

## Contact Improvisation and the Alexander Technique

by Susan Lehotsky

I recently completed training as an Alexander Technique teacher. During this time I was introduced to a form of modern dance called Contact Improvisation. I didn't have a set of previously formed habits attached to Contact Improvisation, so I was starting fresh, exploring this form in tandem with my training. I have found this dance form a compelling way to explore my understanding of how I use my self and measure how my use has changed as I progressed through the training.

In Contact Improvisation physical contact between dancers provides the impetus for improvisation. Elements of the dance include weight transfer, counter balance, resistance, rolling, falling, flipping, suspension, and lifting. Humor can play a role in defining the dance, as can mood, pace, or gesture. Dances can range in mood from a subtle and delicate flow to large gestured, powerful, tear-up-the-room activity. Dancers are generally silent, though spoken word and inarticulate sounds can be woven into the dance.

While often used by choreographers as a means for fueling creativity, this dance can also be improvised live before an audience or approached as a social dance form. In the social setting, Contact Improvisation events are called "jams." Like jazz musicians, dancers come together to explore the limits and possibilities of the form. Dancers alternate freely between actively participating in and witnessing the dance. There is generally no music. When music is added, it is typically improvised in synergy with the dancers. Though often performed in duet, a single dance can involve any number of participants. Sometimes objects are incorporated into the dance. Instructors tell beginners that the floor can be your first partner.

### A Brief History

Contact Improvisation originated in the early 1970s, when trends in dance and theater emphasized physicality, improvisation, social commentary, and crossing boundaries, and there was a rising interest in the mind-body connection and sensory awareness. At first, the dance was done with mats to protect the dancers who were falling, rolling, and crashing into one another. As time passed, the mats were seen as a limitation and were eliminated. As a result, the dancers needed to acquire greater skills and control—for example, as in gymnastics or aikido—to protect themselves.

### Experiencing the Dance

Contact Improvisation promotes awareness and sharpens both movement skills and perception. I have found that I am able to challenge myself in this dance form in ways that I would never have thought possible. Sometimes I am quite astounded at where this leads me. I am able to lift dancers weighing more than I do easily and without my usual cautious tension. In a recent jam, I stood in monkey and offered my back as a stable standing base to play with and a dancer found his way into a handstand balanced on my back. I wondered if I were mistaken in thinking this was what he was doing. Since there are no mirrors in the studio where we dance, I could not see what was happening, and it seemed so



*OK, now where's forward and up?*

simple and balanced. Since then, he has repeated this move, and we have discussed it with other dancers, who wondered if we found this difficult. My partner and I agreed that it wasn't difficult and didn't require much strength, but rather required body awareness, alignment and conscious direction.

My understanding of how I direct myself from the floor has changed. I am exploring finding opposition or leveraging not only from my feet, but wherever the point of contact is at the moment. I am becoming more tactilely sensitive to the points of contact with other dancers and have a keener sense of where these points of contact can lead me. This new awareness greatly enhances the range and diversity of choices available to me.

I am additionally aware of how my sense of direction and balance has improved, enhancing my ability to explore new paths and respond to more subtle leads. With improved proprioception and clearer direction, I have more awareness of the amount of tension required in the moment while at the same time I am able to keep the rest of my body in a state of poise, ready to respond to what is offered to me. I find myself able to choose where I am going in a much more conscious and directed way. Paradoxically, this has freed me to go someplace new. I have recently

had the sensation of being in a free-fall spiraling downward off a partner, while at the same time feeling safe and in control of the movement. This growing confidence allows me to open up to greater possibilities in the dance, which then can take on momentum of its own, flowing freely. Moments like these are intoxicating and addictive.

Because dancers come with widely varying experience and body understanding, it is essential that a dancer take responsibility for her/his own safety in the dance. This presents a different sort of challenge. How I handle these situations is still evolving. With growing experience, I find that I am becoming more adept at influencing the dance in such a way that I do not find myself in intractable situations. As a result, I can use the dance itself as a medium for communicating and don't have to resort to using words.

I have found that the Technique is an invaluable tool for keeping me safe, while at the same time allowing me to challenge myself. The further I progress with both, the more satisfying the experience becomes.

### Reference:

Novack, Cynthia J. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin, 1990.

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