

PERFORMING IMPROVISATION:
THE ONGOING INVESTIGATION OF THE MOVING BODY'S
IMAGINATION

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FOREWORD

My interest in improvisation began during my studies at San Francisco Conservatory of Dance in Summer 2010. This interest grew as I studied abroad in Accademia dell'Arte, Italy, in Spring 2011, and when I returned to San Francisco in Summer 2011.

While studying in these two conservatories, I had the chance to learn and practice different approaches to improvisation. I became aware that improvisation is a never-ending exploration—the moment of improvisation is always unique, and the experience of it can always get more interesting. Through practicing improvisation, I gained self-awareness and, as a result, became a more creative dancer.

After learning and practicing many different kinds of improvisation in a classroom setting, I returned to Mt. Holyoke College in Fall 2011 with the idea of translating improvisation to a performance setting.

Over a seven-month period, I instigated an improvisation ensemble and experimented with different approaches and ideas regarding improvisation. We met once a week in the fall semester and twice a week in the spring semester for two-hour sessions. In addition, I met with faculty on a weekly basis to ask questions and discuss problems. Through these discussions, I gained insights into the nature of improvisation and learned about different ways to direct the ensemble. I gradually developed and refined a structured improvisational score,

which guided the ensemble in two unique performances, titled, *Transcend//dance*, as part of the senior thesis concert, *The Line Between*, on March 30 & 31, 2012.

This paper is a reflection of my experience as an improviser and my role as an improvisation director. I hope this paper will provide some insight into the many explorations, developments, concepts, and instances of problem solving that occurred throughout the seven-month period.

INTRODUCTION

“... Rather than suppress any functions of mind, improvisation’s bodily mindfulness summons up a kind of hyperawareness of the relation between immediate action and overall shape, between that which is about to take place or is taking place and that which has and will take place...”

*-Susan Leigh Foster
in Taken by Surprise*

In everyday life, improvisation is the act of making something from whatever is available, in an unplanned way. In the context of dance, the concept of improvisation immediately becomes something extremely complex. On the surface, improvisation in dance is the act of creating and performing movement spontaneously. However, such a simplified description of improvisation is inaccurate. Improviser Kent de Spain described improvisation as “a way of being present in the movement, and your awareness of yourself within that moment both challenges and refines your presence in each subsequent moment” (de Spain 27). Thus, improvisation does not only concern bodily movement, but also involves the active use of thoughtful presence and awareness.

I focused this project on the art of performing improvisation on stage and investigated the preparation needed for an improvised performance. It surprises me how often the art of performing improvisation is under-appreciated or misunderstood. It is common for people, even some of my fellow dancers, to think that any group of dancers can easily come together and produce an engaging improvisation performance without any previous preparation or rehearsal.

Through this project, I discovered that, in contrast to popular opinion, dance improvisation requires rigorous practice. In order to create, a dancer must engage in a practice that demands acute, separate, yet simultaneous attentions. She must look at herself, and at the same time, must project her attention to everything else on stage—the presence of the other dancers (*What are they doing? Where are they in space? Where am I in relation to them? What is my relationship with them?*), the memory of materials that have already happened (*Did we build a motif? How can I relate to the materials and ideas that were previously presented? Can I create a new idea now?*), the structure of the emerging piece (*What does the piece need now? Can I create a change? How can I interrupt it?*), the music (*What kind of mood is this music presenting? Am I following the flow of the music or am I going against it?*), the space (*Where am I in space? How can I take inspiration from the space?*), and the lights (*Do I want to be lit? Do I want to dance in darkness?*). This ability to be simultaneously aware of these many components of improvisation is not something a dancer can gain easily, but must develop through exploration, training and practice.

ARRIVAL

The creative process is a spiritual path. This adventure is about us, about the deep self, the composer (dancer) in all of us, about originality, meaning not that which is all new, but that which is fully and originally ourselves.

*-Stephen Nachmanovitch,
in Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*

Improvisation can be an extremely rewarding practice for every dancer to do. Through practicing improvisation in various classroom settings, I was able to find comfort and freedom in the unknown, for it allowed me to creatively organize my body with movement. As I began this project, I asked the question: How is performance improvisation different or similar to classroom improvisation practice?

This chapter will address how I began this project by instigating an improvisational ensemble. I will describe each dancer's strengths and challenges, and her growth over this seven-month period. Then I will discuss how working with the ensemble gave me a better understanding about my role as an improvisation director.

I. THE ENSEMBLE

Like any dance project, I began this project by getting a group of dancers together. I wanted to build an ensemble with dancers who were willing to experiment. I was flexible in casting because I wanted to honor the accepting nature of improvisation and learn to work with whatever I had at hand. I was also interested to see how dancers from a variety of backgrounds and histories in

dance could bring different personalities and perspectives to this project. I held several auditions and accepted everyone who was interested. In the end, seven dancers chose to stay. They were Lauren Allen'15, Eirie Blair'15, Shreeya Joshi'15, Lilly Katz'15, Audrey Lehrer'15, Jennifer Roberts'12 and Poorna Swami'15.

Lauren had a background in ballet, jazz, modern and gymnastics. It took her a long time to step out from her familiar jazz and gymnastic movement vocabularies. She wrote to me, “My biggest obstacle in improvisation is allowing myself to find the freedom that improvisation offers. I find it hard to allow myself to be weak, and taste the freedom that comes from that, but it is something that I try to overcome with each performance (in rehearsal).” Towards the very end of the project, I finally noticed changes in her movement.

