



STILL. *moving*

Contact Shoptalk.

“I think that we are doomed to have to look at what we do. And we’re less [doomed] if we can look at it long enough to be able to derive interesting material out of it. So, stand around.” [S.P. from raw transcript] Photo of Steve Paxton during the first talk at Breitenbush Jam, Oregon, 2014.

Why Standing?

Steve Paxton talks about how the Stand relates to Stage Fright and Entrainment in Contact Improvisation

edited by Karen Nelson

Steve talked on two different afternoons during the seven-day Breitenbush Jam in March 2014 in Oregon. To accommodate newcomers, the second talk became a multilayered event, with Steve interrupting a recording of his first talk to make comments.

Talk 1 is on the left; **Talk 2** additional layers are on the right.

[K.N.]

Talk 1

There was a time when Contact Improvisation was not even really imaginable.

And there were a number of things that it needed to learn before we knew what it was. It needed the ability to fall and good reflexes. I recognized that the body was going to be twisting in space in various ways, maybe pretty fast. I had done Aikido, so I had a lot of information about falling and rolling, which I taught. Also about reflexes and how they could be trained, the idea that a reflex is as habitual as other things are, and you can find a way to bend them to the needs that you have.

Talk 2

Maybe one reason Contact Improvisation wasn’t imaginable is because it’s hard to imagine what an improvisation might be before you do it.

I had passed through it with some of my improvising friends. I could just feel through the skin, *This is something that I don’t do in my life.*

I felt that the exercises had to somehow present to the students the final form that we would have before we knew what the form was. The dancing head-to-head exercise is a kind of conceptual version of it. You stand there until you feel the other person’s small dance. You are trying to entrain with his or her reflexes.

Tom Giebink: You talked about the third thing...

Steve: If you’re following each other’s small dance, the third thing will arise.

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Steve asks Lisa Wells to describe her experience standing, as the group stands by, observing their own.

Talk 1

I was a performing dancer, so it never occurred to me that we wouldn't perform, and that brought up the idea of stage fright. You can have a couple of people who are dynamite dancers together and put them onstage in front of an audience and it all falls apart. Everything that makes them excellent to watch turns drab and self-conscious. They try too hard; they do predictable things. In other words, the improvisation slowly but surely turns into a kind of make-believe of improvisation. I felt one thing that might possibly go wrong would be if something became unsafe because of how they changed in front of an audience.

The worst of stage fright is a kind of paralysis. If they were going to perform, how could we prepare? And if this form got as active as it seemed possible it was going to get, the reflexes had to be there to deal with twisting and turning in space. And so, standing seemed to be the answer.

Standing because it's at the opposite extreme of the high activity; it's unique instead of duet; it's an incredibly human thing to do. It's one of our basic archetypal events. Standing because it's a chance to observe systems in the body.

Talk 2

Does that make sense? In those days, nobody had ever been hurt by Contact Improvisation at all, and I was really worried about how far we could trust ourselves. At dinner, Linda [Hunnicutt] said something about the prey and the predator. That struck me as an incredible thing to say about performance because predators stare at their prey. The gaze of the cheetah at the antelope is an incredible fixation, or the cat for the mouse. And the gaze of the audience at the dancer is also a similar situation. I think it's really important for the dancer not to act like prey when performing, because I think it will draw out the predator in the human being.

The thing about the falsification when you perform did strike me as potentially dangerous—striving for effect, not going with the flow in the way that you do in warming up, where you are really going for the sensation. You don't even consider that somebody is watching or not. I think it's a chemical change when you go onstage. You can't avoid it, and so I think it must be acknowledged. If I call this a performance instead of a talk, I think it might change my state.

Talk 1

What is happening in standing is that you are looking at your reflexes hold you up. The standing is meant to be done in a very relaxed way, with the knees a little bit bent. You are not holding tight anywhere. Letting gravity take the limbs down, you are letting the spine rise against gravity. And then you just hang out there and you start to feel the event that is holding you upright, that is keeping you from falling.

And it seems to be going at quite a rate. The speed of thinking for and in the body could be trained to that speed, which is the speed of the body supporting itself. As one of the fastest events that we can watch in ourselves, it's not very fast. In terms of our movement making, there are events happening a couple of milliseconds long, so incredibly fast that thousands of them can happen before we get around to making the movement. But that's not anything the consciousness can really find access to.

