

The Newcomer Experience in Contact Dance Improvisation by Kathleen Rea

January 2, 2018



It is Frank's first-time dancing with Rose. Rose is a newcomer to contact dance improvisation, while Frank is an experienced dancer and has been attending jams for many years. He easily takes Rose into aerial lifts, and the dance is proceeding in a sensual direction. Frank is thinking, "Oh, *yeah!*". He finds Rose beautiful and wonders if she might like to hang out after the jam. What do you think Frank should do?

As a contact dance improvisation facilitator, I am pro consensual high-flying lifts and pro consensual contact dances that explore different themes, such as intimacy and sensuality. In life outside of dance, I am pro-consensual sex. These are all great and wonderful things. If Frank agrees with me, and his

goal is to do these things with enthusiastic consent, then it is essential that he educate himself about situations where consent can be confusing.

Enthusiastic consent is an enthusiastic “yes” that involves proactive communication and mutual excitement or eagerness to do the proposed activity. If you would like to see an example of enthusiastic consent, watch this excerpt from a Pop Culture Detective Video that shows an instance in which Disney got it right. Although Disney still has lots of work to do on opening up gender roles, this is a clear example of enthusiastic consent: https://youtu.be/QJ9OvkB_5s0

One of the things I like about this example is it demonstrates that enthusiastic consent is not a perfect streamlined process. There is a moment when he scoops the women up into a lift and, she has a startle response. He notices and stops and checks-in with her. Enthusiastic consent is an ongoing process that has its bumps and awkward moments.

There are many ways newcomers (of all different genders) might have an impaired ability to assert their boundaries and might be confused about what jamming. This can confuse the process of consent on and off the dance floor.

A newcomer might:

- **lack knowledge of what contact dance improvisation is.**

Newcomers often enter a jam not knowing what the form involves. If they or their partner stretch the bounds of the form, they are not even aware this is occurring because they have yet to understand the form completely. For example, a newcomer attending their first contact dance jam might look at people rolling on the floor together, and assume it's all about sex, and then have their first couple of dances with this misconception leading the way. Thus, newcomers may lead or be easily lead into dances that stretch the bounds of the dance form or of the boundaries of the specific jam they are attending.

- **not be able to say “No” to a request to dance.** Newcomers may not know they can say “no”. They may lack the language (both verbal and non-verbal) with which to decline a dance. They may also lack the practice in doing so.
- **not yet be able to redirect a dance or say “No” to something occurring in a dance.** Newcomers may lack knowledge that they can have a say in the direction of the dance. They may lack the language (both verbal and non-verbal) with which to redirect a dance. They may lack the practice in doing so.
- **not yet able to end a dance.** Newcomers may lack knowledge on when or how to end a dance. They may lack the language (both verbal and non-verbal) with which to end a dance. They may also lack the practice in doing so.
- **not yet understand the CI principle of not taking meaning from a dance into everyday life.** They may think what occurs on the dance floor will be expected by their partners off the dance floor.
- **enter into an altered state of consciousness.** An altered state of consciousness occurs when someone enters a mental state in which their mind can be aware but is not in its usual normal waking state. This can occur for newcomers to contact dance improvisation when:
 - a) **oxytocin and endorphin “high”** occurs due to a combination of the level of touch and exercise-exertion involved in the practice.
 - b) **strong emotion or memories are triggered.**
 - c) **high level of vestibular input overwhelms someone.** With so much incoming stimuli their brain/body might hit the point of overload. This can cause blissed-out altered state but can also cause disorientation and even nausea.

d) **they are not yet able to organize experience.** They might not yet have a psychological “box” or “container” or “organizing system” in their psyche to place experience in, and this can be disorientating. Experienced contact dancers also can experience altered states but frequently the newcomer might be less practiced in managing an altered state.

- **associate touch with sex.** If the only touch in their adult lives has been romantic touch, they may associate touch with sex. They may not have acclimatized themselves to the range of sensual-to-platonic touch that occurs at a jam. In their first weeks of jamming, they might be easily lead, or even lead their partners, into dances that have sexualized front energy without understanding why this is occurring and without knowing how to redirect or end such dances if they feel uncomfortable.
- **have a startle response during a dance which can be miss read and make them, easy to lift.** We all have a startle reflex that involves a quick arching and stiffening of the back combined with throwing the head backward. For example, if you pop a balloon unannounced behind someone their back will reflexively “jump”. A newcomer’s nervous system might be on high alert due to all the new sensations and experiences they are having. When someone moves to take them into an over-the-shoulder lift, they may startle. The jerk of their head and that fact that their body stiffens can make them very easy to lift. The confusing thing about this is that the startle reflex is very similar to the non-verbal cueing one would do in saying “yes” to a shoulder lift. If someone moves to scoop me into a lift, I can consent to this lift non-verbally by arching back, adding tone to my body and tossing my leg into the air. Both reactions look similar on the outside but are very different on the inside. One is a “yes” to being lifted. The other is a nervous system alarm bell going off. Gaining experience over time can reduce this

reflexive nervous system response. As well, through practice, someone can learn to “wet noodle” (release muscle tone and become floppy) or move down to the floor as a way to non-verbally say “no” to a proposed lift. A person skilled in picking up nonverbal cues can tell the difference between a startle reflex and “yes-lift-me” body language. A startle happens with an involuntary jerk backward accompanied by a look of fright and “yes-lift-me” involves a smooth and strong engagement into being lifted.

