

TALK /

SNDO 1982–2006 online

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Flying Low

David Zambrano / talking to students of the SNDO

David Zambrano presented a lecture to students at the SNDO in 1991 about the Flying Low dance technique and his approach to improvisation in dance. The lecture describes Zambrano's background, the transition from studying computer science to dance and explains the role of improvisation and games in the making of his work. He talks about putting theory into practice and compares social dancing to dance composition.

Question from a student (Q) / Why are you performing?

DZ / Why am I performing? Because I love to perform. In my family we were with a lot of kids. I was one of the youngest. I never had an opportunity to express myself. Whenever I was in a reunion of friends or classmates, I've never been able to open my mouth so well, so I was performing dances, like social dances.

Q / What kind of social dancing?

DZ / Like salsa, merengue... I became really good at salsa that's the reason I started teaching it. That's one way of expressing myself, but it was also one way of performing. I did three years study of folk dancing in Venezuela, a lot of little towns, going here and there. Then I learnt a lot about Venezuelan folk dancing which has many similarities to dances in the rest of the world, in many different aspects. We have many different cultures together: Africans, Europeans, Indians, and they have all this information. I performed that a lot.

Q / You performed folk dancing?

DZ / Yes, I performed folk dancing when I was in college, studying computers.

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Q / What was it that made you switch from computers to dance?

DZ / Well, first of all I did computers because I was really good at calculus when I was in high school. Computer science was a very new career in Venezuela. If you were one of the first to study about computers... all these computers were imported, to improve our technology. When my family said why don't you study that, I didn't think about it, I just said why not? Because it was really good. I was really good at calculus. But I was very bad at programming. For four years I kept failing in many different ways but still I was very good at maths. One day I had to switch careers because I just couldn't handle it any more. I went to a study advisor, and the woman asked me, what do you really want to do. I said, I want to dance. And she said, well, why don't you go to the States and study dance at university? The problem is to get a diploma for your family. In my family, that's very important. I lied to my father, I told him I was going to finish my computer experience in the United States. I went there and I did dance, then I talked about it and he didn't help me any more. So I had to get married...

Q / You got married?

DZ / Yes, but I married for love of my green card... Talking about improvisation, you guys like to improvise a lot. Do you know about improvisation a little bit? Because when I went to college, improvisation was like a new thing in dance. In modern universities it was like the new class. Beside modern dance, now you can do improvisation. Everybody was enthusiastic, we are free to do whatever we want. That was very interesting. Later on, I realised that improvisation has been around for many years, and in many cultures, so it wasn't really new.

Q / In other cultures there was improvisation?

DZ / Yes, the other day I was in Barcelona, and I went to see Nusrath Fateh, the big Pakistani singer. There were all these Pakistani people dancing in front of him. What were they doing? Improvising. With the energy and whatever feelings they were having, they were sensational. It was very free. They had the music going through the body and they were doing whatever they wanted. It wasn't social dancing. In social dancing you have fixed steps, this was really improvised. That was like a religious dance. So yes, I think you have this in many cultures.

The funny thing is when I went to study improvisation the first time, I love to improvise with salsa or anything, I didn't know that I was improvising. Then I went to study improvisation with Don Redley, who is a dancer and has his own company, and he danced for Hanya Holm who came from Germany. The improvisation that they developed was very interesting, it was like a mirror exercise. Do you know the mirror exercise? Then you have another exercise with the forces, you push me, I push

you and then you separate and then you have somebody pushing you. That kind of instruction. That was the first improvisation class that I had. The second one was Alwin Nikolais' improvisation class. Nikolais had something extra, he came from Hanya Holm too by the way. OK, he would show this is my step, then you improvise with that. Maybe you can do something with that, you don't know. But he said you had to be sure what you were going to do. It was weird, it wasn't that playful, it was still learning some structure. It was a technique. I saw more improvisation the first time at the American Dance Festival. There was a class of Simone Forti with maybe twenty people the first day, the next day only five stayed. Everybody was very young, and coming from another career. And she would say, OK today we will go from here to there. All we were doing was running from there to there. We did it for two hours, it was difficult to relate but very free. And that's when I said yes, this is improvisation.

It was very specific, yes, but at the same time it was very open. The movements were very specific. It was very interesting to find out what inspiration one can have in the art form and what inspiration one can have, spiritual, ...I think I'm very comfortable with that, more comfortable for example than performing with choreography. Now I can combine both, actually. Because I know most of the improvisational structures. If I am working with somebody who's comfortable with this form, someone like Simone Forti, I say, whatever is going to happen now will happen.

Q / If you make your piece, you basically take improvisational structures? Where do you start from?

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DZ / It depends. For example, if I perform a piece to show you my movement inspiration, that movement inspiration will come from my warm up experience. Just to warm up, to do this, repeat over and over until it gets better. Then I will combine vocabulary that I have made in the same process. That's one way. The other way is performing solos, improvised, which is something that I will show you in a little bit, a simple idea.

Q / So you never use dance movements in performance when you are making pieces for... that you really had a reason, or a story, or like you told the experiences you had, that they are in your body? Do you ever use that experience, try to keep that shape?

DZ / Yes, I have done that. I have done that specifically in two solos I have made. In both solos we have information, like improvisation, some choreographic parts. I have combined them and put them together. But for most of my work I never know what it's going to be until I do it. Otherwise I won't do it. I won't do it if I know what I'm doing. Same thing for my classes. If I know exactly what I'm doing today, I won't do it. Because why are we doing it?

Q / How is it then that it becomes choreography after improvisation? Doesn't that feel strange?

DZ / In the beginning for me it was a problem to perform the same thing for different producers, to be able to take a piece to different theatres. If I can change all the time, which would be very exciting, then how can I present myself with a set piece, in order to sell it? To be able to perform it when I want to perform. So by itself it starts shaping up, but it still changes a lot. It's an open structure. I go to the floor and get up and do some checks here and here, looking for Mr. Goodbody. Then if I don't find it, I go to the floor and I rest. That kind of structure is open.

Q / It seems that something outside is interacting with you, somehow. I think it can be images or, I don't know... Do you remember these images? And do they come again...?

DZ / Sometimes it's new and sometimes they are not there, that is very difficult. That's the part that is very difficult, to do it again. Having images, or semi-images.

Q / And do you compose these images, because it seems there are images...

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Drawing by Katrina Brown

DZ / Yes, we all have to do that because that's what we perform. We perform images, there are images inside whatever it is you are performing. Then people see what they have to see, "I wonder why he's over there?" I've performed many times, because improvisation you can do everywhere, but it still is very difficult sometimes. For example when nothing happens. I can move around and I know my movement inspiration, and I know how to do things, relating with this arm and the other arm, but it still is very difficult. Sometimes when the movement inspiration is new, it's exciting. Like the physical part. It's exciting. Even if the images are not there right now, by doing it over and over, perhaps it will come, but it's getting to find out that.

Q / I think it's good not to have a technique, because you lose the exploration, if you want to improvise. I find this often, doing certain forms, doing certain movements. They are helpful to find their alignment, but they are also very much limiting me, being able to explore some images in my spirit. It's tricky, don't you think so?

DZ / Which is amazing, I have reached that from the other side, all the way around. My training has been how to develop a technique that I can use to improvise every time. It's always like a specific game or games I can set up.

Q / How about Flying Low?

DZ / This is the first time I talk about my work. I will now talk about Flying Low which is the title that I give to some of the classes that I have put together from my improvisational work. Flying low is like flying close to the ground, taking your centre flying to the ground. When I started doing it I had to figure out how to go up and down, without crawling on my knees. When I decided to become a dancer, I was studying computer science in Venezuela for four years and then I decided to change majors. I went to the States to study dance at the Southern Illinois University in Carbondale 1981-1984. I went full out into the matter, into the action. In other words, into the physical action. I did too much, I didn't know about warming up or stretching before doing the dance. I just wanted to move.

After a year I lost the arches in my feet, and then I had some knee problems. I was taking classical technique classes, like ballet, modern dance in Cunningham, Nikolais and Graham techniques. I had to do some extras with each class. I had, as I said, this problem with my knees. It was very difficult. I talked to my teachers to shift into something else, to keep moving but not being able to take these classes. I had to develop on my own. I had to do independent studies. I had to take a lot of dance history and kinesiology classes, and I had to learn a lot about what was happened in modern dance, and how it had developed, and how to be able to do ballet with these knee problems. It was almost impossible. I had to be on the floor all the time, otherwise I had to wear shoes with specific arches. It wasn't very convenient. I went to the gym, just to learn how to stretch. But in the gym there was this guy who was a Kung Fu master and he was about 65. He told me he had some problems with his knees when he was young. I watched him moving and he was amazing, he was very fast, it was incredible. I got very excited about that. And thinking about it, how can I move so fast. That was the first question, how can I move so fast. Then, how can I move with my problems in my legs. I couldn't use the knee while standing up; it was very painful. I had to put ice on every day, and go to the therapy all the time. When I was in college I did that for almost a year. That was my first year in college, going to therapy.

