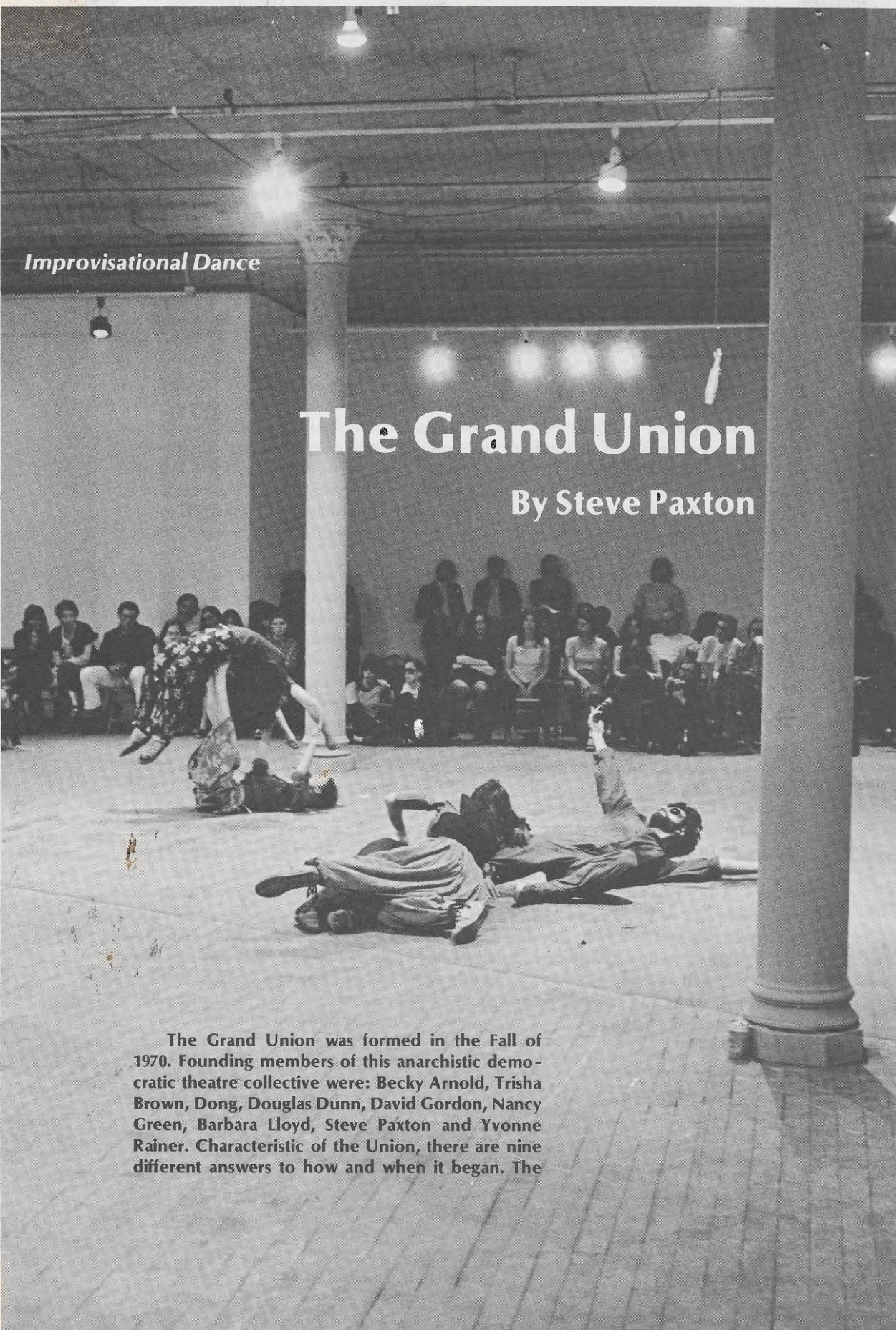


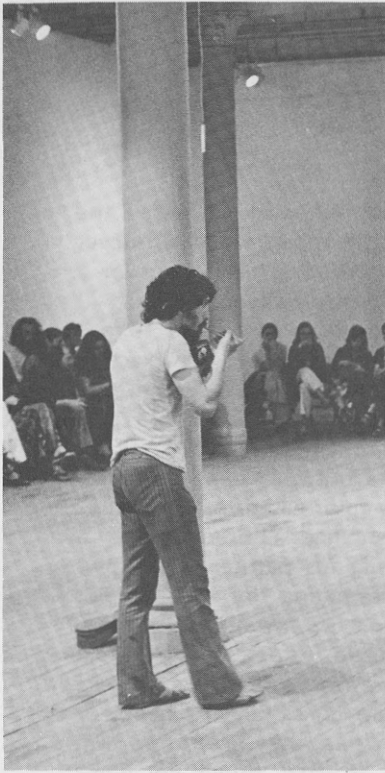
Improvisational Dance

The Grand Union

By Steve Paxton



The Grand Union was formed in the Fall of 1970. Founding members of this anarchistic democratic theatre collective were: Becky Arnold, Trisha Brown, Dong, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, Nancy Green, Barbara Lloyd, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer. Characteristic of the Union, there are nine different answers to how and when it began. The



All the photographs in this article are by Michael Kirby, from an untitled piece by The Grand Union, performed at the LoGiudice Gallery in New York. At left, Steve Paxton is eating with chopsticks. At right, he offers a morsel to another performer.

lives of the members have been intertwined for anywhere from five to ten years. In 1970, the members of Yvonne Rainer's Continuous Project Altered Daily (CPAD) conceived of an organization in which they might share choreography. Three other choreographer/performers of similar mind were invited to join. This was the beginning of the organization but not of the concept.

In its early stages (1969), CPAD was a formal and rehearsed work, with sections that could be rearranged. Rainer began accepting dates at times when dancers were not always available in New York for rehearsal, and, using this exigency as a creative issue, created partial forms to be completed in performance. First, the group was allowed to participate in ordering the sections; then anyone could bring in music to play for a section; then props could be brought in; then new bits of choreography by the company could be inserted, such as the music, or props; and finally, the company discarded several parts of the original CPAD. The development that Rainer's particularly orderly mind evolved began to function as a valuable exercise for the company in such departments as: where do social hierarchical roles originate and how can they be changed; how to make artistic decisions; how not to depend on anyone unless it is mutually agreed; what mutually agreed means, and how to detect it.

