

# A dance practice of ‘choreographic improvisation’: interview with Rosalind Crisp

Interviewed by Mirka Eliášová, Lizzy Le Quesne, Mish Rais

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## Introduction

Rosalind Crisp gave the following interview during the 2021 lockdown from her studio in Victoria, Australia. She discusses the nature and evolution of her creative practice of *choreographic improvisation*; her teaching and performance practices; and her view of the broader implication of dance. Crisp describes how her work has evolved from questioning dance itself to wanting to share with audiences facts and feelings around Australia’s extinction crisis; painfully evident in the rural area where she comes from. This personal imperative has brought her to addressing this critical world issue through the body in performance.

Crisp describes how her creative practice has developed, as a reaction to the constrictions of classical dance training and how, influenced by US postmodern and somatic lineages and her determination to sustain her pleasure in dancing, her practice has become rooted in sensation and attention. Acknowledging the complexity faced by dancers to articulate their own artistic voices, she discusses the slowness of the dance art to mature. Crisp describes how her work became centered in improvisation, and how working with other dancers and academics helped her to develop a language for her processes – her *tools* – and how these arise and function, in the studio and in performance.

On her return to Australia after several years working in France, Crisp faced the shock of the palpable extinctions which her country is experiencing, and is causing in its ongoing policies. She describes the “vanishings” of nature and species and discusses powerful sensory affects as embodied states of lightness - as a visceral response to this state of loss. Crisp’s current multidisciplinary performance project *DIRt (Dance In Regional disaster zones)* is her creative response to and engagement with Australia’s extinction crisis, in the face of the government’s refusal to change political courses which prolong and exacerbate devastation of the natural world. <https://www.omeodance.com/dirt>

This interview was conducted by Zoom in September 2021, within an international academic research project examining the state of the art of dance and performance improvisation.

Exploring “improvisation as an authorial, choreographic and creative principle”, the three year

project (2021-2024) is the collaboration of Czech dance artist Mirka Eliášová (Dance Faculty, Academy of Performing Arts, Prague), Czech theatre artist Mish Rais (Drama Faculty, Prague Academy of Arts, Prague) and British dance artist Lizzy Le Quesne (Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University). The project involves in-depth interviews, in-studio workshops with professional and student dance artists, multiple publications, and a forthcoming book of interviews and commentary in both Czech and English. The project explores the practices and methodologies of a series of renowned international artists working in different ways with improvisational processes, and seeks to grasp terminology in the field.

### **Keywords**

Improvisation, dance, choreographic, discovering, lineage, tools, newness, ballet, performance, practice, methodology, joy, empower, feel, audience, communication, discipline, sensation, weight, vanishing, third person viewpoint

### **Dance improvisation as artistic practice**

#### ***What is improvisation for you?***

Well, it's many things. There is no one improvisation with a big capital 'I'. There are many different types of improvisation: like stand up comedy; or contact improvisation; or scored improvisation from the postmodern American lineage; or what I was calling mine - 'choreographic improvisation'. Then there is theater improvisation, where they do feedback with an audience. And so there are so many types, I would say.

I did give the name *choreographic improvisation* [to my practice] - I suppose because people tend to want a name, or a way of locating it historically, and also, in terms of the core of what it's trying to get at. And I would say my work is as equally choreographic as it is improvised. So I ended up joining those two together.

And actually, I never talk about it as *improvisation* when I'm working. I just say it's *dancing*. Because I think it's so complex. And also because the word improvisation has been bandied around - perhaps not in your circles, because the academic institutions have been really quite rigorous about improvisation in a great way - but in the performance community or in the audience communities, it's often considered like: "oh just do whatever. Make it up. Just make it up". That's very reductive. So to avoid that - and also because, as I said, I think my work is equally choreographic as improvised - I call it *choreographic improvisation*. But generally I tend to avoid the term improvisation altogether, and talk about what it is as *dance*.

And I would say it's not a form, it's many forms. There are some people who are using it as a performance - improvisation as a performance form - in relationship to the audience, or in relationship to scores, or in relationship to my work. There are many forms of it, some of them specifically for performing, but I would say it's not that common.

And I think a lot of people use a lot of skills from improvising but don't call it improvisation, because they can't sell their work if they call it improvisation!

***And we felt that there is a lack of terminology, or language, how to describe it...***

...of how to discuss it. Yes, I agree with you. I think also that comes back to my point that it's many things.

So I think you have to look at an artist's work, rather than at a genre, even though of course in the university, and of course in the field anyway, people group things together to make sense of them, or to sell them, or to understand them. And there are influences. We're all influenced. And we have lineages, and so you can see the threads of history, but I think the real task is to look at an individual's work and see what principles are they working with, and what or how is it particular, whatever you want to call it. So I don't know how useful the term improvisation is in the end.

***What have you found in your practice that you feel is new?***

Constantly! I'm constantly surprised when I work. So I suppose you could say that was new. I mean, it happens in a million moments, you know, millions of moments. 'Oh, that thing I was just doing - oh yeah!' There is lots of joy, discovering, in surprising myself. And so there's a newness in that.

And I think I'm a bit addicted to that. That's probably the same for many people who improvise, that we get addicted to the ride of the feedback of the discovery, as it is happening. So I find it moment to moment. Newness is what keeps me going actually. Though, I would substitute the word *surprise*, I suppose, surprising myself.

