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‘The idea that something new might happen is completely obvious…’ A conversation between Andrew Morrish and Anton Krueger

(via Zoom on 11 August 2020)

In Andrew Morrish’s 40-year career in the arts he has been a performer, teacher, facilitator, mentor and advocate for a range of practices including improvisation, performance, dance education, dance therapy and dance research. From 2008 until 2013 he was a Visiting Research Fellow in the Drama Division of Huddersfield University (U.K.) In 2016 he was awarded the Dance Fellowship of the Australia Council for the Arts (2016-2017). He now lives in the far south east corner of Australia where he continues to practice as a performer, teacher, coach and researcher.

ANDREW MORRISH

Very good lockdown beard; I had one too. I was very proud of mine. We both get that Antarctic look. It’s got that wild eye thing, you know, like – ‘Oh, god, I'm lost in a whiteness I can't do anything about.’

ANTON KRUEGER

(Laughs)…Very kind of you to say so, Andrew…So, I wanted to pick up on our conversation from four years ago, was it in 2016, at the Huddersfield conference? [i] Consider this a very slow rejoinder to a few points made then, now that I’ve had a bit of time to think. Sorry there's been a delay…

ANDREW

(Laughs) Yeah, yeah, you've been busy.

ANTON

What’s that French expression about the moment on the stairs when you think of what clever thing you could have said after you’ve left the conversation? *L'esprit de l'escalier* (thanks Google)...

ANDREW

Right.

ANTON

I remember saying something to you about a missed opportunity in your workshop,

when I could have made some really smart and witty observation; and then you said ‘Oh, that's a thwought’, and that one could work with it. But I never got around to asking you what you meant. What's a ‘thwought’?

ANDREW

It's not original, but a ‘thwart’ is when your thinking gets in the way of what you want to do. You don't do what you want in that moment, because of the thinking that gets in the way of doing it. So, what you want to do is not 'thwart yourself' too often.

There's nothing wrong with the thinking, but you shouldn’t that stop you being in the moment – it’s one of the things we're trying to learn about as performers. You are a thinking, grown-up adult. You've got that kind of brain, you've got that kind of intelligence, you've got your whole life’s experience. You do have a lot of stuff there to use. It's just you don't want to let that get in the way of working with what's present in the moment for you.

It’s great when these things are interacting. Most of us are attracted to improvisation because we want to be reminded about being in the present.

I don't teach people to think in my workshops, because most people are already very good at it. I don't have anything new to offer about that side of human functioning. I don't have a new way of thinking that you haven't thought of yet. I’d rather you train to be more responsive, be more immediate, than to have this kind of delay between a thought and your action. I want to encourage people to take the risk of being spontaneous.

It's one of the first gifts that improvisation offers, that's what attracts people. Most of us need to be reminded about spontaneity and immediacy. Al Wunder would say that it's not a new thing, we're only being reminded about it. We’re all born that way, and we have to remind ourselves to be that way.

In a sense, it’s subversive of the conventions of performance, which prefers things to be carefully planned, well-rehearsed, beautifully structured – everything is there for a reason. Improvisers are saying: 'Well, this may not be quite so neat, because we’re not doing it that way'. It’s subversive in terms of modern conventions. The ancient conventions are full of spontaneity, but the more modern conventions of performance are that it comes from a more thoughtful, enacted, planned and organised, place. They're both valid forms.

A lot of people love improvising, and are very good at improvising; but they just

think it's a cheap way to make conventional theatre. For me, if you can improvise, then you have to have the courage to go: this could be messy. Who knows what it could be, you know? Actually, you don't know, so relish that potential.

No matter how well it's gone, or what good technique I've shown, if I don't discover something, then it's not an improvisation. The purpose of improvisation is discovery every time you perform.

ANTON
It seems quite labour intensive. You have to keep coming up with new materials.

ANDREW
Yes, but we're always at the front edge of our experiencing. I'm getting new layers of experience every second, and therefore I'm constantly growing and changing. Where is my attention? Just noticing that can be immediate and deep.

Sometimes I'm noticing things I already know; sometimes I'm remembering things from the past; sometimes I'm recognising ideas I already understand. I don't mind that, but the things that matters is it's happening to me in that moment. It's not that I planned it before I started to perform. Working with only new material comes from paying attention to what's going on.

Everything around me is changing constantly. It's not static. I'm changing. The whole thing is dynamic. So, the idea that something new might happen is completely obvious.

ANTON
That's a great line: 'The idea that something new might happen is completely obvious.'

