

# Barbara Dilley

## Discovering movement in the moment



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scape of improvisational exploration, if we are able to stay in this very moment, all of it is expressive.

**It implies you can work with any movement vocabulary.** Any vocabulary works. If you bring the fullness of your attention to the most ordinary gesture it becomes extraordinary. There are no mistakes. I work from a nonbiased, nonjudgmental perspective.

**You spoke of "kinesthetic delight." What does this mean?** Kinesthetic, the word, is about the inner consciousness of movement. There are lineages in the history of kinesthetic awareness. I think of Mabel Ellsworth Todd

and her book *The Thinking Body*, Bonnie Cohen's Body-Mind Centering, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais (which I've started to study myself, and I'm totally awe-stuck by Feldenkrais' body-mind work; it's trickster, magic stuff).

Then, the question becomes for an improviser: What is your delight? It has to do with not doing things because you think you should—50 ab curls or looking a certain way for your teacher—but using delight as your touchstone. It's a turning of the focus inward and allowing that to be the source of movement, without pointing to what you should or shouldn't find. For me, that investigation has been the richest. I had to give up my habitual patterns of moving and come back to kinesthetic delight.

**You referred to eye practices in the workshop. What are they?** These are a way of expanding the presence of the gaze. I'm interested in getting people to use their faces more, to lean toward more emotional choices. As improvisers, our gaze tends to be on the floor. That's a survival strategy, to handle the amount of physical risk we're taking. So, when I ask

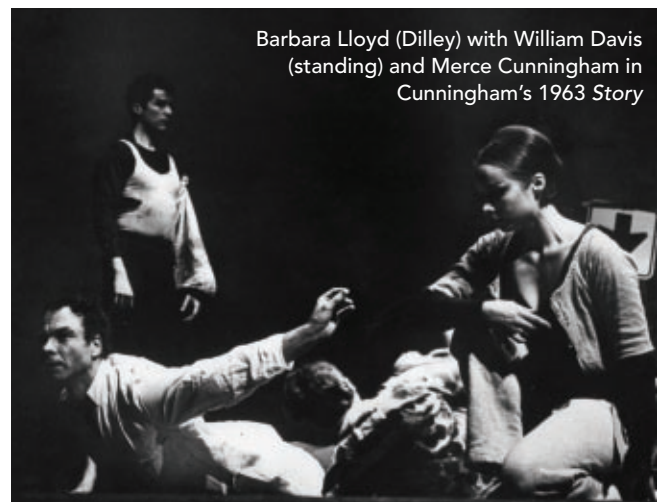
*Barbara Dilley performed with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company in its early years (1963–68) and with the seminal improvisational group Grand Union. In the mid-1970s, she settled in Boulder, CO, where she became the leading force in establishing a dance program at Naropa, a Buddhist contemplative community. She later served for nine years as president of Naropa University. She is a master improviser, and her workshops focus on the awareness and presence that improvisation brings to dancers of all backgrounds. Cynthia Hedstrom spoke with Dilley after a four-day intensive workshop sponsored by Movement Research in NYC.*

**You have a three-pronged dance life as a performer, choreographer, and teacher. Where does teaching fit in your art-making?** Teaching has been a more consistent practice over the last 20 years than performing or choreographing. Because I'm involved in improvisational disciplines, the classroom is a place to make spontaneous composition all the time.

**How so?** As I began teaching improvisation, I found that I often used devices which were compositional. For example, I would talk about the beginning, middle, and end. Just being able to locate a trajectory or an arc of time is a compositional device. I began to see, Oh, we're making something right here, right now.

**How do you structure your improvisational training?** It's a developmental process. One, from the self, being able to work with the inner body-mind as a source for expression and movement; to two, working with others toward ensemble awareness and forming relational compositions in space; and three, to understanding that we're creating an offering, a performance.

**What's the significance of the phrase you used in your recent workshop, "This very moment is always the occasion"?** This comes from the founder of Naropa, Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. For me, it sums up a kind of instruction for the training: No matter what we do in this land-



Barbara Lloyd (Dilley) with William Davis (standing) and Merce Cunningham in Cunningham's 1963 *Story*

Top: Colin Fowler. Bottom: Fannie Melcer. Courtesy Merce Cunningham Dance Company

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dancers to not look at the floor, they have to figure out how to take in more types of visual awareness.

The first three practices are closed eyes, peripheral seeing, and infant eye, which is a strange, esoteric practice. It's easiest to grasp lying around on the floor the way we did when we were infants. A lot of people who improvise are locked between the torso and the neck. In infant eye, the head and the gaze float. The fourth practice, visualizing negative space, is useful in a big group, because the spaces between are where you can move into. In direct looking, the fifth practice, I distinguish between looking someone in the eyes and actually seeing their gesture.

**Who were your early, influential teachers?** I think of Merce Cunningham and John Cage as my first master teachers. There were some seminal experiences when Merce was experimenting with open structures, particularly in *Story* and *Field Dances*. Those dances gave me choice within set material. All that experimental dynamic that we swam in during the 1960s and '70s—it was the air we breathed.

**What about technical training for a young dancer today?** I think dancers should develop technique when they're young. However, it should be enriching and not competitive in a harmful way. Good technical training filled with joy is necessary.

I also feel that multidisciplinary training gives the emerging dance artist a range of possibility. You can train as a ballerina and learn to use your voice, or as a modern dancer and keep on playing the cello. What makes a dance life sustainable is having more disciplines you can pick up and put down according to circumstance.

**Is this the focus of the dance program at Naropa University?** The BFA and MFA programs at Naropa are cross-disciplinary, movement/dance with acting together with voice. Woven into that is the mind-training practice of the contemplative education, which is about practicing mindfulness and awareness in a very ancient, formal sitting meditation. It's what makes the Naropa approach to the arts unique. ■



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