I've developed many strategies to try to surprise myself. So they're not new because they are strategies that I know; but I constantly evolve new ones, discover new ones, and name them, and then they became really supportive for the moment to moment newness. So there's a shuffling going on, of strategies that I know, that still take me to newness.

But sometimes that becomes too familiar, that moment to moment newness. So I dig deeper and evolve other strategies that take me to newer newnesses. And it goes on like this. And this is sort of a cycle of discovering a new strategy: it being hard to grasp because it's new, and I haven't identified it or named it, and then gradually it becomes a bit more familiar, and I can name it, and then it becomes more familiar, and I can use it very easily. And then if I use it too often, it doesn't surprise me anymore. So then I have to dig deeper and find another one, or combine it with another one that I already know, and that provides a collision that produces another newness. So I would say *newness* is actually what it's all about! From moment to moment newness.

But in terms of the bigger context you mean... in terms of the bigger thing about newness, of my body of work, or the methodology... I think there is a lot in it. I feel strongly about my work, but I also feel humbled about it... that lots of people are discovering things. And I also have a history. I have people who've influenced me, and although that's many years ago, and those threads have been totally transformed, that history is really, really important. So I feel connected to a lineage.

But what's coming up just now, when I think about the methodology, is: when I was working with the master students at The Place [London Contemporary Dance School] some years ago, the people who were running the program said to me "Oh why isn't this taught in the BA? Why are they learning all those exercises and patterns and stuff that they then spend years getting rid of? Why aren't they learning how to guide their own attention to find those things themselves?" She/they sort of felt like it was like a new methodology, that needed to replace the codified language and fixed positions and movements - things that are really a kind of fixity from artists such as Cunningham and Graham etc. Maybe at the point when those artists discovered those things they weren't fixities, they were like newnesses. And then we get the next generation that disseminates it as a sort of fixed thing that has no mobility. And I think, there's really deep and profound issues with that process of learning.

I think that second-hand-ness has kept dance in a very impoverished artistic state. Because really what we're doing, it is like rote learning, rather than being artists. And, of course, many visual artists might study masters and copy, before they move on. But the difficulty with dancers is that we often don't move on! It's such a rigorous training to have your body so available, to so much, so often performances are familiar, often they are just exercises on stage. They don't pass the exercises-on-stage test! And I say to myself "is it as exciting as watching a racehorse? No, well, then, what are we doing it for? It is sport, it's not art". So in terms of methodology, yes I think there is something new in what I've been doing that is useful for learning.

***Regarding the lineage that you recognize, and the influences that have fed into that, can you talk about the new thing that they released in you, which you have added to that lineage?***

Ah, an interesting question, I don't think there's a specific technique, because I feel like I've developed my own technique. But the thing that the people that I've studied with have given me, is *permission*. And that's permission to move outside of, or to reflect on, my own limitations and my own assumptions, and to move outside of that.

***And is there a particular limitation or assumption that you're thinking of?***

Oh, well, one is riddled with limitations!

Like for example - all this is maybe a little bit sideways but this issue often comes up for me, when I reflect about my work, and I have been asked about this sometimes - *what do I hold on to and what do I let go of?* Sometimes I've thought that I hold on quite long, or too tight, but yet I know there's a great support in that, because that's how I integrate. And I've noticed other people maybe let go of things more quickly, and I don't. It's finding the balance for yourself.

***When you say 'hold on', do you mean hold on to a certain activity, or certain awareness?***

Perhaps... a certain task, or a certain strategy, or certain value about how I prepare the body. It's like recognizing that 'third person' [an observing inner eye] I was talking about in the workshop: recognizing that "oh, that's not useful to you anymore. Let's move on a bit. Shake that up".

***What was your journey to this practice? And how did you become an improviser?***

Oh, god, it's such a long one!

You know I grew up in a very remote area. We had no television and no dance schools, or no theaters or anything, right out in the bush. So I actually don't know, I've always wondered where my need to dance came from. I have no idea. Perhaps it came from outer space, I really don't know. The first thing I knew about myself was that I had to dance. I remember even when I was four years old - that was the first notion of myself - that I had to dance.

So my lineage: well, I went to ballet school, eventually. I pestered my parents to send me to the city to learn ballet. They were totally supportive of me. Even though they were just farmers, they managed to find the money. So I did, I moved. I left home when I was 12 and went to study in the city, seven hours away. And I studied ballet, because I wanted to be a ballet

dancer, a famous ballet dancer. And then I went on to a tertiary dance study. There weren't universities for dance then. There were schools attached to companies. So I was accepted into the Victorian Ballet Company School, which fed the company. It was just ballet. But we did have a bit of improvisation actually, on Saturday morning. And some contemporary work - mostly kind of Graham work and some other mixed stuff that a guy called Arthur Turnbull taught us. But anyway, I left there after one and a half years. I felt stifled by the training, and I dropped out in the middle of the second year. And I started on my own journey.

And I just started working. I got a studio and started. I worked with a company for a while, and I started making my own work quite early. I was in Sydney at that time, and there weren't that many dancers around. But between us we managed to invite some people from Europe or America to come and nourish the work. Jennifer Monson, and Lisa Nelson, Steve Paxton and people like that came. So they were quite influential on me I would say. So the American postmodern movement was quite influential.

