

A year of collaborations on Fridays

by Warren Burt

For the past year, I've been involved in one of the most rewarding artistic collaborative projects in my life. Collaboration has always been an extremely important part of my creative activity. I love it because it makes me do things I wouldn't otherwise do, aiding my quest for art activities that will help me change, grow and explore. But for the past year, the Year of Fridays project, organised by choreographer Al Wunder, has been an exceptionally fertile and wonderful occasion for all sorts of collaborative activities.

Taking place at the Theatre of the Ordinary, Wunder's dance studio/performance space in the inner Melbourne suburb of Richmond, between 30 May 1997 and 29 May 1998, the Year of Fridays was a project where dancers, actors, musicians, performance artists, etc. performed improvisationally every Friday night for a year. Some of the performances were quite carefully prepared, with only some improvisational elements. Some were completely spontaneous. Some were solos, some were made by groups who have worked a lot together, and a number were one-offs, where people who hadn't worked together previously tried things out. What was especially valuable to many of us in the project was that here was a place where, in front of a sympathetic audience, we could take risks without fear; a place to try out ideas; a place to experiment. In addition to performing, I also videotaped most of the performances, so I got to see most of what was done during the year.

In all the cases, the collaborative nature of the enterprise affected what was done, and how it was done. For example, in my case, I did several solo performances, as well as collaborations with dancers, and with other musicians. The dancers I worked with were Shona Innes, Peter Trotman and Jane Refshauge, all of whom I have worked with before; and Glynis Angell, who I hadn't worked with. The musicians I duetted with were Ernie Althoff, Ros Bandt, Brigid Burke and Mardi McCullea, whom I had worked with previously; and Alessandro Servadei, David Chesworth, Helen Mountfort, Fran Power, Le Tuan Hung, David Tolley and Hartley Newnham, all of whom I may have known previously, but I hadn't actually made music with any of them before.

The 'topics' of the improvisations were determined by the personnel involved. Shona and I share a fascination with physics and new scientific ideas. Our work together, then, was a theatrical improvisation dealing with numbers, infinity, and mathematical ideas. On the other hand, Hartley Newnham is very involved in poetry and in extracting the music inherent in words. In our work together we

used five short poems by the Slovenian poet Tamaz Salamun as the basis for our improvisations for two voices and sampler. (And, in a further example of *real* improvisation, in performance, after the third poem, the sampler crashed. I then moved my chair next to Hartley, and performed vocally what I might have improvised on the sampler for the last two texts!)

Sometimes instrumentation determined our improvisations. For example, Ros Bandt has a Casio MIDI horn which she wanted to use. I had the idea that she should use it to control non-instrumental sounds. We also were both tired of doing very serious work, and wanted to do something lighter. I wrote a computer program which would randomly change the patches that Ros' horn would control, so she couldn't predict which sounds would come out. Unfortunately, I didn't write it too well, so it kept crashing, unpredictably producing silences. In the end, our performance was a collaboration between me on computer, her on MIDI horn, and my cranky, incompetently written program. It was a very funny performance, enjoyable both for us and for the audience.

Another example of the influence of choice of instrument on the improvisation was my improvisation with Mardi McCullea. I had found a number of seaweed 'floats' on a trip to the beach, and found that when dried they made quite nice single pitch ocarina-like instruments. I suggested to Mardi that, as a flute player, she might like to play them. She said that she would be delighted to—to the exclusion of using the flute—she had been wanting to get away from the flute for a while, and this was a perfect opportunity. She then proceeded to play the instruments, shaping each tone eloquently, the end result having more in common with shakuhachi than with flute technique. In response I came up with a computer accompaniment where the physical gestures of my hands (using a Buchla Lightning MIDI controller) would produce soft electronic glides and swoops in order to match the dipping, gliding tones she was producing.

Long-deferred desires also influenced the improvisations. For example, David Chesworth and I had never improvised together before. We both play keyboard electronics, so two keyboards seemed a natural medium. We also both had an interest in rhythms, though from fairly different perspectives. On my own I would probably never have done the repetitive, boppy, Bulgarian-influenced hammering on the keyboard improvisation we did together. But, coming out of our working with each other, I was delighted.