I worked a lot on the floor. When I worked on the floor I was getting all the physical information that I needed to be able to get better, in what I was doing. I didn't know where I was going but I had some instinct that something was going to come from it. I started taking all this information about gymnastics, they have specific rolls, that was one of the first rolls that I started practicing, how to go from here to there. All that stuff, you know, let go your arms, all of a sudden you start getting up, then you go right on your heels and then your whole alignment goes up... It was easier for me to do this. So I said, it's working, something is working. But still it was hurting my back. I didn't know how to do movement more efficiently. After keeping practicing this floor work, I got bruises all the time. I found that I have to breathe. I found out that if I take a breath out and go into the floor, the muscle structure and then the joints make it easier to lay on the floor. Then it's easier on the back, and it goes part by part, it is easier to manipulate the core. And then when I'm going up, I can take the breath through me. I'm playing all the time with breath, any kind of noise. I never realized that where I come from, social dancing is like that. When you learn salsa, you're very young, you learn by the sounds. You learn all this freedom that goes with breath. Starting with breath was interesting for me. That was the basic thing I did every time I improvised.



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At the same time there was the movement exploration I was doing. I was playing around with any kind of movement, noises, with other people. I was always a social dancer, so I had all those things parallel, but I didn't know how to put it together. Then I found out that this roll forward, you could go to one side, but then it hurts me. How to do it? You could go to the other side, but it hurts the knees. In college I took classes in Labanotation. I don't know if you know the Laban scales or the cube, you learn to open up your eyes inside the form. The specific movements mean a specific thing. That was very helpful for me. Because then I could explore, like I don't have to fall on my back but I can fall this way, that way...then from there I can bring it here, travel from here to there. Like we did in the class for some of you, with the cube. The basic exercise. That was a big thing, then I relaxed and said, I don't have to just go up and down, but I can travel with it.

That was when Flying Low came up. Because I could travel my centre. I don't have to just bring my centre down and up, but I can bring it down, travel, and up and down and travel and up, and then take it around. So I get much better in that. At the same time I was working on these conversations with Simone Forti, and other improvisers in New York, just going on stage and improvise. It became more and more part of my improvisation. It was one of the first times it got combined, because before that they were all parallel, social dancing, improvisation, this movement inspiration, Flying Low, and so on.

At the same time I started taking contact improvisation. I didn't know how to carry people but I knew immediately how to fall to the floor. That was a big help, it was a big tool. From contact, of course, I took the things that I needed for my movement inspiration. So then I could keep flying down.

I didn't know yet how to combine social dancing, with improvisation and flying low, in order to dance. That was a big question. How can I go, for example, to a discotheque or a salsa party and be able to have all these rhythms in my body and how can I go on stage to improvise and not feel that would come out? How is it possible? It's like a state of mind. Something like that happened a long time ago, but for me it was the question, how can you combine. I really don't know what happened, but they got together. Now I feel they are more like a unit.

I was still working with Simone Forti, with KJ Holmes and other people in New York. We were part of Simone Forti and Troupe. One day KJ brought a simple exercise that she learnt from the Native Americans. It was an exercise for warming up your spirit in six directions. You breathe, you stand there and you face first like this, east, and then west and then south and then north. Then you just bring your male powers here, you bring your female powers, you put it into the ground, you take it from the ground, you pass it through the air, you take it to the sky. Then from here you offer it to this direction and then you offer it to that direction. You do six directions. It was like a ritual. But it opened up all my senses. I already knew it but I didn't know how to put it together. I put it together, inside the work that I was exploring.

The things about the top, the bottom, the front, the back, side and side and centre started becoming very important. That enriched all my improvisation work, and therefore my flying low work. From there I got just a little bit farther, so I wasn't just flying low to there, I could fly low even there, and reach farther out. Then I found out that by doing this, it was very similar to the gymnastics I had been watching for many years. But it was OK, because nowadays the concepts you find in movement research, did not exist yet at the time. People could do it because of their talents. If you had a talent, you knew how to do it, but you didn't know how to explain it. It's an instinct. When you throw your body, you feel like a rocket. Nowadays the knowledge is put out, the theory and practice. You can put it together. And that started happening. I started to find out myself. The work was very similar to things I was seeing outside. For example, some aikido work, some Capoeira work... A lot of people were coming to me and saying, it's really like martial arts, what you're doing, but it wasn't like martial arts. How to move like that guy I saw in the gym, how to move as fast as I can, that was still my question. So far, what I have found out is that the less tension you have in your body, the easier it is to move faster. Of course you need just enough tension, but the less tension I could have, it was just like flying.

