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## Artistic Expression Through the Performance of Improvisation

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Artistic Expression  
Through the  
Performance of Improvisation

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DANC 459 Senior Thesis Preparation

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Dance improvisation is the act of creating and performing movement spontaneously, without premeditated thoughts, allowing the artist to explore personal expression, creativity, and freedom. Improvisation can be discovered in a classroom environment, in a rehearsal, and even in a performance setting. Whenever a dancer participates in improvisational tasks, he or she draws from personal experience in order to explore and demonstrate individualism. The role of the dancer in improvisation is to move honestly and genuinely, establish an open-minded approach, and allow risks to be taken. The role of the teacher/choreographer, on the other hand, is to regulate the improvisation, through establishing tasks and creating a safe environment, without limiting the creative flow and endless possibilities that occur. A performance that uses improvisation is not intended to achieve the visual aesthetic that audiences are used to observing; rather, this type of performance is centered around a process in which the dancer experiences challenges, adrenaline, freedom, mistakes, and successes. Dance improvisation in the creative and performative processes requires intense practice, creativity, and risk-taking, which greatly affects the dancer's artistic expression, provides freedom and confidence during exploration, forces dancers to be vulnerable in pressurized situations, and proposes variation and curiosities for both performers and audience members.

Dance improvisation in a class or rehearsal setting provides dancers with a safe space in which individuals can experience the endless possibilities of dance through exploration and discovery. As dancers delve into improvisational procedures, the teacher/choreographer must understand the role he or she plays in the experimental realm of this movement process. Daniel Nagrin, author of *Dance and the Specific Image: Improvisation*, stated, "The director/teacher has enormous power, particularly in channeling the minds of the dancers/students toward expected results. [...] I feel my role is to open up areas of imagination, and not subjects of imagination."

<sup>1</sup> It is very important for a teacher/choreographer to understand their role in the creative process of improvisation in order for influence and bias to be minimal during the dancers' creative exploration. Once the teacher/choreographer establishes their role in the class or rehearsal process, the dancer is able to focus solely on the tasks presented and the movement that grows from the exercises. In *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, editors Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere include accounts from multiple educators, such as Susan Leigh Foster, who discusses the idea of the known and unknown in improvisation. Foster explains, "The known includes: the set of behavioral conventions established by the context in which the performance occurs [...] any predetermined overarching structural guidelines [...] an individual body's predisposition to move in patterns of impulses [...] and] that which has already occurred previously in the performance of improvising."<sup>2</sup> This idea of the "known" explains the aspects of improvisation that the dancer embodies prior to the exploration period, further informing the dancer's movement discoveries. In other words, each dancer enters improvisation with innate, "known" qualities that affect the experience and process of the improvisation. Foster also explains, "The unknown [...] is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, and extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be 'taken by surprise.'"<sup>3</sup> This concept of being "taken by surprise" is key for the effectiveness of improvisation as both a tool for creation and a performative experience. Improvisation incorporates the implicit movement style of a dancer while relying heavily on the spontaneity of the exploration. Practice in improvisation, through class and rehearsal, is monumental in the growth of a dancer, both as a performer and an individual. The effects of such a practice of

discovery and risk-taking create a process that benefits the dancer physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Individuals experience a variety of effects through the continuous practice of improvisation. According to Georgette Schneer, author of *Movement Improvisation*, “‘Freedom,’ ‘confidence,’ and ‘better feeling toward myself’—these are benefits mentioned over and over again as rewards for the regular practice of improvisation.”<sup>4</sup> The mind and spirit are affected greatly by improvisation, increasing the amount of self-assurance and open-mindedness an individual embodies. As much as the emotional and mental states are transformed by improvisation, the physical body is also greatly changed by this type of dance study. Schneer discusses the physical effects of improvisation and states, “[...] although there may be many other good technical dancers, you will have exceptional quality as a performer. You will have this because, while you are adding to your improv[isation]s here to make them grow, they are growing you.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the physicality that is discovered and transformed in improvisation also increases the maturity and growth of the dancer as a whole. The concepts of growth, confidence, and freedom that are produced by improvisation can be employed in a dancer’s daily life as well. Schneer also explains, “Our society gradually cramps and stifles movements until we lose our original freedom and instead become inhibited and self-conscious. In a society fearful of unconventional expressive movement, improvisation is a return to freedom; it is a revival of the natural ability of the body to produce a million movements of varying strength, intensity, nuance, and dynamic.”<sup>6</sup> As discussed in this previous citation, individuals experience fear and challenges in many real-life situations. Dancers have the ability to utilize improvisational tasks to release tension and stress that are a manifestation of life experiences. Improvisation allows dancers to translate freedom of movement and expression to their lives outside of the dance world.

