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The Fusion of CI and Acrobatic Stilts: Performance Practice and Training with the Carpetbag Brigade

by Jay Ruby

The **Carpetbag Brigade** physical theater company integrates Contact Improvisation into its unique brand of acrobatic stiltwork to create open-air site-responsive performance work and choreographed spectacle-based drama for proscenium theater. We began integrating acrobatic stilts into our performance training in 2001 after encountering the work of **David Clarkson** from Australia's **Stalker Theatre**.

In the past decade, we have created three acrostilt repertory touring performances as well as numerous cross-cultural collaborations and community projects.

CI—along with Acrostilts, Butoh, and Dramaturgy—functions as one of the four pillars of the company's training. The vocabulary of flow, somatics, and improvisation in CI is a lubricating force in our virtuosic acrostilt training.

CI's practice of sharing weight smooths the edges of the acrostilt techniques. The extra precariousness of the stilts fundamentally changes the sense of interior awareness in one's body when sharing weight on stilts. The added apparatus of the stilt requires an expanded perception of space. Because of their height, the stilts enable an increase of levels and an expansion of the scale of interactive space. The pointed tips of the stilts create a vibrant opening for the amplification of spherical movement because of the body's necessity to continually find and lose and find balance.

The consequence of movement takes a longer pathway, and the requisite responsibility for the space impacted is greater. The resulting relational qualities that arise from sharing weight are thus intensified. The practice of sharing weight on stilts opens pathways for composition with an inherent dramaturgical content. The relationship between an "ordinary" body and an "extraordinary" body (as in, ordinary body with extras) provokes useful



Carpetbag Brigade workshop with participants Tanya Thomas and Alicia Gerstein in Brooklyn, NYC, 2015. photo © Helen Goodrum

associations and metaphors for developing scenic material as the mind tries to make sense of the interaction.

Traditionally, stilts have been a device to create a literally larger than life presence by enhancing the size and visibility of a character or persona. Stilts bring archetypes to life and are a healthy component of festival culture and have anchored rituals and processions for millennia.

Carpetbag Brigade's training subverts the traditional upright use of character-based stiltwork by reorienting our view and intention as practitioners. We expand the habitual use of stilts as a vertical tool and reenvision our stilts as an extreme yoga prop or a self-administered limb extension. An opportunity arises to embody something that is not part of the body but is connected to us and provides obstacles, hindrances, and vantages from an elevated perspective. The application of stilts automatically changes the habits in the body and makes one otherly abled. The intention to explore groundwork with stilts, as well as the levels between the ground and standing, opens up a field of exploration that is ripe for synthesis with the fruits of Contact Improvisation practice.

The decade-plus evolution of Carpetbag Brigade's training—which integrates CI and acrostilts—can be summarized by seeing its contributions in terms of three arenas of practice: (1) the application of CI to skill development through exercises, (2) the facilitation of improvisational awareness, and (3) the evolution of vocabulary.

As our knowledge grows, an exercise that may have once illuminated a particular principle becomes superseded by a more effective or more interesting exercise. There are no regimented exercises in our practice. Despite this, there are consistent themes from Contact Improvisation that reoccur, including the following:

1. The differentiation between rolling, sliding, and pouring weight into the point of contact
2. The continual use of the "table" as a partner exercise in developing the capacity of getting to standing on stilts and returning to the floor with flow and grace
3. The attention and detail given to the extension and equilibrium in rotational counterbalancing; the added weight of the stilts creates new challenges/opportunities for this dynamic
4. The constant practice of sharing weight while standing on stilts to create expressive sculptures on three and four points of stilt tip balance
5. The confidence developed in lifting while off balance and providing surfaces of support while moving
6. The delicacy of skull-to-skull movement and moving while pouring weight into each other's sacrum while on stilts

Initially our CI training with stilts was focused on techniques and repeatable sequences. The development of these techniques led to a confidence and familiarity that permitted us to improvise with a deeper awareness in our craft. In the last five years our training has included the development of jam sessions in which impulses are given free rein and stilt techniques are spontaneously invented and integrated through group movement exploration.

