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Improvisation as Practicing Trust

Interview with Julyen Hamilton

Mish Rais, Mirka Eliášová, and Lizzy Le Quesne

Julyen Hamilton, originally from England, is a dancer, poet, musician, and teacher now based in Girona, Spain, and Athens, Greece. For nearly fifty years, Hamilton has been engaged in creating pieces on and for the stage, whether as a solo artist or in collaboration with other dancers, musicians, and artists from other fields; and as a director of Allen's Line – the Julyen Hamilton Company. Hamilton's engagement with improvisation has made him a renowned and leading figure in the discipline of instant composition worldwide with a generation of artists that follow his teaching and approach. He and his Company regularly perform throughout Europe, the latest work being the solo KOAN and GOAT OCEAN.

Michaela Raisová, Mirka Eliášová, and Lizzy LeQuesne are an international team of dance and theatre practitioners and pedagogues engaged in an international three-year academic research project (2021–2023) on the state of the art of dance and performance improvisation. The project 'Improvisation as a Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle' is a collaboration of a Czech dance artist Mirka Eliášová (Dance Department, Music and Dance Faculty, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), Czech theatre artist Michaela Raisová (aka Mish Rais, Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy, Theatre Faculty, Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), and British dance artist Lizzy Le Quesne (Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University). It involves in-depth interviews, in-studio workshops with professional and student dance and theatre artists, multiple publications (*ArteActa*, *Taneční Aktuality*, *Independent Dance*), and a forthcoming book of interviews and studies in both Czech and English (2023, NAMU). The project explores the practices and methodologies of six renowned international artists working in different ways with improvisational processes, and seeks to grasp terminology in the field. The three authors also have their own research focus and interest in this endeavour. Mirka Eliášová focuses on possibilities of choreography, Lizzy Le Quesne on political and ethical implications of the discipline, and Mish Rais on the multiple attention (of a performer, inner viewer and author) of the performer in the moment of improvising on stage.

Julyen Hamilton gave the following interview in person in February 2022 after a four-day workshop at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. In the interview, he describes his journey to improvisation and his approach to teaching 'making', as he



Fig. 1: Julyen Hamilton. From the performance PIO, Julyen Hamilton and dancers, PONEC Theatre, April 6, 2023. Photo Tereza Jakoubková.

understands improvisation. He shares terminology he uses and focuses on the main topics of his pedagogy.

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What was your journey to improvisation practice, and how did you become an improviser?

I was in a school play (I did all the school plays) when I was eight. A lot of text learning – and I had, in that instance, the main part. The first scene was [such]: one of the teachers, who played this part, had to read to me and I fell asleep. She got very nervous before the performance, went to the toilet, and didn't come out. Well, she did, but then [it was] too late. My friend, Andre Ptaszynski, who was playing the Frog Footman, came in on stage, because I was supposed to be asleep, and the cue didn't happen. And he bent over and said very quietly something like, 'She's still shitting herself, you better get up and get on with it.' And I suddenly felt that a world had opened up. I realised that on stage you often have to solve something, because somebody gave you a cue that was two scenes too early. There are people who close a bit but manage to solve it. So I went, 'Okay, now you're talking!' I had found my element.

Was there a moment you decided improvisation was your discipline, or tool, or space?

I made a lot of pieces of set material. I used to be very good and very quick at making set material, and I could make it for the early pieces of the company. I would just go in and make it, and I could remember it.

More and more, the proportions of set to improvised material had been changing until I was preferring to let only the instantly made material constitute the piece.

Having trained the ability to set and remember material, I think is significant. Handling set material over and over again trains senses of composition and phrasing – so useful in the mode of making instantly.

In the late 1970s, I worked with a wonderful choreographer, Rosemary Butcher. She made her pieces by allowing us to immediately respond to her instructions. And I was completely at ease with that from day one; totally trusted it, and she totally trusted me, which is the other 60 percent of it because it gave me confidence. That was basically when I started dancing, nearly. I was 20. This was early on, and it just felt like that was the bit of dancing where it was alive. Something was nearly secretly alive. It kind of asked something of me that was what I wanted to be.

