

Performing Improvisation – Joerg Hassmann

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Why I perform CI

In a good Contact Improv dance I experience myself as deeply and highly alive. That is also what I wish to achieve in my life: to find my ways to be alive. I love to invite other people into my enlivening world of dance. That's why I teach CI. And I still wonder if it is possible to share this aliveness with people, who only watch me dancing. That's why I am daring to perform CI based improvisations.

What I wish to happen in a performance

What I wish to happen in a dance performance is that the audience can anticipate an aliveness in all its qualities, which overcomes physical, social or psychological limitations of everyday life. I want a celebration of the moving body filled with a soul, which is leaking out of all pores. I want the explosion of energy and emotion as well as the calmness and silence, which lets me hold my breath to witness a twinkle of an eye. I love the juicy and meaty fullness of movement and touch with the complete lack of hesitation, the body as a strong and soft animal. I love to see precise and perfect movements (although I like a cat better than a ballet dancer.) I love to see the beauty of human beings, when they give or throw themselves with all they have into the dance. I want to see people, who are longing to explore their potential; who are curious about their limits; who take risks; who allow themselves to make mistakes; who dare to share their failures, who dare to stay vulnerable on stage.

What I found for myself as a performer of improvisation is: I want to give all that I just described and I have the huge fear that I won't make it. The only way for me to maybe get there on stage is my honest permission that nothing spectacular has to happen. It is a paradox, as in all big truths. To let go in order to find, and nobody knows what.

The fear of failing

I actually started writing about "the miracle of finding" first. But I realized that before I can get there I have to deal with the fear of failing, because the fear appears first.

Ilanit Tadmor, a choreographer and remarkable improviser from Tel Aviv said: "I need some fear when I go on stage." I think she is right. I need the desire to be good, to give all I have, to find something and to make it available for the audience. Otherwise I shouldn't go on stage. But that naturally includes a lot of fear. What if I don't succeed? There is a lot to lose. I show a lot from 'me', when I perform, especially when I fail. People see my weak or dark sides, which I usually hide as well as I can. I might lose status. People think I am unprofessional, a bad performer or just stupid. I might harm my career. People who see me won't take my workshops or ask me to work with them. They might not love me anymore. Others avoid me, because they don't know how to express that they don't appreciate what I did, without hurting me. And I have to deal with feeling bad and embarrassed.

But how can we deal with this fear of failing when we are on stage to improvise? Basically there are three options. The common one is to run away from the fear. Stephanie Maher, a well known Contacter and improviser from America based in Berlin, quoted: "Don't follow the Adrenalin on stage! It is the fuel of fear." Adrenalin enables us to run away very quickly to save our lives and forget about everything else. Our muscles work blindly. Muscles are contracting and in improvisation especially our brain muscle. The brain works like crazy between doubting and creating something new. The ability to hear any real impulses is blocked. And so we invent things, have ideas, we make something up, which is not connected to where and who we are. We blow up the nothing and shape it with our artistic tools, running from one effect to the next, while feeling more and more hollow because we feel we are not giving and sharing anything but our well shaped and hidden fear.¹ The second way to deal with the fear is to go into it or to fight it. I am not completely sure how this works. It is not my way. But it is definitely possible to use this huge energy of the fear and put it fully into the dance until it is used up. It is another way to eventually arrive at oneself.

¹ Usually the fear leads me into a pushing energy. I start looking for good ideas. I want to entertain. Feeling chased I exercise beautiful or artistic movements of my repertoire or more difficult movements, which I can only do when I am in the flow. Then I start bumping into people and hurting the floor. Or I make the audience laugh. It makes me feel that they like me and what I am doing, at least for a short moment. Or I start acting, using words, doing all the things that more easily transport sense than pure movement. All those things I am not really good at. And eventually I realize that I haven't given anything I wanted. I started with running away from the fear instead of trusting in what I have: myself and my body. For me this is the basic experience of performing or watching improvisation.

The third option is to allow that nothing interesting might happen on stage. This is of course my greatest fear: that nothing interesting might happen. It is everything but easy. It is like dying in advance. That's very awful but it is my favorite one because it is eventually the most satisfying. After I let go my wanting and my expectations I can enter an empty space, somehow feeling lost and empty but with a sensation of relief and a soft alertness. And then suddenly things fall into the empty space by itself, which are rooted in my actual being. So I can start a performance with a rather relaxed state of mind, being able to arrive in my body and listen what is there. I start with what I have and not with what I think I should achieve. It becomes easier through practice. I can build up trust through experiencing that it works. And I do it again and again in dancing, but also in teaching and living and eventually in performing.

