

# Gia T presents

Written by Vincent Cacalano

## Intro

In 2011 I took part in a performance with Gia T. Presents. The performance was titled Blink. I was able to experience their process and collaborate and develop methodology for improvised performance. The text below is a description of my experience of working with the group. This includes interviews, discussions and e-mail correspondence with artistic director Gia T, rehearsals and two performances with the ensemble.

Recently, I accepted an invitation to join the collective, as a regular guest and advisor. The collective felt, because of my years of work with Magpie Music Dance and Katie Duck in The Netherlands (1995-present), I could help support them in the development of their work. This writing is intended to give insight to the group's methods, concepts and particular aesthetic features.

*"'Blink' blends dance with art and music to strike enlightening balance"*  
*April 3, 2012 7:55 am*

*By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Gia T. presents is a working ensemble of musicians, poets, dancers, and visual artists based in Pittsburgh. The ensemble collaborates through improvisation. They present evening length performances from their base The Wood Street and Space Galleries in Downtown Pittsburgh. The work is made and performed through an instant-composing approach to improvisation.

Instant Composing is not exactly the same method as structured improvisation. In general, it is the continuous study of compositional structures in time and space, and in collaboration. It uses the recognition of structural possibilities, in real time, as a motivator in the decision making process that occurs when improvising in performance. This spontaneous act can happen, when improvising, with or without a score. It is a way of approaching performance, and more importantly collaboration.

While working with this method the group construct hour- long live performances, responding to instillations of light and object. The instillations help create the compositional structure, sound and movement material, as the dancers and musicians directly relate, spontaneously, with the visual world created, as well as, each other. The group integrates the use of themes, connected to physical

sensations, within their process and as a way to develop their work. Their most recent work was titled "Blink", and is referenced throughout this writing.

*"Gia Cacalano is not one who plays it safe. She has pursued the state of dance improvisation for years, often in private or small alternative spaces with little concern for huge audience numbers, and is one of a growing number of city artists looking within themselves." April 3, 2012 7:55 am*

*By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

## Their Mission

It is the mission of the ensemble to present high quality performance, and to continue to develop a collective working methodology based on interdisciplinary practice and improvisation, expanding some of the traditional methods seen in much contemporary dance and music performance. They do this by consciously leaving an unknown and vulnerable space in their work for serendipity. When referring to traditional methods, they are referring to choreography and music performed with very set structures in time, with the vast majority of the choreographic and musical composition being pre-set. They want to innovate choreography, stretching the imaginations of their public, by taking the risk to not approach performance as pre-set, but to allow set movement and sound composition to be a starting point, rather than the final result.

*"Both the music and the dance were entirely improvised. Although two of the dancers came in from out of town, only rehearsing with the ensemble for a few days, the cast came together brilliantly." April 2, 2012*

*By Adrienne Totino / Pittsburgh Dance Examiner*

They use set music and dance composition as a guideline or reference, allowing the performer to find options, variation, interpretation and the exploration of set materials, transforming them through improvisation. They use this process when producing musical progressions and dance sequences, as well as, toward the over-all composition of the event, consisting of options for spatial arrangements and the ordering of choreographic and musical sections. They expand their compositions through improvisation, but with a line of understanding created by working with a theme, so the performer has a common thread, but is allowed to stretch and still remain connected. The concepts or themes they work with are physical, and evoke kinesthetic empathy from their audiences. They respond conceptually and in movement to themes, which are physical sensations. They work with themes often connected to the senses, stimulated by the alternative spaces they

perform in. Through this they wish to engage our public in universal and shared experiences, such as the physical experience of being in a state of waiting, or the physical sensation of restlessness, these are a few of the themes they have worked with. These themes are something they feel most people know about, and have felt. These ideas are at the forefront of their work.

*“When the light became more animated, the action might slow down. But when the music became more percussive, it inspired a blaze of movement from the men, filled with loping jumps and lashing twirls. In retrospect it formed an overall arc, making it easier to detect all the textures and transparencies that this art combination had to offer. Sometimes it was enough just to relax and join in the interplay of the moment.” April 3, 2012 7:55 am*

*By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

They perform interactive scores and compositions, involving dance, live music, text and electronically generated visuals, creating a dynamic space through multi-media performance. Within an approach to movement and music that is improvised, they want to convey concrete meaning and universal understanding through thought provoking, clever and conceptual performances. It is their mission to perform beyond the notion of a boundary between the performer and the audience, by incorporating theatrical techniques that allow performers to shift their attention and performance choices at any moment, in direct response to the public. They want to create a space to be with their public, including the audience within their serendipity. First and foremost they want to communicate, and do not see contemporary dance -music as a delicate and unsustainable form, they see it as a place to innovate, taking certain choreographic and performance risks that improvisation can create.