Eirie had a background in ballet, modern, jazz and contact improvisation. Her background in ballet and modern technique had a significant impact on her movement choices. These techniques gave her assumptions of what movement “should” look like. For example, when she was asked to run, she would do the classical modern dancer run—running on demi-pointe with arms straight by her side. I corrected her by giving her an image of chasing a bus. I also had another dancer imitate her run, so she knew how funny and unnatural she looked. In the end, Eirie allowed her training background to help her improvisation instead of holding her back.

Shreeya was a dancer from Nepal. Although Shreeya did not have any formal training in dance in the past, she had a unique movement style that made her a positive highlight to the ensemble. Her lack of formal training was helpful because her imagination was not bound by what is considered right or wrong in terms of technique. She was also very open to change. I noticed that she could quickly adapt to different styles or new ideas and could dance together with almost anyone in the ensemble.

Lilly was a very expressive dancer. Although she also had a background in ballet, lyrical, jazz and tap, she often turned to her feelings for movement inspiration. Her emotions were often contagious as it affected the other dancers as well. Lilly also had a sharp awareness of the development of the emerging piece and was always able to create movement in an interesting way.

Audrey was an extremely creative dancer. She was sensitive about the space and the dancers around her, and often used them as sources of inspiration. She was also a very strong performer and had a strong presence on stage. However, Audrey often had a hard time letting go of an idea she developed. At times, I or some other dancers would have to interrupt her when the idea was no longer necessary adding to the composition.

Jennifer was my dear friend. She was also the most experienced dancer in the ensemble. As a senior, the younger members of the ensemble often looked up to her for inspiration and relied on her to bring energy into the improvisation. Jennifer had a strong awareness of what to create, when to move, and when to be

still. She was not afraid to experiment with new ideas. At times, she gave me candid feedback on rehearsals and discussed the development of the project with me. Jennifer injured herself seriously the week of the show. Fortunately, she was still able to perform, although with limited range of movement.

Poorna was a trained classical Indian dancer. Her movement was distinctly different from the rest of the cast. Initially, I was disappointed that Poorna did not bring any of her classical Indian dance training into her improvisation. She told me later that she was in a rebellious stage and did not want any association with her roots. However, when she allowed herself to embrace her roots, her improvisation immediately blossomed. Poorna was very intelligent and had acute artistic sensibilities. She often discussed her thoughts with me, commented on rehearsals and asked questions regarding exercises. Towards the end of the project, I would often turn to Poorna for her artistic input.

Throughout this seven-month period, the dancers and I worked closely together as an ensemble.

II. MY ROLE AS A DIRECTOR

I identified myself as a director of the ensemble instead of as a choreographer. I often reminded the dancers that they were responsible for the creation of the piece, not me. My role as a director was to inspire, educate, encourage, construct frameworks, and create an environment that fostered creativity, vulnerability and trust.

I devoted time in rehearsal to get to know each dancer personally. I talked with them to better understand their concerns or questions with improvisation. I also studied rehearsal footage to identify individual strengths and weaknesses so that I could devise exercises that catered to each dancer's need.

Being a director was not easy. I studied different methods of improvisation from the written accounts of other improvisers and directors. Because the dancers looked to me for inspiration, I made an extra effort to keep myself inspired by reading poetry, listening to music, and looking at art. Although it could be stressful at times, I felt honored to be an inspiration for the younger dancers.

EXPLORING

In improvisation, as in Zen practice, I can be aware and changed by what goes on at each moment. A response is called forth from me when I pay enough attention to the situation at hand (other dancers, space, sound, light)...It is simply the response needed for that moment.
-Ellen Webb
in For the Taste of an Apple

To most people, improvisation implies the freedom for a dancer to create and move in any way she wants. I arrived to this project with a similar impression. As I proceeded into the project, I was stunned by the complexity of improvisation. In particular, the issue of freedom became extremely prominent in the creative process, for it repeatedly came up in different contexts.

I framed my creative research and my work with the ensemble with three different, but related approaches. First, I introduced improvisation as a personal and meditative practice, in which the dancers could find ways to break away from conventions, increase self-awareness, and become more creative. Second, I introduced improvisation as a choreographic and compositional practice, as a way for the dancers to learn how to improvise and create together as an ensemble. Third, I constructed an improvisational score for performance as a guide for the dancers to work with.

I was surprised by how the issue of freedom arose in each of these approaches: How does the increase of self-awareness support a dancer's understanding of individual, imaginative freedom? How can the individual

development of compositional sensibilities increase the ensemble's ability to freely create together? How can improvisation effectively coexist with structure?

In this chapter, I will attempt to address the complexity of improvisation. I will define freedom and its relationship to improvisation. Then I will describe my work and exploration in each of the approaches mentioned above. I will elaborate on those approaches by giving specific examples of different methods of improvisation. After that, I will reintroduce the issue of freedom and discuss my attempts in dealing with it.

I. FREEDOM

The most general definition of freedom is the ability for an individual to think and act without hindrance. It can imply independence from dictates of social and political authority or from imaginative convention. In an artistic context, freedom refers to the ability of an artist to imagine beyond known artistic norms. In dance, this artistic freedom allows a dancer to create and act in ways liberated from conventional routines, and thus, satisfy her most personal artistic vision. Improvisation can be the realization of freedom in dance—its spontaneity allows the dancer to freely explore and express her artistic desire, freeing her from the constraints of set choreography, and encouraging her to open up to greater imaginative possibilities.

As I worked more closely with the ensemble, I realized that there is a particular skill in utilizing the freedom improvisation provides. I noticed that

when the dancers were given the total freedom to do anything, they became overwhelmed by the endless possibilities. Instead of exploring the freedom they were given, they retreated to conventional, comfortable and familiar movements. The dancers could only focus on their individual self and were unable to dance together as an ensemble. Rather than being a medium for artistic liberation, freedom became an obstacle to the dancers' imagination and creativity.