- **Experience a power imbalance that can occur between the newcomer and more senior dancer.** It is a well-understood phenomenon that when romantic relationships occur within a power imbalance, there is a risk that the person with less power may feel a reduced ability to enforce boundaries. The lines that separate what is okay from what is not okay can become blurry. For these reasons, relationships with power imbalances have a higher risk of leading to hurt and even abuse. In the contact dance improvisation communities, I have seen this phenomenon not just occur within romantic relationships but occur within dances. The imbalance of power between the newcomer and a more experienced dancer that can blur the process of putting up boundaries and building consent on and off the dance floor. If the experienced dancer is afforded societal privileges due to income bracket, race, gender, leadership role in the community, the newcomer/senior-dancer power imbalance can be even more acute.

Granted, all newcomers come to their first jam with a wide range of background experiences. If, for example, newcomers enter into contact dance improvisation from a background that involves ecstatic dance, martial arts, BDSM, kink or polyamory or some other relational experience it is possible they may arrive with some knowledge, skills and confidence that carries over into contact dance improvisation. If so, they may arrive at their first jam with

only a few, of the above scenarios. Or the situations may be present in a milder form. However, many newcomers with or without such previous experience arrive at their first jam with many or all of the above scenarios in their most acute form. Every-day living in many cultures does not supply people with the skills needed to navigate their first contact dance improvisation experience from an empowered place. The good news is that acute versions of the above scenarios tend to resolve themselves as the newcomer learns about the dance form and the different ways to assert their boundaries. From my experience, this usually takes about three months of regular attendance, but can take a shorter or longer time depending on the individual. Also, it is important to mention that these scenarios sometimes never fully go away. For instance, I will over my jamming lifetime continue to work on my boundary-setting language. Thus, even the most senior dancer is likely to be still working on resolving some of these scenarios. This can be part of the joy and challenge of the dance form.

So let's look at how Rose's story might play out.

As their dance begins, Rose starts touching Frank with the front of her hands. She does this because, in her adult life, touch has only ever been two things: romantic or massage related. In both these activities, the front of the hand is the main form of touch. Rose moves to this because it is the only touch "road" she knows and because she has not yet learned about rolling-point of contact. She is not trying to initiate a sensual dance with Frank but inadvertently does so because of her touch associations. She does not feel comfortable with the sensual nature of their dance but does not know how to redirect or end the dance. Rose is also in an altered state due to the high level of oxytocin and endorphin neurotransmitters her body is creating in response to the touch and physical exertion involved their dance. She is also feeling disoriented from rolling around on the ground and being turned upside down. She is not able to understand or organise her dance with Frank

using her usual psychological strategies. She questions, “What is this that we’re doing? What does it mean?”, and has no clear answers. In this state of overwhelm, her nervous system is on high alert and she startles the first time Frank moves to scoop her up onto his shoulders. Frank reads the jerk of her head back into his arms as a green-light to carry through with the lift. Frank finds her easy to lift because her startle-reflex has added tone to her torso. The first lift and the subsequent lifts are frightening for Rose, but she does not know that she can end the dance or say “no” to being lifted. She’s taking her cues from the more experienced person. During one of the lifts, a muscle in her back goes into spasm. Despite the pain, she continues with the dance because she still does not understand that she can end the dance. The dance goes on for another twenty minutes and finally ends when Frank needs a drink of water. Rose is not familiar with the general understanding that dancers do not extend meaning from a dance into life off the dance floor. She is confused because she feels that, by the nature of the dance, Frank might think she wants to have sex with him. Rose has felt disempowered throughout the dance. She felt she did not have a choice about being lifted or the nature of their dance or the length of their dance. From this disempowered place she is nervous that Frank might ask her out. She feels confused about what the expectations might be and about how she should respond if he does ask her out. She goes home that night, and while taking a hot bath to help soothe her back-spasm, she bursts into tears and is not even sure why she is crying.

From hearing Rose’s side of the story, and understanding the different scenarios a newcomer might arrive with, do you think it’s reasonable to expect Rose at her first jam can assert her boundaries, or give enthusiastic consent, to:

- acrobatic lifts?
- dances exploring sensuality?
- invitations to carry the sensuality of the dance into the bedroom?

