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# From Solitaires to Solitaires: Real-Time Choreography in the Czech Context



Fig. 1: Eli et al, *Meziprostory (In-between Spaces)*, 2023, Prague, Běhal-Fejér Institute, photo Shoe Bean.

This study is a continuation of a previous paper on real-time choreography (in the Czech context also referred to as “instant composition”), which introduced the topic to the Czech readership in the context of the American postmodern scene.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to charting this genre of improvisation, wherein multiple artistic media meet on stage, and its influence in the Czech context,<sup>2</sup> the ground is far more uncertain and muddled. The foundations of this study lie in the scant few texts that have been previously published, primarily interviews with members of the Czech dance community who have had years of experience with improvisation on stage, both as performers and pedagogues.<sup>3</sup> Last but not least, we base the study on our own experience as performers and audience members. As for international studies and publications devoted to this topic, none of which had been hitherto translated into Czech, we use various materials, though exclusively in English.<sup>4</sup>

1 This project was realised in collaboration with Czech dance artist Bohumíra Eliášová, PhD (aka Mirka Eliášová, Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Dance Department), theatre and dance practitioner Michaela Raisová, PhD (aka Mish Rais, Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy), and British dance practitioner Lizzy Le Quesne (University of Coventry, Centre for Dance Research). The research included six workshops and interviews with international artists from this field (Rosalind Crisp, Wendy Houstoun, Julyen Hamilton, Nita Little, Eva Karczag, Daniel Lepkoff), reflections from the workshops and discussions with a focus group consisting of professionals from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

2 For the problematics and questioning of this labelling by Sally Banes, see Ramsay Burt (Burt 2006, 6–12). This paper is a follow-up to a study in Czech by the same authors (Eliášová and Raisová 2023, 32–58).

3 Interviews were conducted with focus group members (Jana Novorytová, Hana Chmelenková, Helena Arenbergerová, Jiří Lössl, Veronika Šimková), and with Hanka Polanská Turečková, Zdenka-Brungot Sviteková, Anka Sedlačková, Kateřina Dietzová, Marta Poláková and Rena Milgrom.

4 For publications on the phenomenon of dance improvisation on and off the stage, see the first part of this two-part study (Eliášová and Raisová 2023, 32–58).

Ideas about stage improvisation in the Czech context were greatly affected by the violent interruption of all artistic development in totalitarian Czechoslovakia and subsequent political interventions.<sup>5</sup> Improvisation is an expression of freedom, not just in movement but in decision-making and self-reliance, which is manifested as a movement action before the viewer's eyes – in the “here and now”. Improvisation, especially real-time choreography – also known as “open choreography”, “indeterminate choreography” and “in situ composition” (Cvejić 2015, 130)<sup>6</sup> – is a democratic stage form.<sup>7</sup>

Let us start with some basic concepts. The term “modern dance” is equivalent to “expressionist dance”<sup>8</sup> in the Czech environment. In the preceding text on real-time choreography, we described the foundations and influences that were instrumental in shaping the development of the discipline. New tendencies in understanding dance, movement and movement art itself have been observable in the US since the 1950s, as described and elaborated by Sally Banes (Banes [1979] 2011 and 1993).<sup>9</sup> This new approach to dance conceptualisation sees improvisation not only as a pedagogical tool or a facet of the creative process but as a distinctive experimental artistic expression on stage.

In the Czechoslovak region, expressionist dance and rhythmic incorporating improvisation as a natural part of most movement methods emerged in the first half of the 20th century. The methodologies and descriptions of applied improvisation are collected in the works of Jarmila Jeřábková (Jeřábková and Cveklová 2004), in which improvisation is intended as a teaching tool for expanding movement development in children. On the other hand, Jarmila Kröschlová introduces improvisation as a method for creating original movement material for choreography (Kröschlová 2002).

5 Similar thoughts are expressed in a Czech text by Hana Polanská Turečková (Polanská Turečková 2019).

6 The terminology and its development were succinctly described in the previous study in *ArteActa* (Eliášová and Raisová 2023, 32–58). We also briefly touched upon the term used in the Czech context, *okamžitá kompozice* (instant composition).

7 For the cultural-political climate and its influence on dance development, especially Contact Improvisation, see Cynthia J. Novack (Novack 1990).

8 In the modernist era, that is, since the end of the 19th century, two major reformist schools of thought have emerged: expressionist dance (called “modern dance” in America; founded by Isadora Duncan, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Rudolf von Laban) and the multifaceted school of Western artistic dance, based on rejecting the legacy of classic dance techniques and 19th-century ballet. The characteristics of these schools include the search for new movement principles and new types of artistic expression, topics and forms of artistic dance. The expressionist dance movement is closely connected with the development of other areas of the arts, and one of its core tenets is the effort to establish dance as an art form equal to its peers. The main focal points sprung up in Europe and North America, and gradually expanded to South America, Australia and Oceania, and Asia (mainly Japan and Israel). The term *expressionist dance* (Ausdruckstanz) arose out of one of the strains of German dance, closely tied to expressionism; contemporary Czech dance historians use the term to describe a wide range of new dance forms that arose in the first half of the 20th century. The terminology of the time was far more diverse, with terms such as *free/liberated dance* (Freier Tanz); *new artistic dance* (Neuer künstlerischer Tanz); *modern dance* (Moderner Tanz) appearing most frequently; in Russia, the same holds true for “plastic or meloplastic dance”; “German/Expressionist Dance” in the Anglo-Saxon context is often used pejoratively; in the Czech context, there is “*plastic*” dance (plastický tanec), “*artistic*” dance (umělecký tanec), *barefoot dance* (bosonohý), and after 1948 the term *contemporary dance* (současný tanec) becomes more prominent.

