

Book Review

I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom

Danielle Goldman
Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010
ISBN 978-0-472-05084-0
174 pages

Reviewed by Pete Williams

While academic studies of improvisation often center on musical forms of improvisation and musicians' conceptions of it, Danielle Goldman's book brings a refreshing look at improvisation from the perspective of dance scholarship and practice. The result is a body-oriented theorization of improvisation, a shift of perspective that could ultimately be applied to music, theatre, comedy, or other performances as embodied practices. Goldman's book is thus an important addition to the literature on the arts, the body, and improvisation, and it successfully combines theoretical considerations of the body with "thick descriptions" of historically contingent body movement and technique, in much the same way as Marta Savigliano's *Tango: The Political Economy of Passion* did with tango and its historical contexts. Such balancing between theory and practice reflects Goldman's own positioning as well: she is assistant professor of the Arts and Dance at the New School in New York and a professional dancer.

To accomplish this crossing of theory and practice, the book explores three main concepts—improvisation, freedom, and constraint—complicating these terms as they appear in the popular imagination and offering new, more flexible definitions. Each chapter presents a historical case study for the new ways of thinking about these terms, paying close attention to how they have been used publicly and then redefining them in light of the historical specificity of improvised dance. Chapter One explores social dancing at mambo clubs in New York in the 1950's; Chapter Two, the improvised social and aesthetic relationships between dancer Barbara Dunn and jazz trumpeter Bill Dixon in the 1960's; Chapter Three, the relationship between Contact Improvisation of the 1960's and 1970's and instruction for civil disobedience during the Civil Rights Movement; and Chapter Four, choreographer Bill T. Jones' complex relationship with technology and authenticity. Each of these chapters presents a test case for Goldman's refiguring of improvisation, freedom, and constraint.

Improvisation might commonly be thought of as the spontaneous expression of an essential or authentic self, a momentary and fleeting act of creation. Goldman rightly calls out jazz studies for sometimes using imprecisely defined conceptions of improvisation that point toward "something good with vaguely political implications," not to mention for nearly always associating improvisation with jazz music, to the exclusion of other improvised practices (2). Goldman instead prefers to conceptualize improvisation as "the sped-up, imaginative, expressive negotiation with constraint" (27). All improvisation, she argues, has some boundaries, whether narrow, broad, defined, or vague; all performers seek to navigate or stretch those boundaries in improvised performance. Furthermore, Goldman argues, skilled improvisation requires preparation, rehearsal, and training, so that the dancer (for instance) can be ready to move in a variety of ways in an ever-shifting landscape and in interaction with other performers. Such preparation also teaches the improviser to see her choices in each moment and to make split-second decisions. Improvisation for Goldman is not a way to gain freedom from structure or to break all boundaries; it is in fact the learned ability to recognize constraints and to explore the possibilities for movement within them. This sense of movement within boundaries is important to her conception of improvisation as a social practice. Improvisation does not provide the practitioner total escape from the boundaries of society, history, style, or context; such an escape is actually impossible and amounts to a fantasy in popular discourse about improvisation. Instead, skilled improvisation helps one see how to move within those bounds, even as the bounds shift and change in the moment. Thus Goldman describes improvisation as "live, urgent, playful, intelligent, spontaneous interactions with constraint" (54). Goldman's model for improvisation as social practice is alive with the dynamic movement of dance performance, but it applies to many types of movement—walking, speaking, acting, or playing an instrument. And it applies to anyone who "moves" through society and interacts with other people and institutions, encountering historical constraints of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, etc.

Redefining improvisation as a practice of freedom within constraints as Goldman does also entails redefining freedom itself as a process instead of a goal. Goldman points to several misuses of "freedom," especially as

it is associated with improvisation. Improvisation in jazz, for instance, is often spoken of as the method one uses “to be free,” to reach a supposedly free space beyond any boundaries. She also points to the problematic conception of freedom in American exceptionalist discourses that are the stock and trade of political rhetoric of the United States. These misuses of the term elide the variety of sometimes contradictory or conflicting ideas about what exactly freedom would look like when it is supposedly achieved. Simplistic notions of freedom as a goal to achieve or an open space at which to arrive only encourage an inflexible position toward change: if only a particular set of restraints can be overcome, then all problems will be solved, as this simplistic position would have it. Such conceptions of freedom discount the many different and historically contingent forms of constraint. One may break “free” from particular constraints based on race, for instance, at a particular time only to discover that those constraints have shifted or mutated rather than disappeared. For Goldman, the most workable and flexible notion of freedom shows it to be an ongoing practice of negotiation, not a fantasized final destination. We should refer to “practices of freedom,” skilled, rehearsed, interactions with and testing of constraints at particular times and places. She borrows the term from Foucault, whose concept underlies her analysis of dance throughout the study. Foucault emphasizes structures that discipline bodies and that are impossible to ignore as realities of history, but, Goldman points out, he also recognizes that improvisation allows for movement within those structures, if not ultimate escape from them.

If improvisation is a practice of freedom within constraints, then those constraints can be considered “tight spaces,” a term Goldman borrows from literary scholar Houston Baker (who himself borrowed it from Booker T. Washington). Goldman uses the term to denote the socio-historical and material conditions of dancers and their movements. This critical move allows what might normally be called “context” or “background”—the historical conditions and social relations at a particular time and place—to be foregrounded in her analysis. These tight spaces, as norms of race, gender, and sexuality, determine and constrain the possibilities of movement at particular times and places for particular groups of people; they are also the form against which the improviser improvises or seeks to move in new or different ways.

“Tight spaces” also refers to the set of learned techniques of movement. These are not only specific dance styles and movements, but also norms of bodily behavior. Goldman emphasizes here that such movements are learned, that is, reproduced through and as culture; her argument here works against discourses of the “natural” that encode particular movements and bodies as raced, gendered, and sexualized. Goldman emphasizes that expected behaviors in the street can be just as learned as dance styles, and both constitute tight spaces that can both constrain and offer the possibility of different movement. Furthermore, dancers do not leave their “everyday” bodies at the door when they perform; the bodies that are marked in the street also get marked in the performance hall. A well-trained improviser is aware of this continuity and knows how to move with and against those norms. As Goldman states, “The norms dictating appropriate bodily movement often relate to aspects of one’s identity, including race, gender, age, and sexuality. But a skilled improviser will be intimately familiar with her habitual ways of moving, as well as with the shifting social norms that give those movements meaning. Then, on a moment-to-moment basis, she figures out how to move” (10). This instantaneous exploration of movement within boundaries is what characterizes improvisation for Goldman and what she explores through her study.

Goldman is not ultimately interested in improvised dance as product, in what it signifies or means or what effects it produces. Her analysis does not “read” dance as a representation of social practice. To do so, Goldman notes, would be to bracket off dance from other art forms and from everyday life, to separate the “everyday body” from the “dancing body.” Instead, she is interested in improvised dance as itself a social practice, as well as in the implications of this practice for social relations, citizens, and institutions. Thus she is interested in “improvised dance as a vital technology of the self—an ongoing critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society” (22). As a technique, improvised dance involves individual preparedness and preparation, but its execution, its continual movement and process, is in society, in the world, in the streets. *I Want to Be Ready* has implications for dance, improvisation, and performance studies, but it is not just a book about improvised dance history. Because its analysis addresses historically specific norms of movement and body norms, it is also relevant to jazz studies, American studies, and social theory, among other fields engaging conceptions of embodiment, sociality, and identity.