What we have is the senses and the really ordinary stuff—breath, the heartbeat and pulse. In the standing, we have the reflexes as easily observable events that the consciousness is not causing and can take a moment to wonder at.

The standing is happening all over the body, so you get a full body event that you are watching, and one that you are not seeking; it is just happening. You have a thing to focus the mind on.

“The really dangerous thing is if you become self-conscious in the middle of a movement in which your safety depends on your reflexes and your partner’s reflexes.” [S.P. from raw transcript]
Photo of Mark Young and Dorothee Daester at the Breitenbush Jam, Oregon.

Talk 2

Ping-Pong is a good example. As the skill increases, it turns into this very fast, skillful game, in which every detail of the paddle and its movement is critical. You've entrained the potential and the physics of the situation so that the whole thing could go at a blinding speed. In standing, you are there, and however fast your mind can go is what you will perceive of yourself standing, of the reflexes.

Your mind starts to pick up faster and faster aspects of it, because there is a lot of sensation going at a very high speed to hold you up. There are a lot of tiny little corrections so that you don't go off balance. You start to pick up the subtleties and it becomes more nuanced and you get faster at perceiving and understanding what's going on.

Looking at something so fast and yet so safe, training your brain to look for that level of your movement. The big movements of Contact are far slower than the movements of standing.

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photo © Michal Lahav

Talk 1

I saw some dancing this morning that was really more complex than anything I could have imagined in '72. I was seeing moments that looked as though the senses can't possibly be in charge of what's happening, and the consciousness seems not to be in charge. It's very amazing. It's not surprising when I see work like that to know that in its viral way it has kind of spread around the world.



photo © Linda Humnicutt

"I hope in conversations that you all share what your vision is and how it all works; help inform the ongoing dance that we do."
[S.P. from raw transcript] Photo of Steve and group during first talk.

I think if anything of it would get lost, it's the stand. The seeking for the tiniest unit of time the consciousness can follow would stop. In the duet form, when you attune together, not with any ambition to get the dance started but really taking a moment to just connect—20 minutes has always seemed to me a decent amount of time—there could be a dance of such feathery lightness and such absolute security, absolutely beautiful.

Talk 2

Alito Alessi: Dorothee [Daester] and Mark [Young] yesterday got dancing so fast that she took off like a helicopter from his shoulders. And then he dove under her, to save her from crashing on the floor.

Steve: Ahhh, wish I'd seen that. Were you aware?

Dorothee: I remember I was aware that we kind of went the normal speed but then it just went faster, and I was like, okay let's go, and then it went fast and then I went on the floor.

Mark: I was aware of losing control when she left, but then what to do, like slow down the fall...but neither of us got a bruise.

Steve: Tom talked about leaning into the fall in skiing, and into the Aikido roll, where you are arcing into gravity; if you can stay with the energy as it evolves into whatever happens between you two, then amazing things happen. You don't get a bruise.

Tom: It was really quite extraordinarily beautiful to watch from where I saw it.

Dorothee: Yah, I never felt uncontrolled or unsafe. I was not conscious of the down into the floor.

Steve: Well, thank you for surviving

Anyway, that's why standing—because of staying, riding those tiny little moments. And I don't know if it works or not. I mean, I am not saying that this is a one-to-one relationship with Dorothee and Mark surviving what happened. But that's what it was intended for. That's what I hoped would happen. It's almost like, why do we meditate? There is so much to do, how dare we take time to just sit. It's about the extremes of experience.

Contact Improvisation creator Steve Paxton began frequenting the trail-blazing Breitenbush Jam in Oregon as a participant during the mid-'80s. Invited numerous times over the decades by Jam cofounders Alito Alessi and Karen Nelson to teach a bit, he often agreed. The always inventive results, documented in CQ, have influenced the deep practice tone of the Jam along with the dedicated participants and the Jam's extraordinary focus that Joint Forces Dance Company's Alessi and Sara Zolbrod steward as they produce the event forward. [K.N.]

Transcription and proofreading help by Abbi Jaffe and Sara Zolbrod; recording support by Tom Giebink.

To contact Karen: heartgreen@yahoo.com, www.explomov.weebly.com.

STILL MOVING addresses the current thinking, perception, and practice of Contact Improvisation—i.e., Contact Shoptalk.

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