2009

The success and sustainability of improvisation in a live performance context

Ashleigh Rose Berry

Edith Cowan University

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses_hons/1423
Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

• Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

• A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author’s moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

• Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
The success and sustainability of improvisation in a live performance context

“Can movement improvisation, in a live performance context of the 21st Century, connect the audience and dancer through the dancer’s personal movement experience and therefore sustain itself as a successful means of contemporary performance art?”

By
Ashleigh Rose Berry
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
ABSTRACT

I am interested in investigating the value improvisation holds when placed in a live dance performance context. I am discussing improvisation in terms of it being an individual exploration of one’s movement potential to create a personal movement language. Within this, I place focus on the body as a source of knowledge and the embodied movement possibilities that inevitably make up each individual dancer’s personal movement language. I am also interested in the audience’s perceptions of what defines successful dance and the dancer and audience relationship that forms during the duration of a performance. Can the practice of improvising be put on stage in a live performance context and provide the same appeal through fulfilling the expectations of an audience to the same extent that a rehearsed final product potentially could? Through these components, I want to evaluate whether improvisation can be successful when presented live, whether it can sustain itself in this performance environment and finally if so, what components are necessary to ensure this ‘success’ occurs so that the improvised work is viewed as an accessible means of performance by its audience.
DECLARATIONS

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

I. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in an institution of higher education.

II. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made to the text; or

III. Contain any defamatory material.

Signed: [Signature]

Dated: 31/10/09
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I, Ashleigh Berry would like to extend my sincere gratitude to all of the dancers and non-dancers who participated in the questionnaires I conducted during the process of this investigation. The knowledge and personal thoughts that were shared through your answers have enriched my own knowledge and understanding of this vast topic and assisted me considerably with shaping my personal opinions when writing this paper.

I'd also like to thank the following people for their insights, assistance and valued contributions,

Olivia Millard
Sue Peacock
Alice Holland
Nanette Hassall

...and especially
Maggi Phillips

I dedicate this text to my father, Jim Berry, a lover of “dance that makes sense” and my inspiration for striving to “make sense” of dance....
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CONTENTS PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Thesis – Improvisation In Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Copyright and Access Declaration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Declarations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Defining My Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>What is Improvisation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The History of Improvisation – Its Initial Appearances in Dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Dance Improvisation – A Performative Art Form?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>The Body As A Source of Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The Personal Movement Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Directives and Scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Dancer and Audience Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Appendices - Questionnaires</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

My interest lies in using movement improvisation as a medium for creating accessible contemporary dance. Accessibility will be determined by how effectively it can communicate to an audience and initiate a connection between the performer and the observer. My background for this interest comes from my time working and dancing in Adelaide where I studied composition and choreography and became fascinated with audience response. I spent some time investigating and practising movement improvisation within the context of creating contemporary dance. A fellow peer, Tobiah Booth-Remmers, and I worked with mentors Jo Stone and Steve Noonan on creating a short work entitled ‘As Alone As You’ that relied heavily on improvisation during the work’s initial creative developments. During this time, we worked with the notion that by deriving the original movement from improvisations, often based on highly emotive scores or situations, we would inevitably create choreography that manifested a stronger sense of humanism and reality. We predicted that the emotionally-loaded improvisations, which we then re-learned from previous video footage, would involve an audience more powerfully than anything we could create and then impose secondarily on the dancers. Our prediction was particularly evident in duet and trio work where relationships between the dancers were based on real experienced situations of the improvisations which had occurred months earlier, been recorded on video and had since been reconstructed for the purpose of the work. Our opinions and results were not backed up by any scientific or statistical information however our audience feedback suggested that our ideas and processes for defining movement were successful in terms of appealing to the audience and allowing them to identify with the situations and people involved.

My curiosity for the basis of this thesis derives from these early experiences with improvisation but have been enhanced by the experience I have gained in improvisation during the course of this year, whilst undertaking this research study. In As Alone As You, we used improvisation as a tool for creating movement, which then undertook a process of development and refinement within the rehearsal period, before it reached the stage of performance where an audience is present. However, I’m interested in investigating whether the creative process can be shifted somewhat so that the improvisation itself occurs for the first time at a performative level.
Can the practice of improvising be put on stage in a live performance context and still provide the same appeal, fulfilling the expectations of an audience to the same extent that a rehearsed final product potentially could? Can the creative development and structuring process in fact occur during the period of time in which the improvisation is being explored live as the dancer makes decisions about his/her body in the moment? What will ultimately determine success of movement improvisation in a live context and its sustainability as an accessible means of performance?
Defining My Process

In order to continue with my research I wish to define some of the terms I have already touched upon and begin by clarifying specific investigation interests. In terms of accessibility I am not necessarily searching for an ‘understandable’ theme, idea or emotion through dance that the audience can interpret collectively. I don’t believe that an audience needs to ‘make sense’ of what they observe in order to be able to ‘access’ it. Instead I think dance is accessible when the audience and dancer alike share an understanding of the context of the movement language and an insight into the relationship it establishes between them, even if only for the duration of the dance work. I.e: How do I feel about this? What does this mean to me? Through my research I want to focus on locating and defining the ‘movement language,’ each individual dancer possess, as well as how it develops. I am interested in the idea that the movement which develops is inextricably linked with the individual dancer (Pollitt 2001 p 17) and that the body can be a organ capable of knowledge and making decisions in regards to this ‘movement language.’ Through this I am researching how the movement language forms, intellectually and kinaesthetically, how it communicates and connects audience and dancer during the performance and how the movement language influences the dancer/audience relationship as well as how the relationship can evolve out of it.

I’m also interested in assessing the role of the spectator. My focus will lie in the spectator’s engagement with the dancers’ physical movement language and mental processes. I’d also like to assess how personal context and accumulated experiences can be subconsciously drawn on or used in order to begin to understand and relate to what one is observing. I am interested in touching on the differences between purely physical and emotionally loaded scores and how this can impact on the live improvisation with the incorporation of personal experience and context into the improvised movement performance.

For the final aspect of my thesis I will include a research discussion. Within this discussion I want to examine improvisation in a theoretical verses practical circumstance.
I’m interested viewing the theoretical aspects I have mentioned above within a practical environment and assessing whether improvisation can in fact be successful in reality because of these principles, or whether it relies on other aspects entirely. I am also interested in the idea of accessible dance for a 21st century audience, what this means and how improvisation could potentially assist or contribute to assisting in meeting the associated audience demands.

I have designed and conducted two separate questionnaires which I distributed to both dance-related people and non-dancer spectators of dance. The dance-related participants all share an experience in performing and viewing improvisation and include performers, choreographers, teachers and dance academics where as the non-dancers have never danced themselves but are exposed to dance performance on a regular basis via their children, partners, friends or personal interest and have had some experience with viewing improvisation on more than one occasion. I plan to examine the answers from on average ten responses for both the dancer and non-dancer questionnaires, incorporating the insights and utilising the information both qualitatively and statistically. Overall I’m interested in using the questionnaire responses to assist in determining the success of improvisation from the points of view of the dancer, experiencing the movement, and the audience member, watching the movement, therefore beginning to define improvisation’s purpose and place in dance process and performance.

Finally, I want my investigation to question the concept of placing dance improvisation in a live performance context. Whether, despite being arguably more elusive than structured choreography in a set performance, it can actually create a thorough communication of movement intention and amplify the possibilities for audience and dancer to connect as a result. Or whether in practice it completely crumbles on itself, leaving the audience confused as to why they cannot access dance that appears abstract and self-absorbed, despite its principles and theoretical potential. I hope to be able to begin to answer these questions and through this shed some light on whether improvisation can sustain itself, and in fact do so successfully, in a live performance context.
What is Improvisation?

