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## On embodied pedagogy: An interview with Julyen Hamilton



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*Julyen Hamilton, an English poet, improviser, dancer and musician, is well known in the Czech dance scene both as a teacher and as a performer. Since the late 1990s he has been invited to teach and perform at festivals and institutions and to work with alternative theatre and dance companies and spaces. In this interview, he shares his pedagogical practice and approach to creation. The interview took place during a workshop in Amsterdam in 2024 where the three authors came as part of their academic artistic-practice-based research.*

**Julyen, we have already done a few interviews with you, but this time we would like to focus on pedagogy. Our questions will be more or less connected to our current research on embodied teaching and learning. And so, here comes the first one: why, in the feedback, do we never hear you say, “This isn’t good”?**

Primarily, because I don’t think like that. If I feel there’s more work to be done, then it’s my work to find out what is that more work which is to be done. And, based on that intuition or observation, to deliver something which makes sense to the person to whom I’m speaking. A “not good” doesn’t sound like a very good opener because we’re trying to let things develop. The energy of “good” or “bad” seems to take away from the immense energy that’s needed to see what can be refined and to place it in terms of either actions or words or exercises, in order to take that person further into what they’re doing.

**In the studio, you speak of “work that needs to be done”, “letting things develop” or “placing energy into actions”. We experience these pedagogical principles at your workshops. But what do you actually teach? Jiří Lössl, one of our colleagues, who worked with you and Steve Paxton in the 1990s in Bratislava, told us that you used to teach dancing and how to be creative in partnering and Contact Improvisation back then. However, when Jiří experienced your teaching two years ago in Prague, it made him reflect on the development of your approach. How would you name what you teach now?**

I teach people to be creative with their body, with dancing, with objects, with their voice, making performances and performing them.

I don't maybe teach how to dance. I let you dance. I arrange the situation and, through those arrangements and the igniting of inspirations, then you dance. I work with an amount of subtlety, so people sometimes don't see that as the way into dancing or don't notice that it's dancing. Because it comes directly from the physical, human, spiritual, heartfelt body that wishes to live those series of moments in detailed artistic movement. And to come into it in that way is very different than to come into it through a style, or through a series of dance movements placed together one by one, or a searching for a set of dance movements that you might think, by stringing them together, you could call a phrase and then more phrases and then call that a dance. These days, people are, on one level, able to go more immediately into the depths of instructions, and then, through their physicalising, they arrive at the dancing.

**This seems to be connected with the fact that you work with all different kinds of people. How do you navigate the situation of having people of all levels of experience in your workshops? We can see participants from advanced dancers to beginners, or even people from different artistic fields and disciplines.**

Oh, that's the richness. The only thing I demand is that people are absolutely dedicated and serious within the work. It helps when they've studied or practised something to a certain degree. It can be anything, but they've taken it to a certain level through going through a process whereby you practise and you become able. They've gone through the skills-learning tradition of being able to change and to recognise change and to recognise the inspiration of where to go with your inspiration and the evolution of your working.

When that is there, then the fact that someone is 18 years old or whether they've been working 20 or 30 years makes, on one level, very little difference. Every time you go into the studio, you're starting to work and allowing it to be profound and expressive; you're dealing with the work and how you are at that moment.

The other advantage is that then – and I've had this image for a long time – it's wonderful to be in a room with people of different experience because the older teach the young and the younger teach the old. When Charlie Chaplin met his wife, I think, she was 18 and he was 53. And he said to her "Aren't you afraid that I'm going to grow old?" and she said: "No! You're going to teach me how to grow and live and I'm going to teach you how to stay young."

Everybody has their different wisdoms – some through the crazy youthful years of innocence and some through the years of experience. The point is: live working is live working. And the live moment is *it*.

### **How do you think about hierarchy in teaching situations?**

I think it's a wonderful theatre. As dear Mr Dylan said, you've got to know what theatre you're working in. And when, as you know, you have children, you're in the theatre of being mum or your partners of being dad and your children are in the theatre of being kids. And then when you're not with them, you're in a different theatre.