9 Compare with Burt (Burt 2006, 6–12), who resists the foundations established by Banes, claiming that there had been similar tendencies in Europe, only with different foundations.

Given the political situation in the country, all traditions and developments of expressionist dance were severed, since:

[T]he establishment of the socialist regime required the cultural sphere to move away from interbellum modernism and towards art based on the principles of socialist realism. [...] Local traditions of expressionist dance in schools, which were private businesses and as such had no place in the new “proletarian” society and its legal structures, lost all social relevance and value. (Gremlicová, Lössl, and Němečková 2021, 33–34)<sup>10</sup>

New information about contemporary and emerging dance techniques, or shifts in the fundamental understanding of dance, made their way into the Czechoslovak environment with great difficulty. One could even claim that this is still the case, as there is a lack of any dialogue with the theories that pushed the concepts of dance forward, especially those from the West in the 1960s. There was a brief “breath of fresh air” in the late 1960s, when opportunities to travel and study abroad became more available. As in the US, Czechoslovak dancers used improvisation mainly to educate the artist throughout the creative process. Nevertheless, from the 1960s onwards, Czechoslovak dance built increasingly on modern influences rather than postmodern ones.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the 1960s, and even more so in the 1970s, improvisation gradually turned into a performance form, or an analogue to stage forms where the stage was generally replaced by a non-theatrical space, particularly in action art (Morganová 2009) and the dissident milieu. For obvious reasons, this development was neither systematic nor continuous (Morganová 2011, 30–40). In the 1980s, as Czechoslovakia opened to more contacts abroad and opportunities for travel to Western Europe and the US become more numerous, new inspirations and impulses began to trickle into the local dance culture. As more guest artists visited Czechoslovakia, and later the separated republics, improvisation sporadically appeared as a stage form as well.<sup>12</sup>

Looking back at the situation, we can say that in the Czech context, as in the situation west of the border, the basic principles of improvisation as a stage form were cultivated primarily on alternative and amateur scenes and at art

10 Compare with Polanská Turečková (Polanská Turečková 2019).

11 Official dance on stage was based on the format of the USSR, that is, “dramballet” or folk dance. The value of improvisation, the level to which it was inspired by experience abroad, or the extent to which it was passed on to others – all these aspects were entirely dependent on the personality of the given choreographer or pedagogue.

12 When compared to Prague, Bratislava benefited significantly because of its relative proximity to Vienna, and it was initially a more progressive venue in terms of applying postmodern dance. This is proven by workshops with world-renowned guests (Steve Paxton, Julyen Hamilton, etc.), which were attended by, for example, Jiří Lössl and Anka Sedláčková, who were directly influenced by this experience and used it in their artistic and pedagogical practices. They themselves then influenced many other Czech professional and amateur dance artists. For the history of workshops in Bratislava see Bratislava v pohybe, n.d.

institutions, which have been largely out of the public eye until very recently.<sup>13</sup> Internationally, a deeper critical assessment of improvisation has taken place only in the last decade, as evidenced by (among others) academic texts focused on improvisation.<sup>14</sup> The Czech scene has not undergone or even started this process yet, which is why we present this text: as a means of opening the topic to further research.

### Pioneers of Czech Postmodern Dance

As yet, there are no publications covering the rapid developments in the Czech dance milieu since the 1990s, even on the most basic level. The field of dance theory has neglected postmodernity and its impact on local artistic output. After the Iron Curtain fell and the borders opened, the Czech creative environment was exposed to myriad, disparate foreign influences coming from all directions and in all areas of art, be it professional or amateur. This was the time when Czech contemporary dance as we know it today formed. It was also the time when previously amateur companies and creators became professionals (Opavská 2015, 72).

Throughout the 1990s, many companies formed – and have since disbanded – that sought to express themselves through contemporary dance.<sup>15</sup> These largely consisted of dancers and authors from the amateur dance environment (Opavská 2015, 86). Some of these people returned from abroad and tried to apply their experience in art and teaching. During this time, various artistic experiments were put into practice in amateur conditions. Systems of financial support for the arts, which were meant to help professionalise dance companies, were only just being set up.

In the following section, we will attempt to chart the topography of Czech improvisation since 2000 by briefly introducing the individual figures of the scene. Two significant creators who turned professional during the 1980s, and

13 Students at HAMU (Music and Dance Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) can attend classes in *Taneční improvizace* (Dance improvisation, originally called *Metody taneční improvizace*, Methods of dance improvisation), which approaches improvisation not just as an artistic and pedagogical process but as a process of composition as well. It has been taught by Mirka Eliášová since 2000. At DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague), some improvisation principles are used during *Body in Motion*, a class taught by Mish Rais and Jana Novorytová as a means of developing performers' psychosomatic condition and to introduce basic principles (time, space, rhythm, tempo, Eutony, etc.). The subject *Awareness in Movement*, taught by Rais and Novorytová, applies the pedagogical principle of developing the awareness of the performer and the viewer as a singular person, which is used in some form by Julyen Hamilton, Nita Little, Rosalind Crisp and Daniel Lepkoff in their teaching practice and performance (the interviews that showcase this are part of the authors' research archive for the project "Improvisation as Choreographic, Creative and Authorial Principle"). At the Duncan Centre Conservatory in Prague, improvisation has been taught since the foundation of the institution. The classes do not introduce improvisation as a set of tools for instant composition but rather as a creative process and a pedagogical tool.