"...making instant compositional choices using language of dance in response to other performers and internal dialogues in an extemporised present." (Pollitt. 2001 p 28)

Improvisation is a widely used expression in reference to an array of different contexts some including theatre, dance, and music, particularly jazz music. I think it is vital to begin then by saying that by even in making reference purely to dance, by using the term improvisation, I am encompassing an enormous topic – a broad, vast and sometimes conflicting range of practises and training methods that have been instigated by various dance practitioners all over the world. Therefore when I refer to improvisation in a live performance context, unless otherwise stated, I am referring specifically to a practise whereby the dancer undergoes a thorough process of individual exploration and development of his/her personal movement language in a period of preparation time prior to the live performance. Despite this technicality, I acknowledge that the topic of improvisation, both in process and live performance is truly epic and to attempt to examine or explain it in its entirety would be unfathomable. This is why I have chosen to focus my paper on one particular improvisational practise in an attempt to examine its accessibility in the general sense.

In order to determine what role improvisation in performance plays in creating accessible dance, I must first define the term 'improvisation.' According to The Australian Oxford Dictionary 5th 2001, to improvise means;

1. To compose or perform (music, verse. etc.) extempore.
2a. To provide or construct from materials not intended for the purpose.
2b. To devise, invent, especially on the spur of the moment.

Improvisatory adj. derived from Latin improvisus meaning unforseen.

To articulate the essence of dance improvisation in its complexity through these few concise definitions is virtually impossible. In their text The Moment of Movement, Lynne Blom and L. Chaplin enquire into the elusive nature of improvisation and suggest perhaps why it is so difficult to articulate in words its very essence,
[Improvisation] ...is so elusive. Not only is it ephemeral, but at best improv is a constantly changing phenomenon. Trying to pinpoint in words exactly what improv is seems at times to betray the medium itself, for language is linear and improv is not. (1988 p ix)

Jo Pollitt continues her own investigation into this intangible phenomenon stating that;

“...an improvised movement is definitive only in the exact moment it is performed” (Pollitt. 2001 p 18). She goes on to quote Phelan (1993) “...there are no leftovers, the gazing spectator must try and take everything in.” (Pollitt. 2001 p 18)

Dance is an ephemeral, ever changing, alive art form. Even in choreographed performance no two shows are the same with the body’s instabilities, external conditions and relationships interchanging and varying the performance every time. However when the dance is improvised live, the intangible nature of the performance is somewhat amplified.

Often described as free, not thought out, impulsive, momentarily focused and spontaneous, improvisation is not a product or rather about reaching a product. Despite this, it should not lack form. In order for improvisation to be successful it is imperative that structure and intention are highly considered so that the movement doesn’t simply spill out in a stream of unconsciousness or drift on meaninglessly, evolving into what has been described as ‘hippie dancing’. The difference between having structure and aiming to reach or form an end product is that the improvisation remains in a constant state of flux; on a journey that mind and body take symbiotically through space and time, as the dancer creates, performs and responds to the movement simultaneously without pre-mediating a process or outcome. Olivia Millard, a dancer and lecturer at Deakin University with a particular interest in improvisation, describes it as a “negotiation.”
This improvisational journey should allow for the dancer to completely immerse his/herself in the transient exploration of movement, which the audience is invited to be a part of. It should take both dancer and observer on a journey together, into the process of realising the movement as it occurs rather than observing the product secondarily. Neither dancer nor observer should be able to wholly predict what will happen next, the dance itself becoming momentarily focused as a result. Through this the audience is in a position to witness the dancer’s responses to his/her movement experiences and the dancer as a result can respond to the audience’s reactions, creating a continuous feedback loop that keeps unfolding. I refer to this later on in regards to the ‘dual carriageway journey’.

Pauline De Groot speaks of her personal experience and understanding of improvisation in the following excerpt from the 1985 Fall edition of Contact Quarterly. Through a few sentences she manages to sums up, quite poetically, what I believe to be an enlightened and highly educated insight of what occurs during the process of improvising from the dancer’s perspective.

_Improvisation. The challenge to make decisions in the nick of time, or to risk postponing decision and spend time in an open moment, in undecided time, to walk the unclaimed/uncultivated terrain between activities, so that decision makes itself, is not wrought up but is guided by an alertness to the forces and emotions at play at the moment – the intensity of light, sound and movement and their placement and displacement in space._

_In this play of forces, a state of mind, an atmosphere and temperature is generated between performer and watcher. This can never be reclaimed – in any case, not with the impact and sharpness of the moment. The challenge is in generating this fullness, not in claiming its final form._ (1985 p 6)
The History of Improvisation – Its Initial Appearances in Dance

Improvisation has always been a component of folk and ritual dance, however it became more predominant within the professional dance scene during the early 20th century and again as a significant aspect of the post modern revolution. At the turn of the 20th Century, European dancers broke away from the strict technical precisions and specific aesthetics of classical ballet to pursue a path of natural movement and self expression. Rudolf von Laban, a dancer, choreographer and dance theorist, began to experiment with human movement and group improvisation in the early 1900s. He taught and analysed the laws of dynamics and expression in human movement from 1910 till his death in 1958. Through prolific instigators such as Laban and pupil Mary Wigman this movement rebellion from traditional dance continued and developed into what was known as “Ausdrucktanz.”

Evolving out of Laban’s investigations in movement and becoming widespread in Europe post World War I, ‘Ausdrucktanz’ was ‘expressionist dance’ which looked to movement to express personal experiences and artistic freedom. The dance stimulus came from within the physical body’s knowledge rather than being determined by the intellect. Movements were in tune with that of the individual’s capability and awareness and free improvisations were often used as tools for choreography. Wigman described this modern dancing:

*The form, in which modern dance expresses itself, is not haphazard, is not an unique creation of somebody’s nor devised for any particular purpose but has grown out of the times we live in.* (Wigman in Kaltenbrunner. 1998 p 13)

However even before Laban’s theories, the earliest individual reformers of traditional classical dance were Americans Lois Fuller, Isadora Duncan and Canadian Maud Allen from as early as the 1890s. Looking to explore alternative methods for movement and expression, each portrayed subtleties of what would eventually be known as ‘expressionist dance.’ However, despite the brute force of the women’s movement at the turn of the century, the United States ‘social conservatism’ attitude remained dominant and this ensured that the women received very little acclaim or acknowledgment for their prolific and revolutionary research in their own countries.
Despite the initial popularity of modern dance in Germany, innovators constantly struggled to compete with the contradiction of the dominant classical ballet principles. The rise of the National Socialists party in politics, leading to the outbreak of war also had significant impact on modern dance. When the Nationalists Party took Germany over in 1933, dance was perhaps the most affected art form of all. The Nazis wanted to 'purify' dance, forcing all modern dance schools to include classical ballet technique classes and examinations in their syllabus. Many modern dancers fled Germany, heading to other areas of Europe but also to the United States of America. German modern dance and its continual development almost completely ceased just as it was beginning to thrive but at the same time modern dance took flight in the US.

Although the Americans had disliked Duncan’s work to begin with, in time they too jumped on board and began to join the new rebellious dance movement. By the 1950s, American modern dance was prevalent. It had been established as a serious art form and had manifested itself into numerous festivals, schools and successful artists among them Doris Humphrey, Jose Limon, Charles Weidman, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm and Merce Cunningham. Although improvisation had been apparent in modern dance and performance for quite some time at this stage, it definitely became more visible in the professional artistic community during the mid twentieth century. This began first with the likes of Cunningham and Anna Halprin and then through the 1960s post modernist era with the Judson Dance Group, Continuous Project-Altered Daily and Grand Union through innovators such as Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown.