Through the process of improvisation, dancers are eventually able to recognize and embrace the growth and development in their minds and bodies. Schneer presents multiple reflections of individuals who have participated in various improvisation processes, giving readers insight into the thoughts and experiences of dancers. Schneer provides:

One dancer explains,

What improvisation is to me is having an idea or a feeling and expressing it nonverbally. It's seeing where the idea takes me-seeing what grows out of it. As long as you can hold an idea in your head, whatever you do has beauty to it. It never looks phony.<sup>7</sup>

Another dancer reveals, "I've learned to go into my artistic self, to trust my inner life and impulses, allowing myself to touch and be touched by others - both physically and artistically."<sup>8</sup> An additional dancer's insight is presented, "The end result of improvising that I've experienced is greater confidence; [a] deeper understanding of myself and others; more effective, assertive behavior; a sense of freedom and empowerment."<sup>9</sup>

Although each dancer expressed different experiences with improvisation, each received results that improved their physical, emotional, and mental states in relation to dance. Spontaneity of improvisation and how impulsive thoughts can be used to create movement are two ideas that are discovered in the students' exploration process. Each of the dancers also acknowledged the growth of his/her personal artistry through the discovery of improvisation and new movement vocabulary. One of the dancers revealed that improvisation can bring awareness and intimacy to a group of dancers as well. It is important to not only understand personal exploration of a dancer, but also recognize the artistic choices and expression of other dancers in the space. The

effects of improvisation on an individual were mutually discussed in each students' reflection. Improvisation allows for many dancers to experience a sense of growth, individualism, creativity, and freedom. The accounts revealed by these dancers reinforces the effects of this type of creative and performative process, which further encourages individuals to participate in the experience of improvisation as a way to discover freedom and creativity.

Specifically in a performance setting, improvisation provides a liberating, adrenaline-filled, creative, nerve-racking, spontaneous experience that forces dancers to overcome their fears and dance for personal satisfaction rather than focusing solely on the needs of the audience. In *The Moment of Movement*, authors Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, explain, "Improvising in front of an audience can be unsettling, and your usual responsive, spontaneous creativity can dry up like a mirage [...] you are in performance and must see it through for better or worse. [...] The biggest danger for improv in performance is that it can get boring fast; lacks a reason for being; has no internal structure; or becomes self-indulgent."<sup>10</sup> Dancers may experience doubt when it comes to aesthetic appeal and execution of movement. Improvisation completely disregards these concerns, and instead, emphasizes artistic freedom, imperfection, and the overall process rather than the product or end result. Blom and Chaplin further argue, "[...] improvisation-in-performance for the performer-artist is hardly easy. Each improviser must keep her body tuned to its utmost, without the luxury of being able to concentrate on the specific skills needed for any given dance or movement in a set repertory."<sup>11</sup> It is very important for the dancer to establish a sense of technique and spatial awareness in order to create a strong and successful foundation for improvisation in a performance setting. During such a performance, experienced improvisers feel an array of emotions while creating and taking risks in front of an audience. Nagrin reveals that dancers "find an excitement in the challenge of trying not to be

