

# »TRACES«

## A Guideline for Dance Improvisation

Task & Tools by  
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## INTRODUCTION

»**TRACES**« is a practice-oriented research, in which I have been interested in finding strategies to transmit the teaching of Dance Improvisation to other dance pedagogues in the field of Contemporary Dance. My research also focused on the implementation of somatically oriented improvisational tools in the same field. This orientation emerged during my studies and research process for my Master of Arts and Artistic Master Class at the Palucca University of Dance Dresden.

This guideline for Dance Improvisation classes begins with a personal presentation, providing the reader with an understanding of improvisation as much as my personal experience. It finally gives concrete advices and tasks to be put into practice in a Dance Improvisation classes. These tasks were compiled by myself and are inspired by my own teaching experience.

## ABOUT ME

I am a choreographer, dance teacher, researchers and freelance dancer. Since 2002 I live and work in Hamburg. I started my dance education as a child at the Dance Conservatory in Santiago de Chile. My artistic career is characterized by various international experiences in Latin America and Europe. In 2005 I founded my label "*Danza Urbana*", for which I am in charge of the artistic direction and creation of intercultural dance projects.

In 2021 I successfully completed the "*Master of Arts*" in dance pedagogy/contemporary dance and in 2023 I graduated from the "*Artistic Master Class*". Both Master programs were held at the *Palucca University of Dance Dresden*. For the Artistic Master Class I explored the connection between practice and theory in the field of improvisation in dance education.

During 2021, I also realized the project "*Carajo! what's next?*" It consisted in the development of a hybrid dance concept, combining analog/digital media. In 2022, I realized the project "*In & Outside*", a digital documentation of all my choreographic projects. Both projects were sponsored by *Dis-Tanz-Solo*, *Neue Start Kultur* and *Dachverband Tanz Deutschland*. In addition to that, in 2022 I was selected for a Dance Residency by *Fonds Darstellende Künste* entitled "*Who am I today?*" for which I did a research on improvised choreography, with/instant composition. It was sponsored by *Fonds Darstellende Künste*, *Neue Start Kultur* and in collaboration with *Wiese eG*, Hamburg. My pedagogical and artistic work is characterized by offering a space for reflection and individual expression and by providing quality space for experimentation.

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## UNDERSTANDING DANCE IMPROVISATION

In Dance Improvisation, the dancer relies on his/her technical skills, body awareness, and artistic intuition to generate movement spontaneously. He/she may also draw inspiration from various sources such as emotions, sensations, imagery, or the surrounding space. Improvisation can take place individually or collaboratively within a group, allowing dancers to engage in dialogue and exchange ideas through movement. Dance Improvisation is not limited to any specific style or dance genre. It can be found in Contemporary Dance, Modern Dance, Jazz, Ballet, Hip-Hop, and many other forms. It is often used as a tool for choreographic exploration, as it allows dancers to discover unique movement possibilities and develop their own artistic voice.

The practice of Dance Improvisation encourages dancers to embrace risk-taking, adaptability, and spontaneity. It challenges them in having to trust their instincts, listen to their bodies, and make artistic choices in the moment. This can lead to unexpected and innovative movements, fostering a sense of freedom and individuality within the realm of dance.



## DANCE IMPROVISATION FOR ME

Dance improvisation has, for me, the potential to get closer to both the emotional and psychological imagination and the cultural identity of the dancer. This expression through body language offers one a world of possibilities and interpretations that mark the individual stamp of the dancer. My guidance in Dance Improvisation focuses on creating a bridge between the dancers' feeling, the communication between them as an entity and their interaction with me as a guide in the process. It also aims at activating the dancer's skills such as listening to her/himself, getting out of his/her usual movement patterns, encouraging body exploration, awakening the ability to be responsive, and being receptive to musical and environmental stimuli. I would say that Dance Improvisation offers the opportunity to move out of one's own comfort zone, to disrupt the usual, to reveal what was not known, and to surprise.