Well, right now you're in a theatre of being an interviewer. And I'm in the theatre of being... interviewed. So it's just a case of knowing very clearly which theatre one is in. In other words, what are the parameters and what is the goodness of the situation? And the goodness of the situation in a teacher-student situation is that the students can relax into being students and the teachers can relax into being teachers. And both roles have just as many but different responsibilities and rights to ask of the others certain things. The teacher can ask something of the students. The student demands something of the teacher. As long as that deal, that theatre, is clear enough for everybody, and the rules of it are not being abused, then the situation can be truly positive.

What we must distinguish is: a different role does not mean people are not equal. People being equal doesn't mean to say they're all in the same role. And this is a great confusion sometimes. We can be equal and in different roles.

### **MM: Listening to you, I wonder if you are familiar with the situation where you would be teaching with someone else? Having a plurality of teachers' voices?**

Yes, I have done that and it is very delicate. It doesn't particularly interest me. Yes, I have done it with Barre Phillips, with musicians. I did it for a few years with Mark Tompkins. But in each case we had a very special relationship. So that, at the end of the morning of my class, Mark would sometimes say at the beginning of his [class]: "Well, remember everything we did with Julyen? Right! Now forget it!" And so there'd be a very respectful, complete shift. As opposed to trying to reinforce or back up the other. We were, on one level, very different and yet underneath our differences were complementary.

And with Barre Phillips, we just took the classes as a stream of intuitive interludes, entering the work as two voices intertwining as we each saw fit in the moment. But that was how we were naturally when together performing duets on stage.

When there is only a single teacher, then the student can face you directly and they won't be disturbed by a second voice. They can focus through the one mind of the single teacher.

Many of us have grown up with two parents and we know that that's quite something to navigate, two parents. It's very healthy in a developmental sense, but being a student in a dance or theatre workshop is not developmental in the same way. Risk it. Risk to put all your eggs in one basket and just listen to one thing/one person, and go deep in that one thing. Otherwise, it so easily becomes comparative. And when your education



*Julyen Hamilton, Prague Improvisation Orchestra and dancers,*  
CreWcollective, Divadlo Ponec, April 2023. Photo: Tereza Jakoubková

becomes comparative, I think you're talking about how they do it, rather than actually doing what they're asking you to do. Every student has to learn the idiosyncrasies and the weaknesses and the way of speaking and the nature of the teacher, and that's a lot of work for a student to do. So to have to do twice that amount is twice as much work.

I want to really credit the fact that the student brings a lot of energy and a lot of focus to actually get to know who and how the teacher is being and through which subtle voices they can receive deeper than the form, what the teacher is giving to the essence of the work, which is neither the student nor the teacher – it's the essence of the work. That takes a lot of work on the teacher's point of view, from the teacher's side, to expose that, to expose the work. And the student has the similar work to go beyond the character of the teacher into the work that is being proposed.

**MR: Yesterday we did this exercise: one was moving on the line doing the grammar; the other was doing the melody. I think this exercise, among other things, helps to activate the inner viewer in yourself. So that you don't need the other person in the flesh. You cultivate this ability to observe yourself. Do you have this inner viewer when you teach and when you perform? Who are they?**

Perspicacity. You see through the mirror or through the immediate illusion of what you're doing. You see the bigger picture. You go through the immediacy of your own fire and notice not just what your energy is making but what is being made. And so it's a case of what you're focusing on. And I think very often when you're very young, you focus completely on the imagination. And you don't have technique and you don't have other worries. You go straight to it. It's a childlike experience. And it's wonderful because you go straight to the flesh. You go straight to the point that was held in your imagination. And sometimes it's frustrating because you lose it for whatever reason. And if you're really busy with it, you certainly don't want to come inside in time for tea or go to bed that early. Because you're going straight from "zero" directly towards that thing you imagine. And you don't even have to consider how you will get there. You just go there in your imagination, and your imagination somehow asks of the body to take you there. And this of course is the childlike state, but it's also the later, deeply mature state.

You've forgotten your technique and you just go straight to it. You start working with technical or any skills; you become aware of your own body, your own mind, your own breathing, your own observation, your own being, your own character – a plethora of things, which is you and which have to be refined so that (eventually) they don't get in the way. And that all of the mechanisms of them, the physiological mechanisms, the mental and emotional mechanisms, can allow you to go straight into that place of imagination like you did when [you were] a child.



