions and tools of N. D. Perkins, a professor of pedagogy and education. The experiment involved saying whatever was going through a person's head in each moment of improvisation. Her report on the experiment suggests that the various students of dance who participated in the experiment all reflect and perceive their real-time decision-making processes in different ways.[68]

For this study, let us set aside the idea that it is immensely difficult to describe the exact processes of improvised dance performance and the experiences of the performers.[69] We should accept the idea that there is at least some possibility, albeit imperfect and imprecise, of describing this experience in words. For example, the short reflections of Doughty's students confirm that, during decisions, improvisers enter into a dialogue with themselves; they display a range of attitudes towards themselves and the actions they take. A similar variety can be seen in their reflections:[70] they take on different roles to act on the impulses that they notice and that these roles enable. Philosopher Barbara Gail Montero admits that the very definition of attention is complicated, and that there are many different conceptualisations.[71] Nevertheless, Montero's work attempts to dismantle the long-standing myth that thinking is a barrier to action. On the contrary, professionals from various fields of expertise can often achieve the best results if they actively think about the action they are performing right now.

In the spirit of the relationship between the fine arts and dance performance discussed above, Czech painter Petr Veselý offers this noteworthy insight when asked about the role that chance plays in his work: '[S]ometimes I just happen to look and spot something that later proves to be quite persistent. It simply occurs, there is an element of spontaneity, which to me is a better word than chance, although it is certainly not a purposeful process. That which comes to me is a result of a mode of thinking, a rough intention, and participation (plain old presence!) during the process of creation. I use the slightly shifted meaning of *other presence*, a presence where something occurs unexpectedly, unwittingly... I do not know what to expect, but it needs to be as specific as possible.'[72] 'Other presence' is a fitting description for the kind of attention that dancers operate with during improvisation.

When practising Dialogical Acting,

> *[e]ach participant goes through an initial period of chaos and confusion, which typically lasts between six and ten sessions. They then gradually begin to concentrate, loosen up, and start to perceive and express themselves in the 'here and now'. They begin reacting, acting consciously, relating and articulating in a more differentiated way. They start understanding and observing contrasts, polarity and oscillation; true opposites and complementarity; reciprocity; and the interplay of opposites. They gradually start acting dialogically and they start experiencing a dialogical being: they experience what it is to dialogically — and often paradoxically — be. They reach a 'creative state' (Stanislavski), they reach inspiration. They experience what it means for 'it to be playing in and with a person' (Patočka) and what it is when 'the ear is amazed at what the mouth is saying' (Werich). They get to 'hear one's partner and respond to him' (Voskovec and Werich). They mature into their own psychosomatic fitness, the one needed for conscious, creative communication. This takes at least three years of systematic, continual study, if not training.*[73]

Improvised dance performance takes place in front of a live audience, just like the practice of Dialogical Acting (although, to be specific, in Dialogical Acting it is public solitude: viewers are present but practitioners take turns entering the space alone and practising in front of the others). This is crucial, as the presence of an audience and their attention motivates a specific flow or conductive tension (*vodivé napětí*). Improvising solo, for example, in a studio and improvising in front of an audience are not the same thing, as many improvisers confirm.[74] When I am improvising, I notice that certain impulses and ideas are responses to the action that is occurring. This is the moment when I notice

that I am in dialogue with myself, and I embody a specific position (performing/dancing–viewing–commenting[75]). If I step into the role of the viewer, for example, not only am I observing the actions on stage but I also have the need to comment on, support or change what is happening. At the same time, it is undeniable that I am the author of the action itself. I am also the author of any response to that action (in this respect we can also incorporate self-forgetful spontaneity, as formulated by David Velleman[76]). I enter a state of relatively conscious and organic 'oscillation, permeation' of attention that these positions require. I am purposefully using the word 'organic', as this is not a staged dialogue but rather a conscious awareness of an ongoing process that occurs alongside the process itself, or perhaps just moments later.[77] In the diary recordings that Doughty kept as part of her research, she also mentions changing positions during improvisation.[78] These 'changes in perspective' represent similar changes in body tension and engagement during Dialogical Acting.

Vyskočil's ideas about the triunity of the performer during improvisation (actor-viewer-author) outline the creative process in the moment of improvised action and serve as a guide to attentive observation and analysis of an improvised performance. It is important to understand that, during live improvisation, we are following the decision-making process of the performer. We are following the creative dialogue in real time, a dialogue maintained by the performer and through them.

I have already noted that during improvisation on stage, the performer demonstrates their ability to compose time and space, maintain a dialogue and engage with anything that emerges. They enter open play with stage partners (light, sound, musicians, dancers, video, etc.), with the audience, with themselves, at the same time as everything is happening at once, 'here and now'. Open play is a crucial principle, if not an outright requirement, for this process.[79]

THE BODY THINKS, THE MIND ACTS

In her discussion of the phenomenon of dance improvisation, phenomenologist and dancer Sondra Horton Fraleigh rejects the Cartesian duality of body and mind and suggests using the term 'body-mind'.[80] Another seminal text on performance arts devotes significant attention to the links between the mind and the body and the 'organic body-mind'.[81] According to Kloppenberg, the Cartesian division of the body into an 'object' and a separate 'I' is further complicated during live performance. Dancers are aware of the cultural connotations

and conditioning of their bodies, the intrinsic everyday habits discussed by Erving Goffman and Judith Butler as 'performance'. They are also aware of the communication potential of movement: the artistic medium and the artistic product are literally of one body.[82] The idea of the 'body as a tool' has been repeatedly questioned, and an increasing number of academic studies view the performative format of improvised dance performance and dance improvisation through the prism of phenomenology. Montero studies so-called cognition-in-action,[83] and Malaika Sarco-Thomas discusses dance improvisation in conjunction with philosophy, primarily phenomenology.[84] There are also the ontological differences between theatre and dance, encapsulated in philosopher Alain Badiou's view of dance as the embodiment of thinking through movement.[85] Other texts dismantling the dysfunctional separation of the body and the mind operate with the term 'embodied consciousness'. Their authors attempt to reflect their own practical experience through the application of pre-existing terms from phenomenology.[86]

As for Dialogical Acting, Zuzana Pártlová and Boleslav Keprt suggest that 'learning to think through the body is part of establishing the psychosomatic condition required for public performances'.[87] Repeated performances of improvised dance cultivate the ability to manage the situation, to compose in real time and to maintain a dialogue with oneself and one's surroundings. This ability facilitates the emergence of imagery, narrative, emotion — simply put, the things that the audience perceives during a successful performance of improvised dance. In this respect, both Dialogical Acting and improvised dance performance are transparent disciplines. The audience watches individual performers handle the situation of zero-point acting.[88] The audience can see the process of thinking though the body in space. The process is made public and open: it unveils the strategy used in the composition, the source of any action in the situation.

There is no right way to improvise/perform/practise improvised dance performance, and neither is there one for Dialogical Acting. Seasoned improvisers gradually cultivate their own authorial handwriting, approach or 'style', for lack of a better word. In Dialogical Acting, practitioners slowly discover their own practice, their own genre.

The rest of this text builds on Vyskočil's idea of the triunity of roles during stage improvisation: actor-viewer-author. I use interviews and data from the focus group to individually discuss questions of actorship, viewership and authorship. When I act as a performer on stage (according to my decisions, experience and conditions), I also have an (inner) viewer following this performer, informing her, giving her impulses. The author oscillates between the other two positions: as the viewer, she notices specific aspects; as the performer, she puts them into action.

Let us now focus on the discipline of instant composition: how do improvisers themselves describe their strategies of thinking through the body and focusing their attention?

ON ACTORSHIP: THE QUALITIES OF ATTENTION

The pioneers of improvised dance performance arrived at improvisation via many different roads: they had different motivations, different interests and, above all, different past experiences. In interviews with De Spain, they mention that improvisation is a holistic discipline involving conscious work with the body and the mind and an ability to be present in the moment, open to impulses. It is a practice in which conscious work with attention plays the central role.[89]

I base the following summary on written reflections, discussions and correspondence with a focus group of nine experienced Czech and Slovak improvisers, dancers and pedagogues: Helena Arenbergerová, Kateřina Dietzová, Mirka Eliášová, Lizzy Le Quesne, Jana Novorytová, Hana Polanská Turečková, Anka Sedlačková, Veronika Šimková and Jiří Lössl.[90] I also use interviews with six international artists: Rosalind Crisp, Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton, Nita Little, Eva Karczag and Danny Lepkoff. The questions I posed during the interviews sought to learn more about the conscious decision-making process and the position of the inner viewer during composition. What happens to attention just before I begin an improvised action? Where am I concentrating my attention during improvised dance performance and how can I describe this decision-making process? When I am improvising, am I also concurrently following and observing that which is emerging in the moment? To what extent am I aware of the inner viewer? Does the awareness of my own ability to observe myself create a distance between me and the proceedings? What is my relationship to the other, to the viewer, and how does this relationship influence my actions?

According to Wendy Houstoun, the moments just before the first improvised action are filled with a strange stillness and attentive listening,[91] while Rosalind Crisp describes attention growing to fill the space both inside and outside the body.[92] Polanská Turečková mentions a conscious switching between analytic, kinematic and intuitive thinking during improvisation. She sets different goals for herself during improvised action, such as where to focus her attention. Therefore, she leads herself — 'directs' herself, one could say. She consciously lets the environment influence her (and/or stops it from doing

so). The attention is fully focused on the decision-making process, in the most sensitive way possible, to reach new possibilities and adapt to changes.[93] Novorytová describes a similar experience: '[attention is] beside me, inside me, outside me. It changes from moment to moment, but sometimes I experience it all at once.'[94] The body is in a state of other consciousness, attuned to a 'different time flow'. The senses are heightened, more perceptive, the body 'vibrates' and is ready to go (Eliášová).[95] Similar qualities are described in a text covering the performer's energy in relation to the 'decided body'.[96]

On the other hand, Lössl compares the attention during live improvisation to any other consciously performed activity: 'Performing/improvising on stage or in any other space requires the same amount of attention and interest I devote to having breakfast, combing my hair, sitting by the river or watching snow fall in a forest. For me, it is the event of the given moment, of the given time, and I am fully engrossed in it.'[97] Improvisation, exploration and a way of life are 'essentially the same' for Sedláčková as well.[98]

Le Quesne considers attunement to her surroundings to be a conscious work with energy, with spiritual dimensions: 'I tune in to the sensations both within me and around me — feel the forces and trajectories which I can allow to take me, or into which I place myself, I place a gesture, or a flow... The experience is energetic — physical and spiritual.'[99]

In the moment of improvised dance performance, attention is 'on the very edge between the body and the space, sometimes reaching one way, and sometimes the other. It is a very complex sensation,' says Eliášová. She perceives her body 'in three dimensions' and observes a clear temporal element.[100]

Hamilton also considers improvisation to be a decision, a composition, a form of choreographing: 'It might be that the mind is concerned at moments on the whole overall compositional context of the work... or might be more focused on the micro view of the action second by second. I have trained myself to be focused on both micro and macro awarenesses when improvising.'[101] 'Composing time and space' is also often mentioned.[102]

The word 'agency' comes up frequently in connection with instant composition. Ravn describes various phenomenological concepts of experience with awareness and thinking that are related to brain activity and embodied thinking.[103] This is an ability cultivated primarily by dancers and performers, who undergo years of training aimed at perfecting the awareness of their own bodies. Philosopher Aili Bresnahan speaks about agency in connection with dance improvisation, seeing it as 'the control and intention' of the dancer.[104] Since, as Ravn suggests, dance training can be seen as a 'specific kind of agentive training — equipping the dancer to move from a certain repertoire of possibilities'[105] — we can also claim that the cultivation of condition in improvised

dance performance, and by extension also in Dialogical Acting, can be seen as cultivating the ability to decide in the moment.

Rosalind Crisp perceives different positions that allow her to see what is happening at any given moment when dancing in front of an audience. She says she devotes a part of her attention, five to seven per cent, to an outside view, as if she is viewing herself. The rest of her attention is fully immersed in the current moment and in resolving the movement of the dance. She is also aware of a *third* position, the choreographer in her, whose goal and purpose are different to that of the viewer. She is focused on the big picture, guiding the moment-to-moment progress of the choreography.[106]

What are the other positions of the inner viewer and how does this role influence the creative principle of improvisation?

ON VIEWERSHIP: THE INNER VIEWER AS A CREATIVE STRATEGY

The above reflections from dance improvisers suggest that attention and conscious work with attention play an important role in instant composition. In these attempts to verbalise and comprehend this internal process, presented to the audience as physical action and an unveiling of decision-making and creative strategies, there is a tangible focus on the inner viewer and their part in the process.[107] As Ravn writes, when improvising, a dancer enters into play with various roles.[108] I have already mentioned that the process of focusing attention and taking positions is conscious for most of the seasoned improvisers. What is more, some also use it as a creative strategy in improvised dance performance.

It is worth noting that Crisp, Hamilton, Little, Lepkoff, Karczag and Houstoun also use the position of the viewer as a pedagogical principle.[109] Work in pairs, where one student dances and composes, and the other watches and comments, is a useful strategy that cultivates both the ability to observe and the ability of the performer to employ compositional attention. The experience of the viewer continues to inform the experience of the performer.

The artists mentioned in this study consider this position not just as a way of entering another person's point of view but also as a development of a special form of attention in the improviser themself. Crisp mentions the position of an inner choreographer who is in charge of the dancer when she is composing.[110] Little mentions the cultivation of three different perceptual positions when training performers.[111] When he is teaching, Lepkoff employs a simple

but effective exercise with an object whereby one person closely observes an action of their partner. They learn from the action, and it informs them when they switch roles, thus cultivating the role of the inner viewer.[112] In his workshops, Hamilton purposefully works on developing the viewer in performers and mentions the important quality that the viewer nurtures, which is acceptance, empathy and support.[113]

In connection with the practice of Dialogical Acting, Martina Musilová mentions the activisation of the inner partner and connects Dialogical Acting with Stanislavski's concept of 'acting of experiencing' and Brecht's 'inner spectator'.[114] However, in the case of Dialogical Acting, this does not involve the artificial switching of different roles in a dialogue but rather the cultivation of a sensitivity and attentiveness to the situation and the person's role in it — all in the context of public solitude. For Vyskočil, viewing is as important a skill as acting.[115] And this skill needs to be cultivated, as it informs the quality of the performer.

In a similar vein, Little mentions three perceptual positions. Even though she conceptualises these primarily with respect to space, her thinking also involves a specific change of roles and positions. The first perceptual position is, to her, the ability to embody oneself, where the self is either limited to the 'skin sack' or extended beyond its limits. The second perceptual position is the ability to engender a relation with the other (an object, a partner) and of looking out through the other's eyes, of being empathetic. The third position is entirely outside the body, capable of observing the entire situation from the position of 'a fly on the wall'.[116]

The different performers experience and describe their inner viewers differently. Polanská Turečková does not perceive the viewer as an 'eye' but rather as a 'voice': 'My consciousness is telling me, via proprioception, what position I am in, what is my velocity and force of action, where I am in relation to the outside world, and I (as in my analytic brain) keep asking myself: "Why am I choosing this specific motion? Why am I making any given decision?"'[117]

Arenbergerová describes the role of the viewer as a form of distancing herself from what she is doing: 'I am mostly engrossed in the action and in the ongoing moment, but sometimes I sort of step out of my body and observe the scene. I am watching and noticing what is happening in me, with me and around me, how the moment is laid out spatially, what are the dynamics, the tempo, the rhythm of the actions, what is their meaning, relationships. Once I have observed enough, I try to keep it going, give it a direction, or do absolutely nothing. This all happens quite fast.'[118]

'The viewer' is also commonly described as a 'critic', someone who watches, comments, assists, assesses and provides feedback that the dancer can use to decide. '[T]he helpful critic… helps me see better, and helps me understand

the current situation,' says Arenbergerová.[119] A different mode for the same role, one not labelled as a critic, could be called the 'supporter', or someone who 'enables' or 'allows' something to emerge.