And I was reading. I started to notice connections to ideokinesis. And way back to the somatic, people like Mabel Todd - way, way, way back in the 40s, 30s, I think. The only book I had in the beginning was Doris Humphrey's book, which is just a classic - the 'diagonal line' and 'avoid the center' - which I still remember. Again, *permission*. I started my own studio in Sydney. And there were these people (foreign dance artists) who came. There was sort of every year, or every second year, someone would come for two weeks. That was about the scale of it. And the rest of the time, myself and others would just work furiously on the things that they left behind for us, and continue on our own ignorant journey. And I've always had my own studio, since I could remember, whether it was a church hall or whatever it was, I just knew I had to have somewhere to work all the time.

And I was first overseas in 91/92/93, at the school in Arnhem, the Center for New Dance Development in 1991, which doesn't really exist anymore. It was a really exciting place then with a lot of those American teachers there. And I think that was a big influence on me. And again, it was about permission, about not holding too tightly to what I thought I knew. And it took a long time. I remember when I first arrived everybody was lying on the floor and I thought "Oh my god. So boring!" I just had to go in early before the class started and do acrobatics and all these absurd things I thought I needed, or I liked doing.

***Who were the teachers there (in Arnhem) who were the greatest influence on you?***

Well, Lisa Nelson was there a little bit. Steve Paxton came there. And Wendell Beavers - he was a Body Mind Centering teacher from New York. He was a really big influence. He had such a beautiful way of working with Body Mind Centering that was like farming. It wasn't all esoteric

and feely touchy, it was just deep, deep underneath support. And I found it really empowering. And Mary Fulkerson, she was wild and mad and again permission: "close your eyes", oh it was like tripping. Amazing!

There was a big influence of that stuff. And I think it opened a whole well of things. I was only there for a year as a guest student, but I felt like it opened up so much for me that I would have the next 20 years to explore.

And a lot of even simple things like weight - like feeling, discovering that weight is bottomless, that you never actually understand it. You have to keep going into weight, to feel, like it's got to be renewed every day. And the whole centering of the somatic experience as a basis to create from, rather than an idea. That came from there for sure.

***Was there a particular moment when you decided that improvisation was your discipline?***

Yes, there was, definitely. It was in January 2005.

In October or November 2004, I was running a lab in Sydney for a large group of people for a month, it was very intensive. And it was set up so that I could also continue to research. I would give them tasks and I would work as well. It was a lot of dancing, and a lot of exploring. And the others were watching me and I would be watching them. Yeah, the exchange. And then we would try and talk about it. And so it was trying to put words to things. And I felt this thing start to crack open. I knew I was on the edge of something that would allow me to keep dancing. It was like discovering this key that you put in the lock. And away she goes. And she could keep dancing. It was like going beyond thinking about it.

But I had to work very hard and concentrate very hard to hold that kind of condition to allow all these factors to be operating, and me being able to move between them. And then I was there. I felt it. I felt it shift.

And then in January (2005) I was in Perth with two Australian artists who invited me to go and work there. Jo Pollitt and Olivia Millard. They were at the university and we worked there for five weeks on a project. It was in that time. Again, it was a very exploratory situation, where we didn't really have to produce a product and we could really explore, and it was in that time that I would say this whole genre of *choreographic improvisation* really landed - where I thought "Oh I get it now. I know what it is".

And from then it started. I trained dancers, who'd been working with me a lot anyway, in this work. And we made a work - a quartet - together that was completely improvised. But 'completely'? - I don't know what that means. It was sitting on tools, you know, like *following one surface of the body at a time* and some of the tools that I shared in the workshop. And the dancers were just filled up with them. We were just doing it every day for a year. And they were so full of it - we were all so full of it - that it was very easy to throw a kind of a structure together that allowed us to continue to work.

And of course the first thing I realized was that it couldn't be frontal. Because we were too vulnerable with the work. If you went out there, and it stopped 'working' you would feel like shit. So there had to be the situation where you could just get out of the way, and not have to walk offstage, so of course the audience had to be amongst us, and things like that. But that's another issue. But it was a really definite moment in time where I realized "Oh, my God, this is a whole world of stuff that is an endless supply of dancing". It was like it really cracked open.

And it was also years of work before that. It wasn't as if I didn't have some of those tools already operating, like what you were saying Misha, about using improvisation to create material. I'd made the solo where I had choreographed which surfaces of the body would lead for each movement. So then I remembered the surface of the body that would lead, but not the movement. And then I could mess it with the timing, and the effort, and the speed, direction, and things like that. So there was lots of that. And that *one thing at a time* - that was a dance before it was a tool. It was a piece. So and then it was "oh, right, you can apply that to anything", and how endless it becomes.

So there's tools that can be applied to anywhere in the body and kind of self-generate, self-perpetuate, an endless supply of movement, by applying it to anywhere in the body. And I would say that's what cracked open - a tool that you could use in a million places in the body. And then at different speeds, and different efforts, in different directions and different levels. And so that's been the crux of it.

And so it was cracked open then, and then - it never went away. And I kept making. My own company works were always in that practice from then on. They were never set material. They were studied and integrated and very rigorous to practice. And then structures to 'faire exister' (I want to speak in French because it all happened in Paris) to 'allow to exist', allow these tools to exist in performance, supportive structures that allowed us to continue to work.

And I never went back. A couple of times, I would say to myself "don't you want to go back to setting?" Because sometimes I would see a set piece and think "Oh, it's so finely choreographed. And you can really make delightful decisions". And really fine choreography is really beautiful. But my experience of this improvising was just so much more exciting. Again, it

was a sort of addiction to the new I suppose. I had the pleasure of it, and the experience of it, and the simple adventures. I just loved it.

