

investigations brought me into what I now call the Neuro State—trying to move from the brain, as fast as the brain. Elaine Summers’s “Letting the body stretch itself” exercise brought me into what I call the Kinetic State—moving from the body.

Was your question how to tighten up the bodily reaction time? Were you interested in getting the slowness of the body to match the agility of the brain?

Or more, how do you develop the ability to improvise that doesn’t include deliberation? In order to be fast, you have to be firing in a way that doesn’t allow you to study and judge and then decide what your reaction is going to be. You’re trying to move from a preconscious state.

How does your ensemble work help develop this skill?

You can take this “brain time” sensibility into your ensemble work. One way is to train in a number score. I think this originally came from Anne Bogart. Because in improv we don’t know what the future is, we tend to be “glacial” in our timing—things happen slowly, they evolve; testing the waters, so to speak. It’s natural, but I ask, “Well, can we change that? Can we act as a group and do something fast together? Can we make decisions quickly? How do you get that to happen? Can we execute a jump cut as a group?”

The number score: you have six pieces of paper representing six sections of an improvisation. Each paper has a number on it representing the number of performers: zero means clear space, one means a solo, and so on. So you make a series of random numbers, tape the papers up on the wall, and perform that sequence. You don’t worry about *what* you do, you are just fulfilling the number. So if it’s a three and there are three people in, as soon as another person comes in, it pushes the whole group forward into the next section of the score, the next number. It’s incredibly arbitrary and unartful.

You’re not working off the content of what’s happening...

No, it’s just strictly bodies and numbers. It’s just training you to notice and act quickly. You’re not going in because you’re inspired to or because you’ve seen something that you connect with; you just throw that away and go in because that’s what the score says to do. You go in and *then* figure it out, and then get out. If there is any confusion, you go forward to the next number.

The next step is to imagine that there is always a number score—and really, there always is! When the numbers are taken down, the ensemble can continue to maintain the

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Finding my way in Marfa

by Heidi Henderson

In the spring of 2006, I traveled to Texas to take part in the first March to Marfa, a gathering of improvisers facilitated by Nina Martin. The participants were mainly people who have worked extensively with Nina, with a few exceptions.

A three-hour drive from the El Paso airport takes us through beautifully empty country—dry, brown, with tumbleweeds and antelope that are so much smaller than I imagined them—past the fake Prada store on the side of the road, and at last into Marfa, a small town that has become an unlikely enclave of art since Donald Judd created the Chinati Foundation there in 1979.

On the first day, after a morning of meeting each other, we assemble in the afternoon at the local Vets hall. I know I am in Texas because there is a horse at the bank across the street. The hall is a big room with a beautiful wooden floor and photos covering the walls of all the soldiers from Marfa. We check in with some Nina scores, since some of us, like me, are totally unfamiliar. These scores provide me with a first glimpse of her toolbox of ideas.

We start with Nina’s “Fussy” score: Lying on the floor, rearranging the body in space. Bursts of movement with no intention. Nina says, “Don’t get comfortable in any place. Keep shifting; do not go into vocabulary, do not go into interest. This is like training yourself in randomness.” I feel like a bag of body parts. How freeing this feels to do. There is no judgment about the individual places I go to. But there is a wrong way to do Fussy. And despite Nina’s warning that “no’s” come with her training, I am struck by the unfamiliarity of this word for me in teaching improvisation.

Later, we do longer dances. No structure other than time and edges to the space: there is a front, there are sides, maybe 30 feet wide by 20 feet deep. There is an audience (everyone who is not dancing) in folding chairs along the front edge. Three groups dance for 20 minutes each.

At some point in our group’s dance, I join Andrew Marcus in his arm movement. After all the dances, we talk. I say that when I consciously repeat

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I like to think that I choreograph my improvisations and I improvise my choreography.

the New York Dance Intensive, which I started with Frances Becker; and NYU/Experimental Theatre Wing. In these extended situations, I began to formulate some forms. Besides Contact, are there any forms for improvising dance? For the Contact people who hadn't worked on other forms, there weren't any. So I tried to expand the form from the idea of unrelated duos in space doing their own thing to that of framing the duet.

How would you do that?

By emphasizing solo and ensemble sensibilities. For example, the 2/3 structure—arbitrarily saying there's a trio and a duet, and the duet is in contact and has the focus, and the trio is supporting. Do that. And then flip it. This gets people to value time and space outside of touch. Touch is so powerful that it is hard for people not to get lost in it.

I feel that the performer has value as a solo body, a weighted body (CI), and an ensemble member. For me, they all live together. If I go into my Contact duet, I carry my solo sensibility. There are also times to dive into the Contact duet and depend on the ensemble to frame it. That is the beauty of ensemble work—a division of labor.

A performer gains value when he or she is skilled in all three areas. I can teach them all together or focus separately on the ensemble, on Contact, or on solo. Articulating the Solo Body is an umbrella for ideas about solo work. Ensemble Thinking has the intent to train an ensemble focus by developing compositional skills.

I have seen you perform numerous times and have come to associate your distinctive solo vocabulary with your "chaos of intention score." What came

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a motif (Andrew's arm gesture), it feels too easy. I feel strongly that I do not want to choose ways of connecting in an improvisation that I have used before (like copying) simply because I know they will work. I want to find more impossible things that work in surprising ways. In the process of discovery, I am willing to find many places along the way that do not work. It seems clear to me that Nina wants the improvisation to work for the audience.

Throughout the six-day gathering, even when I feel resistant to the constraints of the exercises, I feel energized to be pushed so hard. Is there a property of physics that says that a push can be harder if it is in one clear direction?