Throughout the creative process, I had to find ways to help the dancers develop skills to utilize freedom in a way that could benefit them individually and the ensemble as a whole.

II. DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL AWARENESS AND FOSTERING CREATIVITY:

IMPROVISATION AND GAGA

In the early stages of this project, I noticed how most of the dancers' movement vocabularies were trapped under their familiar dance techniques. Although technique is extremely useful in providing a dancer with a language of expression, it can easily become an obstacle in improvisation if a dancer clings onto technique and only creates movement within the limits of a particular technical vocabulary. I also noticed how each dancer was very self-critical about the way her body moved and, therefore, was less willing to take risks and create something she was unfamiliar with. These issues became problematic for they caused the dancers to retreat from the freedom to imagine, as well as from creating beyond their comfort zones.

I attempted to approach and resolve these issues by introducing Gaga to the ensemble. Gaga is a movement language created by Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. It is an improvisational practice based mostly on imageries. Prompts such as “melting the flesh off your bones,” “let your bones float underneath your flesh,” and “move like a night creature, quiet but explosive,” are used to cultivate the dancer’s creativity by expanding her imagination and sensation.

Gaga is especially useful for technically trained dancers who have limited experience in improvisation. The usage of imageries and sensations encourages a dancer to imagine beyond her known technical vocabularies, freeing her from the constraints of technique, thereby allowing her to create new movement vocabularies for herself. Gaga also allows a dancer to be more aware of the endless movement possibilities her body is capable of. This increase of individual awareness immediately increases a dancer’s ability to utilize her freedom to imagine and create.

In the same way, Gaga encourages the creation of an environment devoid of personal judgment. A dancer practicing Gaga is not bound by the expectation to look a certain way, do certain movements, or create in certain ways. This judgment-free environment is helpful in nurturing improvisers as it encourages them to take risks, push through conventions and be ridiculous. This environment devoid of personal judgment is also useful in nurturing the expression of true

emotions and vulnerability. I agree with Nachmanovitch's advice, "Practice this totally judgment-free, discrimination-free pouring out of heart...we allow ourselves to say anything, no matter how outrageous, no matter how idiotic...because (the) seeming nonsense is the pay dirt from which creative work is mined and refined" (70). When a dancer stops judging her movement, she is more likely to notice its beauty, thereby allowing herself to become even more creative in fostering new ideas.

I led the dancers into a practice that is similar to Gaga. I used imageries as prompts and fostered the creation of a judgment free environment. Through this practice, I helped each of the dancers to reconnect to her body, discover greater movement potential, and be freed from technical vocabularies. Dancer Audrey wrote regarding this practice, "It made me not judge my movements so much in (technique) class...(when improvising, I) just let whatever happens happen." Gaga influenced the other dancers in similar ways. They began to break away from conventions, let go of the constraints of technique, become less self-critical, and take risks to create movement outside of their comfort zones. Most importantly, they were able to find more freedom to imagine, explore and create.

III. IMPROVISATION AS A COLLABORATIVE AND COMPOSITIONAL PRACTICE

Improvisation becomes a collaborative and compositional practice when it is done in an ensemble. When a dancer is improvising in an ensemble, her actions no longer only concern herself. This is because an improvisation created by self-

absorbed dancers can easily result in clusters of random and unrelated solos—arbitrary and uninteresting for the audience to watch. Therefore, to improvise in an ensemble is an act of collective creation. As a member of the ensemble, a dancer must create not only based on her personal impulses, but also based on the influence of other dancers on stage. She must pay attention to the emerging performance as a whole—to the way its many parts are collectively developing—and respond to the unspoken, unplanned agreement within the ensemble.

Freedom inevitably begins to diminish as soon as a dancer allows anything other than herself to influence her decisions in the process of improvisation. However, in order to perform ensemble improvisation effectively, the dancers must allow every member of the ensemble to have equal responsibilities in the creation of the piece and navigate their freedom together as an ensemble. To do that, it is necessary to develop compositional skills and sensibilities, so each dancer can have an awareness of how she can interact and actively work with the other members of the ensemble to create a performance.

I devoted time in rehearsal to help the dancers develop compositional skills and sensibilities. These compositional sensibilities, summarized in *The Viewpoints Book* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, can be separated into two general kinds: Time and Space.

a. Time: Tempo, Duration and Kinesthetic Response

Tempo concerns the speed of a dancer's movement, and duration concerns how long a dancer can stay in a certain tempo. As previously discussed, it is common for inexperienced improvisers to retreat to their most comfortable tempo in movement. Moreover, movement in a faster tempo is exhausting and can be hard to sustain for a long period of time. As a result, these improvisations often occur in a medium or slow tempo. A good improviser should have the ability to create movement with a variety of tempos.

I introduced the dancers to the awareness of tempo and duration by asking them to create a spectrum in their mind. On one end was extremely fast, on the other end was extremely slow or even stillness. They were to play with every speed in the spectrum and to bring in the sensibility of duration. I asked them to note how long they could stay in a certain speed or what happened if their speed changed very quickly. This exercise became especially interesting when I limited the dancers to only moving at full speed or stillness. Although there were seven dancers on stage, the space did not feel busy or cluttered. Therefore, I found that the variety in tempo and duration could enrich the improvisation.

Kinesthetic response is the immediate response to an external event. For example, a dancer can allow her decision to move to be influenced by the movement of another dancer. This ability to respond kinesthetically is essential as it enables dancers to pay attention to the movement of the other dancers on stage.