*“More than 100 audience members squeezed in and around the exhibit on each of two nights. They found three light installations, with a circle in one corner that projected a ring of light onto the accompanying wall, and a square that lay on the floor near an adjacent wall.” April 3, 2012 7:55 am*

*By Jane Vranish / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

## Their Artistic Vision

They work as a democratic collective. The core members of the collective are dancers Gia Cacalano, Jill, musician Jeff Berman, Dave Bernabo and visual artist Eden McNutt. They also invite guest performers in the areas of dance, music and visual art, into their work. This happens in two ways. They invite young artists, who show interest in the work, into the collective. These young artists,

who are always from the Pittsburgh area, offer the ensemble the challenge of articulating their ideas to those less familiar with the work.

*“As we then begin to collaborate, opening up our process to include the insights of these young artists, we are stretched to continue to consider how to keep the work fresh.” Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

They also invite established artists from New York City and Europe.

*“Our guests from outside Pittsburgh are performers renowned in the area of improvisation, and are selected by the ensemble to help us develop our work through collaboration and the exchange of ideas.” Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

This helps the Pittsburgh based members develop their technical and artistic strengths via the knowledge transfer that occurs in the rehearsal process, where ideas and languages are articulated through words and artistic expression, as well as, the performance moment itself, where the knowledge transfer, in some ways, happens much faster. In 2011 Pittsburgh native, dancer Wendell Cooper, based in New York City joined the group as a guest, as well as, Vincent Cacalano a founding member of the renowned music-dance improvisation group, Amsterdam based Magpie Music Dance Company. Through this exchange involving the Pittsburgh based collective, young guest artists, and established artists from outside Pittsburgh the ensemble continue to develop their work in improvised performance through exchange, both ephemeral and through dialogue.

In their work the performance site is very important. The attributes of a space become integrated within the work, developing the aesthetic nature of the work. Rather than imposing an aesthetic on a space, we prefer to work with a space. They allow it to affect their process, involving them, and influencing the outcome of the work, its' content and form. This approach to space, and their choice of venues, form a creative vehicle, as well as, obstacles.

*“We consider our performance environment to be extremely important, and even in some cases even more important than the dance, as the space supplies structure which informs musical and movement choices.” Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

They are often drawn to alternative sites and venues, in keeping with their desire to consider options that stretch them to think “out of the box” and in a less traditional or presumptuous way.

But, they also want to be flexible in how they consider venues, welcoming opportunities to present, and in a variety of places. The non-traditional venue can further open the imagination, and innovate working methods, as they collaborate with a site.

*“We welcome the chance to adapt in a space to what many might consider obstacles or hindrances such as; existing structures in a space; walls, pillars, hard rough floor surfaces, windows, mirrors, holes in walls, or doors.” Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

Rather than ignoring space they use alternative settings as they develop their improvisations, adding texture and dynamic to movement, and spatial options for compositional choices. As well, they are able to steer away from perceptions of how and where dance can happen, seeing the potential to bring high quality dancing to a variety of venues.

*“Our work in alternative spaces brings the collective together in a particular dialogue over the functionality of a dance in a space, and how to include difficult and special obstacles, rather than ignoring them. “ Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

They prefer venues that can offer an intimate and close connection with public, as they wish to connect very directly and plainly to their audience. Traditional theatre spaces can remove the public from the performer, unless one sets out to avoid this.

*“We see no barriers that divide us by placing anyone in a “higher “ position, often performing within the audience. That is one of the strengths and signatures of our work.” Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

They see dance as something to feel, as well as, see, interacting with public within their performances. At the end of an event they also have informal question and answer sessions, and have received an overwhelmingly positive response. Through their work in alternative sites in Pittsburgh they have developed their relationship as an ensemble, and with their public.

*“They offer an enormous support for us to continue to keep our work fresh and ongoing, to push ourselves. We prefer a “lived in “ touched- space, it creates warmth, and a working energy that stimulates us despite the challenges it also creates. “ Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

## The History of the group

(This section of writing was written by Gia T. Cacalano on June 20, 2012 this is taken from e-mail correspondence, with additional writing by Vincent Cacalano)

Since 2006 we have worked in collaboration with Wood Street and SPACE, (Pittsburgh Cultural Trust), among other venues, such as The Mattress Factory, Future Tenant, Kelly Strayhorne Theater, Artist Image Resource, Modern Formation, The Space Upstairs. In these selected and more alternative spaces for dance, we have had the luxury of spaces in which to entertain, and create our own aesthetic environments. The following text will elaborate and focus on a few past performances at Wood Street or SPACE.