The next day, we do the "2/3" score: Five people are standing shoulder to shoulder in a line. Two must go down if three are up, or vice versa. "Up" is standing, "down" is leaning forward with hands on knees or squatting—black or white, up or down, no grays. Any two, any three, at any time. This is an exercise to train our group mind by requiring us to pay attention to our role within the group.

We begin to move between levels within a small rectangle of space. Some of the five (I am one) have the desire to find other 2/3 overlappings than that of level. KT and I can be together as a two if we are dancing in a frenetic way, even if one of us is up and the other down. I can be down with Andrew but frenetic with KT. Some of us move on to that place without speaking about it, working on a broader group mind, until we stop and discover that not everybody is with us. I am excited to discover how many of these ideas I can hold in my head; I can feel my ability to pay attention growing. But if I did not notice that everyone was not with me, was I practicing group mind?

Nina says our group was too complex and wasn't able to hang together as an ensemble. What we are working on cannot be seen clearly from the audience's point of view. We watch the second group work. They are following the original score—it's lovely dancing, with clear, visible spatial forms. This prompts a rather heated discussion about complexity.

Exciting questions arise for me: Is the amount of complexity tied to a particular aesthetic? How much can we process as dancers? How much can an audience see? Do I care primarily about what the audience sees, *visually*, in terms of space? Is the "working at togetherness" also something that will affect the audience, but more *viscerally*?

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overnight if you just have them do pixelated Contact. Flow is the hardest thing to teach—those graceful, rolling dances. But if you take the gawky, completely uninitiated beginner and say, “Just move from position to position, from moment to moment,” they feel comfortable doing it. Each person tries to move at the exact moment that they have the image. Awkwardness is not something they are trying to avoid. And amazingly, it turns into flow; if they do it long enough, it turns into beautiful flow.

I like to use the Neuro state to teach Contact. Image and move. I’m doing a Contact duet with somebody: I image our next place, and my partner images our next place. Those places can be totally unrelated. I image that I am up on your shoulder and you image yourself lying flat down on the floor, and of course those two images would never work; they might have to be modified in the moment. The resulting movement material from these unrelated images is very interesting. Using the Neuro state while doing Contact gets people into surprising places. It’s another way of listening.

In your training, with all your forms and exercises, are you thinking all the time of performance?

Yeah, it has to be for performance. For me, everything has to be from that viewpoint; otherwise I get too confused. People come for whatever reasons they come for, but if it’s clearly pointed toward performance—whether in the round or proscenium—it just keeps things clear, I think. A performance lens allows me to take a qualitative approach to my improvisational work.

You mentioned you learned a lot after the March to Marfa 2006. What did you learn?

I see March to Marfa as a forum for extending improvisational dance forms. My job was to facilitate rather than teach, which often required me to get outside of my own box. One of the most interesting ideas that came out of it for me, and I’m grateful to Heidi Henderson for raising it in Marfa, was the question of whether I’m teaching an aesthetic or imparting tools. If you go to art school, they teach you to draw a straight line, in dance class, you learn steps. Are the straight line and steps the aesthetic, or are they tools from which you create an aesthetic? Often in improv, people are not making conscious spatial or timing choices. For me, that’s part of the challenge of improvisation—to have a choreographic sensibility, a compositional sensibility—about what you are doing.

In the training, we want to be able to make a clear line dance, for example, with all its variations. Later you can make a choice *not* to ever be in a line, and then it is a choice rather than an unconscious default. So that was key for me to be challenged and forced to think about what’s an aesthetic versus what’s a tool.

Nina says “2/3” is about communication rather than invention. She says she is trying to train a conservation of invention, being economical with personal vocabulary so that you move more into composing space, getting the most impact for your decisions.

These tools come in handy later when we dive into longer unscored improvisations. When the dances get muddy with too many elements, we can use a tool to create less muddiness.

Nina sees the tools as preparation for performing successful ensemble improvisation. “One Idea” is a tool. Being able to make a clear line in space is a tool. The *desire* for a line in space is an aesthetic. But, I wonder, is an aesthetic invisibly implied by focusing a training on the development of particular skills?

Although I may still choose sometimes to slog through the mud, Nina’s work made me question my own habits of working from the inside out.

In the beginning, using a tool within a group improvisation feels simplistic. But in the hands of one experienced in these methods, I see that the tools become much more: they fuel shifts, they change habits of flow, they bring structure. There is a moment in our public performance when Margaret Paek saves a floundering improvisation by singing a ’70s love song. Many of us join her readily, if off-key. Her shift (which uses both Status and One Idea) makes the improvisation work.

In the closing circle, we are all moved by gratitude for Nina’s teaching and for the experiences of the week. In Marfa, I was pushed firmly and beautifully in one direction. I felt welcomed to push back in a way that helped me define my own desires. Nina also offered me some meaningful personal feedback. She said that I am always too willing to shift. If I was not so ready to change to something new, I might find more in each place. Hard to imagine finding more than I found during this week in Marfa.



March to Marfa 2006 participants: Amber Largent, Andrew Marcus, Andrew Wass, Barbara Dilley, Delisa Myles, grace jun, Heidi Henderson, Jennifer Keller, Joanna Rotkin, Julie Lebel, Kelly Dalrymple, Kirsche Dickson, KT Niehoff, Leslie Scates, Lindsay Sworski, Liz Faller, Margaret Paek, Nathan Montgomery, Nina Martin, Polly Motley, Rebecca Bryant, Sally Doughty, Sarah Gamblin

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