14 See, for example, Vida Midgelow (Midgelow 2019); George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Lewis and Piekut 2016); Bojana Cvejić (Cvejić 2015); Kent De Spain (De Spain 2014); Melinda Buckwalter (Buckwalter 2010).

15 The term *contemporary dance* (současný tanec) is somewhat problematic in the Czech context as it lacks a clear definition and delineation. Nevertheless, as Opavská writes: "[...] contemporary dance is an internationally accepted technical term in dance terminology describing a wide range of individual artistic expressions, tied together by certain overarching signs, approaches or methodologies. The Czech equivalent is 'současný tanec'" (Opavská 2015, 21–23).



Fig. 2: CreWcollective, Po pás 14 (Face to Face 14), 2022, Prague, Studio Truhlárna, photo Tereza Jakoubková.

had experience acquired abroad, were Eva Černá and Karel Vaněk. In the early 1990s, they taught the principles of Contact Improvisation, even though they themselves were only finding out about this form through individual research and applying their findings in practice. Their first duet, *Malé modré nic* (Little Blue Nothing, 1991) was based on Contact Improvisation. The largely set structure of the piece included two sections that were entirely improvised.<sup>16</sup> They expanded this approach in their subsequent choreographies. They performed fully improvised pieces in collaboration with musicians or as short-format, site-specific projects.

Another important figure who changed the perception of contemporary dance in the Czech context is the choreographer Lenka Flory.<sup>17</sup> Upon returning from international internships, she started teaching at the newly formed Duncan Centre Conservatory, but she also founded the Festival of Progressive Personalities of European Dance Theatre project, where she introduced Czech audiences to David Zambrano, Julyen Hamilton, Jonathan Burrows, Thomas Hauert and others. Many artists from abroad were invited to teach workshops for students and the public. As part of this festival, which was renamed Dance Theatre Festival in 1996 and Confrontation: International

16 In 1983, Vaněk and Černá encountered Contact Improvisation through Kedzie Penfield, Nita Little and Repertory West. As Vaněk says, they gained initial experience by going directly into practice and experimentation without oversight. Later, in the latter half of 1980s, some dancers, including Vaněk, had the opportunity to travel for short residences to London, and in 1991 to the American Dance Festival, where improvisation and modern partnering were taught. See e-mail correspondence of Mirka Eliášová and Karel Vaněk, authors' archive.

17 In 1994, Flory founded and led the Progressive European Dance Theatre Project. This turned into the Confrontations international festival in 1996, and was held every October at various Prague venues until 2003.



Fig. 3: Julyen Hamilton, PIO and dancers, 2023, Theatre PONEC, CreWcollective production, photo Tereza Jakoubková.

Festival of New Dance in 2001, many progressive development tendencies of contemporary dance were presented, along with improvised performances by, for example, David Zambrano, Jonathan Burrows, Russell Malliphant and the then unknown Akram Khan, as well as shared improvised evenings of upcoming talents and local artists (Opavská 2015, 117–118).

In connection with the growing awareness of dance improvisation, we would be remiss not to mention Min Tanaka, who first introduced himself in 1984 with his solo performance *Emotion* at the Prague Juniorklub Na Chmelnici, and a year later with the project *Heavenly Vault*, which was also performed as a site-specific performance in Zbrašovské jeskyně at Teplice nad Bečvou (Václavová and Žižka 2008, 306). In 1994, Ondřej Hrab, then the director of the Archa Theatre, invited Tanaka to open the theatre in a performance with musician John Cale.<sup>18</sup> Visual artist Miloš Šejn worked with Frank van de Ven, a member of Tanaka's company, to create the Bohemiae Rosa Project (Bohemiae Rosa, n.d.). This interdisciplinary environmental project blends dance, performance, visual arts and improvisation, with improvisation playing an integral role. The Plasy Monastery was also a prominent site for performance experimentation and improvisation, as well as for many

18 Ever since its founding, Archa Theatre has been regarded as a progressive venue and its repertoire includes progressive music groups, theatre and dance performances. Min Tanaka created several pieces for the Archa Theatre. One of the first was *Grim Grim* (1997), in which he invited young Czech dancers and performers to participate. He influenced many of these with his specific Body Weather training method. He organised intensive summer workshops at his farm in Hakushu, Japan. This workshop was attended by, among others, Kateřina Dietzová, Zuzana Sýkorová and Ondřej Landa, who described the experience in his diary (Landa, n.d.).

interdisciplinary symposia and festivals (Agosto Foundation, n.d. b.; Václavová and Žižka 2008, 42–51).<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary Slovak dance played an undeniable role in the formation of the Czech scene. Following the separation of the two republics, Slovak dance underwent a more dynamic development. Thanks to several prominent artists, it leaned more towards experimental and somatic forms. These artists included Anka Sedlačková, Marta Poláková, Mira Kovářová, Zuna and Milan Kozánek and Zuzana Hájková. Some of these were trained in somatic disciplines and used their knowledge of teaching and production, thus influencing the shape of contemporary dance in Slovakia.<sup>20</sup> A seminal moment was the formation of the company Štúdio tanca at Banská Bystrica (Divadlo Štúdio Tanca, n.d.), which is still active. Throughout its existence, the company has raised, trained and influenced many dancers and improvisers who now work in the Czech environment. The company has also worked with a range of innovators and experimental artists, for example Julyen Hamilton and David Zambrano.

