

Tune in, Stand Around

Four Postmodern Dance Improvisation Scores

1. Come to standing.

Slow down all doing and simply stand. Let your doing be just the standing, natural and easeful. Watch what happens as you stand.

Sense your alignment. Let your feet stand naturally forward with some space between them. Have soft knees. Invite attention to roam through your body, letting your skeleton support you. Relax completely while maintaining the stand.

Inner reflexive movements keep your body erect. It is a very small dance that causes itself. Steve Paxton, founder of Contact Improvisation and whose life work has inspired this exercise named this dance of standing “the small dance.”

Let your breathing be easy. Feel the movement of the diaphragm up and down as you breathe. Sense the mass of your pelvis, ribs and shoulders, and head as they counter balance on the spine. Relax tensing muscles again and again. Let the organs be supported by the bowl of the pelvis. Let the earth have you and let your skeleton receive the unconditional support the earth gives back.

Stay for a while in this meditation, five, ten minutes or more. Sense the earth below the soles of your feet and the space above your head. The sensations can get more subtle and vivid. The mind can grow to sense the whole body at the same time. You can notice the mass of your body swaying, constantly falling and catching itself. Feel the space your body takes up.

It took your baby body about a year to learn how to stand. Since then it’s been an unconscious reflex. In standing we can hear the reflexes.

When you are ready to take a break from standing, begin to consciously move. Take your time. Find the antidote movements. Take a walk; sense how weight shifts through your bones. See how this reflex experience underlies your every movement.

2. The Third Thing: Partner Head Dance

Stand facing a partner. Someone of similar height is easiest at first. Close your eyes and sense into your stand.

After a period of sensing your small dance, open your eyes and see your partner. Wait until you are both ready, open eyes will be the signal. Using your hands if it helps, bring your foreheads together at a point near the top of each forehead. Allow this contact to have a bit of pressure, a comfortable bit of leaning into it. Return your hands and arms to

hanging at your sides. Drop in again to your small dance meditation. Sense the contact with your partner's head.

Through the point of touch on your heads extend your awareness into noticing your partner's small dance. Can you sense their skeleton and the little or big waves of movement?

Sense each other and let your small dances entrain. Listen for an invitation by something that is mutual between you—a third thing. Let that third thing invite movement that adjusts to the balance—the skulls may begin to roll a little or a lot, perhaps a sliding might occur. You may find that moving your feet is a way to stay in contact. Always keep at least the same amount of contact pressure that you felt at the beginning. How does this dance evolve?

As you become ever more entrained with each other's small dance, let the exploration expand to more unknown possibilities. The score is to keep the touch to the heads. It's amazing how much surface area there is between two skulls—infinite, like two spheres. Notice how the movements affect your whole body. Keep tuning your awareness to what is happening in your balance, your small dance, your partner, and the third thing between you.

After a while notice when the dance seems to finish. Find a place to pause or sense an ending together. Gradually part from your partner's head. Take some time to move on your own, and eventually come to standing by yourself. See how you relate to your small dance now.

3. Interplanetary Dances

Sit back to back with a partner. Lean comfortably towards the other. Play with that. Sit on your pelvic sitting bones and let your back connect with your partner's. Your support environment has now expanded to include the earth below you and another planet: your partner. Sense both the warmth and support of your partner's body, and contact with the earth below you. Feel your own and your partner's breathing. If movement begins to come, see what it's like to follow it.

The feeling may be similar to the rolling Head Dance, except it starts at you back. The movement may invite you to lay back and stretch over your partner or to take the weight of your partner. Listen to your comfort. Take care of your self. You are the only one who knows if some part of you is uncomfortable. You can move anytime to help yourself feel safe. That is part of communicating your situation. Experiment with rolling together. Remember you are on the earth and are already dancing. Your first partner is yourself in awareness.

4. Tuning an Instant Duet (Trio, Quartet, etc) using “Pause” and “End”

These are some Tuning Scores influenced by inventions of Tuning Scores founder Lisa Nelson, and made to compose dances in space. The score offers an opportunity for communicating a direct desire and to experience consequences in relationship with others. Learning to track one's compositional desire is a practice of honest self-listening and experimentation, not unlike meditation in action.

