



Introduction

The book you are holding in your hands is the result of a four-year exploration: ‘Improvisation as Choreographic, Authorial and Creative Principle.’¹ In 2020, the three practitioners and authors of this book began an adventure of practical research dedicated to dance improvisation in performance, known in the Czech context as ‘instant composition’ or ‘open/free improvisation’. During this project, we set out to introduce this form to the Czech reader through articles published on various platforms,² published interviews and, finally, as this volume. Dance improvisation as/in performance is contextualised and approached theoretically for the first time in the Czech environment. To date, there are almost no Czech translations of foreign publications dealing with this phenomenon³ in English, and there are still very few theoretical reflections on this artistic discipline. Thus, with this publication, we aim to introduce dance improvisation as a creative discipline to the Czech artistic scene through the practices of highly respected international dance makers and to contribute to the wider discourse among professionals, amateurs, theoreticians and practitioners.

This phenomenon has been described in depth by other researchers, both in the past and also quite recently, and is again becoming popular in academic writing.⁴ The form of instant composition is defined as the legacy of postmodern dance of the 1960s and 1970s associated with a certain geographical location — the US.⁵ In the Czech context, postmodern dance (if we follow Banes’s categorisation) did not develop in the same way as in the countries of the West. Before the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Czechoslovakia was under the occupying forces of the Soviet Union. There was very little information and few possibilities for artistic dialogue between Czechoslovakian artists and those associated nowadays with the Western postmodern approach.⁶ State-sanctioned dance consisted of ballet, modern ballet, black light theatre⁷ and folk dance.⁸ However, experimentation in movement, non-verbal theatre and dance, including improvisation, did take place, mostly in the form of artistic and political provocation, dissident efforts and the amateur scene, or as part of the underground ‘action art’ performance scene.⁹ Postmodern ideas, concepts and approaches permeated the Czechoslovak and later Czech borders randomly, in an uncoordinated manner, through individual encounters and experiences. Dancers, choreographers and performers, who often later became pedagogues at various institutions and/or pursued their artistic careers, travelled abroad as soon as it was possible and brought back with them new ways of thinking about movement, dance and performance. They experimented with new material and thoughts in their teaching and performing.

Following the Velvet Revolution, the 1990s and early 2000s were very rich in the exploration of new concepts and formats of improvisation in performance on the Czech and Slovak¹⁰ scenes. However, these developments escaped the attention of mainstream audiences and interest within the newly emerging contemporary dance scene and funding structures.¹¹ New festivals were established, including Konfrontace, 4+4 Days In Motion, Festival Tanec Praha, ...Next Wave, Czech Dance Platform and ImproEvents Prague. There were also new venues, including Archa Theatre, Studio Alta, Ponoc Theatre, NoD, Duncan Centre Theatre, Alfred ve dvoře, Meetfactory and Akropolis, and new dance companies. Artists who were open to experimentation emerged and invited teachers, choreographers and collaborators from abroad. Encounters with these foreign artists influenced the whole Czech dance scene and the rising generation of artists. Among the artists who visited Prague and Bratislava¹² were Min Tanaka, David Zambrano, Akram Khan, Steve Paxton, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houstoun, William Forsythe, Victoria Marks, Susanne Linke, Xavier LeRoy, Nigel Charnock, Meredith Monk, Beatrice Libonati, Jan Minařík, Kirstie Simson, Ruth Zaporah, Stephanie Skura, K. J. Holmes, Lisa Nelson, Jennifer Monson, Daniel Lepkoff, Andrew Morrish, Russell Maliphant and Thomas Hauert, to name only a few.¹³ The invited artists came on various occasions to show their work at festivals, give workshops to students and professionals, on private invitation by a company, for an artistic project or to teach at an institution (for example, the Duncan Centre or AMU, the Academy of Performing Arts¹⁴). Some returned regularly over the years and became well known in the Czech artistic scene and with the wider audiences of the festivals and venues mentioned above.

The 'Wild Nineties', as this decade is called in the Czech Republic, was a unique time for the arts in general. The 1990s saw the establishment of the grant system to provide financial support for the arts and culture and new possibilities for cooperating with foreign institutions and guest pedagogues. The fact that the three authors of this book could meet, work together and share experiences and ideas is a reflection of the fruits of the 1990s. Lizzy came to the Czech Republic for the first time in 1992–1993 and returned in 2000–2005, first as a guest teacher of Release-based technique and improvisation at the Duncan Centre, then as artist in residence at HAMU¹⁵ (the Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague). During this period, she worked with the Czech quarterly dance magazine *Taneční zóna* and the *Prague Post* newspaper, writing and editing on dance and the visual arts. She became deeply involved with the Czech dance scene

as a choreographer, performer, teacher and writer, collaborating with Czech, British and American artists based in Prague. Mirka and Lizzy met in 2001 as colleagues at HAMU, where Mirka was teaching and doing her PhD in choreography — the first Czech PhD in the field of dance improvisation (2002–2007). They collaborated on several artistic, performance, curatorial and pedagogical projects. Mish, then a recently graduated linguist and a singer and theatre student, met Mirka while attending her improvisation classes in 2011 at HAMU, and later worked on a performance with her (*Refresh*, 2016) as a voice performer. From then on, they have collaborated on five productions involving improvisation on stage under Mirka's direction. During these collaborations, Mish moved between being a vocal performer, a dancer and a dramaturg. In 2020, Mirka and Mish started working together as post-doctoral artistic researchers and invited Lizzy to join them in the project.