I devised many exercises catering to the development of this awareness. For example, I instructed the dancers to repeat a movement that was already on stage. Then, when they felt it appropriate, they could develop the movement into something else. Through this process, I learned that dancers could relate to each other by using similar materials. Moreover, I discovered that repetition could easily lead to the development of motifs and themes that tie the piece together.

b. Space: Spatial Relationship and Topography

Topography refers to the act of creating floor patterns while traveling through space. I directed the dancers to think about the space as a canvas, their feet as paint; I also asked them to note the kinds of designs they were painting onto this canvas. I suggested they start by playing with straight, zigzag and curving lines. I also asked them to change the shape and size of the canvas and notice how those parameters changed the way they moved.

Spatial awareness is very important in an ensemble work. It concerns both the distance between dancers on stage and each dancer's choice of placement on stage. In the early stages of this project, the dancers usually chose to stay at a medium distance from each other. They avoided going downstage and concentrated their movement in the center of the stage. I introduced spatial awareness by making rules to guide the dancers' spatial choices. For example, they were to dance either extremely close or extremely far away from each other. I also made them pause to look around in space and note what kind of spatial

pattern they were making as a group. Spatial awareness also involves groupings in space. I would pull a dancer off the stage and ask her whether the current grouping on stage was interesting to her or not. If not, I asked the dancers on stage to regroup until they pleased the observing dancer.

These compositional sensibilities in time and space provide a way for a dancer to logically examine and analyze her movement choices individually and also in relation to the other members of the ensemble. Through the development of these skills, the dancers became more capable of using the given freedom to improvise and effectively create an interesting performance.

IV. MIRRORING AND FLOCKING: SOME METHODS OF IMPROVISATION

This section follows directly from the previous discussion on time and space. The following methods of improvisation are examples of how these compositional sensibilities come into play.

Mirroring is one of the most basic methods of improvisation. It is a kind of kinesthetic response that is especially valuable for members of ensemble to know as it helps dancers watch and react to others on stage. Mirroring is usually done in pairs in which the dancers aim to copy each other's movement and move together in the same way. Depending on the score, one of the dancers can be designated as the leader, and the other, the follower. The leader can always create movement with the awareness of time in relation to her partner—how fast can she move without losing her partner? And how long can she and her partner sustain a

certain tempo? Here, the leader needs to be aware of her personal ability as well as of her partner's.

Flocking is a more advanced version of mirroring because it is more spatially complex. A group of dancers follows a dancer through space, mirroring her movements. The leading dancer is responsible for more than one person, and, therefore, has to be cautious about her choice of movement and her placement in the group. Here, the awareness of space comes into play. The leader can create with the awareness of topography in mind, finding ways to creatively lead the group into traveling through the space.

V. STRUCTURING IMPROVISATION

Unlike in-class improvisation, performance improvisation occurs within certain constraints. For example, the performance must happen in a certain length of time (in this project, the piece was not to not exceed twenty minutes); the emergent piece must be well developed with a beginning, middle and end; and it must be engaging for the audience to watch. In order to achieve that, I found the need to provide a certain structure—an improvisational score—to guide the development of the emerging piece.

The process of constructing an improvisational score was challenging. In order to honor the true essence of improvisation and provide the dancers with maximal freedom, I had to relinquish all choreography. I aimed to devise a score that could allow the piece to be different every time. Ultimately, this

improvisational score had to be simple and clear, so that the dancers could freely and creatively navigate it.

VI. REVISITING FREEDOM

As mentioned, a dancer must relinquish some of her personal freedom when improvising in an ensemble. This brings up an important aesthetic and creative question: How can the improvising dancer achieve maximal individual freedom when performing in an ensemble improvisation?

Throughout the seven-month period, the ensemble and I engaged with this interesting and complicated dilemma of working between freedom and structure in performing dance improvisation. We practiced Gaga to increase individual awareness of our bodies, fostering greater movement possibilities; we practiced compositional skills through exercises; and we practiced in different improvisational methods and scores. I soon realized that these exercises and scores, some previously mentioned, were actually constructed with “rules” that limited a dancer’s imagination. “Rules,” although seemingly limiting, can act as a catalyst and provide a point of view for inspiration. They can present a definite situation that can provoke a definite reaction from the dancers. Working within the limits can also force a dancer to change her personal habits, enabling her to transcend her norms (Nachmanovitch 83-84).

Keeping the idea of freedom in mind, I continued to work with the ensemble with rules and limits. As the dancers gained more self-awareness, and became more familiar with the compositional skills and sensibilities, I reintroduced

individual freedoms by allowing them to obey, change or ignore the rules. They were free to create new rules according to their individual aesthetic desires, or choose to join another dancer to collaborate on an emerging idea. As the dancers developed more skills and sensibilities, they became better able to handle greater degrees of freedom. Therefore, I began to let go of some rules. Ultimately, in order to maximize each dancer's artistic freedom within the ensemble creation, the most important, underlying principles became "always break the rules."

THINKING IN MOVEMENT

...thinking in movement is a way of being in the world, of wondering or exploring the world, of taking it up moment by moment, and living it in the flesh.

*-Maxine Sheet-Johnstone
in Thinking in Movement*

The process of “thinking in movement” involved in improvisation is complex. The attempt to describe it as precisely as possible is to microscopically look into something that happens within one’s mind and body in 0.01 seconds.

As stated earlier, dance improvisation is commonly described as the act of creating and performing movement spontaneously. Each dance exists here-and-now, and any future performances will be different. However, to improvise and dance involves more than just moving your body. It involves critical thinking, risk taking, imagination, perception and awareness of emerging dance. In Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s *Thinking in Movement*, Sheet-Johnstone discusses how “thinking” comes into play in the process of dance improvisation.

