Ensemble Thinking:
Compositional Strategies for Group Improvisation

by Nina Martin

NINA MARTIN has been a dedicated force in the development of postmodern dance as a performer, choreographer, organization builder, and teacher. For nearly twenty years she worked in New York City as a professional dance artist and major activist in the downtown dance community, teaching and performing contact improvisation and creating dance works for Nina Martin/Performance. In 1995, Martin cofounded Lower Left, instigating a postmodern aesthetic in dance and community philosophy in southern California. Since 2001 she has been carving out a dance destination in remote Far West Texas, where she continues her collaboration with Lower Left.

Over the last thirty years, Nina has developed training systems called Ensemble Thinking, Articulating the Solo Body, and ReWire: Dancing States. Martin's improvisational systems emphasize compositional forms within the ensemble, tightening reaction time, and breaking habituated patterns. The skills acquired in these training systems are a means to an end— ***improvisational performance.***

Ensemble Thinking is an improvisational training system that facilitates the creation of a performance language, wherein creative choices made by the individual performer can be understood and acted on by the group. Ensemble Thinking enables the performer to produce clear choices and avoid the bane of improvisation: "mush" (when there are no primary compositional concerns being articulated/recognized by the group, and complexity overwhelms everyone's efforts). By facilitating the group toward conscious composition, Ensemble Thinking creates a satisfying scaffold with which to frame the individual performer's efforts.

HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENT

I began my studies of ensemble improvisation in New York City in 1976. At that time, I was studying with Simone Forti, working with simple movement vocabulary on an imaginary grid on the floor for long stretches of time. I also studied with Mary Overlie, who was developing her Viewpoints Theory, and Nancy Topf, whose ensemble work was influential for many dance artists. And I began to study Contact Improvisation in early 1977 with Danny Lepkoff. Though I had never studied with them, I understood that Barbara Dilley, Anna Halprin, and others had influenced the improvisational work that I was studying in New York. I also took theater workshops with the Wooster Group and Andre Gregory, and joined the faculty of New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing, where I worked with Anne Bogart, Steve Wong, Wendell Beavers, and Overlie.

In the early eighties, I cofounded the improvisational performance collective Channel Z with Robin Feld, Stephen Petronio, Daniel Lepkoff, Randy Warshaw, Diane Madden, and Paul Langland. We all had enough experience as improvisers to articulate sophisticated concerns regarding improvisation for the stage. Since Contact Improvisation (CI) was a common vocabulary within Channel Z, the group quickly identified practices within the CI form that did not always support our ensemble goals. For example, we didn't want to confine ourselves primarily to duets, and we wanted to animate the edges of the performance space.

Teaching improvisation successfully requires an honest and fearless environment for the work to reach a sophisticated level.

photo © Bill Arnold

Nina Martin warming up before a pickup Contact performance at Movement Research, Ethnic Folk Arts Center, NYC, c. 1986.

We went on to develop work that continued to emphasize our passion for Contact Improvisation but within an ensemble sensibility. Within this nonhierarchical cauldron of anarchy, my perceptions were honed, and improvisation became a reliable and exciting performance tool.

In the early nineties, I continued my improvisational investigations in NYC with Locktime, a group whose primary artists were Jennifer Keller, Johanna Meyer, Alexandra Hartmann, and me. In 1994, I cofounded Lower Left in San Diego, CA, with Karen Schaffman, Mary Reich, and Jane Blount. This innovative West Coast collective grew to include Andrew Wass, Kelly Dalrymple, Margaret Paek, Rebecca Bryant, Alicia Marvan, Jessica Radulavich, and others. Over the years, my work with all these artists helped me develop a systematic approach to dissecting the elements that make up this unwieldy and challenging dance form, which lives in the spontaneous moment.

