NET Travel Grant Share Back - B3W Performance Group
Emily Berry, Alba Lucera, Rafael Monteagudo, & Tino Van Der Sman
Flamenco Dance & Music, Contemporary Dance & Jazz & Afro-Cuban Music

I’m a big believer in collaboration. Collaboration offers an opportunity to learn, to be pushed out of our comfort zones, to see and/or approach something in a new and/or challenging way, and to shift our art making. The collaboration between Alba, Tino, Rafael, and myself solidified some extremely beneficial ways of approaching exchanges and collaborations as well as allowed us to hone the development of some useful collaboration tools.

Entering the collaboration:

The more I collaborate and work with different forms and different disciplines, the more I realize the most essential elements to effective collaboration are actually how we all enter the process more than the process itself.

Some of those essential elements include:
• our willingness to be vulnerable
• our willingness to try and fail
• our willingness to allow our own ideas to be malleable
• our willingness to transform

This all allows a process to be created collectively and also space for the process to continually change and adapt. It can be a scary way to work because there is a lot more unknown, however, the results are always so much "Juicier" as Alba says.

Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable opened up space for us to dig deeper into the process and into each other’s forms as well as revealed new possibilities. The moments when both Alba and I allowed ourselves to be vulnerable were the moments that brought the most intimate and meaningful connections. This happened repeatedly in the improvisations once we opened ourselves up to the possibility. In these instances, a moment, a movement, or a theme emerged that was a surprise to both of us and would not have been discovered without the surrendering to the vulnerability. One example of how that manifested within an improvisation was when we were improvising with the Bata De Cola and Alba fell into me. We both surrendered to each other’s weight and to the moment. A connection emerged along with some interesting partnering that would not have happened had we planned it or thought it out.

Being willing to try and fail allowed us to take risks without fear. While that led to many improvisations that were not fruitful in creating anything that would eventually go on the stage, the improvisations that came after and did lead to seeds to develop for the stage would never have happened. It was in those moments of failure in a sense that we were able to discuss what went wrong and led us to more clarity for our next improvisation in some cases and in others led us to much more exciting ideas, pathways, or structures that would not have been discovered without the fails.
Allowing our ideas to be malleable opens up possibilities that none of us on our own would have discovered. It allowed for one idea to be thrown out with another adding to it, adjusting it, or layering it.

Our willingness to transform was the most important element for entering into this collaboration. Learning flamenco transformed my approach to my own contemporary practice. The sharing and exchanging of forms created new perspectives, approaches, and ways of moving that affected and transformed each of us in our own respective forms. An example of this would be when I learned the wrist and arm movements of flamenco. This was very difficult for me because I am not used to isolating that level of detail in my wrists. I often struggle with how I am using my arms and rarely initiate from my arms when I am improvising in contemporary dance. Learning the wrist movements in Flamenco made me more aware of my wrists and arms and how I use them in contemporary.

**Some Useful Collaboration Tools:**

The freedom to be open, without restriction and without the pressure of an outcome allowed time to explore, fail, and discover. It allowed us to continually re-create our process, while at the same time, being really clear about entering into a connected conversation of listening, reacting, and responding to each other in movement. The process itself created the process. This allowed us to enter into a much deeper exchange and conversation in movement. The process of taking time to learn each other’s forms each day, followed by free improvisations of listening, reacting, and responding to each other was the basis of what allowed us to share, combine, and enter into a more meaningful conversation in movement.

Our first day in the studio we both went in very open as to what might possibly transpire. We knew we wanted to begin each session with 20-30 minutes of yoga. This was to be our warm-up. We settled on this because it was something that we both had in common. We both have a regular yoga practice. It allowed us to prepare our bodies together for the rehearsals with something that we were both familiar with and could do together. After yoga, we dedicated the first day to more open explorations. Our first improvisation we played with contact. We did not have many parameters other than we could use touch and we wanted to listen through movement and respond to each other. This allowed us to discover and explore each other’s movement preferences through movement rather than words. We learned more about each other in those 20 minutes than we possibly could have in hours of conversation. This gave us information that allowed us to shape the upcoming rehearsals. Our next improvisation was also open. Alba put on the Flamenco shoes. She improvised with rhythms and I responded with movement to the rhythms. All of the improvisations were very open ended on that first day. It helped us realize what we wanted to focus on and spend time on for the next rehearsal and a structure for working during our time together. Had we made those decisions prior to moving together so openly, we would not have made the choices we made as far as what to focus on and the structure of the rehearsals.

We took time each day to do yoga. I then would work with Alba on Bartenieff Fundamentals, a somatics practice that focuses on muscle re-patterning to increase
range of motion and movement efficiency and prevent injury. I then taught Alba some contact improvisation. Alba then taught me various Flamenco techniques from the rhythms of the feet to how to use the Bata de Cola. Working with Alba on Bartenieff Fundamentals and contact improvisation changed how she moved with me. My learning Flamenco changed how I interacted with Alba when she was dancing Flamenco and I was dancing contemporary. One example was when we used the Bata De Cola. Before trying an improvisation with the skirt, Alba taught me how to use it. She explained it and demonstrated for me. Then, she had me put it on and taught me the techniques for moving the train and the movement used with the skirt. She then put the skirt back on and improvised in the skirt while I improvised with her but without the skirt. Having had put the skirt on and having learned how it moved changed the ways I interacted with her and the skirt. We decided to keep playing with the Bata De Cola and kept pushing how we played with it and interacted with it and each other in it. Sometimes we played with just the idea of the movement of the skirt. Other times we played with how the train could get tangled and wrapped up in the other dancer. We also played with how it can be restricting as well as how it can allow the other dancer to restrict the person wearing it. Many of those discoveries happened not by dictating what to play with but by remaining so open within the improvisations to allow space for whatever emerges to emerge. Our prompts were most often simply to listen and respond to each other. We only decided what elements to use - for example, whether one or both of us had the Flamenco shoes on and who, whether to use the Bata De Cola and who was going to wear it (although sometimes it naturally transferred bodies in the middle of the improvisation), or whether or not to use the shawl. Each improvisation ended up having a life of its own with a new set of discoveries. After each improvisation we spent time talking about our experiences in it, what worked, and what didn’t work. That conversation then informed our next improvisation.

Our process for the improvisations:

1. Decide the tools we want to play with (rhythms & who is wearing the shoes, what props to use and who is going to use or begin with them)
2. Commit to listening, reacting, and responding to each other
3. Experience the improvisation with openness, vulnerability, willingness to fail, etc.
4. Discuss our experiences in the improvisation including what worked and what didn’t
5. Apply discoveries from improvisation to next improvisation