

Improvisation and Interspecies Performance

Kimber Sider

Note: This paper is to be read in conjunction with a silent video of horses and humans improvising together through ground training.

The video may be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oq9d1MIQgH4>

Prelude

We walk into the arena. Katrina, my equine partner, follows my lead as we head towards the centre of the ring to begin. I look over my shoulder at her and engage in the subtle conversation that is occurring between us all the time. She flicks her ear towards me and turns her head to my response. Her muscles twitch and sense the air, sending ripples of vibration through her form, resonating with the world we inhabit. I step to the side, changing the course of our action. Katrina responds and begins to circle.

We are joined via a lunge line, but the tension is slack. We are walking together because of our conversation and the parameters of our engagement, rather than through a demand made with muscle and tension. Katrina steps into work, and the line straightens as she leans into our connection, finding her balance in our circle.

We are both simultaneously aware of each other's presence and the subtle communication occurring, while also being grounded in our surroundings.

I relax my posture, and Katrina turns towards me, responding to the shift in our dance. We are working together through our actions, resonance, and feel for each other—and all of it is a performance.

Playing with Horses

It is a performance of improvised action through physical, embodied communication that creates mutual understandings and performs shared meanings. Here, I am using “embodied” as a holistic term, which recognizes the interconnected ecology of awareness and perception. This sentient and kinaesthetic experience creates knowledge through the body, not only through the mind. Recognizing this embodied knowing and communicating is crucial to our understanding(s) of performance (including music) and theatre, but how do we learn, or teach, this way of knowing and being? How do we (humans) learn to recognize the other, subtextual, conversations taking place all around us; the conversations that do not rely on speech, but that are no less complex or meaningful? How do we hear the silent conversations between bodies, amongst our senses, mind, physicality, and being; between animals of shared or different kinds; between those who live in the sentient experience and share space, if only for a brief time. Understanding these other ways of knowing is foundational to our ability to create meaning through performance. Diana Taylor states that “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices,” and that performance is “a way of knowing, not simply an object of

analysis” (xvi).

Humans have a tendency to discount embodied information or to relegate it to a lesser method of analysis, beneath analytical reasoning, choosing conventional arguments over revealing physical communication. This choice can cause us to disconnect from our sentient (sensing) being, and weakens our ability to meaningfully connect, communicate, and get to the core of the matter. As performers, especially when focusing on improvisation, having a gap in our comprehension of communication, or experience, compromises our ability to bring about telling performances, raising the question, how do we reconnect? How do we learn to recognize all of the levels of awareness available to us and appreciate their knowledge?

I propose that one answer may be found in our relationships with non-human animals. And for the purposes of this discussion, specifically by engaging with horses through improvisational performance. I recognize that this sort of access to horses is not ubiquitous, still there is much to be gleaned from theoretically playing with this exchange. Though all human interactions with animals hold the possibility for expanding human perceptions, horses, as animals of prey—which have to respond quickly to changes in their environment in order to survive—are especially attuned to reading and responding to embodied communication and physical methods of meaning. Horses excel at remaining present in the moment while instantaneously adjusting and flowing (improvising) in response to shifts in the given situation, including modifications in the physical communication of the humans around them. Jane Smiley—a writer whose fictional and non-fictional works focus on equestrian topics—states, “if humans have smarter brains, horses have smarter bodies” (qtd. in Brandt 146). Working with horses creates an opportunity to hone our bodily intelligence. At the foundation of the equestrian arts is a deep reliance on improvisational performance. Or as equestrian social anthropologists Anita Maurstad, Dona Davis, and Sarah Cowles state, “These are naturalcultural [*sic*] practices where mental and bodily performances matter in the species communication” (325). It is through the improvisational exchange, between human and horse, that the language of equestrianism is created; it is a language which is collectively shaped through inter-species exchange and is fundamentally reliant on embodied engagement, communication, and knowledge.