This project and book emerged from the need to contextualise instant composition in dance as a performative format for the Czech audience. We therefore invited six renowned international artists — Rosalind Crisp, Julyen Hamilton, Wendy Houston, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little, all of them living legends in the fields of performance and teaching worldwide — to give four-day workshops with a focus group of Czech dance improvisers, ourselves and students at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. Our intention was to invite expert artists — pioneers of experimental dance and various forms of improvisation in performance — who were either already associated with the Czech dance scene or with us through personal contacts. In this sense, we continue the practice of the 1990s, which reached out to and brought Western artistic influences to the Czech artistic scene via personal connections.¹⁶

Each of the six workshops was accompanied by an interview intended to provide a closer understanding of the form, individual approaches and use of terminology of the artists. All of the invited artists are active as performers or teachers and all have developed their own practice and approach to improvisation. Wendy Houston, Julyen Hamilton and Daniel Lepkoff are well known among Czech dancers, having taught here (or in Bratislava) and left a strong impression. Rosalind Crisp, Eva Karczag and Nita Little had not previously taught in Prague but have touched the authors personally through their practices shared in London over the last fifteen years. While a few of the artists have published writings, either on their own or as part of an academic collaboration, all share their expertise primarily through their making and teaching and are examples of profound embodied knowledge, transmitted through

artistic practice and embodied encounter. This is not intended to represent a comprehensive or objective representation of knowledge in the field. Respecting the veracity of embodied experience, the assembly evolved through existing relations to the Czech scene, personal contacts, our embodied experiences and practices, and availabilities.

We worked with the artists in the following order: Rosalind Crisp, Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton, Nita Little, Eva Karczag and Daniel Lepkoff. This chronology is reflected in the order in which the interviews appear in this volume. Originally, we intended to invite all of the artists to work with us in person in Prague. However, the project was sadly affected by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the workshops and interviews therefore took place with the artist online while the focus group, the students and the authors were working in the studio at the Academy in Prague.

The interviews draw out the artists' personal approaches to improvisation in performance from various points of view, reflected in the following sections: dance improvisation as artistic practice; becoming an improviser; the practice and language of teaching; the practice of performance; and political dimensions. For many of the artists, this was their first opportunity to reflect on the early development of their practice and explore why and how they came to improvisation as a core discipline. In reflecting on the interviews, we noticed that they can be approached in various ways: as oral history, cultural ethnography, a mapping of language through individual usage (terminology), pedagogical methodologies, sharing a performer's and creator's expertise, and insights into the broader implications of dance improvisation as political practice. It was interesting to note that all of the artists have different notions of the place of improvisation in their practice. For example, Wendy Houstoun doesn't call herself a 'hardcore improviser'; Daniel Lepkoff prefers to think in terms of open movement research; and Rosalind Crisp highlights simply dancing.

Over the four years of our collaboration, research and conversation, unexpected parallels and connections surfaced. Our questions were first developed in a series of discussions between the three of us and evolved further during the project as we discovered ambiguous and unexpected threads. For example, the issue of terminology came up when we noticed how differently we all understand some words (choreography, score, composition, etc.). Many Czech dancers use English words that have no clear Czech equivalent. For example, the word 'score' is translated and used in Czech studios as 'partiture', 'task', 'structure', 'script', etc. Therefore, we decided to use the untranslated English word 'score'

also in the Czech version of this book. This is not, however, simply a problem of translation from English; even among native English speakers, words are contested and worked with differently. We are excited by the current complexity around the terminology for grasping experience, e.g. body-mind, mind-body, somatic, psychosomatic, psychophysical, (in)corporeal, embodied, which reflects the fact that the field is evolving ahead of the language. In the Czech language, some of the words are not (yet) in use and thus some words in the Czech version of this book might seem unfamiliar. These realisations provoked us to insert more questions about language into the interviews and also propelled Mirka and Mish to write a short additional text, published in a Czech dance journal in both Czech and English, on the language of dance improvisation.¹⁷ Some of the interviews have also been published elsewhere (in full or as excerpts) on various professional and academic platforms.¹⁸ The interviews that appear in the book have been edited in collaboration with the artists owing to the length and focus of our research.

Another discovery was the emergence of a definite picture of the US post-modern influence through Contact Improvisation and releasing dance practices.¹⁹ Steve Paxton and Mary (O'Donnell) Fulkerson appear in the interviews as spectral figures, mentioned by several artists as significant influences and teachers. And some underdocumented history came to light, with Daniel Lepkoff and Nita Little speaking of their involvement (among several others) in the emergence of Contact Improvisation. In our discussions with Lepkoff, Karczag and Little, we could sense the atmosphere of New York in the late 1970s and 1980s, while Eva Karczag brands her own work as 'post-Judson'. The threads of this influence can also be traced through the practices of Julyen Hamilton and Rosalind Crisp. At the outset of the project, it is fair to say that we did not fully anticipate the strength of this lineage. Only Wendy Houston does not specifically identify this in her practice, which comes through a history of content- or task-based improvisational dance theatre in the UK, in addition to her own connection to the Czech scene through experimental dance theatre. While the immediate link to US postmodernism emerged within our study, researching the broader and longer histories and origins of improvisation — such as the influence of African dance and music forms in the US²⁰ — is a valuable line of inquiry that lies beyond the scope of this project.

Several other issues, currently discussed in studios and in academia, appeared within the research: dance improvisation as a potential source of political and social change; questions of personal and embodied

agency; embodied consciousness and presence; questions of hierarchy and democracy, both on stage and in relation to the audience; the rich and contradictory use of terminology; and the broad range of approaches to choreography within the form. Many and various understandings of the value and meaning of ‘dance improvisation’ are revealed to include theatre, dancing, joy, playfulness, performative freshness, making, physical inquiry, relationality, emergence and quality of being.

Being primarily practitioners ourselves, we approached the research as a shared exercise in which we moved and thought together. We participated in the studio work to experience the artists’ current approaches in our bodies. We discussed these experiences and asked each other the same questions that the focus group dealt with. We made the decision to pose the questions to the artists as one body, containing all our individual comments, thoughts and research focus — replacing ‘I’ with ‘we’.

To extend the reach of the practical research, we asked our Czech colleagues, experienced performers and teachers who work with improvisation, to join us as a focus group. Helena Arenbergerová, Jiří Lössl, Jana Novorytová and Veronika Šimková participated in the workshops and dialogue with us to assist the study. We invited more Czech and Slovak dancers and artists to join the discussions and workshops and were happy to be joined by Zdena Brungot Svíteková, Kateřina Dietzová, Hana Chmelenská, Rena Milgrom, Marta Poláková, Hana Polanská Turečková and Anna Sedlačková. Over the course of three years, we collected different kinds of data, from written reflections, questionnaires, photographs, videos and personal discussions, and produced a number of texts published in Czech and English.

Alongside our joint research, the three of us each approached the data according to our own current research focuses, and these are developed in three individual studies following the interviews. In her study, Mirka introduces dance improvisation as essential complexity and possibility that increases the joy of dance for both the dancer and the viewer. She deals with choreography and improvisation, and notices changes in how these are understood as interrelated practices in dancing and dance making in the moment. Mish considers the dialogical nature of dance improvisation practice in performance through the lenses of her experience with the Czech experimental discipline of Dialogical Acting.²¹ She highlights improvisation as an embodied discipline of awareness that requires ongoing practice. Lizzy considers the active sensory presence cultivated in improvisation in relation to explicit or implicit political inquiry. Reflecting on the historical legacy of political agitation and experimentation within improvisation, she draws out

aspects of the artists' current practices of attention and participation, understood as empowering and emancipatory process.

All of the images in this book (apart from the portrait photos) are from the workshops given by the artists in the frame of this project. They were taken in the dance studios at HAMU²² by the Prague-based photographers Shoe Bean, Anna Benháková and Michal Hančovský and feature the artists, our focus group, associated professional performers, our pedagogical colleagues, our students and ourselves. The images are grouped and presented in relation to the specific workshop in which they were taken. It is interesting to note, in the images, the differences in atmosphere and flavour of the movement occurring in the workshops led by the different artists, even within the same space and featuring many of the same dancers.

Our title, *Secretly Alive*, is borrowed from Julyen Hamilton's interview, in which he describes the thrill of improvising as a dancer with Rosemary Butcher: '[T]hat was the bit of dancing where it was alive. Something was nearly secretly alive. It kind of asked something of me that was what I wanted to be.' This reflects the way we understand that improvisation enacts a space for a subtle vitality and agency to exist within the body and between bodies — beneath or alongside, within, over and above, or entirely in the place of traditional forms of set choreography. We also enjoy a resonance with the idea that improvisation itself, as a marginalised art form, has had an insistent life, despite being largely excluded from mainstream arts practice and discourse, especially in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, various forms of dance and theatre improvisation remained 'secretly alive' in Czechoslovakia during the years of authoritarian Soviet rule and through the years of democracy and capitalism since 1989.

Mish, Mirka & Lizzy
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