



DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL, THINK, IMAGINE?

A CONVERSATION WITH JULYIEN HAMILTON ABOUT IMPROVISATION, DANCE, TEXT, LANGUAGE, AND PERFORMANCE.

By Sabina Holzer

corpus: You are very well known as "improviser". You use improvisation in performance and you teach it. What is the combination of improvisation and making pieces for you?

Julyien Hamilton: Improvisation for me is the process. I seldom say anything about the process in the introduction of my works. I never call a piece "improvisation". To me it is a piece and my wish is that my process is not labeled in front of people to be dominant in their experience. The main thing is: Can you experience it. That is the work. Does it make you think, feel, imagine? Later we can talk about me, my process, whatever.

If you engage in the process of improvisation with time you get more experienced, maybe certain sides of you calm down and become less noisy with time. So in the heat of the moment it is less noisy and you can sense clearer, your intuition becomes more refined, your fears become less dominant. You can handle material from a less personal point of view, as well as a personal point of view.

That moment of being creative, that moment of not having anything planned, no structure, no words in a text but just some gut feeling, that you are on some road and going along that road and making that moment, is still a deep joy. I think also a personal need.

I have a great sympathy for people who do their art anonymously. There is something very intelligent in saying, I am anonymous. There is an ancient lineage for instants of poetry that is written anonymously. It is not a question of ego and not ego. It is a question of wanting to give people the most direct experience of one's work. For me it is the same. I do not want to talk about my process right away.

Observing the architectures of the moment

corpus: How did you develop your methods of working?

Hamilton: I started to work on stage when I was very young – I am talking about learning long texts – when I was 9 or 10 years. Of course in performance sometimes people forget their texts, they skip forward a few pages. It always happens. In those moments you have to "ad lib.", as it was called then.

I noticed there were two sorts of people among us. Ones that freaked when they had to ad lib., and others who seemed to come alive. It was really quite clear that when things went a little bit off plan some people felt reduced and some felt expanded. I was the second sort.

So much so that I went "Oh, I want to dedicate myself to that state." It was for me an expanded state, when I went outside of any rules or structures ... but kept on track of the thing which was being made. I felt I had perception there, I felt I could handle material better from there. It was a different world. Now I can say that. In the beginning I could not. It was a gut feeling, a gravitation, a personal attraction to that state. Basically that is what I kept doing.

Of course it involves a lot of training – rigorous mind of memory and structure. Observing structure, observing the architecture of the moment. A lot of the process you learn when you are setting material. When you are writing and presenting, it is absolutely needed to have the experience of those. It is like learning a language off the street, but also learning its grammar. You develop another framework within you. So that for instance when you are improvising, you can feel a structure evolve. You can sense it in the time durations. So you can refer back. You are not just in the spontaneous moment – you also have other facilities which are a larger sheet or volume than the material. Those skills are trained very well by doing set work, by learning steps, by repeating material.

This of course is celebrated in the music world. There is no improvising musician who has not been going through that. This is absolutely accepted from Bach onwards. Even before Bach, but especially with him. Both modes, no conflict to improvise and set material to play later.

The fourth volume

corpus: You started your performance lecture "Of planes boats and fish" in the Tanzquartier [1] saying: "Hello!" and waited for the audience to respond, which it did not do immediately. Then you continued: "One is always alone." In German you have this double meaning of *alleine*, which is all by yourself and at the same time all in one. When the performance took its course, you started to construct a world through your movements, your way of naming things. You constructed a space. It seemed as if you were talking to yourself, reflecting and by doing this the self became the other.

Hamilton: That is the wonderful thing about theatre that you allow yourself as an audience member to hear somebody talking to himself. On one level they are talking to themselves, on the other level they are talking to you. They let you hear. They are alone and they are not alone. It does not have to be solved. It is clearly a stage device. It is not a confusion. It is just an obvious paradox that theatre audience allows.

I think these different levels existing together reveal something. They don't need to be explained; maybe the very explanation would kill the life of it. It is best to have this situation where you just can allow material to be and it does its magic.

Because my work has unusual editing, unusual forms, unusual aesthetics, I like also to use some very familiar forms

for people, like monologues, like light going on and off-stage, like objects. Simple things that do not confuse. So maybe they can be taken through the surface into the complexities of things.

corpus: You use language like poetry, not in a linear way.

Hamilton: Yes, it is often (but not always) non-linear, multileveled and polycentred. I want the people to allow themselves to let the material come into a depth, rather than to stay at the surface. So if there are more ordinary things where they can orient themselves, it could help to observe the less familiar.

I am very clear that this is what I want. I don't want them to just touch the surface. I want them to entertain the material to its most complex themselves. I can't push them to do that. I have to have them in the experience. So if there is some easing oil that I can use, I use it.

corpus: You also used a kind of fourth wall in your way of performing. Still it is a very reactive space you construct and one feels that you are in dialogue with the audience.

Hamilton: Maybe one could call it a fourth volume, not a fourth wall. There is something happening which is not daily life, although it is not highly stylized. It is a sort of an agreement. The performer and the audience pump something in the atmosphere: an expectation, a readiness, a willingness, a wish. There is a pumping, a tonifying. Maybe it is not necessary to think of it as a wall, but it is something where something can resound while protecting and allowing things to pass through. I take that protection very seriously myself.

Theatre and cinema conventions are learned by our society. They are really deep conventions and every society or every person in the society is in agreement to it. These conventions are man-made or they are man-agreed-to. When you are in an area where there is no such agreement then this is exactly where confusion comes in.

This is poetry!

corpus: When I got to know your performances in the beginning of the 90s, you were mainly dealing with physical movements, not words. Sometimes a melody, a song would occur. How did spoken words come into your work?