In addition to my studies and performance experiences, my approach to improvisation developed out of my teaching of Contact Improvisation. I started teaching CI in NYC at the invitation of Christina Svane in 1977. As I witnessed my students' struggles as they approached Contact as a performance language, I was inspired to develop tools that eventually came to be known as Ensemble Thinking (ET) and Articulating the Solo Body, which help the performer move seamlessly between ensemble, Contact, and solo dancing. The development of ET would not have been possible without the hundreds of students who were willing participants in my exploration. Many of these students went on to become artistic colleagues and to make contributions to the further development of this training tool.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Success in creating an improvisational ensemble sensibility requires creating an environment that is both rigorous and artistically open. I describe "openness" as the state in which participants feel empowered to risk putting their ideas forward and free to follow their desires. "Rigor" is the state in which mutually identifiable formal compositional concerns are generated in order to support the "free and spontaneous" nature of improvisational theater.

My hope is that Ensemble Thinking can be not only a tool for making improvised dance but one that facilitates the teaching of it. In my experience guest-teaching at many colleges, I've found that improvisation is often put into the curriculum (sometimes only for one semester) because it will help the dancers' choreography, rather than as an artistic language in its own right. Often the faculty member assigned to teach the course is untrained in improvisation and may be nervous or fearful of teaching it. I speak to this issue of fear because teaching improvisation successfully requires an honest and fearless environment for the work to reach a sophisticated level. There needs to be an atmosphere of learning on everyone's part, even the teacher's.

The book *IMPRO* (1979), written by Keith Johnstone of Theatresports fame, was important to my development as a courageous teacher. Mr. Johnstone suggests that if one is asking for creativity, openness, and risk taking from the students, then one has to dare to be creative and open as a teacher as well. He goes on to suggest that only the inept, bungling fool can teach improvisation well, because when the teacher is not the expert, the students are empowered to be their own authority. I have learned that one of the

most effective phrases I can say to a class with a hundred questions on the tips of their tongues is, "I don't know, I have never done this before," or "I'm not sure how this is going to work out, let's try it and see." Immediately I see the surprise, then an attentional shift that seems to say, "If she doesn't know what we're doing, I better take some responsibility or there is no telling where we'll end up!" By daring to be in the learning along with my students, I invite them as partners in the quest into the unknown.

A second essential ingredient in the studio is rigor. Improvising doesn't mean we don't have objectives, however open-ended they might be. But to identify objectives as an ensemble, we must become like scientists in the lab, creating an atmosphere that allows us to discriminate between successful and less successful experiments. This attitude of rigor helps students lose their fear of failure and encourages them to work boldly and to learn through trial and error what is and is not helpful toward our goal of ensemble improvisation. Experiencing and understanding what doesn't work is as essential to our development as seeing what does work. Our job as improvisers is to understand why ideas work, what process brought us to that outcome, and how we can consistently return to the identified process so that it becomes a familiar tool.

Experiments must be rigorous to move the work forward, but rigor is a tricky master. When does one persevere in the search for solutions, and when does one move on to another idea? (There is no better sound than to hear students heave a sigh of relief when I say, "It's not working, let's try something else.") It is my responsibility as the guide to be a fearless eye for the group.

Rigor in improvising is supported by the principle of simplifying the composition when something is not working. As we enter our experiments where "pushing the envelope" is encouraged, we are always keeping an eye out for the moment when we enter "Improv Hell," where instead of the parts adding up to a whole, the whole breaks down into its parts. Ensemble Thinking helps the ensemble reorganize toward simplicity—finding a clarifying notion from which we can branch out again.

Because of the difficulty involved in performing spontaneous material in front of paying audiences, improvisers often make choices that will enhance their comfort and security rather than those that will maintain dramatic tension. It is important to acknowledge that the improvisation that is working is not necessarily one that is comfortable for the improviser. Audiences often delight in watching performers find their way out of tight or awkward places. I call this the "Romans watching the Christians improvise while being eaten by lions in the Colosseum." An embarrassed or otherwise compromised performer has great value. The challenge is to overcome our fear and be open to existing in a vulnerable position for our audience.

