

On Stage: Improvising Through Dance and Life

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We often say that the world is connected by six degrees of separation. But the dance world, so familial, has to be half of that.

Over the past few years, we've become more acquainted with Gia Cacalano, who has brought her improv skills to the forefront, much to our delight. She has spoken about her brother, [Vincent](#), and will finally bring him here this weekend for *BLINK* at the [Wood Street Galleries](#) for an evening of improvisation with guest artists, musicians and HC Gilje's light installation, *in transit*.

But there's more. As it turns out, Vincent has worked extensively with another improv great, Michael Schumacher, who will be in town next week for the Pittsburgh Dance Council presentation of *Last Touch First*, a project created by Michael with iconic contemporary choreographer Jiri Kylian.

Small world, indeed. It turns that the pair are good friends and have worked together extensively at [Magpie Music Dance Company](#), based in the Netherlands and a cult favorite in Europe. FYI: The group was founded by [Katie Duck](#) and, to put things in perspective, American dancer Steve Paxton, founding father of contact improvisation, often worked with the artists in the collective.

As Vincent puts it, "Improvisation in a Magpie performance is not the antithesis of choreography or composition; it is how the choreography's and compositions are made, out of practice both in the studio setting and the newness of real time improvised performance. A Magpie performance is about the experience of being there, you are participating in the event and thus, in a sense, the work."

But how did this Virginia boy, a former gymnast who had some ballet studies but was far more interested in studying theater at the college level, make his way into the farthest reaches of dance?

It turned out that he was an arts adventurer. The theater program at Virginia Commonwealth was more play-based — it wasn't about making work. During college breaks, Vincent would join Gia, three years older, in New York where she was studying, and had exposure there to the acclaimed experimental theater company, The Wooster Group, founded by artists like actor Willem DeFoe and monologist Spalding Gray.

So Vincent began to make his own work back at VCU, using movement and text. When he showed at a local gallery, the dance people attended, pointing out how it looked like choreography.

He was already taking Laban and had assembled quite a few dance credits, including a ballet class, just for fun. So the young would-be actor “naturally gravitated” into becoming a dance major. During college breaks in NYC, he studied with [Alwin Nikolais](#) and [Erick Hawkins](#) and performed in a piece by Meg Harper, who was running the Cunningham studio.

Vincent did his first real improvisation, though, with Alwin Nikolais, who designed specific improvisations for performance goals, rather than just an exploration in the studio. “It was the first time I saw it not as a method to make choreography, but as a way within itself,” he recalls. “I remember it very, very distinctly.”

He decided to pursue his masters degree at George Washington University, emphasizing composition and body-movement and alignment theory. While there, Vincent had the occasion to tour with a local company to Germany and the Netherlands.

At a festival in the Netherlands, he met students from the School for New Dance Development. As he recalls, “I liked their work very much and they liked what I was up to.” The enterprising students suggested an exchange program. While in Amsterdam, Vincent met Katie Duck, but returned to finish his degree.

Another colleague informed him that there was a teaching position open at the School, so he headed back to Amsterdam and taught an audition class and got the job. He renewed his friendship with Katy and along with Michael Schumacher and some other artists, founded Magpie.

It grew to a loosely-organized company of 16 improvisers — eight dancers and eight musicians within the space of a decade, from 1995-2000. During that time the group was instrumental in bringing a renewed respect for the art form. But the members then decided to give each other some space to develop personal projects and Magpie became an umbrella organization. Vincent decided that he would accept a position at The Manchester Metropolitan University in England where he could work in an interdisciplinary setting.

But there are signs that Katie is re-organizing Magpie and certainly

she and Vincent remain close. In the meantime he is looking forward to bringing his skills to the Pittsburgh dance turf.

He's "really excited" about *BLINK*, particularly in coordinating the "movement of light in relationship to our movement. It's like working with another dancer and it will really play off and with the other dancers and musicians. It kind of reminds me of Nikolais...fascinating."

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