

Becoming More Yourself: Dawn Pratson, Michael Joviala and Michele Herman in Conversation

For about 2 years, Dawn Pratson (dance and choreography) and I (piano and composition) have been meeting every week through Zoom to improvise together. Dawn usually leads us both in a physical warm-up. Eventually I wander over to the piano and start to play. We go wherever it leads, and sometimes end up with (or start from) a composition of mine. As part of our pilot artist's residency with the New York Chapter of the Dalcroze Society of America, we decided to open our rehearsals once a month during the spring of 2023. We've done two so far (the next one happens on May 6th, Saturday, 1-2pm NYC time. Details on how to join [here](#).) Both times, exactly one person has showed up! But that's been enough to influence our process in interesting ways. Last month, writer [Michele Herman](#) attended, and stuck around for a short discussion afterward.

In the rehearsal, Dawn left and re-entered several times with changes of clothing. Michele had some great questions for us about that and about our process in general that got us all thinking about the many, moment by moment decisions that go into the artistic process.

Dawn: There were a number of possible endings, and I know you were aware of them. We usually don't think about it so much, but when we have somebody watching I worry about it a little bit more. Are we making it go on too long? Should we stop here? So I'm curious, Michael, when I was here [*performs movement*], I really enjoyed this moment. It was like a recap from where we started. Did you feel that as a possible ending?

Michele: Being a writer, my creative process is very different from yours. I'm by myself with words. You, Dawn, have all of the parts of your body that you can move. I was very curious about how much the conscious part of your brain is working away and how much you're able to just let it go and not care.

Dawn: That's the dance. I'm confused about it all the time, but I think that's OK. I'm starting to work with masks. Michael's connected me with this great mask teacher in New York, Peggy Lewis. But I don't have any masks, yet. She has a developmental process which I really like, and putting on different kinds of clothing and costumes is a starting point.

Michele: That was fascinating for me too. Each time you disappeared for a minute you came back with new clothes and the flavor was different because of whatever you were wearing. It grew freer and freer with whatever you had on, and that was really fun to watch.

Michael: I enjoyed that, too! That's the first time she's done that.

Michele: Really? Did you have fun doing it?

Dawn: Yes! What was it like for you Michael seeing that for the first time?

Michael: I was expecting it, but, yes, that was the first time I had seen it. It created very clear demarcations between sections, so it made me very aware of our transitions. When you would

come back with something new on, we really had to find out who we were and where we were going next. Without the costumes, the transition phases are more ambiguous. In fact, we might not even both be experiencing a transition at the exact same time. It's not necessary that we do in that case. But when there's a costume change, we are both aware that we are in a transition. I can feel us both waiting to see where it's going to settle.

Dawn: For me it was about deciding when to do it. Do I do it abruptly or gradually? At the end of a section? I'm trying to work with the music.

Michael: Did you have those things laid out in advance?

Dawn: Yes, I did. I had mostly decided on an order.

Michael: That might be an interesting way to organize a set. "OK, we're going to start with green scarf, and then business woman suit and then we're going to fade into..." You know?

Dawn: Yes! I noticed how you carried the music through the transitions. I trust you to do that.

Michael: Sometimes (without the costume changes) I have the urge to stop playing, but with costume changes you would disappear completely for a period of time, and it felt like not a good time to stop playing. There would be nothing there. But we could experiment with that too!

Michele: As an audience member, I see you come in with a fringy, stripy thing, and I accept it. But then you change to a black coat, and I think, "Are there going to be more costume changes or should I settle in with the black coat?" But when you come in with the third thing, I get it. My expectations keep subtly shifting throughout.

Michael: When you came in in that big Martha Graham cape it immediately changed what I wanted to play.

Michele: I was thinking about the image of cloak and dagger [*ed. Names of the compositions we started and ended with.*]. You were doing sort of a viewfinder thing for a while that I really loved. It felt very spy-like.

Michael: That's funny! You were kind of planning (playing?) with identity there, weren't you?

Dawn: Yes, that's what the mask work is.

Michael: Thinking about your question, Michele, I am aware that while I'm playing I have different internal voices that might say things that I choose to accept or ignore. And sometimes the executive "I" might say, "Ok, I'll take that suggestion, or no, I'm not going to do that." But when I'm working with somebody, especially somebody like Dawn, the executive accepts far fewer inner suggestions or impulses. That's why I like working with Dawn. It makes me more responsible. I am less likely to simply abandon something because a voice says, "this isn't working." I'm more likely to stay with it and work through whatever is happening so that I can at least accept the original impulse that arose. I try to live with it a little longer because I am now

also affecting her choices. Because if I just change too quickly, especially because of a critical voice, it will be harder for her to settle into something.

Dawn: We have a responsibility to each other, yes. It's great to hear you describe how you listen to or don't listen to this "editor".

Michele: I'm also really interested in the masks. In the school where I teach, The Writers Studio, the whole premise of teaching creative writing is that you have to create a persona. Even if the "I" is all a construct and constantly shifting anyway, the idea is that you find freedom through a little bit of artifice. A little bit of disguise get you out of the limitations that are often just nonsense in your head anyway. The word 'persona' refers to masks.

Michael: I had an opportunity to do some mask work with the teacher that Dawn is working with now, Peggy Lewis. It was completely liberating! You completely become someone else.

Michele: And in doing so you become more yourself.

Michael: exactly!

Michele: I ask my students if they've ever gone to a Halloween party completely disguised, and if it made them feel more free or less free? And they always say way more free!

Michael: I wonder what it would be like to play piano with a mask on?

Dawn: Is there a comparable phenomenon for music?

Michael: Good question. Maybe music is less about identity than writing, dance and acting. I'm not sure what the corollary would be.

Well, it's been great to have you here, Michele. Even if just one person shows up, it has been a useful experience **And, this time,** having someone appear who's willing to engage with us has been really valuable!

Michele: I'm so glad! It's a comparable thing to my world. I'm teaching writing students and I'm always trying to free myself up enough to get to the good stuff! I feel like maybe that's my life's work is helping other people do that as well.

Michael: Well, thank you for being here and talking with us today!

Michele: My pleasure! Thank you!

See clips of Loco Motors on YouTube, including the full performance.

To learn more about the future New York Dalcroze events, [click here](#).