Some dancers deliberately avoid the concept of the third or 'external' eye and perceive the viewer as a barrier to the creative process.[120] Nevertheless, they later admit that a certain viewer is also present; they do not label this viewer as a 'censor' but simply as an 'observer'. This is because they are aware of the quality and potential influence of this figure. Lössl reflects on this:

> *I must admit that I am actively avoiding [the external viewer, eye]. The reason is simple. For me, the external eye inadvertently turns into a threat of censorship that could take effect immediately. This censorship ceases all actions in my body, it diminishes my driving force — it robs me of the curiosity for what comes next.... When events are allowed to unfold naturally, without the presence of this viewer, it gives me joy. There is, however, the presence of the unbiased observer. They are doing just that: observing, watching, assessing, but never criticising, they are not a form of self-censorship. So yes: there is the 'unbiased' observer. Although the word 'unbiased' is perhaps a matter for discussion — it is, after all, my observer, with my experience, my eyes, my thinking and analytical skill.*[121]

The role of 'critics' and 'supporters' is a certain quality that changes based on the perception of time during the performance: '[W]hen the mind starts getting ahead of itself, it becomes the critic. If I am in the right time, it supports me. Sometimes during improvisation, there is a dialogue between me and it in my body; other times we become one' (Eliášová).[122] Time perception proves to be an important factor in the dialogue during improvised dance performance: 'the viewer' enters the decision-making process as another voice but only after the body has completed an action, since the body is in a faster time frame than the viewer (Novorytová).[123]

The quality of the viewer that follows the ongoing action from a distance is often perceived as an imaginary line separating the actions of amateurs and professionals (in terms of conscious analysis of the moment that is happening right now). 'I think the distance is quite an important moment,' says Polanská Turečková:

> *Without the distance it becomes authentic dance (a therapeutic tool, where the goal is to give up any control and submerge into the unconscious), or ecstatic or group dance, where we give in to various impulses. In those cases, we need to get rid of the critic, let go of any censorship*

and release the excess energy, let loose, or settle down, go deep within ourselves. It is a tool for deep self-discovery. All this is also present in the performer's line of work, the difference is in the ability to distance oneself from what is happening. I am in control, I am making decisions, I have a repertoire of concepts and tools and I know how to use them. I have honed this skill. I like it when dancers or performers say they do not dance 'as they feel', but they do what the situation requires, or that they have certain rules they employ and change as time goes on. Sometimes, this happens intuitively, sometimes more rationally, but it requires the distance from oneself.[124]

The ability to enter a situation and maintain a relationship seem to be key principles of stage improvisation. However, this relationship is not just with some other entity beyond myself but also with myself and with what I am doing. If I am enjoying what I am doing, then the joy and experience of it is transferred to the audience. When talking about open dramatic play and the actions of an actor who is capable of taking on all the roles at play, Vyskočil mentions the engaged inner partner but also the *law of transference*: '[A]nything that happens on stage in a state of concentration, joy, delight, etc., is similarly followed by the audience with concentration, joy, delight, etc. In other words, it is carried from the stage to the auditorium. And then it is carried back onto the stage and back into play.'[125]

ANOTHER NOTE ON VIEWERSHIP: 'HOW TO WATCH?'

Let us return, for a moment, to the experience of the viewer in a traditional theatrical setting, or, in other words, the people in the auditorium. When talking about the cultivation of the (inner) empathy of the viewer, about the cultivation of the viewer in the performer, we can also talk about embodied cognition and condition.[126] If we are talking about the experience of the viewer in the auditorium during a performance of improvised dance, we can talk about so-called kinaesthetic empathy.[127] What we observe from the auditorium has a direct effect on our brain, creating a response facilitated by mirror neurons.[128]

I would also like to mention a special quality of attention, which deserves deeper and focused research but is beyond the scope of this study. This quality was repeatedly mentioned at different moments and in different workshops, and by all the performers interviewed. And, again, it is a quality that is present in

Dialogical Acting. This quality is empathy. In Dialogical Acting, empathy is labelled 'wishful/wishing attention'. In dance improvisation, it is often quoted as 'allowing'. It is a quality, a principle, even a strategy for the role of both the performer and the (inner) viewer. It seems that this quality arises not only from the long-standing and repeated practice of Dialogical Acting but also from repeated encounters with the practice of improvised dance performance; it seems to grow as the understanding and the awareness of the process deepens. If it is treated as an assumed condition, as in the case of Julyen Hamilton's teaching, this quality of attention has a direct effect on how I perceive that which is emerging in front of my eyes, not only as a performer (or inner viewer) but also as a viewer in the audience following the emerging composition.

I suspect that immediate analysis and reflection are key aspects of cultivating the performing and viewing condition in students and teachers of both instant composition and Dialogical Acting.[129] As for the performing experience, it extends beyond their immediate experience, since performers cannot observe the entire picture of the stage in real time as the audience does. Open discussions held after performances have a similar effect.[130]

Apart from the above-mentioned law of transference, the development of wishing attention can also serve as a key to understanding improvised dance as a performance event. In the Czech Republic, the number of improvised performances is growing, as is the level of public interest. Audience members without (regular) experience of such performances — which often have different contexts, both amateur and professional — can find it difficult to understand what it is that they are seeing, what the quality of it is. This is not merely about the virtuosity of the dancers and their formal education. That said, the body of an experienced performer shows different qualities of embodied consciousness, something that is noticeable to the audience.

A performance of improvised dance is part of the neo-avant-garde[131] and is a 'niche' event. Since this discipline is not about demonstrating formal movement virtuosity but about the ability to compose time and space, to be present, to maintain a dialogue, the understanding of such an event relies not on exclusive education but rather on the ability to observe attentively, to 'follow' the performers, to notice the images that they are creating in the here and now. The active engagement of the audience is co-creation, interplay, a dialogue with what I am seeing.[132] These abilities can be honed through repeated exposure to the situation of observing an improvised performance. Some authors even deliberately deny any authorship or hierarchical influence over the performance and allow the audience to take full ownership of what they take from what they have seen.[133]

Sally Doughty admits that the terminology and definition of improvisation varies and is a 'slippery and tricky' area. In the list of the different approaches

to improvisation we find descriptions such as 'the ability to fully present in the moment', 'work with consciousness' and 'work with attention'.[134] I would like to expand this list to include the following phrases: improvisation can be 'joy',[135] 'the enjoyment of creativity',[136] 'research into movement',[137] 'fulfilment of the present',[138] 'movement of attention',[139] and so on. Whether the goal is to hold the interest in what I am doing in order to continue dancing (Crisp)[140] or to find freshness in a set performance (Houstoun),[141] dance improvisation is not a random activity and is not (just) the result of happenstance. It is a conscious action, and different performers use different strategies to compose in real time on stage. The performance itself is also an encounter between many different entities, forces and structures. Part of the professional's job is to be attuned to the density of these forces and to let them surface (Le Quesne).[142]

How should we assess a performance of improvised dance, or, rather, how should we interpret it? For the time being, this is a fringe area of research, since stage improvisation is not part of the mainstream.[143] I have already mentioned that improvised dance performance and Dialogical Acting are transparent disciplines, meaning they are intimate and immediate revelations of improvisational strategies, the ability to concentrate attention and the maintenance of a creative dialogue. Just as the performer develops their condition by practising in front of a live audience, so too do regular attendees of performances develop a condition that helps them understand this stage form. Over time, they are able to distinguish and appreciate the quality of it.[144]

This is the perfect time to point out that the pioneers of unique approaches to dance, those who strove to rid themselves of any remnants of traditional performance interpretations, also strove for inclusivity, not exclusivity. Anyone can understand improvised dance performance, regardless of their previous experience with this artistic language, since the performance is always an encounter and a creative dialogue.[145] In Robert Dunn's workshops, which inspired the foundation of the Judson Dance Theater, the central thesis was not to find 'the good' or 'the bad' but rather to support the viewer's own analysis. Dunn asked questions about structure, form, method, material and whether the author's intention was legible in the performance.[146]

ON AUTHORSHIP

I have dealt with the roles of the actor and the (inner) viewer with respect to viewership in general. But what about the third role, that of the author, which

Vyskočil also mentions in the context of Dialogical Acting and improvisation? And what about authorship in improvised dance performance?

While Vyskočil incorporates the question of authorship during improvisation or free play in front of an audience into his theory of triunity, the participants in our research, people who have dealt with improvisation for years, are not preoccupied with authorship. I believe this is not because it does not concern them. On the contrary, dancers must first free themselves of the formal and habitual movement patterns acquired during their training.[147] Only then can they become artists. In a similar vein, Lepkoff admits that since he did not study dance, he had the advantage of not having to 'unlearn' any training and thus could readily build on his experience with naturally acquired developmental movement patterns.[148]

What about the authorship of movements that we repeat after someone else (unavoidable in formal dance education) or experience acquired at various dance workshops or seminars? One answer can be found in Julyen Hamilton's approach. A participant at his Prague workshop asked him what she should do if she notices she is repeating his movement. He answered: 'Even if you move like me, you will never become me, and if I move like you do, I will not become you. It is only natural that, as we learn, we copy the original pattern, consciously or unconsciously, but over time this crutch will fade away and the material will transform into something different.'[149] Hamilton finished this thought with an anecdote: for years, he had been using a fantastic, effective movement. He thought one of his dear friends, and a fantastic dancer, was the author of this movement. One day, he admitted to his friend that he had stolen his creation. But the friend said: 'Oh, Julyen, I got it from you!'[150]

I have already said that a successful improvisation is a moment of dialogue between the author and the form that emerges. It is also an open dialogue shared with the audience, along with the emerging piece. Crisp mentions the ability to be transparent, naked, available.[151] Houstoun values improvisation for its freshness and aliveness, and uses it as a strategy when making a set performance to give the impression that the material is actually emerging in front of everyone in the here and now.[152] I have noticed that all the interviewees offered tools for making oneself open and transparent as a conscious strategy for 'being present' in the space, or, as Crisp adds, as a strategy for 'disarming the viewer'.[153] While some might consider this strategy a calculation, it always ties back to the performer's condition. And this condition is not a result but a process, since it can be both gained and lost.

THIS IS WHERE THE END SHOULD BE…

I have attempted to analyse the phenomenon of improvised dance performance by applying Ivan Vyskočil's theory of stage improvisation, particularly his distinction between the attention of the performer, viewer and author. I have used my own personal experience with both disciplines and, more importantly, I have used the experiences and approaches of my colleagues and of international artists, who count among the pioneers of instant composition or who have long-standing experience in teaching, performing and developing dance improvisation as such. I suggest viewing the improvisational creative process as a dialogue occurring within the performer in the moment of live improvising. In the course of a three-year research project, I have accumulated a sizeable body of material reflecting performers' experiences with improvisation. From the start of the project, it became clear that the very language with which we talk about improvisation needs to be addressed, as it is not unified, both in the Czech and in the international context. Improvised dance performance is a relatively new discipline and its terminology is still being invented and codified by performers who employ it as an integral part of their artistic and/or teaching practice.[154]

As for the experience of dance improvisation on stage, the Czech context is still in a highly specific form of encountering and accepting this discipline. It was only after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 that ideas and influences from the West started seeping into Czechoslovakia. The local dance scene has been working to grasp postmodern dance and its theories ever since. In this respect, the local context lags behind the West, and progress is made by artists who have practical experience with the discipline and who continue to pass this experience on, both as teachers and performers.[155]

Improvisation cultivates the ability to be present in the moment. This ability, this attention, is alive, fresh, aware of the responsibility for actions. It can receive, send and develop impulses. This quality of presence is legible even for the viewer. Furthermore, stage improvisation also develops the ability of the viewer to be present in the moment.

When it comes to the language used to describe instant composition, I have attempted to present new angles to formulate the experience of this unique art form. This attempt expands the options for theoretical reflection on the discipline. I have focused on how performers themselves reflect on their experience, since, as Ivan Vyskočil's concept of triunity in stage improvisation suggests, the actor, the viewer and the author are always influencing, informing and complementing one another, because they are in constant dialogue. Hopefully, this text can also be read as an expansion of the possibilities for viewing improvised dance performance from the perspective of the auditorium.

The Focus Group

Mgr. Helena Arenbergerová (1980), originally a History graduate from the Faculty of Arts at Charles University, is a freelance professional dancer. She engages in interpretation, contributes to performance creation and leads classes and workshops in contemporary dance, improvisation and Contact Improvisation. As an educator, she teaches at the Duncan Centre Conservatory, HAMU (Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) and DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). She is a Thalia Award winner for outstanding stage performance in a dance production, for 'Where' by 420PEOPLE. By her own account, she is fascinated by liberated, sensitised, interconnected and conscious bodies, energy, touch, the present moment, non-verbal communication and community. She practises improvisation within dance classes and workshops, jam sessions, during selected stage performances, in public spaces and in everyday life.

MgA. Kateřina Dietzová (1982) studied dance and choreography at the Duncan Centre in Prague and at SNDO (School for New Dance Development) in Amsterdam. She subsequently worked primarily as a dancer and performer in various projects (for Tabea Martin, Gaia Gonnelli, Sumako Koseki, De Dansers and others) while also focusing on stage improvisation and her own creations (such as 'Two Particles Hit Me in One Heartbeat' and 'Analog'). She is one of the founding members of CreWcollective, under whose umbrella improvisational interdisciplinary projects such as 'Moving Orchestra', 'Arthuur', 'Open Sunday' and other original projects were created. Currently, alongside her osteopathic practice, she leads workshops on dance improvisation and anatomy in dance and movement. Occasionally, for the joy of it, she assists in the creation of original choreographies. She is currently based in Amsterdam.

MgA. Bohumíra (Mirka) Eliášová, PhD (1975), is a Czech choreographer, dance educator and performer. She holds master's and doctoral degrees in Choreography from the Department of Dance at the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (HAMU), where she currently works as an educator. Simultaneously, she teaches children and non-professional dancers of all age groups at ZUŠ Klapkova in Prague and in educational and outreach workshops. Since 2008, she has collaborated with the Berg Orchestra on site-specific performances featuring live interpretations of music by contemporary composers. Her focus extends to creating interactive performances for children and experimental performances for adult audiences. She is the founder of the Eli a kol. ensemble and has received several awards, including the Prix de l'Intellect prize from the Czech Dance Platform in 2000. Her long-term dedication involves exploring the principles of improvisation in contemporary dance and instant composition. She has studied improvisation under renowned figures such as Randy Warshaw, Victoria Marks, David Zambrano, Elizabeth Corbett, Lisa Nelson, Kirstie Simson, Daniel Lepkoff, Wendy Houstoun, K. J. Holm, Ruth Zaporah, Stephanie Skura, Milan and Zuna Kozánkovi, Karel Vaňek, Eva Černá, Martin Kilvády, Nita Little and others. In her considerations of improvisation and instant composition, she has been significantly influenced and inspired by Julyen Hamilton. As a choreographer, she has had long-standing collaborations with Jana Novorytová, Mish Rais, Veronika Šimková, Jiří Lössl and others. See the biography at the end of the book for more details.

Lizzy Le Quesne, MA, MRes (1968), is a British dance artist, choreographer, and educator. In 1990, she earned a bachelor's degree in Fine Art and Performance from the University of Brighton under the guidance of Liz Aggiss. In 1998, she obtained a master's degree from the Laban Centre (now Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance) in London, focusing on Laban principles, choreography and aesthetics. Her study of choreography with Rosemary Butcher had a profound impact on her. She studied Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) in London with Gaby Agis and later in the US with Bob Davidson, Sally Metcalf, Theresa Moriarty, Joan Skinner and Stephanie Skura, among others, becoming a certified SRT teacher in 2011. Her exploration of Release Technique and improvisational approaches in dance influenced her perception of dance as a felt state. She has delved into somatic movement practices such as Authentic Movement, Experiential Anatomy, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Body-Mind Centering and improvisation, earning an MRes (Master's by Research) with a focus on SRT and the autonomic nervous system in 2019 from the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University. In her work, she draws inspiration from various figures, including Rosemary Butcher, Diane Vivona, Gill Clarke, Alice Cummins, Susan Schell, Jane Bacon, Miranda Tufnell, Eva Karczag, Olive Bieringa, Amy Voris, Scott Clark, Giovanni Felicioni, Susan Rethorst, Simone Forti, Victoria Marks and Michael Kliën. In her somatic therapeutic work, she incorporates Craniosacral Therapy, Rolfing, Somatic Experiencing and Bodynamics. Her stage creations emerge from improvisation, showcasing her experience with both open improvisation and structured improvisation based on energy, posture, relationships and space.

Bc. Jana Novorytová (1985) studied Theatre Theory and History at Masaryk University in Brno, graduating in 2010. She later attended the Duncan Centre Conservatory in Prague. Jana is a member of CreWcollective, actively participating in projects as an artist and creator, in addition to serving as a curator, coordinator and producer. Her artistic focus revolves around immediate composition and open stage forms. As a dancer, she closely collaborates with choreographer Mirka Eliášová and the Prague Improvisation Orchestra (PIO). Jana is a co-founder and member of the authorial duo Partial Uncertainty / Částečné znejistění (with Mish Rais) and undertakes her own authorial projects. In the realm of education, Jana works as a faculty member at DACP at DAMU, where she teaches movement discipline classes for bachelor's and master's students in both the Czech and the English programmes. She is extensively involved in teaching dance and movement education for school-age children through the Tanec Praha project (Tanec školám) and runs the dance studio Altík for children aged 1–12. Additionally, she has been collaborating with the Association of Czech Film Clubs on the Letní filmová škola (Summer Film School) festival in Uherské Hradiště, serving as the Head of Staff Production since 2012.

MgA. Hana Polanská Turečková (1980), a dancer, performer, choreographer, dance pedagogue, dance publicist and scientist, graduated in Choreography from the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. She studied three years of Body Awareness and Laban Movement Analysis with somatic movement educator/therapist Rena Milgrom and was trained as part of the Dance Well international project. As part of her postgraduate studies at the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports, she is devoted to the topic of dance-movement therapy for the cognitive and physical abilities of the elderly. During her rich professional career, she has worked, for example, as a soloist at the National Theatre in Prague and collaborated on dozens of projects with renowned choreographers and artists. Currently, she is mainly engaged in scientific and pedagogical activities. She collaborates with a number of institutions and individuals on research projects thematically focused on artistic and scientific research. In her work, research and pedagogical process, she uses mainly improvisation as an explorative principle. She has been part of many workshops or events focusing on improvisation with Mirka Eliášová, Rena Milgrom, CreWcollective, Martha Moor, Béatrice Massin, Yoshiko Chuma and Julyen Hamilton, and she is now working with dancer and choreographer Alice Chauchat.