Was that the moment you started training in this discipline?

I never trained in it, I never took improvisation classes, and I've never done an improvising workshop. I felt it as a talent and a voice, so I went deeply into it as a discipline and a way of making and performing.

It was the same for me becoming a solo performer. You don't become, you don't choose to become a soloist; you [either] are or not. And being a soloist is... it's not just choreography for one, it's a completely different interest and action. That's why every young dancer should make a solo to find out if they are that, if that interests them or not.

So I think I always knew how to do it. Which is what you should try and find in your life somehow to do what you were always good at. Of course, you train, and it develops; there's a discipline and a dedication over years.

When you realise that you can actually improvise, then you let go of a certain naivety towards it. And you place a demand on it, which is very serious, because you sign the contract with that gut instinct. At that moment, you step over into a sort of professionalism. You lose a certain naivety, and you advance towards a maturity. Which is a lot of work. These are the steps of an age of innocence, an age of experience, and then the mature state, according to William Blake. And that takes a bit of courage because you lose the first state as you go.

I think it's a case of what gets you excited. Making something spontaneously? Or do you get excited by the planning of it, and the details of it, and training to be able to do those details and going over them many times? Fantastic. A different world from mine, but I totally respect it. There's no easy road, in a way.

Maybe I never studied improvising except through many performances with other improvising dancers and musicians – and in my own classes. By teaching, you study. I'm really glad to have been able to like teaching. I've learned and am constantly learning in my classes. So, in that way, that's my study. And I'm not talking about learning from the students; I'm talking about actual revelations that come, because in the face of others who want to know, things can focus deeply, arriving often further along the road of discovery, and understanding, and ability.

When you do and teach your practice, do you have a fixed terminology or methodology?

My interest is not to teach improvisation. I'm an improviser because it's a way of being creative. Personally, it's pertinent, and I noticed it's very pertinent in the world now. So I have nothing to deny. My teaching work has formed itself into certain areas: the overall title is 'THEATRE WORKS' and the sections are:

- The Space Issue,
- Working with Time,
- Working with Objects,
- Voice and Text Work,
- Working with Music and Musicians.

My centre of attention is composition and making things: they are all areas, actions, abilities, tools, which help us in our composing, whether that is instant composing or pre-written composing.

I want people to take joyfully and seriously the action of creativity – that revelatory moment.

How do you understand the relationship between improvisation and choreography?

Both can be seen as the act of deciding movements in form, configuration ... and arrangement in space and context. For me improvising is the act of choreographing in the very moment of action and performance.

Maybe for some, choreography is a set of choices which take a longer time to be made, longer than choices made in the moment, especially in the moment of performance. When improvising, we are making choices, we are composing or choreographing. It might be that the mind is concerned at moments on the whole overall compositional context of the work ... or it might be more focused on the micro view of the action second by second. I have trained myself to be focused on both micro and macro awareness when improvising. Choreography for me is the act of taking care of all the elements which move on stage – decor, objects, people dancing, musicians moving.

When improvising on stage, do you work with imagery, and if so, what kind, and how do you use it?

For me, all actions on stage (be they improvised or pre-set) are being done and sensed with regard to the imagery which emanates from them. The very action of stepping on stage involves the perception of imagery at its radical and living level. The actor perceives these images and allows the public to sense them as well.

Of course, our business as creative artists, involves imagery and the imagination – both the actor's and the public's. On stage we train and develop the ability to be aware and to handle imagery. Our work is to notice it arriving from and alongside the physical activity of the performance. I feel there are so many kinds of imagery: sonic/graphic/historic/human/animal/political/literary/verbal/spacial/sensual/kinaesthetic/rhythmic/tonal/communal/personal/geographic/objective/cultural. Action leads to imagery and images lead to action. And really I have little idea which might come first.

How does your teaching influence your improvising or creating?

