

# Performance Responses

edited by Amy Terry and Laura Vorweg

## Improvisation as the Practice of Resilience in Precarity

Zoe Katsilerou

### Abstract

*Improvisation is a practice that invites performers to  
interact with the present moment  
negotiate stimuli and ideas and the potential conflict  
between the two  
build confidence in following their own  
impulses  
move away from capitalist notions of finished and polished performative  
products*

Choreographer Jonathan Burrows defines improvisation as the 'negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking' (27), alluding to the embodied experience of making decisions in the moment through negotiating behavioural patterns unique to each performer. For an improviser to comfortably engage in such processes, the ability to identify and manage personal habits in relationship to stimuli of the present moment is key. Through this constant negotiation performers can develop strategies which support them in moving with patterned physical and cognitive behaviours, and in uncovering creative potential that is directly linked with spontaneity, presence and play. These skills are akin to the life skills identified by the World Health Organisation as most vital skills of the future.

Dancing within an unknown structure can offer insightful discoveries for one's way of moving and thinking. It can also be intimidating.

Drawing on my movement and text improvisation practice, I am proposing a poetic essay which will be constructed upon an embodied experience of thirty consecutive days of improvisation. Writer bell hooks suggests that the bridge between theory and practice is real life (1994). In an attempt

to theorise and physicalise the significance of improvisation in developing skills necessary for the future of performing arts, for thirty days, I will improvise and use writing as a reflective tool around notions of resilience, precarity, joy, play, negotiations, conflict and ecology. The poetic essay will include visual and written material.



*Fig 1. Improvisation performance CCA Glasgow (2018) captured by Brian Hartley*

## **Introduction**

This writing consists of a collection of critical and creative reflections on notions of resilience as embodied and articulated through the lens of my improvisation practice. Combining academic writing with sections of reflective 'interpretive pieces of poetic expression' (Elliot 12), I explore the qualities, understandings, and aspects of resilience that can emerge through a regular improvisation practice. I use improvisation studies as a critical framework and a practice-as-research methodology of documenting and reflecting on improvisations. The written reflections draw on thirty consecutive days of solo movement improvisations in my home, and touch upon themes of

resilience, motherhood, performing arts pedagogy, creative practice, and ecology. The audio-visual material is a selection of documented moments of these improvisations and aims to capture some of the physical and sensorial textures of this experience.

I have composed this collection as a way of pondering the future of the performing arts within educational systems and professional contexts. Some of the questions I am reflecting upon include: what are the relationships between improvisation and resilience as practices which can help support the future of performing arts? What types of training can support performers in cultivating and growing these? How have the temporal and physical realities of raising a newborn baby shaped and influenced the ways I improvise, in particular the qualities and themes arising within my improvisations? What relationships between resilience and flexibility can this experience cultivate? By asking these questions I aim to bring your attention to the significance of improvisation as a practice that can offer life skills. Rather than providing answers, I hope to inspire you to further explore these questions in your own practices.

In this writing, I approach and reflect on improvisation from the perspective of my movement and voice practices. This allows me to forefront elements that I consider essential within improvisation, and to contribute my distinct embodied understanding to the field of improvisation studies. Combined with my own research on relationships between choreography and voice (song and text), my work draws on a variety of practices which share a common interest in developing presence, listening and spontaneity. These include and are not limited to:

- Pauline Oliveros' Deep Listening which emphasises voluntary and conscious listening. Deep Listening refers to listening that requires an 'active engagement with attention' (xxi), an attention that allows for the listener to expand their perception to include 'the whole

space/time continuum of sound' (xxii).

- Ideas of tuning by OBRA Theatre articulated by Eilon Morris. Morris describes tuning as a metaphor of 'a highly adaptable and fluid process that is as much about discovering and playing with dissonance and fractiousness as it is about finding harmony and union between performers' (Morris).
- John Britton's *Self-With-Others*<sup>1</sup>, a psychophysical training practice that explores relationships between an ensemble and a performer as a way of developing attention (316).
- Andrew Morrish's improvisation practice.
- Frankie Armstrong's voice work and commitment to freeing the natural voice.
- Somatics, mindfulness and creative anatomy that emphasise attention on physical perception and experience.
- This work has been written in short intervals which fitted around my newborn baby's needs and the reflective poems include implicit reflections on my journey of becoming a mother. The temporal, physical, and cognitive flexibility I had to embody in the process of writing this essay highlights the significance of the subjects explored and underscores the need for improvisational skills in daily life.