ANDREW
People do say: 'Ah, it must be really difficult to make up new material all the time', I think it's actually very easy. If you're relaxed enough about it, it's just like having a conversation. We don't know what we're going to be talking about in 20 minutes, but that doesn't create any anxiety in us. Every good conversation is an improvisation and the process is quite simple. You say something, I respond to that, and then you respond to what I say. We're responding to each other. Good conversation doesn't require planning. You don't require an agenda to have a good conversation. Improvising is like that.

ANTON

Well, sorry mate – *(holds up notebook showing his prepared questions for the interview).*

ANDREW
(Laughs) Well, I know you've got an agenda.

ANTON
I may be over-prepared…it's something I get anxious about.

ANDREW
That's because you're looking to produce something specific, which is fair enough. The truth is a good conversation is already perfect. When I go and have a cup of coffee with somebody, I don't worry for days what we'll talk about, or get anxious that it might be difficult. You just go and engage and the context produces the content.

ANTON
'The context produces the content'?

ANDREW
It's the same when I'm performing a solo. If I notice what I'm doing – and I have different ways of engaging with it – then it unfolds. It's not that clever. After 40 years, I don't think it's difficult either. I just think it's normal.

ANTON
I saw a video recently of the 12th Tai Situpa, (a high-ranking Tibetan lama) talking to a huge crowd at Yale without any notes. In fact, whenever one sees these Tibetan Lamas at high profile events, like the Dalai Lama appearing at the UN, they never read from notes, because they're just honestly responding to whoever is there. So, they don't need to prepare.

I'm also reminded of Chögyam Trungpa's comment to Allen Ginsberg, asking him why he had to write his poems down, why he didn't just get up and speak. Trungpa asks him – 'Don't you trust your own mind?'

Perhaps when we prepare to speak or perform there's always the possibility of deception; but these remarkable people are not trying to trick anybody or to be clever, they're just saying what they really believe.

On the other hand, Peter Brook says something interesting, that at the human level, the audience and the performers are all the same. The only difference between them is that one group has prepared. Maybe improvisers prepare in a different way?

ANDREW

There is a skill base. You do practise technical ways of working. Techniques, one might call them, or technical aspects. That's reassuring; but the work produces the material, so I don't have to think about how I'm going to get material. I just do the work, and I can be completely relaxed, because why would it stop producing material now, after 40 years?

I've got many diverse ways of working and some of them are very conscious and deliberate and practised, and some are more amorphous and mysterious. A lot of them are produced by my obsession with communication, my directness with an audience. That's my personal thing, (it's almost a disease), but it makes performing incredibly easy because it's so clear to me: I'm not there to do anything else, just communicate.

ANTON

Al Wunder says your 'superpower' is your ability with language, and your charm.

ANDREW

Yes, I think my love of language has really grown through improvising. Every now and then, I fall in love (artistically) with someone because of the way they are with language. Do you know Dr John Cooper Clarke, the English punk poet from Manchester? He's a classic Mancunian, with a machine gun voice. It's not the least bit mellifluous, it's all 'eh – eh – eh – eh', and he writes fantastic poems. He was a heroin addict for many years; used to be the opening act for the Sex Pistols, but he always wore suits and looked immaculate. They used one of his poems in *The Sopranos*, and that made him famous again. Then one of his poems got into the high school curriculum in England, which meant he could go around to schools, and talk to them about writing poetry. On a podcast he was talking about how much he enjoyed the chance, 'To thrust [his] poetry down their reluctant throats'. I was listening to that, and realised he could see there was a gap between 'their _ throats' and had time to choose a word to put in that gap. I just love that attentiveness.

I can't do it all the time, but every now and then when I'm performing, I can almost see spaces to put words into to make the language more vivid, more interesting, more alive. The kind of language I'm most interested in is the language that paints pictures in the imagination.

The kind of discursive language

we're engaged in at the moment is a bit like sharing our thoughts. The things I say make you think, and the things you say make me think. That's the nature of an interview. In performing, the role of language is to stimulate imagination. It's not to tell people what I think about things. It's to paint pictures. The 'thinking experience,' or what we might call an 'educational experience' is not what theatres are built for. You go to the theatre and then afterwards you think; but when you're in the theatre, you feel.

My love for theatre and dance is about feeling. It's best when I feel like I'm seven and I've fallen into some other place, when the theatre has taken me somewhere and I'm defenceless. I prefer that to sitting back and 'processing it' or 'having a view' or thinking about what they're doing. (Of course, this means I'm often disappointed with my experiences in theatres!) The theatre is about the immediacy of bringing people to the campfire.

Language is important to me, but the other thing I know about language is I can't do it without moving. If I leave my brain just to do the language thing, then I get very caught up in thinking and that is potentially ponderous, or pretentious. I start trying to think of things to say, or, even worse, being clever.

