

It's a Group Thing

This month's Little Con focused on group improvisation with feisty cohorts of performers doing feats of impossible anticipation. There is also a heady mingling of the old with the new, with dance students from the VCAM and Deakin University joining regular Little Con performers.

- * Olivia Millard, Rachel Carne, Gemma Laing, Sydney Smith, Elanor Webber and Rhiannon Ferris
- * Alana Everett, Beth Lane and Rachel Heller-Wagner
- * Timothy Walsh and Briarna Longville
- * Leif Helland, Natalie Jacobs and Robert Brassington
- Paul Romano, Ann-maree Ellis, Grace Walpole and Shaun McLeod

A group of solos

Olivia Millard

I am conducting a research project, which is investigating the making of a group improvised performance. There are six of us in the group. I am both dancer and 'choreographer'. Performing at The Little Con was an opportunity for us to practice with an audience and to perhaps, elicit from the watchers some information about their experience of the work. Having been practicing regularly in this way for eighteen months (some of the dancers have done more, some less), it seemed a good time to leave the privacy of the studio and be watched by an audience.

I consider myself the 'choreographer' in my project even though I am not, in a conventional sense, creating 'steps' or choreography and imposing them on a group of dancers. Even though I am dancing alongside the other dancers, the creative process exists to experiment with and fulfill my particular aesthetic interests. I am not divesting myself of authorship, but because I am a dancer within the group my role is slightly different to that of a conventional choreographer. The dancers, too, have roles, which are different to those in conventional choreographic processes. In improvising, they have different

demands on them than they would in a 'choreographed' dance. They are 'producing' the movement vocabulary in real time. In a 'choreographed' work the dancers' responsibility lies in the refinement of the execution of pre-learned, known and definable movements. In my research, the responsibility lies in the spontaneous composition of the movement, with 'scores' as the guide or the measure or as suggesting the values.

A score could be a simple verbal phrase such as *noticing the space behind me*. A score could be a complicated set of instructions which includes information such as where to be in the space, how long to explore particular movement for and how body parts relate to each other. A score could be allowing external forces to act on my body: light, another body, the feel of the air. It may be in a touch and the way we respond to it. It is the way we are seeing while we are dancing. I could choose to let my gaze be direct, I could have a scanning focus, or I could allow my eyes to be led by my body. A score is in the way we are being watched.

The methods I am using to devise the scores are varying but deliberate. Sometimes they are aimed to enable and refine movement generation such as the consideration of *weight, direction and force*. Sometimes they come from dancing. I notice what I am doing, try to use a few words to describe it and then share it as a score. An example of this is *never quite getting there*. In sharing this score, I might explain how I came to use those words. In this example I had a sense of never quite knowing where "there" was. It may have been that I didn't quite define what a movement was but it might also have been a rhythm that I left before I could define, or place in the space. In an example like this, I also might not describe how it came about so that each dancer could explore it in whichever way they find to be of interest. Scores come from watching and also from the descriptions of their improvising experiences that the dancers might offer. Sometimes I deliberately attempt to suggest a movement possibility or range which seems as though it hasn't been considered.

A score on its own would not determine what the dancing that it initiates would be. I could use others' scores and never emulate the work of those people. The approach to a score is something I see as being just as important as the score itself. By the approach I mean how I think about the score; the way my body interprets or uses the score as a stimulus for dancing. The way of thinking about the score has been very specific and defined in my dancing. Namely, I approach scores from a movement exploration point of view. It is not about a story, it is not about expressing an emotion, it is not the answer to a problem that exists outside the body. The way I use scores is to allow them to stimulate the exploration of the movement possibilities within the body.