<https://on.soundcloud.com/VEJ1k>

*2. Interrupted Improvisation (audio) December 2022*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the significant contribution that John Britton has made to improvisation pedagogies and the value of his approaches to improvisation. However, there are aspects of his practice that I do not endorse relating to teacher-students power dynamics and interpersonal interactions with students.

## **COMMIT**

Can I commit  
Can I commit  
Can I commit

What does reflecting feel like

What do I do

I do

I dream

I feel

I allow my body to be transferred to a different space and time

I follow with my words

I follow my imagination

I blindly follow

I jump into

What my mind brings

Restlessness

Tiredness

Consistency

Consistency

Consistency

Commitment

I commit

## Improvisation

Improvisation is a practice that invites me to immerse myself in the present moment; negotiate stimuli and ideas, and the conflicts between the two; build confidence in following my own impulses; be skilfully spontaneous within uncertainty; and move away from capitalist notions of polished performative products. While many of these abilities may be inherent in humans, they are not always fully developed, even in improvisational performers. My improvisation practice and pedagogy are committed to facilitating spaces for performers to develop these skills through in-depth training, and to sensitise them to relationships between improvisation practices, daily life, and resilience.

Choreographer Jonathan Burrows defines improvisation as the 'negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking' (27), alluding to the embodied experiences of making decisions in the moment through negotiating behavioural patterns unique to each performer. These patterns consist of cognitive, physical, interpersonal, spatial, and imaginative elements. By highlighting the ability of the body to think, Burrows moves beyond notions of mind-body dualities and refers to the body as a whole; a body that thinks, feels, listens, and responds as one; a body that is aware of its patterns and their relationships with the present moment. Many performing arts practices I have encountered often assume a separation between the mind and the body, sometimes between the mind, the body, and the voice, too. This is reinforced by arts institutions within which students usually study theory and practice separately. Within improvisation training, a performer is required to engage cognitively, physically, and imaginatively all at once. Separation of mind and body is impossible as there is a constant intimate interrelation in order to pay detailed attention and respond to the stimuli of each present moment. In this writing, I will be using 'body' to refer to the body as a

whole and I will assume that the body has the ability to think through 'a set of senses' (Morrish), through its nerves, muscles, ligaments, bones, and all the other structures.

Movement improvisation is a 'spontaneous mode of creation' (Goldman 5) and asks performers to combine their technical training with their ability to assess the physical, musical, spatial, and interpersonal elements of the moment to respond with spontaneity. It asks them to move 'between the known and the unknown, between the familiar/reliable and the unanticipated/unpredictable' (Albright and Gere 3). Professor of Dance and dancer Danielle Goldman writes that improvisation is a practice that requires 'enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize' (Goldman 5). These words highlight the challenges in combining technique with spontaneity, and balancing listening with responding. Within contemporary dance training there is an unspoken, collective presupposition that the body can think for itself, and as in Burrows' describes, to negotiate patterns and movement phrases. Movement improvisation offers possibilities of applying 'analyzed, theoretical material into the soma-psyche (body-spirit)' (Blom and Chaplin 5) as a way of embodying and processing learning. However, I often encounter dancers who claim that they cannot think or speak but can only move. Such statements reinforce mind-body dualities and disregard the enormous skill necessary for dancers to engage their body in full, and to coordinate with other bodies and spaces. Within my improvisation practice, the assumption that body and mind are one, and work as one, is key as multiple parts of myself collaborate as a whole; I am present, I listen, respond, think, and propose, to name a few. When spending time with my 3-month-old daughter, I see all these qualities in her, and even though she yet has no words, she is able to be fully present and interact in honest, spontaneous ways. Why does it become harder to access these abilities as we grow?