Hamilton: It came back, it returned. I was using language before I started dancing. From very young I was connected to a lot of language. Not just reciting a few things but learning long texts, knowing and loving that. Knowing the power of that. I studied poetry, Shakespeare and the Metaphysical Poets amongst others and the novel. I studied their compositional structures and emotional content.

The reason I started dancing was because I love poetry and I love the physicality of sport. First I did not realize they could go together. Suddenly I had the chance to dance in a modern dance performance and I went: "This is poetry! This is everything I know about poetry." Although there were no words and everything was physical. So that is why I started dancing. I felt all the forms which I knew about literature, in the physical body, in the rhythm, in the music of it. I did not need all the literal side. All the verbal side was absorbed by the music of dancing. The body was hungry and just took it.

It still is the base. Even in the poetry. The mind is not the base of the poetry. It is the music, the physicality of it.

Some deep nature inside

corpus: How did you develop your way of relating text and movement?

Hamilton: Sometimes people have said: "You are putting text and movement together." I take a deep breath and say: "No I am not." I never thought of putting them together. For me they live together, they always did. I don't have any big strategies.

Of course in doing it, I notice the musicality of a phrase of text, which might go with a different musicality than the phrase of body. The phrase of body might be resolved with two words of a text. Or the beginning of a line of text might be finished as a phrase with a movement.

But this is just like text and subtext. This is like top of the body and bottom of the body. This is like left and right. You would never say to somebody: "It is so interesting that you are putting torso movements together with leg movements." They live together. You can choose how much they are exposed. In my case they have asked to be both exposed. So I just do what they ask in a way.

It seems natural to me. I had no wish to do anything which does not seem natural to me. I think that is a responsibility of an artist. That you should do what feels natural for you. I really think that is a very deep responsibility. When Francis Bacon painted a face like he did, he did it because it felt natural to him, not because of trying to be strange or different. It was natural. And it is natural for me to use the words as I do.

corpus: What do you mean by *natural*?

Hamilton: Whoever I am. From every parent, culture, mind, spirit. It is natural for me. I have no interest to force something.

I feel that from all artists that inspire me, they are just doing what is obvious, what is normal to them, to their nature – not necessarily in a social way or even esthetically normal, or even normal to their upbringing, but "normal" as it concerns some deep nature inside.

corpus: Which artists are inspiring for you?

Hamilton: Well, a whole range of people: Da Vinci, David Lynch, Allen Ginsberg, Michael Jackson, William Blake, The Fugees, Bach, Gertrude Stein, Lawrence Durrell, the historian A.J.P. Taylor, interviewers, scientists, inventors and some of the people I teach.

The Advantage of Being a Dancer

corpus: I remember very vividly this experience during your classes, which came from your way of advising and focusing awareness to perceive the body in its intelligence. You did this in practical exercises by directing the mind to be aware of daily occupations and functions of the body we often take as granted: for instance, knowing instantly how heavy a bag is if we lift it; even when we approach it. Or knowing the distance to a person or an object in a situation. You also were reading poetry in class while we were exploring anatomical relations and improvising. We would move and listen to Gertrude Stein or Paul Auster. The body would take and respond to spoken text as music. It was an

invitation to listen to the body while linking to knowledge and imagination in concrete, functional and tangible ways.

Hamilton: I think one of the privileges when you are dancing is that you are demanded to deal with the practical situation, with the mass of the body in the solar system. It is gravity, levity, trajectory, friction, pressure. You have to deal with the physicality of a situation. You are constantly confronted and you have to be aware of it, because your instrument lives in that matrix.

We are living in a moving, not in a static world. We know the earth turns, the sun moves and so on. And in fact it really is so profoundly moving in essence. That is the situation in that you are using your tool, and the tool has, is living in and speaking through very clear laws of physics and existence on earth.

The advantage or privilege is, those laws are perceivable not only through the concepts and measurements that we have made, but also kinesthetically. It is possible to sense them again and again and again. So by essence they are dynamic laws. Even if they change by themselves again and again, it does not mean they are changing into something different. They are living.

By touching and by involving yourself in those, you are given two things: a dynamo of movement plus a calmness and ground. You are given stillness and movement at the same time. Simply because you are in sync with, you are living in that situation. When this is happening with the body, then you can start directing and playing. Just like a kid with a ball. When you know how to throw and catch it, you can set up a game. Even if you don't have many rules. Even if you don't have any rules at all. The play starts.

If there is no acceptance or a refusal of the tangible kinaesthetic (sensed again and again and again, each day, each hour, each moment,) then you have to use rules, you have to use boundaries that are completely different constructs of how to play.

The advantage, or what is on offer for a dancer, is that they are allowed to go into that deep reality and live it directly. So the movement is primarily the move of the move of the move. Later it can be used as, or placed or be composed – gesture, style, all these other things. But it is rooted in the physical situation, it is not primarily representative at all.

corpus: Would you say that this is your way of teaching?

Hamilton: Yes. I want people to have access to that. I know the more one has a kinaesthetic sense, a sense of the deep logic of the physical body in its situation, the more the imagination, even the fantasy can grow. Linking to the obvious, tangible, palpable situation automatically and instantly allows you to be in touch with other worlds. They might have other laws: the spirit world, the fantasy world, the past, the future ... but one has connection.

You can spend a lot of time meditating about intuition and discussing it, but if you actually use it a few hours a day it develops. It develops, it's real, it's alive. If you don't use these facilities, they tend to atrophy.

So in both my teaching and my personal creative life, I take care to exercise and work with this gift of intuition.

I was always interested in using these abilities and developing them, working and being with them, ... getting to know them.

Footnote:

[*] "Of planes boats and fish" was presented at the Tanzquartier Wien during "The Skin Of Movement", December 2009.

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