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Aiken, Chris + Scully in Common Denominator, Chicago Reader 1992

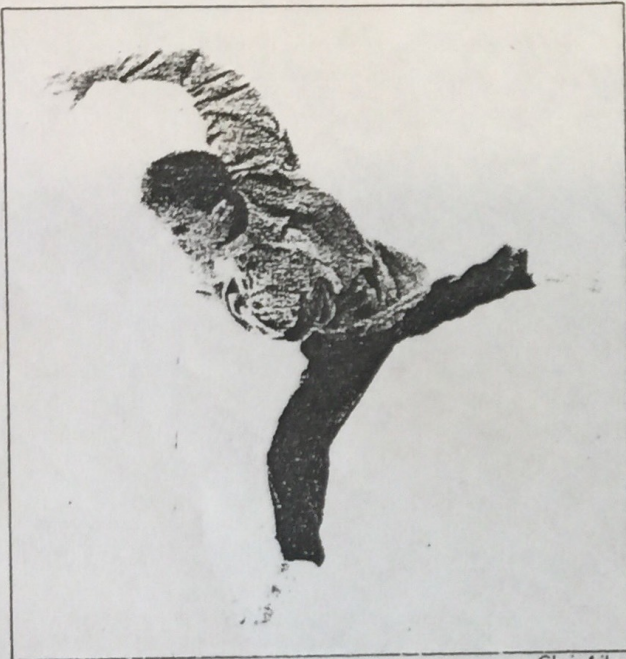
30 READER — Section 1

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Improv Without Anxiety



Chris Aiken

CHRIS AIKEN

at Link's Hall
April 10 and 11

By Laura Molzahn

Improvisers must walk a peculiar line between safety and risk—they can't make the audience anxious that they're going to mess up, but they can't play things too safe or what they're doing will seem dead. I felt I was in good hands, however, as the performers were warming up for Chris Aiken's concert at Link's Hall: at one point one of them assured the small, chatty audience, "You can keep talking, we haven't started yet."

Though three of the five pieces were going to be improvisations, things couldn't be too risky if the atmosphere was this relaxed.

Another crucial factor in improv is the performers' familiarity with each other. Aiken, a Minneapolitan appearing as part of the Midwest Exchange at Link's, brought with him two very good friends: performance artist Patrick Scully, with whom he regularly improvises, and dancer Cathy Young, Aiken's wife. In fact Aiken and Scully's ease with each other formed the bedrock of the first piece, *Common Denominator (or Improvisation No. 81) Part I*. The two are an odd combination physically: Aiken

is tiny, a pixieish Baryshnikov with deep-set eyes, and Scully is tall, blond, and ponytailed, with a broad Nordic head and a wingspan like an eagle's. Something of a Laurel and Hardy set, they also seem to adopt those comedians' personas—Scully often plays the dominant "straight" man, the grown-up, and Aiken is his quieter but looper sidekick.

They began by sitting side by side on two chairs. When the el rumbled past, Scully said, "My mother's on that train." After a few more jumbled but fairly naturalistic remarks ("If the buzzer rings, better answer it—it might be her"), Scully started stretching his mouth in a very impolite kind of way and speaking in a high, squeaky, almost incomprehensible voice; meanwhile Aiken acted as his verbal and physical shadow, repeating and sometimes amplifying or garbling what he'd said. Scully's high pitch turned into a low pitch, which turned into yawns, which produced a deal of stretching from side to side and leaning against each other. At some point the loud yawning merged into roars, then abruptly stopped, and the two primly scooped their chairs back together again.

Picking up on this new pseudoserious mood, Scully announced "You have to have an outline." Eventually his pompous pronouncements turned into a discussion of "the royal we." "Which," Scully intoned in his deep voice, "means, of course..." "But of course," piped up Aiken in a mock French accent. "I," Scully proclaimed, completing his thought—if this silliness can be dignified by that term.