Cunningham, based in New York, was interested in pure movement. His dancers represented the physical movement only and his abstract choreographies decentralised the space and eliminated any hint of a story, emotion or a definite idea. He also began to experiment with the idea of improvisation in controlled situations. Immediately prior to the performance, his dancers were given choices in performance and encouraged to improvise within specific guidelines, transferring the artistic licence from choreographer to dancer. Audiences were also were made to choose where to focus their attention in the space with many things all happening at once. Suddenly both dancer and audience were actively participating in the performance, making choices and engaging intellectually with the movement.
Focusing specifically on significant individuals, Anna Halprin, was another influential figure of the time. She was developing her own, considerably different ideas on the West coast, particularly when she began to explore and place emphasis on improvisation. Throughout most of the 1950s Halprin had concentrated on working within the confines of modern dance as conceived by the schools of Graham and Holm. However in time she developed a greater interest in improvisation. It was a time of ‘avant garde’ experimental theatre and social revolutionary dance and this was reflected in her own explorations as well as in her influences of the unconventional Jerzy Grotowski and the Living Theatre. Growtowski focused his theatre toward what he believed was its most essential aspect – the actor-spectator relationship. He considered everything else, including lighting, scenery, make up, props and the stage, to be unnecessary in comparison, maintaining that through an intense interaction both performer and audience can be liberated from falsity and vanity. To ensure his strategies could be executed he would design specific physical and vocal exercises for the actor to ensure he/she acquired the athletic strength needed to powerfully connect with their public. (Jowitt. 1999 p 5)

Halprin formed a non-judgemental approach to collecting information and creating movement and her interest remained in “understanding the nature of dance” and in developing a natural “authentic” dancer. (Kaltenbrunner. 1998 p 15) She introduced the idea of a ‘score’ in place of set choreography in performance, allowing the dancers to make decisions in the moment of performance and for spontaneous changes to occur as a result. Her focus through this was to break down the idea of the passive observer of dance and engage the audience in the process as it evolved so that real life experience could be shared by performer and audience as equally valued active participants in the event. (Kaltenbrunner. 1998 p 17)

Not only did she identify improvisation as a tool for the creation of dance movement, she was also one of the first to argue that dance improvisation was a valuable and independent art form. (This argument would continue a controversial debate between appreciators of dance, well into the 21st century.) Halprin’s work was crucial to the developments that followed in improvisational dance particularly with the Judson Group as she explored and instigated ways to define and structure improvisation.
In the book *Democracy's Body, Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964*, Sally Banes acknowledges Halprin’s teaching influence claiming that it provided members of the group with the ‘freedom to follow intuition and impulse in improvisation...’” (Banes. 1993 p xviii) Halprin continued her investigations with natural movement, devising ‘Movement Ritual’ sequences and later moved into healing arts, founding the Tamalpa Institute in 1978.

The New York dance collective Judson Dance Theater, was founded in 1962 out of a series of dance composition workshops taught by Robert Dunn. The workshops prompted a group of young choreographers to question traditional movement vocabulary and instead introduce ‘pedestrian’ movement and improvisation into the creative process and into live performance. The dancers included Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown who had worked previously with Halprin as well as Steve Paxton, Judith Dunn, Lucinda Childs and Deborah Hay. The Judson explosion saw the beginning of a new era of defying convention with a myriad of choreographic approaches. Contemporary improvised performance still owes much to these predecessors who looked to redefine dance. (Pollitt. 2001 p 19) Rainer continued to work in the improvisational context with her work ‘Continuous Project-Altered Daily’ where the rehearsal process was included as part of the performance and each dancer was given equal status on stage when creating and performing. Shortly after this work, Grand Union was formed in 1970.

Grand Union was a free improvisational group comprised of a number of previous Judson dancers including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Douglas Dunn and Steve Paxton which created ensemble, duo and solo performed works based on open ended improvisations. The work was highly individual and often worked with moving kinaesthetically and responding to reflexes and experience rather than relying on learned dance vocabulary and choreography. Brown experimented with verbally instructing the dancers while in motion as a means for determining the direction of the performance and Dunn began to actively involve the audience both verbally and physically as a way of breaking down the conventions of ‘fourth wall’ theatre. (Morgenroth. 1987 p xii-xiii)
It was during this revolutionary era in dance, that the performers and audiences’ interests in the process over the product manifested itself as they engrossed themselves in the immediacy of live improvisational dance performance and its amplified temporal nature.

These initial experiments with improvisational dance and live performance were only the very beginning. Throughout the world there has been, and still is, a continuous interest and development of improvisational techniques in contemporary dance by numerous choreographers, dancers and practitioners. Each individual explores his/her own understanding of improvisation influenced by their practices, concerns and different career paths. This transfers into a diversity of ideas and opinions that branch so far and wide, that it would be impossible to follow each prolific improviser on their individual pathway and pay a due respect in a lifetime, let alone in a thesis. Instead I have chosen to concentrate on improvisation itself, acknowledging its origins, its instigators and the innovative movements that ensured it developed and found a place in today’s 21st Century contemporary dance. Throughout this paper I bring to attention or quote certain improvisers whom I have had experience with or found interest in however again these references are brief and within a certain context included primarily to reinforce my discussion, not to make in depth comment on the improviser or their personal practice.
Dance Improvisation - A Performative Art Form?

[1] “believe in improvisation as an art form and choreography as a vehicle to further develop improvisation.” (Zambrano in Pollitt. 2001 p 25)

Pollitt uses the phrase “becoming and becoming undone” in relation to dance improvisation (Pollitt. 2001 p 7) and the idea of noticing the movement ever changing and always re-beginning in the exact moment it is being performed, cultivating a perception that there is never a ‘real’ final product. This makes improvisation difficult to measure, articulate and compare and as a result there is little published about the area in comparison to alternative, more tangible dance subject matters. Without this conventional attribute, dance improvisation is often perceived as something without thought and substance and somehow less valuable than choreographed dance. These opinions have sparked an ongoing debate in regards to the value or lack thereof that dance improvisation holds as a justified, performative art form.

There are certain perceptions, particularly from dance academics of the latter half of the 20th century but even still today, that despite its history with the Judsons, etc. dance improvisation’s value lies solely as a tool for creating or generating movement during the rehearsal process stage and should not be incorporated into live performance. In her book entitled Movement Improvisation, Georgette Schneer clearly states her opinions on the subject.

I think of movement improvisation as a springboard into the art of dance, but unlike dance, improvisations are not intended for an audience (1994. p 37)

... Improvisation is not an art itself; it is a seedbed for experimentation, trial and error, winnowing and retaining, chancing and sounding. (1994. p 39)

Schneer is not alone in this perception. Pollitt explains how the spontaneity of dance improvisation can often be interpreted as having very little thought or “making do” (2001. p 7) It is non judgemental and therefore its “anything is valid” approach can subsequently set up connotations that dance improvisation is less valuable than choreographed performance and that it sits more comfortably as a warm up or a
preparation tool for stimulating movement creation, before the supposed ‘serious’ dancing begins.

In response to this, Pollitt emphasises the importance of noting that the practice of improvisation is not whimsical or without definition. She highlights its significance and high regard in other cultures such as in India, where only the older, mature dancers who have lived and accumulated life experience are granted the privilege to improvise. (Pollitt. 2001 p 21) To further support this argument Pollitt also quotes Dana Reitz.

[The word improvisation] doesn’t indicate necessarily the work that’s involved … it might take me two years to develop a structure, so then to call it improv feels like I’ve just done it that day. (Reitz in Pollitt. 2001 p 7)

Although not necessarily scripted or defined by a syllabus or specific technique, improvisation requires a thorough preparation, commitment to a continual practice, a practising of that practice and a developed understanding of one’s embodied and patterned movement in order for it to be truly spontaneous and achieve a broader scope of movement potential and sustainability. In relation to this, An Independent artist contributing to my questionnaires\(^1\) talks of Deborah Hay’s ‘performance practice’ specifically.