*Julyen Hamilton, Prague Improvisation Orchestra and dancers,*  
CreWcollective, Studio Hrdinů, November 2024. Photo: Tomáš Hejzlar

But you've gone through years of awareness, self-awareness, awareness of self-awareness and the complexities and different layers of all of that. And that has to be, it just seems like that has to be done because we live in a very material world and that's the tempering of the metal... the material which is us. As with the metal, the heating it up, the putting it in the cold, the hitting it, the heating it again, the hitting it, the putting it in the cold. It realigns and relaxes something and it takes many years. You put yourself through a process, but you observe yourself going through that process. And then the further process is to go beyond seeing yourself doing it.

**MR: Speaking of the inner observer, in 2017, when I was in your workshop in Prague, I was concerned whether my dancing was "good enough". It took me years to shake this worry off, not to be concerned with it, to get to the real work.**

Mostly it does, yes.

**MR: And this inner viewer that I'm talking about was observing and criticising me, not being really helpful.**

When I was a child, criticism didn't mean negative criticism. And then the word started to be used mostly to denote negative criticism. The inner voice is the critic, and without a critic you're lost. But you stop using your critical facility when it is a pre-judged negativity. Then it risks becoming an escape. Maybe another reason why I don't say "bad" is that we've got enough of those voices saying "not good". We don't need any more.

I usually work with praise, because I've noticed that things grow with praise.

You know, people sometimes say, "Julyen, why don't you work with more difficulty?" And I must confess that, in my experience, you'll get to experience enough difficulty in your life... maybe you do not need for the teacher to bring you any more.

I don't think we need to be given more difficulty as a way of working. I think there's a fine enough amount of difficulty in the world, and to come into the studio and work even more with difficulty is rather stupid. But I do understand the slave situation. And we love our slaves and we love being slave drivers, and we also love being slaves. We love the whole mechanism of slavery. We're deeply, deeply, enamoured by the whole concept of slaves. We don't even mind whether it's us driving the slaves or it's us being driven. This concept of something, or some force, which drives the other, is deep. I see it. It's deeply, deeply, in many of us. And it's become so pernicious that it's nearly, for many of us, the last resort to gaining energy, the energy to do what we want to do. And I just think we should move on. You know, we've got more important work to do. We've got a lot of important work to do individually and in the world.

**MR: How do you take care of the conditions in the workshops so things can happen? Both in the morning and the afternoon, because those are usually two different situations/set-ups.**

Strictly. Sometimes it's not noticed and that's very fine by me. The stricter it is, the more freedom that there is for everybody in the room, the clearer it is in my mind, in my heart, what it is we're doing, then the more space there is for everybody, including me, to involve themselves in what is demanded. The moment that I'm not clear, that I'm not strict about the core of what that day or that morning is about, then I notice the whole room floats... wondering. Not in an interestingly free-range way, and I don't wish anybody to waste their time.

We have five hours. People have paid a certain amount of money. They have brought all their attention. They may have left their families to do this work. They've travelled. There's a lot of commitment already. The least I can do is to be clear about what we're doing in the morning and what we're doing in the afternoon. Many years ago, that clarity was very horizontal. There was a list of things that I wanted to touch upon. I wanted to get

a bit of this done, then a bit of that done. And this had a clear and structured pedagogy to it. And after every class, I would write down what we'd done or what we hadn't done.

It was a list of what we did and didn't do. And then there was a list of what we did do, which had not been planned. And as the years went on, the fifteen things that I wanted to do became ten, became five. Until now, not only do they become one but I can even hold them in my mind without thinking of them. So that they don't even become a thing. They don't even become a theme. They become some little niggle in my body and mind. And if I get that, then I go to that sensation and thought, and then out from there come the exercises, the comments, the situations, all of those things. And then that's the class designing itself. I need that central focus, and it's not a theme, it's a point. It's the point of a point before the point of the point becomes a point. This may sound pretentious but it is how I perceive it!

