

# **“That lady”: The story of what happened when a woman put up a boundary in the contact improv world by Kathleen Rea**

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It's a typical Wednesday night in Toronto. In a third-floor ballroom, some forty people have come to dance together. A bow lifts and settles on cello strings and one can see the bodies absorb the first awaited note. A couple in the corner are intertwined in a rolling dance in which it is hard to figure out whose body is whose. A high-flying trio gracefully makes its way around them. The bodies in this space are engaged in a type of group sensory “listening” that uses all the senses to gauge space and direction of momentum. There are all types of dancers here, from those that dance professionally to those that do it for fun. The ages span nineteen-year-olds to

seventy+, and include diverse body types. There is an equal mix of women and men, not often seen in most other dance scenes. There is every combination of gender-mixing in the couplings and trios. In the groups that fly or roll across the dance floor, both men and women share the job of lifting. It is not just the men who lead—the lead and follow are shared by all in a seamless exchange.

I sigh.

This is the jam I founded and have facilitated for the past nineteen years. Coming from a ballet background, for me it's a utopia of gender equity and freedom of expression. I love this form and I love this jam for which I have been the caretaker.

You should know something about me... I am a fierce caretaker. That is my nature. When I started facilitating the Wednesday Dance Jam, people would come to me with complaints about boundary violations. Right, I thought, I am going to see if I can help them by writing clear guidelines. I did this because I assumed that, for the most part, people were basically good, and that most boundary violations were based on lack of knowledge. That began a nineteen-year process of building the Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam boundary guidelines. There's a link to the latest version of the guidelines at the end of this article, if you would like to take a moment and read them before proceeding. I'll wait.

Recently I wrote a #metoo post in which I discussed the harassment I faced over the past nineteen years in response to these guidelines. Before the post, in my mind, each incident felt separate. It wasn't until I wrote the post that I was shocked to discover it all added up to a pattern of harassment. This was a difficult realization to come to, since for the most part, I saw the contact dance world as a fair and just place.

My guidelines evolved over the years, but have always been very clear and direct in their language and guidance. I have faced both praise and critique for this direct approach. I think one of the reasons they have been controversial is that I leave little room for misinterpretation. In the guidelines, I say things such as, "Do not intentionally caress another dancer on their breasts or genitals", and, "Non-consensual pass-by pokes, kisses, tickles, caresses, massages or pats while dancing or passing by someone in the studio or hallway will not be tolerated". I think this approach was unusual in the contact dance improvisation world. I had said something which is usually not said, and as well I was a woman saying these things. Yes, a woman stood-up and essentially said:

*I just want to dance with a group of people in Wednesday nights in Toronto for an hour and a half and have it clearly understood that my vagina is not to grabbed or caressed. And please as well don't touch me elsewhere unless it is consensual. So, don't come up from behind me when I can't see who you are and tickle the small of my back or give me a massage. I want to dance with a group of people that generally understand these agreements.*

Many years ago, I was asked if my guidelines could be posted as part of a compilation of jam guidelines from around the world. I agreed, not knowing what I was stepping into. Since then, many people in the worldwide contact dance improvisation community have been deeply and passionately offended by my guidelines. People contacted me privately and publicly from all around the world with complaints. These complaints vary, but generally followed these themes:

1. I was taking away people's rights.
2. I was not trusting the form of contact improvisation to hold the space on its own.
3. I was not letting people defend their own boundaries.

4. I was going against the tenet essential to contact dance improvisation that we are free to do what we want with the understanding that each person is responsible for their own safety.
5. I was insulting the attendees by not trusting them.
6. I was going to cause false accusations.
7. By talking about this stuff, I was going to draw focus to it and cause it to happen more.
8. I was letting feminist rhetoric taint the contact dance improvisation world.
9. The way they were written was not fun and thus they were going to take the fun out of the dance.