Anna Sedlačková (1962) has been a prominent figure in the Slovak dance scene as a dancer, choreographer and teacher since 1987. In 1995, she founded her own group, AS Projekt, for which she created 15 performances. Her primary focus has been on the influence of postmodern dance on contemporary dance. She encountered postmodern approaches during her artistic stays in the US, beginning in 1994. It was in the US that she began studying the somatic approach of Body-Mind Centering (BMC) in 2000, and she has been a BMC lecturer since 2019. A distinctive aspect of her artistic work is the incorporation of somatic approaches (movement shaped from within) in relation to choreography and dramaturgy (known as organic dramaturgy), functionality and the expressiveness of movement. She is known for her exploration of open dance forms and improvisation. Projects representing this approach include 'Ako sme sa smiali' (2012), 'V ascendente Tiger' (2019) and 'Na dlhé lakte' (2022). Her teachers in improvisation and Contact Improvisation include Mary Fulkerson, Nancy Stark Smith, Kirstie Simson, Daniel Lepkoff, Julyen Hamilton, Deborah Hay and Barbara Dilley. In 2012, she studied Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A'. In 2023, she collaborated with Daniel Raček on a performative lecture titled 'Korene tanečného experimentu', focused on the legacy of significant figures in postmodern dance for contemporary young dancers.

MgA. Veronika Šimková (1981) is a professional freelance dancer who is involved in interpretation, contributes to the creation of performances and leads classes and workshops in contemporary dance, improvisation and yoga. As a dance educator, she works at the Duncan Centre Conservatory in Prague. She engages in improvisation within dance classes and workshops, during selected stage performances, in public spaces and in everyday life. Her creative and educational work has been influenced by Zuna and Milan Kozánkovi, Martin Kilvády, Chrysa Parkinson, Mirka Eliášová and Julyen Hamilton. As a performer, she collaborates with Mirka Eliášová and has danced in her performances, which often incorporate structured improvisation. Some of these performances include 'Comprimons – dance for camera', 'Kam letí nebe', 'Labyrinty', 'Kontinuum', 'Svět z papíru', 'Disgrafické partitury', 'Voluntas Vitae', 'Momo' and 'Škatulení.'

Doc. Mgr. Jiří Lössl (1962) studied dance pedagogy at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he was also appointed Associate Professor in the field of Dramatic Arts. He has been working as a dance specialist for NIPOS (National Information and Consulting Centre for Culture) since 1999. He is a lecturer at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, teaching at the Department of Dance (HAMU) since 2007 and at the Department of Drama in Education (DAMU) since 2003. He is dedicated to pedagogical, methodological, conceptual, publishing and research work in the field of contemporary dance and movement arts. He focuses particularly on issues of amateur dance art. He has been involved in improvisation and Contact Improvisation since the 1990s. His encounters with Karina Holla in Berlin in 2000 and with Julyen Hamilton, Steve Paxton and Daniel Lepkoff in Bratislava in 2002 were crucial for his artistic development. He founded the dance and movement theatre 'my' in 1999 and was part of the dance and movement theatre Neočekávaný výlet (2003–2006) and the ensemble Páté, later MY 5 (2009–2019). He has a long-term artistic collaboration with Mirka Eliášová.

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Notes

1 In this text, I speak about a specific stage format of dance improvisation in performance that is also referred to as 'real-time choreography', 'real-time composition', 'open choreography', 'spontaneous determination' and 'situation-response composition'; see Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 130. For the sake of simplicity, I use the term 'instant composition', because it includes any action on stage, not only the movement of the body but also play and work with voice, speech and actions from other disciplines, such as visual arts, music, scenography, and so on. In the Czech context, 'instant composition' (*okamžitá kompozice*) is widely used to describe this performance format of stage (dance) improvisation. On the nomenclature of instant composition, see Bohumíra Eliášová and Mish Rais, 'Real-time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem', *Taneční aktuality* – special edition 'Dance and Words' (9/2023), 116–135.

2 See the interviews with Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little in this publication. These were part of the research project headed by Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne called 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle' (2021–2023). Kent De Spain examines the pioneering thoughts of the first generation of stage improvisers in the context of postmodern dance and cognitive science, and also reads instant composition and dance improvisation as conscious work with attention. See Kent De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

3 Annie Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process: "Post-control" Choreography', *Dance Chronicle* 33, no. 2 (2010), 186–187. Phenomenologists Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding devote their study to an active and conscious approach as opposed to a purely reactive and intuitive one, which is – according to the authors – represented by the work and notions of American philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, among others. See Susanne Ravn and Simon Høffding, 'Improvisation and Thinking in Movement: An Enactivist Analysis of Agency in Artistic Practices', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2022), 515–537.

4 Heike Kuhlmann, 'What are specific values of dance improvisation in performance?', 2, 2004. Originally available at https://www.heikekuhlmann.net/texte/, now available only as part of the personal archives of Mish Rais and Bohumíra Eliášová.

5 In the context of Czech dance criticism, performances of instant composition have long been overlooked or interpreted through the traditional lens of dance and theatre criticism. Hana Polanská Turečková's texts consistently defy this imprecise understanding, as seen in her reviews of performances: 'Budem furt stejný nebo uvidíme barvy jasněji?' (Are we gonna be the same or are we gonna see colours more clearly?). *Operaplus.cz*, 26 September 2023, https://operaplus.cz/budem-furt-stejny-nebo-uvidime-barvy-jasneji/); reviews of the CreWcollective format 'Po pás' (Po pás: CreWcollective a posun v chápání tance), *Operaplus.cz*, 12 October 2019, https://operaplus.cz/po-pas-crewcollective-a-posun-v-chapani-tance/; and 'Tanec a filozofická myšlenka jako choreografický problém? – Tělesná slova', in *Choreografie mysli – Úsilí – Tělesný pohyb jako časoprostorová (dis)kontinuita*, ed. Viktor Čech, 62–75 (Praha: NAMU, 2022). Additional texts by Polanská Turečková can be found in the References.

6 In this context, the term 'condition' can be understood as ability, fitness, fulfilled or unfulfilled potential, or state. I draw from the usage I encountered in the specific context of the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (DACP) of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU), particularly in the context of the discipline of Dialogical Acting and authorial acting by Ivan Vyskočil. See Ivan Vyskočil, 'On the Study of Acting: Inaugural professorial lecture upon receiving a professorship in acting', 3, Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting, 6 January 2021, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/ke-studiu-herectvi-rec-ku-priznani-profesury-v-oboru-herectvi-1?lang=en. See also Michaela Rais, 'Whirling Circling, Emerging, Submerging: About Speech Education at DACP', 19, Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting, 19 January 2022, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/virive-krouzeni-vynorovani-zanorovani-o-vychove-k-reci-na-katap-2021. See also Eva Vyskočilová and Eva Slavíková (eds.), *Psychosomatický základ veřejného vystupování: jeho studium a výzkum* (Praha: Akademie múzických umění v Praze, 2000), https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/psychosomatický-základ-veřejného-vystupování-jeho-studium-a-výzkum-2000.

7 See, for example, Sally Doughty, 'I Notice that I'm Noticing', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, ed. Vida L. Midgelow, 118–134 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). The phenomenon of thinking during an ongoing physical action is covered by Barbara Gail Montero in *Thought in Action: Expertise and the Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 See Fiona Bannon, 'Ethico-aesthetic Practice of Improvising: Relations through Motion', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, 42.

9 For example, Sally Doughty's research project 'Improvisation: What Do I Do and Why Do I Do it?', People Dancing, Animated Edition, Winter 2007, https://www.communitydance.org.uk/DB/animated-library/improvisation-what-

do-i-do-and-why-do-i-do-it?ed=14047; and Kent De Spain, 'The Cutting Edge of Awareness: Reports from the Inside of Improvisation', in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 37. The quality of improvisation as a dialogue of the author and the material, or the author and light, or the author and audience, is also covered in Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 197–198.

10 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 201.

11 When this text refers to instant composition, it primarily refers to dance improvisation in performance. However, I do not use the term 'dancer' but rather the more general term 'performer'. I view it as more open, offering a broader interpretation and stemming from the historical development of instant composition, in which various disciplines (lighting design, music, audio-visual media, visual arts, dance, music, word) encounter one another on the stage. Individual performers may use tools other than those specific to them (dancers work with voice, text, musicians move on the stage and co-create the choreography of the performance, etc.). This approach builds on the experimental actions of the pioneers of new visions in postmodern dance and performance (Grand Union, Judson Dance Theater, etc.). See Bohumíra Eliášová and Michaela Raisová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína', *ArteActa* 6, no. 9 (2023), https://arteacta.cz/okamzita-kompozice-jako-svebytna-umelecka-disciplina; and Eliášová and Rais, 'Real-time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem', 133, note 3.

12 See De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*; Albright and Gere (eds.), *Taken By Surprise*; and Montero, *Thought in Action*.

13 Matthew Reason et al., 'Researching Dance Across Disciplinary Paradigms: A Reflective Discussion of the Watching Dance Project', in *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being*, ed. Nicola Shaughnessy, 39–56 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). In the context of dance, this term is used by, among others, Einav Katan, *Embodied Philosophy in Dance: Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

14 A. L. Moradian, 'Dancing with Complexity: Fear and Trembling', *Performance and Mindfulness* 4, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.5920/pam.828.

15 Nalina Wait, 'Embodied Consciousness', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, 135–149.

16 Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022; Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2021. An edited version of the interview was also published as 'A Dance Practice of "Choreographic improvisation": Interview with Rosalind Crisp', *Independent Dance* (2022), https://independentdance.co.uk/library/choreographic-improvisation-rosalind-crisp/.

17 This discipline, developed and explored by Ivan Vyskočil for almost forty years, is the flagship discipline of the psychosomatic approach to studies at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of the Performing Arts in Prague. For more information, see Ivan Vyskočil, 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation', in '*Hic sunt leones*: On authorial acting', ed. Michal Čunderle (Prague: Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, 2003), https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/dialogick%C3%A9-jedn%C3%A1n%C3%AD?lang=en.

18 Professor Ivan Vyskočil (1929–2023) was a Czech actor, educator, psychologist, director and author. In 1994, he founded the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at the Academy of the Performing Arts in Prague, serving as its head for many years. Vyskočil influenced an entire generation, particularly in the field of theatrical creativity. For more information, see https://www.damu.cz/en/department/department-of-authorial-creativity-and-pedagogy/about-of-department/ or www.ivanvyskocil.cz. Further details and selected publications on Vyskočil's life, work, and pedagogy, by Michal Čunderle, Jan Roubal, Přemysl Rut and Eva Slavíková, can be found in the References.

19 Doughty, 'I Notice that I'm Noticing', 118–134.

20 Ivan Vyskočil, 'Subject: Stage Improvisation', Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting, 6 January 2021, first published in the journal *Amatérská scéna* in 1975 and 1976, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/predmet-jevistni-improvizace-1?lang=en.

21 Vyskočil, 'Subject: Stage Improvisation', 9.

22 In the original Czech version of this study, I used the word *aktér*, which can be translated as 'action maker', 'action initiator' and 'carrier'. For the English version, I use the word 'performer' only.

23 Eliášová and Raisová. 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína'.

24 As part of this research project, six workshops were held at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, between 2021 and 2023, with international artists (Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little). These workshops focused on improvisation as a way to create, and on the

development of the ability to compose in the ongoing moment. The processed data included interviews with the head of each workshop, analysis of visual material from the workshops, written reflections from a focus group made up of mainly Czech and Slovak artists (Helena Arenbergerová, Kateřina Dietzová, Mirka Eliášová, Lizzy Le Quesne, Jiří Lössl, Jana Novorytová, Anka Sedlačková, Veronika Šimková and Hana Polanská Turečková; see the individual biographies at the end of this text) who participated in these workshops, and my own notes taken during these events and throughout the entire research project.

25 The interviews with Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little were conducted by me with Mirka Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne. Each of us focused on a set of questions related to our research interests. My questions revolved around the performers and their compositional attention and creative state in the moment of improvisation on stage. For more details on the methodology, please refer to the introduction of this publication.

26 The data consist of freely written reflections after the workshops, structured reflections responding to specific questions, and targeted questionnaires with inquiries about the experience with attention in the moment of improvisation on stage and during the workshops. I have a long-standing artistic, pedagogical and research history with most members of the focus group. Many of us also encounter each other on stage, and not just in performances that employ instant composition. I posed questions to the focus group and the international artists that aimed to explore the performer's experience with dance improvisation, with a particular focus on attention and its various types and qualities.

27 As for Dialogical Acting, I draw on my own written reflections from between 2011 and 2018, when I was a student and an assistant (pedagogue) of this discipline. As for dance improvisation, I have been using it in my own authorial projects since 2014, such as *Partial Uncertainty* (Částečné znejistění) (2017) and '%& 3-5-8- @#...and there's dawn there in Alaska' (2019); as a performer and dramaturg in collaboration with Mirka Eliášová (Eli a kol) and others in projects such as *Refresh* (2016), *Boxinbox* (2018), *Tabula Rasa* (2018), *Pokračování příště?!?* (2019), *Meziprostory* (2020); as a performer in collaboration with CreWcollective in projects such as 'Moving Orchestra' (2017–2021), 'Po pás' (Face to Face) (2018, 2019, 2022) and 'PIO, Julyen Hamilton and dancers' (2023). For more information, see http://crewcollective.cz/en/people/mish-rais/.

28 In Dialogical Acting, Vyskočil expanded Stanislavski's concept of 'public solitude'. See Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work*, ed. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2016). For more on the adaptation and expansion of public solitude, and on the influence of Stanislavski on Dialogical Acting, see Markéta Machková and Mish Rais, 'On the Hidden Potential of Public Solitude, Part I: Ivan Vyskočil's *Theatre as Encounter*', *Stanislavski Studies* (4 December 2023), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/20567790.2023.2286600.

29 Vyskočil. 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation'.

30 The terms 'cultural baggage', 'context', 'environment' and 'landscape' are used by socio-cultural psychologists to describe the context in which individuals find themselves, whether it be a personal experience, or an experience gained in their place of work or residence. See S. R. Kirschner and J. Martin (eds.), *The Sociocultural Turn in Psychology: The Contextual Emergence of Mind and Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). See also V.S. Sobkin, 'L. S. Vygotsky and the Theater: Delineation of a Sociocultural Context', *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology* 53, no. 3 (2016), 1–92, https://doi.org/10.1080/10610405.2016.1230996. We delve into these concepts more thoroughly in the context of the ongoing interdisciplinary artistic research that partially follows up on this study: 'Performer as both an Actor and Viewer: Practical and Theoretical Research on the Dialogical Principle of Dual Attention and its Cultivation in the Pedagogy of Movement Disciplines', which I am conducting at DAMU throughout 2023 and 2024 together with Markéta Machková (PhD student and pedagogue at DACP and Université de Neuchâtel) and Jana Novorytová (dancer and pedagogue of movement disciplines at DACP). For more information, see Markéta Machková, Mish Rais and Jana Novorytová, 'Cultivating Compositional Attention', workshop lecture presented at the 9th annual conference, 'Body Knowledges: Praxis, Politics, Performance', School of Performing Arts, University of Malta, 23 March 2023, https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/notices/opportunities/2023/03/2023-annual-int-conference-of-the-spa-um.

31 I have been consistently working on the development of my psychosomatic condition at DACP since 2011, initially as a student and, since 2015, also as a teacher, or, in the terminology of Dialogical Acting, as an assistant in this discipline.

32 For more on the issue of the term 'postmodern dance' and on the geographical anchoring of this term in the US in the context of the development of the dance field see Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

33 Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, 125.

34 As Ramsay Burt notes, most of Trisha Brown's peers, particularly those who engaged in theoretical reflection on their experimental practices, were university-educated and familiar with then contemporary theories and trends in the fine arts. Their writings guided audiences towards specific interpretations. See Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 20.

35 See Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion: An Account of an Ongoing Personal Discourse and its Manifestations in Dance*, 3rd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2021); Anna Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, ed. Rachel Kaplan (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1995; and Albright and Gere (eds.), *Taken by Surprise*.

36 *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*; Susanne Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation: From Spontaneity to Agency', *Dance Research Journal* 52, no. 2 (2020), 75–87, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767720000182; see also Ravn and Høffding, 'Improvisation and Thinking in Movement'; George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, *Vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 180–207.

37 Such as the project that resulted in this text, or, for example, Doughty's research project: 'Improvisation: What Do I Do and Why Do I Do it?'; also the project 'Technological Enhancements in the Teaching and Learning of Reflective and Creative Practice in Dance', https://dora.dmu.ac.uk/items/80f8307e-6120-4f81-8923-a2bf9c53c521.

38 Authors who delve into the transdisciplinary exploration of dance improvisation from a phenomenological perspective include Susanne Ravn, Simon Høffding, Barbara Gail Montero and Sondra Horton Fraleigh. See the References for more details.

39 Denisa Kujelová, 'Institucionální vs. alternativní: Formy prezentace neoficiálního umění konceptuálních a konceptových tendencí v Československu 1968–1982', in *Čs. koncept 70. Let*, ed. Denisa Kujelová (Praha: Fait Gallery, 2021), 157.

40 Bohumíra Eliášová and Michaela Raisová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires: Real-Time Choreography in the Czech Context', *ArteActa* 6, no. 10 (2024).

