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### Improvisation as a Tool for Choreography and Performance

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### **Improvisation as a Tool for Choreography and Performance**

In her book Dance Improvisations, Joyce Morgenroth wrote, “Structured improvisation is a mixture of conscious choice and spontaneous reaction. It includes periods of sustained concentration and moments of unreproducible magic.” This “magic” is what I have been chasing in my choreography this year. My project in Creative Scholarship is an exploration of the ways that improvisation can be used as a tool for choreography and performance. The bulk of my project includes researching ways to use improvisation scores from the Judson Dance Theatre and other significant artists who were active choreographers in the 1960s, and presenting them in a way that combines them with my own movement and choreography style. I am drawn toward the works of the Judson Dance Theater because of the many different styles and experiments that came from this movement, from very neutral and straightforward, to eclectic and performative.

I have a personal interest in improvisation because I find that it helps me as a dancer to stay active in how I think about the composition of what is happening around me. I love the spontaneity, and as an audience member I am always interested in the choices that the dancers make in the moment. For me, the freedom of spontaneously creating something with my body is something that will always reassure me that dancing is something that I am meant to do.

One of the original goals that I set for myself at the start of this project was to revisit original historical improvisation scores and present them in a contemporary context. I spent the entire fall semester of 2015 doing just that. I researched and took note of over fifty improvisation scores, and I had my dancers reconstruct and experiment with about twenty-five of them. In the end, ten historical improvisational scores made it into the final showing in some way. It was a very rich experience for me to read about these scores that played a vital role in defining post-modern dance, and then choose those that interested me most and see them come to life in my rehearsals. I know that in the process of interpreting and explaining them to my cast of dancers they changed and evolved, but I think that is the beauty of an improvisational score; it is going to be different each time it is done, and it is always dependent on who is staging it, who is performing it, and the previous training and experience of all involved.

I tried to find video evidence of these improvisations, but was only able to find footage for three of the scores. I spent a lot of time searching for these videos because I was interested in discerning what intent the choreographer had, what kind of performance the dancers gave, and also what kind of response the audience at that time had to the work. The videos that I found were very interesting to watch with my dancers in my rehearsals; they gave us perspective as to what is interesting to watch, and sometimes clarified exactly how the score is meant to be structured. However, as we didn't have access to video for most of the scores we were trying, it was also interesting to take the time to figure out how the score should be performed, and how to stay true to the original intention. We often found that in

words the scores seemed convoluted and busy, but once we tried them physically, the intent and thought behind them became apparent.

Another goal that I had during this process was to provide a template of development for my dancers. From the beginning, I wanted to push them to explore spontaneous composition and really consider what makes improvisation interesting to watch. We spent a lot of time watching each other perform various scores in groups and then discussing what made them interesting, successful or not, and what might be exciting to try in the future. Often times I would have them try a score, we would talk about it, and then they would have the opportunity to try it again with the feedback that they received. I sometimes found that giving them a clear goal as performers really helped to clarify the kinds of choices they were making. However, I also found that for some scores giving the option for the score to be more open lead to really interesting movement and compositional choices; it just depended on the particular score we were working with. Taking time to experiment became an important part of this process for me.

In addition to historical improvisation scores, we also investigated some more contemporary scores that I have been exposed to in classes, workshops, or in the making of other works that I have been involved in. This part of the process was interesting for me because I was able to see the similarities and differences between how I relay the information in comparison to how it was relayed when I first learned it myself, and what kind of results that would yield. The group of dancers and their comfort level with each other also played a role in the direction that the improvisations would go. It was fascinating to see how my expectations would be

met, exceeded, or completely shattered when I switched roles from participant to observer.

There was one contemporary score in particular that we ended up using a lot in rehearsals in order to warm-up and prepare ourselves for more improvisational work. I was exposed to it at an improvisation class at the American College Dance Association's Northwest Regional Conference in 2015, although I think it is a score that isn't necessarily accredited to any one artist, and is widely practiced. It starts with one person entering a designated space with a solo, developing an idea or a movement motif as they go. From that point on, the rest of the ensemble has the option to enter or exit the space at any time. The goal is to develop a cohesive dance as a group. This requires having complete awareness of what is going on around you, making fast decisions about what might be visually compelling, and knowing when to step back or step up to pull focus. Practicing this helped prepare us mentally and physically for more complex improvisational work later in the rehearsal.

As the process went on, some things that I became interested in were layering improvisational scores in different ways, finding ways for them to feed into each other, and finding ways to connect them together so that they had similar context. One combination that I found myself drawn toward was pedestrian movement (such as walking, running, standing and natural gestures) paired with rich movement sequences. I like the juxtaposition of seeing these two very different things onstage together. When given time to develop, this combination of movement styles seems to emphasize the virtuosic movement and make it appear to be even

more of an expression of the soul than if it would have been seen alone. In the final showing, there are moments of solo, duet, and trio work set against more pedestrian ensemble movement for this purpose.

Another interest that I developed midway through this project was in the line of where improvisation stops and set choreography begins. I became interested in making the audience question whether what is happening onstage is improvised or not. In the end, I came to the conclusion that I wanted a little ambiguity at times, while still keeping moments of apparent improvisation and definite, set, unison work. However, even in moments where it is clearly one or the other, I encouraged my dancers to find a compromise between the two by bringing the idea of life and spontaneity to set choreography, and bringing clarity to improvised sections.