**MR: We can feel that originating in the class, stemming from the interest of people and their comments or whatever springs out there. And you navigating us through that and building upon that. It is felt in the studio.**

Well, this is the way it works. And it's after a few thousand classes. I always wanted to get to this place. I remembered my teachers and I remembered them going in, and I don't remember the syllabus. I don't remember what they were talking about. We just went straight in. And that was magical. And to have something magical in the scholastic context was amazing. Of course, it made all the other classes hell for me, because you had to remember things, and I couldn't remember them. And then you had to have read things, and I would fall asleep reading. And so that wasn't very good. I mean, it was a series of failures. But luckily, I was blessed with being educated beside very intelligent people. So I was used to this alertness of mind. They just remembered all the facts, so they got the straight A's. I didn't do that bit. But I could participate in the alertness of their mind. And when the teacher could appeal to something nearly unspoken, I found this was very, very exciting. And I had the feeling I just wanted to share, to let people have that experience of that dot, that focus, that immediately goes to the higher mind. And from that, you get solid, fleshy exercises.

**MR: Speaking of teachers, in one of the previous interviews we did with you, you mentioned working with Rosemary Butcher and the experience that gave you to build upon in your further work. In this workshop here, you mentioned the late Steve Paxton. How do you deal with sources in your material? Is there some exercise or principle that you use in its original form, original meaning, as you encountered it?**

I noticed when I worked with Richard Alston at one point, it was as if I'd done weeks and weeks and it was only six weeks of his classes. But it influenced me for years and years and years. I can get a lot of mileage out of a few days. And sometimes when people

say, "Oh, you must have known those people very well..." and I reply "No, I just met them for a weekend." But it was so intense and it marked me because of its essence.

It was then my work to just go into the essence and see what comes out now. To see what comes out in the present moment and time, because when you're teaching, you're not teaching for you or your past, you're teaching for the people in the class now, not for the you that was in those classes then. And you're also not teaching the classes that you would have liked to have had yourself. We all, as teachers, make mistakes with that. And that's perfectly understandable. But deeply, the only people that matter are the people in the room, and they matter to me. I often can't even remember people's names. I mean, I'm awful like that. But I teach their spirit, I care about their spirit. But somebody else has to remind me of their names.

Sometimes I do take specific exercises from other disciplines, but I rarely do this and I always credit the sources involved.

**MR: We are touching upon the question of authorship and ethics. Some people come repeatedly to your workshops. How do you deal with the fact that they also take this material and they teach it themselves, or they use it in their performances?**

Oh, good luck to them. You can't mess around with good material. I don't mean you can't mess around with what I'm teaching. (And there surely is a mountain of misunderstanding in those whom I teach.) What I mean is, the essence of good material cannot be really deformed. That's what good material is. It might not be good material, as I'm saying it, but the essence of it is good material.

And so anyway, many people misunderstand me. So, I know that fifty per cent of what I say might be misunderstood. And that's how it is. You have to get used to that. You say two sentences, and one has this logic and the other has this logic. I often have to correct what people say they remember of what is said. I'm very strict with this. They have every right to say, this is what you said, and then to be corrected. They have every right to that, because all of that is part of the process of handling it, juggling with it and embodying it. So, understanding it precisely is of importance, but it's not the end goal. The end goal is the essence of it. And once you get to the essence, it cannot be messed around with.

I received many influences from Bob Cohan because Cohan, whenever he looked at me, whenever I saw him looking at people, would look right through many, many layers of them as if he was seeing right to their essence, even beneath dancing. I will never forget that. He looked to the point which was beyond his style, or his culture, or his ideas, or his learned nature. He just went deeper. He led me deeper. Deeper to that other place that doesn't have a right or wrong or doesn't have an opinion about it. And he was just correcting in a context which had complete practicality, but it was a way of doing it. And he could do it with his eyes, and he could do it with his hands. And you just knew that you were receiving something of essence.



Workshop with Julyen Hamilton, *Working with Objects*, CreWcollective, Prague, November 2024.  
Photo: Tomáš Hejzlar

**MR:** Last year in April, in Prague, we went one morning to a café and I was telling you about this research that we had just started with Markéta and Jana, and what it was about – cultivating the performer's inner viewer, and the performer's abilities to do/perform/act but also to watch/observe/see. I think these abilities inform each other.

Yes.

**MR:** And the next day, you thematised the viewing, the watching and the seeing in the opening of your workshop. And I was thinking, is this because it has always been there in your teaching or are you formulating it in a certain way because of our conversation? This thought leads me to our question: does our research and close conversations with you influence you? Or is this an example of synchronicity, that we pay attention to certain terminology, principles or language, because that's what we are dealing with right now?

