

Dance Improvisation: The Process is Itself

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Abstract: According to the definition of International Encyclopedia Of Dance “Dance improvisation can be defined as the spontaneous exploration of human movement possibilities. It is an important element in performance dance, as well as in ritual, social, educational, and therapeutic dance.” In the realm of dance art, improvisational dance is considered a unique and highly creative form of expression, where the essence lies in the process of creation itself becoming the dance. This form transcends the confines of traditional dance, emphasizing the dancer’s freedom to express emotions, thoughts, and ideas in real-time creation. Tracing back to the 1960s, the counterculture movement in the United States laid the foundation for improvisational dance. The experimental dance techniques of Merce Cunningham and John Cage profoundly influenced subsequent developments in dance art, inspiring dancers to break free from traditional dance paradigms. Concurrently, Robert Dunn’s teaching methodology further deepened the understanding of creative exploration, seamlessly integrating the improvisational dance’s creative process with its performance.

Keywords: Improvisation; Process; Creativity

The aim of this paper is to dig deeper into the creative nature of improvised dance presented as a dynamic and evolving ‘process’. We will explore the non-linear character of improvised dance and analyse how dancers express free thoughts and emotions during the creative process. In addition, we will trace the trajectory of improvisational dance, analysing the dramatic changes in dance aesthetics brought about by the improvisational collective “The Big Leagues” in 1970 and Steve Paxton’s “Contact Improvisation” in 1972. This paper will examine the impact of contemporary improvisation on dancers’ creativity and audience interaction, while exploring the diverse and groundbreaking nature of improvisational artistry in comparison to my three improvisational projects with Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin and American dancer Randy James, further emphasising the nature of improvisational dance as a direct demonstration of the creative process.

1. The essence of improvisation dance

Improvisation, taking the feeling of the body as its core, is a kind of “embodiment” of the body as a unity of various existences such as matter, brain activity, conscious behaviour and psychology. Under this conception of the body, improvisation unfolds various methods and paths of listening, feeling, awareness, and naturally flowing movements, which undoubtedly open the door to self-knowledge and self-discovery. Improvisation, on the other hand, is often described as an ‘unrehearsed’ and ‘casual’ form of dance. As dance theorist Bales (2012) emphasises “improvisation is a deconstruction of predetermined dance structures and rules, a creation in which the dancer corresponds instantaneously to the moment.”

1.1 Creative process as dance

Paul Taylor (1998) argues that there are three basic reasons for improvising dance: for personal entertainment, for performance and as a creative tool. Improvisation can stimulate the mind, generate creativity and create some unexpected surprises, the key point being that the emphasis is not on creating a certain outcome, but on the process itself. According to Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, “improvisation emphasises process, focuses on the experience and creativity of the dancer, and offers the audience ‘surprises’ rather than traditional, predictable movement.”

Dance theorist Hughes (2006) argues that “improvisation removes the boundaries between dance creation and dance performance, placing creator and audience in a shared creative experience.” Improvisation integrates the creative process with the dance work, emphasising that creation is dance. This uniqueness requires dancers to create while performing, making the audience not only spectators of the dance, but also witnesses to its creation. This interactivity reflects the originality of improvised dance, and as dance researcher Rebecca Nales points out, “Audience participation is not only a complement to improvised dance, it is one of its central elements” (Napier, 2004). Thus, the deeper

character of improvisational dance lies not only in the uniqueness of its artistic expression, but also in the redefinition of the artistic process as a physical expression that is both free and creative.

In improvised dance, the performer is not only the executor of the dance, but also the creator. The immediacy of this creative process allows the audience to experience the generation of art first hand, rather than merely admiring a completed work. This breaks down the traditional barrier between the audience and the performers, integrating them into the heart of the creation. As Taylor describes, one of the motivations for improvised dance is personal entertainment, and the audience is entertained by participating in it.

Compared to traditional dance, improvisation is aesthetically more focused on the emotions, ideas and experiences of the process. This process-emphasising quality provides the audience with a new aesthetic experience that transcends the predictability of traditional dance and allows them to feel more deeply the thoughts and emotions of the dancers' creations. As Bloom and Chaplin emphasise, improvisation provides the audience with 'surprises', not only from the form of the dance itself, but also from the unique experience of the dancers in improvisation. For the audience, the process of participating in improvised dance is an opportunity to interact directly with the artist. The audience is no longer just a passive spectator, but co-constructs a unique artistic experience with the dancers. This process of co-creation deepens the audience's understanding of the dance, taking it beyond the superficial form and focusing more on the creator's independent thinking and emotional expression.

In improvisation, the audience's participation is not only to appreciate and understand, but also to support and inspire the creator. This interactivity continues throughout the performance, linking the audience and the dancers closely together. Dance is no longer a one-way performance, but an energetic and creative dialogue that together shapes a unique artistic moment. The uniqueness of improvisational dance in artistic creation lies in its emphasis on the creative process, integrating the audience into the core of creation. This novel way of expression breaks through the boundaries of traditional dance, providing the audience with a richer, more direct and highly participatory artistic experience. In this body expression full of surprises and creativity, improvisational dance shows its unique artistic charm and points out a dynamic path for the development of dance in the future.