In 2002, as part of the Bratislava in Movement Festival, a special meeting of the members of the improvisation and Contact Improvisation communities was organised. This included, for example, Steve Paxton, Daniel (Danny) Lepkoff, Eva Karczag, Lisa Nelson, Julyen Hamilton, David Zambrano and others (Bratislava v pohybe, n.d.). They taught and showcased their improvised pieces and jams.

This encounter in Bratislava, and other events like it, clearly influenced Czech dancer and pedagogue Jiří Lössl, who has practised improvisation since the late 1990s. His activities influence and connect the spheres of amateur and professional dance. He explored stage improvisation through his project *Páté roční období* (The Fifth Season, 2008–2009),<sup>21</sup> during which he worked with musicians and amateur dancers, and through organised improvisation encounters dubbed *Tanec pod modříný* (Dance under the Larches), which resulted in developing his own methodology for teaching psychosomatic movement disciplines based on work with imagery and the anatomical qualities of the body through guided improvisation. He is presently teaching this methodology to the students of DAMU (Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, namely in the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy, until 2022, and in the Department of Drama in Education) and

19 Miloš Vojtěchovský initiated and organised these events.

20 Anka Sedlačková continued to study the BMC approach, Mira Kovářová the Feldenkrais method, and Marta Poláková the Laban-Bartenieff method.

21 *Páté roční období* (The Fifth Season), a series of improvised dance/music pieces, was presented as part of the event *Zatančí si s námi* (Dance with Us), which existed between 2008 and 2009. The final performance of the piece was presented at Tanambourrée, 4 June 2009. Karolína Kalinová was responsible for the concept. For details on the performance, see Jiří Lössl (Lössl 2019, 102–104). For details on the project, see Kalinová (Kalinová 2021, 20–23; Kalinová 2022 a, 27–34; Kalinová 2022 b, 44–47). Following on from the project, between 2009 and 2019, the group Páté (Fifth, renamed MY 5 / US 5 / in 2016) continued to perform, with Karolína Kalinová, Radana Kodetová, Jiří Lössl, Martin Rubáš and Jan Švec as members. They performed several improvised pieces focused on the organic blending of movement, music, voice and site-specific projects.

HAMU (Music and Dance Faculty, the Dance Department).<sup>22</sup> His artistic and, more importantly, teaching practices have influenced many artists, both professional and amateur, who want to focus on improvisation and real-time choreography.

Festivals have also had an undeniable effect on the development of improvisation as a stage form, serving as a gateway for new trends and tendencies in contemporary dance, and as venues for artists who have already worked with instant composition as a creative practice. Czech professional dancers have had the opportunity to encounter the work of their international colleagues at workshops, which often accompany the artists' performances at festivals.<sup>23</sup> One example for all is the foundation of the Tanec Praha Festival, which introduced many interesting artists to the Czech audience, and, especially in its early years, represented the premier way of seeing the rising stars and new tendencies of progressive contemporary dance.

Another such event is the festival ...příští vlna/next wave..., which has helped spread the phenomenon of stage improvisation ever since its beginnings, as it provided a venue for experimental projects, including improvised pieces. The latter half of the 1990s saw the emergence of the festival 4 Days in Motion (today called 4+4 Days in Motion),<sup>24</sup> highlighting site-specific performances, a genre that incorporates improvisation by its very nature. In the brief period from the late 1990s to the turn of the century, many such events and initiatives emerged and disappeared. Only a handful of them have survived and managed to retain a progressive dramaturgy.

### Stage Forms of Dance Improvisation at the Turn of the Millennium

After 2000, a new generation of creators emerged on the Czech scene. These were notable for their experience abroad, which they continued to apply and pass on. They spread awareness of improvisation through their projects both on and off the stage, for example via teaching, and would often use different forms of improvisation. It is their use of structured/scored improvisation or entirely open real-time choreography that is most relevant for this study.

Structured improvisation is applied as a choreographing process, a self-contained piece or a foundational element of a set performance.<sup>25</sup> According to Joyce Morgenroth:

22 See Lössl (Lössl 2021).

23 For example, David Zambrano's workshop at HAMU, as part of the Confrontations festival, 9–12 October 2001.

24 See Václavová and Žižka (Václavová and Žižka 2008, 79–146).

25 It is a creative and staging process. The authors of this article use it themselves and define it separately from the improvisation used to find new body expressions or movement material for an otherwise set piece, whereas this term refers to the cultivation of real-time choreography as an independent artistic expression/discipline.

