

On Working with the Grand Union...

Central Notion Company evolved from an interest in Self-direction inspired by the improvisational work of the rio Grand Union. During the spring of 1972, a group of Nyu dance students worked for twelve weeks with members of the Grand Union. By the beginning of the second six-week period, the group had dwindled to five very committed women: Joan Evans, Fran Page, Donna Persons, Louise Udaykee, Fern Zand.

Central Notion Company made its debut in May 1972 when the five of us performed two pieces which had grown out of our work with Barbara Dilley and David Gordon. We were very nervous that night. Our pieces were on a program with modern dance pieces and the audience was rather hostile toward this "new dance" we were presenting. Barefoot and clad in jeans and T shirts, we performed a loosely-structured, workmanlike theatre piece directed by David. We then closed the program with an improvisation based on image and energy projection within a circle, directed by Barbara.

The first night all went well. The second night, Louise was hurt by an unintended criticism and she walked out of the first piece after the first section. Our real improvisation began then. We struggled with our confusion and nervousness, not quite sure how to react to her departure or each other. That material became an unwelcome addition to the work. During the break between pieces, we gathered for some strong honest talk. We used the final improvisation as a formal way of resolving the conflict.

As the five of us stood around afterwards, feeling like total failures, a jubilant David came over to talk to us. He told us that we had just done one of the best things he'd seen in theatre in a long time. He asked us if we would like to continue working with him in the fall. We were thrilled, but startled and confused by his evaluation of the event we had just been through. Sometime during the course of the next year, we came to understand his reaction.

From September 1972 until April 1973, we worked one night with David and one afternoon with Barbara each week, learning techniques of self-directed improvisation. We received very different information and direction from each one. The combination proved to be a very good one.

As I look back on that time, I remember being in awe of David and fairly frightened by him, sentiments all five of us shared to some degree. He would appear at NYU every Thursday night at 9:00 P.M. in some outrageous outfit, take a seat, and watch us improvise for an hour or so. At least once during the night, he would enter the space, often to change a stale scene we couldn't seem to make work, often simply to join us in improvising for the rest of the night. After we finished, David would discuss the evening's work with us, probing us for reasons and motives for our choices of action, offering suggestions, and giving harsh criticism when he felt it necessary. A master in the art of using double negatives, David is often very confusing; but ultimately I learned more from him about performing improvisationally than from any other single person.

I think David's overall objective was to instill in us a sense of constant consciousness about ourselves, each other, and every single action or non-action that occurred during a session. In fact, the only time in seven months that he really blew up in rage occurred after a session in which we let one side of a Doors record play over and over again for an hour, totally oblivious to it. He almost walked out for good.

Three major areas of concern come to my mind as I look back on the many tools, tricks, and methods he gave us. First he sought to instill in us an eye for design - a way of seeing time and space in terms of an overall wholeness, rather than in terms of a chain of separate events. We learned to move in and out of actions and moods, exploring stillness and movement, seriousness and humour, silence and conversation, subtlety and overttness, all in terms of creating one unified event. Following David's example, we made ourselves comfortable with props and costumes, learning how to use them in designing the

space. We also learned to use each other in terms of design, experimenting with leading, following, supporting, destroying, and with creating one, two, or five focal points at a given moment.

Second, David taught us the art of timing, definitely one of his strongest personal assets as a performer. At the beginning of our work together, the five of us fell into that trap which is so common to new performers of improvisation: we pushed everything. We were so afraid of a moment of boredom that we changed scenes much too quickly, never allowing any scene to develop to its fullest, be that climactic excitement or total dullness. As well, we did not yet trust each other, so we were often acting as five frantic soloists, which was much worse even than acting as one frantic group.

Gradually we began to relax and let situations develop to their fullest; and of course we overdid that as well. At times we would let things drag on and on, until David, in exasperation, would explode onto the scene, interrupting the stagnation and shooting us up with an idea for a new direction. From one extreme to the other we bounced back and forth; gradually we began finding a middle ground. The longer we worked together, the stronger the trust between us grew, and that helped as well.

During the last three years, the membership of Central Notion Company has changed several times; with each change, the problem of timing arises once again. I am beginning to feel that sensitivity to timing remains the first and most basic problem that each beginning improvisation group must confront.