I think the answer is no. I believe she will not be able to offer clear consent to these things until she has acclimatized herself to jam culture and picked up some contact dance improvisation boundary-setting skills. The idea that there are vulnerable individuals goes against the well-known tenet of contact dance improvisation that: *we are all responsible for our own safety*. This tenet gives people the freedom to be, knowing that we each take responsibility to protect ourselves both physically and emotionally. For a large segment of the experienced contact dance improvisation population, this approach works out well. But how does this tenet work out for the average newbie in the room who may not yet have the skill, knowledge, practice, vocabulary (verbal and non-verbal) or state of mind with which to be in charge of their own safety? I believe it is like throwing children into the water to teach them to swim. It works great for some, but many people drown. This attitude often acts like some sort of unspoken initiation ritual. We can convince ourselves that this works out okay, since the ones that are traumatized physically or emotionally at their first jam usually never come back and we don't ever hear from them. So we don't have to think about them. They are invisible to us, and so it can be easy to underestimate the magnitude of issues that newcomers face. We reassure ourselves that these people just "didn't have what it takes" to be part of our jam community.

I was shocked after I wrote my *#metoo* post on Facebook, which told the story of some boundary challenges I faced in the contact improvisation world. Out of some 150 responses to the post, almost 30 of them were people who told me that they came to a jam once and were so traumatized (physically or emotionally) that they never came back. The Me Too movement had given this group of people a voice that I could hear and made me realize the magnitude of the newcomer issue. For some people, the art of contact dance itself is traumatizing, similar to the way even the most well-administered style of psychotherapy can traumatize a client because it is not the right fit for

them. For some people, the amount of touch they receive from a stranger or the fact that they are rolling on the floor may not suit them and can leave them with a feeling of never wanting to come back. I do however believe there is a large segment of newcomers for whom contact dance improvisation would suit them, but they have such a traumatizing entrance into our community that we lose them. Or else they stick around but have painful stories to tell.

Now in our story, Frank is *not* some insensitive asshole who is out to abuse Rose. He is probably a well-meaning guy who just does not understand the different scenarios facing a beginner arriving at a jam. In fact, he might even have been using a motto of “safety can be found in following where my partner wants to go” as a way to keep his dance with Rose consensual. While this motto can work well with an experienced dancer, it falls short with newcomers. As we’ve seen, a newcomer might not know enough about the dance form to lead or redirect people where they want.

On the darker side, I want to tell the story of someone attending the jam with the intention to find a sex partner and who is well practiced in using persuasive methods to do so. This is often referred to as “cruising”, and is more consistent with nightclub culture. It is something that many jams do not tolerate. Let’s say this Looking-For-Sex-Person arrives and scopes out the room to see who is the most likely person to give them what they want. They see Rose at the end of the studio, and from her body language and look in her eyes they think, “Yes, there is my target”. This person tends to target young newcomers because their lack of know-how about the dance form often makes them more pliable. They ask Rose to dance and easily lead her into a very sensual dance because of the touch associations she has arrived with. Throughout the dance, they work to establish their power over Rose by being in charge of the dance and moving her body around at will. Rose feels very uncomfortable but does know how to redirect or end the dance. Looking-For-

Sex-Person dances with Rose for 45 minutes until the jam ends. Rose is now in an altered state caused by more touch than she is used to. She also has a feeling that her boundaries were crossed but she can't quite figure out why she feels this way. Looking-For-Sex-Person then asks Rose to come over to their place after the jam. They see she is uncertain about how to respond. Eager to have sex with her, they move to persuasive techniques to help ensure she will say yes. They undermine her confidence by telling her that her hesitation represents a flaw in her ability to connect with people. They explain how they could sense her inability to trust from the hesitation she had when they lifted her. They explain that, as someone very experienced in contact improvisation, they can easily help her get over her fear of trusting people. They offer her lessons at their private home studio.

The predator techniques used in this example combined with Rose's newcomer status can make it very challenging for Rose to assert her boundaries effectively or even figure out what she wants. Please note that if this situation, or something similar, ever happens to you at a jam, tell the jam facilitator immediately. In most jams predatory behaviour is not tolerated.

Now at this moment, you might think this doesn't happen in your CI community. I sincerely hope that you are right. I also want you to consider for a moment that unearthing this type of behaviour in your community might be too painful to acknowledge. Possibly, you need to believe that your contact improvisation community is a just and fair place that is able to stand above rape culture, might outweigh your ability to see the truth. One way to figure out if this is happening in your community is to start talking with people. Have them read this article and ask if any part speaks to what their newcomer experience was like. If so, maybe ask them in what ways these scenarios played out. Also, keep in mind that these are the people who stuck it out. The voices that will be missing are the ones who left after their first few jams and never came back. From the stories you hear, you can start to imagine what

these lost voices might say.

