DANCE IMPROVISATION: A GESTALT APPROACH

Rob Esposito, MFA

MY APPROACH to dance improvisation draws on techniques and theories from various sources, primarily from the art and pedagogy of Hanya Holm, Alwin Nikolais, and Murray Louis, et al. Originating with Laban and Wigman, the German school of modern dance has a rich legacy of movement analysis and creative experimentation. Nikolais, in whose company I danced from 1971-1981, often used improvisation in his choreographic process. Over the years I have incorporated therapeutic concepts based on the work of Moshe Feldenkrais, Thomas Hanna, Irmgard Bartenieff, Sally Fitt, Joseph Pilates, and others. The principles of these artistic and somatic systems form the foundations of my pedagogy. Also, extensive research in psychology has led to aesthetic adaptations of Gestalt Therapy in teaching improvisation and composition.

GESTALT relates well to the creative process in dance. In addition to talking and conceptualizing, Gestalt therapy includes spontaneous designing of action-experiments in response to presenting muscle tension, body posture, and movement behavior. Gestalt views the mind and body as a holism, each part expressing the nature of the whole person. Moreover, in Gestalt, a healthy individual is not only self-integrated, but actively engaged with others and the environment. This inclusive concept of personhood relates beautifully to Laban’s movement analysis, *spatial intent*, and the phenomenological concept of being-in-the-world. The dancing body spontaneously creates a homologous sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral *world* in which both artist and audience find meaning and value. The dancer simultaneously creates a world and lives in it.

BASICALLY, in “improvs”, we’re concerned with the dynamic interaction of two broad areas: **FORM** and **CONTENT**, each with its own vocabulary**.** Elements of FORM and CONTENT constitute the structure and meaning of a dance. They are naturally inseparable, although for the sake of study we talk about them differently.

FORM AND CONTENT each have four interconnected elements. The objective FORM elements are: **shape, space, time,** and **motion.** Nikolais called these “the big four”. (Nikolais & Louis, 2005). The subjective CONTENT elements are: **sensation, feeling, thought,** and **movement.** These comprise what Feldenkrais called our “waking state”.(Feldenkrais, 1972, 1977). Together, embodied shape, space, time, and motion give *form* to the *content* of our sensations, feelings, thoughts, and movement behavior.

FORM constitutes the nuts and bolts, the art and craft of dance that results in choreography. In consciously designing shape, space, and time through motion, we express the CONTENT of our sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral experience. Body-shapes, motional qualities, spatial orientations, and temporal urgencies reveal (or conceal) the richness and complexity of our experience. Choreography is a poetics of action. Thus, in dance, we speak of “movement metaphor”. *Gliding* or *flicking* gestures in space imply different values and meanings than *slashing*, just as, for an actor, dabbing a character’s tears with a tissue conveys something different than slapping him in the face.

FORM AND CONTENT are dynamic and ineluctably integrated. Only together do they substantiate the *gestalt* or character of a dance. Gestalt animates and guides all creative decisions concerning the structural values of an improvisation or composition, marking it as a cohesive *object d’art*.In the studio our work moves us steadily (if not erratically) toward this inclusive aesthetic wholeness.

EVERY DANCER IS UNIQUE, with specific strengths and weaknesses manifesting as *central* and *dominant* movement tendencies. In the studio the content of our personal experience is drawn out and supported by the formal architecture of space/shape/time/motion. Given the uniqueness of each dancer, the learning process involves bringing habitually conditioned movement patterns—*dominant* movement behavior—into awareness, with the goal of integrating them in ways that do not violate the *central* qualities making a person authentically unique. During improvisation, content-values and formal-values fluctuate, movement impulses sometimes springing from deeply personal sources, and sometimes from strictly formal manipulations. Whether conscious or unconscious, when motivations and responses spring from *my* central movement character, I can say that my movement is authentic, that I have found my own voice as an artist.