The third problem David explored with us was how to overcome tentativeness. We probably learned more about David as a person through our work in this area than in any other, because nothing outraged him more than to see one of us become coy, silly, or evasive through fear of plunging in and taking a risk. The risk, of course, was the risk of making a fool of oneself. Several specific examples come to my mind:

One night Joanie asked me to sing a Scottish folk song.

After a moment of thought, I said " Joanie, you know I am not Scottish; why should I know a Scottish song?". " Well Donna, I thought you had a Scottish background, so I thought you might know one." Back and forth this conversation went, well past the point of frustration. Finally, I opened my mouth and belted out a Scottish lullabye. Afterwards, I asked Joanie to accompany my song with an Irish jig. Almost verbatim, we repeated our earlier conversation. Finally, finally Joanie and I got it together; I sang and she danced and it was wonderful. But, as David said later, "It took so painfully long for you two to arrive at the climax, that by the time it finally happened, my (audience) reaction was one of uncomfortable release rather than the utter amazement it would have been without your procrastination."

Another night I received the most devastating personal criticism David ever gave me for a similar show of tentativeness. I had somehow ended up in a very strong position sitting still and quiet in a chair in the center of the room. I could have sat there all night, relying upon my sense of timing and my trust in my fellow performers to use my passivity as they saw fit. Instead I chose to talk. I asked Fern why she was putting a mat on top of Louise. Fern answered with a quip, "Why is nine times three twenty-seven?" My response was silence...silence...silence. A minute must have gone by before I came up with a reply, and that is quite a long time during an improv session.

At the end of the night, David honed in on me: "Didn't you realize what strength you held in a center stage passive position? Didn't you realize that you didn't need to speak at all, even if spoken to? Didn't you realize that by initiating a conversation you took a center stage active position, and were therefore responsible for center stage active behavior? Finally, once you took the position and found yourself at a loss for a good response, why didn't you at least just open your mouth and share your confusion with the audience, by saying something like, 'Oh dear, what have I gotten myself into now. Why didn't I keep

my mouth shut? I guess I'll just get up and do....', or some other similar sequence. In other words, once you are put on the spot you must do something, anything but just sit there letting thoughts appear on your face without communicating them."

The message from these two examples is this: When you are given a direct command, respond directly, strongly, and immediately if at all possible. If you truly are stumped, don't just disintegrate into vagueness when the focus is upon you. Anything is better than nothing.

David himself actually enjoys watching certain moments of indecision more than anyone else I know. He loves to watch performers caught in real drama when they are thrown an action which truly baffles them, such as occurred with us when Louise walked off stage during our first performance. When the nervousness and self-consciousness are that real, that realness is communicated, and the audience becomes an active participant in the drama of 'what is going to happen next?'

During our year of work with Barbara Dilley, we learned a different way of approaching improvisational work. We worked with her on Tuesday mornings. Like David, Barbara never gave pre-session directions; unlike him, she always participated in each session from beginning to end. Her leadership was much more indirect because of that. We would improvise as a group of six women friends; at the end of a session, we would discuss what we had done and how we felt about it.

Being in tune with one's feelings was an important motif throughout our work with Barbara. From her example I came to understand that the idea of free improvisation implies understanding one's state-of-being at the moment and using that state as the beginning point of working. If you cannot be honest with yourself, you cannot be honest with an audience; and free improvisation must be based on honesty if it is to communicate anything. I remember a day when I came to a session not feeling

well physically. I began apologizing for my state of being, only to be quickly silenced by Barbara. "Donna, she said, all of this explaining and apologizing isn't necessary; nor do you need to present to anyone a rigid idea of what you can or can't do today. You will do what you do today because of where you are physically and mentally; that is all you need to think about." Her words cut through layers and years of tension concerning expectations, which I had grown up with.

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| 4 | | 1966 |
| * 5 | FIRE ISLAND, SALT AIR | 1967 |
| * 6 | Colorado, boulder | 1968 |
| * 7 | FIRE ISLAND, SALT AIR GROCERY. | 1969 |
| 8 | CALIFORNIA, Berkeley (RICK NELSON) | 1970 |
| 9 | Roma, Italy? | 1971 |
| * 10 | MASSACHUSETTS, CAPE COD, WINDMILL | 1972 |
| * 11 | MASS, SUMMER CAMP | 1973 |
| * 12 | ENGLAND, ST. ALBANS. | 1974 |
| * 13 | CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ, BERKELEY (HARRIS) | 1975 |
| * 14 | CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY (RAINER) | 1976 |
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