

Inside and Out of Practice

Vincent Cacialano

Magpie Music Dance Company, founded in Amsterdam 1995-2005 was spearheaded by Katie Duck and co-founded by several of its original members. Some of the performers involved in the project were Vincent Cacialano, Vitor Garcia, Masako Naguchi, Sharon Smith, Martin Sonderkamp, Eileen Stanley, Michael Schumacher, and musicians Michael Vatcher and Mary Oliver, with lighting designer Ellen Knops. kateduck.com

Magpie's beginnings were motivated by its founding group members, who were lecturers or former students at the School for New Dance Development (SNDO) in Amsterdam. The School, with its rich history in the study and practice of improvisation, had specific connections to the American Judson Church movement, but the improvised work coming out of the school was largely isolated in a community of dancers specializing in contact improvisation and improvisation methods. In Amsterdam, within the larger context of contemporary dance, improvisation as an explicit choreographic approach was underdeveloped. kateduck.com

A foment of artistic exploration at SNDO played a key role in Magpie's work. It occurred during the period when Trude Cone and Ria Higler were the artistic leaders. At that time, the SNDO was developing a Body-Mind Centering- inspired pedagogy that supported somatic-studies studentship as well as the nature of artistic questioning, in which every individual Magpie group-member was invested. During Magpie's formative years, Cone's pedagogical approach, with her knowledge of Body-Mind Centering principles, offered some Magpie members a practical language framework for discussing movement quality and performance presence. BMC terms and ways of understanding and describing movement were used within the eclectic pool of dance descriptors.

One could imagine describing movement almost entirely through language that referenced the material of the body itself. Utilizing Cone's research, this language added specific detail to the already developing approaches to movement analysis being used by group members at that time, such as dance kinesiology, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, and Laban-Effort-Shape. In addition, language akin to Laban-Bartenieff work utilized words such as "indirect," "light," and "strong," to explain movement qualities. Magpie's studio practice expanded further for me through these modalities and through the influence of working alongside and studying with Trude Cone.

During this time, Magpie's studio and performance processes remained in dialogue with BMC terms for several group members, adding ideas, enticing the imagination, and expanding ways to understand the physical phenomena

occurring when dancing. When analyzing or describing an indirect movement quality or indirectness in performance presence, a dancer could consider the physical attributes and role of bodily systems, incorporating language such as synovial fluid, lymph, and cerebrospinal fluid. This is only one example, but this exchange of ideas, approaches, and language was common both in Magpie and the SNDO.

As well as developing strategies for analyzing their dance, the members of the group were also interested in something very different from what was being offered in theaters at that time. Ideas about performance work were seen in the choice not to pre-set materials in time, to abandon the role of the choreographer, and to work without themes or narratives. Nevertheless, the amalgamation of dancers and musicians, with backgrounds and training as varied as classical dance to new dance to live art, rehearsed regularly, which helped define the very specific traits of the group without positioning improvisation as a specific performance genre.

From the onset, the work set up in rehearsal not only focused on the performers and how they interacted with each other, but also helped the performers work to create improvised choreography that integrated the public or gathered-crowd. When a public is present they are participating in the work. Because the work is not pre-set, the public's presence has a very clear role in the way it can influence the work. The performers of Magpie worked specifically with the way a public could influence and change the development of a composition and its content. Magpie interacted directly with the audience without delivering a pre-set text or speech, often asking the public questions, dancing with the public, stealing things, or otherwise engaging spectators not just as watchers, but also as participants in the choreography.

The members of Magpie also discussed notions of the way a space feels with a gathered-crowd and how performers could influence this spatial relationship. This dialogic process recalls the BMC-phrase "changing the mind of the room." Performers develop structure in dialogue with the audience and within the space and time of a previously unknown composition and performance.

Coming from diverse backgrounds, the various members of Magpie were able to meet within the very specific context of the School for New Dance Development. This acted as a base-environment that was, since the school's foundation, clearly invested in questioning some of the traditional compositional and choreographic methods seen previously in dance, both in ballet and modern dance. This line of questioning was something that the initial members of Magpie all shared. And it is a line of questioning that had been firmly established in experimental dance since the Judson church movement in New York and since the development of notions of post-modernity in American dance.

In their performances, Magpie does not aim to replicate the content or materials from their rehearsals; they use structural tools to help them work cohesively.

Some of these tools are the same that a choreographer would use to make a fixed or pre-set dance; however, in a Magpie performance the dancers are also the choreographers, as noted, doing both jobs simultaneously. The tools are modified to address those specific demands. The tools include design, time, timing, space, spacing, and presence. In order to work cohesively, the members of Magpie felt it necessary to acknowledge that their concerns while performing needed to be primarily of a choreographic or compositional nature in order to achieve their goal of choreographic improvisation.

The exercises, frameworks, and language that Katie Duck proposed in rehearsal set the stage for the development of much of Magpie's subsequent work. It was a basis for the group's development. Duck also worked individually with group members, discussing performance and dance from her research perspective. These meetings were crucial to targeting the key issues of concern, which Duck's research had uncovered and to making transparent the research questions to be answered through Magpie's practice. This question was simply how to develop choreography for an audience using improvisation as the method.

Both Duck and Cone were questioning existing processes in dance-making and education. The reinvigorated energy in a European context that evolved from the momentum of the Judson Church movement was palpable at the SNDO during the time of this BMC-inspired pedagogical approach. SNDO offered Magpie Dancers a challenging and supportive place to develop their work. This was a place for the dancers present at that time to consider, within a critical and questioning atmosphere, how to proceed from previous dance developments.

Magpie was current; it was working in a context where dance performance could be discussed through languages that were expanding and developing through the continuous evolution of somatic research and improvisation. Magpie was working to embody and capture movement quality in time and in phrasing, with the desire to illustrate subtle detail, within the spontaneous moment of improvised performance. The BMC-inspired pedagogy and research of Trude Cone helped give some language to articulate and make bodily-manifest that, which is felt in the moment of dancing. Therefore, the group pioneered the use of nouns at times to further illustrate that, which had previously been described primarily adjectively.

Through improvisation in Dance and Music, a commitment to question established modes of presenting dance inspired from the Judson Church Movement and through the integration of some Body-Mind Centering principles — Magpie evolved a specific language, acknowledging individual stylistic performance differences that became understood as expressions basic to the human body. Engaging in movement through the language of body-based systems allows the dancer to understand that movement quality is not acted any more than movement mechanics are. It is the body expressed through the system that creates and supports the movement: the what, the how, and the who,

through which our bodies understand our selves and through which our bodies and their bodily systems are tapped in moments of performance.

“Body-Mind Centering...taught me the link between the use and training of the body and the responses and involvement of the person. During this time, we redefined New Dance as an approach that accesses all parts of the self and that each part acts as a guide for new movement material and constructions for dance performance. (Cone, 2008: 23)”