So what do we do to give newcomers a better chance at making it through their newcomer status without trauma (or at least less trauma) and with a sense that they want to stay engaged with our community if they so choose? We can never make the experience perfectly safe, but could we do better?

There are several avenues through which this issue can be addressed:

1) **education the community** – educate the community about possible newcomer scenarios and give guidance as to how to dance with a newcomer.

3) **educate newcomers** – newcomers receive information that gives them some know-how and skills in taking care of their own emotional and physical safety at a jam:

a) hand-out

b) video

c) tutorial

4) **designate dance ambassadors** – dancers trained in dancing with newcomers are at each jam.

5) **jam facilitator** – keeps an eye out for troubling newcomer issues, and offers support to newcomers.

5) **other ideas?** – I would love to hear from you about other possibilities. Please feel free to add your own ideas in the comments or send me resources.

It's common that jams worldwide are run by volunteers or low-wage administrators and there is little extra money for resources. The cheapest thing, time-wise and money-wise is to do nothing about the newcomer issue. All of the above takes time and thought. For example, to train, hire and schedule dance ambassadors to be at every jam is a big job. A person taking

on such a job, with limited resources, risks burnout. So the big question is, what can be done that is both sustainable and effective?

As the facilitator of the Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam I have chosen at the moment to educate and guide my jam population about the newcomer experience and to give information to newcomers through a hand-out that they read before their first jam. Please see below for these resources. This approach is an experiment in progress. I'm not saying it's the right way, it's just the way I am trying at this moment.

Okay, so now for my final story. Let's pretend that after reading this article, Frank uses a time machine to go back in time to redo his first dance with Rose. In this redo, let's also say that Rose watched a video outlining some general community practices and giving her pointers on how to assert her boundaries. This time, right from the start of the dance Frank acknowledges Rose's newcomer status and shows her how to end a dance, letting her know she can end their dance whenever she wants. Frank holds back from taking her into aerial lifts and directs their dance away from the exploration of themes such as sensuality that might be intense and confusing for a beginner. Rose ends the dance after ten minutes and takes time on the side of the studio to watch the jam. While doing so, she starts to sort through her experience and figure what exactly this jamming thing is. Frank is attracted to Rose but understanding the vulnerability of the newcomer experience, he decides to give things time. Rose gradually acclimates herself to jam culture and learns language with which to assert her boundaries. Frank and her start to have dances that explore the theme of sensuality and aerial lifts with enthusiastic consent on both sides. They get to know each other as they hang out in the social scene that occurs after the jam. Eventually Rose invites Frank over to her place and they start dating. When Rose talks about her newcomer experience she says it was scary and at times confusing (that is, not perfectly safe) but she felt that she received the necessary tools and support needed to

make it through. She arrived at a sense of empowerment and became an enthusiastic member of the contact improvisation community.

Okay, let's all take a collective sigh of relief that Rose made it through okay in this final story. Let us also begin the discussion about ways to support newcomers so this outcome is more common.

Resources

Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam Boundary Guidelines

<http://www.reasondetre.com/my%20downloads/RDDP's%20Wed%20Dance%20Jam%20Safe%20Boundaries.pdf>

Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam Newcomer's Tip Sheet

<http://www.reasondetre.com/my%20downloads/CI%20newcomer%20tip%20sheet.pdf>



Author

Kathleen Rea danced with Canada's Ballet Jörgen Canada, National Ballet of Canada & Tiroler Landestheater (Austria). Kathleen has taught at School of Toronto Dance Theatre, York University and Niagara College. She is a faculty member of in the dance department at George Brown College, teaching Contact Dance Improvisation. She has choreographed over 40 dance works and been nominated for five DORA awards. Her film Lapinthrope, co-produced with Alec Kinnear won Gold Award at the Festival Der Nationen (Austria). Kathleen is also a recipient of a K. M. Hunter Choreographic Award

and is a published author (“The Healing Dance”, Charles C. Thomas). She has a Master’s in Expressive Arts Therapy and is a Registered Psychotherapist (CRPO). Recently Kathleen graduated as a Brain Advancement Coach. In January 2015 Kathleen became a candidate teacher of the Axis Syllabus. She is the director of REASON d’etre dance productions who produces the Wednesday Dance Jam, the Contact Dance International Film Festival, and the Moved by Natural Forces Retreat. Recently Kathleen premiered Men’s Circle a dance-theatre play that tells the story of a men’s therapy group. “... *The vulnerability we are often taught to erase in men is fully realized throughout the piece in a variety of gorgeous choreographed modes*”

Bateman Reviews

www.reasondetre.com

www.the-healing-dance.com