When Rainer had ritually merged her separate ego with those of the company via CPAD, they had reached the beginning of Grand Union. Some members had been prepared for a long time, through the exploration of dance forms occurring at Judson Church and elsewhere.

Grand Union, begun as a repertory dance company with an inheritance from CPAD, created several new choreographies in which improvisation played

a significant part. Barbara Lloyd added a follow-the-leader work in which the leadership was determined by the direction in which the group faced (whoever could not see the others was the leader). The leader had six variations of a rhythm, and was free to move about and employ the rules as she wished.

It soon became clear that the members were unwilling to submit to any leader, however temporary. David Gordon's piece, *Sleepwalking*, an exacting and demanding work, was given an unsatisfactory performance after even less satisfactory rehearsals. Improvisation seemed the form in which all could participate equally, without employing arbitrary social hierarchies in the group.

Grand Union dropped the stricter CPAD structures but continued to utilize the looser ones. The loose forms were similar to new improvisational structures invented somewhere every two years. Trisha Brown had choreographed a duet in which one person falls like a felled tree, while his partner breaks the fall. As the performers get more daring, they stop alternating the falls, do not stand at a safe close distance to each other, and topple in any direction. Consciously or not, Rainer had a similar falling section in CPAD, which David Gordon sees as a model for the subsequent Grand Union sequence. Six performers stand in a small circle and have the options of: continuing to stand, or of falling in any direction. If they fall away from the circle, they extend an arm to catch themselves. If several people choose to fall at once, things get complicated, for each faller might not find a catcher; he might be left to fall on the floor.

In a work of this kind, the eyes learn to judge more acutely, the skin becomes hypersensitive to qualities of touch, particularly the arms; timing in the arc of the topple becomes a game in which you trust as long as your nerves allow, pushing your limits. Understanding where another's focus is becomes easy since it is instinctive. It is also crucial to safety and to communication.

Thus, during the initial stage of dependency on CPAD material, Grand Union used some new structures, but improvisation became the major developmental technique.

Improvisation does not submit to precise definition. It contains a spectrum of possibilities that run from the popular idea of total spontaneity in content and form to the special ability to attack a rigorous discipline as though for the first time, living each moment for its own unique quality. Improvisation is not historical (not even a second ago).

The form is permissive, permutative, elastic, unspecified. In the Grand Union it is continuously invented by nine people, and discovered only in fragments remembered and garnered. In other words, they do not know what they create, but they trust it. Not an *aesthetic* venture, unless you like aesthetics raw.

The totally improvisational company that the Grand Union unintentionally became bypasses the grand game of choreographer and company. There, ego-play is the issue, and those gentle means of assuming authority or submitting to it had, in the past, been played thoroughly by the members.

Instead, following or allowing oneself to lead is each member's continual responsibility. The security of pre-set material is only occasionally indulged in, since it seems to get in the way of the amplified self-exploration that arises in improvisatory performance. The weighty theatrical tradition of subjecting one's self to another person's aesthetic of time-space-effort manipula-

tion is ignored in favor of the attempt to be emancipated without confining or restricting others.

It has not been a clear path for some members. We are conditioned to voluntary slavery. In a democracy, dictators must demand that others be slaves; fortunately for the dictators, the American life produces slaves who are unaware of the mechanism of that production. The ties that bind are the ties that blind.

It is important that the vision was cloudy. How can a true group process evolve if a course is concretely pre-determined? To me, Grand Union seems only the current manifestation of a decade-long exploration of social formulations in theatre aimed at producing freedom for individuals of a group and spurring them on to new awareness. Many social forms were used during the 1960's to accomplish dance. In ballet, the traditional courtly hierarchy continued. In modern dance (Graham, Limon, Lang, et. al.), the same social form was used except magicians rather than monarchs held sway. Post-modern dancers (Cunningham, Marsicano, Waring), maintained alchemical dictatorships, turning ordinary materials into gold, but continuing to draw from classical and modern-classical sources of dance company organization. It was the star system. It is difficult to make the general public understand other systems, inundated as we are with the exploitation of personality and appearance in every aspect of theatre. Though this basic poverty of understanding on the audiences' part is a drag, unique and personalized forms have been emerging, such as those seen in the works of Robert Wilson, Judith Dunn, Barbara Lloyd, and the Grand Union.

The Grand Union performance is not a two-hour predetermined flow, but an instant-to-instant, personal, additive experience. The head of the group evolves from the freedom of interaction in the social set, rather than from the performers striving to realize the aesthetics of the director.

The medium is people and what they are doing to and with each other. For the collective head to develop, several years were needed. Grand Union members were influenced as much by their shared past and the particular focus on new developments in collective action as by their own decisions about their future.

The Grand Union members, while gaining confidence in their powers of invention in performance, have kept some of the best "bits." What is termed "improvisational repertory" has been created. This repertory, a first step on the scale toward set forms, recurs exactly or with variations. The unpredictable in groups is: Who will pick up the signs and what version of the original will they play? The members slip in and out of the elastic structures, often playing as much on the levels of mutual understanding as on the original form. This understanding of others' mental and physical beings is the result of countless rehearsals, parties, and late-night recaps of performances over the years. The entanglements of lives in the past is the basis for a fresh appraisal as they spend time together in the present. Mutual interest and shared exploration result in a recognizable "head" among a group—a "head" that can itself provide the basis for near-telepathic communication of intent of activity.

Any two people, even superficially aware of each other, are in communication with each other; but I am talking about reinforced communication, in which both parties are sure that the other is aware of the communication and is actively involved in it, however swift. Overt mind-fucking is to be avoided.



