

the underscore

WHAT IT IS

The Underscore is a framework for practicing and researching dance improvisation, that I've been developing since the early 1990s. It is a score that guides dancers through a series of "changing states," from solo deepening/ releasing and sensitizing to gravity and support, through group circulation and interaction, Contact Improvisation (CI) engagements, opening out to full group improvisation with compositional awareness, and back to rest and reflection.

The Underscore can be seen as a vehicle for incorporating Contact Improvisation into a broader arena of improvisational practice; for developing greater ease dancing in spherical space—alone and with others; and for integrating kinaesthetic and compositional concerns while improvising. The Underscore is also being used in the CI community worldwide as a way to focus and concentrate their Contact jams.

A BIT OF HISTORY

I came to the Underscore—or it came to me—in 1990 after a crisis in my teaching. I had been developing and teaching Contact Improvisation for over fifteen years and had accumulated a tremendous amount of teaching material—exercises, principles, concepts, language—and began to feel hugely claustrophobic in having to follow my own syllabus. Where was the constant sense of discovery, the invention of materials and methods of the early years, when every class posed new challenges to the task of "passing the dance" of CI—and with them brought new solutions. Classes now were too full of "must do's." Internally, I rebelled.

My rebellion came in the form of open space. I found myself prolonging open, structureless sections of class during which time I would suggest things to focus on—through language and my own movement. As we danced, I would continue to add images and concerns but never stop to form the activity into specific exercises or scores. Over the course of the session, we'd pass through silent depths and lively heights with less and less organized, structured activity and more and more "space." What was I teaching now? Nights before these workshops I was uncharacteristically sleepless. I enjoyed the classes immensely while in them, but all around them I was rather bewildered and anxious. I even considered not teaching for a while until I got clear about what I was doing.

But then one summer I noticed something. My classes were by now consisting of a changing proportion of this open "talked" space and a few specifically focused activities/exercises occurring in a seemingly random, intuitively determined order. It was 1990 and a student in my class at the two-week A Cappella Motion workshop came up and said, "You know that part of class where we get very wild and disoriented with lots of momentum

and falling and jumping?" Yes, I thought, I know what "state" you're referring to, but I didn't understand what he meant by "that part of class." A few days later, another student approached me to talk about "that part of class where we get deep and still, focusing on tiny sensations." Again, I recognized the state of movement and mind she was referring to, but what was this "part of class" thing? And then it dawned on me that underneath what I was experiencing as a random selection of materials, there was a very consistent score operating all the time, informing my choices. What was this inner, under score?

I remember looking at a strange and beautiful blue flower on my way to the studio one day during this week, a few days after the birth of this "under score" thought. The two have always remained linked for me. On a bush, tight rectangular clusters of pale blue/yellow buds were framed by small blue petals spraying out of the corners of the rectangle, only at the corners—an unusual brooch-like flower, something my immigrant grandmother might have worn, in pewter, on her dress or wool coat. The colors were cooling, the form surprising and delightful.



Drawing, NSS, 1990

Fleshing out this "under-score" revelation became a compelling focus for me and the students and colleagues in my workshops over the next years. Significant phases or states of movement and mind in the improvisation were identified and named; graphic symbols were created to capture the spirit or energy of the phase without words. And thus the Underscore evolved.

The score didn't have a name for the first ten years of its existence. We used to just call it "the score." I searched for a name for many years but nothing felt right. Until finally I heard myself tell the story of its beginning and heard myself say that there was an "under score" functioning all the time. Voilà! I tried it out for a while and it stuck.

The Underscore is still in process—its components, concepts, and applications are still growing, deepening, and clarifying. I imagine that more phases will be added and others further detailed in the future. The Underscore is a form of play and research, not the law. I hope you will approach it in this spirit.

Here, now, is a short rundown of the current phases of the score. May it serve you and your dancing well: