

**The Score by Clarinda Mac Low**

*Clarinda Mac Low reflects on dance scores in the second of a series of several writings for CC in 2012, which she has dubbed "The Year of Dance." Mac Low will be presenting 40 Dancers do 40 Dances for the Dancers at Danspace Project this September 2012. The piece is based on The Pronouns: 40 Dances for the Dancers, a series of dance scores by her father, Jackson Mac Low.*

A score takes the self out of the self, jars you away from habit and requires you to problem-solve on the fly. Even if a score is a detailed plan, the self becomes a composition machine, and presence flies out of you in surprising ways. A score gives you a predetermined plan for undermining your usual predetermined pathways. Interpreting instructions is a felicitous combination of creating your own world and listening to something outside yourself. It can create cooperation around a single idea, or it can be a fruitful clash of opposing ideas. It can have gorgeous clarity or it can be a glorious mess. Scores are intimate, approximate, alive.

My thesis in college was titled "Chance Methods and the Pursuit of Freedom in Dance Composition." After an exhaustive analysis of how chance procedures had developed and been used in visual art, writing, music and dance, I turned around and concluded that the next logical step in pursuing freedom was structured improvisation.

*As a philosophy, the use of chance methods can be seen as a step along the path that leads towards presenting a situation of freedom in art. ... It would seem that the ultimate aim of using chance methods would be to train the mind, body and perceptual faculties to be able to think logically and non-causally...independent of any specific guidelines. (1)*

In the thesis, I concluded that improvisation was the next step because "Using performance guidelines in which some of the parameters of the material are undetermined until the moment of performance allows a spontaneous element to enter into the action." A score designated for improvisation explicitly invites multiple interpretations.

After I graduated from college I was lucky enough to stumble on "Music-Dance." Taking place every Saturday morning at PS 122 in New York City, Music-Dance was where the best, brightest and most ornery dance and music improvisers of the day, of many ages, gathered together to make and test out different ways of creating relationships between the performance of sound and the performance of movement. To do this we created a set of instructions—a score. The scores we came up with were simple, clear and often impossible. The intention of carrying out the scores produced some of the most interesting improvisations I've ever witnessed. My personal favorite, and one I still think about as a good template for improvisations of all kinds, started with a duet. As that duet develops, other performers respond to the relationship (what I call the "ghost") that is formed by the duet, and then other performers respond to one of the "ghosts" in one of the relationships going on, and so on.

The pleasure of the interpreter, in any art form, is the pleasure of giving up to a force outside the conscious self. To surrender to being directed. This can be achieved through the strict discipline of exact choreographies (of sound, movement or words) OR it can be achieved by surrendering to the score.\*

Lately I've become involved with working with scores that start as oblique, poetic instructions.

*"You are a flying oyster." Yvonne Meier (2)*

*"First, anybody gives gold cushions or seems to do so while doing something under the conditions of competition..." Jackson Mac Low (3)*

With Meier, the instructions create a poem, inadvertently. With Mac Low the poem becomes an instruction, intentionally.

Meier intends her instructions to be surprises, and seeks the first impulse from the interpreter. The instructions are metaphors, exhorting the interpreter to become a whole bevy of surprising creatures (a mouse in a glue trap, an exploding flower). The instructions are states of being and movement tasks (a sad diagonal, exploding turns that melt into a pitiful puddle). Her scores are kept hidden until the moment of performance. There's no time to carefully construct. It's about the moment, the flash in the brain. As an interpreter, if you work this way for a while you end up becoming very good at creating elaborate plans really fast, and skilled at allowing the first impulse to lead you to the next with few barriers, to make snap judgments on the fly. The results are generally chaotic, wild and occasionally very sweet.

While working with Mac Low's text, *The Pronouns: 40 Dances for the Dancers*, in preparation for a performance at Danspace Project in September, I've been thinking about scores differently. In this case we're interpreting a text, and it's more like working with a play, a text that lives on after the author dies. In this case the original score (written almost 50 years ago) transforms into a new thing, something immanent but mutable. Now that the text stands alone, it is its own living thing. You can have a conversation with it, look at it again and again, and with each time of looking it shifts and changes, and with each person looking it becomes a different text. The plan is made, but the plan can change. Will change.

With the poetic tasks delineated comes a set of decisions—do we play with meaning, do we think about meter and abstraction, do we include one person or many? There are instructions and limitations on how to interpret the text, but not many, so the actual performance is up to the combination of minds interpreting. When we experimented with this piece at Mount Tremper Arts in June 2012, people came up with interpretations that would never have occurred to me. David Thomson (a dancer and choreographer) took each line apart into numbers of syllables; Bobby Previte (a musician and composer) interpreted “coming across serious holes” as digging a grave; “seeing lines” became a soulful balletic movement score for dancer and choreographer Lise Brenner; EJ (poet and father), Lyla (age 11) and Jane (age 5) McAdams came up with “being earth” by standing still with rounded arms on a trampoline.

In the end the *Pronouns* score became a way to create art together through play and experimentation, which, in turn, brought us all closer together as friends and thinkers. The poetry and the parameters elicited active problem-solving and intuitive leaps, a state of serious play that drew the audience into the world we created and spilled over the edges of performance into the performance of “real life.”

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\* I am defining score here broadly as **a situation that's open to interpretation, within given parameters**. Jonathan Burrows, in his *A Choreographer's Handbook*,<sup>(4)</sup> gives a very lucid explanation of how the word “scores” is often used in dance:

*It seems to me that there are two main kinds of approach to the idea of writing a score. In the first kind what is written is a representation of the piece itself, a template which holds within it the detail, in linear time, of what you will eventually see or hear. A classical music score works in this way. In the other kind of score, what is written or thought is a tool for information, image and inspiration, which acts as a source for what you will see, but whose shape may be very different from the final realization. These two approaches can mix. Both can arrive at structure, and both can arrive at strong image, atmosphere and color.*

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*The score represents, in a way, the piece itself, separate from the personality or desires of the performer. This can allow the performer to disappear at times.*

Notes:

(1) Clarinda Mac Low. "Chance Methods and the Pursuit of Freedom in Dance Composition." Thesis project. June, 1987.

(2) Instruction from Yvonne Meier to Clarinda Mac Low, DANCEROULETTE, Feb. 4, 2012

(3) From "19th Dance--Going Under--1 March, 1964" from: *The Pronouns: A Collection of 40 Dances for the Dancers*. Jackson Mac Low ©1979

(4) Jonathan Burrows. *A Choreographer's Handbook*. ©2010 Routledge: NY