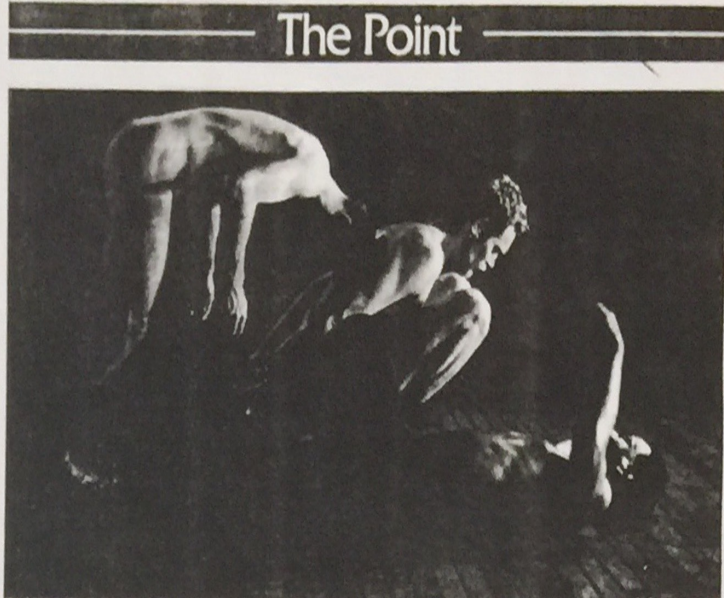
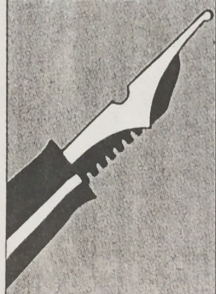


# The Washington Blade



Keith Hennessy, Patrick Scully, and Ishmael Houston-Jones (lying down) improvise before the audience in *Unsafe, Unsited*.

## High-risk contact

Dance performers 'delve into the unconscious'

by Cathryn Harding

A couple of years ago, Patrick Scully took a look around the dance and performance art scene and realized that something was missing. It wasn't that Gay men couldn't be found, says the Minneapolis-based choreographer — quite the contrary. The stages were full of openly Gay artists. But most of these guys were working solo.

"I wondered if that was an economic reality that it's cheaper to work alone," recalls Scully, "or if it was a social and political reality that Gays are less threatening when we're alone on stage — that we're more abstract."

That question, along with other thoughts about the nature of dance — in particular the brand of body-on-body dancing known as contact improvisation favored by Scully — prompted him to launch a Gay group performance structure. He called on fellow dancers Ishmael Houston-Jones from New York and Keith Hennessy from San Francisco to create *Unsafe, Unsited*. Dubbed "a high-risk meditation," the group improvisation comes to Dance Place for two performances this weekend — Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 7 p.m.

The phrase "high-risk" may bring health issues to mind, and certainly HIV/AIDS factors into the improvisation. Scully has had HIV infection for more than 10 years and much of his movement and spoken word has dealt with that on the other occasions when the three men have improvised together. Indeed, for all of them, "HIV is a very real part of our shared cultural reality as Gay men living in three different cities," says Scully.

The other significant risk comes in the very act of improvising. For Houston-Jones, the artistic thrill of acting in the moment, every moment is unsurpassed.

"It allows the performance to be really alive and different every night," he says. "It's like jazz, like playing. We're delving into the unconscious before an audience. And the audience gets to see the

The results are unpredictable, often funny, sometimes somber and sometimes even provocative. Houston-Jones and Hennessy have actually come to blows more than once, although usually the scuffling has taken a form closer to wrestling. The words have ranged from incantations of "he's gone" to queries like "who's your favorite goddess?"

Still, the three dancers know that some things will certainly happen. The piece will last at least 50 minutes, for instance (the person running the lights is instructed to look for an ending after that) and will begin in silence. All three men will be outfitted in business suits and begin the improvisation from different spots on stage. And the music will comprise any or all of a quartet of pre-selected tapes (Aphex Twin and a remix of Led Zeppelin tunes). Indeed, the men rehearse together before performances to get those elements in sync.

How exactly do they "rehearse" an improvisation? Scully says that the process is analogous to being a great conversationalist.

"In the realm of human speech, that's something you can practice," he says. "It doesn't mean you'll have the same conversation time after time, but it's something you can get better at. Our rehearsal process is about improving how we communicate with each other and increasing our shared base of communication. Part of what we do in rehearsal is explore what we're all open to."

For Scully and his fellow improvisers, *Unsafe, Unsited* is always profoundly emotional and extremely physical. In fact, says Houston-Jones, that's the glory of it.

"It's very beautiful to see three Gay men being very physical together," says Houston-Jones. "There are dark elements, but I think it's very hopeful. The three of us are very vital and I think most people feel affirmed by this work." ▼

*Unsafe, Unsited* will be performed at Dance Place March 23 and 24. For more information, see the Appointments calendar.