

## **The Opening.**

An art project + An party-as-case study of improvisatory events.

by tori husain

As an events producer who has always desired building spaces between worlds, as a body of multiplicities – I always have questioned my relationship to structure and improvisatory looseness. What are the fixed structures and places to create myself/body -- the “right way”? Where are the places where this connection can be freeform? The swing between the pendulum of structure/structure-lessness? Is life possible in between the three – where did this life force exist?

Thus, obsessed with understanding the body as a smaller fractal representation of the space we inhabit, Spring 2025, I attempted to play with these swinging dualities through an event series titled “Residency”. This was a three-part(y) production bringing together artists from Harvard, Cambridge and the Global Community, to question what a residence was – our body, our identity, our space – and how we could evoke its transformation using motifs of the circus. The first two parties worked with a completely different set of artists with ranging formats – the first highly structured and the second highly improvisatory. The last event toyed with an amalgam of both teams plus two new artists – a blend of improvisation and structure. For the sake of this essay, I plan on particularly analyzing my experiences within the first event to analyze the relationship between the use of structure and improvisation in music events – to propose a new form of running events through improvisation attuned to the needs of participants to evoke aliveness. Ideally, these takeaways will add to the conversation and act as a tool for event

producers/directors to play with improvisatory performatic formats more strategically to positively impact audiences.

### **The Party.**

- **Format:** Structured >>> Structure-lessness
- **Where:** Williams Chapel and Multifaith Room at Harvard Divinity School
- **When:** April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 6-9:30PM
- **Who:** Karina Yum – Dancer, Mya Johnson – DJ.

### **The Planning:**

As an events producer, much of my training within the industry has been to create highly structured shows with clear call times for performances – so, this first show was highly tied to structure. With a focus on the unleashing of the circus animal, to create this somatic releasing, I collaborated on a lineup that was strictly ordered by time and space: we would start in Harvard's William's chapel with Spotify music as guests walked in to mingle and eat from 6 to 7pm, then the lindy hop dance teacher would organically begin the electric slide at 7pm, then at 7:15pm I, the ringleader, would introduce myself/the show with a planned speech, we would dance some more, I would take all the participants through the secret doorway at 7:30pm and introduce them to another room with DJs for participants to dance with until 10pm. Our team had rehearsed this, the dance teacher had a syllabus, the DJs had prepared their sets for exact times and before the show the team was ready to follow this set timeline.

Then, the show had other plans.

## **The Show:**

When the event started, we watched as a group, many of the dancer's friends arrived on time, many filling the few chairs at the front area of the Harvard Divinity School's Williams Chapel. Even though music was playing, many of these people sat in the chairs and were mingling with each other. Knowing the community that I often invite typically shows up to the event around an hour later than what the invitation says to start, I was planning on sitting and waiting for that first hour – per our event plan. Then, by 6:45 when there was still a low turnout – I went up to the dance teacher and asked her to delay. 7:15 passed. Then 7:30 – still delaying the dance portion, inevitably shifting the altered timeline. With still a low turnout and feeling the sitting crowd's anxiety for a change in space, or need for entertainment – I sprinted to bring the collaborating DJ and Dancer together who both felt the same angst of the bored crowd. We needed to make an absolute shift in our plans; shift the vibes to bring the crowd to the excitement we intended to have. So live, hearts pounding, in the corner of the Chapel the three of us met – and made quick decisions to augment the party so that I, the ringleader host, would begin. We would bring the audience to the second room and then conduct both the dance portion and DJ section in the same room. And this is what we did. As soon as we transitioned the crowd to enter the other room, we viscerally felt the awakening of their energy, one of aliveness and excitement. The participants were taught how to partner dance by the dance teacher, surprised by the new room, as she also augmented her lessons. I announced the introduction to the other acts, and the DJs played sets that made everyone feel alive. It was a raging success – not just for the participants but the surprised collaborators too.

## **A new framework: the Improvisatory Party**

After learning this new successful way of making a high vibrational experience, this first show gave me fascinating takeaways which would serve as the basis to inform the two other shows that would continue to lead this – centering on the idea of: what could a party look like if it was a little bit looser with its plans? Here is what I learned are important tenants.

