

Editor Note

Levels of the Game

I was reminded recently of an exercise I used to direct in class. We'd be walking in a circle and I'd say, "Imagine that you're the leader, the first one in the line, leading the line through the room, everyone else is following behind you, including the person in front of you who's following you through the rest of the line. Feel the sensation in the front of your body, your back, your face and eyes, your presence, how you feel in your movement. Now, still walking, without any other change, imagine you're the last one in the line, following everyone else, including the person behind you. Feel the front of your body, your back..."

How we're oriented inside our dancing affects not only the way we feel but the choices we make.

Whatever we focus our attention on—as a culture, a community, a family, an individual—grows. The number of forms, scores, approaches, methods, and intentions for practicing dance/movement improvisation is enormous right now. And we're not all doing the same thing.

As dancers moving through this ever-enlarging field of improvisation, we're like animals sniffing through the woods, tracking our own interests by the choices we make—consciously or unconsciously—to move either toward or away from what we find. In this way, we map and add to the territory as we go. Within the profusion of possibilities, questions arise with some frequency about what in fact people are doing when they're improvising dance, and toward what end.

Intention functions on many levels in our improvisational practices.

Inside any explicit score or structure given for improvising, there are many other scores operating—some of them conscious, some not; some of them given, some assumed, chosen, or arrived at by default. Sometimes this explicit, or "outer," score comes with an instruction manual of sorts—a physical, perceptual, and conceptual preparation given by the maker/director of the score that establishes a ground, or "inner" score, that informs the improvisational choices. In many cases, these preparations are as much the score as the outer structures given—maybe more so. The inner score gets established in many ways—through experiential exercises, through talking, or simply through the presence and actions of the director.

Meanwhile, inside the inner score, the individual dancer carries her own reasons for dancing—her particular intentions, interests, instincts. What is she after? What is she looking for and therefore at? What does she make of what she sees? Though the given score itself may directly or indirectly address intention, ultimately, in the microplaying field of improvisational choice making, the individual is on her or his own. This independence among improvisers is central to the power and pleasure of the medium.



photo: Bill Arnold

This "secret" innermost level of the score—why we are dancing or making dances—is as personal as our DNA, and possibly as complex. There are often many strands of intention operating at the same time within each of us, and they're subject to change.*

(I was interested to find out, for instance, that in Bali, the only difference between the performance of a sacred temple dance *in* the temple and the performance of the same dance at a tourist attraction—often by the same dancers—is the intention of the dancers as they do the steps, and the fact that the costumes and masks for the tourist performances have not been blessed and empowered.)

Though our choices when we improvise are invisible at their source, they telegraph clearly through our actions. As we move, something of the complex matrix of intentions, assumptions, definitions, and desires can be glimpsed, bumping up against one another—within a single individual, between players, and between forms. In the rub of intention against intention, context against intention, and material against material, frictions occur. If nothing else, the sparks illuminate our individual paths, challenging us to become at once more specific and more generous in our practice.

More and more, I'm realizing the powerful effect my intentions have on the choices I make when I'm improvising. My intentions for any given session will surely affect my choices in the moment. These small choices add up—both in a single dance and over the years.

The levels at which our scores play out don't only move successively inward but also project outward into the world. What and how we dance affects the way we, our students, and our audiences see, think, and act.

I find it notable that it's taken a page of words and many hours to describe what happens in an instant when we dance. Such an efficient and eloquent language... All the questions in a turn of the head, all the answers in the drop of a hand.

Nancy Stark Smith

* I've taken the notion of outer, inner, and secret levels from Tibetan Buddhism.