Surprisingly, given the gender balance in the CI community, I found that these complaints tended to be from men. Although perhaps it was not that surprising. These reactions were sometimes presented aggressively, which frightened me. I did not tend to hear comments from women or people of colour.

One night while I was locking up the studio after a jam, I was approached by two men who were regular attendees of my jam. They angrily told me that I was taking away their freedom to be and that by not trusting people to defend their own boundaries I was undervaluing my community. They scared me with their tone and physical posturing and I had to build up the courage to return to my jam the next week.

At one point I added a note about non-consensual pats and tickles using clear and direct language. Shortly after that, some men at my jam would come up to me from behind and poke me or tickle me. When I turned around, they would be grinning and saying something like, "are you going to kick me out?" They were both making fun of my guidelines and minimizing their importance by touching me in a way I did not like without my consent. I have

since talked with the men who did these things and explained how their actions were inappropriate. Although these incidents were processed with the responsible individuals, they speak of a larger picture of harassment that many women in the contact dance improvisation world have faced when they establish a boundary.

Just the other day, I heard that when a man read the guidelines, he said “what a buzz-kill”. I’m left wondering how many other people have thought a similar thing? What they fail to realize is that for many people, dancing in spaces where they don’t feel safe has been a major “buzz-kill” since the dawn of contact dance improvisation. What they fail to realize is that as long as there are people in a group not feeling safe, it is a buzz-kill for everyone.

I believe we all gain by working towards creating consent-based spaces in which to dance. Many Tantra and BDSM communities know this, and put focus towards building consent-based cultures to hold what they do. From this, they have discovered the boundless joy and freedom that can come from clearly defined boundaries. I told [Kristen Chamberlin](#), a tantra teacher whose work I greatly respect, about the harassment I had faced over my jam’s boundary guidelines. She responded by saying, “In my world, I teach that good boundaries are the doorways into an expansive world of wonder and bliss for which we all long. But that is only if you want to be conscious in your relating. Sloppy boundaries create more room for shadow or unconscious motivations. Clearly, some people do not want to give that up.”

One of the well-known tenets of contact dance improvisation is that we are responsible for our own safety. This gives freedom to be, knowing that we each take responsibility to protect ourselves both physically and emotionally. I think in general it is a great idea that should continue to be promoted. For a large segment of the population, this works out well. It is empowering to learn methods and techniques that puts one in charge of one’s own safety.

This is why, in my boundary guidelines, there is a whole section on how to assert boundaries. I believe it works well for those who are self-assured—who know what they want and do not want, and who are practiced at defending their boundaries. It also works well for those in positions of privilege in our communities for whom defending their boundaries is less affected by potential power imbalances that can occur in relationships.

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 and other types of community relationships. For example, in a student/teacher relationship, the teacher inherently has power over the student. This can sometimes make it hard for the student even to figure out what boundaries they need to assert when the teacher “muscles” them into a complicated lift or pursues them romantically. Power imbalances don’t just happen in the teacher-student relationship but can occur when there is a gap in age, experience level, or level of societal privilege and standing. Sometimes power imbalances are fabricated or elevated through deceit, threats or attempt to undermine someone’s community connections or confidence in themselves or their beliefs. Being on the lower end of power imbalance has been the source of anguish for many men and women in contact improvisation communities worldwide within dances and in their community relationships. In situations where consent becomes blurry due to being on the lower end of a power imbalance, I think the tenet that we each are responsible for protecting our own boundaries falls short. In these cases, guidelines such as the ones I propose can establish expected community norms and offer



education to support people in protecting themselves from abuses of power.