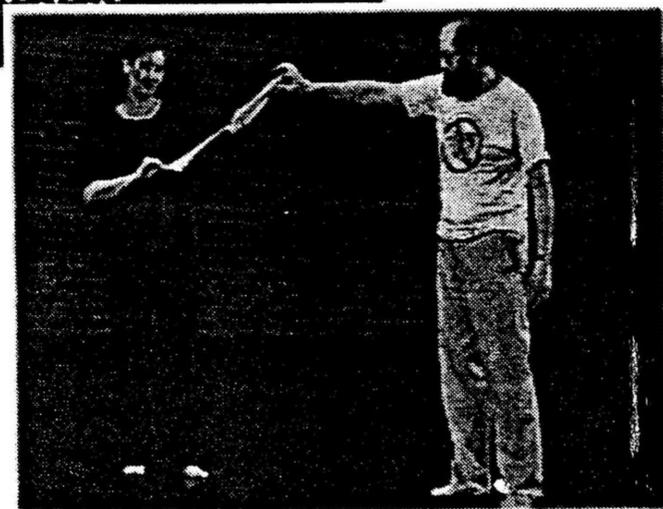
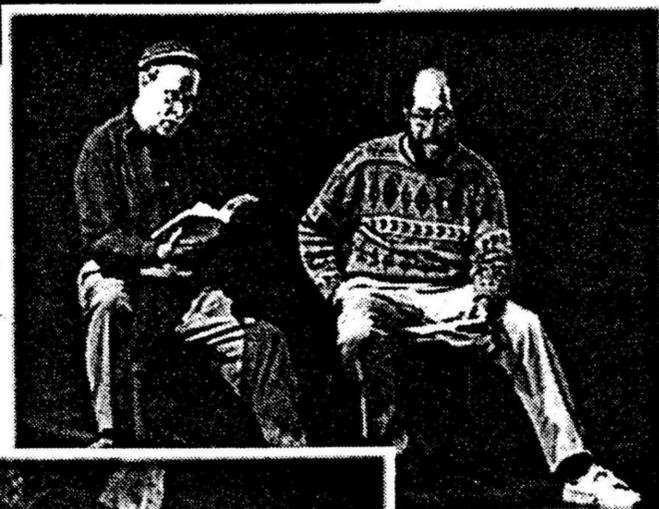
In another case, my desire to 'throw a curve' at a friend, and to see what they did with it, was the motivation for a work. Brigid Burke makes very elegant improvisations and compositions for electronically modified clarinet, which I like very much. They are, to my ears, the epitome of good taste. So I asked her if she would mind having a really crass collage of cheesy pop fragments thrown at her while she worked with the electronically modified clarinet. She said that she thought it would be fun to try. I found a number of really garish Cantonese pop songs, which I proceeded to dismantle into some fairly hilarious and jarring samples. I then added a number of other samples to the stew. In a twenty-minute performance, I hurled about eighty different samples at her, which, with the grace of a Martina Hingis, she musically served right back at me. We both enjoyed this one so much that I've since made two versions of a tape of my improvising with the samples that she can use in a solo performance context.

Physical limits also affected our performances. Ten years ago, Jane Refshauge and I had performed some contact improvisation (a form of dance improvisation where the performers must always maintain physical contact with each other—the idea is always to be giving and receiving weight in different ways) while both wearing piano accordions. Since then, we have both aged ten years, she has hurt her back, and I now have a new high-tech Dutch kneecap, the result of an accident in Holland. We decided to revive the performance, working with the new diminished limits of our bodies, while still keeping the premise of the original improvisation unaltered. Ten years ago, it was a mildly dangerous improvisation. We could have been hurt doing it, if we weren't careful. Now, it was treacherous. By learning to respect our limits, we were able to keep our performing safe, and yet still have it look both controlled and satisfying.

Each of the collaborations provided different challenges. In all the cases, we all wanted to do things that were an amalgam of the talents and desires of the participants. Working with David Tolley, for example, was thrilling. His level of virtuosity and the quickness of his imagination are astounding. I suggested that, as I was eager to try out Ross Bencina's new real-time sound modification program AudioMulch (another topic to be discussed here might be the collaboration between the improviser and the electronic or acoustic instrument designer), that I record samples of his playing and modify them against his live playing. He agreed that playing into this kind of distorted musical mirror might be fun. After the performance I said to him that I was sweating during the performance, as I was always changing what I was doing in an effort to keep up with his wonderfully rapidly changing playing. He said that he was changing so fast in response to the extreme rate of change in my playing. To our mutual delight, we had both become involved in a feedback loop.

One of the most magical moments of collaboration was in an early rehearsal with Glynis Angell. We both approached this, our first working together, without too many clear ideas of what the other could do. Just to warm up, I put on the accordion and started playing. She began just by doing dancer's warm-ups and stretches. No words passed between us. Gradually I played more and more elaborate phrases, and she began moving with larger and larger gestures. Suddenly something clicked, and we realised we were both performing in response to each other, with a gentleness and sensitivity that took us both quite by surprise. It was moments like this, and there were many of them during this past year, that made the Year of Fridays project so incredibly rewarding and fulfilling.

Warren Burt is a composer, writer, radio producer and video and computer graphics artist who lives and works in Melbourne. His most recent work has been in live performance with interactive technology and/or accordion. He was recently awarded an Australia Council Composer's Fellowship for 1998–2000.



Photos from top:

Ernie Althoff and Warren Burt performing 26.9.97
STILL FROM A VIDEO BY ANDREW MORRISH

Hartley Newnham and Warren Burt performing 24.4.98
STILL FROM A VIDEO BY CLARE HEYWOOD

Jane Refshauge performing 23.1.98
STILL FROM A VIDEO BY ANDREW MORRISH

Shona Innes and Warren Burt performing 26.11.97
STILL FROM A VIDEO BY ANDREW MORRISH