I have become more and more interested in Deborah Hay’s ‘performance practice’ a philosophy, practice, method for improvisation. The work is rigorous not oh I’ll just improvise on the day, but requires a commitment to the practice, the practice of practising performance and improvisation. This work can be very successful in the performance of a structured work. (A)

\(^1\) Of the questionnaires I distributed, I received 19 completed – 11 from dancers and 8 from non-dancers. I have labelled the questionnaires from A to S, with each letter determining a different participant.
To consider dance improvisation a performative art form is both a controversial and negotiable discussion involving extensive examination into its historical status, and value among 21st century audiences, something which I will talk more of later with regard to the questionnaire responses. However in my opinion, I think that the perception that improvisational practice should be reduced to merely a compositional tool in rehearsal is one of ignorance. The idea that improvisation is somehow less valued in comparison to ‘real’ (choreographed) dancing restricts its potential to be explored in a live context, limiting the scope of what dance performance can be thus potentially limiting its accessibility. In saying this I emphasise the subjective natures of art, dance and improvisation respectively. Each work will be different and each observer will have a different thing to say about each work. I believe improvisation has the potential to succeed in a live performance context. However I also believe there have certainly been circumstances where live improvisations have abused the privilege of an audience by disregarding them entirely, whether this was intentional or not. In all cases, there is definitely specific considerations that need to be taken into account in order for improvisation to be successful and sustainable in live performance and these will vary slightly with every performance and every audience.
The Body As A Source of Knowledge

Anyway, I think with my knee.
(Joseph Beuys in Hermans. 2003 p 1)

Thought is inextricably linked to the physical body and therefore any embodied movement. This idea lies in opposition to French philosopher Rene Descartes’s concept of body-mind dualism. Descartes excludes the body as an organ capable of knowledge or thinking, instead perceiving it merely as a place for stored experiences, “where pleasure and pain could leave their marks and influence habits and the shape of life.” (Volckers. 2007 p 11) Despite Descartes long standing conclusions, the most recent cognitive research has, in fact, re-linked the body to thinking and as a result created a significant interest among neuroscientists who are investigating, often through dance, into how thought and physical movement are related. Interestingly enough, today’s research follows in the footsteps of the earlier avant garde movement thinkers such as Laban, Frederick Matthias Alexander and Moshe Feldenkrais. All were figures who invested great interest in body-mind connection and in the rediscovering of the body as a source of knowledge.

Instigated by the likes of Laban, Alexander and Feldenkrais, the ideas relating to the body being capable of knowledge and possibly even a vessel for ‘thinking’ were soon embraced and adopted by other forward thinking groups, one such being a London based experimental dance group who referred to themselves as ‘X6’ and began the publication, “New Dance Magazine.” Through the distribution of the magazine as well as their own physical practises, ‘X6’ developed a concept known as “New Dance.” Described as encompassing a variety of different approaches, it allowed for the fusion of dance technique and improvisation while incorporating other elements of performance and body awareness. Again utilising body-mind techniques of Alexander, Feldenkrais and Release, the principles of New Dance highlighted the individual and their unique movement potential in response to spontaneous bodily impulses. It encouraged a holistic awareness where by the body and mind become equally active in the process of ‘moving’ and the possibilities for choice.
Today the phrase “New Dance” is referred to more commonly in the United Kingdom than anywhere else and is used in a more general sense to describe the aesthetic revolution that took place in dance during the early seventies. Despite this, it remains quite possible that the revolution was pre-empted by the ‘X6’ investigations into the body-mind connections via movement.

*Movements of the body are developed almost without conscious effort, in most cases. There seems to be a sort of intelligence of the body: a new dance is learned without analysing the sequence of movements. (Barral. 1965)*

In his 1983 book ‘Frames of Mind’ Howard Gardner gives rise to a kinaesthetic bodily intelligence through his focus on “Multiple Intelligences.” A Harvard psychologist, Gardner emphasised his theory that there are multiple intelligences in the human being’s make up including linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic and intra- or interpersonal. Each is a valid system of knowledge that stands independently from the others and differs in terms of its function rather than its strength or ability. Therefore it is interesting to note that no one intelligence is higher or more valuable that another, there is only more appropriate intelligences than others for specific tasks.

*How smart we are doesn’t much matter, but how we are smart really counts.*

(Gardner. 2006 p 1)

Because each ‘intelligence’ is needed for a different function or use, not all of the intelligences can be verbally translated. Looking specifically at the example of bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence in a dance improvisation context, if the dancer was to engage in an improvisation process for five minutes and then attempt to talk for five minutes about the execution of the improvisation exactly as it had occurred, it is likely that the words would warp the understanding and communication of the physical movement and therefore fail to define what really occurred. This is because in improvisation, the body relies on its kinaesthetic bodily intelligence to map and locate the movement primarily. Although the brain remains aware of the experience, it is the kinaesthetic bodily intelligence that ultimately makes the decisions and holds the memory (both muscular and nervous) of the improvisation long after it has occurred.
This then begins to explain why sometimes as dancers our brains can’t remember exactly how a movement phrase goes while we are sitting down, however if we get up and try to execute the exercise we find that our bodies seem to know the pathways automatically and can identify the correct sequence without consciously recalling it. The intelligence, and therefore in some way the thought processes, are occurring in our kinaesthetic memory and bodily intelligence as opposed to only in our brains.

But how does this happen? Carolien Hermans has done some extensive research into how the body ‘thinks’ and through her explanations goes on to discuss how this ‘thinking’ process can be used to assist in analysing dance improvisation. She talks of how the body can be seen as having two sides. One side is an ‘object’ of consciousness and intention, where the brain carries an image of the body, a mental representation and a set of values and attitudes that surround this image. The other side works much more subconsciously and in a pre-reflexive state where body schemas regulate posture and movement. On a daily basis the body’s movement patterns are mapped out and monitored using the body schemas and through proprioception. According to Hermans, the term proprioception refers to “all the information about the movement and position of body parts relative to each other deriving from the mechanical receptors in muscles, joints, vision and the inner ear. (Cole & Paillard in Herman. 1995 p 1) This means that our movement, rather than being mentally or consciously analysed, occurs more subconsciously because information channels contribute sensory, nervous and kinaesthetic information about the body, and then the body’s schemas and proprioception work to organise this information so that the body is able to move.

This is not to say that no brain activity takes place at all, after all when we get out of bed in the morning and walk to the bathroom or when we pull our hand away from a hot plate so we don’t burn it, our brain still registers what is occurring and our cerebellum in particular is active in ensuring we can coordinate, etc. It just that it doesn’t have to consciously tell us how to walk or that the plate is hot because our embodied knowledge – sensory systems, muscle memory, body schemas and proprioception – already knows this and can adjust accordingly.
In such cases the body is a source of knowledge, “capable of making bodily decisions, at least on some intentional level, it contains the capacity to act or react in a more intuitive sense.” (Hermans.2002 p 2) Hermans describes the decisions made by the body as being ‘partially conscious.’ She goes on to explain the importance of this capability not only in daily situations but also in reference to dance improvisation, particularly emphasising the vital role body schemas play in ensuring ‘bodily decisions’ can occur.