Both. Everything's all together. Everything's co-influencing itself. We can call it serendipity or coincidence, or we can deny it. And if we deny it, then what is happening only half happens, so we don't notice the coincidences because we're half doing. But as soon as you start deeply doing something, all the coincidences come out of the woodwork. And they always do. That's the "cry from the heart", "God, give me a sign!" And God says, "Yeah, well, just do something completely, and then I'll give you a sign. I can't give you a sign if you go halfway and check and say, 'Is it okay?'" No, you have to go fully in and then all the signs, all the omens, all the coincidences, are evident.

What I'm meaning is that everything is in place. But to get to the place where everything is in place is a lot of work and a lot of not quite getting to the place where everything is in its place. And before everything is in its place, everything might need to be moved to be in its place. But once everything is in its place, nothing has to be moved. As they say: "When you give up trying, it happens." It's not quite like that in my experience. It's when you give up trying too much, but you still nevertheless are working at it.

If you don't extend that energy, then there's nothing to which those coincidences can arrive. But there are times in life when you... Shirley MacLaine said this in that book that she wrote, *Dancing in the Light*. She said that the moment she decided to go deeply into her spiritual path and hole herself up in a Swedish hotel room for six months to write, all of these things just suddenly started coming to her. These people and these suggestions and these offers. And I think everyone experiences that if they've ever been blessed enough to go into something to a certain level.

**MM:** I hear there is a parallel between the things that you are teaching others and doing yourself as a dancer and improviser. What I hear are the same words when you describe the paths. There is a lot of work, a lot of not coming to the right ends, and then at some point, coming to the right ends and sensing, as well as in the instant

**composing or being on stage in the moment, as well as in being in the class. And you said you had this pedagogical material from previous years, becoming at one point embodied inside you, and then you work with it as if you were on a stage, yet as a pedagogue on stage.**

A few years ago, somebody said to me, I think either after class or after performance, "But, Julyen, you're teaching what you do." And I went: "Yes, of course." What did you expect? You expected a performer to have a performing life and then teach something else? It's all one thing. I do what I do, and I teach what I do, and I do what I teach. I'm perfectly content to do what I do and teach what I do and do what I teach.

**MM: It is also to me a question of "how". You teach what you do. And is the way you teach it the same way as you do what you do? For instance, being in the moment and working. With your gathered material?**

Oh, yes, yes. Yeah. A few years ago, when the World Wide Web began, somebody said: "Oh, we're putting things up online, and you're a teacher of improvising. Please, can you tell us, could you write ten things about how to teach improvising?" And I think number one was just improvise in class. Do it. Do what you you're asking the students to do. Be what you're asking them to be. Do what you're asking them to do.

Do what you do, and ask them to do what you do. And do what you do in front of them, you know?

I don't have set answers beforehand. I have them at the time. And then I don't have them afterwards. They are for that moment. And that's the beautiful thing of what Giacomo [Calabrese] said: "It's sacred in an ordinary way." You know? It's sacred because that moment is specific and alive. And then it isn't anymore. And that's how moments are. It's not *like* life. It is *life*. You know, it's not *like* performance. It is a *performance*. And if you're going to practise swimming, get in the water. And if you don't dare to get in the water, what right have you to ask your students to get in the water?

Which is not the same as do it *like* I do it. It's not the same as that.

You know, if I ask you to go and be spontaneous, then I have to be in the world of spontaneity, asking you to be spontaneous. Otherwise, there's a weird energetic difference between the mind that the teacher is putting out and the mind that they're wanting to inspire. And, of course, I remembered this from my teachers, who insisted with a strict finger, "Relax." It's a disconnect. They were not relaxed when they said "relax". So, of course, the body was in a schism. It was getting a mixed message. And the mixed messaging is a very big issue when it comes to teaching and learning. And we learn from the attitude and the atmosphere more than just the information.

**MR: This is helpful to hear. For our research, but also for our own pedagogical reflection.**

I think it's fabulous that you're doing this work. It engages other sides of the mind, of the perspective of the being, then it just makes it healthier.