Dance and movement practices offer me possibilities for a deeper un-

derstanding of my body in relationship to myself and the outside world, as they remind me of the significance of accessing embodied ways of relating and connecting to something other. This understanding has an impact on my interpersonal relationships and behaviour both within and outside the performing arts context. Through consciously practicing how to sensitise and tune my moving body to the movements, sounds, and presence of others, I become more aware of patterns that might inhibit clarity in communication and creative expression. Through becoming aware of these habits, I am given the opportunity to find ways of moving in and out of them. This process is not technical in the way we understand movement technique, and is applicable to my dancing and everyday body<sup>2</sup>. Within my pedagogical improvisation practice, I sometimes find it challenging to convince my students of improvisation's principles significance for the everyday, predominantly within undergraduate courses. What interrupts our ability to continue developing skills on being present, listening, responding, and to use them within an improvisation practice?

According to the World Health Organisation (1997), life skills are the abilities for 'adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life' (WHO 1). Within an improvisation, I use my body to adapt, respond, 'deal' with the 'demands' of the moment. In this sense, for me, improvisation is a life practice, and its principles support me both in and out of the studio. My aim as a pedagogue and performer is to find articulate and embodied ways of sharing this knowledge and to support my students and collaborators to develop skills that are essential not only for 'professional but also personal lives' (AlHouli and Al-Khayatt 416).

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<sup>2</sup> My dancing body is not separate from my everyday body. These terms are used here to describe a body that moves in prescribed, technical ways, and one that moves freely, responding to everyday demands.



## Untitled

Listening  
To myself  
To the environment  
Presence  
Adaptability  
Responsiveness  
Attracted to the uncomfortable  
Attracted to the comfortable  
Attracted to pleasure  
  
Make no conclusions  
No products  
No answers  
Improvisation as a continuous journey

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In 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO) outlined a core set of ten life skills: self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, effective communication, interpersonal relationship skills, stress-coping techniques, and emotion-focused coping techniques (1). These are intangible qualities that support 'adaptive and positive behaviour' and 'enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life' (ibid). Improvisation as an artistic and life practice, can support performers in developing strategies for adapting and moving through challenges, both in and out of a performing arts context.

My improvisation practice focuses on developing presence, listening, adaptability, self-reflection, embodied and creative problem-solving, empathy, and confidence. These intangible qualities offer a specific articulation of the ones proposed by WHO. Used as primary principles, they support

me in further developing my movement, vocal and collaboration skills, in deepening my creativity and spontaneity. They also support me in adapting and dealing with moments of my every day life. Within a compassionate environment, through practicing improvisation, I discover ways of being a more present, responsive, compassionate, brave and creative performer and human.

Reflecting on the similarities between the life skills proposed by WHO and my improvisation practice, the following questions come to mind. What are the relationships between performance training and these skills? What kind of training can provide tools for building these? Do current curricula in the UK offer such trainings? Could this work support performers in developing life skills and a sense of resilience both in and out of the studio? The answers to these questions are elusive and can only be found in practice through 'direct and consistent experience with uncertainty' (Mehta and Fessell). Uncertainty often makes performers feel vulnerable so this work is the most affective within a carefully facilitated environment and with the individual performers taking responsibility for their own learning. Since beginning to teach in 2011, I have witnessed performers being transformed through undertaking improvisation training that has its roots on building listening, presence, adaptability, embodied problem solving, empathy and confidence. With this work having no end point, performers are encouraged and guided to discover their own ways of developing these skills further and finding ways of applying it to their own practices and daily lives. This flexibility can be both exciting and daunting, and it is a facilitator's responsibility to curate a safe and supportive environment for those engaging in improvisation training to become 'active participants in learning' (hooks 5). By taking active responsibility of their learning, performers are more likely to become confident in their craft, sensitive to their environment and others, and bold at solving problems. These elements contribute to one's ability to improvise

eloquently, with eloquence here suggesting qualities of attention to the present and articulate physical responsiveness.

Movement improvisation is flexible in style and content and accommodates individuality in practice. It has the freedom to take any form, shape, and style, with performers being invited to practice as a way of further investigating how their bodies operate within uncertainty. As Goldman writes 'to even suggest that improvisation looks a certain way is to obscure its power as a process rather than a product' (109). This fluidity of form can deter performers from wanting to engage with improvisation, as it does not offer tangible results. It requires personal and active responsibility in relation to decisions and a clarity around individual behavioural, physical and interpersonal habits.