beautiful, to be successful, to be liked by the audience [...] The anxiety arises from detecting the slightest infringement of new noble commandments and whipping themselves, mentally, during an improvisation.”<sup>12</sup> An experienced improviser does not focus solely on the effect or aesthetic of the improvisation for the audience, but rather moves beyond mistakes or flaws to gain the most benefit and experience from the performance. Along with accepting the successes and failures of artistry and freedom on stage, the dancers must also be fully aware of the environment and other dancers sharing the space. Albright and Gere provide another account from Foster in which she reinforces, “Shared by all improvisers in a given performance, embodied consciousness enables the making of the dance and the dance’s making of itself.”<sup>13</sup> A performance may be a spontaneous improvisation, but the composition of such a work remains an important factor in the aesthetic and overall result. The awareness of the structure and dancers in an improvised performance is as crucial as the organic and impulsive movement being presented.

Improvisation is a performative tool that embraces creative decisions and personal investigation without the sole intention of entertaining the audience for a specific choreographic or visual aesthetic. Schneer argues, “It’s nice to create a performance and have people pay and clap and applaud, but it’s more about sharing the dance of life with people.”<sup>14</sup> Many people believe that dance is merely an entertainment art in which performers adhere to the needs of the audience. Blom and Chaplin refute this belief in stating that improvisation “emphasizes process, and performance by definition emphasizes product, therefore, here is one instance where process becomes product ...”<sup>15</sup> Improvisation-in-performance focuses on the dancers’ experiences, implying that the individuals create a piece that provides the audience with surprising twists in composition, rather than traditional, predictable movement. Foster reveals that in a performance

“the tension among what was happening, what might happen next, and how that choice would influence the overall shape of the piece electrified the performance.”<sup>16</sup> This type of performance provides the audience with curiosities, resulting in different perspectives and reviews of such shows. Nagrin explains, “The structure may be the same, but if it is a true improvisation, what goes into it and what comes out of it will be different and novel each time.”<sup>17</sup> This statement can be applied directly to improvisational performances and the viewpoints of audience members. Because improvisation includes spontaneity, an improvised performance may not appeal to every audience member. Although this may result in mixed reviews, the intent of the performance is focused on the dancers’ experiences rather than the audiences’ opinions. Audience members who are open to this type of performance will gain insight into the experience of the dancers through a genuine and honest movement portrayal of life experiences.

During creative and performative processes that employ improvisation, dancers experience intense practice, creativity, and risk-taking, which greatly influences the dancer’s freedom and confidence during exploration, artistic expression, vulnerability in various settings, and variation and curiosities for audiences. As Nagrin expresses, “Performance of improvisation for a dance audience is possible, desirable and potentially as rewarding as any dance experience, and like other dance forms it must be preceded by a long period of practice. There is no denying that performing improvisation is difficult. It requires a specific talent, an enormous amount of integrity, many hours of work in the studio before public exposure, a company that is bound together by trust in each other, and a director who can maintain the delicate balance between ruthlessly weeding out the false and meretricious and giving the dancers the freedom and the courage to take risks.”<sup>18</sup> Improvisation is created from spontaneous thoughts and decision-making. It also includes influence from personal experience in order to explore individual

artistry. The dancer's role in improvisation is to express genuine and honest movement that demonstrates risk-taking and freedom. The teacher/choreographer regulates the improvisation, but must understand the boundary that allows dancers to explore and discover without influence or limitations on movement. Improvisation-in-performance focuses on the process and experience of the dancer rather than the immediate aesthetic desires or needs of audience members. Once a dancer removes the idea of audience approval and expectation, the individual can experience the improvisational performance with an open mind and a freedom of expression and personal artistry.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Nagrin, *Dance and the Specific Image: Improvisation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 157.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere, *Taken By Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Georgette Schmeer, *Movement Improvisation: In the Words of a Teacher and Her Students*, (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1994), 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Moment of Movement: Dance Improvisation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), 121.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Nagrin, *Dance and the Specific Image*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Albright and Gere, *Taken By Surprise*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Schmeer, *Movement Improvisation*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Blom and Chaplin, *The Moment of Movement*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Albright and Gere, *Taken By Surprise*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Nagrin, *Dance and the Specific Image*, 168.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

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