



Sharon Fridman [center] speaking to the audience while participants are preparing for dancing, running as fast as they can to get to a state of exhaustion. Ibiza Contact Festival (Spain), August 2014.

Catching the Fall

An interview with Sharon Fridman on Contact Improvisation & Choreography

by Romain Bigé

Ibiza Contact Festival 2014, August 27. Under the pine trees and the blue sky of the island off the coast of Spain, I had the pleasure of conversing with Sharon Fridman after a workshop he offered to some of the 150 Contacters and contemporary dancers gathered for the occasion. Based in Madrid, the Israeli choreographer came with Alejandro Moya (one of the dancers of his company) to give a four-day intensive during the second week of the festival dedicated to “CI & Performance.”

The theme, a classic conundrum since the beginnings of Contact, brought lots of questions along: What kinds of impacts does the focus on choreography and performance have on space-sharing in the night jams? Is the external focus brought by performance and contemporary dancers compatible with the internal explorations of weight-sharing in CI? Are we still doing Contact Improvisation if we’re learning set movements? How can I maintain the increased and enlivened sensitivity brought by Contact within set material?

The workshop proposed by Sharon fit perfectly in that realm of questioning. Although his pieces focus for the most part on set movement phrases, the quality of touch, the constant exchange between rough encounters and soft listening certainly bear a lot of common ground with CI. His three-year journey with Israeli dance company Vertigo gave him a background in CI, but his relationship to Contact is also rooted in his understanding and exploration of human interdependency and mutual reliance. “Why contact?” (physical contact, metaphorical contact, Contact Improvisation) is the question he constantly asks himself, and he finds answers in the fragility of the individual and the necessity to find support in others.

Sharon shared, along with some bits of his renowned choreography, ¿Hasta dónde...?, some pathways for exploring his vocabulary, such as what he calls “the knots”: rather than exploring the “rolling point of contact,” dig into the contact point until it creates a human puzzle of the two partners—their bodies are thus interlocked, creating the hold for a lift, which is resolved when the partners loosen up the knot. This shocked some participants, accustomed to the usual prohibition against “holding” or “locking” their partners. And that was a good way out of the usual easiness and freedom we cherish.

Another score (described in the box) brought us to a new understanding of the political aspects embedded in CI. This is where our conversation began. [R.B.]

“Cityscape”: score for six dancers

Each dancer is given a separate score, which the others ignore while having to remain in physical contact with each other. The six scores:

1. you only breathe well when standing on someone
2. you only breathe well when you are lying on the floor, without anyone on you
3. you only breathe well on the intermediate level (knee height) or when you are lying down
4. you only breathe well when everyone is breathing well
5. you only breathe well when everyone is still
6. you only breathe well when everyone is moving

The score begins with everyone running for three minutes so as to get exhausted, then they are instructed to start their scores. The focus on these self-centered instructions (where *you* only breathe well) results in chaos and struggle that lasts for ten to fifteen minutes. Then the supervisor of the score proposes that they try to do what they’re doing “peacefully.” This results in listening and a form of stabilization.

When tried during the Ibiza festival, this score resulted in having #5 on all fours, #1 standing on her, #6 rolling on the floor without changing location, while #2 was surfing on him. They had collectively created a “cityscape” for the others to circulate in, simply because they were reminded that they could do their tasks without struggling against each other.

How do you build a society?

Romain: *I’d like to start with the “cityscape” score and the theme of mutual dependency. Could you tell me more about the score you shared with us yesterday?*

Sharon: The new piece [*Caída Libre* (2014)] is actually based on that question. It’s about sensitivity and the fragility of the individual inside of society—How can a society become a kind of net (a physical net) that can receive the fragility of these individuals?

Romain: *What I was struck with in the score you proposed was that, when it worked, it had ceased to be a matter of individuality; the group had really grown into a big “organism” functioning according to its own laws. Because when you say that there is a net, and that the individual is caught by the net, you seem to imply that there are two things—the individual and the net—while what you actually propose is that you cannot be caught by the net if you’re not part of it.*

Sharon: Yes, the issue is that every one of us thinks of ourselves as being in front of the universe (people, nature, etc.). We think, “It’s *my* fight to get to *my* end.” Rather, I’d like to see the goal of the individual as something like: “I have to understand my function, what is my function to you, what is making us different, why is it necessary for me that you exist?”

