

# Bodies collide to form Contactworks

by Donald J. Hutera

The Minneapolis-based contact improvisation dance company Contactworks has existed a little more than three years. (It originally was named the Contact Workgroup.) Present members Patrick Scully, Wendy Oliver, Jam Smiley and Teresa Kruzan have been together about a third of that time. Before watching the first of their two consecutive performances last weekend at the downtown Minneapolis Ozone Dance Studio, I had little idea of what contact improvisation is. Its official description as a "non-traditional dance form blending elements of modern dance, gymnastics, yoga and the martial arts" is helpful. Seeing the company in action, however, is the best way to appreciate the special kind of unplanned, amalgamated body communication Contactworks does.

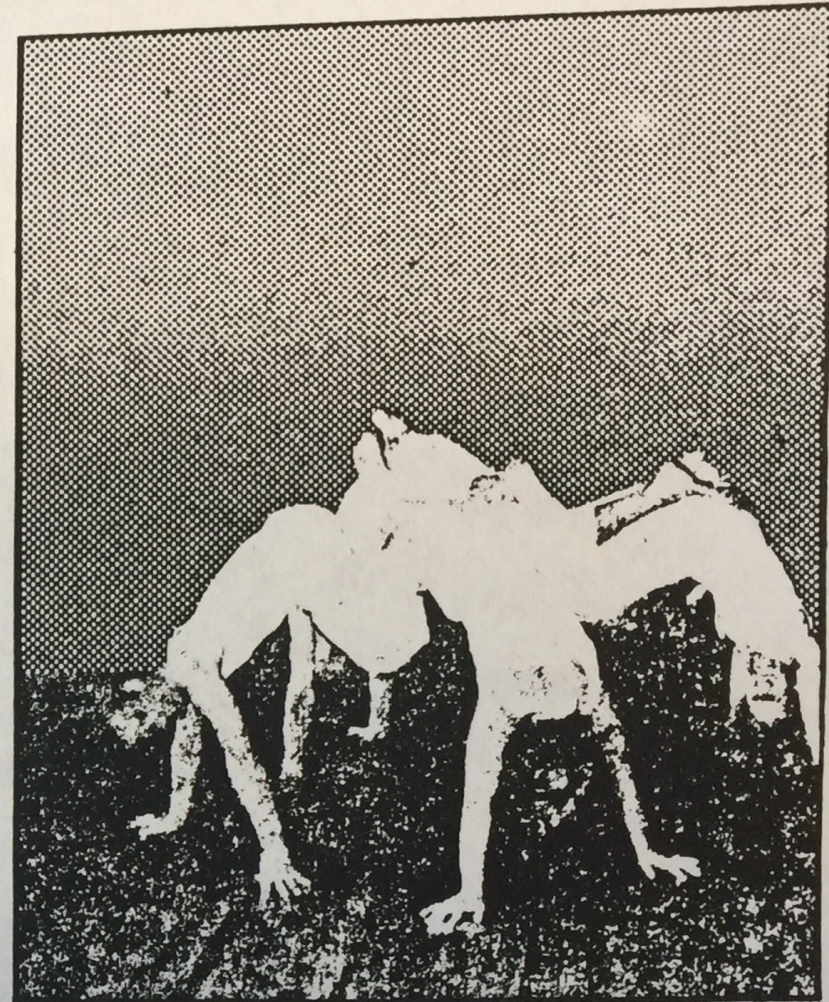
Contactworks' dancers roll on their own and their fellow dancers' shoulders, necks, hips and spines with bone-wearing suppleness. They cling and spiral like vines around each other's trunk-like bodies, or tumble over each other as if those same bodies were exceptionally bumpy bridges. A pair leans and orbits in relaxed resistance, like unlikely planets glued together off-course. In their infrequent static states, they lay as interestingly twisted as pieces of deadwood. You want to draw what they do as they assume the shapes, motions and functions of wheelbarrows, ful-

crums, rocking horses, seesaws, platforms, toys, tillers, leaves, vehicles and jungle gyms.

Contact improvisation is based on an unsystematic metamorphosis of body weights, balances, measures and sheer trust, in which touch between two or more participants is not a rule but a constant aim. Contactworks' performers are vicariously stimulating, volatile and immediately accessible. Their kind of movement is about as far removed from intellectual analysis as are the sports to which it's often compared. This emphasis on physical over intellectual rigor clears the air of the pretensions, as well as some of the dimension, modern dance forms are supposed to possess. The company's best improvised work is sincerely inventive, unflaggingly energetic and simply great fun to observe. It's a humorous mixture of daring interplay and assured horseplay. Scully set the tone for one of their most engaging improvisations by reciting Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" line, " 'Twas brillig ...," after which the company proceeded wittily to suggest they sometimes were competitive, physically adult children and the writhing creatures and objects of their imagination. They also convey a sensual but non-erotic athleticism: another fine, more thematic improv found Scully and Kruzan acting out through body, facial and verbal expression the poignant awkwardness and anxiety of first-time, adolescent lovers.

It was nice to watch the emergence and merging of four distinct personalities and physical presences. Scully, at 6'8", is like a gracefully overelongated beach boy; Kruzan is the company's most apparently creative entity, with a face that hides almost nothing; Oliver is my idea of what a milkmaid might look like, her work always reliable, her body the most receptive to the others, and Smiley is an exotic elf, a puck with dyed-at-the-neck hair in a punk cut.

Because of their resourceful skill, open ease and comic sensibility, this quartet makes contact improvisation as entertaining to watch as it obviously is for them to perform. They perform with and without music. The evening I saw them they used words instead, sometimes as a drolly effective commentary on the movement or situation it suggests, at other times in a plain silly or trivial way. Sometimes they emitted groans or straining sounds, both for self-mocking theatrical effect and for real, when a particular contact didn't work—and it hurt. Their freedom to be foolish, to make mistakes and recover, is a wonderful opportunity for an audience to feel it's sharing in the creative process. The company has a repertoire of set, choreographed pieces; I'm eager to see, some day, how high they can fly following a sustained, predetermined dance pattern instead of trusting to the often joyous vagaries of spontaneous improvisation.



Contactworks will perform again at 8 p.m. Friday, Nov. 16, in Ozone's 6th floor studio (at 400 N. 1st Ave.) with Nancy Stark Smith, one of the originators of

contact improvisation. Smith also will conduct dance and writing classes in residence Nov. 15 through 21. Call 339-9398 for complete information. □