Al is too kind to say it, but I think he would agree that my biggest 'enemy as a performer' is my cleverness. It's the least satisfying part of myself. If I let myself go too much into the thinking, linguistic side, then I end up being clever, and then I always feel like a bad actor or a cheap philosopher. I can let cleverness help me, but it's really not what I want to demonstrate when I perform. Whereas if I recognise that the language is being stimulated by sensations of moving, which is stimulating my imagination, then this gives me things to talk about. Without starting from the embodied position, I can't do it. I can do it for 5 minutes, but I can't do it for 55 minutes.

ANTON

It feels like even to talk about sensation could be a kind of cleverness. Earlier, you brought in the word 'love', which is something quite formless, or alludes to something inexpressible. You mentioned sometimes being able to 'see the gap' where the words might fall. In talking to different improvisers, I've been curious about this gap; or about the idea of 'space', and how one can 'make space', or 'hold space'. And if there is a practise, maybe it's to learn how to make a space for

something to arise, something as yet unknown.

ANDREW
Yes.

ANTON
And whereas ‘over-writing’ could be the mark of a beginner writer, in improvisation one might try to do too much. This was something they were just talking about in a comedy improv course I’m doing at the moment with The Nursery, in London; how when people first start out, they try to keep building ever more outlandish situations, adding more and more to a scene; whereas a more mature improviser might find one thing, and just keep going with it for some time.

I suppose it has to do with trust, and not panicking or tightening up at the appearance of a space, or what seems to be a lacuna, or a gap in the flow.

ANDREW
Yeah, Al would call that the ‘search mode,’ when you haven't got material, but you're looking for it. He said, once you've learned to make your searching mode interesting, then you can't have a problem. If you're wandering around, searching for material, looking anxious, that doesn't work for audiences; but if you know that the way of searching will produce material, or is already material, then you can actually enjoy finding material.

My language is very pragmatic because I have very pragmatic ways of understanding what I’m doing, but the process of learning to trust the material is difficult to speak about pragmatically. I don't really have a spiritual framework, and I think that's really a massive distinction between what I'm doing and the Mindfulness practice of Buddhism, and the spiritual side of things. I've never sought that kind of understanding, so I don't have anything to say about it. My frame of reference is to see it as ‘art making’. But certainly, miraculous and mysterious things happen when I'm improvising. I don't always have to know what the material is, but I can still be inside it, and let people see me.

For me it's really important that at some point, I come out and communicate. Even if I'm just communicating that I'm lost, that I don't know what the material is. But that urge to communicate is what stops me being lost forever. There's a need for me to be with the audience in some way.

I duetted for many years with Peter Trotman, and there’s a story I often tell about him in my workshops. It’s a true

story, though I'm probably decorating it a smidgen. Anyway, I would have seen Peter do thousands of solos. We started working together in the early 80s, and for 20 years we worked together a lot. We'd never duet in a studio, because there was no one watching. So, we did lots of solos – thousands and thousands of solos. He's a genius of the imagination. He has an incredibly vivid inner world and I never saw him get stuck. I certainly got stuck quite often, but he never would. One day in a solo, he was standing still and said he was surrounded by desert, seeing nothing but sand – the sun burning down out of a bright blue sky. He looked at his feet and sees a map in pieces, blowing away in the wind. Afterwards, I said ‘I loved that bit in the desert, Pete.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, I was stuck’. That's Peter Trotman.

What I deciphered from this was that he has the experience of, ‘I don't know what to do’, and immediately that goes into his imagination. He doesn't have to process the thought of being lost, it immediately becomes an image of being lost in the desert without a map. He’s taken his direct experience and turned it into this poetic, visual thing. I'm not worrying about him not knowing what to do. I'm just going, 'Tell me more about the desert. Where are we going?’ I'm engaged with him. But he just said, ‘No, I was stuck there. I didn't know what to do.’

That's been a big inspiration to me – whatever you're experiencing, allow it to access your imagination. Don't label it. Don't say, ‘I'm bored…’. That experience was much more interesting before it became psychologically labelled. Once you say, ‘I'm bored,’ that's the definition of not interesting, because all I've done is labelled an experience as ‘boredom’. It's a cliché. I've told people what the cliché is, and how is that going to interest people? People, quite rightly, should yell, ‘I don't care’. Why should they care if I'm bored? I'm there to produce theatre for them. And it's not that I'm being dogmatic about a rule that ‘You must never express how you feel’; but the reason I’m performing is to work with how I feel and turn it into something that's interesting, poetically.

