

IMPROVISATION — EXAMINED AND PRACTICED AT THE AMERICAN DANCE GUILD CONVENTION

by
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For once, side issues and fringe companies took center stage for four days in June, 1980, at the national convention of the American Dance Guild. Held in middle America, at the University of Minnesota, there were some 70 lecturers and companies performing, teaching, leading discussions or presenting papers to some 300 dancers and dance educators gathered from all over the U.S.

Officially, the theme was "Dance as Art Sport", a phrase coined several years ago by Simone Forti, the avant garde dancer, suggesting new words for what she was doing. What was emphasized was improvisation. Anna Halprin was the recipient of the American Dance Guild Award, a prestigious acknowledgement of a life-time of provocative work. With her architect husband Lawrence Halprin (who designed the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv) she has developed a whole style of enormous group happenings she now calls rituals. Halprin conducted a group "ritual" for the finale of the Guild convention, a fascinating and moving conclusion to the highstrung, exhilarating four days.

The participant had a hard time choosing between the four simultaneous offerings of classes, workshops, and even performances. Participants literally ran around the campus, trying to watch and do as much as possible. Besides detailed accounts of the counter-culture in dance during the past twenty-five years in America, there were also more conventional how-to classes dealing in Alexander technique, Mable Todd alignment workshops, Feldenkrais lessons daily, as well as workshops on preventing dance injuries, video tapes and dance, basic Laban kinetic approach to teaching children and even Laban movement choirs outside.

Robert Moulton, a choreographer on the faculty of the U. of Minn., staged a dance for all those pedestrians and actual conference participants who chanced to watch from the enormous bridge spanning the Mississippi River (which runs through the university campus). From the river banks below, theatre and dance students waved enormous ribbons and streamers. Those watching on the bridge were free to answer the movement signals if they so wished, making the dance at once improvisational and part of the river scenery.

Other performance events included the Improvisational Dance Ensemble headed by Richard Bull of New York. Their work was surprisingly witty and unified, appearing to be very planned and choreographed. Bull explained that this look comes of the years the three dancers have spent working together and the constant use in movement of the improvisational forms used in jazz music. Other groups showed their totally co-operative, democratic creations or those governed by many elements of chance.

The video workshop with movement was an example of the fine quality of the workshops. Four different "porta-paks" or hand-held video cameras with monitors (television sets for instant viewing of the video-tapes being made) were situated in an emptied dining room in one of the University dormitories. Lisa Nelson, an American dancer and filmmaker working mainly in England, gave the 40 participants a jiffy lesson in how to film video tapes, stressing that the camera can take a part in the actual choreography by the way it is moved as well as by what it chooses to film of the movement. In the workshop, a group of dancers created together a dance which was viewed by others who had to learn it by watching in order to perform it. Others took turns viewing the monitor in order to try to approximate the filming that was being done by a cameraman. The roles constantly switched until a participant had passed through all experiences from learning the dance to performing it to watching the screen and then actually filming the dance. One person could perceive the challenge of all those professions — dancers, choreographer and filmmaker through one small workshop session.

By far the most provocative speaker was Steve Paxton. He gave the keynote address and also performed in an improvised evening-long concert with Lisa Nelson. Paxton himself has years of familiarity with the unfamiliar, first as a member of the Merce Cunningham Company, then as a founding member of the experimental Judson Church Dance Theatre in New York during the early '60's and a performer in the co-operative The Grand Union. Paxton originated the idea of "contactworks" or "contact improvisation", a democratic duet and group format incorporating

elements of martial arts, sports, social dancing and children's game playing. By the late '70's this had spread throughout America, to England and other places in Europe.

In his address, Paxton said that improvisation in dance "is arcane, or understood only by those having a special secret knowledge". By this he seemed to say that only a new kind of dancer could understand the mystical meanings and uses of improvisation, which is really nothing more than movement on the spur of the moment. "Improvisation allows you a chance to glance at yourself, as if from the side, because you arrive at undetermined risky movements you have no way of planning. A result is that weight propels you forward faster than your mind can and you're dancing more freely, outside of habitual channeled movements."

Photography has made an impact on dance that Paxton thinks is very important. Finding the images these days is what dancers must really be concerned with, and that is also what photography does, said Paxton. "One hundred years ago, when movement first started to be photographed or stopped, there was no clear sense of what movement was. Now it can be stopped, done backwards, made faster or slower by tools of the media, and we are bombarded with movement images. We need to examine images and information not with our heads but with what is in our bodies, through improvisation. Ironically, improvising is to use the wrong tool, the conscious mind, in order to find out what other parts of the body already know."

Every day there were contact improvisation sessions, based on falling, leaning, tossing, pushing physicality. Some of these sessions included over 200 participants at once, totally filling the room with writhing dancers. Although obviously a thinker, Paxton is also a charismatic pace-setter and he convinced many who were experiencing improvisation for the first time.

"Part", a dance for Paxton and Lisa Nelson, was performed at Walker Art Center, showing the dancers in their own environment — a totally improvised full-length duo-conceived dance. Paxton was a blind person, on his way, meeting up with a strange Charlie Chaplin figure wearing a skirt who guided him through his life journey. The movement was continuous, with absolutely no break, and it was extraordinary and compelling. It presented characters, impressions and images that one could identify with. The images were strong (even including a pieta) and yet fleeting and unrepeatable as the dancers reversed roles.

Anna Halprin explained during a panel discussion on the problems of improvisation in performance that her own dance training had required that she absorb many "imprints" like the Graham technique or the Humphrey-Weidman technique. Trained in the traditional dance studio manner, she realized that there must be a basic way to move outside these patterns. Improvisation was her way of discovering other manners of movement. Years ago she set up "disarming situations" for herself in order to discover the unexpected. "When dealing with who we were there was a lot of emotional material that emerged even if the activity we gave ourselves to do in the improvisation was only pushing a chair or carrying a log."

Halprin and her husband began collecting people from all kinds of professions at their mountain retreat in northern California, creating events on the seashore and the mountainsides.

"Since improvisation is a total surrender of the will, allowing spontaneous, risky, non-critical and unpredictable material, I eventually stopped doing improvisations. Instead, I do rituals, where the audience is a witness and a participant. We each become a part of a collective creativity, so that the performance is a creation, a statement and a manifest of the spirit, connecting art with life, so that we can grow and change and integrate the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental to become a whole person," said Halprin during the conference. One could understand how her charisma could carry thousands of people in city-wide events that have taken place in the last few years in San Francisco.

Again, it took seeing Halprin in action to understand the impact of her words. The closing ceremony, or "ritual", created by Halprin included drummers, flutists, stringed instruments and vocalists who chanted improvised music in a huge gymnasium. Halprin guided the convention participants with her voice, encouraging each person to improvise alone to the pulsing, sensuous music. Gradually, a rhythmic pattern was established and eventually the dancers joined hands, stamping and moving snaking lines as if part of a primitive rite. The group naturally parted around Paxton and Halprin who had been drawn to dancing together, he pitching her to the air as she seemingly tried to wrestle him to the ground. Those present felt they were watching the god and goddess of new dance struggling with their powers. Eventually the dancers merged into an enormous circle, everyone feeling in one last moment the high energy and excitement of dance improvisation and the Guild convention.