[...] structured improvisation is a mixture of conscious choice and spontaneous reaction. It includes periods of sustained concentration and moments of unreproducible magic. By responding to each other's imagination, intelligence, style, and energy, the dancers find themselves breaking through the patterns of thinking and moving that have limited them. Witness the spontaneous outburst of laughter and applause at the end of a successful improvisation. (Morgenroth 1987, xiv)

In structured improvisation, performers<sup>26</sup> may engage a specific task (task-based improvisation),<sup>27</sup> which they attempt to fulfil during the improvisation, or any predefined condition or structure, often referred to as a score.<sup>28</sup>

In the Czech context, this approach is represented by individual projects, companies and artists. In the last fifteen years, there have been several examples of the use of structured improvisation on stage, which we discuss below. We are only charting the basis of the situation.<sup>29</sup> As companies, these projects include CreWcollective,<sup>30</sup> VerTeDance,<sup>31</sup> Temporary Collective,<sup>32</sup> ME-SA,<sup>33</sup> Částečné znejistění,<sup>34</sup> Filigrán,<sup>35</sup> Ostružina,<sup>36</sup> Eli a kol.<sup>37</sup> and the activities organised under the patronage of SE.S.T.A.<sup>38</sup>

26 We deliberately avoid the term "dancer", since the format of real-time choreography may involve the collaboration of various artists from different disciplines, including but not limited to music, visual arts, lighting design, sound design, new media, acting or poetry. In this respect, real-time choreography continues the pioneering events of Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union; see Baner (Baner [1979] 2011; Perron (Perron 2020).

27 Anna Halprin experimented with this approach in the 1950s. See Halprin (Halprin 1995).

28 This may be any sound, space or composition element, which is applied throughout the performance and serves as its dramaturgy. The term "score" itself is taken from music and refers to John Cage's influence on postmodern dance.

29 Due to the range of this essay and focus of our current research, we do not analyse individual performances here to give examples of different possibilities of the work with instant composition in performance. However, it would be very useful to do so and in this regard work with material including reviews of these performances and include also conversations with the artists themselves on the process of their work. We see this as an opportunity for further research to come.

30 CreWcollective facilitates various opportunities for the use of real-time choreography. For example, their former interdisciplinary improvised performance *Setkáme se* (We shall meet) was followed up by Moving Orchestra, a site-specific improvisation format in unusual or outdoor spaces, where both dancers and musicians improvised together (CreWcollective have long worked with a musical body comprised of George Cremaschi, Petr Vrba, Pasi Mäkelä and Zdeněk Závodný). Very often, the only set element is the space itself – a given stage limit, sometimes the audience decides on the order of the performances or the number of performers. Individual interventions in the select space are about ten minutes long and are always real-time choreographies. Another project is *Po pás* (Face to Face). See the website of CreWcollective (CreWcollective, n.d. d.).

31 Tereza Ondrová and Veronika Knytllová (VerTe) used structured improvisation and score in their piece titled *Ceviche* (2015), supervised by David Zambrano.

32 Temporary Collective was set up in 2017 and created pieces using real-time choreography: *Duety* (Duets, Tejnorová et al., 2019), *Voices* (Tejnorová et al., 2021), *InSectum in...* (T. Ondrová, S. Gribaudi, 2022). See the website of Temporary Collective (Temporary Collective, n.d.).

33 See the website of ME-SA (ME-SA, n.d. a.), for example the piece titled *Much more than nothing* (2012) supervised by Stano Dobák and Peter Šavel, and *Swarming* (2013), together with Rasmus Ölmé and Refug Collective (ME-SA, n.d. b.).

34 *Částečné znejistění* (Partial Uncertainty) is an authorial project of Mish Rais and Jana Novorytová, who have used improvisation as a stage principle since 2014 in their authorial pieces, for example *Částečné znejistění* (2017; see Kocourková 2018) and *%& 3-5-8-@# a na Aljaše se právě rozednívá* (%& 3-5-8-@# and there's just dawn there in Alaska, 2019), together with artists such as René Vitvar, Pasi Mäkelä, Roman Zabelov, Štěpán Hejzlar and others. See the website of CreWcollective (CreWcollective, n.d. c.).

35 See the website of Barka (Barka, n.d.).

36 Bára Látllová and Zden Brungot-Svíteklová employ real-time choreography and improvisation in their pedagogical projects and some performances, such as *Different?* (2016). See the website of Ostružina (Ostružina, n.d.).



Fig. 4: CreWcollective, Po pás 9 (Face to Face 9), Studio ALTA, photo Tomáš Hejzlar.

Individual artists include, for example, Lucia Kašiarová,<sup>39</sup> Jaro Viňarský,<sup>40</sup> Lenka Kniha Bartůňková,<sup>41</sup> Rena Milgrom,<sup>42</sup> Roberta Legros Štěpánková, Tomáš Janyпка<sup>43</sup> and others.

As an example of venues that have consistently supported real-time choreography and improvisation, and have opened their stages to the research and application of both, we single out Studio Alta. Ever since its founding by Lucie Kašiarová in 2008, it has been a progressive and experimental venue

37 Mirka Eliášová et al. (Eli et al.) use primarily structured improvisation and real-time choreography on stage, for example in the project *Prostor pohybu a zvuku* (Space of Movement and Sound, 1999), *Deep Space* (2004), *Kam letí nebe* (Where the Sky Flies, 2012), *Kontinuum* (Continuum, 2014), *Voluntas Vitae* (2015), *Refresh* (2017), *Boxinbox* (2018), *Tabula Rasa* (2018), *...pokračování přístě?!?* (... to be continued?!?, 2019) and *Meziprostory* (In-between Spaces, 2022), and in shows for a young audience: *Svět z papíru* (World of Paper, 2014), *Momo* (2016), *Škatuleni* (Boxing Up, 2022), etc. See the website of Music-Dance Association HTSpE (Eliášová, Mirka, n.d.).