ANTON

Your story about Peter Trotman reminds me of another story about Meredith Monk. She had this crisis when one day, well into her career, she developed this crippling stage fright, and became very afraid of performing. So, she used the fear as material for ‘The Fear Song,’ about how afraid she was. This is also part of what one might call the Mindfulness approach:

not denying anything, not suppressing anything. Acknowledging what's there, seeing what it is...

ANDREW
Yeah, I think that's right. I once taught a workshop in Czechoslovakia with Kirstie Simson. Do you know Kirstie? You should work with her if you get a chance, she's a very interesting woman. She teaches at the University of Illionois and does workshops throughout the world. She's a fantastic movement teacher. I think she's some kind of Shaman and gives people enormous courage through the body. She never talks about shamanism or the 'spiritual' side, but she has a kind of mission. It was really interesting to work with her.

Anyway, she invited me to run a workshop with her in Prague. Every day at lunchtime there'd be this long line of young Czech Republicans wanting to talk to me about their problems. I spent two days trying to help them, but on the third day, I just said to the whole group: 'You don't have problems, what you have is material'. They had these things they'd labelled as problems, and [were] saying, 'Teacher, fix it for me'. I'm sure this is the same with Buddhist teachers, that they say, 'Well, your task is to work with it'. If that's what you're experiencing, what art do you make with that? Rather than coming to me to fix your problem, go and work with your problem.

Improvisers don't have problems, we just have content.

ANTON
There's an excellent phrase for that in the Vajrayana teachings: 'The obstacle is the path'.

ANDREW
Yes, exactly.

ANTON
What are some of the differences between your and Al Wunder's approach and that, for example, of Action Theater? I've just been intensely reading Ruth Zaporah's book *The Improvisation of Presence* which Sten Rudstrom helped to put together.

ANDREW
Did you see in the preface to the book? She says that she only ever had one mentor, and that was Al Wunder. She and Al had a shared practise in San Francisco with Terry Sendgraff. So, there is some common legacy between her and Al. I've always thought there were lots of connections between what Al taught me

and Action Theater.

I think the book presents very clear tasks. It's very practical and very good. There's a kind of organised legacy behind it too. Ruth has been training people to become qualified teachers for many years. The content of the book and the exercises are not so different, though I have never consciously used any of her activities, but there is a difference pedagogically I think, both between Al and her and say Sten and me.

Based on my limited knowledge of both Ruth and Sten as teachers I think part of what they do as teachers is looking at improvisation from a *directorial position*. So there is a lot of side coaching. My interpretation of this is that there is an aesthetic that they are encouraging, that gives them scope to guide and correct you.

There's that sort of flavour in Action Theater; whereas Al gives you a task, and there isn't really a right or wrong way to do it. I think my teaching is the same. A task is set up as a kind of provocation, and then you're interested in what people learn from it. You're interested in them finding their own way through the task, rather than seeing that they fulfil the task in the right way.

I've had conversations with Sten about this, and I think he's drawn to being a director. He's got a very strong aesthetic view of both theatre and performance, and he's trying to shape people in that direction. Al's never really had that; he's always been more interested in letting people grow in their own individual way.

One of the real outcomes I loved about Al's teaching is that he never produced people that look like him. He produced an incredibly diverse and multi-levelled community of students, some of whom, perhaps, weren't very good. They were getting a lot from it in their own way, and they would do it for years and years, so it really worked for them at a personal level. As a fellow student, it was always interesting to watch them, but most of them wouldn't ever actually perform in public.

I really admired that about Al's teaching, that he didn't create clones. It's hard not to do that. It's hard not to make your teaching a way of making people do what you do; or make them do what you like seeing.

ANTON

Do you think that what Al had to offer could have taken a different form, which was not necessarily performative, or theatrical? It feels like he wanted to express or explore something about being human – being in the moment, being alive – and theatre was

a way of doing that. So creating a great theatrical performance wasn't necessarily his main criteria.

ANDREW

Yeah, but you know when he moved to the West Coast of the US in the late 60s, he was in that *milieu*, and there was a radical flowering at the time. Happenings, and all of that. He was there and part of that scene; he'd come from a dance background in New York. The performing thing has always been his world. At the same time, when he came to Melbourne, he'd also done a bit of Gestalt therapy and he was open to that, but he also didn't want 'Theatre of the Ordinary' to become a therapeutic form. His work was about performing. He called them Performing Workshops, and he attracted people who were interested in performing. A lot of the benefits of this work are personal, for sure, without any question. His performing world came from his dance background, in particular. Although he has a lot of really wonderful dance, movement, and physical content, he never calls what he does dancing. Still, it's really strong in his background, and that really suited me too when I met it.