41 Eliášová and Raisová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína'; Eliášová and Raisová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'; Eliášová and Raisová, 'Real-Time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem'; 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'; Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022 (an edited version of the interview was published as Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Improvisation as Performative Freshness: Interview with Wendy Houstoun', 2022, Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting, 18 February 2023, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/improvizace-jako-performativni-akt-neotrelosti-rozhovor-s-wendy-houstoun-2022-8?lang=en); Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle']. Personal archive of Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.

42 For instance, *Contact Quarterly* is a platform dedicated to Contact Improvisation. It features various texts, particularly personal experiences with this form of improvisation (see www.contactquarterly.com). The exceptions in the Czech context are Hana Polanská Turečková's writings on instant composition, postmodern dance and interviews with artists in the dance and improvisation field. These texts provide interesting contexts for instant composition and other approaches to postmodern dance. See the References for more details.

43 For further comparisons, see Doughty, 'I Notice that I'm Noticing', 121–125.

44 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton', 2022.

45 Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems*, 130.

46 For example, the texts by Kent De Spain and Melinda Buckwalter, and the essays by Sally Doughty, Eva Karczag and others in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*.

47 Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011); and Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962–1964* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

48 Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 6.

49 I-Ying Wu, 'Rethinking Improvisation from a Daoist Perspective of Qi-energy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, 171.

50 In the Czech context, action art developed from late 1940s to the 1950s. Not only did its form and relationship to the audience gradually transform but so did its connection to theatricality and art in general, and to the methods of documentation. It is crucial to note that action art contained the seeds of what we now refer to as 'performance'. In the 1980s, performance began to be used to highlight specific actions and events. Pavlína Morganová describes the life of the alternative and underground scenes during the socialist era, the dialectical relationship with official culture and their aesthetic and ethical dimensions. She also opposes the label 'alternative theatre' for action art, which, according to her, has a different mission to action art, despite some intersections. For more, see Pavlína Morganová, *A Walk through Prague: Actions, Performances, Happenings. 1949–1989* (Prague: Academy of Fine Arts, 2014), 16. There are certain similarities between dance and the fine arts in terms of the conceptualisation of the body, experiments with casual, everyday movement in front of an audience (or without it, in the case of action art) in unconventional spaces, and a postmodern understanding

of movement/dance and performative situations. In the context of Czech dance, this remains a relatively unexplored area.

51 See *Avantgarda známá a neznámá. Sv. I. Od proletářského umění k poetismu 1919–1924*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín (Praha: Svoboda, 1971); *Avantgarda známá a neznámá. Sv. II. Vrchol a krize poetismu 1925–1928*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín (Praha: Svoboda, 1972); *Avantgarda známá a neznámá. Sv. III. Generační diskuse 1929–1931*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín (Praha: Svoboda, 1970).

52 The various influences of fine art and contemporary music on the development of postmodern dance in the US are covered in Eliášová and Raisová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína'. Parallels between the postmodern approach to dance and movement and action art, in the Czechoslovak and later Czech context, are worth exploring independently and in greater depth; however, there is no space to do so in this text. Nevertheless, I am working on a separate publication on this topic in collaboration with dancer and dance theorist Hana Polanská Turečková and phenomenologist Petr Soukup. Our focus will be on the parallels between the visual arts and dance and their intersections with phenomenology.

53 Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 13.

54 There are certain parallels between body movement in contemporary dance and fine arts applied in conceptual performances, mostly in gallery settings. Conversely, in the approach of dancers (some of whom experimented as fine artists during the 1970s and 1980s in the New York alternative scene) to movement in certain types of performances (e.g. Steve Paxton's choreography *Satisfying Lover* from 1967, where performers incorporate everyday walking, etc.). Similar parallels can be found between action art and postmodern dance. Pavlína Morganová delves into considerations of performance and action art, and their conceptual delineation and contextualisation in the Czechoslovak space. Examples can be traced most recently in Pavlína Morganová, Terezie Nekvindová and Dagmar Svatošová, *Výstava jako médium. České umění 1957–1999* (Praha: AVU, 2020). The transformation of the perception of body and movement within postmodern reflections on dance has not yet received attention in the context of the Czech dance scene, except for Viktor Čech's 'Choreografický moment, archiv a moderna (2015)', in *Choreografie mysli – Úsilí – Tělesný pohyb jako časoprostorová (dis) kontinuita'* ed. Viktor Čech, 10–29 (Praha: NAMU, 2022). See also Morganová, *A Walk through Prague*.

55 The arrival of improvisation as a stage form in Czechoslovakia after 1989, especially in the 1990s and early 2000s, is discussed in Eliášová and Raisová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'. In this context, it is worth noting that Czechoslovak intellectuals were aware of ongoing experiments and new approaches to thinking about performing and fine arts, thanks to the lectures of Petr Rezek, originally published by *Jazzová sekce* more than thirty years ago. Rezek's lectures contextualised the art of the 1960s and 1970s and were later published as *Tělo, věc a skutečnost* (Praha: Svojtka & Co., 2010).

56 At the III International Conference on Psychodrama and Sociodrama in Baden, near Vienna, in 1968, Roy Hart (a South African actor and vocal experimenter, a student of Alfred Wolfsohn and later founder of the Roy Hart Theatre) assisted Vyskočil in a workshop on Dialogical Acting. In their approach to theatre, they followed the ideas of the fringe theatre movement, perceiving theatre as a laboratory for exploring and developing human potential through theatrical disciplines. See Michaela Raisová, 'Mezi řečí: Různé pohledy na pedagogiku přednesu (a hlasu) v českém a britském kontextu na základě vlastní zkušenosti' (doctoral thesis, DAMU, 2020), 84.

57 Ivan Vyskočil was interested in creative situations, in theatre at the moment of inception. He deliberately called his authorial outputs 'non-theatre' to distinguish them from 'artificiality'. He was particularly interested in simple situations of contact with the audience, of theatre as an encounter (with oneself, with partners on stage, with the audience).

58 Cynthia Jean Novack explores this context in the US in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990). In the Czech context, there is still ongoing reflection and research on this period, especially within the fine art; see Nekvindová and Svatošová, *Výstava jako médium* and Kujelová (ed.), *Čs. koncept 70. Let*.

59 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 184.

60 Vyskočil, 'Subject: Stage Improvisation', 9.

61 The practice and theoretical exploration of Dialogical Acting (DA) have been ongoing at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) since its establishment, and it was also present in the 'school for workers' before the Velvet Revolution. Prof. Ivan Vyskočil actively served as an assistant in DA until December 2019, participating in meetings with students, DA assistants, and the general public, as DA courses are traditionally open for free each semester. Currently, the third generation of DA assistants (pedagogues in this discipline who have undergone specific training) is in place, and I count myself among them. Dialogical Acting, thanks to the existence of the English programme at DACP, extends beyond the borders of the Czech Republic and has many followers, including students who have been 'raised and educated' at DACP. Not all students with extensive experience in the discipline become DA

assistants; the role is reserved for selected students who acquire the assistant role under professional guidance. An unwritten rule for assisting in DA is that the assistants themselves regularly enter the role of students and practise DA in a relatively open format every week. Currently, MUDr. Eva Slavíková is the guarantor of the DA discipline. The discipline is also practised outside of DACP, facilitated by experienced DA assistants, the so-called second generation, for example at JAMU in Brno under the leadership of Assoc. Prof. Martina Musilová. She is also the director of the Institute for the Study and Research into Authorial Acting at DAMU, which publishes texts on DA (theoretical studies, collections and reflections of assistants and DA students) and authorial acting in both Czech and English. Visit www.autorskeherectvi.cz for more information.

62 Vyskočil, 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation'. Vyskočil's language is playful, elusive and non-specific. It can be read as a reaction to the totalitarian regime but also as part of his poetics, as Vyskočil was also a writer and playwright of absurd theatre. Dialogical Acting is a discipline that is difficult to describe because, in the words of the founder, 'It's about nothing and for nothing' (this quotation is almost folklore at DACP, as Vyskočil often expressed it in DA classes; see notes and reflections from DA classes from 2011 to 2023 in the personal archive of Mish Rais).

63 Vyskočil, in the experimental format of the practical discipline, elaborated on Vygotsky's concept of 'inner speech', which is an experience shared by most people and is particularly explored as a phenomenon in psychology. See Markéta Machková, 'Enacting Inner Speech on the Academic Stage. A Dialogical Review on Fossa, P. (ed.). (2022). New Perspectives on Inner Speech. Springer', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 57 (2023), 1065–1083, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-022-09739-8. Vyskočil was, among other things, a trained psychologist and a 'mixer', especially in terms of combining influences and approaches in inventing his own paths; see Václav Černý, *Paměti III (1945–1972)*, 2nd (expanded) edition (Brno: Atlantis, 1992). For more on the influences on Vyskočil's conception of theatre and his adaptation of Stanislavski's term 'public solitude,' see Machková and Rais, 'On the Hidden Potential of Public Solitude'.

64 Vyskočil, 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation'. Vyskočil expresses himself in a specific, expansive and ambiguous manner. He resists simple descriptions of things and states, expanding the possibilities of perception and interpretation. As such, his language is not easily interpretable in an international context, especially in English. Vyskočil's texts may sometimes give the impression of 'fogging up' the discipline rather than clarifying it. Having personal experience with Dialogical Acting is very helpful in understanding his texts.

65 Vyskočil also uses the term 'creative state' (Stanislavski); Vyskočil, 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation'.

66 Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 21–22 (page references taken from a PDF from the University of Southern Denmark, in the archive of Mish Rais, which uses different pagination to the text cited in the References).

67 See De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*. For research context, see also Marlon Barrios Sorrano, 'The Landscape of NOW: Interview with Kent De Spain' [video], YouTube, 12 September 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOdm0Tn3clM, user channel Dancetechtv.

68 See Doughty, 'Improvisation: What Do I Do and Why Do I Do it?'

69 De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*, 54.

70 Doughty, 'Improvisation: What Do I Do and Why Do I Do it?'

71 Montero, *Thought in Action*, 45–48.

72 Silvie Šeborová, 'I barva je materiál. Petr Veselý', *Art Antiques*, no. 7 (2023), 54–65.

73 Vyskočil, 'Dialogical Acting: Information for Authorisation'. An integral part of this process is the continual writing of reflections, in which the assistants of Dialogical Acting (usually two per group of students) and other participants in the classes contribute. For comparison, Sally Doughty attempted to raise awareness of the decision-making process during moments of improvisation in dance by recording participants (both in audio and video format) using Perkins's approach, which involves verbalising any thought processes happening in the present moment. It is noteworthy that, in this experimental project, written reflections played an important role alongside the transcription of verbal expressions. See Doughty, 'Improvisation: What Do I Do and Why Do I Do it?'

74 For example, Daniel Lepkoff; see Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle'], personal archive of Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.

75 However, this does not always happen in every moment of the performance; describing this experience is challenging, precisely because what the dancer perceives in the present moment is a complex experience, ranging from proprioception to kinaesthetic sensations to the assessment of these pieces of information. See Montero, *Thought in Action*, 45.

76 Montero, *Thought in Action*, 47.

77 Ravn, in dialogue with the dancer Kitt Johnson, reaches a similar conclusion; see Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 21–22.

78 Doughty, 'I Notice that I'm Noticing', 122–124.
79 For more on open play in Dialogical Acting, see Martina Musilová, 'Stanislavski in Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner – In the Neighbourhood with Brecht', *Stanislavski Studies* 6, no. 1 (2018), 80, https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2018.1439674.
80 Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 9.
81 Franco Ruffini, 'Stanislavsky's "system"', in Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, 150–153 (London: Routledge, 1991).
82 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 184–185.
83 Montero, *Thought in Action*, 38–41.
84 Malaika Sarco-Thomas, 'Mass May Be the Single Most Important Sensation: Perceptual Philosophies in Dance Improvisation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, 152–169.
85 Čech, 'Choreografický moment, archiv a moderna (2015)', 13.
86 In *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, there is an entire section dedicated to similar texts, including contributions from Sondra H. Fraleigh and Nalina Wait. Wait elaborates on the concept of 'embodied consciousness' and explains the challenges of theorising improvisation within the context of Western culture and tradition. See Nalina Wait, 'Embodied Consciousness', in *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, 135–150.
87 Boleslav Keprt and Zuzana Pártlová, 'Tělové proměny v dialogickém jednání', in *Teritoria umění. Vědecká konference doktorandů pražských uměleckých škol*, ed. Petr Zvěřina (Praha: NAMU, 2015), 196.
88 It feels appropriate to reiterate that Dialogical Acting is not a discipline intended for public display. On the contrary, the practising groups are closed, practice takes place regularly over time, placing it in the territory of comprehensive psychosomatic training. The condition gained through practising Dialogical Acting, in the case of the performer, is similar to that acquired through repeated live improvisation in front of an audience.
89 De Spain, *The Landscape of the Now*, 167–172.
90 The biographies of the focus group members are listed on pages 283–285.
91 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.
92 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
93 Hana Polanská Turečková, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.
94 Jana Novorytová, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.
95 Bohumíra Eliášová, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.
96 Eugenio Barba, 'Introduction', in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, 17–19.
97 Jiří Lössl, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.
98 Anna Sedláčková, interview on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', August 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais
99 Lizzy Le Quesne, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.
100 Eliášová, written reflection on the project, 2023.
101 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton', 2022. An edited version of this interview was published as Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Improvisation as Practising Trust: Interview with Julyen Hamilton', *Theatralia* 26, no. 2 (2023), 197–203, https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2023-2-12.
102 Kateřina Dietzová, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais; Novorytová, written reflection on the project.
103 Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 12.
104 Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 12.
105 Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 13.
106 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
107 Albright and Gere (eds.), *Taken by Surprise*; and *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*.
108 The dancer switches between various qualities of attention, positions and roles, as discussed in Ravn, 'Investigating Dance Improvisation', 21–22.
109 I draw from my own experience with the workshops of these artists, which took place at AMU as part of our project. Hamilton introduced his work in Prague during a workshop organised by CreWcollective in April 2023, followed by the performance 'PIO, Julyen Hamilton and dancers' at the Ponec Theatre. Some participants from

the workshop also took part in the performance: Tomáš Janypka, Mish Rais, Jana Novorytová, Mirka Eliášová, Bettina Neuhaus, Ursula Sabatin, Giaccomo Calabrese, Gianna Grünig and Roberta Štěpánková.

110 Mish Rais, notes on Rosalind Crisp's online workshop in Prague, 2021, personal archive of Mish Rais.

111 Mish Rais, Bohumíra Eliášová and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little' [part of the research project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle']. Personal archive of Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 2022.

112 Mish Rais, notes on Daniel Lepkoff's workshop in Prague, 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.

113 Mish Rais, notes on Julyen Hamilton's workshop in Puget-Ville, 2018, personal archive of Mish Rais.

114 Musilová, 'Stanislavski in Dialogical Acting', 81–82.

115 Vyskočil, 'Subject: Stage Improvisation', 9.

116 'Interview with Nita Little'.

117 Polanská Turečková, written reflection on the project, 2023.

118 Helena Arenbergerová, written reflection on the project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle', 2023, personal archive of Mish Rais.

119 Arenbergerová, written reflection on the project, 2023.

120 This aligns with the myth of the 'just do it' approach to professional performance, refuted by Montero in *Thought in Action*.

121 Lössl, written reflection on the project, 2023.

122 Eliášová, written reflection on the project, 2023.

123 Novorytová, written reflection on the project, 2023.

124 Polanská Turečková, written reflection on the project, 2023.

125 Ivan Vyskočil, 'Small Stage Forms or How to Go about It?', 9–10, Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting, 6 January 2021, https://www.autorskeherectvi.cz/post/male-jevistni-formy-aneb-jak-na-to-1?lang=en. I have also mentioned that Vysočil was educated in psychology and had experience with it; the term 'law of transference' can be traced to Sigmund Freud.

126 Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993). The relationship between condition in Dialogical Acting and embodied condition is mentioned in Keprt and Pártlová, 'Tělové proměny v dialogickém jednání', 177–196.

127 Reason, 'Researching Dance Across Disciplinary Paradigms', 39–56. For more on the research of Dialogical Acting and its connections to the cultivation of embodied connection, embodied fitness and kinaesthetic empathy, see also Keprt and Pártlová, 'Tělové proměny v dialogickém jednání'.

128 For more on the phenomenon of motor sensations experienced by the audience while watching dance performances, see Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 199. For similar insights in the context of Czech dramatic arts, see Otakar Zich, *Estetika dramatického umění: Teoretická dramaturgie* (Praha: Melantrich, 1931).

129 In Dialogical Acting this role is fulfilled by the assistants. In improvisation, Julyen Hamilton uses the concept of performance analysis.

130 In Czechia, similar events are organised by, for example, SE.S.TA in the format of *Choreografické kafe* (see https://www.se-s-ta.cz/akce.php?sesta-pro-publikum&choreograficke-kafe) but also by CreWcollective, Divadlo Ponec, Studio Alta and Divadlo Archa on different occasions.

131 Polanská Turečková, 'Po pás: CreWcollective a posun v chápání tance', 2019.

132 A certain guide on how to approach instant composition performances is provided by the texts in the catalogue for Viktor Čech's exhibition; see Čech (ed.), *Choreografie mysli – Úsilí – Tělesný pohyb jako časoprostorová (dis)kontinuita*.