Sheet-Johnstone starts her discussion by defining what “thinking” means. In general, there are two assumptions about “thinking.” First, it is regarded as something that only the mind can do. With that, “thinking in movement” implies that thoughts are transcribed into movement and, thus, a person’s thoughts and her bodily movement exist as separate entities. Second, “thinking” is relative to a symbolic system and its products always refer to something concrete. However, these assumptions can easily be proven incorrect in the context of everyday life. Even when not dancing, thoughts and movements are inseparable.

The body constantly perceives new information through bodily interactions with the world. In return, these interactions provoke bodily response through movement. Subsequently, movement enables the body to interact and perceive more of the world, which then triggers more bodily responses. This cyclical relationship shows that thinking and movement are interlaced and impossible to separate, that they inform each other. The world which the dancer is perceiving is inseparable from the world in which she is moving. Similarly, the world the dancer is exploring is inseparable from the world she is creating. This process of thinking in movement is especially evident in the process of improvisation as it is tied to the evolving situation and environment.

A good improvising dancer never creates movement without having an awareness of the world around her. Although it may seem like the dancer is just moving her body, a complex process of perception, thought, and decision making is actually happening as each movement is being created. Sometimes this process happens without the dancer even knowing it. Yet, the dancer never stops thinking. The previously described cyclic and interlaced relationship of thinking and moving has shown that improvisation involves more than mere physical activities of the body; each movement created in an improvised performance is produced through thinking in movement.

WORKING WITH MUSIC

Music can open paths to the subconscious, to the spirit world and even to the transcendent. By opening ourselves to vibrations we can tap into primeval parts of ourselves that we didn't even know were there.

-Tony Silva

I. PREDETERMINED MUSIC VS. LIVE MUSIC

A very important and exciting part of this project was the opportunity to collaborate with Tony Silva, a local musician and composer in the Pioneer Valley. Initially, I was not sure whether I wanted Tony to compose a score for my performance piece in advance, or if I wanted him to improvise live during the performances. I made this decision by weighing the advantages and disadvantages of both options.

A predetermined music score can provide the improvising dancers with an element of assurance and security that improvisation lacks. The unpredictable and spontaneous nature of improvisation can be frightening, therefore, the more predetermined and known elements an improvisation has, the less likely for an improvisation to completely fall apart. For example, having a predetermined music score can aid in pacing the emerging dance piece and provide a structure for the improvisation. It can also provide cues for transitions within the structure.

However, in reference to the previous discussion on freedom, the existence of any kind of music immediately creates limits for a dancer's imagination. Such limitations are especially evident in a predetermined music score because of the music's inability to change and adjust in relation to the

emerging dance. With that said, using a predetermined music score held the risk of the dancers becoming overly dependent on the music. Moreover, if the dancers became too familiar with the music, they could easily plan their movement ahead of time, and thereby produce a less spontaneous work.

Although one could argue that I could have simply created different music scores for each performance or rehearsal, I think this is problematic. Each act of improvisation, even the ones under structure, creates a different atmosphere for each emerging work. Ideally, when dance and music are both present on stage, one should mutually support the atmosphere set forth by the other. However, if the music is predetermined, this relationship is no longer mutual and the emergent dance would always have to be in reference, directly or indirectly, to the music. Moreover, in the context of my project, the atmosphere created by the improvised dance was unpredictable and therefore made it impossible for me to create a music score that could adequately support the ever-changing dance.

Therefore, it is most ideal when the music is also improvised along with the emerging dance. The use of live, improvised music could create another layer of spontaneity on top of the improvised movement, making the performance more unpredictable. The musician has a lot of room for interpretation and can provide immediate and appropriate support as the dance is being created. Then the music is no longer viewed solely as a supporting role for the dance, but as an equally important creator of the performance.

In the end, my decision to use live music relied on whether I could trust myself in preparing the ensemble to respond to another layer of the unknown. I also had to develop trust in the dancers that they would not treat the live music as a security but as something that is continuously developing and changing along with their movement. This decision was especially hard because it had to be made early on, before I had enough experience working with the ensemble. After much deliberation, I took a leap of faith and decided to take my chances with Tony's live music.

II. THE PREPARATION

To prepare the dancers to work with live music, I created exercises to facilitate the development of their responsiveness to music. I found that the most natural way to respond to music is to dance to the music completely—in sync with its beat, volume, lyrics, and sonic textures. This is almost inevitable because music immediately creates a mood and foundation for the emerging dance and as a result, the most organic reaction is to respond to these directly. However, in order to provide more possibilities for the dancers to interact with music, I encouraged them to try to break away from these most conventional responses.

In one of the exercises, I separated the ensemble into trios and quartets. Each group contained a dancer who was always dancing to the music, a dancer who was dancing against or independent from the music, and the remaining dancers were free agents who could switch between the two. We did this for three rounds. In round one, the music had a very steady and obvious rhythm and tempo,

allowing the dancers to easily recognize how their movement choices were connected to the music. In round two, the music had obvious dynamic shifts throughout, to which the dancers needed to pay close attention and make quick choices accordingly. The third round had overlapping layers of music that differed in tempo and texture. This required the dancers to choose a particular layer of music to dance to or against. They were also encouraged to switch among the different layers to find ways to respond. In order to make the exercise even more useful, the group that was not dancing had to watch and guess which dancer of the dancing group had which specific role in this exercise.

Overtime, the dancers developed more sensitive musical awareness and were able to make movement choices creatively in regard to the given music. They found ways to dance with the music without necessarily following its beats and tempo. More specifically, they no longer only danced to the music that had obvious rhythm, but were able to dance to a variety of music and sound. This had become especially useful when we began to work with Tony.