For a totally conscious decision to be made, neuromuscular information needs to travel all the way up to the brain and be cortically scrutinised until a conscious decision is made, and then travel all the way back down again into the muscles before the decision can be acted out. For this process to occur every time we move, our reaction time would be constantly delayed and our movement inefficient. Instead what occurs is that the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive information is delivered directly to the body schemas keeping the reaction time short and allowing for the decision to take place closer to the muscles, training the muscle memory and encouraging the body to work more intuitively as it follows its own ‘intrinsic physical.’ (Hermans. 2002 p 2) Forsythe has described it is as ‘a precious moment when the body takes over.’ (Forsythe in Hermans. 2002 p 2)

When improvising, particularly in performance, the dancer utilises his or her internal information as well as the external environmental factors – spatial configurations, other dancers, audience responses, etc. – when making decisions about his or her movement. However, once again because of the immediacy at which movement is created, if the brain was to be solely in charge of the decision making, the movement would lack consistency and efficiency. It is also important to note here that the level of cortical scrutiny would be so high, analysing each step before it could be performed, that the improvisation would lose its essence and its sense of spontaneity completely. Instead the dancer makes ‘partially conscious’ kinaesthetic decisions through the body’s information channels and body schemas, placing the mental awareness of the physical action in the exact moment that it occurs so as not to rely on the brain to pre-empt or analyse the movement before it can be explored.
These partially conscious kinaesthetic decisions are vital then in determining how the movement, personal and completely unique to the individual, unfolds. I refer to this as the ‘personal movement language.’
The Personal Movement Language

Movement is expressive, practical and instinctive; it is a medium for communication through the physical body. In fact it has been estimated that 70% of daily communication takes place on a non verbal level. (Blom and Chaplin. 1988 p 5)

All movement is driven by instinctive forces, internal signals and the desire to move in a certain way. This, combined with external information received by the body, will determine how an action evolves. External information can be instructed or observed. For example, directions from a teacher or leader, spatial configurations, time constraints and one’s relationship to others in the space may influence instantaneous bodily decisions.

When movement is not pre-choreographed or imposed on the body from the outside, it is said to be ‘improvised.’ Improvisation is very personally driven and is often instinctive. The movement develops momentarily out of the instrument (the dancer’s body) and the two remain inextricably connected. Each is a reflection and response to the other, rather than something else that is external and supplementary. What unfolds as a result is the individual’s personal movement language – a basis for communication and expression through movement which is unique and identifiably his/her own.

The personal movement language accesses and exposes everything the body has acquired and experienced up until this point in time. The body’s fundamental human movement patterns, its intuitive movements, its learned motor behaviour patterns and skills and its emotional responses will tend to be at the forefront of the movement itself. These include but are not limited to reflexes, gestures, postures, body language, facial expressions, practical and aesthetic patterns, mimicry and signals. All of these physical movements are embodied so entirely that when the individual is improvising they become semi-conscious choices and considerations within the movement. This is what I was referring to in my information about Carolien Hermans and the embodied knowledge just before. While recently working with Olivia Millard she conveyed her idea that all of the body’s embodied and accumulative knowledge is drawn on to support every new improvisation exploration.
In addition to the dancer's physicality, the personal movement language is also specific to the dancer's psychology, body type, self image, movement idiosyncrasies, aesthetic preferences, emotional tendencies, accumulated experiences, values, beliefs, and desires. (Blom and Chaplin. 1988 p 4)

The role of technique within an individual's personal movement language during improvisation is an important consideration. Technique is a platform for the body's strengths and weaknesses where skills and co-ordinations are learned and repeated as movement patterns. As a result they are usually not interconnected with the body's natural human movement and therefore have to be learned and embodied as a practise. This is a main reason that as dancers we take regular and even daily technique classes. Technique will influence and be evident in any trained dancer's improvisation as it is practiced patterns that over time have become memorised within the dancer's physicality and a part of their accumulative experience as a human being. Improvisation is not about trying to strip an individual's movement of technique in order for it to be spontaneous but rather use the body's accumulated knowledge of technique to support the improvisation. This means it will be incorporated but should not be the dominate factor pre-determining the movement quality. In order for this to occur, the dancer needs to avoid self perception from an objective, outsider point of view. Olivia Millard has explained this as 'objective vs subjective.'

If the dancer observes his/herself subjectively - from the inside out and in relation to the experience of the movement only, the dancer is able to improvise without being tempted to produce movement that they think the audience will see as appealing. An objective point of view is one by which the dancer critiques his/herself from the point of view of the audience. The movement becomes about the shape and the dancer sees him/herself in the critical eye rather than staying present in the experience. (Millard. 2009) Through this objective view, often linked with a self conscious will to satisfy the audience, it is easy to lose sight of the improvisation's intention and therefore difficult to stay true to an authentic personal movement language that unfolds.
Finally, because live improvised movement is spontaneous and in response to an immediate need, technique needs to be considered without dominating the movement just in the same way that embodied and learned movement, internal responses and external factors are considered – subjectively not objectively. At this point, the movement that develops is coming from an internal place rather than being derived from us wanting to appeal to our audiences by looking a certain way. By stripping the excess baggage we often carry as performers, the movement can become much more fundamental and the focus is placed on the relationship between audience and dancer which can be known as a “feedback loop.” As the dancer moves, he/she is interested and attentive to what is happening and remains in this state of constant response. The audience is invited in as a result of the dancer’s openness and commitment to the physicality evolving from their personal movement language and can then feed off the audience’s response to what is occurring in the performance. Both are vital components of the experience and a connection forms that is real and identifiable in everyone, creating communicative and accessible dance movement through the relationship that is formed as a result. I will discuss the ‘feedback loop’ in greater detail shortly but first I must address the use of directives or scores within both practised and live improvisational processes.
Directives and Scores

I use the word directives to sum up the variety of different ways an improvisation can be 'structured' to assist the improviser and create intention. These directives can range from a set of instructions that the performer must adhere to within the improvisation to parameters in which the performer can work within during their exploration to a score given to the performer prior to or during the improvisation which direct their personal exploration in a specific way. The point of a 'directive' should not be to control the outcome of the improvisation in any particular way, instead it is there to assist the improviser with defining what is it they are exploring so that the improvisation has a sense of intention or structure. This can assist in ensuring the performance does not drift into 'dance for dance's sake' or become self indulgent. It can also help to give the improviser to find a clear pathway along which he/she can explore his/her personal movement language.

The academic analyses of improvisation, and to some extent, groups such as the Judsons and Grand Union have shown us that, in an improvisation context, the individual dancer’s movement language is successful in communicating to an audience because of the journey the observers are taken on by the dancer and his/her physicality, aesthetic and embodied movement, all purely physical components of his/her self. Majority of early improvisers and improvisational groups, except for Anna Halprin but in particular the Judson Group and followers, focused their improvisation directives on the physicality and body only, for the development of a movement language, consciously choosing not to involve themes or emotional contexts. However it should be emphasised at this point that improvisation can and has also communicated successfully through idealistic, experiential or emotional directives, rather than them always being purely physical.

Physical directives or scores can vary from initiating from a body part, to exploring a range of weight, breadth, control or release or a spectrum of quality or dynamic. For the purpose of this paper I will include the elements of space and time under the umbrella of physical scores however they can definitely also be considered separate directive groups, particularly in the case of a theatrical score such as ‘The Grid’. ‘The Grid’, in its most basic form, restricts the performers to walking, sitting and stopping
in vertical and horizontal lines only. From this point other locomotive movements and even other scores can be introduced on top of ‘The Grid’s’ initial concept to further accentuate its visual capacity and potential for audience connection however in its most basic form it relies heavily on its spatial and time possibilities for ultimate success. In terms of physical scores it can be stated that they create the possibility for an endless array of options, whilst emotive scores can sometime be overly directive, not allowing for less abstracted options. While working on *If Every Time Was The First Time* with Olivia Millard in early 2009 I asked her about her choice of score. She explained that she prefers to work with purely physical scores to generate movement because they are not already loaded with an emotional layer. She believes that the physical score can hold enough merit to sustain itself in performance, provided the performer remains true to the personal movement language and in constant response to what occurs. She also acknowledges that the emotion that is evoked as a result of the improvisation score, just like the movement that evolves, is extremely valid and should not be stifled. For example, an embarrassed giggle resulting from an off balance tilt that causes the dancer to stumble or fall is a raw and immediate emotion, which evolves purely out of the physical movement. The emotion is experienced within the context of the improvisation because the dancer is attentive and responding to themselves fully. Therefore everything that has occurred, the movement and the response, has been in the moment and completely real, allowing for the audience to interpret the improvisation however they choose. In this case, the movement and emotion has evolved together, as a result of one another and it often engages and communicates to the audience more truthfully because of this. In my opinion I feel like for this circumstance to genuinely occur during the performance of an improvisation, the dancer needs not only to be attentive but to also have a solid, well researched and practised background in improvisation, a maturity which enables the improviser an understanding of how to be omnipresent and responding to what is happening at the exact movement it unfolds.