ANTON

In our conversation, he talked a lot about his mentor Alwin Nicholais? I'd never heard of him so I looked him up. He seems to have been very experimental, *Avant Garde*?

ANDREW

Yeah, very New York, you know, the late 60s, early 70s. Very New York. Really, in the top echelon, around the same time as Merce Cunningham. Nikolais is renowned for being the first one to compose his own electronic music for dance. He was also very adventurous with lighting projection and things like that. It was a very pioneering work. Apparently, half his ashes are in New York and the other half are in Paris. He had a very big influence in France, connected to a choreographic development centre there. He was quite a significant figure.

We met him once. He came to Al's studio in Melbourne when he was on tour. And he sat in a quiet corner while they had a very loving interaction. It was a wonderful relationship.

Did Al tell you about his father's business? Soda water business, they made lemonade – Wunder Sodas. I loved that.

ANTON

Life gave him lemonade.

ANDREW
Indeed.

ANTON
Wunderbar.

ANDREW
Exactly.

ANTON
Should we play a bit of word association?

ANDREW
I can do word association by myself. *(laughs)*

ANTON
No, this isn't a solo, Andrew…

ANDREW
(laughs)

ANTON
How about I give you a word and you tell me what comes up for you and then we see if anything meaningful happened or if it was just silly?

ANDREW
Go.

ANTON Attention.
ANDREW Salute.
ANTON Control.
ANDREW Witness.
ANTON Trust.
ANDREW Wilting.
ANTON Unconscious.
ANDREW Wet.
ANTON Freedom.
ANDREW Lemonade.
ANTON Ordinary.
ANDREW Peach.
ANTON Legacy.
ANDREW Window.
ANTON Death.
ANDREW Carnation.
ANTON Earth.
ANDREW Soil.
ANTON Artist.
ANDREW Crystal.
ANTON Presence.
ANDREW Ribbon.
ANTON Sunshine.
ANDREW Hell.

ANTON
It's interesting that when I gave you abstract terms you came back with concrete nouns. Maybe because you work with images?

ANDREW

Yes, absolutely. So, you said ‘artist’, I said ‘crystal,’ because it went into this kind of image of being made of glass that could be shattered. It was like that a couple of times.

ANTON

Did you ever feel reluctant to call yourself an ‘artist’?

ANDREW

Yeah, it took a while. Definitely in the 80s, I never went ‘Ooh, I'm an artist’. No, no, no. Working class boys don't become artists. It was my hobby to work with Al, and I was performing and I loved it. It was really helpful to have that kind of release. Maybe after seven or eight years I started calling myself a ‘performer’.

When I met Rosalind Crisp (now my wife), things shifted. She’s a dancer and choreographer. She's driven, fiercely dedicated, all the classic ‘artist’ things, she ticks every box. I knew I didn’t have that kind of ambition or drive for myself as an artist. But in the last 20 years since meeting her there's been a gradual accumulation of thinking about it.

In the last seven or eight years, I've been saying that I consider improvisation to be an art form. And, therefore, I'm interested in the question of what kind of art one can produce from that form. The choices you make about a form imply something about what it is you produce. For me, it's really important that I don't have to fulfil the characteristics of well-made theatre or a choreographed dance or a well-written play. None of that criteria applies to me, because I have a different form.

By being respectful of the essential qualities of a form, and especially those qualities that make it different to other forms, we can discover what improvisation offers people or what we take from the form. For example, as an improviser I've taken from it, the chance to develop attentiveness or mindfulness and pleasure etc.

Now that it’s time for me to give something back to improvising, the question has become: ‘What is its artistic potential? What is its artistic destiny?’ I think one of its artistic destinies is the Long Form Solo. That's when we’ll start to see improvisation as an art form. We can borrow understandings from other solo art forms such as the visual art. Things such as starting with a blank canvas, signing it, taking responsibility for it. In the Long Form Solo it's clear who's responsible, whereas in the ensemble thing, the responsibility is

very hard to identify. Improvisers love collaboration, and often they want to de-author an individual by doing a group improvisation; but I actually love the responsibility it gives me to make the kind of art that is satisfying to me, to discover my aesthetic.

It was a long journey, and it certainly started because I was working class. I never applied for funding, because I thought people like me don't get funding. I worked with Al Wunder for seven years and we might get door split for performing, but mainly, I paid him. Then Peter and I worked away for twelve years and we'd produce shows and we'd just want to break even. We both had other work to make our living. So, in that sense, it was a hobby. We never applied for money; we wouldn't have known what to do with it.