Our first collaboration with installation at Wood street was an improvised dance solo with musician Jeff Berman on vibraphones and percussion, who became co-founder and musical leader of "Gia T. Presents", 2006. This was in collaboration with visual artist Miguel Chevalier and his visual digital movement sensitive installation that stretched roughly 60 feet as the backdrop. We worked alongside this mural of trees and flowers, scenic like that of a lush forest. When movement occurred the installation would react and shift and move, as though the wind might have blown, the dance and the installation were able to react to the other. This gave not only a fluid and warm environment to work within, but also allowed me to develop the dance in direct relationship to the visual art. The musicians responded to both the visual and the dance. The three of us were in real time creating instant composition through improvisation and installation. Other solo performances took place at Wood Street and SPACE and other venues in Pittsburgh until the ensemble was organized as "Gia T presents" in 2010.

In 2010 with Mr. Murray Horne, curator of Wood Street and SPACE we organized our bi annual residency with Wood Street and SPACE (Pittsburgh. Cultural trust) and we soon presented their first installation as "Gia T. Presents " Crossing center without my glass slipper" Feb. 2011. We devised own visual installation, with shoes hanging and dangling from the high ceilings, flickering lights, flashing cameras, boxes and platforms for the dancers to move in, around, on top of, and this became extremely helpful setting up a composition for the performers. "SPACE", is a very large and difficult space to perform in. We also incorporated film taken from a twenty- year- old project that I had made at NYU School of arts. This film and prop organization was a key tool in defining the space, and helping the performers set up boundaries and directional motivators for movement. The cast

were Beth Ratas , Allie Greene , Jasmine Hearn, Gia t. Cacalano (dancers), Hill Jordan, Dave Bernabo, Jeff Berman (musicians)

In June 2011 we made a dance duet with Beth Ratas and myself, in collaboration with electronic artist David Bernabo, now a core member of Gia T Presents, Jazz musician Hill Jordan on horns, and Bill Vorne's, "Hysterical Machines". These machines were robots that were attached to the ceiling and reacted to energy and movement in the room created by the public as well the performer. In addition to these robots, on the 60 foot long back wall were long grids of extremely bright and abrasive lighting. This created a very tense, edgy, and surreal environment. There was nothing soft or warm about this room. It was a great challenge in realizing this performance as there was already so much going on in the space. We practiced adapting our movement to the swinging robots, so not to be hit by the heavy armour. We used the lighting to guide us and to gage our sense of time. In this performance we were led by the impact of this very overwhelming, intense, yet very interesting environment.

These can all be viewed on " you tube ", under "Gia T. Presents". Our last performance was " BLINK" funded by the Heinz small arts initiative in March of 2012.

In March of 2012 "Gia T. Presents, showed a new performance, titled "BLINK". An international cast of professional improvisers collaborated with, " In Transit", an installation by HC Gilje. This work used image, light, sound and motion. The projection used by Gilje was as he is quoted "*an advanced light source that can be masked to the shape of different surfaces of a room or an object, affectingly modulating the light and sound we project on to it.*" In addition to the artist's installation we also incorporated a film, which was projected onto the ceiling, helping to create a completely filled space. We also added a large crate to an emptier part of the room on which a dancer in bubble wrap performed a solo as an installation in itself. This also can be found in footage by Wendell Cooper <http://vimeo.com/40035170>.

We have a history of working with Space and Wood Street, and with visual arts instillations. We wish to continue this, to hone our skills in our next performance The Frequency of Structure and Flow.

**An insight into the methods used in Blink** (these methodologies were developed collaboratively with Vincent Cacialano and Gia T.)

The concept of the evenings' work was a response to the sensations of "waiting" and "falling". We performed interactive scores and compositions, involving dance, live music, text and electronically generated visuals, creating a dynamic space within an evening of multi-media performance.

The group's projects evolve through the continued collaboration of an established working ensemble of professional musicians, dancers and visual artists, with input during the process and performance from guest artists, and young emerging dancers and musicians.

The process involves several creative stages.