Many of the challenging boundary issues occurring in the Toronto community are with newcomers to the jam. When a young lady comes into the room for her first jam, there is sometimes a lineup of men ready to try her out and throw her around or see how far she will go in terms of sensual expression. This is problematic because the newcomer lacks basic knowledge about jam culture, and this can cause a temporary power imbalance. This imbalance usually resolves itself when the person acclimatizes themselves to the form, but after this initial experience, many don't stick around long enough. Many young women have been so traumatized by this occurrence, they never return. What I want people to understand is that when a more experienced dancer dances with a newcomer, the newcomer might not know how to end a dance or might not know that they can say no to a dance. If someone engages them in a very sexualized dance, they might not know yet that this is not our focus as a classical contact jam. That is why I have all newcomers read through and sign off on the boundary guidelines before dancing. I also use the guidelines as a tool to educate my community about the needs of newcomers. I say, "do not look at a newcomer and think, what can I get from them? Rather, look at the newcomer and think, what can I do to help this person have a good (both emotional and physical) entry into our community?"

With some who disagreed with me, we were able to come to a better understanding after much back-and-forth discussion. In some of these debates, people offered their viewpoint in a respectful and non-threatening manner. There was good that came from the exchanges. Having to explain myself and my intentions brought much clarity for me. To do so I educated myself on consent and the abuses of power that can interfere with consent, and this has been a life changer in helping me understand and name the abuses of power in my past and current life. One man, I have been speaking

with over the past year recently said, "Kathleen I thought you were crazy when you first came out with your boundary guidelines. But now with all this "me too" and Harvey Weinstein stuff, I finally get it and see how your guidelines can be useful."

As I travelled in the contact dance improvisation world, I encountered all sorts of stories people made up about me related to the fact that I was the person who created the Toronto Wednesday Jam Guidelines. Yet, after getting to know me, many people said things to me like, "I'm surprised you're actually a really cool person... after reading your guidelines, I assumed you were really uptight". I realized that many people think that a woman who puts up a boundary is automatically a prude who does not like sex. Recently I was at an event at Earthdance. After I introduced myself, a person said, "oh you're that lady who made up those boundary guidelines". I wondered if I really was famous all around the contact dance improvisation world for being "that lady". You know the one... "that lady" who fought for the right to vote, or "that lady" who ran for office, or "that lady" who said, "let's dance for the next hour-and-a-half and not grab each other genitals." I have come to realize I am "that lady" in a long lineage of others fighting for women's rights.

One frequent complaint about the guidelines is that there is a lack of subtlety. But when defending a boundary, I believe clarity is essential. Direct and plain language helps make things clear. If you are asking or requiring someone to be subtler in asserting a boundary, I think you should pause for a moment and do some inner reflection. Why are you asking the person putting up the boundary to take care of *you* by saying it in a softer or more indirect way?

Groups with a lot of diversity tend to communicate in a more obvious manner. Words and phrasing are chosen to have the best chance of being understood by a diverse group. On the other hand, communities with less



cultural diversity often develop wording and phrasing that is subtle, with multiple meanings that are only understood with a shared cultural perspective. Canada's identity is based on multiculturalism. The city of Toronto is incredibly diverse. The Toronto CI community, while tending to be very white like many contact dance improvisation communities, has more diversity than many jam communities. It makes sense to me that there might be a Canadian jam that uses more direct language than is usually common. Also, in any given group there are likely people on the autism spectrum for whom clear and obvious language about the expected social norms is really helpful. This can relieve their social anxiety as they no longer must face anxiety or miscommunication that tends to occur when they misread a social situation. For me, accessibility is about creating guidance that a diverse group of people can understand and use.

I think another reason people have been upset about my boundary guidelines is they believe I am trying to write a prescription for the entire contact dance improvisation world. In fact, however, I would be upset if the Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam guidelines became global guidelines. I am happy when other jams offer different guidelines and ways to build consent based cultures. I believe that every group needs different guidelines to suit the nature of their jam and the culture their jam occurs in. Also, my way is just one way and it is not infallible. In Toronto, we have had issues with sexual predators. What the guidelines have done, I believe, is create a cultural understanding of expected behaviours. When transgressions do happen, I am able to use the guidelines to show people where trust has been broken. I am very interested in hearing how other communities deal with these issues.