We had our practice: we would rehearse two or three times a week for forty-eight weeks of the year, we would perform maybe ten or twelve times a year. We had everything we needed. It's only in the last seven or eight years that I've started to talk about art in relationship to improvising. So yeah, it was a really long journey, but I've been very inspired by Ros and her explicit commitment as an artist.

ANTON

Most improvisation I've seen has been in ensembles or duos. The solo form seems very daunting.

ANDREW

Actually, it's the easiest form in improvisation. I think it's always healthy to have a solo practise, because otherwise you get too much caught up in getting your material from the other person. Then you start to think 'Well, if they give me good material, it will be good'. But you never think it's good because of you. I think it's really the healthiest thing to have a solo practice. And it's not like the conventions of theatre, where you've got to be really good to do a solo. It's the opposite of that.

I couldn't do a rehearsed solo, I really couldn't. I mean, there's too much to remember. The anxiety is about what you're going to forget. But in an improvised solo there's nothing to remember. You can't get anything wrong. It's my personal feeling that it should be everybody's foundational form. If you don't know yourself as a solo, then often the relationships are dependent. It's not that you shouldn't do any duets, but it's very good to know who you are by yourself. And then you can engage in healthy relationships with other people.

ANTON
What's your current practice during lockdown?

ANDREW
I'm doing a little bit of coaching which keeps me going. I also do a bit of solo sharing; I'm sharing with two people in Berlin (Meltem Nils and Fiona Kelly) once every two weeks. I share with Peter Trotman once a week in Melbourne, I share with Tony Osborne in Sydney, and I also do a joint share with Neil Thomas in Melbourne and Kevin Jeynes in Brisbane. We do solos for each other on Zoom, and that's been really fantastic. It's great to get over the fact that it's different.

You start off by going, 'It's terrible', and then you realise it's just different. I'm really enjoying having someone watch. It might be hard to get that feeling from the screen when you first start, but gradually it comes back. I've been exchanging short videos with the guy in Melbourne.

It's all a lot shorter than what I used to do. My solo practice has been 50-55 minutes for a few years now, so I've cut back from that. I also applied for funding because of the Coronavirus thing and got a $5,000 grant to perform in sheds. All the video stuff I do is part of that project, so it's paying me to do that. I think it's going to be quite a while before we get audiences and spaces, so I had this idea to just go to people's houses and if they have a shed then I perform in that.

That's another plan for people who normally aren't engaged in the arts very much. The reason came from the bushfires here, which were really awful. Where we live has the last bits of forest left, most of it has been logged. So, we had these vestiges of ancient rainforest, and that's all burned now. There was already a huge rift in this community, between the logging people, and the environmental people. The fires made it much worse. It was really divided, with awful aggression, a terrible, terrible thing. And everybody was very convinced they were right.

We were in Berlin when the bushfires started, and we didn't get back until just before the end of it. Ros and I and our friends were on the environmental side, and then there were these people we hated called 'the loggers'; but the bushfires proved we were all wrong. The best outcome was to get acceptance that what we're doing hasn't worked. Therefore, we have to all find something different.

I was really wanting to make some contribution to this community in terms of bringing people together, and these shed

solos are part of that idea. So, we'll see if I can get that off the ground once we come out of lockdown.

I've certainly never felt this rusty for many years. Because I was rusty, I had to find new and old ways of generating material. The questioning of the form and the context and circumstance is never going to end, and I'm going to keep doing it because it's endlessly interesting and challenging and demanding. So, it's great.

ANTON
A solo show is quite something. I mean, even doing a scripted solo show is quite a big deal for a performer.

ANDREW
Yes, it is.

ANTON
To keep an audience's attention for an hour, even if you're armed with a script and sound and lighting, and all that.

ANDREW
Yeah, yeah.

ANTON
It's interesting that you insist on the solo form, doing it on your own; but also, that you won't do it if nobody is watching. So, you're not alone.

ANDREW
It's just a fantasy in my anthropological imagination, but when I think of what performance is about, I get an image of cold, frightened people sitting around a fire. There are wolves howling and somebody gets up and says something that reminds the group of Spring or what makes them excited about going hunting the next day. They're saying something that's bringing people together, generating a sense of togetherness. That's what theatre is about. We've become confused about it in the last hundred years, because it's become associated with stardom, fame, making money, having a big production. But improvisation stays very humble. It's very clear to me as an improviser that in terms of ambition, there's nowhere to go. There isn't an improvisation scene out there, waiting to make you a star. There are no Oscars for improvisers. So, if that's not what you're doing it for, then why are you doing it? You've got to find really substantive reasons.