And a couple of times I had University gigs, making a piece, or for another company, a young company or university or something, but I was not game to work with the [choreographic improvisation] tools then. I would work with the tools, but I would get them to set the material - until about, I don't know, probably 2011 or something. It was at least five or six years before I felt confident enough with the tools that I could - what's the word - 'invade' their consciousness, their physical consciousness enough, so that they wouldn't be able to do anything else, and that they would feel safe and supported by the tools in performance.

***When you mention this 'cracking open' and this 'delight' - it sounds like you tapped into some kind of stream...?***

You can say that. But I think that stream was a whole lot of threads converging. As I said, I had used some of those tools that I discovered to choreograph from, for example setting material in the studio. When I used to set material, part of the way of remembering it was often almost like a tool. Not just a movement, but 'it's a new part of the body', or it's 'oh, everything squishing together and then one piece goes out' kind of images. I think what was happening at that moment was a whole lot of those things were converging.

And also - that was the other influence - I had done quite a bit of Authentic Movement practice. And that was really also very influential. Close your eyes, have someone witness you who's very concentrated and supportive, and do whatever the hell you want. It was just so amazing. And I would find myself in these places - I wouldn't really call it a state because that sounds a bit fixed - but more like a sort of world that I could stick with. And so that would have been one of those threads that was converging. I mean, so many threads.

And the other thread that was occurring was the fact that I had dropped out of ballet school because it was killing me. It was so rigid. Obviously from way back was this necessity to free myself up in dance. Why else do we dance? We don't dance just to correct a position, or perfect a move, or satisfy a teacher. We dance because we bloody love it! This was really important for me from the beginning.

And then I think about my father's family - Irish political activists, way back, who were extradited to Australia. He said "don't believe what you read. Question!" And so I wasn't going to put up with dance destroying my love of dance, with dance training destroying me! So that's another thread. That's an interesting question.

Another thread was that *third person* I was talking about in the workshop, [who is] sort of having this overview of “wow, she's having a lot of fun right now! How do you keep that going? What is that? Hold on to that, but let it make you keep doing it? And can someone else take notes?” Like, all this, all of me, trying to grasp it.

And I noticed - looking back at videos - how fast I had to go when I first discovered this work in order not to think, not to think about it, I mean, not to get in the way.

So, yeah, it's definitely a convergence of a whole lot of threads: from different tools I'd already started to develop to make work with; a necessity in myself; perhaps a skill as a choreographer already. And talking about the rigor of improvisation, it's *choreography plus!* It's, a lot more than choreographing. You are choreographing, and you have to digest all that and manage all that, and enjoy all that, and make those decisions, and know when you need to change it. It's choreography plus a lot more, I think. The plus being the strategies to make those decisions in the moment. And the practice of that. So inside that discipline are a whole lot of extra skills and strategies.

***Did you start training and developing the discipline from that moment?***

Well, yeah.

***And then it was some time before you started teaching it?***

No, I worked with the dancers who work with me. There was a continuity. There were dancers who worked with me before the thing cracked open, and after, so they were there for that whole journey and were integral to it.

And I was teaching already before then. I don't know what I was teaching actually, kind of a mixture of stuff, probably. Things I might have learned. Things I was starting to develop myself. So there was a continuity there with that huge thing cracking open. I don't know if anyone would have noticed. They might have. Yeah, I suppose they did. I mean, certainly.

***And what has the journey, the development, been since that cracking open?***

Well the methodology has continued to grow and expand, and become more definite - but at the same time more mobile.

I was saying in the workshop about the *tool-bank*. Isabelle Ginot, who I worked with in Paris, was commenting “Oh you're really focused on this or that tool now. But then the other things don't go away, they just go back into the *tool-bank*”. And those other strategies or approaches

or processes, at some time they will possibly come back into the foreground again. So that shuffling has gone on all the time.

But it's also continued to fill out. It's just become everything. And I discover new things all the time. And mostly those things pretty much come out of my own solo practice, on my own. So a lot of time is spent not knowing, and then noticing "Oh, okay, is that what it is?" - or not knowing, then kind of following something, then naming and applying it. That process goes on all the time, and new things come out of it. And sometimes it does take some time. Sometimes it takes a long time for new things to come out, because I've never heard of them before. They don't exist. They are not worded, so it is quite a process.

***So you had to come up with your own terminology in other words - finding names for things, and that has become like a structure?***

I suppose words - yeah.

I worked a lot in France with this work, so there were a lot of French words that are intimately connected to the work, which still feel more relevant than English words. Like what I was trying to say before - 'faire exister' - sort of allows it to come out, does more than allow.

Another word I love in French is 'accueillir' - in English it means to welcome, or to receive, or to host something - you take it in. It works so well, but in English it doesn't do the same thing. In English I probably use the word 'feedback', to *feel the feedback* - but accueillir is to receive the sensations...

But also, working with other dancers, words do all that. I'm sure you know, when you work deeply in project process, you develop words to mean things - a language develops. The dancers who worked with me in Paris were the same dancers for 10 years. And we definitely had a language that allowed us to dive into the work, in French, shared amongst us. And we knew what we meant.