Emotional scores may draw on the dancer’s personal experiences of joy, nostalgia or loss and therefore ask the dancer to move according to a personal occurrence that links them with that particular emotion. It can be argued that emotional scores are more easily identified with by an audience and therefore set up a connection regardless of how successful the physicality of the improvisation actually is.
In my experience as a dancer, although perhaps more intellectually challenged by a physical score, I prefer to work with emotional or imaginative scores, where I can draw on experience or conscious knowledge. This could be due to my inexperience in working with improvisation and that in time I will find a stronger sense of my personal movement language and therefore my semi conscious embodied knowledge probing a greater interest in physical scores. At this time however, I find that particularly the non-dancer audiences I have been in contact with can often find it easier to relate to the physical movement through an emotional directive or score because of the ‘universal’ emotion that is being explored. Those feelings of joy, nostalgia or loss as only a few examples are ‘universal’ in that they extend across a common base in human existence. Based on her own research, Maggi Phillips suggests that emotions may be the first part of understanding. The observer sees what is happening, experiences sensations in the body that trigger the brain and then the brain deciphers the sensation and links it with previously felt emotions in regards to the same or a similar situation. As a result the audience is strongly linked to the dancer through feelings of empathy and often feels they have connected with the related physical movement language as well.

Directives, whether physical or emotional or perhaps something entirely different – interactive? scientific? – can be used to improvise in variety of ways. As stated earlier Trisha Brown would verbally instruct the dancers whilst in motion as a means for determining the direction of the performance. On separate occasions, she was also known for asking the public to “animate” her body with cries out loud or vocal encouragement. (Jowitt. 1999 p 3)

Then there are choreographers such as William Forsythe who has been known to use directives quite differently. He directs the dancers through microphone or via earpieces they each wear during the performance, ensuring the possibility for complete control of the outcome of the improvisation. (Genter. 1999 p 111) It could be assumed that with control over the outcome, the likelihood of the improvisation remaining spontaneous and not becoming pre-determined could be quite improbable, hence limiting the performance possibility. Therefore, personally I would argue that this type of directive defeats the purpose of the improvisation being a process and not aiming to form an end product because it allows for control of the final outcome.
Although perhaps utilising improvisation as a tool for making the performance whilst on stage, I would not classify this kind of performance in the same category as the live improvisation I am discussing.

At this point I think it is vital to acknowledge that because circumstances will always vary and audiences will always view a work subjectively through their own personal contexts, values, attitudes, understanding and experience of dance and improvisation specifically, it is impossible to determine whether one type of score communicates to an audience more successfully than another. When I posed this question to the survey partakers, most responses claimed that the preference of score was determined by how well it was utilised suggesting that any score delivered by a skilled performer should be able to make a connection with an audience despite its physical or emotional basis. It seems that if the performer is skilled in the practice of improvisation and has refined their process, the score becomes a secondary importance to the performer’s interest in what it is they are exploring. One questionnaire participant states,

_The score is a way of shaping the work so [it will] always affect how the dancer communicates but not their ability to communicate. A score that says for example ‘hide yourself or shut off from the audience’ is intentionally less open but is still communicating, just [through] another emotion or physicality._ (A)

It is the dancer’s ability to access an understanding of that score through their movement language and remain attentive and interested in what they are doing that will then determine how well the score has communicated and hence how successful the performance has been from the audience’s perspective.
Dancer and Audience Relationship

“Dance is infectious.” (Volckers. 2007 p 10) Interest has surrounded this statement for a number of years as dance and movement researchers have strived to discover and explain what makes dance so appealing. Most recently, dance has been significant in the research of neurophysiologists, particular with a case study involving Wolf Singer and William Forsythe. After observing a number of Forsythe choreographies, Singer, a neuroscientist, was motivated to investigate the physiological conditions experienced in neural terms by an observer whilst watching dance. The results concluded that our brains can simulate the range of movement we observe and hence participate in the motor performance of the dancers. This immediately creates a connection and what unfolds is an interaction between the movers and observers which Singer refers to as a “resonance looping” between audience and dancer. (Volckers. 2007 p 10)

This ‘resonance looping’ has the possibility to be significantly amplified when the dancer is improvising. Improvising live simply invites the audience to be a part of the process, the investigation of the dance, rather than only allowing them to witness a finished product. Potentially, the audience can become an integral part of the improvisation’s context because the dancer has the freedom to respond to the audience without the constraints of imposed choreography. What occurs as a result is a ‘charged feedback loop’ (like the infinity sign) whereby dancers and audience are in constant response to one another and rebounding off one another’s responses.

Improvisation has a truly collaborative focus on decision making and process, demanding a tremendous amount of trust and responsibility both with the audience and co performers. (Monsoon in Pollitt. 2001 p 22)

It is important here to recognise that although the improvisation in theory attempts to be a complete amalgamation of the dancer and his/her personal movement language, embodied knowledge and accumulated experience, the unification of person and performance can never be completely authentic because the dancer knows he/she is performing and being observed. As dancers we often aim to please and can be tempted to ‘produce’ movement that we think audiences will find appealing.
By critiquing what is or is not ‘valid’ the dancer automatically puts him/herself in an objective state of mind where, rather than engaging with the practice and responding instinctively, he/she sees the performance from the outside encouraging interference from rational thought. This is just one reason why experience in improvising is important and particularly beneficial here. A dancer with an embodied knowledge, an understanding and commitment to their personal process and a sufficient amount of practise and experience of that process is much more likely to be able to remain attentive and in constant response to what occurs in comparison to a less experienced dancer who has had less practise or exposure to improvising live. This is because the dancer is required to attempt a kind of omnipresent in the space, having a semi-permeable mind that can filter different information constantly and at the same time, all the while still improvising. The dancer needs to be able to acknowledge that the improvisation practice is occurring in a performance context and therefore must in some way entertain, but also be aware that producing movement to entertain will ultimately defeat the purpose of the investigation. He/She also has to be able to form a relationship with the audience which allows for spontaneity but considers the observer and the observer’s responses, ensuring the dancer is “susceptible to the whims and energies of the audience.” (Pollitt. 2001 p 24)

If the dancer can balance the awareness and response in their own spontaneous movement with awareness and response to the audiences’ experience, the improvisation’s “charged feedback loop” is heightened and felt by all in the space.

...the feeling that you’re offering a genuine experience to an audience – not hiding it from them, or forcing it on them. That puts us in the same environment, and it creates a positive exchange. (Smith in Pollitt. 2001 p 26)

Through this “charged feedback loop” a relationship is formed and the power of decision-making can be repositioned and exchanged between dancer and audience. What occurs then is a “dual carriageway journey” that both dancer and audience travel through simultaneously as an improvisation unfolds that neither can completely predict, but that both will certainly influence. Pollitt refers to it as a “shared reality” (2001. p 26)
The ‘dual carriageway’ journey will occur because dancer and audience share an experience of the same circumstance as it unfolds and happens. The audience are present in both the process and the performance so they too are witness to the ‘experimental stage’ which results in a greater understanding of the movement that manifests itself. This understanding is like having extensive program notes - the audience becomes privy to the process of the work as it develops.