Further to Goldman's comment and due to its fluidity in style, improvisation has the potential to facilitate inclusive and diverse spaces. A variety of styles, techniques, genders, ethnicities, and religions can coexist within an improvisation studio, with the only requirement being openness to listen and respond to each other in the present moment. Although this openness is key, improvisation classes and performances are often dominated by white performers, whose training is predominantly in contemporary dance and contact improvisation. This exclusiveness has its roots in postmodern improvisation practices of the 1960's that often 'failed to acknowledge the importance of jazz and black social dance traditions in their so-called innovations' (Goldman 16). Postmodern white practitioners drew on Zen and Asian practices and black culture, but often unknowingly failed to recognise and respect these sources. In thinking about improvisation as a life practice, I am committed to raising awareness of inclusivity and diversity in our institutions and training, and to advocate for spaces that can comfortably and safely hold the improvisation principles independently of racial, gender, cultural and training backgrounds. In my work as a lecturer and pedagogue,

I strive to highlight the interconnected relationships of the politics of the studio and the politics of everyday life, as a way of planting the seeds for fairer and more inclusive professional spaces. With its focus on listening, improvisation has the potential to create a space for 'fresh models for scholarly inquiry and political action' (Goldman 2), and for growing informed, non-biased interpersonal relationships. In this sense, our performance practices carry the responsibility of a fairer and healthier future.



*Fig 3. Improvisation January 2023 by the author*

# Resilience

## **A day of twos 22/12/22**

Body  
Cut in half  
Soft tissues  
Scarred  
Muscles  
Separated  
Forcefully and naturally  
Layers and layers of deep, careful cuts  
To bring life  
New life  
A body that is cut in half, feels cut in half, but moves as one  
yearning for the familiar patterns of the past  
radiating a freshness that is inexplicable  
carrying long nights and fractured days  
A body  
Resilient  
A body that bends under and bears the wind  
The storms  
The unexpected  
Resilient  
A body that knows, instinctively, how to  
How to  
How to  
How to be  
Resilient  
How to  
How to  
How to  
Live  
Pause  
To be resilient  
Is  
To be cut in half and to know that life is  
Wearing the scar  
Letting it transform this body  
Allowing it  
Allowing it to be soft  
And to return to the future  
Strong/Soft  
Continuing  
To live

A desire to live  
The desire to live  
To continue living

\*

Resilience as a concept has become more frequent in everyday conversations, literature, and practices both within and beyond those found in the performing arts. The broad use of the term offers opportunities for resilience to adapt its meaning to a variety of contexts, raises questions around its relationships to the environments it can occupy, and interrogates the ways one can cultivate it. Through reflecting on my 30-day solo movement improvisation practice, I am investigating the relationships between resilience and improvisation within the context of the performing arts pedagogy and performance practices. Within this section, I am asking questions around key understandings of resilience within our field. How can these understandings offer opportunities for gaining tools that will support the industry to build strong foundations for its future as a significant contributor to a more creative, sustainable, and inclusive world.

As a term, resilience has been used to describe: 'people and systems that bounce back from negative experiences and disturbances' (Mehta and Fessell); 'the ability to be agile enough and maintain some form of identity through difficulties' (Mehta and Fessell); as 'systems that survive being jostled around — whether or not they go back to where they were before, or to any stable state, for that matter' (Mehta and Fessell). These are some of the multiple definitions of the word, which, although they carry a similar essence, offer nuanced interpretations.

What emerges from these and other understandings of resilience is a sense of the ability of something/someone to be adaptable and directly responsive to changes in its/their environment as a way of continuing to ex-

ist. Resilience's key qualities echo improvisation's principles of adaptability and spontaneity. It is essential that one is present, adaptable and able to spontaneously respond to change to be resilient. It is essential that one is present, adaptable and spontaneous to be an eloquent improviser. In this sense, improvisation and resilience are practices that require and cultivate presence and adaptability.

Resilience lives in the body; it represents the body's ability to make choices that affect its vitality and future. Whilst these choices can be made and implemented slowly, unlike within an improvisation, they are informed by one's attention to the present moment. For me, resilience requires a body that works as a whole; a body that is aware of itself in relation to the outside world; a body that is confident to swim in uncertainty; a body that listens and responds spontaneously with eloquence; a body that is present; a body that improvises. When reading about resilience, I often encounter metaphors of trees enduring strong winds. Their trunks and branches are soft enough to move with the wind and not break, and strong enough to not crumble. If they are too rigid, they will break. If they are too soft, they will also break. It is as if trees can respond to the strength of the winds moment by moment and adapt both in the now and over time in order to survive. Similarly, within an improvisation, one needs to fully immerse oneself and tune into the present moment with softness, openness and attentiveness. Only then eloquent decisions can be made, decisions that will respond directly to the flow of the present moment.