DRAWING A LINE BETWEEN ART AND LIFE is not always easy. I want to make clear that our point of view in the dance studio is artistic, not therapeutic. In class, we work at the formal, observable level of craft. Yet dance uniquely illuminates the humanistic nature of all creative activity. Dance is anthropomorphic and holistic in the sense that a dance, like a person, is more than the sum of its parts. As it gathers itself toward solid form, a dance radiates content, sending from its body-center multiple streams of meaning and value. Whether dancing or observing, we instinctively imbue abstract craft elements such as line, volume, effort, and tempo, with subjective values that extend the dance’s influence beyond its observable frame. Those kinesthetic *signs* express a depth of contextualized personal experience most easily grasped in a classroom by talking about how they make us feel, think, and act. As a result, when narrowing our focus on purely formal design we often learn as much about ourselves as we do about our craft.

THE SUBTLEST, MOST TENUOUS SENSATIONS, feelings, thoughts, and movements can be *languaged* in motion. In class, affinities between FORM and CONTENT are noted, explored, and developed into clear, actionable experiments by *alternating, overlapping*, and *integrating* dancing and observing, moving and talking. Once formed into dance compositions, discussing the movement experience leads the artist back into a fertile ground of source imagery, often revealing hidden associations, preconscious insights, and habitually conditioned patterns. These deeper understandings stimulate further improv experiments that extend beyond the studio hour, requiring individually tailored composition assignments, or “homework”. But while in class, “what you see is what you get”—we’re interested in making dances, and everything we talk about, write, draw, or read, must be demonstrated physically, *here and now*, through movement.

A WORKSHOP ATTITUDE PREVAILS and the atmosphere in the studio is non-judgmental—inquisitive, permissive, and creative. In Theory class, technical proficiency is relatively unimportant; the novice can do and achieve as much as the advanced dancer in this method. Artistically, the challenge always lies in balancing FORM and CONTENT—whatever one’s level of training or experience. In any art, too much feeling around for subjective content produces indulgent, self-centered melodrama—obscure or illegible in the context of fine art; while too formalized a technique produces rigid structure without soul. Aesthetic balance is achieved neither through self-aggrandizement nor self-effacement. Both extremes inhibit the artist’s ability to spontaneously respond to others and to the world with authenticity. Communication is a two-way process, and these extremes also make it hard for an audience to approach the work.

MY GOAL AS A TEACHER, then, is simply to help students become more available to themselves. By simultaneously developing keen powers of observation and a trusting, intuitive approach to movement, we make the full range of aesthetic potential available. But how do we teach it? Explaining dance is tedious compared to dancing itself. As Duke Ellington said, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.” The studio is a playful and respectful space encouraging the realization of personal empowerment,aesthetic freedom, a sense of belonging, and fun. For this there are three prerequisites for success.

THE FIRST PRIORITY is gaining ***full somatic awareness***. This means getting to know yourself, not from the outside by looking in a mirror or by imagining some magazine cover version of yourself; but gently, by sensing your body from the inside. The goal here is to relax and make friends with ourselves as we are, not as we hope to be or think we should be. Somatic awareness is developed with the help of exercises derived from the work of Moshe Feldenkrais, Thomas Hanna, and others. “Somatics” is pre-technical and pre-stylistic. Full sensorimotor awareness constitutes the *foundation* of an artistic medium deeply rooted in the individual’s bodily experience.

THE SECOND PRIORITY is ***awareness of the relationship of one’s body-self to the world***, the self-world connection. We use our growing somatic awareness to develop technical, theoretical and compositional skills—to communicate through dance—by alternating, overlapping, and integrating moving and observing, dancing and talking, (or writing, singing, drawing). These skills lead us to consider past, present, and future issues in dance, theatre, painting, literature, music, art and science—our personal and cultural narratives and histories.

THE FINAL PREREQUISITE is a ***basic trust that the mind and body are always related*** and that work on one is work on the other. Trust allows us to either throw ourselves passionately or playfully into a personal feeling, sensation, idea, or movement behavior; or, to dispassionately manipulate abstract motional qualities, temporal frames, spatial orientations, or sculptural forms, knowing the results will be both meaningful and beautiful even if we don’t initially see their connections to the whole. A basic trust in the holism of sentient bodily experience must exist to propel the artist toward these higher-level integrations.