



## Improvisation

"Improvisation" is frequently used to refer to the creation or performance of a task in a spontaneous manner, in the instant and unplanned. In many professional fields, its use is rather pejorative and refers to the lack of preparation or organisation. However, this is quite different in the arts.

In musical terms, we spontaneously think of jazz, but we should not forget that Bach, in the 18th Century, would perform lengthy improvisations for Frédéric II. Closer to home, in the 60s and at the theatre, the *Living Theatre* of Julian Beck and Judith Maline worked less on a literary text than on collective improvisation. Even more recently, hip hop dances call upon the use of improvisation, notably during *battles*; but this method of practice is also to be found in ancient forms of social dances, from the mazurka to the tango, or even in traditional forms of dance such as flamenco.

Whether in music, theatre or dance, whether individual or collective, improvisation often requires a vast amount of preparatory work. It enables juxtaposition of the present, all of our experiences and surprises, which come about due to unexpected artistic gestures. In terms of choreography, it has become a training and practice method for contemporary dancers and a manner of creating new material in a choreography. It is also seen as an alternative to the development of studio creation and is referred to as "on stage process" or "instantaneous composition".

When we asked French choreographer Régine Chopinot [*L'improvisation*, interview from 2012] about improvisation, she responded, with her customary honesty, that today improvisation has become a throwaway word, a sort of unbearable hodgepodge. Yet, she gives few hints how to see things in a clearer manner. How can some sort of order be re-established amongst this jumble?

### **1. Improvisation as pleasure of the present and unexpected**

Improvisation in dance may be seen as an autonomous and instinctive practice, a form of its own. It is, therefore, less related to the desire to construct a show, than to channel the vitality of movement which simply needs to be expressed, when a sonic or festive environment, for instance, encourages you to express yourself.

Improvisation is, therefore, at the root of jazz dancing, when cotton picking masters would organise competitions between slaves, which led to the emergence of solo/groups and call and response between musicians and dancers. In these moments where music and dance are inseparable, challenges or competitions are developed with the active complicity of onlookers. Without any original circumstances for their dances, the slaves adapted music and dance to the colonial system; inventiveness solely had the



limits of their own capacities; this is why many period dances are based on a standard step along with an improvised gesture, often lent from the work undertaken. This relation is nowhere more present than in the hip hop universe, created at the end of the 70s in the Bronx, an underprivileged area of New York. Just as in jazz, the first forms of hip hop dance (*break, smurf, popping, locking, etc.*) took place at the centre of a circle as part of a challenge; and just as their predecessors in jazz, hip hop dancers are self-taught, they grant an essential place to improvisation and have a symbiotic relation to the music on which their movements are based.

Today, in becoming the most widespread educational technique, jazz has in large part lost something of this dimension for improvisation. However, hip hop, especially in Europe, has moved towards the stage whilst continuing to protect improvisation through *battles* which retain the area for regeneration, unique proposal and a test area for the movement [Kartons, 2010]. In terms of improvised techniques as were the origins, hip hop dances tend to remain as an art which expresses a *feeling*. Consequently, even if the majority of performers have left the streets to perform in institutions, even if hip hop has become a dance performed in studios, rehearsals or on stage, dancers often return to the circle, by an attachment or homage to improvisation which has participated to the essence of this aesthetic.

## **2. Improvisation as an autonomous practice not for performance**

However, improvisation is also a training and practice discipline for dancers, without intending to be performed. It is developed on the US West Coast with Anna Halprin and in New York, in the classes of Robert Dunn at the Merce Cunningham studio. It would notably develop under the impulse of a former dancer taught by the latter, Steve Paxton, who in the 70s invented a new form of dance named *Contact Improvisation*.

When talking about his work, Paxton did not hesitate to state that "it is a form of perception, rather than an art form [...] it is about seeking elsewhere, not being moulded by your own tracks". At the outset, *Contact* had the goal of communication through touch. In traditional dance class, usually there is a sphere of isolation so as not to disturb other pupils, you move one after the other so as to allow the teacher to make individual corrections. However, *Contact* requires independent performers who develop in a complex environment without any structure. It is about working with the whole surface of the body as a host of connections possible with the body of the others. This subtlety developed during *Contact* is not, in the majority of cases, reproducible and using this for a choreography would simply be a pale copy. This technique is emblematic of post modernism as it seeks to liberate dance from emotions in favour of the senses.



Improvisation is also found to be an educational method which allows teachers to react to propositions made by pupils, as in this Master class led by Elsa Wolliaston on the theme of walking [*Elsa Wolliaston: marche et improvisation (walking and improvisation)*]. Other choreographers have taken this educational work one step further still by using the technical resources available in their time. Consequently, in 1994, choreographer Willian Forsythe developed a CD-Rom entitled *Improvisation Technologies*, used as a preparatory and training tool for dancers. Its principle consists of commenting on the working methods of Forsythe by himself and he outlines the primary elements which comprise his technique and explains his operating fundamentals of the body and its manner of creating movement or structuring existing bodily proposals in a different manner. This document is a remarkable overview of his own conception of choreography and explains how, from the start of the 2000s, Forsythe distanced himself from the classical vernacular to create ballets on the basis of complex improvisation processes.