However, I have encountered improvisation practices which are not always in agreement on how to best approach cultivating presence, listening and spontaneity. What is ultimately a collaborative art form still has the potential to generate aggression and violence.

A memory:

It is 2019. I am in a studio full of improvisers of all ages, backgrounds, levels and disciplines. It is the end of a weekend full of exchange of practice, improvisations, discussions and performances and we decide to do a final improvisation to close the event. The rules are: everyone stands at the edges of the studio and they have the freedom to enter and exit the space as they please. We begin. A few minutes later, someone shouts 'STOP! We are not doing it right, everyone is doing it wrong! We need to start again!'. Everyone freezes and even though the improvisation begins again several group members are reluctant to enter the space.

In that moment, I am surprised by the improviser's lack of openness, softness and presence. I am surprised by their lack of respect to the journey of the group. Whilst I recognise their need for control, and anxiety, in a moment full of newness and uncertainty, it seems to me that this exclamation is breaking an improvisation's main principle: to be present in, listen and respond to each specific circumstance. In that moment, the improviser surrenders into ideas of what the improvisation could be and not what it is. I am, in that moment, reminded of Kirstie Simson who writes that, when under pressure 'if the performer focuses more on themselves than on the preciousness of connection in the context of working closely with others, the resulting actions can be tainted by gross or subtle forms of aggression that are often unconscious' (Simson).

There is aggression in the improviser's voice. Their voice is like a strong wind breaking a group that is newly formed and has not had the chance to bond in flexible and sturdy ways. The ecology of the room is disturbed. For me, to be resilient is to be able to improvise so as to maintain the every-changing balance of an ecology, and to improvise eloquently requires ecological resilience. In this sense, there is no resilience in the improviser's understanding of the dynamics of the group, and this has an impact on the



flow of the work and on the connections between its members.

Resilience requires an intelligence that is informed by individual and collective histories, politics and ecologies, and a responsiveness to these. Similar to improvisation, it thrives when combined with detailed attention to the present moment. It is a practice that needs to be cultivated and can only do so in the moment. As with improvisation, inhabiting the moments of the 'continuous flow of internal and external signals' (Blom and Chaplin 3), resilience is also most needed in moments when one is required to discover new ways of relating to another or the environment, as a response to change. Resilience presents itself in the necessity of a direct negotiation between the internal and the external. The political significance of this negotiation underlines all human relationships and ecologies, and the immediacy of improvisation has the ability to highlight the politics of these relationships.

How can resilience contribute to the shaping of the performing arts industry as it is adapting within a fast-paced, ever-changing, diverse world? How can these relationships support a sense of balance within precarious moments? How can they facilitate diverse, inclusive spaces? Is there a necessity for adaptation of the performing arts, and how can movement improvisation principles support this change? What are the relationships between the need for adaptability for survival and movement improvisation?

## **A Day in the Attic**

Moving small  
Moving parts of  
Moving continuously  
Internal, invisible  
They keep us alive  
The resilience of being  
With its ups and downs  
Its successes and failures  
Moving through waves of unknowingness and structure  
The resilience of life

## **Performing Arts Institutions**

In my work as a senior lecturer within Higher Education institutions, I have frequently encountered students who are overwhelmed with regards to their studies, professional life, and interpersonal relationships, particularly during and following the COVID-19 pandemic years. There is a collective recognition that the generation entering university between 2020 and 2022 have lost precious transition time between high school and higher education, and that this has an impact on their engagement with university. What I recognise in their behaviour is an intolerance for the unknown. This has a negative impact on both their experience of learning and on the content of the training I, as a pedagogue, am offering. Students often demand to know exactly what we are doing, why, and what knowledge will each task provide. It is encouraging that they are more aware of their rights in education and that they want to ensure a high level of learning, however, there is little understanding of, and interest in, less familiar forms of learning that take place subconsciously, more slowly, or in a non-cognitive way.