I have also found an interest in the nature of rehearsing, and how in the process of rehearsing improvised materials over time, patterns start to emerge, the score becomes more closed, and inherently the movement edges more toward the side of set choreography. To keep the improvisations fresh I started to experiment with giving my dancers even more specific goals within the score, or at times I allowed them more freedom within the score. I found both of these tools useful in continuing to develop the work.

In terms of putting the full work together, I tried to place the sections of improvisations in an order that creates connections and brings back motifs that were established early in the work. Some motifs that ended up being important to this work include: pedestrian actions, gestures, imaginings or wonderings about what dance can be (a reflection of the philosophies about dance that the Judson

Dance Theater explored), chance methods, and use of the voice. In addition to these motifs, there are also specific movement threads that pull the piece together visually. I used a backwards model of starting with a set phrase that was built based upon both my movement style and the movement of my dancers, then I incorporated bits and pieces of the phrase into the work. This happened both through moments of set phrase work and using improvisational scores that draw from the material.

Something that became a goal for me as I was deciding what to include in this work was to provide a look into the choreographic process and the compositional mind in terms of dance. When I look back at the piece as a whole, I think this was accomplished. One element that contributes to this goal is the interspersed quotes about dance making that are vocalized by myself and the other dancers. I have chosen thought-provoking quotes, some more renowned than others, that bring up questions like what dance can be, what improvisation is, and why dance is important as a form of expression. The authors of these texts range from dance historians like Sally Banes, to music composers like John Cage, to innovators in dance and improvisation such as David Gordon, Yvonne Rainer, and Steve Paxton.

Another element that provides a look into the mind of the choreographer is the improvisation score "Recursions" by Richard Bull, which I have set on my dancers in a format that is slightly modified from the original. The premise is that the dancers would emerge from a group improvisation to explain to the audience a dance that they are imagining or remembering, and the remaining dancers would then follow each other to make their idea of that image come to life. The way I

framed it for the final performance showing will be shortened due to time constraints; the speaker will speak to the image they are imagining or remembering, and then the dancers will enter from the wings, improvise together, and find an ending after about one minute of dancing. This is just enough to barely get a movement idea started, whereas Richard Bull and his dancers would let the improvisations go on for as long as they took to fully develop, sometimes over thirty minutes. However, for the purposes of this show I like the excerpted version of this score. It provides a glimpse into how choreographers might start thinking about how to create movement with a certain context in mind, and also how dancers in a collaborative creation process might contribute to the choreographer's vision.

Another success of this project is the way that the dancers improved in their ability to work together in an improvisational way. Their comfort level in taking risks onstage and staying invested in a work has grown significantly since September. This is evident by the way that they interact with each other without hesitating, are conscious of everything that is happening onstage, and are able to adjust and change ideas quickly. This is no doubt a byproduct of practicing improvisation on a weekly basis, but I think another factor that contributed to this growth was the performance practice allowed to them. Not only did we perform for each other in rehearsals, I also had them perform at three informal dance concerts on campus and the informal concert at the American College Dance Association's Northwest Regional Conference in Laramie, Wyoming. I think practicing improvisation for a live audience pushed them to think about viewing the dance



from the audience's perspective, and resulted in them being more clear and concise with their movement.

A major part of the showcase at the end of April is the use of live music. I have been in contact with three musicians: a pianist, a cellist, and a violinist. We have come together in two rehearsals so far, and I have found that the music plays a huge role in the type of movement that the dancers come up with, as well as the overall mood for the piece. Since September, we have been rehearsing with a diverse playlist of about one hundred and forty songs that include the genres of classical, folk, instrumental/atmospheric, electronic, hip-hop, jazz, and pop. For the most part I just let the playlist play on shuffle. This forced the movement qualities as a group to be constantly changing, and pushed us out of patterns.

Having live musicians has limited this diversity a little, but it has brought a beautiful cohesiveness to the work. To keep the element of surprise, I have been having the musicians follow a similar method of receiving prompts that the dancers use in many sections; they roll the dice to receive a mood word (happy, dramatic, nostalgic, etc.), and from there they follow the movement of the dancers while at the same time the dancers are responding to the sound they are hearing. I tried to keep the prompts universal to both music and dance, so that we were always on the same page, and I think this created a bridge between the two mediums.

As I move on from this project, I would love to continue my own personal exploration of improvisation as a way to continue to develop my own choreographic voice and movement style. I would be interested in seeing what some of these scores would look like as a solo performance. I am also continually interested in

finding ways to keep the audience engaged by creating a work with a range of types of movement and improvisational guidelines.

If I had more time and resources, I would want to make a longer, full evening-length show from this work. As a continuation, I would be interested in making longer, more robust culminating phrase work that ties in the elements of the improvisation scores but in a set, choreographed way. I would also be interested in finding ways to incorporate more audience interaction. Right now I have plans for some indirect ways of drawing information from the audience; for example, I will put slips of paper in the programs with a prompt like “I am imagining a dance that \_\_\_\_\_”, and I will collect the answers and we will perform them within an improvised structure. However, I am curious to research other ways to draw the audience into the performance.

In conclusion, this process has not only been beneficial to myself in helping me find my personal movement style and choreographic preferences, but it has also benefited my cast of dancers by exposing them to a variety of choreographic and improvisational tools and practices. It is a crucial skill in collaborative work to be able to follow improvisational prompts and structures and to be able to generate material, and this process has provided practice in both of those areas. In addition to the creative and practical benefits to myself and the cast of dancers that I have been working with, I hope to bring something visually and intellectually compelling to the stage with this work.

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