133 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

134 Doughty, 'I Notice that I'm Noticing', 121.

135 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

136 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.

137 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

138 'Interview with Nita Little'.

139 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff' and 'Interview with Nita Little'.

140 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

141 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.

142 Le Quesne, written reflection on the project, 2023.

143 Performers are also often the audience for such events. See Eliášová and Rais, 'Real-Time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem', 116–135.

144 Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process', 199.

145 Eliášová and Raisová, 'Okamžitá kompozice jako svébytná umělecká disciplína', 44–45.

146 Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 79.

147 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
148 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.
149 Rais, notes on Julyen Hamilton's workshop in Prague, 2023.
150 Rais, notes on Julyen Hamilton's workshop in Prague, 2023. It is worth noting that the question was raised by a student of DACP who had previous experience with Dialogical Acting.
151 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
152 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.
153 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
154 Eliášová and Raisová, 'Real-time Choreography as a Linguistic Problem'.
155 Eliášová and Raisová, 'From Solitaires to Solitaires'.



Some Ways in which Dance Improvisation is Political Inquiry

Lizzy Le Quesne

INTRODUCTION

If politics is the process of deciding and administering how we arrange our collective life, dance improvisation offers specialist insight into the field. Questions of individual responsibility, organisation, participation and degrees of freedom are at the fore. Dance improvisers negotiate the event with charge and openness, inhabiting and negotiating a zone of potential and emergence. In their performance and teaching practices, each of the six artists in our project[1] enacts a position of creative commitment to inhabiting a delicate state of lived presence in the shared space of performance. Set in relation to historical contexts of improvisational approaches as political agitation and experimentation, and considering Dana Mills's concept of 'weak' and 'strong' political readings of dance,[2] I explore how the artists' practices reveal ways in which dance improvisation informed by somatic awareness may function as embodied political inquiry. I consider how the skills and approaches within dance improvisation can offer a field of practice adequate to relearning and reconstituting rules of engagement towards individual and shared embodied vitalities and intersubjective equalities.

Traces of technical innovations and radical intentions extend through the histories of experimental dance. And I argue that these are enjoying a new flowering in current dance practices rooted in subtly embodied and attentional practices. In this essay, I explore this through the work of the artists in our study, in addition to some of the most recognised historical contexts for dance improvisation as countercultural movement. I begin by visiting political purposes within improvisation as a performance form in the American dance innovations of the 1960s and 1970s, arising out of the 'postwar "culture of spontaneity"'.[3] Threads are traced through early-21st-century engagement with the themes to the present, and the six dance artists in our study — themselves already now a senior generation. During our conversations, workshops and interviews, five of the six made overt reference to the impact of the American dance avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s on their development as artists, and some were themselves a part of it. Nita Little, Daniel Lepkoff and Eva Karczag all experienced first-hand watching performances by, learning from and working with key figures on the New York scene in the 1970s and 1980s, including Judith Dunn,[4] Steve Paxton[5] and Trisha Brown,[6] and relate their aesthetic concerns directly to this influence. Rosalind Crisp acknowledges the importance of studying with US artists visiting Australia or during her time at Arnhem, in the Netherlands, including Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton, Wendell Beavers, Jennifer Monson and Mary Fulkerson, all of whom worked with sensory improvisational processes. And Julyen Hamilton acknowledges the importance of his time as a young dancer working with UK choreographer Rosemary Butcher, who studied and

worked in New York from 1968 to 1972 and was profoundly influenced by the exploratory processes of the Judson scene.[7]

After noting the political dimensions of historical improvisational practices — focusing on Anna Halprin and Steve Paxton in the 1960s and 1970s, then on the revisiting of these practices by European artists in the 1990s and 2000s — I introduce Mills's theory of dance as politics and reflect upon the interviews and workshops we undertook with the six artists. I consider how the early postmoderns challenged divisions, hierarchies and oppressions within dance and wider cultural and social frames, and how another critical wave addressed similar notions in the context of corporate capitalism. I then explore the ways in which dance now, in the age of somatics, can be understood to operate as Mills's strong politics and, further, embrace and demonstrate an ethics of care and collectivity in desperate times. Amid multiple social crises and the climate emergency, dancers are etching out states of presence, potential and embodied relationality, which their art — and, in a special way, its improvisational qualities and processes — can creatively inhabit. I highlight the artists' descriptions of their own experiences of discovering ways to dance which were personally inspiring and invigorating as opposed to depleting; strategies to discover and negotiate embodied powers; and patterns of attention that set up sensitive and creative ways of being — and being together — in and through the body. All of them are artist-performers, and teachers, who have spent a life in dance, developing and sharing their own ways to creatively inhabit movement so that it spills in and out of the current of life. The very premise of improvising dance before an audience is a sharing of embodied vulnerability and vitality — just as it comes. This commitment to the lived present is already a political shift away from structures of hierarchy or control towards practices of listening to and for signs of connectivity and life.

While some of the artists do not define their work primarily in political terms, I consider a series of ways in which their performance and pedagogical practices may be understood to engage with questions of negotiating powers within and beyond the embodied self. I use Mills's theory of the wordless and sensory nature of dance as a key to asserting human rights and equalities, and her three main concepts (weak and strong political readings, contraction and release, and sic-sensuous) to argue how improvisational practices can deepen and increase the political undercurrent of dancing. I explore how aspects of the six artists' practices creatively assume political shifts by offering ways of enlivening the body in relationship, as a sensing and agential part or parts in/of a moving world. I discuss how they reveal sensitive and sophisticated creative practices of attention and participation, as ways of playfully navigating and negotiating individual and collective freedoms, powers and connectivities.

DANCE IMPROVISATION AS POLITICAL INQUIRY IN THE US DURING THE 1960s AND 1970s

Avant-garde dance in the US in the 1960s effected a revolution against canonical modern techniques and towards more self-governing, inclusive and experimental forms of movement and organisation. While much of the work produced by the Judson Dance Theater and associates has been understood to enact primarily an internal deconstruction, aimed largely at subverting and reinventing the techniques and aesthetics of modern dance itself; it also proposed implicit and explicit 'political themes of participation, democracy, co-operation and ecology',[8] particularly within the new improvisational practices. Artists exposed and explored dance improvisation as a portal to personal freedoms and instinctive registers and experimented with newly collective and egalitarian organisational frameworks. In developing improvised dance methods for training, creative process and within and as performance, innovative practitioners and teachers etched a new space between and across the personal and political.[9] I highlight Halprin's process-based dance practices for personal development in connection with the New Left[10] movement and the approach of Paxton and his peers in developing sensory skills for embodied readiness and responsiveness, and articulating new organisational structures.[11]

A key inspiration for the 1960s dance avant-garde[12] was Anna Halprin, whose intention was 'not to invent a new dance genre but to restore the anthropological function of dance as an instrument able to solve individual and collective problems through the sharing of a creative way of moving'.[13] Working independently amid the politically minded milieu of the West Coast, Halprin consciously turned away from modern dance techniques and training towards a more open, instinctive and self-expressive process with a socio-political consciousness. She became associated with New Left countercultural practices and the grassroots drive for social change.[14] She founded the experimental San Francisco Dance Workshop in 1955, exploring improvisational tasks and non-dance movement. Dedicated to open structures in practice and performance, Halprin describes the importance of the notion of 'scoring' — 'very different from choreography, because scoring is based on process' — in providing 'a method of collective creativity'. Her practice and performances involved playful free-form explorations of everyday activities and functional movement, and allowed space for instinctive personal process.[15] Halprin adopted the New Left idea that individual empowerment through creativity is a source of a more equal and integrated society, and she became a member of the Human Potential Movement[16] evolving in California in the 1960s. Her work developed

around emancipatory dance practices and ritualistic performances where personal and social tensions could be exposed and worked through.[17]

In the wake of the 1965 Watts riots in Los Angeles — a response to ongoing tensions and police brutality against black citizens — the Studio Watts Workshop was set up to support social regeneration in the city through the arts. Invited to create a performance at Studio Watts, Halprin embarked upon a series of creative dance workshops with a group of black students in Los Angeles and white students at her home in the San Francisco Bay Area, then brought the two groups together to 'see what reconciliation's all about'.[18] The groups improvised for each other, played physical games and explored speaking, vocal, drawing and movement tasks together, encountering and negotiating complex racial and sexual tensions.[19] The resulting performance, *Ceremony* of *Us* (1969), segregated performers and audience along racial lines and then brought them into 'a ceremony of coming together, of forming as a group, performing together, of discovering each other and beginning to work as a group… the discovery of difference, of separation and conflict, of racial competition, identity, strength, soul'.[20] Halprin's description of the process, including conflicts and conquests, jealousies, seductions, retributions and risings, is a powerful testimony to improvisational dance as a space for conscious and pre-conscious energetic and social structures, emotions and power-play to emerge and be explored.[21] The final performance presented an intimate and highly charged intersection of bodies across race and gender, which challenged social norms. The performance 'threw some of the audience. They expected to come and see the familiar configurations — and there had been too many changes already. Barriers were breaking down fast'.[22]

In New York during the 1960s and 1970s, Judson dancers and others, many of whom had attended Halprin's summer workshops, explored various improvisational approaches termed 'indeterminate choreography', 'open choreography', 'situation-response composition' or '*in situ* composition'. Addressing personal and collective freedoms, 'these were political issues, although not always stated explicitly.'[23]

After becoming uncomfortable with the tightly set choreography and hierarchical company structure while dancing with Merce Cunningham from 1961 to 1964, Steve Paxton joined the experimentation occurring at the Judson Church, and wholly devoted his performing and teaching practices to improvisation from 1967.[24] Paxton was a founder member of the improvisation group Grand Union (1970–1976) along with several dancers from the Judson scene.[25] After experimenting with various formats proposed by members, Paxton describes how the dancers resisted taking directions: 'The members were unwilling to submit to any leader, however temporary' and the group looked for a structure in which all could participate equally, and without social hierarchies:[26]

> *The totally improvisational company that the Grand Union unintentionally became bypasses the grand game of choreographer and company. There, ego-play is the issue, and those gentle means of assuming authority or submitting to it had, in the past, been played thoroughly by the members. Instead, following or allowing oneself to lead is each member's continual responsibility. The security of preset material… seems to get in the way of the amplified self-exploration that arises in improvisatory performance. The weighty theatrical tradition of subjecting one's self to another person's aesthetic of time-space-effort manipulation is ignored in favor of the attempt to be emancipated without confining or restricting others.*[27]

Eventually, the Grand Union did not rehearse at all and came together only to perform, experimenting with fully open improvisations. Members could bring any costume or material to a performance,[28] accentuating the frame for playful individuality and theatricality. Paxton describes the company as a conscious attempt to create space and conditions for dancers to explore individual impulses and develop sensory responsiveness, among other things, through the performative event. It was an exploration of 'social formulations in theatre aimed at producing freedom for individuals within a group and spurring them on to new awareness'.[29] One gets a sense of demonstrative unpredictability and raw encounters emerging within the dance. Trisha Brown lists an array of affective elements and human power-play:

> *[C]ollusion with the audience, massive behavior displays, pop music, outlandish get-ups, eloquence, bone-bare confrontations, lack of concern, the women's dance, taking over, paying deference, exhilaration, poignancy, shooting one's wad, wadding up one's wad, making something out of nothing, melodramarooney, cheap shots, being oneself against all odds and dancing. Dancing and dancing and dancing.*[30]

Some of the dancers struggled with the openness, and Paxton relates this to wider socio-cultural conditions of control, leaving the dancers ill-equipped for self-governance: 'We are conditioned to voluntary slavery… American life produces slaves.'[31] Decades later, Goldman declares 'the political power of improvisation' as a 'practice of freedom'[32] but recognises the difficulties Paxton describes. She argues for improvisation not as an attempt at liberation per se, which would mean different things for people with different life experience of different constrictions and oppressions, and thus unviable. Rather, Goldman proposes improvisation as a valiant continual engagement with shifting constraints, a constant negotiation with various 'tight places'.[33]

Dance improvisation represents not freedom as such, but an empowering and emancipatory process, first and foremost a practice of a state of presence and readiness to maximise and navigate the possibilities of a given moment.[34]

Looking back on this period, the development of Contact Improvisation (CI) appears as an act of working out embodied skills and conditions for handling oneself within relational spaces, as one practical way of answering the questions that were opening within Grand Union, through dancing. Following the celebrated men's group work *Magnesium* (1972),[35] Paxton and others developed Contact Improvisation,[36] facilitating new structures and techniques for free-form relational embodied play. CI evolved new methods of giving and taking weight between partners with a released muscular state and active, open attention. It aimed to practise and demonstrate safe, interpersonal choices, equalities, responsibility, playfulness and touch.

Curtis highlights the personal and creative freedoms accessible within the new palette of embodied textures Paxton opened up for men, both in *Magnesium* (its two sections formulating investigations of vigorous physical risk in contact, alongside meditative liveness and subtle movement in standing 'still'[37]) and in CI. Beginning as a form for men to dance together, CI quickly became a practice in which gender stereotypes and entrenched embodied roles are effectively challenged, where men could practise tenderness and softness and experience support, and women practise strength:[38]

> *[The] combination of strength, wildness, physical risk, non-sexualized yet intimate touch, proprioceptive sensitivity and trusting physical collaboration made CI an ideal forum for destabilizing traditional gender roles — roles that relegated strength and physical risk-taking to the domain of a dominant male gender performance, and intimate touch, proprioceptive sensitivity, and non-dominating physicality to the domain of a submissive female gender performance.*[39]

Accusations of naivety have been made against the political aspirations of the 1960s dance avant-garde.[40] Amid valiantly utopian visions of equality, there were and have been failures to prevent hierarchies, elites and exclusions among participants, with the key players already a privileged group of college-educated artists. Burt raises awareness of 'the tension between the egalitarian aspirations of those who founded [CI] in the 1970s and a tendency to create a hierarchy of exceptionally talented dancers within it'. He cites Novack's recognition that 'while the community's social ethos of egalitarianism has survived, it has been difficult to maintain' and compares the problems with the difficulty of maintaining a knowledge commons, as analysed by Hess and Ostrom (2007).[41] And Goldman, while comparing early CI to techniques

of non-violent protest (2007), nevertheless notes that for some, such as black US dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones, who had been initially excited by the possibilities of CI, it remained an inaccessible domain of the privileged:

> *[C]ontact improvisation was more exclusionary than its practitioners liked to admit. Even within the safety of dance studios, surrounded by contact improvisation's egalitarian rhetoric, imbalances of power abound. It is easier for some to move in particular ways than others, depending on the context, and the stakes are not always the same.*[42]

Further, while consciously addressing divisive practices regarding gender, sexualities and later dis/abilities,[43] a continued prevailing whiteness of CI has been widely recognised.[44] More recently, somatic dance practices in general have come under criticism for their whiteness, cultural essentialism and social privilege.[45] Understanding that the development of improvisation in the US itself owes much to jazz and other popularised African music and dance traditions present through enslaved peoples and oppressed groups,[46] and the extent to which Eastern and global practices and philosophies underpin somatics,[47] these are critical ongoing issues. If dance is to maintain an interest in collective and emancipatory process, awareness of the many conscious or unconscious difficulties with, and barriers to, inclusion must remain active. And the rarefication of artistic practices on the whole within unequal societies remains highly complex.

While recognising blind spots and failures within the postmodern movement, a space between the personal and political, where embodied impulse and experience could explore and question given forms and structures, and challenge certain roles and hierarchies, was opened up as a function and capacity of dance — and, from my point of view, remains open. Burt affirms the 'correlation between avant-garde sensibility and the social and political radicalism of the counterculture' and argues that the early post-moderns explored 'new sets of parameters through which to rethink the social and political relevance of the dancing body'.[48] Dance artists actively sought freedoms from the external constraints of dance techniques, aesthetic tastes, social roles and hierarchies, and this was explored most directly and effectively through experimentation around social organisation and personal emancipatory experiences through improvisational processes. This process continues to evolve, for example in the work of Collod and Spångberg, and in current practices that find new registers within improvised movement.

REVISITING THE POLITICS OF DANCE IMPROV IN EUROPE DURING THE 1990s AND 2000s

Banes notes how the dance avant-garde responded to the increasing economic stress affecting society from the 1980s onwards as neoliberalism took hold: '[B]y the early nineties, the prospects of worldwide financial crises made abundance and leisure seem antique, nostalgic notions from the past.'[49] Needing to attract and entertain audiences, US improvisation in the 1980s moved away from the earlier relaxed experimentation towards an aesthetic of highly crafted multi-arts theatricality. And, while the 1960s and 1970s had seen an 'emphasis on… freedom, abundance and community', and sought to encourage and release an inner '"authentic" self', improvisation in the 1990s turned towards a more stark and contentious identity politics.[50] For the new generation of improvisers, CI was deemed 'too gentle, passive, even boring… younger artists saw only dancers tangled together, endlessly rolling around on the floor', and not theatrically engaging.[51] (Indeed, the Czech dance quarterly *Taneční Zona/ Dance Zone* dubbed a CI jam 'Contact Marmalade'.[52]) As stage dance in the 1980s and 1990s tended towards increasingly virtuosic technique and athleticism and an overt theatricality, the skills developed in CI facilitated acrobatic expertise and fluidity or were used as a means towards ingenious partner-work choreography, often losing sight of its origins and focus on equality, openness and sensitivity through touch.