Silly it was, and funny too. They cupped their hands together and cooed over some invisible creature, then became the tiny creature, fluttering their crooked hands and squawking. Scully stood on a chair,

Aiken on the floor, and they tried—vainly—to modify this even greater contrast of their heights. Scully by shooting down into a crouch, Aiken by shooting up with a jump. Ludicrous. Scully told a story about tossing a stick of butter in the school cafeteria so it'd stick to the ceiling, then placing bets on when that rancid stick of butter was going to get warm enough to fall down on someone's head.

What's difficult to capture in words is the rhythm that, moment by moment and overall, Aiken and Scully set up. Nothing lasted too long, nothing was rushed. They returned to the stick-of-butter theme later, by twirling their shirts over their heads like circular fans and running around the room "cooling" the ceiling. A swimming motif introduced early on—Scully was the coach and Aiken the unwilling pupil—was repeated throughout and at the end.

The fact is, in this *Common Denominator* the performers took care of us. The verbalizing was a way of reducing our anxiety. At one awkward point Scully was leaning back on his hands in a sort of backward crouch and Aiken was prone across the tabletop of his torso, his legs resting on Scully's shoulders, his face hovering above Scully's knees. Aiken's look said as clear as day, "Now what?" Suddenly, as if the two had been hit by simultaneous bolts of inspiration, Aiken was doing a butterfly stroke and Scully was saying "I want you to do it just how we practiced." Then Scully added a rocking motion to the proceedings, which Aiken embellished with a momentary seasick look.

To have such an image interpreted for us, and in a benign and even humorous way, is reassuring. Especially since close, unscripted physical contact between adults in our culture is apt to mean sex, and sex onstage can be unnerving. At one point Aiken fell

across Scully's lap in the classic spanking position, but Scully began squeezing first his shoulders, then his dangling legs, like an accordion, and Aiken produced the appropriate high and low wheezes. Not only did they defuse any worries in this piece, they managed to skip back and forth between verbal and visual wit with the alacrity of players at Wimbledon.

Aiken's solo improvisation, *Serpentine Logic*, was dance alone. No longer the receptive sidekick, he showed himself to be a master of fluid and occasionally quirky movement. Jon Hassell's music has an Eastern feel, and Aiken's dancing sometimes resembled the balanced, flowing motions of t'ai chi. Many of his movements were circular and done close to the floor, so that in his silky shirt and billowing pants he looked like a small low-flying cloud. Yet he could mark the end of a phrase with complete authority, coming to a standstill, hands cocked and held just so. Or he might

DANCE

kneel, his back to us, and cup a hand near his ear, or crouch and run his fingertips around the hairline at his nape.

But however impressive, *Serpentine Logic* didn't communicate the excitement of *Common Denominator Part I*. And *Common Denominator Part II*, which opened the second half of the program, fell pretty flat. No talking this time, so there was no possibility of the ice-breaking verbal wit

of part one. And though the program listed only Aiken and Scully for this second part, Young performed too. They may not be used to being a threesome, and another person is more than just another variable to consider—Young's presence seemed to change the chemistry between the two men. This performance came across as careful, slow, and directionless. I think everyone, performers and audience alike, was relieved when all three, happening to be in a clump near the exit, just rolled out the door and ended the piece.

The program also included two nonimprovised works. Scully's *Too Soon Lost* uses time-lapse film of a demolition in Minneapolis, Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Scully's recitation of what I assume is an autobiographical text, and several real estate signs and a handful of flowers to mourn the passing of a city block and of Scully's friends who've died of AIDS. This kind of thing is devilish to do well—it's so personal the audience can feel left out. I felt left out.

Aiken and Young choreographed and performed the last piece, *One Day Our Paths Crossed*, which agreeably showcases the romantic side of their own relationship. The tumbling and swinging motions that marked both *Common Denominator* pieces were repeated here, but I found that the occasional dancery finishing touches detracted from the movement's freewheeling style.

Unfortunately everything that came after the concert's powerhouse opening was at something of a disadvantage. But I guess if you choose to do improv, that's one of the hazards.