#### Stage 1- Finding materials

First the Pittsburgh based group, with emerging local dance artists, collaboratively develop raw material in response to the concept, "the sensation of waiting". They develop musical scores, phrases of choreography, electronically generated sound atmospheres, and theatrical texts. They develop these raw materials through solo and collective improvisation tasks in response to the concept stated above. Once these initial materials were found, and inspire further dialogue amongst the ensemble, the working collective begin to find sub concepts. They continue to work through improvisation, but at this stage, the improvisations are to discover a second layer of expressive materials and possibilities. By refining the materials found so far, new material, and ideas develop and unfold. These sub concepts and materials, evoke and develop even more refined and detailed strands of thought. Once they reach this phase the work begins to reveal itself in more detail. They have some detailed materials, and can begin to see how these materials work in time and space.

#### Stage 2- Looking at compositional possibilities for the materials, juxtaposing materials, and developing potential sections for the piece

Secondly, they continue to develop ideas by practicing their materials through a variety of compositional games. Instant composition, where movement materials are chosen and manipulated spontaneously in time and space by the performers creating spontaneous relationships, is the main method of composing. For example, they use improvisation to show how one movement material looks when performed by one dancer, in relation to another material performed by another dancer. They also juxtapose music and dance in a same way. They allow, when working on these materials to change the timings, and qualitative aspects of the material. This helps the collective to understand



the material qualitatively in counterpoint structures, allowing them to make choices about how best to organize our ideas for the performance, so that the nature and essence of the theme at hand, rather than a set structure, is fore-fronted. Potential sections for the piece also emerge, and can be organized in a variety of ways, as they recognize how a certain sound atmosphere might work with a particular solo, or duet, and how a particular solo can be juxtaposed with a particular text, or trio, or another solo etc ... They can begin to see the things that work together, create certain atmospheres, but still leaving space for choice. While they begin the process in a rehearsal space spending the last week in the performance venue itself.

These sections will not be set in a rigid structure however, so that they create a unique and fluid communication between the players where listening is essential. The communication between the performers now has another level of understanding, as they play off each other's choices with qualitative and timing decisions. A sense of osmosis between the players is developed by the greater freedom of compositional play, of chance and choice making. This leads to the arrangements materials might take in performance, where many variable structural outcomes exist, while maintaining a common thread or "one-mind" of consciousness, which is embedded in our theme. Film installations and costuming will also be considered at this stage of the process.

### Stage 3- Integrating guests

Through instant composition games the group has an understanding of how materials work in solo, duet, or in ensemble, and with what sound, visual, text and combinations of all of these elements. Through rehearsals in the performance space, the group see how materials work in dialogue with the specific attributes of the space. The ensemble also understands potential sections for the performance, however we do not set these sections in an order in time.

The Pittsburgh based group has now created a base, which is flexible, allowing space for guest performers to integrate their movement and sound material into the composition. The guests work on developing materials in response to the same theme prior to joining the Pittsburgh based group. Once the ensemble has established a base. The guest performers are integrated into the work with their materials. This is done through continuing our exploration of instant composition.

## Stage 4 – The performance event

On the night of the performance the group will have practiced their materials in a variety of ways, and explored the relationship between the materials, and how this can create sections. The ensemble will leave the final structure to choice however, where the performers will have options. They might see the Pittsburgh ensemble's section 2 before section 4, followed by guest artist solo 3, followed by section 7 and so on, and another evening they might have section 5 then 4 then 3 etc.... The performers will not know who might begin the performance, and with what material or section, but this is part of the excitement they share with the public. They will know, however, a great deal about the materials expressive potential, and what materials might accompany and support which. They will allow the performer to feel the moment with the public and adjust certain qualities and timings to ensure that the material is communicating. The performer can capitalize on expanding the potential expressive nature of the material through performance and choreographic options, where choices made in the moment are responses to other performers and the audience.

*“One highlight transpired when Vincent Cacalano (from Amsterdam and England), and Wendell Cooper (from New York) engaged in a powerful duet. The two men exploded through the space with the athleticism of a break-dancer and grace of a ballerina. Difficult to imagine? Picture them diving into the floor, pressing into handstands and leaping through the space without bravado or gimmicky tricks. Ms. Cacalano and female counterpart, Jil Stifel, were equally mesmerizing. With intricate floor work and quick moments of partnering, the two sensed each other with the highly tuned focus of seasoned improvisers. Shadows raced across the ceiling like storm clouds over a black sky. Text and street sound layered the musical blend of percussion, horns and vibes.”*