III. WORKING WITH TONY

I had my first rehearsal with Tony in early November. At that time, I was still experimenting with different short improvisational scores. I asked Tony to do anything he wanted, suggesting that he take musical ideas from the dancers. By that time, I knew the dancers well enough to know that they were highly dependent on music and that having Tony respond to them could create an interdependent relationship between the two.

I did not work with Tony again until late February. At that time, we decided to have only three additional rehearsals before the week of the concert as a way to cultivate the most spontaneous experience. By February, I had a movement score ready, along with some themes and ideas for the dancers and Tony to use as a frame for improvisation. Initially, I deliberately withheld the movement score from him to see how he would respond to the score prior to seeing it. After running through the movement score several times, I gave him the outline of it so that he could have a better understanding of the happenings on stage.

The rehearsals were quite successful—the dancers were able to respond to Tony’s music in a variety of ways and there were obvious interactions between the dancers and Tony as they listened, watched and took inspiration from each other. At times, the dancers allowed themselves to create in accordance with Tony’s music, but they also allowed themselves to create something totally different from Tony and waited for him to catch up to them. Tony also affected the way the dancers understood and responded to the movement score. Poorna wrote to me, “Tony’s music makes the silence less daunting. Because there is no choreography, his music makes me feel like there is ‘order.’” Ironically, although the music was also spontaneously improvised, the dancers found comfort in it because they trusted Tony to create something beautiful even when they became lost in the moment of their own improvisation.

After improvising with Tony for several rehearsals, I noticed that the ensemble and I became overly dependent on him and took advantage of his ability to create and respond to us. As a result, we often disregarded the music and relied on Tony to adapt to our movement. I also identified a problem regarding the volume of the music. It was often too soft, making it difficult for us to engage with.

I expressed my concern to the ensemble, telling them to pay more attention to Tony. I also talked to Tony and asked him to be louder and bolder at times, so that the dancers' movements would not overpower his music. Tony returned to the next rehearsal with an extra microphone for his percussion instruments. A louder volume immediately made the music more powerful and engaging for the dancers. The dynamics of the music were also more obvious, allowing the dancers to make choices accordingly.

Overall, it was my pleasure to collaborate with Tony. It was surprising how improvising to live music could be so different from improvising to a set music track. When improvising with Tony, we experienced an exchange of ideas and inspirations. The dancers became even more creative and willing to take risks. They allowed their notion of right and wrong to drop away, knowing that Tony, as well as the rest of the ensemble, could always take care of whatever was introduced in the space. I cannot imagine having done this project without Tony; he played such a vital role in supporting each spontaneous creations of the dance.

DEVELOPMENT OF THEMATIC ELEMENTS

The body has a potential of a wide range of expression and recognition of its environment. It can orientate itself at the same time both in the tangible world of its surroundings and the intangible world of its imagination. In the improvised moment the audience is present as the dance deals creatively with these two spheres.

-Julyen Hamilton

The idea of building and maintaining relationships in the creation of an improvised performance became apparent as I continued to explore and navigate this project. I realized that the improvisation was always an act of dancing in relation, either directly or indirectly, to something or someone. For example, a soloist is always dancing in relation to everything the space has set forth; a dancer in an ensemble is always dancing in relation to the other dancers on stage; dancers are always dancing in relation to the music; in a performance, the dancers are always dancing in relation to the audience.

There were four kinds of relationship I repeatedly addressed as I worked with the ensemble: the relationship between a dancer and her inner imaginative self, between a dancer and her fellow dancers, between a dancer and the space, and between a dancer and the audience.

The process which a dancer goes through to find self-awareness and create personal movement vocabularies is a way for her to build a relationship with her inner imaginative self. In this project, this relationship was reinforced repeatedly with a practice similar to Gaga.

It has already been discussed that improvisation, when done with more than one dancer, is a process of creating collectively. Therefore, the way a dancer

in the ensemble relates and interacts with her fellow dancers on stage is crucial for the performance. Through working together for this project, the dancers and I created a strong relationship among ourselves. I constantly reminded the dancers to bring their genuine feelings, including the ones toward each other, on stage. These feelings made the process of improvising together easier because they had already developed trust for each other.

A dancer dances in relation to the space by allowing the space to affect her choices of movement. This includes the dancer's spatial awareness as well as her ability to relate to the architecture, light, and sound that the space offers. Moreover, this relationship allows the dancer to use the space creatively, devising interesting spatial patterns and groupings on stage. It is obvious that the development of compositional sensibilities can aid the development of these relationships.

The last relationship I attempted to develop was the relationship between the performers and the audience. I believe that the audience and the performers are always in communication in a performance. Both the audience and the performer contribute in this communication; this exchange is the performance (Pape 33). From a performer's perspective, I wanted to find different ways to acknowledge the presence of the audience and erase the invisible line between the performers and the audience. I approached this relationship from different angles. First, I chose to use everyday casual-wear as costumes so we looked approachable and not too distinguishable from the audience. I also structured the performance

piece to allow dancers to interact with the audience before, during, and after the piece. I told them to cancel the line between performers and audience by abandoning the feeling of being superior as a performer. I often said, “We, as dancers, are simply human beings who enjoy moving our bodies. This does not make us any different from any other human being.”

In the end, the ensemble and I were able to successfully develop each of these relationships to varying degrees. We felt comfortable creating based on our personal impulses. As an ensemble, we were able to dance and create together, while making use of all elements the space provided. The relationship with the audience, though hard to evaluate, seemed successful, for we received positive feedback from the audience.

THE PERFORMANCE SCORE

For me, everything has to be from that (performance) viewpoint; otherwise I get too confused... it just keeps things clear... A performance lens allows me to take qualitative approach to my improvisational work.