1. It is essential to work with collaborators open to improvisation.

As the DJ, dance teacher and I actively revised our format at the party, I noticed as one of the dance teacher's friends (her planned assistant) began to struggle a bit with the shift in plans. He had mentally planned to teach in one room with one format, and I could tell his nerves and resistance to shifting the dance lesson real time. This made it apparent to me that the personality and collaborator experience with improvisation was essential in allowing a break in the format – as with the other collaborators this augmentation of experience was open/easy. I interpreted this openness due to the often, open artistic process of both the DJ whose work often centers on the real-time needs of a crowd, and a Lindy Hop dance teacher whose lessons would often need to highly adapt to the student's learning style. This openness to change on-the-spot easily led to the success of the event.

2. The feelings of the crowd operate at their own pacing and is essential to follow.

When presenting different energetic flows to the audience, reading the crowd real-time, we were able to get data about information you would not have planned prior. For example, the original plan factored in the arrival of certain participants at a certain time block. Yet, when the event itself began, an entirely different crowd arrived and many of my invited guests did not end up coming until significantly later in the event. Reading the needs of the room in real time – feeling the boredom of the seemingly shyer group who

had entered on time – allowed us to be in higher relation to the group we were surrounded by. This relationship, being of service to the group, I feel, allowed for the explosion of embodied connection which arose in the second half of the event when participants felt awe and shock.

3. Sometimes these improvisatory decisions come in high pressure crucibles and happen in minutes.

Reflecting, I feel that it is fascinating the decision-making processes which can happen at such a rapid pace when bodies are under pressure. Prior to the event, the collaborators and I spent weeks creating exact planning of how to perform minute-by-minute performatic elements of the event – from scripting to songs to movement. By the time the event ended, many of these elements had been completely altered with a story seemingly co-written by the alive audience. When us three collaborators entered the fast-decision-making process to actively shift the night's plans – we all embodied a laser focus. Less distracted by the elements of “what could be” commonly found in the elongated creative process, we needed to make decisions to impact an almost-bored audience into excitement and aliveness. There was not any time for overthinking, decisions needed to be made, and we felt a phenomenal clarity to think quickly and then prioritize action.

4. The structure of the space made this improvisation possible.

Though the improvisatory frame allows for feelings of freedom, high attunement to the audience and the possibility of an incredible event, this is only possible also because of the structure of the event. If this event had been done without a timeline, set collaborators, a set theme and/or space, the experience would have lost its power and

potency of creating affecting experiences. The overall strict beginning and end of the event allowed for the high decision-making pressure of the main collaborators to be possible, and for performers to want to make the most of their performance – knowing that their time was viscerally limited. Additionally, the space allowed for a delineation of bodies to assert more focused attunement from the improvisatory artists on the particular guests. If the room had been full of transient beings coming in and out without knowing if they were actively part of the event, the artists would likely struggle with reading the needs of the room as they would not know who they would be directly making music for. Thus, having an intentionally closed room of guests made this group obvious, and easier to serve. Lastly, though I had spent weeks working on the lineup and the performance which ended up not materializing at the event itself, this structure infused the ways that all the artists' intentions in the space moved. In this sense, the practice of creating an event frame was more of a ritualistic element subconscious infusion/intention setting which allowed for the performers to sincerely embody these values/ways of performing when it came to the performance. Fascinatingly, as the material plans made prior did not show themselves, the event's intentions made their way to reality obviously.

### **Another way...**

This creative framework of working among improvisatory artists to attune an event to the needs of the crowd in real-time is one that I feel must be used more in artistic spaces. This orientation prioritizes using artistic mediums as service to the participants, following the greater need of the room and the people in it rather than the individual priorities of the performers. As this

framework was implemented in the following two events of the series, with a fully loosened improvisatory lineup at the second event and a blend of both structure and improvisation in the last event – I am still on the process of learning where a balance must exist but look forward to discussing this evolving music ritualistic format to other producers in my field to expand their scope of possibility.