38 SE.S.T.A, Centre for Choreographic Development (SE.S.T.A, n.d.), created and led by Marie Kinsky, is an organisation that has long presented various postmodern approaches in dance to the Czech context using various initiatives and projects. It strives to connect scenes and contexts via the platform of contemporary dance. Its activities include pedagogical projects for children, acquainting the audience with professionals, discussions with international or Czech and Slovak experts, etc. The projects also include the festival Korespondance in Žďár nad Sázavou (Korespondance, n.d.) and activities aimed at the professional dance sphere (e.g. coaching residencies for choreographers, workshops, performances with international artists, Choreographic Café Project). It also introduces progressive artists from abroad to Czech artists, allowing them to collaborate on projects (e.g. Martha Moore's 2015 piece *Marine Archaeology* at Veletřní palác employed work with a score) and aims to combine various areas of art with dance (e.g. the visual arts in the piece *Tanec v galerii* [Dance in Gallery], etc.).

39 Among others, for example, *AllaIII* (2010), *Eau de vie* (2016), *Mnohohdinec* (Multivudal, 2022) and countless other projects left unnamed due to their improvised nature.

40 For example, *Posledný krok před* (Last Step Before, 2006), *The Touch of the Open* (2019).

41 For example, *Requiem* (2012).

42 For example, *Global Water Dances* (since 2011).

43 Legros Štěpánková and Janyпка focus on real-time choreography, especially recently as part of the Orbita collective (ORBITA.space, n.d.).



Fig. 5: Částečné znejištění, %& 3-5-8- @# a na Aljašce se právě rozednívá (%& 3-5-8- @# and there's just dawn there in Alaska, 2019), 2019, Prague, Běhal-Fejér Institute, photo Pavel Doušek.

for numerous workshops (e.g. Impro Events Prague<sup>44</sup>), residencies and multi-disciplinary events, including a 2018 symposium on dance improvisation.<sup>45</sup> Particularly during its tenure in Prague's Holešovice neighbourhood, before moving to a venue at Invalidovna (2020), Alta was a haven and rehearsal space for many groups seeking to research real-time choreography or use it in their projects.<sup>46</sup>

Long-term projects employing real-time choreography on stage in a cohesive manner are few and far between. Some real-time choreographies for dancers have been made in collaboration with PIO<sup>47</sup> (Prague Improvisation Orchestra, Pražský improvizací orchestr). Another important project is *Po pás* (Face to Face),<sup>48</sup> which brings together artists who have not collaborated artistically

44 A festival organised every spring between 2010 and 2015 by Hana Chmelenská and Zden Brungot-Sviteková, with support from Lucie Kašiarová, regularly introduced international artists who had been exploring dance and theatre improvisation in their work. It usually took the form of a one- or two-week intensive workshop supervised by guest artists, who also performed some pieces as part of their internship, along with theoretical lectures and discussions on the topic of dance improvisation. Kirstie Simson, Andrew Morrish, Ruth Zaporah, Lisa Nelson, Wendy Houstoun, K. J. Holmes, David Lepkoff, David Zambrano, Julyen Hamilton and Stephanie Skura all introduced their approaches at these events.

45 See the website of divadlo.cz (divadlo.cz 2018). The symposium brought together Czech and Slovak artists and international guests Julyen Hamilton, Rasmus Ölme, Renan Martins, Jaro Viňarský, Peter Šavel, etc.

46 For example, in the Nau collective, which existed between 2009 and 2014 (Markéta/Vacková/ Pucová, Veronika Beňová, Zden Brungot-Sviteková who were the founders); as part of CreWcollective and the project LAB4TOOLS, which worked under the supervision of Mish Rais and Jana Novorytová as a laboratory for real-time choreography. Each three-hour meeting had a topic, with every fourth meeting taking the form of a jam. See the website of CreWcollective (CreWcollective, n.d. b.).

47 For example, *PIO and dancers*, 5 May 2017, 23 March 2019, 6 April 2023, at the Ponec Theatre; see Bitterová (2017). The main proponent of this project is the double bassist, teacher and improviser George Cremaschi, currently living in Prague (Cremaschi, n.d.).

48 *Po pás* (Face to Face) is inspired by *Monday Match* format from Amsterdam, see the website of Hello Amsterdam (Editor 2018). Since 2017, the curator of *Po pás* has been Jana Novorytová, whose work and teaching methods are inspired and greatly influenced by Julyen Hamilton's practice. These evenings,

for at least a year. The festival *Vs. Interpretation*,<sup>49</sup> which took place in 2014 and 2016, also deserves a mention. This was a music improvisation festival that included other media (such as dance, visual arts and film). Another similar project, in the vein of *Impro Events Prague*, is the real-time choreography festival *Immediatus* in Brno, put on by the *Orbita* collective<sup>50</sup> or the *Plynutí* (*Flowing*)<sup>51</sup> improvised evenings in Ostrava.

### Real-Time Choreography as an Issue of Terminology

While it is essential to practise, experience and cultivate a specific discipline, it is equally important to try and understand the context in which it originated and developed, and to observe it analytically. According to Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull, the audience applies the same criteria to a poorly made show, a poorly executed set choreography or an unsuccessful improvised piece, to the detriment of the comprehension and acceptance of the format (Cohen Bull 1997, 17–20).