When you propose and put forward things to a group of 25 intelligent people, you can see immediately where something is not focused, not clear. I try to make notes, to catch some of the spontaneous 'jewels' which come out. It's constantly evolving, of course, also because of the years. Even more so with every new generation, [because] they already have certain skills, which are different skills. So, there are certain things that I don't teach any more. Two times I have let go of about 60 percent of my teaching tools, because they were not needed any more; I had to reduce it to what was really necessary, of essence.

I have always taught how to observe as a maker and performer and also as an audience. All theatre action is in the context of the audience perceiving it; no action is on its own, and in being observed the action has a fullness, which can lead us beyond its simple nature to something deeper, maybe closer to a truth. A theatre performer is required not only to observe themselves, the society around them, the times and history in which they live, but also to notice and be present in the moments when their work on stage is being observed by the audience because audience/observers, along with performers, make what is presented onstage more than simply the actions which are rehearsed and decided upon and presented.

It is demanding to live in the world and to observe not simply because observation is difficult, but because of what one sees. I get overwhelmed sometimes. And I think we all do – it is our time, it's an overwhelming time.

I feel the luck of being able to teach, that I have a place where I can try to handle something of what is really going on – not just as artists, but as artists who are in this world now. This is why people love to study things: because you feel you're going somewhere. It's not just that you accumulate knowledge, it's sort of like hope (but I don't think it's hope, it's a forwardness). It's something that just comes alive so you feel there's a future, not this future or that future or even a better future, just an 'on-goingness' where perhaps life's depths can resound.

What are you busy with in the moment of improvising on stage? Where is your awareness?

I'm a performer; I love to be on stage, I'm at home on stage and that is more important to me than improvising or performing set material. It is a love of a certain disposability, of a certain availability – to listen and to make something, to put something in a realm where more is made from it, to enter the space where you and the audience are listening through the imagination. And because that is live, one is obliged to improvise with it to some extent.

My awareness is working and alert on multiple levels: the second, the phrase, the section of the piece, the whole of the piece; the others on stage... the audience. The main focus moves all the time but is always accompanied by these other secondary foci. And for this, the mind, and the body, and the feelings are all being used fully all the time.

Where do you see the value in this kind of work?

A good evening out; a little bit of joy even when there's tragedy; a little bit of ludic playfulness, even while it's deadly serious; a little bit of seeing how high human spirit can go; and how ordinary and muddy and pretty smelly and nothing it is, as well. But deeper than this, our theatre allows us collectively to experience beyond what we might experience alone. In the experience being shared, in an instant, it grows to larger and clearer dimensions than it might ever do on the page or in rehearsal. This collective experience of the 'gathered crowd' and performers can transform the larger mind and hearts of all who are present.

And... I think it comes with a lot of trust. This is one of the deepest things for me in the work, developing that trust. Not belief. But what is trust? Many years ago, I spoke with Steve [Paxton], and I said, 'What are you doing in your work?' He said, 'We're practicing love.' And if somebody asked, what we are doing, I think we're practicing trust. And we are. At least, I know, we can build that trust, and I know we can also break it. But the issue is, nevertheless, how to engender trust, and to work with that trust that is very active and very physiological.

On stage there's no time to hope that it's going to be right; you have to be with the moment, the instant, with trust. The moment you lose that trust, its power retracts. Its power to extend and resound diminishes. So, I think very often, this is, deeply, what we're working on. Therefore, politically, it touches pedagogy, teaching, philosophy, which are often based on a lack of trust, on not trusting the children, on not trusting that things can work out in their own way. Without any trust, regulation enters in order to secure the result, to be sure, and the whole openness closes and enlightenment is reduced.

Now, if you don't regulate, then give something of deep, deep, deep worth. But you have to trust that, and that's not hope. I've seen it [happening] again and again and again, when the trust is broken, wonderful philosophy and even fantastic ideas of great worth are turned into dogma. Rubbish turning to dogma doesn't really matter in one sense, but worthy stuff being turned into dogma through a lack of active trust – that's pretty tragic. But it's work to keep fresh to that. To keep fresh within all the situations.



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