

It takes two

The Little Con
Dancehouse
Friday April 24

This was a night of duets. There were three duets. Perhaps because I had been asked to write about it, I found the performance very thought provoking. Normally I would probably react less cerebrally, allowing it to flow over me and to just entertain me. In the course of the performance I began thinking of duets and the issues raised by improvised duets. I thought also about improvisation itself. Having tried my hand at directing pieces over the past few years, I found myself having urges to direct the pieces, but then stopping myself and thinking that improvisation is about play and exploration, going where you may never go if directed, so I should cast aside my desire to mould and direct. Anyway, more of that later.

The first duet was between Grace Walpole and Shaun MacLeod, who had often seen each other's work and performed together on the same programme but hadn't danced in duet previously. This is a brave thing to do, as many who improvise together practice together over a long period, but the newness also has the potential for dynamic energy and interactions, unhampered by habit. They began in silence. Music was added later. They listened well to each other, employing pauses and stillness to allow the dance to develop and to allow the other. Some times in improv, there is a compulsion to constant activity but the improvised dance needs time to breathe and find itself, as was allowed in this duet. This enabled some beautiful meetings and confluences. I began to see a narrative and a sense of two emerging characters at the half-way point. There was some play with 'duff, duff' sounds. I thought will they stop and go to something new or go further with it? This is often a question that presents itself while improvising. Again, Shaun introduced a moment of resistance-a different dynamic, as they pushed against each other's legs. I would have liked the resistance to be explored for longer to go deeper and maybe darker-interesting territory, a pushing of edges. There were some beautiful sculptural shapings and the piece had a symmetry, beginning and ending on the stage at the back of the space.

Dianne Reid and Stef Hutchins began with a solo by Stef. This was a nice focus and good to have this spacious beginning. Dianne joined soon after and developed a great movement story. I wanted more of it. I know from being on the inside of an improvisation how hard it is to know whether to extend something or to move on. Stef made a good choice to become very minimal during this dynamic movement story by Dianne. They moved between simultaneous solos and duet. There was a moment of very appealing natural humour and play on the stage. It was natural-ness performed-a hard thing to capture. The duet found its life a few minutes in and curiously at the same time, the solos also took off. Simultaneous solos can be very pleasing to watch. These two dancers had the ability to relate while solo-ing-but not in an obvious or contrived way. There was a great frenetic solo from Dianne that my inner Director (who just wouldn't leave the room that night) wanted to extend and then have the partner joining in, taking the frenzy as far as it would go, exploring it fully.

Ann-maree Ellis and Nicola Eddington found their way towards each other gradually. A tripping of each other with legs entangled began the relationship with an interesting flavour of obstruction, suggesting the beginnings of an intriguing relationship story. Ann-maree's commitment to a flicking head movement and later her commitment to seated stillness drew the watcher in and proved the compelling nature of repetition and stillness in performance. The real moment of connection between the two came when Ann-maree turned and became a spectator for Nicola's dance solo opening us to a full focus on Nicola's lovely solo. Then there was a moment of physical contact which gave the duet, whether or not they were in physical contact, from then on more of a quality of two-ness. Throughout there was a great sense of spatial placing and juxtaposition.

While watching the show lots of questions came into my mind about duets, which I have faced and thought about many times over the years while improvising in groups of various sizes. Are we there for ourselves or each other? How much? How much do you stay with your own material without losing the sense of duet? How much do you go with your partner's material without it becoming a mushy lead and follow exercise? How not to lose your self while trying to connect with your partner? How to allow yourself to lose yourself and blend with your partner when necessary? While both performing your own material simultaneously can you maintain a connection? Is it important to maintain a connection? What do you do while your partner is 'cooking' in solo, becoming a 'main event'? When do you join in or cut in? How much to give up, give in, take from each other?

The arguments inside my head between the improviser and the director also brought some general thoughts about improvisation. How do you not lose those golden moments which could be extended, deepened and explored? How do you recognise and value them without an 'outside eye'? Sometimes when improvising in front of an audience one is influenced by the desire to entertain and by one's own idea of what will be entertaining. That can lead to discarding of potentially interesting material that may take one to new places. There were a number of times in the evening when I wanted to say "Oh please keep doing that. See where it takes you. Don't throw it away yet. That could lead to an entirely different mood or emotion and that range of emotions would enrich this dance for me. If you kept that going, a character or narrative would begin and grow." Of course, any outside person will have their own particular preferences and tastes in art.

Crafting something through feedback from an outside person in on-going improvisation practice can be of huge value. Yet crafting and choreographing to the nth degree can drain playfulness, spontaneity and discovery and the product can become dead and stale. People use improvisation for many purposes. Maybe for its own sake, maybe to find fresh material that they will later explore further, build on and set to some degree for performance. People also improvise with many structures, ideas and forms in mind, so that even while improvising freely, there is an aesthetic or technique at work.

It's great that we have forums like the Little Con, initiated by artists, where people can try and show their work and which encourages this type of on-going discussion.

Janice Florence