

Contact Improvisation

Adding to the dance therapy toolkit

Robyn Price

Robyn Price, BA, Grad. Dip. Movt. & Dance (Melb. Uni), Grad Cert Dance Ed (UTS), is studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Dance Therapy at Wesley Institute in Sydney. She has a longstanding involvement in dance, as a student, teacher and performer, and views her move into dance therapy as an important next step, both personally and professionally. Robyn also works part-time as a marketing writer.

We sat in a circle, five women and one man, concentrating on the teacher – not a sound other than the birds singing in the trees outside. To introduce ourselves, we were asked to share nothing more than a name and a word that would reveal our current feeling state. Some three hours later, there had been no further words offered to describe the backgrounds and life experiences of the other participants. However, after a series of physical, sensory activities, and occasional embarrassing moments, sitting, standing, rolling, surfing, we had learned much more about each of the other people in the group: the feel of their skin, their ability to receive another person's weight, to respond appropriately to contact cues. I also left with a deeper understanding of myself, of how touch affected me and informed me personally. And, as an added bonus, the afternoon left me with more energy and greater concentration that I had felt in years.

This is an overwhelmingly positive dance form. In contact improvisation, you are identifying what other dancers can do in order to dance together. There is no right or wrong and any mistakes you may feel you made are forgotten as you negotiate the current interaction.

What interests me, as a dance therapist-in-training, is the way contact improvisation gives permission to practise and achieve closeness, touch and non-verbal communication in a non-threatening way.

This was a beginner's workshop. We were learning and practising contact techniques. For the uninitiated, like me, it was extraordinary to experience the sheer range of information that can be received and transmitted through touch.

For the practising dance therapist, such skills are vital, whether they are used to read client sensibilities or to work with issues related to touch. The contact improvisation techniques offer a great

tool to pop into the therapist's toolkit. They could be introduced in the most elementary of activities – a walking warm up that invites people to greet each other through hands, shoulders and so on – and then developed according to the abilities of all participants.

For those with disabilities, the opportunity to dance in this way would allow them to initiate, to support others, to feel valued for what they have to offer. Carers would benefit from the contact improvisation experience too.

As a future dance therapist, what's in it for me? I mentioned the energy. Dare I mention it was fun? From this one experience, I learned a little more about me. I tried things I would never normally try – when you work cooperatively with another body, it's amazing what you can do.

I will reveal that contact improvisation didn't feel good every minute – crushed under the dead weight of another woman's body... she didn't look heavy when we started the body surfing exercise... With support and technical advice from the teacher, we became unstuck and I drew breath once again.

After three hours' practice, I really understood how to communicate through contact with other moving bodies. I also felt that my movement and my movement choices were always valid, and as I observed our final duets, I found I was looking only for the positive, for those magic moments in the dance.

I don't believe for one minute that after one workshop I know all there is to know. I do believe, however, that I will use contact improvisation techniques in my future work.'

Message to members:

We regret to advise members of a small increase in annual fees effective for the membership year 2003 – 2004. This has become necessary because of our increased administrative costs. The Association continues to be entirely manned by volunteers. The new rates are as per form and are an approximate 10% increase. The O/S rate remains the same.