The changes of material in performance should be aimed at furthering communication, not hampering it. Like jigsaw-puzzle pieces, the two persona/activities are put together. But they rarely remain intact; instead, they tend to blend through evolutionary or mutative communication forms into shared material.

It is pleasurable to be in communication, organic or ruled. Ruled communication is useful for making sure of factors in exploratory stages. Should communication slip, acceptance of that new situation is the quickest path to re-establishing firm communication.

Trust, the developing trust, or the acceptance of a condition of frustrated trust (missed trust), seems to me the basis of mutuality and quickness in the transitions between those naturally arising phrases, the "bits." Acceptance is the beginning of trust, bringing in information about the actual state of the other person, and erasing images of the other person as one would have liked him to be. No expectations, no disappointments, no blame. Just results.

Theatrical improvisation is a model of earliest experiences, like infants' cumulative awareness of increasingly complex references, connotations and forms. The Grand Union process is this, coupled with the adult ability to comment on the experience, and with the all too-human contradictory effort to re-live earlier visions.

I am balanced on my head on the slightly rough floor, pressing painfully, pivoted by an unseen friend at the other end of my body (lower: upper). My arms and hands are busy supporting a beautiful woman, stalling a fall she began, assuming that somebody's hand would influence the outcome, but ready, should she fall unnoticed to the floor. A man arches me over his back and lifts me into the air where time stands still due to my anticipations (fall? support? firm touches? my movement?), heightened by the chance of danger and the possibilities of all available energy pathways.

After being turned over and over in slow time, I am uncoiled to the floor

and squat on one leg. Then we huddle, nine of us, and blend our softnesses together and feel close warm breath and hugs. We stand for a time.

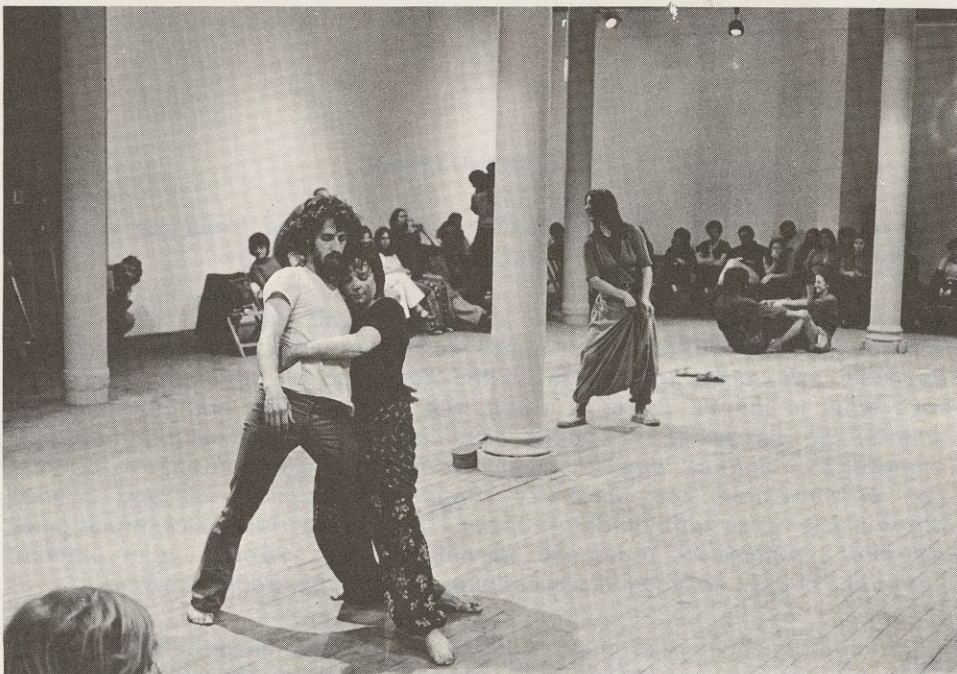
Then one person thrusts away and runs around the room alone. I join and soon we are all hurling ourselves through the air at each other, colliding forcefully, rebounding to collapse on the floor, and up again to twine about each other in the air, falling as a unit. The arms and legs grip from digits to armpits; the muscles of two bodies blend into a single falling mass, mutually sensitive to reinforce physical communication through soft-surface verification of movements too quick for consideration. Crash. Roll and balance across a hip which turns under, propelling me onto a rising back which takes me into a scheme of poses and standing balances, rigorous rules instantly known and quickly discarded for a continuing group boogie around the room.

Physical orientation of these dancers is not determined only by eye or habit, but through weight (where is down?) and touch. Touch contact with others maintains the integrity of the system of physical forces alive among the people. The eye is used, to its periphery, and the aural messages function not only as transmissions of information but as locators. Sensual contact is direct and undifferentiated, since in this context, sexual energy is used simply, as an accepted part of the contact between any two people. People are sexual. The social perimeters are open. Entering into formal space is allowable; following impulses to activity is allowable and desirable. The nature of others' response becomes known, and much work occurs at that line of concentration where the mind turns from the outward to the inward; it is not too late half-way through a fall to make adjustment for a safe landing, should the helping hand be late.

Clearly this is an aesthetic path removed from the carefully modeled choreographies of the ballet-into-Graham (and beyond) tradition. It is even removed from forms adapted from the purveyor of new musical means, John Cage: chance and indeterminacy allow the aesthetic pratfall wide berth. Here is the first bogey of dance improvisation. The results can be calculated only roughly, if at all, especially in group improvisations.

The second bogey relates to the understanding Laban had of: we-who-make-up-and-are-made-of-cities. He stressed improvisation for children and beginners to free them from movement constraints created by the increasingly mechanical social forms that came about when Western society became the prey of the assembly line. We are afraid of physical exploration. In dance—one laboratory for exploring the human body and all it carries with it in this life—repression of possibilities is the general rule, mirroring social forms.

For the dancer, the fear is of physical injury. Considering the physical isolation most dancers experience in their training (in class each person is equally spaced from all the others in floor work, or sequentially isolated when moving across the floor), unplanned physical contact might well provoke such fear. Different cultures have different concepts of personal space. That each person must stay within his isolated space allotment (like similarly charged particles) is typical of our culture. When crowding occurs, personal space is maintained by condensing the field into a tight little bubble around the person—or even withdrawing inside the skin wall. There is dignity for the



mind even if the messages of the body must be ignored. The understanding of personal space is social/habitual and since the habit is defensive, having that space invaded can be shocking.

Freed of habitual denial, the sense of touch can expand beyond the usual allotment of personal space to the architectural enclosure, becoming larger, softer, easily penetrated, or easily encompassing others' personal space. Contact with the body becomes a matter of degree, already initiated with the first possibility of touching or blending enlarged personal space-fields. The diffusion of personal space is used with another awareness, that of potential use (not selective negation). Contact can be allowed without foreknowledge of the nature of the contact if prejudiced fear is absent. This is the safety factor and one of the keys to the development of the art of improvisation. Greater sensitivity is the result of personal space extension. The body becomes vulnerable to outside forces (other people) and must respond in other than programmed habitual ways. The action of high wind on the willow and on the oak is a useful reference.

The preparation is opening the senses, judgment, building trust; tuning the body for strength, elasticity, getting it ready for quick changes through the range from relaxed to tense. Body and head must be ready for fast control or instant release of that control, when personal control must yield to that imposed by the situation.

A mark of the dancer used to improvisation is his quickness of response. This quickness is faster than habitual movement/thought and is based on acceptance of the imminent forces, letting the body respond to the reality it senses and trusting it to deal with the situation intuitively. Trust is an organic form of communication.

New material comes into range with the ability to relax into contact and attune movement awareness to the demands of the situation. The body can move more swiftly when it acts out of intuition rather than prejudice. Relationships become possible at high speeds that would be arduous if slowed. It becomes evident that dancers have been only touching the surface.