This interview was part of the two-year research project "Performer as an actor and viewer at the same time" realised at the Department of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy (DAMU) in Prague.<sup>1</sup> As part of this research, there were two major practical events: two week-long workshops with Julyen Hamilton, one in Amsterdam in March 2024 and another in Prague in November 2024 produced by CreWcollective.<sup>2</sup> The above text is an edited version of an interview we did in Amsterdam during the workshop called "Theatre Works". We have interviewed Hamilton several times in the past,<sup>3</sup> and this time we were specifically interested in questions of embodied learning and teaching. We quote from this interview in our study on "multiple attention",<sup>4</sup> in which we argue that 1) the ability to act and view oneself acting at the same time can be cultivated in students-performers; and 2) this cultivation opens possibilities for a third quality of attention to emerge in students-performers – when they start to author and compose while acting and viewing at the same time.

Speaking with and listening to Hamilton, we were looking for support to articulate our hypothesis of embodied dialogical pedagogy, which we knew from our former teacher, the Czech author, actor and psychologist Ivan Vyskočil (1929–2023), and which we had been sensing and recognising in Hamilton's own ways of working with the participants of his internationally known workshops. What came out of our dialogue helped us to explain that pedagogues, just as much as performers, are capable of working-teaching as actors, viewers and authors at the same time, i.e. in the body-mind state of "multiple

<sup>1</sup> AMU in Prague project "Performer as an actor and viewer at the same time" with the support of the Institutional Endowment for the Long Term Conceptual Development of Research Institutes, as provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in the year 2023. The principal investigator of the project was Mish Rais (Department of Creative Writing and Pedagogy – KATAP, DAMU), with co-investigators Markéta Machková (KATAP, DAMU and the University of Neuchâtel) and Jana Novorytová (KATAP and KVD, DAMU).

<sup>2</sup> CreWcollective consists of artists Jan Bárta, Jana Novorytová and Mish Rais. For more information, visit [www.crewcollective.cz](http://www.crewcollective.cz).

<sup>3</sup> Mish Rais – Mirka Eliášová – Lizzy Le Quesne. "Improvisation as Practicing Trust: An interview with Julyen Hamilton" [online], <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2023-2-12>. Mish Rais – Mirka Eliášová – Lizzy Le Quesne. *Secretly Alive: Embodied Perspectives on Dance Improvisation*. Prague: NAMU, 2024. Another interview took place during the workshop in Prague in 2023 produced by CreWcollective. See Hana Polanská Turečková. "Radicality of the Body: An interview with Julyen Hamilton" [online]. *Opera Plus*. 14.6.2023, <https://operaplus.cz/rozhovor-plus-s-julyenem-hamiltonem-radikalita-tela/>.

<sup>4</sup> Mish Rais – Markéta Machková – Jana Novorytová. "On the Hidden Potential of *Public Solitude*, Part II: Cultivating Multiple Attention in Students-Performers". *Stanislavski Studies*. 2024, vol. 12, n. 2, p. 173–199, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20567790.2024.2394930>.

attention". We based this statement on Vyskočil's view of pedagogy as a special case of acting in a public situation. According to our own pedagogical experience, "multiple attention" in teachers also needs to be cultivated and developed via their own practice of the subject they are teaching. Or, to echo Hamilton's words above: "I'm perfectly content to do what I do and teach what I do and do what I teach."

Our research has brought together improvisation in movement and dance with improvisation in theatre acting; respectively, Julyen Hamilton's approach to "instant composition" and Ivan Vyskočil's concept and practice of "dialogical" or "authorial" acting. In the auto-ethnographic challenge of the research, we managed to make sense of our personal experience in both instant composition and dialogical acting – in both performing and teaching. To describe performers' and teachers' capacity to act, reflect and direct (make, create, author) at the same time, we used Vyskočil's triadic concept of the author-actor-spectator. In the end, we named and described four laboratory conditions in which one can cultivate "multiple attention": 1) public solitude; 2) the analytical language of embodied teaching; 3) a creative state; and 4) wishing or respecting attention... all of them joined in a wider condition of safe space. Since public solitude and a creative state are terms and practices coming from Konstantin Stanislavski, our study was published in *Stanislavski Studies*. We invite interested readers and practice-based researchers to consult the details in our open-access articles.