And the other thing that has shifted the whole thing, has been an interaction with academics. So Isabelle Ginot, who wrote a piece about the work, she came into my studio one day to watch me, and ended up staying for years. And the other person who had an input or connection was Susan Leigh Foster, an American writer and academic. We made a duet together. That was hysterical. She wrote a lot. And there are two others - two PhD students in Australia - who've worked with me on and off over the last 20 years. And we've started to dialogue again since I've been back in Australia. So that's really exciting. And they're also all about words. They're writing their thesis, and they're really in that part of the brain, and it's just so exciting to dance and talk that talk. So that's shifted it along.

And the other thing that has shifted it is the collaborations, collaborations with other artists. So there's the dancers who've worked with me, but there's other artists like this rock and roll musician and performer. And a photographer I've been working with a lot, outside, in the forest. So they've shifted things in the work I think. And that's the other thing that shifted the work, working outside in devastated sites here in Australia. That's really changed the work.

And the thing is, it doesn't feel like it's finished. People say "why don't you write a book?" but a book would fix it. Although there's a lot that I can set down, it's mobile. Its nature is mobile. I think it's really important that it doesn't become like one of those fixed second-hand techniques. You know, when I teach, I teach differently for every group, I mean it shifts. So how would you write that down? It's not 'do this then that will happen, then that will happen'. I mean there is often a chronology that makes sense. But it can be shifted around. There are so many parts to it. So it's more like I need a ball - than a book (laughs).

***Is the space that you're in now with your work different from your expectations regarding when you started codifying, or developing the practice?***

Well, I didn't set out to do improvisation. I set out to enjoy dancing. And so I mean, if I'm doing improvisation, it's because that led me there. I didn't have an idea that I should follow improvisation. In fact, I never had an idea. It's just come from dancing, and from where the greatest joy is.

It is in the play and the rigour. And as I said before, there's just a lot more fun when I don't know what I'm going to do next. When I do (sighs) well it feels like death - when I know what I'm going to do next. I know where I'm coming from, right now, but I don't know what the next thing is until it starts to happen. There's just a lot more pleasure in that for me - and joy.

So I don't think I ever had an expectation of what I should do. I don't think that at all. I just kept following my nose with what I really love doing. And that is a hard road because you're going somewhere you haven't been, and maybe nobody's been.

For me it's all about the dancing. But it's not about the moves. I think that was one thing that was in that cracking open. And it took me a long time to articulate what that was, but I know that my interest is not in the movements; it's in what produces them. Because for me, that's what dance in real time is. It's how to continue, how to find the next thing somewhere else.

I mean I don't have anything against set material; but I think we have to learn complex body awareness if we want to have a big access to the orchestra of the body. It's not an instrument.

It's an orchestra in my opinion. And there's a lot of different parts. Some of them are playing and the others are being ignored. Well, that's a kind of a very slack orchestra. So I'm really interested in a sophisticated, complex, intelligent awareness, through the whole body, all the time. And you do get that from really good dance training. It's just that artistically, you get stuck with the moves.

And I do work with some people who aren't trained: one of them, she was a hat maker, and she wasn't a trained dancer, but her attention is so awake. And it's probably not very watchable to anyone else, because her body's not really showing it in a way - that communication through the movement is not there - but I find it fascinating, because it's potentially so switched on. So, it really is about attention, but attention in every bit of the body; to or with attention.

***Looking at this development, where would you say your focus is right now? What's emerging right now?***

Oh, I don't know if I can articulate the thing that is happening right now because it's sort of new. But it's where the next bucket of joy is. I think it's really around this issue of how much I hold and how much I let go of - which is probably why I brought that up.

It was really interesting working with you all last week because this morning when I was working, I felt like some *tools* - some of my tools - were really present, really in the foreground. And they were really enabling. I don't practise my tools as a rule very much, but sometimes I notice that I'm using one of them, like a jazz musician might practise a certain scale. And I notice that the necessity or the support of being kind of scholarly with myself, and practicing the tool sometimes, gives me the permission to abandon them the rest of the time. If I stick with them I'm not in the exploration, but if I don't practise them, they don't support me in the evolution of the exploration.

And this thing that I really just love at the moment - it's not holding on to anything. That's the dance I'm doing at the moment - not holding onto anything. But I know that underneath that there's a whole lot of holding on. That inter-weaving is just fascinating to me. But if I'd only stayed with this new dance of not holding onto anything - and there's other ingredients in it that I'm aware of, because I still haven't mastered it - but if I only did that, then it wouldn't keep feeding me. It's like the tools. The tools are really like the scales. They really keep feeding me, to be awake to all the options, so that then something new might happen.

And I think the things that interest me a lot lately are to do with sensation, more, even more. Sensation, and weight, and a sort of lightness of being... something about us paling into

extinction, where it feels like there's a whole vanishing going on, in Australia. Species are disappearing. Sometimes I just feel this kind of empathy really in my body.

***We would say there is currently a new permission - if not imperative - to hang out with sensation...***

Yeah, and I think it's really important now. It's really what is totally cut off when we are on the screen all the time. And we have to really work back away from that, into the body.

### **The practice of teaching**

***When you teach your practice, do you have a set methodology that you teach?***

The *tools* I use are not ideas, they are practices.

And I think they take years actually. I don't tell people that in the workshop, but I think they take years to integrate. And you only integrate them by being in the studio. You know, you can't do that in a week. You need a few years. And then they can get into your system and have a role in your artistic work.

They're not ideas and they don't work as ideas. You can't just take one off the shelf, it doesn't work. It has to really be practiced. They are a practice. Sometimes, I have people come back to workshops for years and years and years, and I say "go out and explore it, get out and explore it. Go" And they go away for a few years. And they come back and they say "wow, so exciting!" Then they go somewhere else with it and the work grows. I think it does take years. And it took me a few years to train these French dancers that's for sure. And I think because the work isn't fixed, it continues to move, so then the enquiry never ends.