## MY SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

Dance is a way of living in the world. Lisa Nelson,  
dance artist.

For this guideline I was mainly inspired by Somatic approaches and Improvisation Technologies, wanting to combine both in Dance Improvisation classes. Somatic comes from the Greek word: Soma and refers to the integration of body, mind and spirit. Somatic dance is an embodied movement practice that focuses on cultivating a deep awareness of the body and its sensations. Another key of Somatic dance is the concept of "listening" to the body, as well encouraging the integration of motion and awareness.

As a teacher of Contemporary Dance, an integral part of my teaching philosophy is the conviction that Somatic approaches are essential to the development of the dancer as an artist, as they support the dancer's powers of agency, self-regulation and independent problem solving.

This guideline is also influenced by the work of the American choreographer *William Forsythe* through his system called "*Improvisation Technologies*" (1995-96). The keys to his vocabulary offer multiple perspectives on his approach to improvisation, as the body being transformed as an interface to draw lines, curves and volumes in space.

I have personally practiced "*Improvisation Technologies*" and consider it a method that generates practicable tools that allow dancers to get in touch with different ways of conceiving movement, inviting to go beyond the usual and preferred ways of moving. With the influence of these two concepts I have generated and put into practice my own version, with excellent results.

## TARGET GROUP

This guideline is mainly addressed to young teachers in the field of dance and body expression. The task can also be implemented in classes taking place in a Community Dance context or can be adapted to an adolescents and adults context.



## HEALTH AND SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS

Before beginning each session, it makes sense to talk about health and safety with the dancers. Besides developing creative skills, it is also important that dancers become aware of moving safely, according to their muscle strength, developing a sense of responsibility for their own and the group's health and safety. For example, they should avoid performing extremely acrobatic movements during improvisations without being previously trained; they should rely on basic principles of weight transfer and floor technique to prevent injuries; they should warm-up where before getting into motion. Therefore it is important that you, as a teacher, clearly state safety tips before beginning an improvisation class.

## CLASSROOM CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE TEACHER

Before each session, it is essential to prepare the space and discuss hygiene issues with your dancers or group.

**Floor:** The surface for dance practice should be appropriate, ideally a linoleum or wooden floor. If the floor is too hard or slippery it can cause injuries. It is also essential that there are no obstacles or sharp objects on the floor.

**Ambient temperature:** in case of high temperature in the dance studio, remind your participants to hydrate themselves, mainly with water, to support their own cooling system (sweating). A dancer can become dehydrated or suffer muscle spasms as a result of exhaustion.

In case of cold temperatures, it is advisable to wear appropriate clothing and to warm up beforehand to avoid muscle injuries. It is important to air the room in order to have a suitable temperature for the practice of dance.

**Health:** If a participant has a cold, you should advise him/her not to participate to the class until he/she gets better. In this way you promote a healthy hygienic environment.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY TIPS FOR DANCERS

In the following are some considerations the teacher should mention at the beginning of each session:

- ➔ Always assign a time beforehand for a proper warm-up.
- ➔ Maintain the level of concentration throughout the session and avoid over-fatigue.
- ➔ Each participant should be aware of his or her own physical potential and preferably avoid attempting extremely difficult movements, which may cause injury.
- ➔ In case of lifting, use proper lifting techniques.



- ➔ Hygiene is important especially when working in a group.
- ➔ Be aware of the number of dancers in the room, the space and the intensity of your movements.
- ➔ Remember to remove your jewelry, watches and any other clothing that could injure a partner when dancing.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDELINE

This Dance Guideline contains ten tasks to be explored and is designed to support Dance Improvisation classes. Each task has an objective, so you can decide individually how to organize and vary each one.

Each task is synthetically explained and contains:

A purpose, the instructions, a reflection part and some suggestions.

With this methodology, space is offered to modify and individualize each task according to each dance pedagogue.

## REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENTS STRATEGIES

Personally, as a dance artist, I consider it important to follow a pedagogy that contains reflection enabling the dancer to express his/her feelings. This is why reflection is also part of this guideline. I find it very important to encourage the ability of the dancer to reflect through dialogue on what he/she observed or perceived while dancing. In this way, reflection becomes an integral part of the improvisation process.

## TASK & TOOLS

### #1 "MY NAME" | TIME: 7 MIN.

#### **Purpose**

This task is ideal to introduce dancers to improvisation and to each other. It is an individual task that enables on one hand each participant to introduce him/herself in a playful way, getting to know the whole group, and on the other hand it allows them to start improvising without having to think about what they need to do. With this task they can create movement material on the spot, in a very easy way.

#### **Instructions**

First begin the task by asking the group to form a circle, stretching out their arms and taking equal distance on both sides, right and left. The circle needs to be as big as possible so that it is large enough to dance.

Next ask the dancers to say their own name out loud one by one.

Then ask them to say their name drawing the initial letter in front of themselves, as if painting with a brush, with one or both hands, in the movement they like. This action will be performed one by one by each participant.

Finally ask the dancer to repeat the letter three times in a row. The group will observe him/her and then copy him/her the next two times. At the end all the dancers can move freely in the space painting their own name as they want.



## Reflection

The instance of reflection in this first task should be short and can take the form of a dialogue with the person on the right side.

## Suggestion

In this task you can stimulate the dancer to discover his/her own body and the space around. You can also experiment by asking the dancer to paint the letter on different levels of the space and with different parts of the body, for example on the floor, painting with the foot or with the head.



## #2 "FOLLOW YOU, FOLLOW ME" | TIME: 10 MIN.

### **Purpose**

This task can be used as a warm-up in a group, since it activates the heart rate but it also helps new participants to get in touch with the group and space. It is also an excellent strategy to introduce dancers to improvisation, as they have to anticipate, react and respond on the spot.

### **Instructions**

First organize the group in a line. Start the task as a follow-the-leader game, in which one dancer moves around the space and all the other dancers follow and copy his/her actions. It is necessary to guide them at first, as they may have difficulties in choosing how to move.

To stimulate movement, tell the dancers to perform an action, for example, evading imaginary objects in space, in a natural context, in a jungle for instance, executing movements with their arms, crawling, jumping from one stone to another in a river, hanging from a tree, etc. It may be the first time they perform this task, therefore it can happen that the dancers feel a little shy.

Next you can let them decide when they change the role of leader by saying "now me", so the other dancers will re-organize and follow the new leader.

Then you can practice different body actions into this task, for example, focusing on three body actions at a time: balancing, turning and moving slow.

Finally for an advanced variation, have the dancers play “follow the leader” in smaller groups of four or five. One group might play with gesturing, turning, and moving; another might play with falling, moving, and standing still; and another might play with balancing, jumping, and gesturing. This way, the groups may have to go through, around, over or under each other. You can create the obstacles by having half of the groups stop at a certain point while the other groups keep moving in the space.

## Reflection

The reflection can be guided, first with the whole group, then in smaller groups. Each dancer can reflect on how he/she felt while performing his or her role as a leader, and then how he or she felt as part of the group. It is not necessary for each participant to express his/her opinion, so the flow of the session is not interrupted.

## Suggestion

If you have a group you know, you can let them decide when they change the role of the leader by saying “now me”, so the other dancers will re-organize and follow the new leader. In a more advanced group, the leader can change without saying anything, just assuming to lead the group in a silent way. Another option is to define from the beginning the dancer who wants to be the leader. It is helpful to give a time limit of 3 to 5 minutes, depending on how it works best for the group.



## LITERATURE RECOMMENDATION

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## CREDITS

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## CONTACT AND INFORMATION

You can purchase the Dance Improvisation guideline the following way:

- you can order it directly online on my website
- participating at a Dance Improvisation workshop

If you are interested, please send me an email to:

[info@danza-urbana.de](mailto:info@danza-urbana.de)

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