I understand many of the reasons why my guidelines have triggered people and why I have faced misconceptions, judgments and aggression. But even so, I am mystified by how one jam that runs for an hour and a half every Wednesday night in Toronto, Canada could upset people so much! I even had

several people from overseas contact me expressing anger over something occurring halfway across the world from them. What I realized is that I had struck and unearthed a deep a chord of misogyny that many of us in the contact improvisation world have trouble even naming or beginning to talk about. I believe that many in the contact improvisation world suffer from a “just world” belief. In this phenomenon, a person’s need to believe that their world is a just and fair place overrides their ability to see the truth. Many want to believe that somehow the contact improvisation world is a just and fair place that is able to step above rape culture and misogyny. When someone with a “just world” view of contact dance improvisation reads my guidelines, they can seem silly and unnecessary. The belief that they might be needed can even be frightening. If they start to feel the guidelines might be needed, then their view of the contact improvisation world as a just place will crumble into disorienting uncertainty and pain. When this happens, they may need to look back at their past and reinterpret their lives, which can be a painful endeavour. I understand the pain of this process well, having passed through it myself.

In this article, I could start to unpack the possible gender issues involved in people’s aggression and/or discomfort towards me and their assumptions about me in relation to these boundary guidelines, but I am not going to do that because I want you to do this work on your own. If what I say in my guidelines causes a big reaction in you, I offer that it is your job to take a breath and do some inner reflection. Yes, your reaction could be based on the fact that you just don’t like the wording or tone of the guidelines. But I ask that you question what percentage of your reaction is due to sexism or internalised sexism. Our contact dance improvisation world is not immune to misogyny and if we all can begin the conversation about the ways we might be participating and supporting misogyny we are on the road together. Putting forth these guidelines has felt dangerous and took bravery and courage. I

would be thrilled if this risk takes us all somewhere new, whether you agree with me or not.

Although my guidelines have faced critique over the years, many others offered words of thank-you in a quieter and less public manner. Newcomers have frequently expressed how helpful the guidelines were because they were so confused as to what exactly we were up to. Frequently, seasoned female dancers told me that it was such a relief to be able to focus on dancing because they were spending less time defending against unwanted touch. The support I have received has been strong. A whispered thank you from a woman accompanied by a squeeze to my arm and a certain look in her eyes that told a thousand stories. I have received so much of this type of support over the years. These encounters outnumber the challenging experiences by far. But the thing about the aggression I have faced is that, even though it was the exception, it climbed into my body to create an imprint of fear that lasted long after the person stopped speaking. This has been the case even in instances when a person apologized. Fear lives on in me, and that is the experience of many who have faced harassment.

In finishing, I offer that people think of my guidelines as a score. That for an hour-and-a-half, once a week, a group of people gather in Toronto and use these guidelines as a score or holding container within which to dance. A score for a specific time and place and group of people. A score that supports the practice of classical contact dance improvisation in a consent-based culture. I present it in this way because using restrictions in a score to create a certain atmosphere or feeling in a dance is a well-practised concept in the contact dance improvisation world. I feel I can possibly open a door of understanding by having people think of my jam guidelines as being a score. A score that does as all scores can do... creating a holding container for creativity to flourish. Also, if anyone doesn't like this score, there are other choices in Toronto. There are four other jams, all with different guidelines. I

think this is a wonderful thing! Diverse types of jams are a benefit to our community. I want this type of diversity to be welcome.

I want to take part in creating a culture of consent in the contact dance improvisation world in which it is understood that we can cheer for someone and support them when they put up a boundary. If we can move in this direction it will hopefully put an end to harassment people have faced in the process of asserting their boundaries.

Signing off  
"That Lady"

[Toronto Wednesday Dance Jam Guidelines Link](#)

If this link does not work try

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



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) with a private practice for the past 15 years. 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'être 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 she wrote, directed and choreographed 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

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