The result is a dynamic understanding by the audience of the dancer’s experience. The dancer’s personal movement language becomes a dialogue between dancer and audience. The exploration of this movement language in the dancer’s body and the space becomes a negotiation, as dancer and observer are aware of each other and responding and adjusting constantly to the other. This will hopefully assist in contributing to a greater appreciation for the work from the audience’s perspective. At the same time the dancer should thrive off the atmosphere created by the audience’s responses, allowing that to influence where they take the movement next. If the performer remains conscious of the spectator in the immediate moment and the spectator recognises the live choices being made momentarily in the space, then the “dual carriageway journey” is a success.

To enter into a live dance performance as a performer or as a viewer is to accept an unstable journey. (Pollitt. 2001 p 58)

Of course there are variables which can impede on the “dual carriageway journey” and these need to be factored into the equation. One danger is that the dancer becomes too internal with their movement. Improvisation can often be accused of being introspective or having an esoteric movement language which does not translate to an audience, causing a ‘glaze over’ effect. In addition to this, dancers will often use improvisation as a ‘self-satisfying’ movement tool, to help loosen up - dancing for dance’s sake, or to connect the mind and body through engaging with a score. However when improvisation is being transferred into performance, there has to be definite consideration of an audience’s presence to ensure that the improvisation does not succumb to its reputable self indulgent nature.
The dancer not only has to keep his/her focus rooted deeply in the constantly evolving present but must also consider the fact that they are being observed.

This can be confusing when the dancer then has to avoid producing movement for his/her observers. In this situation, eye contact with the audience is vital. This doesn’t necessarily mean eyeballing the audience or loading the eye contact with intention or emotion. Nor should the eye focus drive all the movement that unfolds. Instead eye focus and eye contact is about inviting the audience to be a part of what the dancer is experimenting with and experiencing. It is about a negotiation of the relationship between the audience and the dancer. (Millard. 2009)

_in 1939, Martin described the role of the spectator as “one who responds to the dance with an associational relationship to their own background, demanding that they be active in forming a motor response to the dance in order for it to function as an art of movement.” (Martin in Pollitt. 2001 p 12)
Theory verses Reality – A Research Discussion

The concepts I have spoken about in this paper until now, involving the embodied knowledge and accumulated experience, the development and unfolding of a personal movement language and the concepts of resonance looping and the dual carriageway journey, are used to explain why and how improvisation in performance can be successful and sustain itself for the duration of a performance. History has shown us that audiences enjoy live improvisation, thriving off the unpredictability of the Judsons and Grand Union groups in the 1960s. The principles behind improvisation make sense, and although complex remain convincing in creating successful improvised dance as long as they are considered and prioritised in both the process of practising and in performance. However, the more I read about improvisation and the more I see it or speak to people who have seen it performed live, the more I begin to notice contradictions in what is being said and the practice I actually observe. I feel I am speaking the truth when I state that the principles all make sense and are convincing however when it comes to watching improvisation in a live performance context, I find it somehow lacks an ability to communicate or appeal to its audiences. In actuality, I struggle to identify a considered personal movement language, resonance looping or a dual carriageway journey as I watch the movement unfold. This prompts me to question the validity of these principles. I know they exist, but do they really work? In theory, improvisation in performance has the capacity to be extraordinary if these concepts are considered and instigated correctly, however, in reality, I wonder if they are really responsible for the success of the improvised performance, and whether ‘successful’ is a word that can even be used accurately to describe what the audience is observing?

In order to build on my own understanding and research about live improvisation so that I could most accurately conduct this discussion, I chose to distribute two slightly different questionnaires on process, performance and improvisation. The first questionnaire was aimed at dancers with a strong knowledge and experience in improvisation and the second was for non-dancers, who have been exposed to a relative amount of dance performance including more than one experience of observing live improvisation.
I have used the insights and opinions from these questionnaire responses to assist me in defining the success of live improvisation from the varied points of view of the dancer and the audience member. Through the questionnaire responses, I have come to evaluate improvisation's value and place in live dance performance as I construct my own opinions on its integrity in a performance context of the 21st century.

There are a number of different factors and variables that can determine what makes dance and specifically live improvisation successful for an audience. The observer’s personal interpretations, the dancer’s form and ability to remain attentive to what they are doing, the amount of dancers on stage, production and design elements, choreographic and thematic choices and context are just some of the reasons that improvised dance can achieve or fail to achieve success. On top of these factors, lies the concept that live performance is intangible and inevitably unpredictable, indicating that the success of these factors will vary each time and thus vary the degree of success of the final outcome. Finally, there is the definition of the word itself ‘success’. What defines success? Throughout this paper I have viewed success in terms of being determined by the accessibility of the dance from the point of view of the audience. However sometimes, movement experience that doesn’t communicate well to an audience might be considered extremely successful by the dancer, depending on where their personal interest lies. Audience perceptions also vary considerably. Often one audience member will find a particular improvisation fascinating and another will take absolutely nothing from it. This was a comment that was prevalent in the questionnaire answers, particularly from the dancers, with a unanimous response that success is always highly subjective and that it will occur on various levels depending on the individual’s tastes, experiences and expectations. “One man’s trash could be another man’s treasure”, (C) summed it up for one participant.

On the success of improvisation in a live performance context, the responses from non-dancers who observe dance were often very similar, whilst the dancers’ responses differed in detail. The majority of non-dance people enjoy live improvisation but prefer set choreography in performance, feeling that improvisation often appears to lack structure and that the dancers sometimes lose direction in their movement intention and repeat the same movements a lot, especially if the improvisation “goes
on for too long.” (D) Every response from dancers, who have experienced improvisation in both process and performance, agreed that improvisation was a successful tool for developing material, with most believing it was an integral part of the creative process in order to “effectively shift existing movement patterns – encouraging a broader range of movement and dynamic.” (B) Opinions concerning improvisation in a live performance context varied, again emphasising the subjective nature of dance and the difference between performing improvisation and watching improvisation be performed. One individual stated;

_In my opinion, a work is often successful when it invites you in, when the performers have such a strong connection to what they are doing or who they are doing it for. Improvisation can therefore be a pertinent part of performance, [because] it is in the moment ... The beauty of improvisation is that the performer is in a heightened state of performance awareness – meaning they are just as fresh to the unfolding of their natural body as the observers are._ (C)

Overall, according to the responses from dancers, probable issues that improvisation faces when placed in a live performance context, include its length, specificity of structure and sustainment of the performer’s personal intention and performance intention. Most participants felt that highly structured tasks and specific rules, where the performer is clear of his/her intention and works within a set of parameters, are important factors in making improvisation successful in performance.

In terms of the accessibility of a dance work, every non-dancer response stated that it was important for the audience to make sense of the work’s themes or intentions in order to be able to access and connect with the work. One observer went further in saying that “I like watching it (improvisation) when I have something to relate it to, or a context to put it in. I don’t see the point without context.” (O) Considering this, I found a dancer’s response to the same question to be quite pertinent, stating that rather than making sense of the dancer’s intentions, the audience should be able to understand that the performer _has_ an intention” (B) and that “it is about the performer and the clarity and integrity they bring to the work.” (B)
It is interesting to address at this point (although not at all discussed prior due to the subject matter of this paper), the ideas of contact or interactive improvisations that were brought up in some of the questionnaire responses. Both contact improvisation and improvisations incorporating more than one person, whereby the performers have an intention of interacting and forming relationships on stage, tend to be highly successful in performance according to some of the responses citing ‘The Grid’ as an example. Although I entirely agree with this comment, I should point out that in these cases the intention is very different to that of the improvisations I have been discussing, those being an individual’s exploration of their personal movement language.