TEACHING CONCEPTS

In retrospect, I realize that those early years working "in the grid" and in other ensemble structures of Overlie, Forti, Dilley, and Topf were training me to be simple and to focus on the ensemble. The value of simplicity is integral to ET's usefulness as an improvisational tool. We emphasize simplicity first because decision making in improvisation happens in the moment, without the leisure of drawn-out deliberation. Simple choices allow for fast, intuitive action, which helps avoid the "amorphous space" and the "glacial timing" that too frequently occurs in group improvisations. (Amorphous space and glacial timing can be useful, but in Ensemble Thinking, we would strive to make them conscious choices rather than the default.)

It is crucial that everyone have a common understanding of what simplicity means, so that we can have a clear starting point for building an improvised language. Often complexity results in "mush"—material with an unfocused objective. Every individual who is added to a group brings an exponential degree of complexity; consequently, the larger the group, the greater the need for simplicity. This usually means fewer "great" ideas are required. In the training structures that follow, the performer learns how to make choices and respond to others in the simplest way possible in order to be on "quick time" as an ensemble.

One element of improvisational performance that can frustrate efforts toward coherent composition is "personal vocabulary," or focusing on the body's movement vocabulary within its kinesphere. I have found that even for performers with years of training, personal vocabulary trumps the group's compositional concerns much of the time. Similar to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, the more a performer is concerned with *what* her body is doing, the less she is aware of *where* she is in space or time. It is difficult, though not impossible, to simultaneously work on the microlevel of vocabulary while maintaining awareness at the macrolevel of the group's compositional goals.

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[left to right] Andrew Wass, Margaret Paek, and Kelly Dalrymple in Nina Martin's *I Know You Know;* CounterPULSE, San Francisco, December 1, 2006.

[left to right] Margaret Paek, Kelly Dalrymple *[supporting]*, and Andrew Wass in *I Know You Know;* San Francisco, December 2006.

As a step toward maintaining a macro-compositional awareness, I often employ the concept of "Straitjacket Dancing." In straitjacket dancing, one strips away vocabulary (composing in the kinesphere) and just uses simple, pedestrian locomotion (walking and running) and level changes. This allows performers to concentrate on the larger spatial composition. Like a dam holding back water until the pent-up water finally breaks through, we at first deny ourselves the pleasures of personal vocabulary in order to focus on other compositional concerns. Then, once group awareness is established, we can flood the improvisation with our individual movement vocabularies, text, stories, music, props, and wildest dreams. When we take the straitjacket off and indulge fully in whatever expressions we desire, we still have an ensemble frame to hold them. It is as if one has to earn one's freedom in order to appreciate it.

Constraining personal vocabulary forces the performer to work compositionally. However, taking personal vocabulary away from performers is like pulling a tiger's tooth without a sedative. In fact, defining "vocabulary" in this way is often an eye-opener for performers; they must be trained to recognize the difference between these macro- and micro-levels of attention. Educating the body/brain/mind of each member of the ensemble toward the aesthetics of simplicity is a helpful foundation before allowing the complexity of everyone's ideas to populate the improvisation.

TRAINING STRUCTURES

One Idea

The objective of "One Idea" is to have all the individuals agree on and exhibit one spatial idea. This structure helps to create a shared notion of compositional form. In One Idea we start with static space (still positions), because focusing on spatial forms while moving is very difficult for most performers. One Idea is the most basic training structure we use, and it's a real challenge for performers who value their individuality above all else. Somehow the individual must get past the fixation on being "the very creative individual" and move into the richness of an ensemble sensibility, where she is often required to do the obvious to support the group and the idea that is presented.