I do it because it's endlessly interesting for me, it's really great to be challenged by it. My rhetoric is constantly being challenged. What I say as a teacher is constantly being challenged by my

experience. I can't just rest and say: ‘I know what it is, and it’s what I tell you it is’. It’s as we were saying: ‘Your problems are your content.’ When improvising is easy, you don't need to remember that; but when it’s challenging, that's what the practice is for.

I don't think I'll ever stop improvising. I might stop teaching, I might stop performing in public, but I don't think I'll ever stop improvising. One day we’ll be at the Improvisers Old Folks Home and Al Wunder will come out in his wheelchair with his hum drum every Friday and all the improvisers and their families will be there. (Well, all improvisers *are* family.) You'd never know what time dinner was. It would be chaos. Great!

ANTON

Yeah, there's definitely something that it does to a person, learning to improvise. A special quality, a kind of generosity. It's exactly the opposite of mechanical behaviour or mechanical reproduction. You know the famous essay by Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’? Improvising is something that’s not reproducible. I mean, there might be a video clip, but that isn't really the thing.

ANDREW

No, it's clearly not the thing. That's something I'm learning from this video exchange. I'm not becoming a video artist. I'm using the technology and enjoying engaging with its potentials, but it's there to help me disseminate my improvisation. Knowing how it works is really good, but it's not that I’m taking on that form, or that it's what my art will be. My art will remain improvisational.

ANTON

To get back to your practise: when I was looking at your videos, I noticed a few ‘angry rants’, and a lot of humour. Are there particular emotional places that you find yourself coming back to, or that you avoid? Does fear ever come up?

ANDREW

I don't really experience much fear when I'm performing, although issues of death arise very frequently. It's gotten to the point where I think it's cheap, like the trump card will be that I do a bit of death stuff in the end. I had a heart attack nearly ten years ago, and I had a quadruple bypass as a consequence. A lot of people were worrying about me while I was performing after that. Before that, there was my father's death over forty years ago, and my

mother died fourteen years ago. So, the death theme comes around.

This is kind of slipping off your question a bit, because it's not really an emotion; but I don't really think of emotions as material. It's a flavour that comes with the content, so I don't directly address emotions, but death is definitely a clear thematic.

The other clear thematic that seems to keep happening is that I feel part of my job as an elder is to impart wisdom at some level. This is not something I want to do, or that I even consciously approve of. I would have hated someone doing that to me when I was in my 20s; but I don't seem to be able to stop it happening.

When I'm performing as a kind of 'elder person', there should be something inspiring or hopeful for younger people in what I'm doing. That's definitely begun to mark the end of my solos a lot. I've tried to get away from it; as I say, it's not a conscious thought. Because I've always been a teacher, it actually gets somehow more poetic as you get older. It comes with ageing, like having grey hair. You end up being in this kind of leadership role, it's quite strange.

You'll notice that when I talk about material, I'm talking about my experiences. I'm not doing the 'actor thing' of having the emotional experience and expressing it. That doesn't happen very much. I'm narrating the content and then there are emotional shifts in that. Apart from the rant – which I've always loved.

It's often insincere, I'm just making it up. These things don't really annoy me in any way. It's more like I'm narrating events or scenes, and they might have an emotional flavour, but it's not my personal emotion. I want to describe things rather than be in the middle of things.

ANTON

One thing I did want to get back to. In your workshop at the Huddersfield conference, you told me on the side, 'You're my favourite'. It freaked me out a bit, until I realised you were saying it to everybody. Is that your own thing, or did you get it from somebody else?

ANDREW

Ah, well, let me make the list. I got it from Carl Rogers and his 'unconditional positive regard'. I got it from my mother and my father. I was one of three boys, and in my first ten years, at least once a year, there'd be a moment when one of them would say, 'You do know you're our favourite, don't you?' And when we were driving to my father's funeral, I told my brothers about

this and that's when I found out they were saying it to all of us.

It's been a pedagogical device for me for forty years. Twice I've been challenged on it by students who said to me it's insincere. And I said, 'No, it's not. When I'm talking to you, I'm giving you my attention. You're my favourite in that moment.' So, it's actually completely accurate in that sense.

I've also got a little mystical thing about it, especially for men. I was a primary school teacher and I used to work a lot with seven-year-old boys. It's kind of a crucial age, certainly in the Australian school system. When a boy is seven, he's usually just learning that he's naughty. Many of them are completely bewildered by school and the regulations. They get you to come inside and sit down and not move; whereas before he spent his whole life running around chasing things and climbing trees. Suddenly there are all these rules about what you can and can't do, and the boys just don't get it.