The most interesting and, I think, essential component of the questionnaire, was that of the discussion of a dancer’s skill in performing improvisation. Although it was stated that it could be extremely interesting to watch a dancer make decisions about his or her body and movement in the space, most responses commented on how the dancer’s skill and refinement of their own practice affects the success of the improvisation. “[Improvisation] requires a commitment to the practise, the practice of practising improvisation and performance. It cannot just be like ‘oh I’ll improvise on the day.’” (A) The majority of the non-dancer responses tended to claim that although as individuals, they understand and respect its validity in performance, they find it difficult to watch unless the improviser is particularly skilled and fully focused on what it is they are exploring and performing and even if they are skilled, if the improvisation goes on too long it often becomes “boring.” (B)

“I like watching improvisation if the dancer is good at it, but not everyone can improvise!” (N) was one person’s response. Another individual expressed her opinions and for me really summed up the reason why it can be so difficult to access live improvised work from an audience’s perspective;

One has to be supremely skilled at improvisation for it to work well in general (or even for a knowledgeable) audience as it is generally so inwardly focused. It definitely has a place in popular culture, but the whole context of one group of people watching another [dancing] – as opposed to watching and participating ie, at a club, party etc – sets up certain expectations.
We want to see people who are really ‘expert’ – that’s why we pay with our money and time to see them – if its not just about seeing someone’s internal process it [improvisation on stage] could work but would have to be at a very high level. (M)

I found this comment particularly interesting because it emphasised how important it is to an audience that dancers ‘perform’ or at least aim to fulfil certain expectations which are associated with the notion of ‘performance.’ Often improvisation can be very difficult to perform because its nature is exploratory and its intention is rarely about reaching an end product but rather moving through a process of discovery of broader personal movement possibilities. On top of this, when the improvisation’s dominant focus ‘or intention is about exploring one’s personal movement language, with the audience a second priority, it can be difficult for an observer to access the performance. If the dancer is particularly skilled and practised they can often move within a semi-permeable mind, considering both movement discovery/intention and audience relatively equally and I think that in this way they can explore their personal interest whilst fulfilling some of the expectations of an audience. Ideally this is how improvisation should be executed and is possibly the reason for its success in a historical sense. However, and I found this particularly evident during my most recent improvised performance experience with Olivia Millard’s work, “If Every Time Was The First Time,” if the dancer is new to the practice of improvised performance and unfamiliar with their own movement language, it is almost impossible to be able to explore one’s possibilities for movement in a genuine way, not taking on board the need to ‘produce’ for an audience and yet still considering them and prioritising their appeal in the work. All in all, even the sentence sounds like it contradicts itself and that for me is a perfect indication of why improvisation can be so difficult to access and connect with as a work of art when placed in a live performance context.
Conclusion

Can movement improvisation, in a live performance context of the 21st century, connect the audience and dancer and therefore sustain itself as a successful means of contemporary performance art? In short, my answer is, potentially. Every principle I have discussed, every fact I have researched and explored and every opinion I have quoted substantiates that improvisation has the potential to be both successful and sustainable when placed in a live performance context. The problem that exists is that this success seems to be almost as elusive as the improvisation itself. Of course the subjectivity of improvisation and performance means that on some level, individuals will always draw on something or find one positive component in observing even the most inaccessible improvisation. However, I also think there are definite considerations and practices that can be implemented which have the potential to enhance the improvisation’s accessibility, therefore improving the likelihood of success.

It seems that although the exploration of the body’s embodied knowledge, the pursuit of a personal movement language and the intention of the directive are all important and necessary for describing the practice of improvisation, it really is vital that the audience is equally considered in order for the improvisation to be accessible. Although the concepts of the charged feedback loop and dual carriageway journey are definitely possible, these ideas rely heavily on a connection between dancer and observer that will not occur on its own, but in fact requires thought, consideration and action, implemented specifically to achieve this connection. The principles all make sense, but they alone are not going to be responsible for collectively creating accessible live improvisation. Audience consideration, appeal and expectation are something separate which need to be highlighted and explored as a separate principle throughout the practice of improvisation, both in process and performance. This is because of the distinct traditional differences between the two words ‘improvisation’ and ‘performance’, the objectives they involve and the often-contradicting expectations associated with each.
Improvisation and Performance. Traditionally both words conjure up certain expectations that are generally quite contradictory and most certainly as concepts they do have very different priorities. Performance in itself is about audience appeal and aiming to fulfil that expectation, which often involves reaching a final product or finding a resolution. Improvisation is an ongoing practice, the intention of which is to not to find an end product and to encourage the break down of any expectation. This is not to say that I believe achieving success by placing improvisation in a performance context is impossible. I do think, however, that it requires equal consideration of both the improvisation and performance aspects, and the meanings that are traditionally associated with these concepts, so that the work can be specifically planned and structured to nurture the principles each possesses. This in turn would fulfil the criteria needed in order to satisfy both dancer and observer for the duration of the performance, allowing for engagement with its accessibility and thus deeming the work both successful and sustainable in a 21st century live performance context.

By Ashleigh Berry
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Accessed on: 12/04/09


Gardner, H. (nd) Multiple Intelligences (Powerpoint source),


Hermans, C. (2003) “When the Body Takes Over...” Online resource:


APPENDICES

Questionnaire for Dancers

1) Do you believe that improvisation can be successfully utilised as a tool for developing movement in the creative process of the work? Explain your answer.

2) What are your opinions on presenting improvisation in a live performance context? What defines it as being successful? If possible explain why you think this?

3) Do you think that improvisation can sustain itself as a tool for performance? How do you think this is best/most often achieved?

4) Would you consider improvisation to be an independent performance art form? Why or why not, explain your answer?

5) What has been your personal experience with improvisation? Where does your interest lie?

6) Do you like to watch improvisation? Explain your answer.
7) Do you think an audience needs to be able to;
   a. understand the work’s themes/ intentions
   b. be able to relate to the work through similar shared experiences
   c. have background knowledge of the work ie: extensive program notes or access to the rehearsal period
   d. be able to follow a clear storyline
   e. none of the above
   f. all of the above

   ...in order to be able to access and connect with the work. (Please circle) Any comments? .................................................................

8) What do you think most successfully holds an audience’s interest. (eg: good technique, relationships between dancers, dancer’s self movement investigation, dancer’s interest and commitment to what they are doing, eye contact, etc.) Can list more than one, please explain your answer..............................................

9) In a society obsessed with consumerism and always wanting more, wanting it faster and wanting it different, do you think that live improvisation is an answer to this demand for immediacy? Why or why not? ............................................................

10) Do you think that the type of score used in improvisation (whether it a purely physical score or somewhat loaded with emotional content) affects how the audience and dancer are able to communicate and connect? Do you prefer to use one over the other when you work? Give reasons for you answer.

.................................................................
Questionnaire for Non-Dancers

1) Why do you like to watch dance? Why do you go to watch dance? .................................................................

2) Do you think you would recognise improvisation in a dance performance? If yes, what helps you to recognise it as being different from set choreography? .................................................................

3) Do you like to watch improvisation? Explain your answer. .................................................................

4) Do you think an audience needs to be able to;
   a. make sense of the work’s themes/ intentions
   b. be able to relate to the work through similar shared experiences
   c. have background knowledge of the work (ie: extensive program notes or access to the rehearsal period)
   d. be able to follow a clear storyline
   e. none of the above
   f. all of the above

   ...in order to be able to access and connect with the work. (Please circle) Any comments? .................................................................

5) What do you think most successfully holds an audience’s interest. (eg: good technique, relationships between dancers, dancer’s self movement investigation, dancer’s interest and commitment to what they are doing, eye contact, etc.) Can list more than one, please explain your answer .................................................................

6) Based on your experience of improvisation do you think it holds a place in live performance? In other words, are you more entertained by choreographed dance and set material or would you prefer to watch the dancer explore their own improvisation? .................................................................