

Dancers, musicians join in improvisation for an uneven show

By Mike Steele/Staff Writer

Improvisational performance is a risky venture with, more often than not, minimal returns. As dancers, actors and musicians know, improvisation in private can pay dividends, developing trust among performers, stimulating creative and spontaneous acts, testing and expanding the performers' field of expression.

But what's a process in private turns into a product in performance and too often the glib and facile, the desire for immediate audience reaction, pushes aside the deeper explorations at the heart of the form.

Patrick Scully is a veteran improviser and Chris Aiken is one of the best I've seen at physical improvisation, at using his lithe, fluid body to explore stage space and hurl himself into the unknown. When the two of them teamed up this year on the Minnesota Dance Alliance's Short Order series their performance was an unusually provocative one.

On one hand, they created richly fascinating shapes making savvy use of their contrasting body types — Scully tall and rawboned; Aiken short, silky, lighter than air. That made for inevitable humor, which they tossed off with almost throwaway wit. But on a deeper level, they touchingly gave themselves to each other, responding like jazz musicians to every nuance of the other's movements so that their often complex partnering was at once sensuous, mutually energizing and, ultimately, moving.

It was two men supporting, nurtur-

A review

Improvising Movement Music

Who: Improvisational dances by Chris Aiken and Patrick Scully.

Where: Walker Art Center auditorium.

Review: Aiken and Scully, joined by dancer E.E. Balcos and three musicians, are marvelous physical improvisers who create wonderful, often touching, sometimes very witty work. But here they get too involved with words and try too obviously to play to the audience. The result at best is a good-timey, gamelike show that elides over deeper, richer material.

ing and stimulating each other into ever richer interrelationships, and both on a physical and metaphorical level, it was important work.

The two reappeared for one performance Saturday at Walker Art Center, joined this time by fellow dancer E.E. Balcos, pianist Carei Thomas, wind player David Edminster and percussionist Eric Coursen, for a program called "Improvising Movement Music."

The purpose this time was to extend the improvisational mode beyond categories, so improvisational musicians could interact physically and verbally with dancers while the dancers could attempt to improvise like jazz musicians either through movement or, more often, through quick ad lib speech.



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Photo by Glenn Halvorson

Chris Aiken, left, and Patrick Scully performed in "Forward Motion 1992" at the Walker Art Center.

What had been important with the two alone became far less important with the larger group. What had been giving, probing, a private sharing of experience in the first performance here became six guys working independently in the same space, each reacting more to the audience than to each other.

The intention seemed different from the beginning. It was a good-timey, fun and games atmosphere and on that level was often engaging. Occasionally, good ideas would emerge and the group would follow through — one dealing with Aiken

and a precariously created pathway of tall stools was wonderful.

But just as often a verbal ad lib — one about having a baby comes to mind — led the group nowhere beyond a few facile jokes, yet they determinedly explored the concept until it all finally dissipated.

An oddity of the evening was that with three strong musicians and three strong dancers they gave the most weight to words, which is not their strength.