To begin this Instant Duet score, the group of warmed-up players gathers at the edge of the dance composing space. One person enters to begin a solo. The other players watch within themselves and within the space, for a desirable place to create an instant duet. Each individual will bring their own style of watching, for example visually, kinesthetically, emotionally, through story making, or through a variety of lenses.

When the watcher or soloist, whoever comes first, notices the moment that their compositional desire yearns for, they call "*pause*." Pause creates a stillness in all players. Take opportunities to watch your inner life within this collaborative group process. During the stillness created by pause notice the sensations and emotions in your experience. Perhaps the sudden change to stillness feels to be a surprise, a delight, an interruption, an insult? Allow curiosity to fill your whole body and experience.

The player who made the call enters the dance as the second in the duet. No need to rush, yet the dancer goes directly to join the first soloist in stillness at the place they imagined the instant duet beginning,

This second dancer who enters can move directly into contact with the soloist or can situate their body in space away from the partner. During the ensuing stillness everyone senses, "how does the space change with the second person entering?"

Notice the range of sensation and emotions including anticipation, boredom, predictability, frustration, appreciation, understanding, complicity, rebellion or unknown?

The two dancers feel for the simultaneous moment to begin moving in their instant duet. They "self-start" themselves from the stillness of pause. Everyone is noticing from their own vantage point, and wondering, "How does the relationship evolve in the duet and within me?" Watchers are active players. Everyone is in the dance, holding agency for their own participation, even on the edge of the space.

Once the duet begins, all players begin looking for the inevitable end of this duet. Notice the sense of impermanence and fleetingness of what seems solid and real. Everyone has a unique measure for meaning. The dancers on the inside are looking inside themselves for sensations perhaps of completion. Players on the edge are being present perhaps with their sense of fulfillment. This looking for an end may be experienced as boredom, desire to change things or satisfaction. Perhaps it is a desire to get in there and dance? Players taste the full array of experiences as they pass through the body and awareness. Frustration can be a real motivator.

One of the players calls “*end*”, which clears the space allowing a new dance to begin. When end is called, take the time to feel the completion of the image. Someone in the group has exposed their private meaning. This is a moment of tuning and the whole group can resonate by comparing, within themselves, their own measure.

A tuning score can evolve from this basic ritual of communication. It’s important to note that the rhythm of calls and actions is made by the nature of the group on that particular day and time. It’s generally easier to start simple and to notice how the layers of complexity emerge.

After having experienced a number of successful duets with endings, a group might expand beyond duet to trio, quartet, etc. Using the same pattern as the instant duet, a third person may enter to make a trio after calling *pause*. Following the protocol (or eventually letting it go) where the watcher who calls *pause* is the person who enters, the dance can expand and tune itself to the desires of the players. Sometimes two people will have the same impulse at the same moment to enter or to make a call. This is a natural progression of complexity and a miracle to celebrate.

As the tuning progresses, dancers on the inside can also make calls. They can call *pause* to still the dancing for whatever reason they may have. Making up your own calls or developing your own ways of unfolding a score is a natural evolution of tuning.

A call could be made simply to hear the musical sense of the dancing or to satisfy someone’s need for order in chaos or to relish a visually stunning moment.. Dancers can also ignore any call at any time. Implementing a call is an act of collaboration. By participating we get to learn something about what the caller was hoping to experience. Ignoring a call is a collaborative choice that sends a strong message of individual preference.

Afterword:

Once at a Buddhist retreat I explained Tuning to a fellow practitioner. She turned to me and said, “So, Tuning is the opposite of meditation!” I think she meant that a meditator is “supposed to” rise above desire. For me Tuning and meditation are about getting intimate with the process of desire as it experientially unfolds.

Resources:

ContactQuarterly.com for information about Steve Paxton, Lisa Nelson, Contact Improvisation and Tuning Scores.

BIO corrections

Karen Nelson met Contact Improvisation and Tuning Scores, in the early days studying with originators Steve Paxton and Lisa Nelson respectively, since the late 1970s. She has practiced, performed, and taught internationally for over 35 years, and has co-founded several dance projects, including DanceAbility [International.] She was the Rural Operations Manager at Ser Cho Osel Ling, a Buddhist retreat land project of Kagyu Changchub Chuling from 2002-10. www.explomov.weebly.com