Romain: *So, a part of the task in the score is to discover the task, the real meaning of my task.*

Sharon: Yes, and for that I have to stop fighting to get it done; I have to question it.

Creating rhizomes

Romain: *For your piece Rizoma, you decided to do a site-specific work on the Trocadéro plaza in Paris, with more than a hundred Parisian dance amateurs [N.B.: we are using the word “amateur” in the received sense in Europe of “people without dance training,” “people off the street”]. I’d like you to talk a bit about the relationship between the site-specificity and the work with amateurs.*

Sharon: Well, the connection between the two is actually extremely present in the central score within *Rizoma*, which we called “human landscape.” It really is about how we can coalesce into creating, together, a kind of human island on which somebody could step and walk.

Romain: *Yes, we experimented with that score: the entire group of dancers tries to create an island of bodies on which some of us had to walk without touching the floor. For me, this tells a lot about what dance does to space: it transforms everything—the air; the walls; the skin, flesh, and bones of our partners—into new “grounds” on which we can find*



Sharon Fridman [seated on the right side, facing the watchers] guiding the “cityscape” score. Ibiza Contact Festival (Spain), August 2014.

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“I want to speak of a society that can exist in another way, that can exist through support.” [S.F.]



A “cityscape” moment. Ibiza Contact Festival (Spain), August 2014.

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support. Becoming an island for and with the thirty other dancers in the group, it was really as if the dance was about generating a common ground that was made up of us all. What I like with the image of the “landscape” is that it is, again, an issue of “how do we create a society?” Creating a landscape is about creating the possibility of interconnection between forms of life that are mutually dependent.

Sharon: The work with amateurs, you know, is much more fragile and has of course a social dimension.... And for that, of course, I couldn’t work alone; I collaborated with a psychologist who also focuses on voice and sound and communication, Antonio Ramirez. The aim was to discover a way of using the language that I’ve evolved so that it can take those people to function as a society; so we simplified it a bit, but we stayed with the rules. A fragile and strong project.

Romain: *The word “rhizome” itself has had a long philosophical career ever since 1976, when Deleuze and Guattari published their introduction to A Thousand Plateaus. I find it a good concept to describe both the nonhierarchical relationships occurring in CI and the idea of a movement that transmits through “horizontal” contagion (rather than “vertical” mimicry of a model).*

Sharon: Yes, it’s a powerful image. It makes me think of one of the people we worked with for *Rizoma*, an 84-year-old lady. Of course, she couldn’t do the movements that are quite physical (a lot of things on the knees, some variations on the floor), but she really brought something like a unity between us all. She would bring flowers every day, taking care of the others. In a sense, she had the central place in the dance. In one scene, she is in the middle, everyone is screaming, enjoying their own voices, and she’s holding her flowers, mute but smiling, joyful, laughing, in contrast to this gigantic and dramatic chaos around her.

Romain: *Again, as in the “cityscape” score, it seems you created a micro-society of sharing and cooperation, characterized by the acknowledgment of mutual dependencies.*

Sharon: Yes, to the point that they remained a kind of community after the project, meeting regularly, going to dance classes. There is even one dancer from the project who came to Madrid to become a member of my company!

Romain: *The issue of politics seems to arise a lot, at least in our discussion. Is that intentional in your work, or does it arise in the aftermath of the creations?*

Sharon: When I think of developing the first steps of a choreography, it is something that grows in me in reaction to the people I have in front of me. And it is true that what I have in front of me is the society itself. My focus is society in that sense, and my work is political because of that, because I am interested in people trying to find a structure for themselves.