The One Idea structure goes like this: one person runs somewhere in the room and takes a position in the space, lying, sitting, or standing. Everyone else runs in sequentially to build on that idea. Persons 1, 2, and 3 are very important because they establish the spatial concept, such as a diagonal line, circle, random spacing, or any other idea they come up with. Persons 4, 5, 6, and 7 have less choice, as the idea is already formed, and it is their job to recognize and support it. If everyone gets into a line facing forward and one person faces backwards, then the viewer's awareness is drawn to the variation and away from the "one idea" because the human eye is drawn to variation. The variation is not a problem, but does the dancer understand that he has introduced an idea (opposite facing) that is adding complexity? Often the choice to complicate a composition is made unconsciously.

One Idea at the Martin family, in Austin, Texas, 1954, with the last one on the way. Nina sliding off the back of the Chevy.

photo courtesy of Nina Martin

Jam at SFADI 2004 (Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation). *[left to right]* Johanna Hulick, Lila Hurwitz, Katarina Erickson, Nina Martin, and Matthew Shyka *[horizontal]*.

photo © Tim Summers

Some students experience frustration in this exercise and feel "uncreative" because they don't feel fulfilled as individuals; they want to be different from the masses. From my experience teaching in different countries, I notice that the Japanese execute this exercise with ease because of their cultural emphasis on placing the needs of the group over those of the individual, while Americans often find it difficult, so acculturated to the supremacy of the individual that supporting an idea that is either not one's own or obvious is somehow uncreative. It is important for ensemble members to understand that their ideas of individual creativity can actually be a hindrance to the group effort, preventing the group from getting to more sophisticated work as an ensemble.

Composition is learned by *watching*, just as much, if not more, than by physically performing the improvisation. In ET we are primarily studying perception and observing patterns, which is often easier to do from the outside than from the inside. There may be some argument over what "one idea" is, but the goal is that the observers see a simple form that they don't have to puzzle over. In this beginning exercise, spatial relationship is the focus. The viewers are integral to the learning process. They call out suggestions, like "spacing," to remind the group or individual of the need to clarify the spatial relationship. This feedback from the observers helps the performers deepen their appreciation for maintaining compositional forms within the ensemble. Instead of locking in on her own idea, the performer is encouraged to visually read the stage space to be ready to support the emerging form. After watching the demonstration group, the observers take the stage, and invariably this second group succeeds in much less time because they have been learning it from the outside.

Once the groups are confident that they agree on what a simple spatial idea is, they can begin trying to move those ideas through space. This is tricky, because as soon as a performer moves, his focus often shifts from the One Idea in space to the personal vocabularies used to locomote through space—for example, "We are all jumping so we must be fulfilling one idea." Here, the personal movement vocabulary has trumped the spatial compositional idea. So, very early on, we are training the performer not to be seduced by vocabulary and thus be inattentive to group efforts to compose the space.

Another layer that can be added to this exercise is having two or three groups working the structure simultaneously —interweaving groups as they move through space and allowing performers to change groups. Now the straitjacket can come off as variations are welcomed—even to the point of having a "group of one." So, if you think you are making a choice to be with a group but end up alone, you can be confident in your "group of one," as you embody your solo space until you merge into another group. One Idea can be very satisfying as an improvisation; it can lay the foundation for spatial clarity and can also be useful as a way to tune the ensemble sensibility before performance. In a later exercise, "Completing the Form," performers are required to be radically individualistic within ensemble forms.

Status Work—Giving Focus

A structure that is often introduced after One Idea is "Giving Focus," adapted from Johnstone's "status work" for actors. This structure teaches that space has shifting dramatic values. Giving Focus begins with at least five volunteers and as many as seven. (Five, because that is the smallest number that is a group; one, two, three, and four are solo, duet, trio, and quartet, respectively, and are perceived as such. More than seven gets unwieldy and slow.)

The volunteers begin to work (while the other students watch) and are told that when one person's name is called, he is to simply be still and let the ensemble compose around him. Everyone else in the group must take an action to give that person "high status." Often, there is a person in the group who is unconsciously taking the focus

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