

Building Community through Improvisational Dance

There is a beautiful power inside of each and every one of us to dance based on feelings, images, stories and experiences that are unique to us. Below are two exercises that allow for students to feel a sense of their individuality inside of a group setting. These improvisational dance exercises are adapted for school-age children but are used frequently in professional dance settings.

Flocking

Flocking is like a grown-up version of “Follow the Leader.” This exercise is great to initiate dancers into improvisation. One student creates the movement and the others choose to follow. Rather than forming a line, however, the students are grouped together like a flock of birds. When the current leader turns in any direction, the dancer now in front of the group becomes the group leader. This activity helps students to learn to work together while moving in a closely established group and also learn to think quickly when they are leading others.

Turn up the Volume

In this exercise, you will imagine that you’re turning up the volume on a radio and the students are the sound. Their movements will respond to the ‘volume’ by getting bigger as the ‘volume’ gets louder. Students will start by moving slowly and at a small scale. You’ll let them know that this small, slow dance is like having the volume of the radio at a 1. Then you’ll turn up the volume to a 2 and they’ll respond by moving a little more vigorously. You’ll continue to turn up the volume slowly until you get to a 10, which is when the students are moving at their most full expressions. Then you’ll turn down the volume until you get back to a 0, stillness. For more advanced classes, you can jump around, from a 2 to a 10 to a 6 and then to 0, for example. Students will learn listening skills and how to judge their energy and capacity as movers.



Improvisational dance teaches students to trust their intuition and allow their ideas to flow from them as movements. An idea that I’m researching currently is one of a flower growing up through a crack in the concrete sidewalk. When this image is brought into the mind of a dancer, hope and power come through in the movements. There is a resilience and strength in knowing that despite all obstacles, life and beauty will prevail.

Master Improvisational Creators

During my time dancing professionally in New York City, I came to respect and know three master improvisers: Yoshiko Chuma, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Jennifer Monson. Below is information about these artists as well as video links that demonstrate the possibility of embodying stories and images as they move their bodies freely.

Yoshiko Chuma was born in Osaka, Japan and has lived in the United States since 1978. Chuma has created more than 45 full-length company works, commissions and site-specific events for venues across the world, constantly challenging the notion of performing for both audience and participant. THE SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS is an award-winning collaborative effort of choreographers, dancers, actors, singers, musicians, designers, and visual artists working under the artistic direction of Yoshiko Chuma. The School of Hard Knocks, takes its name from the American idiom meaning to learn things the hard way. This video is an example of her dancing at Danspace Project, St. Marks Church in the East Village in New York City. <https://vimeo.com/312270855>

Ishmael Houston-Jones is an award winning choreographer, author, performer, teacher, and curator. His improvised dance and text work has been performed in New York, across the US, and in Europe, Canada, Australia, and Latin America. Drawn to collaborations as a way to move beyond boundaries and the known, Houston-Jones celebrates the political aspect of cooperation. Ishmael Houston-Jones sits on the Board of Directors of Movement Research and Performance Space New York and is a member of Middle Collegiate Church and Dias y Flores Community Garden. He has received awards from The Herb Alpert Foundation, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Arts and The Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Ishmael Houston-Jones received the 2019 Edwin Booth Award, given annually by the Doctoral Theatre Students' Association of City University of New York which honors "an individual or organization that has had a significant impact on theatre and performance in New York." This video is an example of his dancing at Dance Theater Workshop in Chelsea in New York City. <https://vimeo.com/199926011>

Jennifer Monson is a choreographer, performer, and teacher. Since 1983, she has explored strategies in choreography, improvisation, and collaboration in experimental dance. In 2000, her work took a new turn to investigate the relationship between movement and environment. Her early choreography has been performed in a diverse array of New York City venues including: The Kitchen, Performance Space 122, and Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church; as well as other recognized national and international venues. In 2004, Jennifer Monson incorporated under the name iLAND - Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature, and Dance. iLAND explores the power of dance in collaboration with other fields to illuminate a kinetic understanding of the world. This dance research organization upholds a fundamental commitment to environmental sustainability as it relates to art and the urban context, and cultivates cross-disciplinary research among the arts, environmental science, urban design, and other related fields. In addition to serving as Artistic Director of iLAND, Monson is currently a Professor at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign as part of a new initiative of the Environmental Council. Monson is also a Professor at Large at the University of Vermont, a six-year term in collaboration with the dance, environmental studies, and library departments. This video shows her dancing at Danspace Project, St. Marks Church in the East Village in New York City. <https://vimeo.com/32342896>