Improvisation Dance Project

2.1 Improvisation Dance - Its Process is Itself

Improvisation is emerging as a new form of dance performance and creation in the contemporary art scene. My personal experience includes several improvisational dance choreographies in China, such as the "Aluminium Foil Tube" improvisation workshop in Xiamen in 2022. These experiences, as well as my post-graduate project at the Central South University for Nationalities (CSUN) in China, "Building a Curriculum for Restricted Improvisational Dance", have led to a deep interest in improvisational choreography.

In contemporary art, many groups and independent artists are experimenting with improvisation in different ways, among which the German choreographer Pina Bausch is a prominent representative. She has adopted a unique approach to improvisation by focusing on the "real" and "inner" elements in the expression of her work. For example, Pina's method of improvisation was vividly presented in the documentary film *Anne Linsel, Pina Bausch* (2006). There is no script, no pattern, the process of improvisation during rehearsals is the final artwork. This unique artistic practice not only breaks with traditional choreographic forms, but also emphasises that the creative process itself is at the heart of the artwork.

In contrast to Pina Bausch's work, I use a variety of locations in my dance projects, including outdoor parks, city walls, beaches and indoor dance studios, with the aim of exploring the body's improvisational responses in different environments. Inspired by Pina, I incorporate filming into the dance process, presenting a creative uniqueness by documenting improvisational responses in different environments. While Pina focuses on the "real" and "inside", I focus on the diversity and creativity of improvisation in different environments.

I find that when I improvise in these different places, spaces and environments, my attention is focused on the creative process. However, at a later stage when editing the dance images of this dance material, at this moment when integrating its content by formally critiquing the dance and using montage, at this moment the choreographer uses critical thinking in motion, and creative thinking in motion. At this point each moment recorded with the camera in the dance image has a double dialectic of documentary and fiction. At the same time, my project

highlights the diversity of improvised dance, emphasising the influence of different environments on artistic creation.

Through the practice of my project, I have come to two conclusions. Firstly, improvised dance is seen as a unique 'temporal' artefact, special in the sense that each improvised moment is unique and fleeting. It focuses on the feelings and emotions of the creator in the present moment, the position of the act in the ambient space, and the instantaneous process of the body's movement, as well as presenting a sense of life in the present moment. As psychologist John Dewey noted in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*, "Art is not the work alone, but the emotions and thoughts experienced in the process of art."

Secondly, an in-depth study of improvised dance reveals its nature as a direct expression of creativity, a way of exploring the interior of the body and the core of the mind. At the same time, improvisation is specifically highlighted as a "process". This means that in the process of improvisation, the creator is not able to predetermine the content, but rather perceives and responds to it in the moment. However, in the post-editing process, these improvised fragments become adjectives, adverbs, and nouns, which are actively sequenced by the editor in a manner similar to writing a sentence. This further highlights improvised dance as an ongoing developmental, evolutionary process, as psychologist Ellen Gray emphasises in her 2006 book, *The Mysterious Power of Creativity*, "Creativity is a dynamic, evolving process, a constant adjustment to and response to inner experience. " This emphasis on process enhances the value of improvisation as an evolving creative journey rather than a static artwork.

Through this dance project, I hope to deepen the understanding of improvisation, emphasising that the creative process is itself a work of art. Improvisation is not only an art form, but also an opportunity to engage with the creator and the audience.

2.2 Ohad Naharin and Randy James dance projects

Another dancer worth comparing to my improvisational dance project is Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. She is known for her unique dance practice, especially in its integration with technology. Noah's work pushes the boundaries of traditional dance, combining digital technology with improvised dance to create an interactive performance that incorporates real-time projections, sensors and virtual reality. In her project, the dancers' movements are captured through sensors and then presented in real-time projection, interacting with the digital elements. This integration of technology not only expands the expression of dance, but also provides the audience with a new sensory experience. Unlike my project, which focuses on the natural environment and the spontaneity of improvisation, Noah brings dance to the forefront of technology through digital techniques, highlighting the impact of contemporary technology on the art of dance.

Another worthy comparison is American choreographer Randy James. His work emphasises the expressive power of the body and its emotional resonance, combining improvised dance with improvised music to create a cross-artistic experience. In his projects, dancers and musicians work together to create improvised moments that create a resonance through the melodies of improvised music and the movements of improvised dance. James' practice highlights the interactive nature of improvised dance with other art forms, emphasising the close relationship between body language and music. In contrast to my emphasis on environmental and natural elements, James explores the emotional dimension of improvised art through the interaction of music and dance.

The contrast between these two dancers' practice projects and mine demonstrates the diverse and groundbreaking nature of improvised dance in art making. These contrasts highlight improvised dance as a vast field that can be expressed and practiced through different elements and methods.

Conclusion

The central theme of improvised dance, the creative process itself, has been comprehensively and profoundly elaborated in the in-depth discussions in this paper. Improvisational dance as an immediate exploration of the possibilities of human movement emphasises the creative process as the central essence of dance. By examining my personal project practice, we were able to gain a deep understanding of the impact of improvised dance on dancer creativity and audience interaction. My project practice highlights the value of improvised dance as a creative, evolving creative process that demonstrates the richness of human movement and emotion. In this personal practice, I have emphasised that improvised dance is not only an art form, but also a creative experience that engages with the audience and provides a wider creative space for the art of dance.

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