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The Sensational Facts

In 2014, I wrote an article in which I explored the role of vision in solo, unaccompanied, un-scored improvisational dance performance. The paper proposed and situated a mode of solo 'direct looking' that can be practised as a means of training for solo dances which are improvised in performance. This calibration of solo 'direct looking' as a pragmatic training tool for the generation of choreographic material was positioned and contextualised through analysis of the aesthetic and socio-cultural values of the global training/performance practice of Contact Improvisation as well as various articulations of 'direct looking' that have also developed in post-1960s Western solo/duet/ensemble dance training models (Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 5 (1). pp. 31-44).

This Comeback relates to one small part of my original article – the reflections I made on Contact Improvisation's inward orientation, which is intricately entwined with the use of vision – and my current interest in approaching the form as a mode of actor training in which an embodied appreciation of the energetic dynamics of give and take and an ability to maintain an open awareness that does not depend on vision may be cultivated. I will briefly relate an experimental teaching session that I ran in February this year, in which year 2 students on our BA (Hons) in Drama were introduced to the pragmatics and socio-cultural valences of Contact Improvisation through a tripartite structure of lecture, practical session and reflective writing.

The session took place in what is traditionally a 3-hour 'lecture' slot, but I wanted to challenge this theory-oriented, lecture and discussion format by implementing a more fluid tripartite structure; one that would segue from lecture, to practical experimentation to reflective writing and in doing so embrace and embody different modes of learning and knowing. I wanted the students to appreciate the socio-political dimensions of the form so that they could grasp the link between the desire for social change and questioning of the ideological principles that ruled over social, political and artistic fields that was characteristic of 1970s (and 1960s) American society and the invention of a form of movement that adheres to philosophies of socio-sexual equality and challenges stereotypical behavioural norms. Contact Improvisation was thus introduced as carrying particular socio-political values; this understanding reinforced by showing a clip of a performance which the students were asked to analyse in terms of markers such as the informality of presentation style.

I also needed the students to experience the form from inside; to attune to the tactile-kinesthetic exchanges that are at the heart of the doing of it. I wanted to see if the students could make experiential sense of what Steve Paxton meant when he said that contact improvisers should concentrate on 'the sensational facts' (Paxton quoted in Novack, 1990, p.82).^[1] This statement – pointing to both pragmatic and ideological indices – was introduced in the lecture, and I was interested in then discovering whether any of the students would be able to consciously attune to their 'sensational facts' – to the *feeling* of the body as it gave and received weight, followed a point of contact, rolled, fell or found itself upside down. Once the session moved from lecture into practice, I therefore led the students through a warm-up which began by adopting the idea that the floor is a 'partner' so the students could initially work alone, concentrating on rolling, sliding and pushing movements before developing into slow falls into the floor and rolls back to standing. Students then transitioned to working with a partner, learning how to support and take weight, slide and fall through a series of simple structures. Further work on resisting or yielding to one's partner was explored before the students were invited to improvise a longer duet, drawing on their understanding of the foundational principles of the physical laws of momentum and gravity that govern and generate their movement.

At this point in the session, I drew on Viola Spolin's technique of 'sidecoaching', in which I called out 'just that word, that phrase, or that sentence' that would keep the students 'on focus' (Spolin, 1986, p.5). Phrases or questions were designed to encourage the students to attune to their 'sensational facts' as they improvised (also making an explicit connection between the lecture and practical component of the session). Questions such as 'which parts of you feel soft or fluid, which hard or dense?' and statements such as 'notice your breathing pattern', 'sense your weight' and 'let your weight settle and accept support', functioned as prompts for the students to consciously focus attention on the stirrings of somatic, bodily knowing. At times I asked the students to deliberately slow down as a radical shift in speed invites an even more heightened sensitivity to the tactile-kinesthetic exchanges. Encouraging the students to move with this kind of conscious attention to the subtleties of what Sondra Fraleigh calls

'our body-self' (Fraleigh, 2000, p.57) laid the foundations for the reflective writing that was to follow. The students were beginning to register the immediate moment of experience and were operating as active participants in the process.

I was aware of the challenge of the final reflective writing part of the experiment and curious about how the students might capture in words aspects of their experience of encountering Contact Improvisation for the first time. Fraleigh notes that 'finding the direct and intuitive way to describe movement, affect, and our sensate proximity to others is at first daunting' and the process of describing one's immediate experience requires the student 'to voice what is not initially discursive, but kinesthetic in nature' (Fraleigh, 2015, p.21). In asking them to reflect on their experience and bring it to language, I encouraged them to write quickly and intuitively, 'not listening to their internal critics' (Fraleigh, 2000, p.56). The period of reflection also included a more speculative piece of writing, in which the students were asked to note down some initial ideas on how they might transfer what they learnt in the session to their work as actors and directors on other modules. This was to enable me to gauge further whether, and how, this movement form might be appreciated as a mode of actor training. David Zinder notes that the form 'is one of the best ways...for actors to keep up improvisation/creative skills' and that the form 'is a *must* for anyone interested in any aspect of the physical approach to theater' (Zinder, 2002, p.95, original italics). The more recent *Actor Movement: Expression of the Physical Being* (Ewan and Green, 2015) outlines some of the ways in which Contact Improvisation fosters 'freedom through movement' and confidence for the drama student (Ewan and Green, 2015, p.24). The reflective writing component of my experiment would hopefully add the students' own views on how Contact Improvisation might be able to be applied to their studies in acting and directing.

The tripartite structure is one I would like to pursue further, as there were clearly useful links between aspects of the lecture – including viewing and discussing footage – and the students' own practical experiments. There was a palpable sense of play, experimentation and enjoyment in the practical work, with a few students choosing to work in quite a dynamic register in following momentum and falling. Given that these students had never encountered Contact Improvisation before, nor had they had any significant grounding in physical training or exposure to touch as a medium of learning, I was impressed by their openness and curiosity. Additionally, the writings have given me some useful insight into the students' responses to their introductory encounter with this form and the ways in which they were able to begin to transition from bodily to linguistic knowing.

Sample student responses

Calm – a bodily calm rather than my mind, I felt I had to be quite focused mentally

Heavy – I was surprised at how much weight my body could give over to my partner

Relaxed, open, spacious, released

Flowing & fluid – when we came to improvise the duet, I was surprised and impressed by how much myself and my partner flowed into and around each other

I felt very relaxed. Yet physically challenged. Basically it felt like a good workout

From a directing standpoint, I find the idea of experimenting with CI during my rehearsals interesting. I would be intrigued to find out whether it would open up my actors' physicality and make them more fluid (especially in their interactions with the other actors) as I suspect.

References

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[1] Contact Improvisation is widely credited as having been 'invented' by Steve Paxton in 1972. As part of a residency at Oberlin College in Ohio, America, Paxton did a showing of some work he had been doing in a men's class. The showing was called 'Magnesium' and explored how two bodies could negotiate the sharing of weight around an ongoing point of contact.