Researching during open jams creates a sense of flow in space as part of our group consciousness that contrasts with the accumulation of techniques in training. CI, at its root, is improvisation with the weight of the body.

After becoming confident and skilled at sharing the weight of the body on stilts, vertical and spherical space expand further and virtuosity can be put aside as a goal, allowing the relational quality of movement to inform the exploration.

As we continue to improvise, our vocabulary evolves. Our techniques become smoother and more self-assured, and our confidence deepens in taking the risks that lead the body to the edges of possibility. These possibilities exist at different angles, shelves, and points of leverage because of the stilts. This creative training territory, fertilized by CI knowledge and practices, exists as a rich source from which to harvest material. Immersion produces vocabulary.

Transforming the development of vocabulary into performance material touches on critical questions. Is movement still CI if it is put into a choreographed form? What shifts when the focus moves from random improvisation to repeatable execution? How does such a refinement process contribute to the meaning of the performance or the dramaturgy of the action?

The feeling and sensation of the initial impulse associated with sculpting an improvisation or series of movements does not survive. The feeling passes. The search for the re-creation of the improvised form rarely, if ever, results in the re-creation of the feeling and sensation that accompanied the inspiration of the improvisation. What remains is the memory, along with the possibility of subjecting it to the scrutiny of analysis to reconstruct an aspect of it. This is the fork in the road; does one continue to improvise and search for the feeling and sensation of a new initial impulse, or does one research the content that the impulse led to and try to establish a pathway to the content?

Is it possible to set an improvisation and still call it an improvisation? Is this a contradiction? If improvisation is an oppositional binary, then yes, it is a contradiction; but if improvisation is a spectrum between origin and refinement, then the quality of improvisation remains while changing its nature along the path to a precise repeatable sequence.

Once improvised material enters the refinement phase, it reorients the focus of the performer into the mechanics of execution. The intention behind the mechanics and the motivation behind the intention are changed. The performer then has to remember and rehearse material until it's a new habit in the body, and muscle memory can repeat the material with precision.

A learned behavior operating as a repeatable sequence through precise execution has the possibility of becoming an action that develops metaphorical qualities and the potential to provide dramaturgical meaning.

Mixing stilts and CI to harvest performance material opens up the relational qualities of sharing weight that emanate from CI and weds them to the compositional potential that arises through increasing spherical and vertical space through stilts. Carpetbag Brigade ultimately transforms its practice of CI and stilts into a means of creating performance material through this process.

By elaborating and refining the vocabulary, we discover material that is then developed into phrases of action. These phrases of action exist both as part of our training and as openings to shape and refine the direction of a performance and its dramaturgy.

Does the act of improvisation then disappear in this process?

Improvisation remains essential, but the scale of improvisation changes. It moves to a new location in the spectrum—becoming smaller, not in the sense of diminishing but in the sense of crystallizing details within the new movement vocabulary and performance material.

Similar to how a potter may try to make a thousand pots the same but notices the different qualities in each pot as it is made, we begin to know the physical

score of the work intimately, and the improvisation becomes the awareness of what is around us and within us, the change in our feeling tones, the different sensations, the thoughts and impulses that anchor the character.

The improvisation becomes subtler, igniting the internal world of intentions and impulses as they engage sensation and relation in the confines of the choreographed action. This internal world imbues the performer with presence to balance the decisive sense of expression in the physical form of the action.

At this point our actions and relations come full circle. A coherency arises, enabling a character or archetype to fill our movement. We can then return to the rich tradition of character-driven still performance after inverting it with CI-infused training and invoke a ritual performative atmosphere rising and falling with grace in open-air spaces. CI practice in our training allows us to alter and expand the spectacle nature of stiltwork and broaden its application in social engagement.

Jay Ruby choreographs action to animate social space and invigorate collective reflection as founder and executive director of the *Carpetbag Brigade*.

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