***Does your teaching - and if so, how does your teaching - influence your creative practice?***

Well, I think maybe it satisfies some part of my brain to put really clear parameters around things. I think teaching makes me be very clear. And that reflects back on my own clarity with myself.

This morning for the first half an hour I just did whatever I wanted. Don't look for any rules, don't follow any rules. The new stuff doesn't come out of the rules, the new stuff comes out of

nothing. And then I notice - one of these is sort of like I started pouring my bones across the floor. Yeah, it was like a combination of things we've done, and I could have stayed there all day. It was so exciting. And it felt like that was the clarity of the discrete parameters that I was giving you in the workshop coming back at me a couple of days later, marking out, giving me something to work with, or to move on from. So, I think the clarity is really important.

But like performing, teaching is not the same as studio practice on my own. With teaching, there are you guys there, and I have to find what is between - between what I understand and what you might understand. My partner always says "Just because you're teaching that, it doesn't mean people are learning that. Maybe they're learning something else!" So I keep inquiring into how I communicate across that gap - also because of the Zoom - but that's always been an issue for me.

So there's that pedagogic process of dividing things up. I know I'm interested in sharing this with you, but what are the 10 steps before this then? Sometimes that goes on, and then it does give definition to practice in a way. I really enjoy that. It's not everything, it's a part of it. But I think I actually really enjoy that sort of organizing of myself. It permits me to have more disorganization, because there's the support there of organization.

***Can you say a little bit about the 10 steps before a tool?***

Oh, well, if I want to teach you *follow one part of the body at a time*, it's not going to work unless we've had some experience of the whole body, and the sensation of the whole body, or the weight, or the breath, or how does one part touch something else, or what happens with the rest of the body? If we haven't gotten the breath and the weight going, then following one part at a time is not very embodied. It's going to be just a sort of sketchy idea.

The other thing about the steps is that we have four days, so each day it's like okay we need to get into that tomorrow. And then we've had two days, and great, we already did that on Monday so I can refer back to that. The things start to speak to themselves and to each other. I find that also really interesting.

And part of the teaching process is what I'm not opening. I mean the field is huge, but my job is four days, so how do I make it coherent to you in four days? So I can't do everything. We just touch the tip of the iceberg... but it needs to be integrated so that you get that sense of the thing having different facets, one bit speaking to the other. It's multifaceted, so I can't start with all of them. I can only start with one. And then they start to line themselves up.

## **The Practice of Performance**

### ***What are you occupied with in the moment of performing? Where is your awareness?***

When I'm on stage, in general, what am I busy with? Well, it depends what it is that I'm performing! So I'll talk about the piece that I'm doing at the moment which is a couple of years old, but it's still... it's mobile. It's called *DIRtywork*. It's from the *DIRt* (Dance In Regional disaster zones) project, which is in response to the devastation of the forests here in Australia, particularly in the area that I come from.

There are a lot of different elements in it. There is video, and some text that I've written. And there's in fact a lot of dances. So yeah it's dance, text and video. With this work the text has been renewed all the time because the facts are changing, and my experience of it is changing. Just thinking about when I first thought about coming back to Australia after living in Europe and discovering the forest gone - the shock of that! But that shock has been compounded, and...it's shifted. It's not that first shock any more. Then we had the bushfires, but the government is still destroying everything. The forest is being destroyed despite this. So there is new information that gets taken in, and it affects me physically.

And so what I'm aware of when performing, and the practice leading up to the performance, is bringing it into the currency of the present moment - what my experience of this destruction is right now, and how it's shifting. It's shifting in the text I write. It's shifting in the facts around me. And it's shifting in my relationship to it.

So there's things that are changing in the work. And I'm always wanting to kind of ride as close to the edge of that experience as possible, so that it is alive - it's not a piece I made years ago, it's actually a piece I made now. Even though the format and some of the elements have been there for a couple of years - like the film doesn't change - but my embodying of the whole thing and my journey through it, and the dancing is probably the most mobile and responsive, but also the texts. And I'm in the process of writing some new ones. And this piece is supposed to be performed in October but because COVID pushes it to November I've got a bit more time, but I'm always thinking around it. So what I'm doing is I'm filling up with where things are at for me right now. And I carry that through the work.

There are anchors, that are things that I know work, that I come to, like there is a journey through these materials. And I probably know what journey - which one I'm going to do first and second, third and all that - ahead of time. But how I get from one to the other and how long I spend with each one, I'm managing in real time. So I'm managing a lot of stuff, even though some of the elements exist.

And what I'm managing is where my dancing is at the moment, that response to my experience with this situation. How is that changing? So, when I talk about this "paling into extinction" I mean there's a *lightness* that has been coming in, in the last couple of years. It's almost like giving up. It's not giving up, but there's been a shifting. Where I notice that my dancing in this work a couple years ago was a much more angry, or not literally emotional, but much more angular. And distressed. And it doesn't feel like that now. It feels like something has shifted so that I'm carrying my experience of the world around me, into the dancing, and into the texts. And there will be little hooks and things that I've articulated to myself, that help me to go into that present, with an audience.