In a move to reclaim and resituate dance as critical embodied practice in the late 1990s and 2000s, several European artists made direct reference to early US postmodern dance, including seminal improvisational works, now pitched against modernist ideologies of progress.[53] Burt notes dancers' interest in re-exploring the potential for open forms and improvisational approaches, through close revisitings and reworkings of historical improvised pieces, such as Paxton's celebrated solo *Goldberg Variations* (1986–1992) by Mårten Spångberg in 2003,[54] and Halprin's shifting group scenes *Parades & Changes* (1965) by Anne Collod in 2008.[55] Like the previous era they referred to, these reworkings functioned as explorations of embodied artistic resistance: 'By connecting with persisting traditions of radical, critical, artistic practices, dance artists have legitimated their own current oppositional projects, and… raised questions about who "owns" the history of dance.'[56] Sourcing the collective memory within these earlier works, Burt writes, is a prerequisite to collective political action, resisting neoliberal pressures and the controls this exerts upon the arts and on society in general. These reworkings raised questions of authorship, ownership, methods and market pressures on and within dance in late capitalism, through re-embodying improvisations from the earlier period.

Much of the radical European dance wave of the 1990s and 2000s minimised or, in some cases, eradicated movement; this was interpreted as a refusal to constantly produce the satisfying displays of flowing movement that had become almost obligatory in the 1980s.[57] And I suggest that the reproductions of improvised work such as by Spångberg or Collod find (different) ways to revalue and reassert the act of dancing and the embodied sovereignties this can generate. Spångberg's quiet reiteration of Paxton's elegantly miscellaneous moves honours the corporeal intelligence and adventure of Paxton's spontaneous dancing; and Collod's reprise performs a re-exploration of enthusiastically enfleshed agency on the part of the dancer in a group. Within the structure of Halprin's score, the group as a whole shifts between different basic actions — undressing and dressing, manipulating objects and materials, stomping in collective rhythms. The performers experience the freedom to engage their own subjective experience and make choices about how they behave,[58] creating a space of shared energetic emergence. This work is a ritual exploration of changing shared energetic states, within which the individual can be creatively present, while at the same time it dissolves into a collective moment with its own evolving rhythm. It restages a commitment to the lived agency and playfulness of the dancer, in relation to a given space and community, which is again a prime concern.

Dancer and theorist Dana Mills supports dance's role as powerful political intervention, able to address the notions explored historically, as described above, such as resisting oppression through exploring embodied agency and movement freedoms, and seeking and asserting equalities, through the sheer vitality of dancing. She argues that affecting embodied states are exchanged in the event of dance, and that this can activate a political evolution. In the following section, I introduce Mills's three main concepts to then analyse the improvisatory practices of the artists in our project. I develop this through themes of attention and participation, in order to support a notion of implicit as well as explicit and historical political dimensions and potential of improvised, somatically informed work.

'WEAK' AND 'STRONG' POLITICAL READINGS OF DANCE

In *Dance and Politics*, Dana Mills argues for dance in general as an embodied form of political action and intervention, which, functioning entirely outside and independently of language, is able to reclaim spaces and create fresh modes

of relation and connection between embodied subjects. She proposes that dance can foster 'a world in which lives collide more and further equality is claimed'.[59] She argues that the unique intensity of the embodied exchange that occurs within dance, and between dancer and spectator, can function to animate and assert essential human rights and equalities in material ways. Dance facilitates a physical process of connection and communication between bodies that can overcome or permeate socio-political divides or oppressions on an alternative, embodied plane: 'Dance is a way to dissent from politics practised in words. It is a way to reclaim spaces where those are not always granted; it is a way to investigate a world experienced by a single embodied subject and its relationship to others.'[60]

Mills's theory hangs on three main axes, or concepts. Her notion of 'sic-sensuous' occurs when meaning is transferred between two sensing bodies. The tension between a dancer's 'contraction' and 'release' represents the politics within the inner space of the body, and with another body. And a continuum from 'weak' to 'strong' political readings in dance exists between those ideas which have been previously languaged, to wholly embodied motions.[61] The directness of embodied transmission through dance occurs on a plane of felt awareness and interaction that is quite different from, and functions in resistance to, established modes of communication and rules of engagement. It can stimulate radical bonds between bodies, which defy, escape and disperse standard social and cultural structures and hierarchies. This wordless resonance Mills calls 'sic-sensuous'[62] — the term suggesting a profound aliveness, purposively personal and sensory. Sic-sensuous is 'the process of inscription by which one sensed body writes upon another'.[63] It is a kind of touching and being touched, across invisible divisions, defying presumed separations and differences. Although she does not specifically discuss improvisation, Mills describes the radical impact of sic-sensuous occurring within dances of widely different forms, contexts and cultures, including African, Middle Eastern folk, social or protest dance forms, and Western stage dance. In a variety of different styles or forms, dancing bodies can generate and transmit an enlivening energetic touch or response. For Mills, this emerges from an instinctive twofold process: a 'contraction' into sensory awareness within the dancer's internal body-self-experience, and a 'release' out into space and world, and towards other bodies.[64]

The political functions of dance need not be necessarily overt or conceived to represent a political idea — dance that works in this way would offer a 'weak political reading', whereas a 'strong political reading' of dance is fundamentally sensory, embodied.[65] Mills's strong political reading of dance arises through the embodied processes of sic-sensuous and 'contraction' and 'release', and has the potential to disrupt established relationships and circumnavigate

divides not by way of idea but by affective embodied state. This travels through bodies — between dancers, and between dancers and audience members.

Some dance works can be understood to encompass both weak and strong political meanings, reveal the terrain between them and exhibit what Mills understands as productive 'clashes' as they interact.[66] Halprin's aforementioned *Ceremony of Us* consciously addressed racial divisions and inequalities through a ritualised merging of the two groups (a 'weak' politics), while in the act of free-form dancing together, an unfolding of dynamic, sic-sensuous tensions and releases emerged within and between the bodies of the dancers, and audience — unfolding a 'strong' politics. Similarly, Rosalind Crisp's ongoing project *DIRtywork* engages in political discourse relating to subject matter yet can be understood to effectively articulate both of Mills's political readings. *DIRtywork* addresses environmental destruction through climate change in Australia. Beyond a coherent concept, the performances themselves encompass both words and wordlessness. They combine various spoken texts — including some personal history related to the landscape — with a pervasive embodied state, which Crisp describes as a certain 'lightness'.[67] Her account and gesture indicating this 'lightness' evokes a menacing sense of powerlessness and insubstantiality, a visceral processing and sharing of the embodied bewilderment in the face of the loss of landscape and species that the work raises. Chiming with Mills's continuum and clashes of weak and strong politics through worded and unworded realities, Crisp speaks passionately about the realm of the body as different and complementary to language, and of the strength of the dancing body to process and disclose (political) experience and urgency: 'I don't want to replace the dance with words. That would not work for me. Or politically — because I think it is about the body'.[68] She articulates a dance maker's understanding of Mills' belief in the strength of pre-conscious embodied states through 'the whole centring of the somatic experience as a basis to create from, rather than an idea'.[69]

Dances may have a 'strong' political resonance — performing and authorising new realities, relationships, energised flows and connections that undercut social or other power structures — whether a deliberate, articulated or 'weak' political layer is present or not. A dance need not be determinedly political, in the sense of languaged ideas, in order to have a political life. Further, I argue that the increasing engagement of somatic awareness in dance — which is by definition on some level improvisational — strengthens this process, and thus the political resonance of Western dance performance. Both of the reciprocal powers Mills identifies — the internal 'contraction' and outward 'release' — are intensely and articulately implemented and embodied through dancers' skills in somatic attention and praxis. Somatic engagement in dance supports a subtlety and curiosity of felt process, which increases its potential

to reach and land in another sensing body (Mills's sic-sensuous), so provoking and augmenting the (perhaps implicit) strong political resonance of dance. In the following section, I consider how the artists' practices can be considered in these terms. I identify ways in which they engage various processes of attention and different kinds of participation — both within and beyond the body — to articulate subtle powers of political agitation and value that exist within current forms of dance.

A CONTEMPORARY POLITICS OF DANCE IMPROVISATION

Each of the artists featured in our study practises a deliberate coming alive in the body, a gathering and tuning of kinaesthetic awareness — supporting Mills' 'contraction', that engages in creative play — facilitating the 'release'. Their practices all configure a state of heightened embodied presence and a quality of attention to the sensory that is absorbing and empowering and constitute a particular definition and redistribution of embodied agency and vitality. The artists explore and develop ways to keep going. They reveal a quality of corporeal relationality, which is open, curious and inclusive: conducive to self-care, to self-empowerment and to power-sharing. They speak to an emerging awareness across and through somatic practices that a state of creative embodiment discerns a gentle political restructuring of being, and of being in relation.

While Crisp defines an overt political intent in the project *DIRtywork*, she and all of the artists discuss the structures and methods of their wider practices in the context of philosophical and ethical frames, which reflect an implicit political consciousness. They present a varied picture of improvisational dance practices as spaces in which to foreground embodied needs, creativity and autonomies, and to negotiate or challenge habits of separation, hierarchy and control — within both oneself and the world we co-create. Whether solo or in a group, dance improvisers engage experimental modes and strategies of attention and play, feel into and relate to self, space, other and environment, within the unique textures of an unfolding sensory present. The artists develop detailed processes of sensitive embodied selfhood, navigating freedoms and constraint via embodied presence that can underpin a political positionality.

Karczag is clear that the marginalised field of release-based somatic dance is engaged in a kind of resistance, resourcing vital ways of being and supporting states of sentient agency and connection:

> *[T]hose of us who are working within this particular small world — we're working with ways of existing in the world that are anti-authoritarian. And we are really supporting people to be able to be self-reliant, empowered… human beings actively involved in their engagement with life and others.*[70]

A precondition for this is embedded in Karczag's profoundly gentle and inclusive teaching style, offering lots of time to tune in to sensory awareness and to share this with others through moving together, showing, telling, explaining, witnessing and writing poetry. Karczag teaches through imagery absorbed by the body, and experiential anatomy, so that an affirmative experience of one's own physicality and energetic field occurs in a process of softening and moving through sensory and imaginative poetic play. A sense of (self-)trust and empowerment is nurtured within the respectful listening Karczag fosters in the studio.

At the beginning of her workshop (us together in the studio in Prague and she online from the Netherlands, projected onto a large screen high on the studio wall), Karczag invited participants to 'make a political move'.[71] After saying a brief hello via projection onto the large screen, she asked dancers to remove her image from the screen and instead to tune in through their own small devices — phones and laptops. This created a scattering of intimate groups and pairings across the studio floor, immediately in a more comfortable and spacious yet direct and personal encounter with Karczag, in the shared environment of the workshop.

A state of easeful embodied experimentation is already a political choice. Both Karczag and Crisp describe the conscious shifts they themselves made from the constraints and hierarchies of classical ballet training and performing to the freedoms and welcome of somatic dance and movement practices. For Karczag, Gerda Geddes's taiji (tai chi) classes at The Place in London during the 1970s were critical. They

> *totally upended the way I imagined dancing could be… here was a technique, a movement technique, that actually offered me the possibility of being good to my body, moving in a way that acknowledged my unique body.*[72]

Practices that recognise difference, that cultivate respect and care of self and others, and that encourage playful experimentation of embodied life, have not always been a prevailing feature of Western dance training, and are critical to nurturing an embodied presence and ethics. Lepkoff explains that he had no traditional training and so did not need to 'unlearn dance' but found

fundamental support in improvisational dance practices. He describes the physical play and free-form exploration of developmental movement patterns he experienced in Mary Fulkerson's anatomical releasing classes as profoundly welcoming to his 'boyish physicality'. Physical play offered him a transformative experience of acceptance, arrival in the body and a new plane on which to explore his energetic and relational presence:

> *[I]nside Mary's classes, when we would interact with each other, and the interaction was physical, I experienced myself as capable, as strong, as able to relate to people, able to be compassionate. That's probably the biggest thing… why that work became very important to me at that point. Because it was a survival thing. It was a healing, survival thing to me.*[73]

Karczag acknowledges the influence that seeing Lepkoff and others perform had on her own development as an improviser. And, like him, she notes how a sense of coherence and autonomy can be framed by improvised dance and resonate through embodied life beyond the studio or stage: 'I think improvisation for me… holds with the possibility of being an adult, of total connectedness. One is working towards just being present. Isn't that what we're doing in life too?' Becoming present is perhaps the first and last practice of the improviser, which creates possibilities of openness, listening and relational wisdom through the engaged body. This is a portal to creative political activity.

ATTENTION

Perhaps the first and last practice of somatic engagement, and of improvisation, is attention: 'The basic skill of the practitioner is to be aware; to move their attention, to work with sensation and perception.'[74] All of the artists foreground practices of attention in similar and differing ways — imagery, sensation, touch, tasks and perceptual shifts — in order to stimulate embodied autonomy and tune into a position of relational awareness. Sensory awareness frames a quality of playful experimentation within the body that is physical and responsive, aware of self, and other and world.

Such attention magnifies Mills's embodied contraction and release, 'challenging the boundaries of bodies inwards… and the boundaries of bodies outward.'[75] Inner tuning and aliveness simplifies and expedites extension and association. Beyond the literal sense of contraction and release, I compare the inward

sensing of somatic practices to Mills's contraction, and an outward awareness of space and environment to her release; with the intimate interrelation between them the powerful domain of the dance. With Mills, then, attention to the sensory nature of one's own materiality and that of the milieu in which we find ourselves makes new nuances of presence and connection possible. Embodied attention opens a plane and texture of relationality that rests below the habitual frames of life; that functions outside customary social orders, identities or categories of being.

Several of the artists highlight somatic and releasing dance practices — O'Donnell Fulkerson's Anatomical Release, Skinner Releasing Technique, Body-Mind Centering — as key to deepening the process of becoming attentive to, and activating, the sensory within dancing, of both inner and outer worlds. In Ideokinesis[76] — key to Eva Karczag's practice — we attend to the experience of an image within the interior of the body, which supports an inner process of physical change in state. Karczag teaches with absorbing and fantastical pictures, offering creative reconfigurations of parts of the body as bowls of fruit, or sky, which have material effects of softening, opening, allowing deeper, freer breath and spontaneous movement. These inner softenings and openings facilitate active presence, melting into movement, into space and towards an audience. Crisp sometimes dances in performance with 'sensation-images' in an ongoing 'feedback loop'. She described how images spontaneously arise from a bodily sensation and become part of the dance: 'I might lightly shift a bone and suddenly I have an image-sensation of all my bones flying about in different directions.'[77] These inward interventions to and of the body-self contribute to sic-sensuous meetings through the body's release. Inner processes manifesting in releasing body states possibilise new meetings.

The dancer's body feels into an active relationship with space and world. This is a real meeting. The world comes forward to us, and we to it. Hamilton introduced his four-day workshop by inviting dancers first to practise to deeply experience touching and meeting the floor. This is key to dancing. First with a hand, and then with feet or whole bodies, Hamilton invited the dancers to notice the experience of travelling through space to land and touch and bodily accept the floor: 'Touching the floor, and to be touched by it. My body/being/sensuousness touches, and is being touched. Later, we do the same with air, and space — which is most fascinating work.'[78] Lepkoff engages in kinaesthetic processes of touching, handling and moving objects as key to being in live relationship with the world, from dancing with sticks to building houses.[79]

'Do we want to live in a world that is alive or dead?' Little asks. And she attributes the ability to promote a world of life directly to the quality of sensory attention we are able to bring to our embodied presence. Further, she highlights the depth and openness of embodied attention as directly affecting the quality

of relationships people are able to have with each other, and with their environment. This sets the tone and the speed of our responsiveness to the world and lives around us. It enables us 'to be in a state of readiness, ready to change… so that I'm easily influenced, able to be in relations of communion'.[80]

Little describes how a practice of embodied attention in dancing allows her not only to perceive but to connect profoundly with her environment; to expand her being. Practising awareness beyond her inner or personal world as she moves, supports the body's release into shared space:

> *I'm constantly at play with a much larger world than simply myself alone because I'm making choices relationally. And I'm not interested in solely expressing myself, I'm not interested in actions that are expressing solely conditions of Nita. The improvisation that interests me is a relational practice, arising through the physicality of attention as actions of the body as a mind, engaging with other body-minds, human and other than human, sentient and beyond, including spaces and places. Improvisation is a co-creative practice of bringing the world of relations to life through actions of recognition and play.*[81]

A continuity of interior and exterior realities, perceived and communicated through practised embodied perception and openness, extends the boundaries of the physical self. Sensory awareness encompasses the space within the body and beyond it to forge a new dimension of possible relations. Paxton outlined the ethical potential in this process: 'Greater sensitivity is the result of personal space extension.'[82] The impact of this is still emerging, and is key to Nita's project:

> *[W]hat can a human be if a human is not limited to the skin sack? We're working on a level of communication that is pretty profound, and I don't know where that goes. I have no idea… I want to see humanity go further in its relations, not just with the human, definitely with the human, but also with the non-human. Because we're living in a suffering world. We better get this right.*[83]

Mills sees the embodied expansion of dance as a practical enactment of rebalancing powers and crossing real-world divisions and borders. She implies that dance is a way that oppressed or isolated individuals or groups can reach out and encounter one another despite divisions: 'Dance moves human beings beyond boundaries of their own bodies, constantly reinterpreted and reconfigured as spaces; and of their shared worlds, challenging the limits of who

they may speak with and who perceives them as equal interlocutors.'[84] While Mills is talking specifically about the human realm and political equalities between divided human groups, Little's sense that the dancer's heightened embodied attention can reach out and make connections beyond the self not only resonates with this but also embraces environmental and non-human spheres. Dance improvisation creates opportunities to experiment and experience this on an intimate scale.