So although I have never created a piece with an aim that would be like “I have a political statement to make,” I do want to speak of a society that can exist in another way, that can exist through support. A question I really ask myself constantly is, How can I be part of a society? And, of course, as an Israeli choreographer, when I make work about cooperation and mutual dependency, I can’t but think of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and how they force you to train in the army; how the politicians want to make all of us soldiers. All the Israeli you see in this camp in Ibiza, creating a festival about love and peace, they, we, were forced to train as soldiers. So, of course, I ended up becoming crazy, because that’s the only way out.

Romain: *Yes, craziness, as everywhere, is the surest way out of a society you don’t accept. That’s why there are so many psychotics—or at least people categorized by psychiatric powers as such—in our Western societies. They want out, or they want something else; they’re protesting.*

Sharon: For *Rizoma*, among the hundreds of amateurs that came, there was a lady who had a condition where she couldn’t stop speaking. She had to be talking all the time. So, of course, in the beginning, she was annoying everyone. At one point, she asked someone, “But why aren’t you listening to me?” And we realized we hadn’t listened to her; we had just assumed she was saying nonsense because of this constant flow. She was actually very knowledgeable and was telling quite interesting stories. We learned to take her in, created conditions within which her speech could have a place.

Why do we need contact?

Romain: *You mentioned in our previous discussions that your mother is suffering from a vestibular disease [a pathology of the sensory system that contributes to spatial orientation] that affects her balance to the point where she is constantly falling. How did that influence your work, especially your relationship to CI?*

Sharon: At one point, as a person who’d spent his life dancing, I stopped and asked myself: Why am I moving? What moves me? This question came when I was 22, 23: What is the relationship between dance and life? For lack of an answer, I stopped. And going back to live with my mother, trying to understand ways of manipulating her; planning that when she would fall, the next time, I would get her; this made me realize I was constantly dancing. I began to analyze the kind of dancing I was involved in, and I realized that, if I were to catch her, I would have to fall with her—not trying to control it, not trying to resist the fall (because if I tried to control it, she would stress and hurt herself even more). I was making this choreography for the fall and recovery of my mother—from the front or from the back, from the side—and that’s what brought me back to dancing.

People I choose to work with are usually people in whom I see a kind of fragility. What I hope as a choreographer is that in the creative process, this fragility can find a safer place. So there’s something like: they need me and I need them. I need their fragility for my work to have meaning, and they need me because I can offer them a territory to work on their fragility. I try to give them something stable in the creative process—I keep an eye on them, so sometimes it’s a bit like they are my children.

Romain: *As I understand it, it seems as though you look for people who bring instability for you to invent new ways of reaching stability. For me, this could really be a good*

Sharon Fridman [top of the circle, talking] and Alejandro Moya [on his right] concluding the workshop with a final discussion with participants. Ibiza Contact Festival (Spain), August 2014.



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We think, “It’s *my* fight to get to *my* end.” Rather, I’d like to see the goal of the individual as something like: “I have to understand my function, what is my function to you, what is making us different, why is it necessary for me that you exist?” [S.F.]

answer to another question you kept asking us during this workshop: “Why contact?” (physical contact and Contact Improvisation). And your answer seems to be: contact is needed in the face of instability, to provide support.

Sharon: Totally. When I work with solos, that is exactly what I am looking for: the fragility when you are alone. When you’re by yourself, this kind of fragility is very difficult to find. That’s why it’s often difficult to dance by yourself: because it’s hard to destabilize oneself. What I like in the dancers I work with is that they bring that kind of almost uncontrolled energy. The solo that opens *Al menos dos caras* [from which the 20-minute duet *Hasta dónde...?* was extracted] is based on that: the soloist tries to find stability by himself, through the choreography I proposed to him, and when he finally gets it, at that moment, I enter...

Romain: ...and you offer him your own instability.

Sharon: Yes, because for me, it is the reverse. I am a control freak; because my mother needed stability, I wasn’t allowed to be fragile. I could not fall, I could not run, I could not go far from her; I had to be stable all the time as a child. So what I needed in this work was to break this stiffness; I wanted to become a doll for the other, looser.