Within my improvisation practice, a level of uncertainty is assumed; without knowing what follows I respond spontaneously and adapt to the new now, constantly learning something new about the way I move, speak, interact, exist. To respond spontaneously to a change of circumstances, in a

way that is viable and creative, I require an embodied clarity within which I assess and relate to the past, the now and the new now. Qualities that can support me in such shifts include presence, deep listening, adaptability and confidence. These are intangible and unquantifiable and cannot be measured by grades, scales, and systems. Whilst I encourage students to move away from notions of cognitive right and wrong within an improvisation, there is an assumption that the performer can feel the quality of the present moment. Does it need something different? Can I carry on the same way? The answers to these questions come in embodied, kinaesthetic forms and are often not registered rationally.

How can this *feeling* be cultivated?

Kinaesthetic and embodied knowledge is, for me, one of the most vital ways of learning. To learn through engaging all senses, through engaging the body as a whole. Dancers often cultivate kinaesthetic awareness and embodied understandings through their technique and improvisation classes but are rarely guided in applying these principles to their everyday lives. With interdisciplinary studies and practice-as-research becoming more prominent within higher education settings, I am reminded of the importance of the transferability of the skills taught to other contexts. In addition to practical choreographing, directing, singing, and devising skills, what other skills will students need when they become part of the creative workforce? Are intangible, embodied skills still considered less important than technical skills? If yes, what is this revealing for the impact capitalism has in the arts and how much can our creativity withstand capitalist notions of productivity, making and success?

Considering the combined political, ecological and social challenges we face in the now, I am convinced of the significance of performers' abil-

ity to apply embodied and intangible skills to non-creative contexts. The complexity and the speed with which the world is evolving requires adaptability, spontaneity, clarity and creativity, and the necessity of a confident and strong creative workforce is evident. For me, the resilience of the performing arts world is dependent on the resilience of the individuals that represent it, and the future of our industry is dependent on its ability to be adaptable, interconnected and creative. Performing arts institutions and professional organisations carry a responsibility to adapt to the demands of the now as a way of modelling behaviour that will ensure the survival of the people within their structures.

With arts subjects being removed from schools and with the rising cost of living forcing a number of creatives to remove themselves from the industry, there is a general sense of devaluing the arts and those working within arts subjects. Performers, particularly early career artists and freelancers, are often expected to undertake long working hours, to agree to low pay and to commit to multiple projects at a time in order to survive. The word resilience is often used in such contexts to suggest that performers just need to push through and learn to cope with these challenges. This approach can have an overwhelming impact on one's mental and physical health. Within the multiplicity of conversations around resilience in the arts, it is important to differentiate a resilience that comes from a place of attentive listening, the ability to adapt and self-awareness, from that which comes from a place of panic, lack of choice and exhaustion. Eloquent resilient responses will contribute to a stronger performing arts workforce and improvisation can play a significant role in supporting performers to develop the ability to respond in pertinent ways.

## **In Good Company**

Rushing  
To fill in space  
To fill in time  
To find the story  
Rushing  
Compromising listening  
For quick gratification  
Pause  
Begin again

Listen  
Pay attention  
Follow the lines  
The stories  
The lines of stories  
Of your body  
Listen to me  
Listen to the stories I carry  
Listen to her  
To her small, new, short stories  
Trust  
As deep listening  
Don't follow closely  
Don't close the focus  
Get out of the way  
Get out of my way

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Getting out of the way is an expression often used within improvisation discourse and practice. It entails relinquishing control over the final shape and form of a performed sequence of movements, words or sounds, and it encourages distance between one's actions and the expectations/judgements that might be attached to these. Within my improvisation practice, letting go of ideas around the final product is key. The significance of this ability is amplified by discourses around connecting with others, or what Eilon Morris refers to as tuning, a term borrowed from music to describe connecting 'to

the space, to each other, to arrive in that particular moment and place, to rediscover a shared quality of being together' (Morris). Tuning is, for me, a verb that describes the ability to move away from existing ideas when improvising or performing, and being present to what each now asks of me. Connecting to each unfolding now with my whole being.

The difficulty performers face in letting go and tuning to their environment when improvising can allude to relationships between performance practices and capitalist, linear ways of being which promote a certain type of productivity. Frequent conversations with freelance colleagues evolve around invisibility, lack of opportunities and funding for their work. This is predominantly due to the unsustainable structures of funding bodies, the high demands of a freelance context, and the dominant place social media have in the way artists promote their work. Does this lifestyle have an impact on the ways students, performers and the performing arts workforce are engaging with and viewing their creative work?