Little speaks in terms of an expanded scope of attentional touch, which can occur across and through space, and which too can change things. Dancers profoundly touch and affect space in this way. Little invited the dancers to play with the notion of 'changing size', not simply through contracting and expanding the shape of the physical body but through contracting and expanding one's attention, zooming in and out, to touch and be touched by the world, to move and to be moved. This, she senses, is a portal to emergent knowledge: 'I think we don't know what touch is; we don't know what touch can do. And that's a political thing.'[85]

Further, Little proposes an exercise of a practice of attention that entails dancing *as* another person, or dancing *as* the imediate space or environment — an imaginative and creative process of attending to, perceiving, sensing, becoming and merging with an other, of opening and surrendering to an other. She wonders 'what it is we are doing when we really take on [and] engage with the physicality of our attention so that when I'm dancing *as* you, I'm moved by you...? ... What happens when you move me?'[86] Dance is required to navigate these subtle explorations, and to playfully explore these modes of meeting 'because science doesn't know!'[87]

In dance, then, we are still discovering a space for new shapes of relations based in mutual freedoms and consent to unfold, new kinds of care and ethical power-sharing. Little is clear that the skills are only just emerging. What we know as 'non-verbal communication', or 'listening skills', are, she says, only the tip of the iceberg:

> *[W]hat happens when enough of us start to get our relations right? By 'right', it sounds like I'm saying right and wrong. I mean, 'right relations', as the Native American population here might use that term. And right relations means being aligned. Being in alignment with, alignment as, being together... from right relationships, you get one kind of emergence, from wrong relationships (i.e. disrespectful relationships), you get another. And I'm working on the biggest picture I can work on.*[88]

The embodied attentional practices of dancers are fertile ground for such experimentation and discovery, and they extend through participation with and beyond the self.

PARTICIPATION

Improvisational practice reaches beyond a sensing, to a dynamic participation in, or a giving over to, the moment. Not only do we attend to and feel the touch of inner and outer realities but we actively participate with them, or facilitate their moving, in various ways, which extend opportunities for the body's agency, responsiveness and reach. As we arrive in and participate in the embodied vitality of the dance, we co-create new inner and outer worlds and systems — eking out new degrees of freedom and investigating possible equalities.

For Hamilton, the dancer 'participates' in space and movement. We submit or commit to it. We actively allow movement to occur and we collaborate with it. In a refining of the instinct tapped in improvisation, there is a practised relinquishing of a controlling part of the self and an allowing of the playful, ecstatic body to act. There is an ability to roll with it and keep on rolling until something else occurs. Participating in movement is a way of discovering fullness of form and allowing changes to occur. Participation encourages Mills's 'release'. And this allowing can be practised, learned. Learning to let go of conscious and unconscious habits of resistance — of a critical mind, or patterns of holding in the body — allows the wordless aliveness of movement to come into existence. The dancer must

> *train every part of the body to go — to participate. The whole body participates and appreciates. This is a real discipline. There is no time to change the quality — but there is time to participate in that quality, to taste what you are tasting. It is so beautifully brief… to do, to participate, and to appreciate. Every bone, every part, wants to participate. It's tremendously fearless. When something moves, everything is moved. When one part moves, the whole body shares in the experience. The body loves to share.*[89]

In his workshop, Hamilton invited participants to commit to the momentum and the experience of a movement at every instant of its trajectory, as it travels through air and, when it lands, to enter wholly into the process of meeting

the weight and surface of the ground. He calls for the dancer to 'participate with the floor'.[90] When we participate with the 'physical laws' of motional and gravitational forces, he said, they 'issue out' in meaningful, poetic ways. Rallying the body and joining with motional and directional forces in dance resonates in space and with the audience. Underpinning Mills's sic-sensuous, an expanded and shared consciousness is enacted and received through vibrant bodies giving in to movement and the physical laws that shape them. Participation with the movement — and trust in it — are essential to its outward resonance, its 'release':

> *On stage there's no time to hope that it's going to be right; you have to be with the moment, the instant, with trust. The moment you lose that trust, its power retracts. Its power to extend and resound diminishes. So, I think very often, this is deeply what we're working on. And therefore, politically, it touches much pedagogy, teaching, philosophy, which is often based on a lack of trust, which is based on not trusting the children, which is based on not trusting that things can work out in their own way. Without any trust, regulation enters in order to secure the result, to be sure. And the whole openness closes.*[91]

Trusting and participating with a movement is a surrendering to its autonomy, its force and directionality and 'allowing for "it" to move, rather than the self making the move. Movement, then, ignites space'.[92] This resonates with Mills: 'Dance releases from one body in motion to the embodied space it unravels.'[93] The igniting, or unravelling, of space is an act of change, transmitted between bodies, through the dance, and it has the potential to change worlds, for just that moment — or perhaps beyond: 'Dance as a world inscribes upon the bodies of its participants — audience members and spectators alike — and changes their embodied spatiality after they leave the theatre.'[94]

Our participation in a dance extends to the forces present in the space and its audience. Several of the artists discussed the felt relationship with the audience and spoke in different ways about this as a live exchange and negotiation, and of seeking to achieve an equality in the relationship with the audience. There is strength and vulnerability in being an improviser in performance, and a prioritising of possibility and openness, which can alter the positionality of traditional roles in a theatre. Crisp describes how important it is for her to meet and hang out with her audience before a performance starts, in order to establish relations and acknowledge differing roles in a shared process: 'We are all just here. I'm doing this, and you're doing that. It normalises it, instead of kind of freaking out about what they might think.'[95] And in performance, she pays attention to cultivating a body state that can affect and be affected:

a porous, receptive and non-threatening state, through which energy can move and be exchanged:

> *How can I take these people with me? So there's a sort of empathetic body. It's something about making myself transparent so that the audience is disarmed. I am disarmed and they are disarmed.*

Lepkoff describes strategies to navigate thoughts of the audience's expectation and judgement, and of exploring the potential powers which emerge within the relationship. He has worked to equalise or mollify the relationship by encouraging performers to approach and look closely at their audience: '[E]veryone's just looking at each other… so that the space of the audience is not somehow charged…. And everyone's doing the same thing together.'[96] And he talks about dancing and performing improvisation before an audience as a positive way of sensing and negotiating his own powers — as a way of accessing the vitality within himself. He evokes a vital agency to be found in being able to experience one's physicality, and to move one's physicality under the intensity of performance: 'I liked performing because it's difficult, and it helps you become powerful… And to develop that power to really know how to move your weight, even under dire circumstances.'[97] Dance is a space in which to become stronger, in oneself and in the world.

The powers and potentialities of actively participating in being, seeing, sensing and moving fill the shared space of dance improvisation. And this can function as a practice ground for relations of negotiated empowerment beyond the studio or stage. The body-mind, or 'physical self',[98] feels and moves within a thickening of shifting time and space as relationships form and re-form; energy rises and falls; and powers are claimed, found and lost, and redistributed. Little sees the shifting, motional reality of dance as providing clues to challenging hierarchies and redistributing powers in wider contexts:

> *I'm very invested in the awakening of culture towards relations of distributed power… Hierarchies are power that has never been let go. It's organised so somebody… or something, ends up on top and stays there. That's problematic for movement. That does not create movement… motion requires distribution of power. And it's okay for a moment to arise in which power takes a certain shape. But then it needs to be let go, and something new needs to be able to come. We don't want powerlessness. Rather, we need power to come and go.*[99]

To know and engage this generous body, giving and receiving power in a state of trusting participation, is a joyful experience. Joy is, in itself, a power, with

its sights set firmly on the cultivation of vitality and hope. And several of the artists speak of their practice in terms of joy — a focus on and a commitment to joy in the act of dance. Both Crisp and Karczag speak of having lost this at times, of the frustration of their experiences in traditional dance forms: 'I wasn't going to put up with dance destroying my love of dance, with dance training destroying me!'[100] As Paxton describes the urgency for dancers to inhabit their own body's choices, Crisp and Karczag express the delight they found in coming to improvised and release-based practices to (re)find the joy in dancing: 'I didn't set out to do improvisation. I set out to enjoy dancing. And so if I'm doing improvisation, it's because that led me there… It's just come from dancing and from where the greatest joy is.'[101] Joy is generative and sustaining. It draws you in and leads you somewhere. Hamilton states simply that 'I just make pieces. This is my joy… And I make better material when I improvise… It's a joy of making.' Wendy Houstoun uses joy — enjoyment — as a barometer of what is meaningful to her body:

> *I like to doodle about and push around the edges of things, and then come back… It's not trying to identify something, just recognise, notice it, enjoy it… take a bit more time enjoying whatever you've just experienced, because things sort of sit. When they affect you, and they change you, your body enjoys doing them.*[102]

Crisp indeed defines a principal aspect of her work as being simply to find and prolong the joy of dancing, and describes a central methodology within her teaching as

> *empowering dancers, artists, to love it… to find the joy in it. That sounds really simple but a lot of dancers don't experience much joy. They just feel like it's a chore, and they've got to measure up, and they've got to fit in, and they've got to make a career, and all this shit. You know, we sort of lose the point of the practice, of the art, and the form. And some people do say to me after workshops 'Oh, this is what I thought dance should be, what I thought it was going to be. This is what it's meant to be.' So yes, you can actually take that permission! And I think that's really important — on a human level, but also on a political level too — that we are able to empower ourselves.*[103]

As we submit to, and participate in, our own presence among others we re-sense and re-make our world. We are empowered to do and to become. And we do so with a quality of sensory awareness and humility that can shift relationships and the experience of power from one of struggle for control (of ourselves or others) towards one of respectful and joyful negotiation and experimentation, of more trust and openness. Dance improvisation provides a platform for perceiving and acting more fluently and directly from a state of embodied awareness, which offers a new assertiveness and relational responsibility. And, with practice, this can become a highly compelling state of affairs, offering a way of experiencing potentialities of being that extend and connect beyond behavioural and cultural norms.

Improvised dance practices set up opportunities in different ways for bodies or embodied selves to enter states of heightened presence and awareness and move in relation to one another, to the space and milieu, the moment, in which they find themselves — and for something energetic, spatial, rhythmic, dynamic, to occur between those present. It requires a measure of listening, attentiveness and surrender that are strengthened by somatic sensitivity, which is already a political position, prioritising and practising a role of being among, amid and with the world, in such a way that fosters (and demonstrates) embodied agency and spontaneity, in addition to cooperation, collaboration and creative play. These artists, through their teaching and their performances, along with the current generation of dancers, are instinctively taking forward political potentialities of dance, and deepening this through somatic attention. Their practices reveal how dance improvisation potentially rehearses positive and delicate political skills of creative coexistence that emerge through practice and performance, if not — yet — within wider social and political domains.

Mills argues for a new 'relational movement which creates an independent world, performing a uniquely danced voice… arising out of embodied equality'.[104] In times of bewildering global catastrophes, and a failure of state-level politics to envision and shape how we function collectively, dance improvisation offers a space for learning, performance and discovery of ways to connect, to foster and to navigate vitality. It offers a space for us to practise remaining alive and awake, open and responsive to the flows, the needs, delights and desires within us and our environment. As we practise to sensitively inhabit ourselves and our shared spaces, may we begin to agitate and manifest a world more profoundly rooted in embodied presence and connectivity, more simply and joyfully awake to one another and our powers.

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Notes

1 Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff, Nita Little and Wendy Houstoun were invited to participate as artist pedagogues and interviewees within the research project 'Improvisation as Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle' (Rais, Eliášová and Le Quesne 2021–2024).

2 Dana Mills, *Dance and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

3 Annie Kloppenberg, 'Improvisation in Process: "Post-control" Choreography', *Dance Chronicle* 33, no. 2 (2010): 181.

4 Judith Dunn was a member of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and a founder member of the Judson Dance Theater. From the late 1960s Dunn explored experimental dance and music improvisation with her partner, jazz trumpeter Bill Dixon. Dunn and Dixon were a key performing and teaching partnership in improvisational practices in the 1960s. From 1968 to 1977 they taught at Bennington College, where Nita Little was a student from 1969 to 1973: see Bohumíra Eliášová, Mish Rais and Lizzy Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little' 2022; Shawn Kennedy, 'Judith Dunn, 49; A Dancer, Teacher, and Choreographer', *The New York Times*, 3 July 1983, 18.

5 Buring our discussions, both Eva Karczag and Daniel Lepkoff gave us moving accounts of the impact of seeing Paxton perform improvised solos in the 1970s. For both of them, the experience was pivotal in their own development as dance artists. Nita Little met Paxton as a guest teacher during her last year at Bennington College. Lepkoff and Little researched and danced with Paxton in the early stages of the development of CI; see Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'; 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'; 'Interview with Eva Little'.

6 Eva Karczag danced with the Trisha Brown Dance Company in New York from 1979 to 1985 (trishabrowndance company.org). Karczag had travelled with Richard Alston (director of the experimental company Strider, of which she was a member in London) to explore the new dance emerging in New York in the 1970s. She studied initially with Merce Cunningham, then Nancy Topf and others before joining the Trisha Brown Company; see Eliášová, Bohumíra, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

7 See Judith Mackrell, 'Rosemary Butcher obituary', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2016. Butcher's work was deeply influenced by the released body and functional aesthetic of the Judson artists, and this has in turn been a powerful influence on the UK avant-garde and the strength of release techniques in Britain. It is expressed through the many dance artists who have worked and studied with Butcher, including myself, in the UK. The strength of release techniques in Britain during the 1990s and 2000s, as taught by Gill Clarke, Gaby Agis (both had been dancers with Butcher) and others, and the experimental choreographic approach rooted in embodied state as taught by Butcher throughout her career, contributed to the strong development of somatic dance in the UK.

8 Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), xix.

9 Janice Ross 'Anna Halprin and the 1960s: Acting in the Gap between the Personal, the Public, and the Political', in *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible*, ed. Sally Banes and Andrea Harris, 24–50 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 46.

10 From the 1950s in the United States, the 'New Left' rejected Stalinism and 'old' left focus on labour policy, resisted an apathetic end-of-ideology and sought to re-energise a new 'utopian' political philosophy around countercultural and grassroots organisation. This became expressed in the countercultural, anti-war and civil rights movements. See C. Wright Mills, 'Letter to the New Left', *New Left Review* 5 (September–October 1960).

11 Danielle Goldman, 'Bodies on the Line: Contact Improvisation and Techniques of Nonviolent Protest', *Dance Research Journal* 39, no. 1 (2007): 60–74.

12 Via her summer workshops, Halprin was an inspiration to several artists in the New York scenes of the 1960s, including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Simone Forti and Meredith Monk (Davis, 2012).

13 Serena Massimo, 'The Performative Power of Architecture: Anna Halprin's Dance Deck as the Source of her "Transformational Dance"', *Itinera* 25 (2023): 4.

14 Ross 'Anna Halprin and the 1960s', 26.

15 Halprin's *RSVP cycles*, developed in collaboration with her husband, marks the beginning of her notion of scoring dances, as opposed to choreography; see Samara Davis, 'Judson at 50: Anna Halprin', *Artforum*, 31 July 2012.

16 The Human Potential Movement combines Eastern and Western philosophies and the ideas of Abraham Maslow and Aldous Huxley. Founded in 1962 at Big Sur in California as a 'creative laboratory, an incubator of human potential', the Esalen Institute (www.esalen.org) was the birthplace of the Human Potential Movement. Halprin became a regular dance and movement workshop teacher at Esalen.

17 Ross 'Anna Halprin and the 1960s', 33.

18 Davis, 'Judson at 50: Anna Halprin'.

19 Ann Halprin and James T. Burns, 'Ceremony of Us', *The Drama Review (TDR)* 13, no. 4, Politics and Performance (Summer 1969): 132–133.