*April 2, 2012*

*By Adrienne Totino /Pittsburgh Dance Examiner*

## A sustainable collective

It is common for the ensemble to play before a variety of people. Currently they perform to large audiences, and have been very excited by the strong turn out from the Pittsburgh community. Their audiences are varied, including people ages 4 years old to senior citizens, from a variety of ethnic and socio economic backgrounds. They know who attends our performances by being in close contact with their audience through post- production discussions. They have seen from these discussions that artists, working professionals, students, families, arts advocates and business owners have attended their performance events. They work to get to know their public through these post- production discussions. They have created the beginning of a network, a part of the larger community. They believe a huge part of the attraction to their work is that it is very inspiring

to feel a part of the work, being created in the moment. This type of event creates a close interplay with their public also generating a feeling of inclusion and participation because the audience understands that their performances are very different each night, and that what the audience sees is created in the moment for and with them.

*“Younger audience members enjoy the high physicality and hands on installations, which creates a play like environment, while older populations enjoy clever concepts and the live music-dance multi-media experience. We are very fortunate that members of the ensemble are educators in Music, Dance and Body Work, working in local Public Schools, Universities and Dance Companies. We have seen an overwhelming support from our students, and we continually try to engage them in the various and different issues and questions within the work. The relationships we have with our students go beyond the classroom, and into our performances where the education continues.” Gia Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

They want to continue to expand this already supportive and diverse audience. They have compiled an extensive email contact list from post- production discussions and use it to notify their patrons of their ongoing performance events. They also utilize a large email list from the Pittsburgh Dance Network, which comprises lists of students, companies, school educators, critics, arts advocates and supporters of dance and art.

Most recently they have established a bi-annual performance engagement and working artist relationship with the Wood street galleries and Space in downtown Pittsburgh. Currently performance footage is shown on these venues websites-face book page. Wood street galleries and Space help to promote the ensembles events from their email lists of supporters. Mr. Murray Horne is the curator of both these venues and is a member of the Pittsburgh cultural trust, a continued expansion of their network. Their visual promotion artist Eden McNutt makes all our posters and flyers. They benefit from his intelligent visual art –work, which works as a marketing tool. They display very considered posters and flyers throughout Pittsburgh. The group have been positively reviewed, and frequently previewed by City Paper and Dance Blogs from The Tribune.

## Conclusions

There is a paucity of high standard improvisation-based interdisciplinary performance in Pittsburgh. Over the last 9 years, while Gia has lived in Pittsburgh, she has been working to develop an ensemble to represent this vacant spot in the dance/art scene. As the work has been received with excitement, at this point they hope to continue to try and shape views and perceptions of what

improvised performance can mean. Amongst many dance audiences, and even dancers and musicians, there is a notion that improvisation is merely "playing around", doing whatever you feel in the moment. This lack of methodology has actually given the word "improvisation" a flimsy and poor reputation.

*"The press, my peers, and the general public have commented on our admonition not to follow this approach of "noodle-ing around", and have recognized a rigor in our work. We strive to continue to inspire the public and the dance scene here in Pittsburgh by showing that "good " improvisation is considered and conceptualized, with an understanding of structure. it is defined, re-defined and not vague or wishy-washy." Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*

It is a very serious business preparing and enabling the technically proficient dancer to be able to engage physically, in a moment of un-set time, the established and trained musician to find sensibilities that can interact with the dance. Technique, and understanding established ways of making dance and music, are only the beginning of what goes on to prepare the readiness of the players for improvisation based performance. The art of improvising in Gia T. Presents starts with technique, as a given, but set choreography and set musical scores are only starting points for artists to explore performance, improvising can take a performers understanding of communication to another level. It is important to connect and communicate something to your public. They continue to try and work with concepts and ideas of universal understanding by developing an inclusive performance environment and direct link to the public. Creating this inclusive environment and direct link with public is a challenge for the performer to achieve.

*"BLINK" succeeded in many ways. Cacalano chose an ensemble with equal skill and matching style, while managing to showcase each dancer's individuality. The show had a performative quality that is oftentimes missing in improvisation. The ensemble proved that to execute dance spontaneously at a professional level, one's skills and technique must be honed.*

*April 2, 2012*

*By Adrienne Totino /Pittsburgh Dance Examiner*

*"Our work thus far has been appreciated on a personal and intimate level. We continue to try and make dance alive and imaginative to make a fresh connection with other Pittsburgh audiences." Gia T. Cacalano (taken from e-mail correspondence March 22nd, 2012)*