As with an improvisation, the ability to eloquently and spontaneously respond to a change of circumstances in life can only be developed in practice. The preparatory work for moments of urgent and resilient responsiveness can draw on improvisation training. Presence, listening, adaptability, connections with the environment, confidence, embodied understandings of the world and creative problem-solving are improvisation's intangible, transferable skills that can be cultivated in and for the moments that need them. Movement improvisation, with its lack of interest in movement style and its focus on presence, listening and creative, spontaneous responsiveness, can be an invaluable resource. It can facilitate a rich space for growing life skills and for cultivating resilience. Through this practice, I am reminded and encouraged to notice how the work I undertake in the studio bleeds into my everyday life, and of the impact it can have on my relationships with others and the environment as it highlights valuable possibilities within

precarious, changeable moments.

However, improvisation alone cannot overcome the strongly established systems that impact on the ways performers fund, create, tour and disseminate their work now. Whilst improvisation can provide a strong foundation and a pool of principles for an individual to draw on when encountering challenges and change, a greater shift is needed for the wider systems to adapt to the needs of their workforce. Perhaps improvisation can provide a fertile ground for new growth, an area of study through which organisations can develop skills in listening and responding effectively to those working for them. Perhaps improvisation can offer alternative ways of being with each other, listening and responding to the impending changes in our climate, relationships and societal needs. Perhaps, improvisation can support us in finding new, more resilient and ecological ways of living.

## Conclusion

### OUT

Where does a practice begin  
And where does it end  
What ethics do we encourage when we talk about professionalism in  
dance studios  
Could a practice develop in a forest  
Whilst walking in wilderness  
Could a walk be professional development?  
What ethics do we encourage in a forest?  
How do we talk about us, humans, in relation to the earth  
To a forest  
To a tree  
What do students know about resilience in the ecosystem  
What can they learn from gardening?  
What can they learn from stopping and listening to the birds  
What practices should we be encouraging as educators  
What skills  
Which skills  
Improvisation as life practice  
What practices, qualities  
Improvisation lends to  
A walk in the forest lends to improvisation  
Listening  
Respect  
Coexisting  
The cycles of seasons  
Growth and death  
Resilience  
The elements

Meandering as a form of movement improvisation  
As a way of understanding the human and ecological structures  
Take a walk  
Every day  
In the same forest  
For a year  
And notice  
The colours  
The sounds  
The light



The life  
What do you see?

Commitment to a regular life practice  
In which I can observe the seasons  
And sit in them  
In the cold and the quiet  
In the warm and fiery

A walk in the forest  
How can we encourage greater relationship to the environment as a way  
of nurturing performance skills, improvisation skills?  
How do we learn?  
How do we play?  
Play  
Always play!



*Fig 4. Still of a video of Northcliffe Park in Shipley, November 2022 by the author*

## **A final reflection**

I have spent the last two months improvising, writing and thinking about relationships between improvisation and resilience as practices that can support the future of performing arts. This research has coincided with the birth of my daughter and with me having to recompose myself again as a new mother, a partner, a friend, a daughter, an improviser, a pedagogue, a performer.

What I have discovered in this time, is the vast resourcefulness of the female body – endurance to pain and sleeplessness, care, love, creativity, listening, presence – all amongst circumstances that change daily. I have realised that my improvisation practice is present with me always and everywhere. It teaches me how to take a step back as a way of seeking deep listening and understanding, and how to only respond when the moment is right for me. It asks me to surrender to my body's know hows and to tap into visceral, subconscious knowledge even if I rationally don't know how. It encourages me to trust myself now more than ever and assures me that if I am committed to the principles of a practice, the work continues wherever and however I might be.

This research has been essential in supporting me to maintain a clarity around why I love to improvise and the significance of improvisation within my everyday life. It was not the intention of this essay to discuss relationships between motherhood and improvisation, it has however been inevitably beautiful to be forced to notice the strong links between the two. To surrender to the rising waves of the two together and let their currents take me without resistance. I admire and respect all mothers who give their bodies and hearts to listen, care, respond to and softly guide their children. I am grateful to my improvisation practice for teaching me how to be a good mother, a mother that is simply present.

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