20 Halprin and Burns, 'Ceremony of Us', 140.
21 Erika Munk, quoted in Halprin and Burns, 'Ceremony of Us', 131–143.
22 Interview between Anna Halprin and Erika Munk, in Halprin and Burns, 'Ceremony of Us', 135.
23 Sally Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on Dance Improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties', in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, ed. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Hebble (London: Routledge, 2015), 135.
24 Alastair Macaulay, 'Steve Paxton on Merce Cunningham, in 2018', interview, 6 March 2018.
25 The Grand Union emerged out of Yvonne Rainer's group work *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* (1969–1970), which contained some scored elements in response to changing sites and cast. The founder members were Becky Arnold, Trisha Brown, Dong, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy Green, Barbara Lloyd, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer; see Steve Paxton, 'The Grand Union', *The Drama Review (TDR)* 16, no. 3 (1972): 129. The Grand Union also later included Barbara Dilley, Lincoln Scott and Nancy Lewis; see Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 136.
26 Paxton, 'The Grand Union', 130.
27 Paxton (1972), in Robert Turner, 'Paxton's Interior Techniques: Contact Improvisation and Political Power'. *The Drama Review (TDR)* 54, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 130–131.
28 Paxton once turned up with a lighted candle in his hat; see Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 137.
29 Paxton, 'The Grand Union', 131.
30 Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 137.
31 Paxton, 'The Grand Union', 131.
32 Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 4.
33 Goldman, *I Want to be Ready*, 6–10.
34 Goldman, *I Want to be Ready*, 5.
35 This work, performed by twelve men, including Paxton, during a residency at Oberlin College in January 1972, is often cited as the first performance of CI; see Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 61; Jess Curtis, 'Movement in the Men's Movement: Contact Improvisation and Social Change', *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 7, no. 1 (2015): 130; Keith Hennessy, 'The Experiment Called Contact Improvisation', Dancers' Group, 1 October 2008.
36 While CI is often reckoned as primarily the result of Paxton's work, it is clear that it emerged between dancers within a wide evolutionary zeitgeist. Similar duet forms had already begun to emerge within the Grand Union; see Turner, 'Paxton's Interior Techniques', 130. Nita Little described in our interview how Paxton, as a guest teacher at Bennington College, introduced technical methods to support a section of her student choreography *No Trumpets No Horns*, which involved bodies clambering over one another in a proto-CI; see Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little', 2022. Several dancers and students, including Lepkoff and Little were among those exploring the material in its early stages. And Hennessy lists multiple precursors to CI: 'Before CI's unofficial naming in 1972 there were many experiments, exercises, performances and scores that engaged a new kind of touch and weight exchange; more engaged with gravity and less dependent on gender. Key American artists and events included Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneeman, The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton's Lightfall, Nita Little's *Crawling Under/Over* score, Simone Forti's Huddle, Mary Fulkerson's Anatomical Release, Robert Ellis Dunn's composition class at the Cunningham studio and many more'; see Hennessy, 'The Experiment Called Contact Improvisation'.
37 In the second of *Magnesium*'s two parts, the men practised Paxton's proprioceptive meditation then called simply *The Stand* and later *The Small Dance* (see Hennessy, 'The Experiment Called Contact Improvisation'), where dancers observe the minor reflexes and adjustments involved in standing while releasing muscular tension; see Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 62.
38 Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 136.
39 Curtis, 'Movement in the Men's Movement', 131.
40 Ross 'Anna Halprin and the 1960s', 28; Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 10, 23.
41 Ramsay Burt, *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons*. Oxford Studies in Dance Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6–7.
42 Goldman, 'Bodies on the Line', 72.
43 R. Mitra, and S. Paxton. 'Talking Politics of Contact Improvisation with Steve Paxton'. *Dance Research Journal* 50, no. 3 (2018): 6–18.
44 Tamara Ashley, 'Steps Towards Decolonising Contact Improvisation in the University', in *Ethical Agility in Dance: Rethinking Technique in British Contemporary Dance*, edited by Noyale Colin, Catherine Seago and Kathryn Stamp (London: Routledge, 2024); R. Mitra, 'Unmaking Contact: Choreographic Touch at the Intersections

of Race, Caste, and Gender', *Dance Research Journal* 53, no. 3 (2021): 6–24; Mitra and Paxton, 'Talking Politics'; Ann Cooper Albright, 'The Politics of Perception', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, edited by Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund and Randy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 223; J Keith Hennessy, 'Ambivalent Norms, Radical Potential: Contact Improvisation Re-considered', PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2017; Goldman, 'Bodies on the Line'; Goldman, 'I Want to be Ready'.

45 Doran George, 'A Conceit of the Natural Body: The Universal-Individual in Somatic Dance Training', PhD dissertation, University of California Los Angeles, 2014; L. Drury, 'What's in a Name? Somatics and the Historical Revisionism of Thomas Hanna', *Dance Research Journal* 54, no. 1 (2022): 6–29; Kirsty Alexander and Thomas Kampe, 'Bodily Undoing: Somatics as Practices of Critique', *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 9, no. 1 (2017): 3–12.

46 Nalina Wait, *Improvised Dance:(In)corporeal Knowledges* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023); Curtis Carter, 'Improvisation in Dance', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 Improvisation in the Arts (Spring, 2000): 181–190.

47 S. Fraleigh, 'Body and Nature: Quest for Somatic Values, East and West', *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 13, no. 1–2 (2021): 113–123; Richard Shusterman, 'Body Consciousness and Performance: Somaesthetics East and West', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 2 (2009): 133–145; M. Eddy, 'Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences', *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (2002): 46–62.

48 Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 119.

49 Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 138.

50 Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 138.

51 Banes, 'Spontaneous Combustion', 135–136.

52 Editorial review of a CI event at the Art of Movement Festival on the Volga, Russia 2002; see Nina Vangeli, 'Contact Marmalade', *Tanecni Zona* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 25.

53 Burt, *Ungoverning Dance*, 192–193.

54 Mårten Spångberg, *Powered by Emotion* (2003); see also Burt, *Ungoverning Dance*, 189.

55 Anne Collod, in collaboration with Anna Halprin and composer Morton Subotnik, *Parades & Changes, Replays* (2008); see Burt, *Ungoverning Dance*, 187–189).

56 Burt, *Ungoverning Dance*, 189.

57 André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 3.

58 Boaz Barkan, performer in 'Parades & changes, replays', interviewed in ArteCulture, Dailymotion.com, 2008. https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6sym4 2008.

59 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 118.

60 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 122.

61 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 3.

62 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 16.

63 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 26.

64 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 13

65 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 14–15.

66 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 26.

67 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

68 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

69 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

70 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

71 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

72 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Eva Karczag'.

73 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

74 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

75 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 27.

76 A somatic movement or dance practice that employs the use of mental images – visualised and felt within the body, to support embodied states and movement facility; see A. Bernard, W. Steinmuller and U. Stricker *Ideokinesis: A Creative Approach to Human Movement and Body Alignment*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2006. Ideokinesis was developed by Mabel Todd in the 1920s and since by Joan Skinner, Barabara Clark, Lulu Sweigard, Andre Bernard, Eric Franklin and others.

77 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.

78 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.

79 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.

80 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.

81 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.

82 Paxton, 'The Grand Union', 134.
83 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
84 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 122.
85 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
86 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
87 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
88 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
89 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.
90 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.
91 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Julyen Hamilton'.
92 Joan Skinner, *Underlying Principles of the Skinner Releasing Technique* (unpublished, 2010).
93 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 120
94 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 18.
95 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
96 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.
97 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Daniel Lepkoff'.
98 Skinner, *Underlying Principles of the Skinner Releasing Technique*.
99 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Nita Little'.
100 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
101 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
102 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Wendy Houstoun'.
103 Eliášová, Rais and Le Quesne, 'Interview with Rosalind Crisp'.
104 Mills, *Dance and Politics*, 118.



Biography



Michaela Raisová (aka Mish Rais)

is a Czech dance and theatre artist and translator based in Prague, with a practice in performing, teaching and dramaturgy. She is a practitioner and theoretician of psychosomatic disciplines at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Since 2018, she has been the head of the movement discipline in the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (DACP) at DAMU (Theatre Faculty) and teaches the interpretation seminar, speech and Dialogical Acting there and at other institutions. Her performance work combines dance, voice and text, with a special focus on thematising language and the participation of the viewer. She often works in non-theatrical spaces, such as galleries, industrial sites, private residences or in the open air.

As a voice and dance performer, she has collaborated on various projects with other independent Czech and international artists, choreographers, including Martha Moore, Bettina Neuhaus, Julyen Hamilton, Mirka Eliášová, Temporary Collective, Mind Move and SE.S.TA, and composers of contemporary music, for example Roman Zabelov, Pasi Mäkelä, George Cremaschi, Marek Keprt and Miloš Orson Štědroň. In 2014, she co-founded, with Jana Novorytová, the authorial project Částečné znejistění (Partial Uncertainty) and together they have created more than 40 performances, interventions and public events. In 2017, Mish joined CreWcollective, where she takes on several roles (performer, co-director, lecturer, dramaturg, mentor, co-producer) according to the needs of each project.

After graduating in philology, master's studies in English and American studies and Chinese studies (2005–2011), Mish went on to study authorial acting, its psychosomatics and theory at DACP, with a final thesis specialising in voice and speech (2011–2015). Her doctoral thesis (2020) focused on practical research combining the practice and pedagogy of speech and movement discipline. Since 2011, the continuous practice of Dialogical Acting and its principles, under the guidance of Professor Ivan Vyskočil, has had a profound impact on her work, life and teaching. As for movement practice, it has been greatly influenced by an intensive four-year study and practice of Qigong and Taiji Quan. Not having received a formal education in dance, she gained movement experience and awareness through in-depth exploration and practice of different forms (Contact Improvisation, contemporary dance, hand-to-hand acrobatics, contemporary partnering, butoh, dance improvisation) with various professional Czech and international artists, lecturers and companies over the last twenty years. Among the most influential have been Javier Cura, Daniel Raček, Leigh Tredger and Marcio Mello, Rosalind Crisp, Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton, Eva Karczag, Stephanie Skura, Daniel Lepkoff, Jiří Lössl and Mirka Eliášová.

Her publications include art magazines, podcasts and academic journals. Since 2016, she has regularly appeared on international academic and non-academic platforms to share academic and embodied knowledge (Dialogical Self, Performing Arts in Contexts [PAC], Czech amateur theatre and dance festivals, etc.). In 2015, she co-founded the BA/MA programme in Authorial Acting at DAMU (DACP), the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, becoming head in 2021.

www.crewcollective.cz



Bohumíra Eliášová (aka Mirka Eliášová)

is a Czech dance artist with a practice in choreography, teaching, performing and research. Based in Prague, she is a practitioner of choreography and improvisation in the Dance Department at HAMU (Music and Dance Faculty) of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague and is the head of the choreography programme. She also teaches creative dance for children. Her performance work focuses on dance combined with contemporary music and architecture, interdisciplinarity and interactive formats. She works in theatre and in non-theatrical spaces such as galleries and public spaces, and her work has been presented internationally at festivals and other events.

As choreographer and dancer, she has collaborated on many projects with independent Czech and international artists, choreographers (Victoria Marks, Lizzy Le Quesne, Julyen Hamilton, Bettina Neuhaus and others), directors (Ladislav Štros, Ctibor Turba, Kristýna Bartošová and others) and composers of contemporary music (Ondřej Adámek, Michal Rataj, Jana Vöröšová, George Cremaschi and others). Since 2008, she has collaborated with the Berg Orchestra on site-specific performances to live music by contemporary composers. She has also been involved in the creation of dance films. Since 2005, she has worked closely with sound director Jiří Jakl in the creation of performances and experimental projects, and she collaborates with many Czech and Slovak dance artists and improvisors, such as Jana Novorytová, Mish Rais, Lucie Charouzová, Veronika Šimková, Jan Bárta, Jiří Lössl and many others. Currently, she creates interactive dance performances for children's audiences.

Mirka studied choreography in the Dance Department of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (1993–1997). She has a master's degree in choreography, and her doctoral thesis (2002–2007) focused on improvisation practices in contemporary dance. In 2024, she received the title of associate professor. In addition to her work at HAMU and with children's dance, she teaches improvisation and creative process at many levels and platforms and at any age.

Her publications include art magazines, academic journals and broadcast.

www.htspe.cz



Lizzy Le Quesne

is a British somatic dance artist with a practice in choreography, teaching, performing, writing and research. She is a certified practitioner of Skinner Releasing Technique (SRT) and has a deep ongoing engagement with several somatic movement and therapeutic techniques. Her creative practice includes dance, site, text and photographic imagery and explores a contemplative embodied aesthetics of spatiality, energy and compassion viewed as a cultural and political intervention into public space. It is presented internationally at festivals and in various art and non-art spaces.

As a dancer and performer, Lizzy also collaborates with other independent artists in the experimental somatic field, including Michael Kliën, Rosemary Lee, Florence Peake, Carolyn Roy, Tino Sehgal, Susana Szperling, Dog Kennel Hill Project and Margarita Zafrilla Olayo, and was a member of UK touring company Ricochet Dance Productions. Lizzy teaches SRT, somatic movement and creative process to professional dancers and companies (including Independent Dance, Candoco, Ballet Rambert and the National Theatre), in conservatoires and universities (including Trinity Laban Conservatoire, Central School of Ballet, Central School of Contemporary Dance, London Metropolitan University, University of Brighton, Prague Academy of Performing Arts, Duncan Centre Conservatoire of Contemporary Dance Prague), and in the community (Intercultural Roots, Disability Arts), focusing on arts for health and social change. Her extensive list of publications includes book chapters, academic journals, art magazines, newspapers and broadcast.

After training in classical ballet, Lizzy studied for a BA in fine art and dance at University of Brighton in 1987–1990 and an MA in choreography and aesthetics at Laban Centre London (now Trinity Laban) in 1996–1998. She is currently based at the Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University, 2020–2025, and has been awarded full scholarships from Midlands4Cities for MRes and PhD projects in somatic dance. She produced the first in-depth study on somatic dance/SRT and the autonomic nervous system (2021), and is currently engaged in the final stages of her practice-based PhD, 'A Dance of Becoming'. This is a creative synthesis of SRT and materialist philosophies of becoming, through themes of desire, innocence and gentleness, involving creating the scored improvised group work 'Desire Paths...and the Possibility of Innocence' for indoor and outdoor spaces.

Born in Australia, Lizzy grew up in the UK. She was based in Prague in the early 1990s and again in 2000–2005. She is based in London.

www.lizzylequesne.com



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Some Webpages to Consider

- https://www.omeodance.com
  Webpage of dancer/choreographer Rosalind Crisp and Orbost Studio for Dance Research.
- https://julyenhamilton.com
  Webpage of dancer and poet Julyen Hamilton.
- https://wendyhoustoun.com
  Webpage of artist Wendy Houstoun.
- https://www.nitalittle.com
  Webpage of mover, educator and coach Nita Little.
- https://daniellepkoff.com
  Webpage of dancer, teacher and writer Daniel Lepkoff.
- https://www.alongthelines.net/
  Complex interconnected webbing of post-Judson dance from Bettina Neuhaus and Eva Karczag.
- https://contactquarterly.com/
  International journal of dance, improvisation, performance and contemporary movement arts.
- http://sarma.be/docs/904
  Sarma focuses on artistic research and its discursive outcomes, in forms as diferent as text collections, installations, lectures, exhibitions etc.
- http://oralsite.be/pages/Index
  Laboratory for discursive practices and expanded publication in field of dance, performance and beyond.
- http://www.conversationsinvermont.net/
  Vast collection of interviews with two North-American artists who have been influencing the course of Western dance in the 20th century and up to the present: Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton.
- http://www.emergentimprovisation.org/
  Website for Emergent Improvisation, which addresses the nature of improvisation in dance and music.
- https://grandreunion.net/
  Magazine aimed at documenting, while also cultivating and transmitting, relevant knowledge and practices honed in dance, movement, and choreographic reflection and creation.
- https://www.susannemartin.de/
  Webpage of Susan Martin – a Berlin based artist, researcher, and teacher in the field of contemporary dance and performance.
- https://joaofiadeiro.pt/
  João Fiadeiro (1965) is a Portuguese performer, choreographer, researcher, teacher and curator. He belongs to the generation of artists who emerged in the late 1980s in Portugal and gave rise to the New Portuguese Dance movement.
- https://nancystarksmith.com/underscore/
  The Underscore is a long-form dance improvisation structure developed by Nancy Stark Smith. It has been evolving since 1990 and is practised all over the globe.
- https://vividgrove.org/Tuning-Scores
  Multi-sensorial composing practices initiated by Lisa Nelson.
- https://www.dancesforanna.org/
  Webpage following practices by Anna Halprin adn Daria Halprin – Tapalma Institute. Tamalpa Life/Art process, has influenced the fields of dance, environmental design, theater, body/mind therapies, and art-based psychology.
- https://explomov.weebly.com/tuning-scores.html
  Webpage dedicated to Tuning Scores – dynamic inter-dancing approach.
- https://www.materialforthespine.com/
  Steve Paxton's movement study.
- https://www.sitezones.net/articles/in-memory-of-steve-paxton
  Retrospective article of Steve Paxton's work.
- https://www.ivarhagendoorn.com/
  Webpage of Ivar Hagendoorn – choreographer, photographer and researcher.
- https://mindthedance.com/
  Webpage for Mind the Dance project mapping various reflective modes in developing and transforming the dance class – benefiting both the learning and the teaching. It is a collection of essays, manuals, scores, exercises and maps framing the politics around dance practices, giving voice to a multitude of stances, ideas and applications.

- https://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/whats-the-score-using-scores-in-dance-improvisation
  Paper exploring the use of scores or verbal propositions in improvising dance.
- https://annahalprindigitalarchive.omeka.net/exhibits/show/mapping-dance
  The Anna Halprin Digital Archive is a project of the Museum of Performance + Design (MP+D) which is home to Anna Halprin's personal papers.
- https://movementresearch.org/
  A leading laboratory for the investigation of dance and movement-based forms.
- https://specificobject.com/
  Specific Object (2004–2013, 2018–) is a gallery, bookstore and think-tank dedicated to art post-1959 – specifically pop, Fluxus, minimal and conceptual – with an interest in the art that informed the 1960s and 1970s, as well as artists whose works organically followed from the era.
- https://www.dancingmuseums.com/artefacts/score/
  Definition of score by by Susanne Franco and Gaia Clotilde Chernetich.



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