As we have mentioned, in the 1990s systems of financial support were only just beginning in the Czech Republic. This was also when the first attempts were made to bring real-time choreography into the Czech context through various collectives and artists, be they Czech or international. Despite thirty years of development, stage improvisation, whether the result of the creative process or real-time choreography, is still considered less valuable than set choreography.

The exact reasons for this remain an enigma and a motivation for further research. The issue of accepting real-time choreography as a fully fledged art form is no doubt far more complex, and touches on sociocultural and political questions<sup>52</sup> deserving of a thorough independent study. One possible reason, however, may be the lack of a unified terminology. In the absence of language to describe and comprehend the discipline of real-time choreography, it is only natural that the criteria for assessing the art form are also unclear. Let us therefore consider this question.

where artists from various collectives meet on stage for the first time, were formerly staged at Studio Alta, but have since moved to Truhlárna at Žižkov, where they have continued throughout the last three years. For reviews of these events, see, for example, Orcigrová (Orcigrová 2018) and Polanská Turečková's analysis placing the format in the neo-avantgarde context (Polanská Turečková 2019).

49 The production of the project was headed by Jana Novorytová, Honza Malik and Petra Horká Čechová, with George Cremaschi, Petr Vrba and Miloš Vojtěchovský responsible for the dramaturgy. See the facebook of the project (*VS Interpretation* 2016, n.d.) and see the website of Agosto Foundation (Agosto Foundation, n.d. a.).

50 Roberta Legros Stěpánková and Tomáš Janypka (ORBITA.space, n.d.). The initial event took place in the autumn of 2022 and introduced Czech, Slovak and international artists who cultivate real-time choreography in their work.

51 The series of encounters, focused on music and dance improvisation at Janáčkova Konzervatoř in Ostrava, is organised by Kristýna Slezáková. See Cigánková (Cigánková 2022).

52 Even abroad, the approaches to the discipline vary (both in terms of the financial support for projects, collectives, institutions and individuals and in the responses of the audience) based on the specific developmental context of postmodern dance and its legacy in the given milieu. According to Rosalind Crisp, artists resort to naming conventions that avoid "improvisation" to "sell" their work more effectively. For an edited English version of the interview, see Crisp (Crisp 2022). The full interview with Crisp, produced as part of the project "Improvisation as Choreographic, Creative and Authorial Principle", will be published by NAMU (2024) as part of the forthcoming bilingual publication.



Fig. 6: Eli et al., *...pokračování příště?!?* (...to be continued?!?), 2019, Prague, Studio Truhlárna, photo Anna Benháková.

In the Czech language, many improvisation and choreography terms are taken from English and remain untranslated, though often the specific creative practice of a given artist shifts the precise meaning of the term.<sup>53</sup> At the onset of this research, we presumed that the terminology was discordant precisely for this reason – the idiosyncratic nature with which artists imported the terms from abroad. However, as it turned out in the process of interviewing international artists, the terminological discord is in fact a characteristic of the discipline, even beyond Czech borders. Since the 1950s, the language of the nascent discipline has been regularly influenced by musical terminology, but the early era of development was also marked by blending and cross-influencing other artistic disciplines (e.g. the visual arts).<sup>54</sup>

How are the terms “improvisation”, “choreography” and “composition” understood? Do Czech artists also use their own language, their own translations of English terms based on their experience, or do they use the original term? How should we conceptualise the relationship between improvisation and choreography? Is improvisation on stage a choreography? What is the difference between composition and choreography?

53 This would be the case with the word “score”, which is originally a musical term and is widely accepted though remains untranslated in Czech. When we posed terminological questions to Czech and Slovak artists practising instant composition (pedagogues, dancers, choreographers, theorists), the term “score” yielded a plethora of definitions. Some would translate it as “structure”, “arrangement”, “assignment”, etc.

54 For information on how artists from different fields met in New York, see Perron (Perron 2020). See also Perron (Perron 2022) and Kourlas (Kourlas 2020) or Crawford (Crawford 2020) and Anderson (Anderson 1982).

Even the Czech and Slovak performers who practise improvisation on stage have dissimilar perspectives on the discipline. Some perceive a qualitative difference between set choreography and real-time choreography. Others consider real-time choreography on stage a fully realised choreography (a point of view shared primarily by those who subscribe to the practices and approaches of Julyen Hamilton). Still others view improvisation as more than just a style of creative composition or teaching but rather as an overall lifestyle approach.<sup>55</sup>

The question of stage improvisation as choreography might sound rather radical in the Czech context. This is because current dance theory still refers to the legacy of modern dance, or goes even further back into history. There is an absence of dialogue with the postmodern and the latest reflections on dance, especially those considering philosophy and phenomenology. Finally, do we not lack the very language with which to discuss real-time choreography?

Both in the Czech Republic and abroad, improvisation is a practice employed by both professional and amateur artists. An uninformed, inexperienced audience member is essentially incapable of distinguishing its quality, or, rather, they do not know how to assess it.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, there are qualitative criteria that enable us to evaluate real-time choreography. Like Contact Improvisation, real-time choreography is, by its nature, founding principles and the motives driving its development, open to anyone.<sup>57</sup> It is devoid of a specific style and does not require the audience member to read and interpret the meaning of a given aesthetic representation. As a matter of fact, the American postmodern scene attempted to change the traditional view of dance and movement as an interpretive medium subservient to a theatrical vision (Banes 1993, 79).

Since the active participation of the audience is required,<sup>58</sup> and since the audience may, or even must, find their own interpretation of what they see and hear, and how they understand it, the discipline is demanding of the audience.