***Can you share some of those hooks?***

I think one of the things is how I start. How the dance starts. It might be some text. I might speak first and then there might be a bit of film, and then I will start dancing. And how I start dancing is really important. I locate myself, really calmly, with an audience. So what I'm trying to do is set myself up to be as close to the heart of what's really important to me right now.

And of course all the tools and processes that I'm using, they're all there, but I never try to just show them, I am really trying to live through the situation. They support me.

And the other thing I'm busy with is that audience. Who are these people? The spaciousness, particularly at the beginning of dance, is really important. My sense of sensory receptivity to where I am, and who's there, and 'How can I take these people with me?' So there's a sort of empathetic body. It's something about making myself transparent, so that the audience is disarmed. I am disarmed, and they are disarmed. All those things feel really important to me.

This is all tied up with my aesthetics I suppose, but what I do when I'm there with an audience is consider how can I meet this audience? And how can I bring the work through my body? Because it's shifting, and I have to be prepared for it to shift. It's not a finished, fixed piece. It never is. So there's a lot to ride with.

And then there's the dynamic of the whole - caring for the end. And when's it really good to change? Do they need a shift now? Or, I need a shift. Or not too soon with the humour. It's riding on those meta things as well as the micro decisions.

***Can you just say a bit more about how the reading/feeling/perceiving the audience happens for you?***

It feels like being transparent to me. It feels like they can see right through me. I'm sort of naked, completely naked in a way, I mean metaphorically. Because I want them to feel, I suppose. I don't want them to sit back and close off. So I have to disarm myself. I'm not presenting it at them. I want to find it with them.

I also want them to be surprised. In a way I want them to not realise that they've gone on a journey with me. And I don't really know how I do that. I feel it's a big concentration; and a thing I've been practicing for a long time. And I know I can suck an audience in. And I want to suck them in, because I want them to feel how terrible it is in the forest!

But I also want them to feel joy. In fact, I just want to communicate to them. I have to. It's my responsibility to communicate to them. It's not their responsibility to have to work out how to understand what I'm doing, or how to receive what I'm doing.

***And that 'becoming transparent' for them: does that consciously take different forms in relation to different audiences?***

I suppose so. There's a vulnerability there - if there's a weirdo in the audience, and the audience is close... Though that hasn't happened very often.

City audiences are different to country audiences. And Eastern European audiences are different to French audiences. I mean, they're just always different. And sometimes straightaway I feel like 'oh, this is such a nice audience'. Probably the worst audiences are Parisian audiences. But therefore I did gain a lot of strength from owning my work with French audiences. They are brutal. Critical and brutal, and have opinions.

Years ago I was trying to learn about performing. And I've done quite a bit of work with my partner Andrew Morrish. He teaches people how to perform - not in a way that I perform, but how to be with an audience. I can stay in my own world, but my task as a performer is to be with them. And to be with them from within my own world. I think that's a practice - the feeling of it is a practice. It comes from practising being with an audience. It's only the way I experience it, I'm not saying that there's only one way to do that.

***What do you do in the moments before you start performing?***

Well, I warm up - so that I've got access to my whole body, and my breath, and my imagination.

And I notice before I start that my attention is really big. Really big, and also very inward and outward at the same time. Because it's my responsibility to bring the work to them.

It's an incredibly powerful thing to be on stage. People sit there and watch you. You know sometimes I think 'Oh my god, they just sit there. I could do anything!' It's amazing that they let us do that. And with that comes a big responsibility. So, it's my responsibility to be fully charged and fully awake, and gentle, and available. I notice that my attention gets all kind of buzzing, all around me. And my sensations are strong. And then there is breath. I feel very with myself, I suppose.

One thing that helps me a lot, and which I learnt from Andrew, is to meet people before I start. To come out and be with people - not to hide out the back, but to break that thing and just be there. It's a simple thing, but it really makes a difference. Like it sort of normalizes things. We are just here. I'm doing this, and you're doing that. It normalizes it instead of kind of freaking out about what they might think. No, it's just me doing my thing. So speaking with people before, meeting them, hanging out in the foyer with the audience. It's really helpful.

***When performing, do you have a meta-awareness, or an external eye observing yourself, creating some kind of distance from what you are doing or feeling? How much do you direct yourself? When you perform, do you see yourself from the audience's point of view?***

Oh, I think with probably about 5% of my attention. The rest of it's too busy in the moment to moment. 5-7%.

I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm making. I have a sense of 'yeah, that's communicating isn't it'. I want to have a sense that you are getting what I'm saying. That's happening when I'm dancing. 'Are they getting it?' So a bit of me wants that. But it's a small bit. I'm too busy, but it's just a very thin layer.

***And is that the same thing that you described in the workshop as this third person -'taking care of the choreographer'?***

I suppose it could be ... you could say that... in a performance situation. I don't know. I think it's something else what I mean about that part guiding myself. But they are probably connected. There's layers of your attention aren't there. And layers of awareness. What the

body feels, where the choreography is going, what else needs to be taken care of - the audience. Well, they are part of that outer layer I suppose aren't they. So yes, it is connected.

***You said at the beginning that you like being high on the surprise, or the flow. Is that part of the reason to have the distance, to have the observer? Otherwise, one gets high and forgets about the situation? Or forgets oneself?***

I suppose so. Yeah. That's probably right. You know get lost in it, but keep 5% that's not lost so that you can redirect it. Or be aware that it's too much for an audience, or it needs to change now, or something. Yeah, I think that's true. I would say that.