Through all those years, I was always teaching. I taught even before I went to college. I was teaching some movement ideas that I had, I was teaching social dancing and all those things I was exploring. I was putting all that into my classes and putting all the information I was getting from makers, like Simone Forti, and my teachers, into an approach of moving very fast, and I was beginning to get power from it. It was about terminals and centre. Having my lips like terminals as extremities of the body. I did computer science for four years, I always relate to the idea of the computer as my centre. I have all these things in the body, all the information that comes from there. Immediately that was my first intelligence, my centre. Then the second element was the brain. All this was intelligence. It was an intelligence that I couldn't understand very well but I could follow it instinctively, like an animal that is inside of you. It's something very antique, something very far back, that you can't understand, but the memory is right there. It became very important for me. From there I could relate to my terminals, which was everything going out through my body. To the parts of my body, and even farther. That is why I was calling these terminals. So I say, here you can bring your joints very close to your centre, and from there you can explode out. What happens with the rest of the systems?

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This year, I organised a dance festival in Venezuela where I invited dance teachers from all over the world to bring their techniques, especially people who are working on something inspirational. I brought somebody from Body-Mind Centering. I had the opportunity to take those classes and I learned a little bit more about the systems. It was more of a scientific point of view. It wasn't just knowing what I had inside myself, but knowing that all those things have a kind of spiritual energy, which is part of a whole, everything there is in the world. Because there are six directions, I have this energy going all the way up and I have the energy going all the way down, and this side and the other side, wherever I want to go, I can move it. I am part of this. Then I realized, there is some kind of energy that goes through it. To know, for example, how the organs work, and the different structures of bone, muscle, the digestive system, the nervous system and the endocrine, which is the hardest one, to know all that is good. This knowledge is powerful, even if there's still something that we don't know. All these organs, they have a specific centre to them, a specific memory. Every little part is a memory, like when you were injured or sometimes when you were a child you had some kind of awful experience, and that experience is going to some part of your body besides your brain. There was an intelligent body, a body which has its own intelligence. From there I just extended my knowledge of how to work with the floor and I put that better in the class structure.

Q / And your foot, does it still hurt you?



DZ / No, no. Of course sometimes if I run for a long time on the streets, I get arch problems, but then I had to learn how to work with my feet. Like, if I would take jazz classes today, the most important thing for me is how to place the feet, because from there all the information is just going into your body. It is something I learn from working lately with Joan Skinner Release Technique. All those images enrich the way you can move your body. And you can play with those images. I know a way of putting the theory into practice. In theory, there are specific images. You play with the one that you need, in that moment, then you just take that image. I don't really know what happened, but all of a sudden I was crazy to move again. Also I could move for many hours. From my own point of view, it was learning how to work with my body. Before I didn't know, I didn't know at all.

Q / Did you have any problems before you started to dance?

DZ / No, everything happened after starting to dance. Immediately, with the first time. But now, actually, it's great. I started having some shoulder problems, but knee problems, I never had them again. Still, there's a lot more to learn, anyway. Somehow I felt it was an instinct. Like right now, this conversation was ready to start and I didn't know how to start it. Somehow there was a need for me to talk about things like that, how to get something back from my memory, the questions and everything, and enrich what I have. It has never been important for me to know exactly why I am doing it. The basic sensation is wanting to do what I do. In the world there is a big problem, because people always ask, why do you want to do what you do. You say, I don't know. And they say, well, don't do it then, if you don't know. For any kind of profession, it's like that. Any kind of work that you go in, any kind of thing, it's like that.

Q / Even if you're like a scientist? I mean, you were saying about exploring your own body.

DZ / I would feel like a scientist if I had the opportunity to spend more time in the lab, which is the dance floor. But I haven't had that opportunity because ... the economic situation... Right here it is great because I can have some space to rehearse on my own. Usually in New York that is very difficult. So yes, I would love to have that and feel that it's what I want to be in, to keep discovering ... but usually it's very difficult. The last years it has been easier.

Q / How can you teach things that you're just exploring yourself.



DZ / Usually, I don't know how, I will develop what is called a technique to teach it. And by doing that I will get to know a little bit more about it.