I am interested in approaching the dance as though we are all dancing solos. The idea behind this is that the dancing that we have been practising, which comes from practising in various ways, with scores, is the emphasis of our dance. I am, without doubt, creating group work. The cohesion in the group however, comes not from decisions made about a 'group dance' while dancing but from practising together over a period of time. Rather than having a structure which overlays the work and makes it what it is, or even scores which define the structure of the work such as responding to other dancers in particular ways, I am aiming for the range of states that individual soloists visit over a period of time, to create the structure of the dance.

Before we danced at The Little Con, we had three opportunities to practice our group dance. Up until this time, we had mostly been practicing solos, one at a time or maybe two at a time. We had become very used to the idea of dancing a solo by ourselves. The next step was to put these solos in a context where there were (possibly) several solos going at once. There was only one rule or structural score and that was that the space could never be left empty.

The first time we practiced our dance for a period of twenty minutes, we didn't really know how it would feel or how it would be possible to make decisions within that dancing; particularly decisions which related to the structure of the work such as how long to dance for and where to be in the space. It became clear to me that I could dance as if I was soloing and, for example dance as

long as I was interested, or I could be constantly be aware of how I was contributing to a group dance. Any experience of a group-improvised dance I have had in the past has employed the latter method. In fact much of the skill of improvising in a group seems to be about being able to be receptive to the current action and to make decisions, which affect that action. It is possible that the whole content of the dancing in such a group dance could come from this receptivity, or responsive choices. While acknowledging that although the audience would watch us as a group and read the relationships between us and while also acknowledging that it is impossible for us to entirely ignore that dancing with others is affecting each individual's dancing, it seemed to me that in order to place our particular practice with scores at the forefront of our performing, we needed to treat our performance as a solo.

The second time we tried our group dance we became aware of the significance of the relationship between performing and not performing. We had one audience member in the studio with us and this would certainly have contributed to this new awareness. If we were standing on the edge of the space, were we also performing? If we were watching, had we become the audience? Was it possible to make a gradual transition in and out of performing? Could we be partially performing?

The third time, I became aware, while dancing, of a difference, in varying degrees, in the approach to doing a solo within a group dance. Most of the other dancers were being what I could only describe as considerate in their decision-making; particularly when making choices about entering and leaving the space or about where in the space they would dance. An example of this is at one point, I was the only person dancing. I felt that the other dancers had decided not to enter the space, either to allow me to 'solo' or to allow there to be a range of numbers of bodies in the space throughout the period of the dance. Also in the times when there was one person left in space, other dancers seemed to enter so that that person could leave if they wanted to in consideration of the rule about not leaving the space empty. Rather than being considerate of each other, or feeling a responsibility to try to make an interesting group dance, I encouraged the dancers to, as much as possible, to

make their decisions based on their interests and impulses as soloists; to make a decision to enter the space because they were interested or ready. Over a period of time then, the shifts in dynamics of the group work, including the energy of the dancing and the number of dancers in the space, came about because of the choices made by individuals who were soloing. The only way for it to really work, was if we were all thinking as soloists.

Performing for the public after spending so much time in the studio with mostly only ourselves for audience, was a big shift for us. In practising in the studio, I feel a difference between dancing alongside the group and in being watched. For me, the work is defined by it being aimed for a performance outcome. If dancing with someone watching makes me a bit nervous, it also feels like a thrill of energy and excitement, which makes the experience of it full. We are very used to being watched by each other. Dancing in front of the public in The Little Con significantly changed what 'performing' was for us. It may have brought about a feeling of the need to dance in a way that we think the audience is expecting. It may cause us to fall back on habitual movement patterns and this is where the strength and thoroughness of the practice becomes very important; particularly over an extended period of time. If our bodies are well tuned through our practice, then we welcome the emergence of these habits. We are working towards the idea that the practice in our bodies can allow us to stay as true to what we were intending to do as was possible. By dancing as a group of soloists, I am aiming for that practised dancing to be as visible as possible.

We very much appreciated the opportunity to be involved in The Little Con. If you are interested in sharing your experience of watching with us, my email address is oliviamillard@westnet.com.au