### **3. Improvisation as a method of creation**

Improvisation is also seen by certain choreographers as a tool for composition. They see it as a reflection of the contemporary creation process which combines the performers in the process of development of artistic material. Composition thereby consists of identifying, selecting and guiding gestures seen in improvisation as we can see at the start of this documentary [Jan Fabre: *Questa pazzia e fantastica*]. It is during this period of appropriation of forms when meaning is extracted. The choreographer should then be a lucid onlooker of what is unfolding. Consequently, Pina Bausch guided research undertaken by dancers with questions, themes and key words (*Fragen, Themen, Stichwörter*) which she proposed during a very long preliminary work as discussed here by Dominique Mercy [Dominique Mercy danse Pina Bausch (Dominique Mercy dances Pina Bausch)].

However, certain promoters of improvisation do not intend to confine this to the secrecy of studios where choreographic creations are developed; they claim the interest of performance and want to portray this on stage. In so doing, they are continuing the *happenings* of the 60s as proposed by John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Robert Rauschenberg at the Black Mountain College, performances in which chance and improvisation played a key role. Consequently, Mark Tompkins, who arrived in France in 1973 and worked with Elsa Wolliaston, Lisa Nelson and Steve Paxton, founded the Atelier Contact (Contact workshop) in Paris with the latter. He did not hesitate to launch into shows and events where improvisation was central in front of a press and public who were often left puzzled.

At the same time, Carolyn Carlson proposed that dancers from the Opera be more open beyond the mere classical technique. She created the Groupe de recherches théâtrales de l'Opéra de Paris (theatrical research group at the Paris Opera), which sometimes



attempts to perform shows with improvised sequences. Once more, people are often dubious ! Carlson would never give up on this alternative form and she continues to develop this in the company of musician friends (Ivry Gitlis, Michel Portal or Miguel Angel Estrella...). In [*Poetry Event*, 2013], it is no longer only about reacting to the music, but creating the conditions for mutual listening so as to implement a dialogue with instruments, other (arts), poetry and the location.

#### **4. Improvisation as an alternative to re-presentation**

Now, this immediate use of the body opens up onto a large landscape. This may take on very fun colours, such as in this stage improvisation by Boris Charmatz and Mederic Collignon [*Improvisation*, 2011] where the dancer and musician constantly retort to the movement, sound or space created by the other. In this register, we can also evoke the improv games in contemporary dance in Quebec - on the theatrical model itself inspired by ice hockey games.

However, improvisation further still symbolises the permanent nature of resistance, of a manner of experiencing dance differently, as has been championed for over half a century by the Californian dancer Anna Halprin. The film by Alain Buffard named *My lunch with Anna* [extract 2] shows this critique towards a "puppet dance" focused on the spectacular, which turns the Halprin process towards almost therapeutic practices.

With both critical and aesthetic concerns, it is also possible to cite the work of Myriam Gourfink [*Un Temps autre*, 2011] which uses partitions displayed on the floor allowing each performer choices, in a sort of elastic tempo; that of Rosalin Crisp who, in 2006, trained in *Danse (1)* to superimpose layers of contradictory instructions so as to create an entirely new movement; and finally, let us cite Joao Fiadeiro who seeks to construct availability and decision-making at the time of a performance [*De la composition en temps réel*, 2004]. What these three choreographers have in common (inter alia) is the responsibility left to the performer. The performer is prepared to use a method throughout preparatory workshops over the course of several months. He/She is able to manage the actions improvised, within a simple dramatic framework, which is pre-established and however under permanent development. In this artistic posture, dancers, choreographer and viewers together create, in an uninterrupted manner, the sense of what is happening. This shared responsibility has no implication on this instantaneous composition method.



## To go further :

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SIX Nicolas, « Battlemania », *Danser* n° 266, juin 2007, 41.

- « Contact improvisation », *Danser* n° 297, avril 2010, 58-59.

## Website

CHAUMETTE Sarah, *Elaboration d'une présence en scène dans l'atelier de Mark Tompkins : analyse d'une composition en temps réel dans un contexte pédagogique*, Mémoire de Master en danse, Université Paris 8, téléchargeable sur [http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr/diplome.php?di\\_id=2](http://www.danse.univ-paris8.fr/diplome.php?di_id=2)



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### Excerpts selection

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### Production

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Philippe Guisgand is professor of dance universities at the University of Lille. He is a researcher at CEAC and leads the program "Dialogues between art and research". He is a designer of a choreographic analysis path for which he has developed an original kinesic bias ("Reception of the choreographic spectacle: from a functional description to aesthetic analysis", STAPS Review n ° 74, autumn 2006, 117 -130). He also works to better understand the means by which spectators give an account of their sensitive reception as well as the political consequences of aesthetic debates ("The workshops of the spectator, factories of the sensitive", Quaderni n ° 83, winter 2013-2014, 59 -71). Specialist of the work of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker (The Sons of Endless Intertwining, Septentrion, 2007, Anne Teresa of Keersmaecker, L'Epos, 2009 and Intimate Chords, Dance and Music at De Keersmaecker, Septentrion 2017), Finally, he is interested in the dialogues of the arts ("Demands and addresses: dance and music by Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker" in Stephanie Schroedter (ed.), Zwischen Hören und Sehen, Würzburg, Koenigshausen & Neumann, 2012, 425-437) and to certain aspects of performativity ("About the notion of body condition" in Josette Féral (ed.), Performative Practices, Body Remix, Montreal / Rennes, University of Quebec Press / Rennes University Press, 2012, 223-239).

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