Q / I feel about the things that I'm exploring myself, I feel so insecure that I don't know how to give it to others. How do I give it to others and not say all the time, I don't really know, I'm still trying to find out.

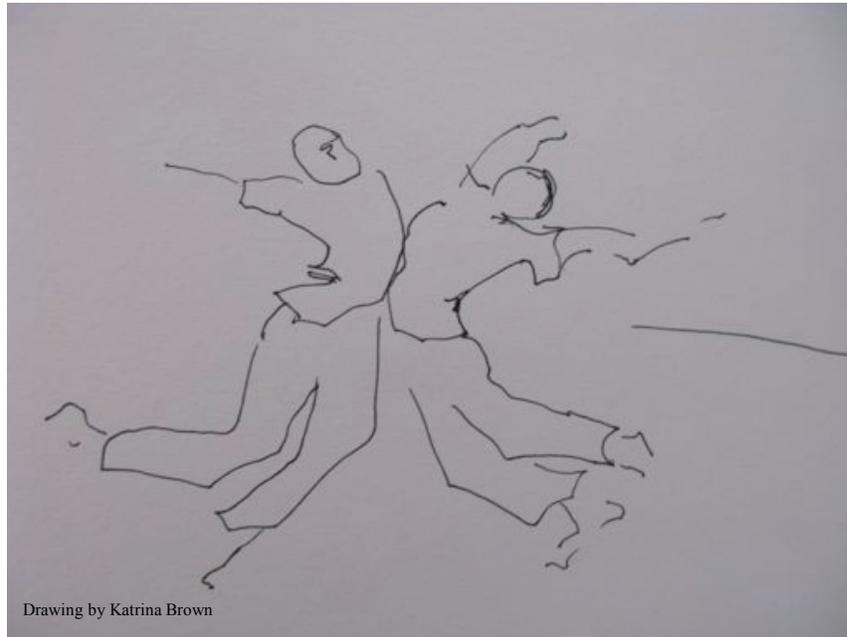
DZ / Well, what I've learnt is that by teaching it, or by trying to share with somebody else, when it comes out, then you learn a little more about it. Because you put it out and then you say oh, like right now, I never thought about this. I think that's important, because then you can get feedback.

Q / In Flying Low when we do things on the floor. You are jumping upwards and the legs are changing. I think the technique is... it's not inside, it's not here, or in here, but it's something more outward. For every difficult part you take a breath in to do it? When you go to the floor, you breathe out and when you want to come up, you breathe in?

DZ / It all depends. Something I have worked on a lot is how to roll back. For example, how to do something like running this way, and coming out this way. But from the resting position, or the flat position, to come out forward is something I'm exploring right now. Without working with the muscles but working on how the breathing is going to work for this. I don't know that very well yet. I know I can go down this way, or that way, or down forward, but to come from the floor, flat up, is very difficult. Flat down is very easy. You're ... in first position and you go up, ... But to go this way, and then without rolling this way, you know what I mean?

We all know that when rolling this way, it's easier to come up. But then all the teachers will say to you, don't roll this way, it's more tense, it's more work. You can bring it to yourself a little bit this way, and then go up. But I have seen people – I really don't know how they do it, but I have seen them – there is a woman in Paris who teaches that, Martha Moore, (she did Susan Klein work) she danced with Marc Tompkins.

Another part of my work is what we're doing in classes in composition. Like for example cohesion and expansion, if you have two centres facing each other, then you bring the two centres in, then you expand it out. You were like monkeys, something like that, and you go through space and expand it out. And then all of a sudden we separate. We say, how are we going to do it now? So we're going to close this space in, then we're going to expand it out. It was a basic of social dancing for many years. You see all these things, you take it in, you bring it out. But you never thought about bringing your centre to it, like elastic, then expanding it out like elastic. Knowing this, the power there was inside that concept. It was something like bringing the two bodies in, then jumping out and that was very exciting.



Drawing by Katrina Brown

About the Contributor

Zambrano, David

Zambrano has been making dance for over 20 years. In his pursuits as both a creator and educator, he has visited 40 countries, worked with more than 25,000 students, and has performed at hundreds of venues across the world. His pieces range from set choreography, structured improvisation, and pure improvisation. Born in Venezuela, Zambrano spent 15 years in New York, and now lives in Amsterdam continuing to perform and teach world wide. His improvisation is committed to art as a cultural exchange developing the creative process in a world without borders. Zambrano sees improvisation as an art and choreography as a vehicle to further develop his work in improvisation.

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Colophon

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