Entering the emptiness and seeing what falls into it

This process of 'letting go – entering the emptiness – seeing what falls into it' can happen on very different levels and in very different intensities, and of course not only in the dance. It is a basic human experience. In the Christian religion it is symbolized by the cross, which stands for Jesus' death. He had to die in order to give space for new life. The Christians are supposed to anticipate this dying somehow: In my understanding through giving up their controlled ideas of how life should be and allow love to take over to lead their lives. I suppose this is the basic experience of all religions. The Buddhists meditate to let go their wanting and their attachment to things, people and ideas in order to find the fullness within the emptiness.

Anyway, it is a very basic principle, in which we can also find in tiny things.

- Sometimes I can't remember someone's name. But in the moment I let it go and accept that I can't remember it with will power, and the name finds me.
- We practice listening to the rolling point of contact instead of planning or knowing the pathway in advance. If we get into it, it feels like the point of contact has its own will and leads both of us into a new land.
- In Alexander Technique people practice so called "inhibition". When I realize I execute a movement pattern, which I wish to overcome, I hold in for a moment, interrupt the mechanism and give space for my body to find its own way to continue. On a non-dramatic level it is listening into a moment of emptiness. The magic is: there is always something arising. It might be beautiful or disturbing but somehow true and valuable, because it is rooted in myself

The state of intuition

I think this 'letting-go-finding' thing is a key to get to the level of intuition. Once we are there it is being close to heaven. Intuition is a state beyond the hard work of choice. There is no doubt, nor hesitation. There is just knowing - or better noticing - that everything I do is perfectly right. Everything is available and possible. My body serves me in a better way than I imagined was possible. It is a state of extreme awareness and flow.

How to get into the state of intuition (on stage)?

I don't know how to work on it directly. It seems to be more the subtext of the regular work and practice, which helps to build up the necessary trust to make it easier to step into the nothing. But I need to want it. I don't give up. It is in the back of my head. I know the taste of it and I am sensitive when this kind of smell is in the air. It is an underlying atmosphere of my work. Allowing mistakes; going for curiosity; "finding" is more important than "following instructions"; the permission to say no; to stay honest in exercises; the priority of listening even in technical exercises; letting go the proposed pathways if they don't work without pushing; taking space to explore according to my actual needs and interests; being passionate in technical exercises, obsessed while knowing that there is hardly anything less important than this movement I try to learn; listening to physical sensations while working on a technical level - the physical sensation is what I always have, even in the emptiness.

The level of making choices

But of course, we are never safe. There is no safe way into the state of intuition. And we can also fall out of the heaven of intuition in every second. We can't force ourselves to let go. Intuition is out of reach for our will. For improvisation it seems to be necessary for most of us to build a safety net. We have to fill our toolbox with technical knowledge on a movement level as well as on an improvisation skill level. This is the level of choice. It saves us when we fall out of the intuitive state and it might also open doors into it.

The level of choice is our reality. It is the level we are working on all the time. It is the base. On this level I want to reach the ability that I can choose between at least two options in every moment of my dance. Otherwise I am trapped, I am a victim or a machine. The art of making choices in an improvisation is to really make them and to go forward towards the next choice. It is like discovering a huge house. I stand in the entrance hall with many doors. It is good to stay there for a while to look at the different kinds of doors, maybe I can hear something behind one door or smell, or one looks more inviting and another one scares me for some reason. This moment before choice is great. I become aware of all the many options I have. But if I want something to happen I have to open one door and enter and discover the room behind it. Actually the house of improvisation is magical. Sometimes the door I passed will disappear or it changes. When I go out of it again the entrance hall might have transformed into a little chamber or into a winter garden. That includes that every choice I make is in some way very painful, because I destroy all other options and they might never come back.

The worst I can do is to doubt my choice. Doubt is the voice of fear. It leads to a judgemental state. It is the contracting brain muscle at its best, closing all doors. I start to imagine what great things I might have missed or I focus on all the things I don't like about the room I am in. So I start to sit down and cry and complain (which is also a choice). But the great thing about this magical house is that every room has other doors and that I can choose again. The more tools I have, the more interesting details I can find in a room and the easier I know how to use and to enjoy the things I find. I'll be able to discover more doors. I'll get a better sense for which door might be good for me.