55 This part of our study is an important detour in our research. Its foundation is the text about the terminology of real-time choreography, "Jevištní improvizace jako jazykový problém" (Stage Improvisation as a Linguistic Problem, Raisová and Eliášová 2023) published in the special issue of *Taneční actuality* magazine in Czech and English in 2023. Throughout 2022, we conducted discussions of specific terms from the field of real-time choreography (choreography, improvisation, score, composition, etc.). We approached artists who practise this discipline as performers and/or teachers and theorists: Jiří Lössl, Veronika Šimková, Jana Novorytová, Helena Arenbergerová, Hana Chmelenská, Zden Brungot-Svíteková, Marta Poláková, Anka Sedláčková, Hana Polanská Turečková, Rena Milgrom, Kateřina Dietzová. As far as we know, our attempts, conducted between June and December 2022, were the first of their kind.

56 See Kuhlmann (Kuhlmann 2004).

57 Banes (Banes, [1979] 2011) and Banes (Banes 1993), or Cvejić (Cvejić 2019).

58 Audience participation and the audience's part in interpreting stage improvisation is a topic worthy of its own study. In the 1960s, as new approaches to dance began forming and improvisation ceased to be just a creative process and became an independent and unique form, the audience was also faced with new demands. Performing pieces outside traditional theatrical spaces, in the public space (e.g. Steve Paxton's choreography *Satisfyin' Lover*, 1967) or in the intimate spaces of private apartments (see Simone Forti's choreography on MoMA, n.d.) opens the question of audience participation, more specifically the attention requirements, but also complicates ideas of the stage and auditoriums. In real-time choreographies, the audience member observes, as the term suggests, a real-time creation along with the performer (this opens the question of time perception from the performers' point of view, which is markedly different given the tense state. This was mentioned by, for example, Nita Little during a workshop in Prague in August 2022 (the interview is part of the authors' research archive); see also the terms "ex tempore choreography", "out of time", in Cvejić (Cvejić 2015, 134).



Fig. 7: CreWcollective,  
Moving Orchestra,  
Prague, photo Tereza  
Jakoubková.

After all, it is telling that the discipline is used almost exclusively by experimental artists at alternative venues, who also often become audience members at each other's performances. The only qualitative criterion paramount to the aesthetic perception and personal preferences of individual improvisers is the requirement of the performer's total presence – their ability to perceive, notice, create instantly and generate relationships through actions – since everything is happening at once (Cage 2010, 47).

The phenomenon of improvisation, not just dance improvisation, is a hot topic (Bertinetto 2022) in contemporary worldwide research, and reaches into philosophy, philosophy of art, phenomenology,<sup>59</sup> ethics and pedagogy<sup>60</sup>

59 Ravn et al. view dance improvisation as a phenomenon of thinking in movement (Ravn and Høffding 2022). Already in the 1980s, Fraleigh used phenomenology and existentialism to explore the experience of the moment in dance improvisation and refused the dichotomy of the body and the mind, or the body as a "tool", replacing these with the term "body-mind" (Fraleigh 1987).

60 The co-author of this text, Mish Rais, studies improvisation from the point of view of her own performing experience and combines her research with teaching. She applies her knowledge of Dialogical Acting discipline, invented by Ivan Vyskočil. She examines the moment of composition on stage through the

(especially in connection to embodied learning). Uses of improvisation have also recently been researched in the context of applied theatre in non-theatrical environments (Martin 2021). We are beyond the point of simply trying to establish stage dance improvisation as an independent art form, which was the goal of Czech artists after 2000. Real-time choreography is a discipline that places specific requirements on the performer (and the viewer), and we need to approach it by understanding its context, foundations and development. In this respect, we, the Czech dance scene, are behind the curve. At the same time, this is an opportunity to research the European foundations of dance improvisation on stage.

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prism of Vyskočil's idea of the triunity of attention: in the moment of composition, the performer is at once the viewer, the performer and the author (Vyskočil [1975] 2021). Her questions within the research “Improvisation as Choreographic, Creative and Authorial Principle” to Hamilton, Crisp, Karczag, Little, Houstoun and Lepkoff are posed precisely to accentuate the role of the viewer and performer as one during on-stage composition. All the above consciously work with this type of attention. See the interviews that are part of the authors' research archive.

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## Abstract

The authors (Raisová-Eliášová) present the second part of a two-part series in which they introduce the phenomenon of dance improvisation and instant composition (real-time choreography). In the first part, they introduced to the Czech readers (in Czech) for the first time the context and historical development of this artistic discipline. In the second part, they focus on how the postmodern stage format of instant composition progressed onto the Czechoslovakian and later the Czech artistic scene in the 1990s and 2000s. Through a concrete selection of individual Czech and Slovakian artists, companies and performances, projects and festivals, the authors map the Czech context and how this discipline was developed and how it is understood. This study brings for the first time in the Czech context an overview of key players of dance improvisation. The authors attempt to join the international dialogue in the field and suggest further possibilities for research.

**Keywords:** postmodern dance – instant composition – real-time choreography – dance improvisation – contemporary dance – contact improvisation – Czech dance – Min Tanaka – Next Wave – 4 Days in Motion – Julyen Hamilton – ImproEvents Prague – Studio Alta – festival Confrontation – CreWcollective – Eli a kol. – Festival Tanec Praha

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