The improvisational performance of equestrianism offers a uniquely tangible method of training humans in embodied skills and awareness, challenging and advancing conventional human understandings of agency, collaboration, and difference. As Ajay Heble suggests, “At its best, improvisation can encourage us to take new risks in our relationships with others, to work together across various divides, traditions, styles, and sites, and to hear and see the world anew” (99). Concentrating on performance in inter-species relations demands that the focus remain on the experience in the moment, offering a common ground and equal foundation of exchange (for both horse and human). Through learning the skills of improvisation, such as to flow and adapt, to embrace change and difference positively, to recognize embodied communication, and to open one’s self up to the expansive possibilities of the unexpected, this distinct form of engagement can bring about a more interconnected state of being.

Working with horses heightens the possibilities of improvisational learning by increasing the level of sensitivity in the exchange and shifting the focus away from the pre-established

conventions of human performance. Equestrianism teaches a manner of collaboration that demands a constant attentiveness to physical projections and negates the possibility of relying on external posturing and rhetoric, placing the emphasis on genuine symbiotic exchange through multiple layers of awareness. This form of equestrian improvisation is most evident in ground training, an un-mounted manner of working with horses. Ground training creates an active opportunity for humans to learn and experiment with embodied ways of knowing, through recognizing and collaborating with equine perspectives. Maurstad, Davis, and Cowles suggest, “Humans become more sensitive [and] gain a more advanced body awareness of their non-verbal communication as their relationships with horses unfold” (327). In ground training, *both* the human and the horse are working from their own feet and communicating through body language, resonance, and vocal cues, rather than through the physical aides manipulated in riding. It is a bit like partnered dancing, or contact improvisation, in that you are following the movement of the horse and influencing their actions through your movements. It is used in many forms of equine facilitated learning, such as those discussed by clinician Linda Kohanov in *Riding Between the Worlds*. Ground training creates an opportunity to experience the improvisational, performance-based practice of equestrianism in a way that recognizes both of the participants as individuals and as connected.

Humans have a tendency towards choosing logic-based reasoning over feeling-based reasoning; working with horses places the focus on the sentient (embodied, sensing, perceiving) experience and what can be learned from this awareness. This does not negate the importance of logic, but rather recognizes that thinking and feeling are interconnected processes. As Theresa May points out, “The absence of spoken words is not the absence of voice” (4). There is a lot to be discovered from learning to feel the conversation, and listen to these other, non-verbal voices—the silent talking of horses.

Working with horses teaches humans to flow and adapt in order to create positive, expansive, and synergetic manners of engaging with both humans and animals, generating a more interconnected state of being through improvisational performance.

An Exploration

These notions and questions are being further investigated in an upcoming IICSI documentary, *Playing in Silence*, which brings together musicians and horses in free improvisational performances.

Works Cited

- Brandt, Keri. “Intelligent Bodies: Embodied Subjectivity and Human-Horse Communication.” *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*. Ed. Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 141-52. Print.
- Heble, Ajay. “‘Why Can’t We Go Somewhere There?’ Sun Ra, Improvisation, and the Imagination of Future Possibilities.” *Canadian Theatre Review* 143 (2010): 98-100. Print.

Kohanov, Linda. *Riding Between the Worlds: Expanding Our Potential Through the Way of the Horse*. Novato: New World Library, 2003. Print.

Maurstad, Anita, Dona Davis, and Sarah Cowles. "Co-being and Intra-action in Horse Human Relationships: a Multi-species Ethnography of Be(com)ing Human and Be(com)ing Horse." *Social Anthropology* 21.1 (2013): 322-335. Print.

May, Theresa. "Voice, Embodiment and 'the Question of Animal' in *War Horse* and *Sila*." Canadian Association of Theatre Research, Congress. University of Victoria, B.C. June 2013. Conference Paper.

Sider, Kimber. "Ground Training." *YouTube*. 30 May 2014. Web.

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.