And when teachers say 'You can't do that,' they go 'Okay', but then they forget, because they're not yet mature enough to remember. So, they end up being in trouble, and then often during that whole school experience they're not learning very much, and they're just completely bewildered. At certain times in my life, I've had dreams about these seven-year-old boys I've taught that were in that state. If you say, 'I think you're great', it can make a big difference. Instead, what they're learning is that they're naughty, and they're stupid.

Once, I was teaching a subject called 'Dance and Psychology' at Melbourne University and one student was a counsellor. We were doing this performative presentation on stage. And just before they went on, I leant to each one and said, 'You're my favourite'. So, they all went on with these ridiculous grins all over their faces. They had to write a journal, and that one student wrote, 'I know what he's doing, I understand his technique; but there's a little bit of me that also knows it's true.' When I tell someone, 'You're my favourite', I'm speaking to the seven-year-old in them. That's who I want to play with, that's the one that can be spontaneous. When I'm speaking to the seven-year-old, they go 'Yes, it's true'. The adult hopefully sees the irony and thinks it's funny.

I've got about 25 layers to the game now after all these years. It starts with 'You're my favourite'. When the workshop is long enough, I get to, 'You're my favourite and all the others are hopeless'.

And that's even more ironically funny, because they know I'm telling everybody that.

Yeah, there's all that ‘perils of praise’ kind of thing, which is that if you give people praise, you're entering the world of also having negative judgements as well. So, I play with that as well. It's quite a complicated game for me.

When I was teaching six-year olds, we had this big sign on the back wall: ‘We are wonderful’. I would make them chant that to me religiously every day. And I would send them off to visit the principal with a message. I’d say, ‘Could you go to the office and ask to speak to the principal? When she wants to talk to you, go in and say, “Mr. Morrish says you're wonderful" and then leave.’ I would do things like that. So, I played that game at many levels.

ANTON

For me, the first feeling was real joy, exactly like being that seven-year-old self. That's what we all wanted somebody to say to us. And then immediately there was also that adult suspicion – ‘Is he coming onto me? What’s happening here?’ And then when I heard you saying it to other people, it was both a relief and disappointment. And then it was like – ‘Okay, it's a game we're playing’.

In some way it ties in with the whole trick of performance. When we’re performing, we’re being a bit deceptive; but there’s also an agreement with the audience. Whatever you do, it’s not going to be biographical journalism or documentary evidence in a court of law. There's a game, and with that comes playfulness. We buy into it, and we enjoy it. And we also enjoy imagining it’s true and that it’s exactly what we want to hear. It’s beautiful.

ANDREW

Yeah, yeah. There’s the whole question of enlivening, entering the moment with those layers. It's definitely playful. I don't want to weigh people down with my approval. That's the other part of it. When you’re running a workshop, people are very addicted to the teacher's approval. So, in a four- or five-day workshop I give it effusively to everyone. Then it's just an empty joke. I go around still doing it and they've stopped listening to me. They're too busy talking to each other about what they enjoyed about their work. After a few days it has no impact, it's been disarmed. At that moment, what I'm saying is: ‘I can't follow you into the world after the workshop, so don't become dependent on

my approval. It's empty, isn't it? By now you should be working from your own motivation.'

I've opened the door to that with the game, but in the end, I just become like an annoying uncle. People say, 'Oh, go away. Leave us alone. Yes, we know.'

It's about playing with the pedagogical issue of the teacher's approval. If you play that way you end up diminishing your authority as the approving one, and therefore they have to find it for themselves. I don't think kids could manage that so quickly, but in a four- or five-day workshop if adults can't work with their own sense of pleasure, then they won't keep going. And I want them to keep going as it is the only way to get better at improvising.

ANTON

Al also talks about getting people to be their own self teachers, or their own witnesses?

ANDREW

Yeah, yeah. I don't mind being their teacher for four or five days. I feel like I earn my money. I don't feel embarrassed about the deal that they give me money, and I give them a workshop. Then they can do what they like with it. As long as they had a good time, I don't mind. They can take it into their practice if they want, or they can use it anywhere else. I'm happy to be their teacher, but I'm not their parent.

For teachers, our job is to become redundant. We're there to handle someone's development over a certain period of time. What you want is to get to the place where they need you less and less. In the end, you want them to be grateful, but you don't want them to need you at all. You're training people to be independent of you. I mean, in the end, if Peter and I had not stopped working with Al, we wouldn't have been independent. That was the next developmental stage for us. It wasn't in any way a criticism of him or his work, but we just had to move on. Since I'm wanting to become redundant for people, I make myself very charismatic and important at the beginning; but by the end, I want to be a kind of overly friendly, slightly annoying, useless thing. By then it should be the work that's interesting not my teaching.

[i] 2nd International Symposium of Performance and Mindfulness, University of Huddersfield, June 2016.