Space and its roots

Romain: *In your vocabulary, there is a lot of, if I may say, “plant metaphors.” The connections to the floor—as well as the feelings—are described as rooting; you often propose to “expand into the point of contact” rather than using it as the inevitable “rolling point”; and you even created a piece called Rhizoma. How would you specify those metaphors?*

Sharon: Quite often, when I am in bed before I fall asleep, I feel I am deeply connected to space—not just being “on” the surface of the earth but really becoming part of the surface. Sometimes, I really like to walk with that feeling...

Romain: ...as if each step were deploying itself under the ground through roots, reaching into the earth?

Sharon: Exactly. As if your feet were connected to the floor through inflexible cables. So also when you go up and back down, there is no risk for the fall. It’s part of the necessity of being connected. So I think my insistence on the metaphor of roots, rhizomes, and so on, comes from my investigation of “what does stability look like?”

Romain: *Yes, and the bouncing movements, which are extremely present in your work, seem to derive directly from that idea of being cabled to the earth.*

Sharon: Definitely, because when you go up, you feel like you’re attracted back to the ground. It’s not only gravity pulling you down, it’s your imagination that connects you to your ever-expanding roots. You know, it really is this imagination that makes a good dancer—how he projects into the forms he does, how he continues all the lines that we don’t see. I remember, when I was a child, I loved this folk dancer who, when he danced fast, I could see the lines he created in space.

Romain: *One of the ideas I defend in my theoretical work is that movement is creating space rather than just occurring “in” it. Movement for me is something that folds space, much like in the general theory of relativity; the presence of a gigantic mass is thought to distort space to the point that rays of light are diverted from their linear progression. So when we dance (and in general when we move, but a dance performance or a dance duet makes that “space folding” even more visible), we create those variations in space, and our partner can go in them, and the spectator can follow them; that’s what they experience—not only a body moving in space but also space being moved by a body.*

Sharon: I think Pina Bausch in a way fell in love with creating that. That’s why the choice of clothing and the use of hair, for instance, is so important in her choreographic design.



Sharon Fridman [right, back; flying on the knees of Alejandro Moya] demonstrating bits of *Hasta dónde...?*'s score. Ibiza Contact Festival (Spain), August 2014.

Romain: *It is interesting that you should mention Pina. Movements in her work are always infused with meanings, carrying with them social as well as private issues—between men and women, between old and young. How do you place yourself within that Tanztheater scope? You told me once that you feel you are part of a generation whose role is to go further with what CI can offer. Where do you want to take it?*

Contact in creation

Sharon: I think we have a responsibility to continue the research and to find inside of this territory more and clearer ways of moving. And my research—right or wrong, I don't know—is always very concrete: let's work on bouncing for one month. And you could do a jam based only on that, within that territory of bouncing you created. Most jams go in a lot of directions that you constantly explore (bouncing and lifting and falling, etc.). I'd like to dig and establish clear territories, and see if that could become a language. That is what happened to most dance techniques—they evolved into languages—and I think that's what "contact in creation" could be: a language emerging from contact improvisation.

Romain: *Well, certainly, but then it would cease to be improvisation, properly speaking, and would probably somewhat endanger its accessibility to different kinds of movers—e.g., in a jam, if you don't feel like bouncing, or if it can be dangerous for your body, you simply don't do it, and it's a perfectly acceptable answer. The population of this festival is a great example of that diversity, ranging from*

contemporary dancers to people who discovered movement through contact a few months ago.

Sharon: Yes. You know, I've never seen a place that shows so clear a divide between contemporary dance and CI. In Israel, the Vertigo Dance Company is very involved with Contact, but I never felt that there was a separation—it was always them, plus the Kibbutz [Contemporary Dance Company], plus the Batsheva, etc. Here I feel that people who are into Contact are really against "forms," while people who are coming from "forms" are really against the freedom. I had never felt this kind of contrast.

Romain: *What I find interesting in your propositions, though, is that for "pure Contacters" (not coming from the contemporary dance world), the movement sequences you give us almost feel like tools to improvise with in a jam.*

Sharon: Yes, and it's incredible how the work on the knots and the bouncing have already invaded the jams within the small community we constitute. This festival is definitely a good place to make dance as a laboratory.



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