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A response to a reader regarding Myths to Break Down - Contact Improvisation Blog

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7-9 minutes

Hi Readers!

In response to my post, "[Myths to Break Down: Moving Toward Ethical Communication and Ethical Sexuality in CI](#)," a reader asked what I felt was an excellent question. Because the conversation deserved greater visibility, I'm writing my response as a separate post.

Because I can't physically see/feel/dance/discuss the issue on a personal level, my interpretations may not reflect the reader's experience. Please read my responses to questions or requests for feedback as criticisms inspired by the question, and not as directly about the reader.

Also, I apologize for the delay in answering, but I wanted to take time to sort through the many layers of these complex subjects.

I sincerely appreciate your patience and, above all, your continued engagement.

I've provided below a brief excerpt from Ryan's comment, but it's definitely worth checking out the [entire comment, as well as the other thoughtful comments!](#)

Happy reading, respectful dancing!

-Sarah

Excerpt from Ryan's post:

1) We were talking around the issues in myth #2- not specifically in regards to massage after a dance, but what another dancer described as "extraneous touch" during a dance: this she described as any touch in a dance that communicates emotional connection or draws attention to sensation, as opposed to touch that communicates weight, resistance, or facilitates pathways of movement.

I had the realization that as of late I personally seek out opportunities for this "extraneous touch" in my dances- e.g. touching the scalp, hands, feet in a gentle way- because I have found that it leads to the most engaging, softened, tuned-in dances. However, It was pointed out to me that just because this type of touch generally produces positive experiences for me, that I cannot assume this is true of my dance partners. This is certainly true!

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|. . . I would love to hear feedback about this.

To Ryan and other Readers,

I want to address your question about “extraneous touch.”

I appreciate your bringing this up. I strongly believe that *because* Contact Improv generates so much possibility for intimacy, and *because* so many people have different desires that influence how they dance, we need to meet the grey areas and tricky places with *more* attention and earnest commitment to understanding how our actions impact others.

Your question to me feels two-fold: on one hand you are raising the subject of whether or not it is okay to enter into a dance with a pre-meditated desire for an “engaging, softened, tuned-in” experience... which I’m going to go ahead and call intimacy. On the other hand, you seem to ask if introducing this kind of touch is an ethical strategy for achieving this intimacy.

Is it okay to seek intimate dances?

As you mention in your post, having any sort of agenda or intention to steer a dance toward a particular end, can impose on dance partners, whether seeking a “tuned-in” quality, or something more obvious like lifts and tricks.

That said, is it even possible to be free of internal motivations (conscious or unconscious)?

It’s my opinion that if we are open to feedback from partners, it’s not necessarily wrong to be honest with ourselves about what kind of dance we most enjoy.

That said, it’s important to be:

- a) aware that a carried agenda can create pressure for others, and
- b) willing to consider how that agenda may imply added responsibilities for you.

For example, if your agenda is to have athletic dances, this comes with an inherent responsibility to have an appropriate level of skill and control over your own weight to be safe.

Our responsibilities necessarily come from the kinds of risks involved.

In the case of intimate dances, we risk sexual or emotional transgressions, even unintentionally.

In short, I think that leading a dance in the direction of intimacy isn’t necessarily bad, but it implies an inherent responsibility to take extra care about consent and non-coercive behavior.

Is it okay to elicit vulnerability through touch?

This brings me to the second part of your question, which I interpret to be: Is this kind of “extraneous touch” an ethical way to achieve intimacy in a dance?

The “extraneous touch” you describe (“touching the scalp, hands, feet in a gentle way”) to me sounds like using touch cues to lower physiological defenses.

There is a lot to unpack about this.

On one hand, lowered defenses can lead to connection, trust, bonding, and profound levels of communication in a dance.

On the other hand, they can produce heightened levels of vulnerability for your partner.

I think it's very important to ask oneself whether one is making the assumption that their partner desires or welcomes being vulnerable.

Speaking from personal experience, there are many reasons why I might feel rightfully defensive in a CI space, and thus uninterested in vulnerability. Touch cues targeted at lowering my defense mechanisms (physical, emotional, spiritual, etc.) may in fact feel invasive, or dismissive to my right to be guarded in a dance.

Personally, I feel that my nervous system will naturally adapt toward an appropriate level of trust with a partner throughout a dance, *without* receiving "extraneous" touch.

However, if you personally enjoy receiving touch that lowers defense mechanisms, and therefore want to include this ingredient in your dances, I don't think it's inherently wrong to do so. But I do think that it's important to take into account the inherent risks and responsibilities associated with eliciting vulnerability in your partner.

I suggest considering the following factors:

- Your partner simply may not want to feel vulnerable
- If vulnerability leads to heightened levels of intimacy your partner may not have the skills, confidence, or adequate power in the situation to shift the dynamic if that intimacy is undesired (especially true for beginners), and
- Power imbalances related to gender, race, ability, age, familiarity with the form or the particular community, etc. affect communication even despite your best efforts to remain open to negotiation within a dance.

Another important point is that introducing touch aimed to produce vulnerability, tenderness, or intimacy could be part of grooming behavior or coercion. If slowly introduced over the course of a dance (or over the course of many dances over a span of time) this kind of touch could be setting the stage for romantic or sexual feelings. Your dance partner may not be aware that this is happening in real time but later feel taken advantage of. This is a complex subject for another post!

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In summation I would say that the desire to use "extraneous touch" in order to achieve "tuned-in" dances isn't necessarily wrong, but does come with inherent risks and is therefore worth analyzing in the context of each dance. It is important to consider a) how having any agenda in CI can impose to dance partners and may come with added responsibilities, and b) how intimacy within a dance creates added vulnerability, which may be undesired or a factor in unequal power dynamics.

I absolutely agree with you Ryan, that CI could be "a profoundly fertile space

for....responsibility.” This includes responsibility towards ourselves, each other, and the larger social context.

Thanks for sharing your experience and your questions!

Happy Reading, Respectful Dancing,

Sarah