***When you are performing, what do you do if or when you lose the flow, or have a sort of rupture?***

Well, one of many strategies I suppose: rest and breathe; sink down into my sensations; come back to the beginning of something small; leave...

I suppose I would tend to come back to my sensations. But that word *flow* - you used that word flow. I think for me *rupture* is equally as important as *flow*.

### **Broader implications of choreographic improvisation**

***Do you define your work in terms of a certain kind of aesthetic - and how would you describe that?***

Well, my own aesthetic. I don't have a name for it. I want people to look at the dancing. I think years ago I thought that I have something to say to dance. Like all these funny bits are part of dance. And all the half-finished things, and the weird lumpy bits, and the bits that never end, and the things that never start. You know everything is something if you give it attention. Like I had a really big mission, to tell the dance world what dance could be. And I still feel that. I don't know if that's an aesthetic thing - but... yeah it is! What do I value in dance? I value anything that has attention. I don't have a preference for a high leg or a low leg. Or a short leg or a long leg. If it's with attention, it's interesting.

But I don't think about that anymore. With the environment work, with the work outside in these devastated places here, I have felt like dance needs to say something serious. And I feel like I have something to say to the world now - not just to dance. And that's to do with the mess that

we're in, and this human environment disaster. You know Australia has the second highest extinction rate in the world. And it's still doing everything to make it worse. And a lot of dance is still feel-good and all that. And well, there's nothing wrong with that, but what I need to do is to use dance to speak to the world. And I don't even mean to speak verbally, I mean communicate about how I experience the world.

And that's taken me a long time. A lot of visual artists talk about their world view; and I think dancers don't talk about it much. We tend totally to talk about the way we dance, or the stories, or I don't know... It all comes I suppose from ballet and all that. I think we - dance people - are really late to become artists. So yeah... [the question is] how do I reflect the way I experience the world in dance?

And as I said, this weakness that I feel, this lightness of sensation, feels part of that for me. Perhaps I'm just trying to forge links with the way I experience the world, but it does feel like there is a dialogue going on, which wasn't there years ago. So that's really shifted my aesthetic. Definitely.

***We love what you said about your work at first speaking back to dance, and then coming to speak to the world.***

Yeah. Maybe it takes that long for dancers to become artists!

Because we spend so long... You know the trouble with dance is we are in our bodies! So we feel this subjective problematic all the time: where we feel stuff, or we don't like stuff, or we're tired, or we're full, or we're hungry. So we are dealing with the material. We *are* the bloody material! So to have the artist there - you know, the choreographer of that stuff - and then to find the artist... I think it's a really long journey actually. And not to just reproduce the forms that you've learnt. Because, the trouble is they get stuck in the body! So you have to work against them, to not just reproduce them... and to find the art.

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

I think in terms of the dance methodology it is empowering dancers, artists, to love it... to find the joy in it. That sounds really simple but a lot of dancers don't experience much joy. They just feel like it's a chore, and they've got to measure up, and they've got to fit in, and they've got to make a career, and all this shit. You know, we sort of lose the point of the practice, of the art, and the form. So I feel like it's really important. It's great for me when people enjoy the work and feel like it gives them a motivation to dance - to keep dancing.

And some people do say to me after workshops 'Oh, this is what I thought dance should be, what I thought it was going to be. This is what it's meant to be'. So yes, you can actually take that permission! And I mean, I think that's really important - on a human level, but also on a political level too. That we are able to empower ourselves.

**(How) would you say your practice is political, or connected to politics?**

I think when I started trying to find a way for dance to respond to the state of Australia, and particularly the state the environment - the nature - is in, I didn't know how to make it political. So I started trying to collide the processes together: reading a lot about what was happening, and going out into the bush, and then coming back to the studio and dancing. And then going back out again, and writing articles to the newspaper, and then going dancing again.

And I started to sort of develop a process for myself. Because it always works like that for me. I have to find the process to make the work. I can't just make a work. I have to find the process... and so I am still in that I suppose: How do they [the politics and the dancing] intersect without mimicking, without representing, without being didactic?

The texts that I might read in the *DIRtywork* piece in particular, they're quite cryptic. There's a family story, and a bit of history - how the sheep came to Australia - and it's a bit poetic, and quite minimal. Because I want the focus still to come back to the body. So it's more like contextualizing. So that people have a sense of the bigger picture of it, and maybe that gives them a way to look at the dance that has more political, social, thematic connection - again without representing it. Look I don't really know. I don't want to tell people how to see the dance. So, I'm constantly pulling away from saying it. Even though I throw in things at times.

I think the body can communicate a lot. I think, through dance, it can communicate a lot. And I don't want words to dominate, because they do everywhere. And I think that actually is counter to what I am trying to do. The body is really important. And dance is a really important medium. And we still haven't - she hasn't - really grown up yet. It's still emerging as an art form that can stand on its own two feet: that doesn't have to be explained by story, or filled in by some other medium. You go to music, you don't expect someone to get up and describe to you what the music is, or do a dance to explain it! I've always felt that dance should be able to stand on her own. I do come from that kind of purist aesthetic really, so this political work that I'm doing now still has that influence in a way. I don't want to replace the dance with words. That would not work for me. Or politically - because I think it is about the body.

***Yes. This kind of lightness that you are describing - that's a completely wordless, mysterious response, isn't it...***

Yeah - we are vanishing! All these species that we love and that are connected to us, they are all vanishing. We have lost 25 bird species in Australia. And there's a whole lot of others, just crashing now. It's intense. And we are connected to them all.



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