*-Nina Martin
in Inter-views*

As previously mentioned, the process of creating this final performance score was difficult. I ended up constructing this score by putting together a series of different “events.” Although I had the score prepared by the middle of February, it was constantly being revised due to the development of the dancers’ improved compositional sensibilities and their ability to perform certain events. For example, I took out an event because the dancers were unable to execute it properly. To compensate, I allowed more time for events that had been successfully executed on a regular basis. I also added or changed the rules according to the compositional need of emerging piece. For example, I added moments of stillness in an event while adding rules to a later event to increase its overall tempo.

The events in the final performance score were as follows:

1. *Intermission Action*
2. *The Grid*
3. *The Trio*
4. *Clearing the Space*
5. *Open score*
6. *The Dragon*

7. *The Duet*

Details of each event were described below.

I. INTERMISSION ACTION

The entire ensemble quietly entered the theater during intermission. We wandered around the house, where the audience was seated. When appropriate, we acknowledged our friends and had short conversations. This interaction with the audience was an attempt to blur the line between the performers and the audience, so the audience could see the dancers as everyday human beings.

The curtain on stage opened about 5 minutes into the intermission. Jennifer and I slowly migrated to the front of the house and eventually onto the stage. We took on Ruth Zaphora's idea from her documentary *The Moving Presence* that the process of improvisation is the process of "creating a world." With that in mind, Jennifer and I moved with the notion of laying a foundation for this world that was about to emerge. While doing so, we continued to interact with the audience by taking movement vocabulary from the audience, following the audience in space, and doing movements that were simple yet attention catching. I hoped by doing so, we could include the audience's experience and allow them to unconsciously become part of the foundation.

II. GRID

The beginning of the piece was intentionally ambiguous. Tony recorded the audience during intermission and played the recording of it at the beginning of

the piece. I wanted the audience to keep talking, allowing the beginning of the piece less obvious. In addition to that, the house lights remained on for the first few minutes of the piece. Eventually, the house lights and the recorded audience noise faded out.

One by one, the dancers left the audience, entered the stage, and began walking on the grid. The dancers could only walk on horizontal and vertical lines, making only 90-degree turns. I chose to use the grid, which was consisted of mostly walking and running, to initiate the beginning of the piece as a way to present movement patterns that were familiar to the audience. For the dancers who were coming from the audience, the grid gave them time to transition onto the stage.

There were four distinct grids, each containing different instructions for performance. The first grid covered the whole stage. With the house lights on, dancers walked on the grid as instructed—horizontal and vertical lines only, making 90-degree turns and occasionally adding stillness. With the house lights on, we could still see and interact with the audience. We decided this grid was about the relationship between the audience and ourselves. The grid also created a neat and tight structure, which would eventually highlight the more chaotic parts of the piece.

The second grid was created when Lilly began to create the border of a smaller “sub grid.” This required the ensemble to pay close attention to the actions of the other dancers on stage. Dancers slowly found their way into this sub

grid. I chose to have the dancers work with a more an introverted feeling because they were still in transition and were trying to find their place in the ensemble. I asked the ensemble to insert a collective pause as a way to break the introverted feeling and acknowledge the presence of each other on stage. This also marked the end of this sub grid.

Poorna broke away from this sub grid and created another sub grid that was even smaller in size. The idea behind this grid was to realize and acknowledge the presence of the other dancers on stage. We began to interact with each other and to develop movement motifs. In this grid, the structure of straight lines was not as clear anymore; instead, the ensemble strove to find a “common ground.”¹

The final grid was created when Eirie left the sub grid to find a new space for an even smaller sub grid. This grid was barely big enough to contain every dancer. Here, we were negotiating space and finding a “collective understanding of the current reality.”² We continued to find motifs as an ensemble. This section concluded when the dancers found a collective end and paused.

III. TRIO

The dancers peeled off from the group one by one, scattered all over the stage and sat down. After everyone found a place on stage and settled down, we began to transition into the trio.

^{1,2} The phrases, “common ground” and “collective understanding of the current reality,” were developed by the dancers themselves. They were open for each dancer’s individual interpretation. I will leave it open for the reader’s interpretation as well.

The trio was originally performed by Audrey, Lilly and Jennifer, but I had to replace Jennifer at the last minute due to her injury. The process of refining the score of this trio was quite rewarding. I wanted to create a trio in which each dancer had a unique role and different rules for performance. I was curious to see how three dancers with completely different intentions could create and dance together. In the final score, I instructed Audrey to find inspiration from the objects or dancers she saw on stage. I instructed Lilly to be in relationship with Audrey and to support her movement. My role in this trio was to observe, react, and create change. In the end, the trio between Audrey, Lilly and I focused on the development of nuances and reaction to each other's movement.

The rest of the ensemble remained seated on stage while the trio was happening. I chose to leave the rest of the dancers on stage to retain the energy that was previously built by the ensemble. Initially, I allowed the dancers to shift, move around in space and interact with the trio. However, this resulted in a scene in which the trio was no longer evident. I revised the score by instructing the seated dancers to recognize the trio as the dominant event. The resulting scene was much more captivating. The trio was highlighted—they were dancing in relationship with each other while navigating the interesting spatial patterns created by the seated dancers on stage. As the trio continued to develop, the remaining dancers slowly accumulated in the downstage left corner. They gave the cue for the trio to find an end as they stood up one by one. The trio eventually found an end in the upstage right corner.

IV. CLEARING OF THE SPACE

After a short moment of stillness, the ensemble dispersed from their small groups, and then quickly exited the stage. This clearing of the space allowed all the energy and content contained in the stage to clear. This also allowed the dancers and audience to take a small break, and to return to the dance with a fresh mind.