Anyway, we have to work on our tools to widen our range, to have more options in our body-movement and body-mind systems, to keep on learning, growing and staying curious. The decisions we'll make on stage are basically from the improv-composition skill toolbox. The solo and CI technique will be most of the time used intuitively by our body to serve our compositional choices and to make the impossible possible.

What I actually experience when I enter the stage is this:

If I managed to let go my wanting and my fear of failing, my body is first in a low intuitive level. Let's say after a good warm up it functions well and is able to provide my movement patterns in a nice way. I can start playing with making compositional choices, arriving in the space with the other dancers and with the audience. Having an easy base. But at some point and not too late I need to get my body strongly involved in physical sensations, in really moving and in a listening state. The body should become the motor. There are those moments when the body takes over. It gives the quality, the passion, the richness, the emotions to the dance. Then the mind serves the body with the appropriate compositional knowledge - sometimes more with conscious choices and sometimes purely intuitively.

When I perform I feel that I have to cope with the impossible challenge (Überforderung) to be aware of what's going on in 4 different fields:

1. me
2. me and the person I am dancing with
3. all the other performers and the room
4. the audience (for more details see the lists below).

And in all fields there is the physical-movement aspect as well as the relational-emotional side. On all levels there are continuously choices to be made. Many, many more than my conscious brain can deal with. So in some ways most choices are made intuitively anyway. The problem is that this kind of intuition is usually strongly linked to my patterns and automatisms, which are not in dialogue with the situation.

In order to make decisions that fit the needs of the actual situation I help myself with a jumping focus. I visit and revisit the most important compositional sights randomly with my consciousness. It is like being a host for a party in a house. People playing or singing dancing or talking in different rooms. But there is a light problem. Once I switch on the light in one room it slowly fades away so I have to come back there after a while that my guests don't get lost in the darkness. If the party goes well people will start to turn on the lights themselves. My experience is that once I visit - lets say the level of 'me and the group' my body will keep on providing some awareness for this field for some time. Then I jump to 'me and my body' ... It is the best I can do when I am in the state of making choices. But once I offered my body to take over and if am lucky he took it, I enter the intuitive level, where I am present on all fields and I am more or less witnessing the choices which are made by me.

(I wish to add a graphic here about the 4 rooms ... sometime)

My tools for performing CI

In order to have more options to choose from I need many different tools, and I need to be able to use them well. There are three different but connected fields of explorations. I just name them. (To get into details would need another 5 pages)

1. solo movement technique
2. contact technique
3. improvisation and compositional skills

Transistor radios and gramophones

All my tools I can only use properly on stage when I manage to find a way not to be driven by my fear of failing. I'd like to finish this text with an image I found how to make the first step on stage.

First of all I like to remind myself that there is no reason that anything special will happen when I enter the stage. Where should it come from? I am a very normal person and I don't bring anything particularly special with me – just my wish to find a way to give everything I have and my fear of failure. But as a concrete substance there is nothing yet. The things that are really happening are usually very small. My problem is to hear them because their voices are so low and the noise of expectation is so loud. It is as if my body is an old transistor radio with bad antenna. Basically I hear the sound of static – white noise. It feels as if the audience with its expectations and my own pressure to be good enough for them creates this 'white noise'. The fear is real. I need to acknowledge it. Somehow I have a short conversation with the fear: "Hello fear. I see that you are there. What do you want to tell me?" The fear might talk about the danger of failing, of being seen in my weaknesses. What I can say is: "I have heard you. But now I want to concentrate on listening to the other voices". And that's what I do. I try different stations with my transistor radio, make some first fine tunings with this little wheel and I direct the antenna in the best position. Eventually I might find a position where I can hear a tune, still in bad quality. And as I start listening to the tune, maybe humming it, the 'white noise' seems to become less. Before the times of Hi-fi people were so happy about gramophones. They could see the orchestra playing in their imagination and then hear it in perfect quality. I think what happens while performing is, that I focus on listening. I start to hear a tune in my body, I hum it and the audience gratefully takes this invitation and enters my world. The white noise disappears. The world of fear and expectation dissolve. The performance finds its base and the music can grow in all possible directions.