V. OPEN SCORE

The piece transitioned into an open score, in which no instructions for performance were given. The stage returned to a blank canvas in which the dancers could choose to continue something in reference to something that had already happened, or to begin something new.

I placed the open score here to make room for the unexpected. However, I had always felt ambivalent about this decision—I was worried that the dancers would not be able to handle the enormous freedom this score set forth. Yet, as the dancers developed more compositional sensibilities and confidence, I became more comfortable giving them this room to be creative.

VI. DRAGON

The open score transitioned into something we named the dragon. In this event, Poorna, appointed as the head of the dragon, was responsible to lead the rest of the group downstage. Behind Poorna, the other dancers had the choice to

either run horizontally across the stage, or run in to join Poorna as the body or tail of the dragon.

This event was especially engaging. With all the dancers involved in the dragon, we were able to create a long-lasting energetic image on stage that was different from the previous events. Moreover, Poorna's distinctive movement made her stand out as a soloist even though there was a lot going on behind her, thereby creating an intriguing visual effect on stage.

In the end, Poorna led the dancers, except Jennifer and myself, all the way back to the audience, where they came from in the beginning of the piece. Here, the dancers had the choice to either dissolve and sit down by the audience, or to dissolve into the background of the cyclorama.

VII. DUET

The piece ended with a duet between Jennifer and myself. I hope that the duet would bring a sense of closure since we also began the piece. It would be fascinating to see how the world had evolved since we first laid the foundation.

Jennifer and I never planned ahead for this duet. We surrendered to whatever had already been laid out. We listened to each other, as well as to Tony, in order to create something together. The duet lasted for about five minutes. In the end, we concluded the piece in the downstage left corner.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As I reviewed the video footage taken throughout the entire process, I was overwhelmed by how much each dancer, including me, had changed. The video from October 2011 showed a group of dancers who were insecure, timid, and unwilling to take risks. By the end of March 2012, I had a group of dancers who were confident, sensitive, creative, focused, and always taking risks.

Although the performances, as well as the long journey of preparation, are over, I still cannot fully grasp what improvisation is. Its complexity makes it impossible to define. However, my work in this project showed me what improvisation is not: It is not an act of letting go of thinking and simply performing spontaneous movement. Everything an improviser does is a personal choice she makes in the moment of improvisation. Improvisation does not always imply actions without plans. An improvising dancer can approach improvisation with a plan such as a structured improvisational score, but a good improviser allows herself to let go of her plans when the moment calls for something else. Improvisation is not an innate skill. It is acquired through practice, curiosity, vulnerability, courage, and acceptance. Improvisation is not a showcase of technique. It is an act of humble yet courageous surrender and acceptance toward the unknown. Improvisation is not always comfortable. It cannot be, because in order to create, an improviser must work outside of her comfort zone.

In the end, I came to the understanding that improvisation is a practice, an experience, a bodily research, and the only way to understand its complexity is to allow it to become part of my life. At the same time, the complexity of improvisation is what makes it so fascinating. No matter how many times I practice improvisation, it is always so fresh and new for me. The experience of it is different every time.

The complexity of improvisation was once again highlighted when I began to evaluate my work: should an improvised performance be judged the same way a choreographed performance is? If not, then by what standards? Should an improvisation be evaluated from the performer's perspective or the audience's perspective? Ultimately, what is "good" improvisation?

As I reflected upon the performance, I took responses from both the audience and the dancers in the ensemble. Because the act of performing is an exchange between the performers and the audience, an evaluation must take account of opinions from both sides. In my view, there is never a definite "good" or "bad" improvisation. Just like any art, each interpretation of an improvisation performance is personal and subjective. In the end, the only person I should worry about pleasing is myself—to trust my choreographic eye to evaluate the emergent work, and to reevaluate the given structure and further improve it.

Like any performance, the creators of an improvised work seek acceptance from the audience. The audience might not necessarily like the work,

but they should respect the outcome and the process of creating the work. I sought this acceptance by presenting the dancers and myself as regular human beings, especially through our interactions with the audience. When we no longer thought of ourselves as superior to the audience, and allowed the audience to see us as moving humans, they are more likely to engage in the moment of improvisation with us. In the end, this successful connection between the audience and the dancers is what a good improvisation should aim for.

I received positive responses from the audience from both performances. I was told that the relationships formed during the improvisation were obvious and captivating. The duet was commented upon as “endearing” for it captured the friendship between Jennifer and myself. The genuine emotions displayed by the dancers captured the audience’s attention. An audience member told me, “I looked at your dancers and saw real human beings with real emotions.” I smiled and responded, “Yes, there is nothing fake about them.”

From within the ensemble, the evaluation of improvisation is a collective endeavor. The collaborative creation of the work creates a collective ownership of the emergent work. Each dancer contributed her reflections, and as an ensemble, especially for me as a director, we sought ways to both confront problems and celebrate moments of success.

The dancers were generally pleased with the performances. They felt connected to the moment, to Tony, and to the other dancers. They did not feel

alone under the pressure of lights and audience, and did not allow the excitement and nervousness to perform jeopardize their awareness of the emerging work. Each dancer was able to take ownership of, and feel proud of the emergent work. In the end, I viewed the dancers' satisfactions towards the performances and the audience positive responses as indications of successful performances.

My exploration and curiosity in improvisation does not stop with the audience's applause and the closing of the curtains. To me, improvisation is a never-ending, ongoing exploration. I want to pursue it as a lifestyle. The complexity of improvisation is driving me to dig deeper and find more ways to imagine. Although I am ready to choreograph again, improvisation will always be my partner in dance, in choreography, and in life.

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