



INTRODUCTION

This book aims to provoke the future endeavours of improvisers everywhere – in theatre, dance, music, live art or any uncategorisable mix of these. Most improvised work is considered as a sub-section of an art form; here I'm trying to look at improvisation as a core discipline, the fundamentals of which exist within all the separate genres. I concentrate chiefly on improvisation within theatre, but dance and music practice are also considered where they share elements or problems. The geographical orientation is primarily the UK, with some reference to the USA, and a few inadequate nods towards work elsewhere.

Let's define improvisation for our purposes here as:

The spontaneous invention of words, behaviours, sounds, or movement within a context understood as fictional, aesthetic or representational.

There are others . . .

THE WHY

Why are we improvising? Why use improvisation rather than tennis, carpet-weaving or opera?

Improvisation tends to be used primarily in pursuit of one of four aims:

- AS RESEARCH into ourselves to increase self-knowledge, perhaps sharing the results of this research with others as performance.
- FOR LEARNING better how to communicate with each other, manage emotions or improve life skills.
- To understand, manage or reconcile CONFLICT. This work is sometimes associated with programmes for social change.
- To create ENTERTAINMENT without necessarily any recourse to a higher purpose, unless you see laughing as a higher purpose, which you might.

ELEMENTS

The aim in this chapter is to identify some core elements of improvisation that underpin all practice. These elements might be considered the *prima materia*, the genetic, embryonic plasma that makes up the form. If you took improvisation practice in each of dance, music and theatre and tried to identify a single pure stock, what would you find? I would admit that I've been hopefully looking down the microscope for an image of something distinct. A worm perhaps. Then I can run from the lab shouting: 'A Worm! A Worm! The Secret of Impro is a Worm!' But in fact should I ever see a worm, I find it pretty soon becomes a piece of string and then a barracuda. However, if I cease to care about this riddle and instead try to pick out some fleeting characteristics of what's consistently going on there under the microscope, I can begin to identify within each art form practice some separate active ingredients that appear in each case. I can see these bubbling away, mutating and muttering and trying to find balance or equilibrium with each other. If this starts to be achieved, then as if by magic, some chef-less cookery occurs.

ROLES

In the beginning, there were roles. Improvisers inherited these roles from formal performance practice, and found them wanting. They discovered there was a need to abandon them, or at the very least, beat them up a little. The move from jazz to free improvisation characterises the process clearly. The musician Simon Fell observes how, *'With free jazz, the characteristic roles of the instruments in the ensemble tended to be relatively traditional. The classic example would be a trio of sax, bass, and drums. In a free jazz context, you'd expect (very, very broadly characterising this), for the drums to do a lot of drumming, the bass to plonk away in a bass style and the sax to be the apex of the triangle, dynamically driving down on top . . . A free improvisation definition of that group would be one*

where the three contributors play much less idiomatically, so the vocabulary which each instrument uses is much less conventional . . . If you play the instrument in the way it's been designed to be played, that tends to put the instrument in a certain hierarchical role because the instrument has been designed to do one or two things very well . . . The saxophone was designed to be very loud and to cut through. A string bass was designed to do almost the opposite, never to cut through, but it has this huge supporting cushion of sound, which goes under everything else. And drums do what drums do. But if you stop doing that — if the sax starts sounding like a cymbal or the drum kit starts sounding like a flute, then straight away that hierarchy disintegrates.'

Fell elucidates clearly the correlation of role and authority. The player-functional roles, to use Waldrick's term, are fixed. But free improvisation can't necessarily use the roles as ascribed by tradition. To try and work within the old ones, the improvisation dies on its feet. The composer and improviser Peter Weigold has found something similar when he's been called in to get orchestras to improvise. He's found that while on one hand, 'Classical musicians absolutely love to have the pressure taken off', in practice it's not easy. The stress induced by being asked to improvise, freezes up the players. In this case, Weigold's strategy might vary. It might be to take away the instruments and give the musicians percussion instead. Or have them swap instruments around. This will help, but 'The real problem with orchestras is they can't hear one another.' Not only that but, 'from one end to the other they simply can't see each other.' There may be screens between different sections to protect the ears of those near to the loudest instruments. And getting the musicians to change positions isn't an option because of union agreements. So the musicians are completely dependent upon the conductor. Peter is involved in some sensitive negotiations if he is to dismantle the role structures and release a different content from the group. The fusion of social organisation (form) with traditional classical music (content) is such that he has to tackle both at the same time, if he is to bring the musicians into a new relationship with their craft. It's not dissimilar in dance. Training encourages a formality of roles, which are inevitably replicated in the larger companies such as the Royal Ballet. Different expectations are made of female and male students that go beyond their natural limitations, being concerned with traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity. Getting dancers to improvise leads to problems similar to those encountered by Peter Weigold. Wendy Houston observes that dancers, for example, are not

encouraged to look like 'people making choices (on stage) — you never get asked to do this as a dancer. But the finest dancers are those where you see these decisions.' Gaby Agis came up against the orthodoxy of contemporary dance when she worked with the Royal Ballet star Ashley Page, in a series of improvised duets. Gaby set herself the task of breaking into Ashley's familiar patterns, helped by the fact that Ashley really made himself vulnerable. *We had a structure, but we were improvising. So when he would come to me — and I could tell there was nervousness — he would lift me, because that's what he felt I wanted. And what I would do is, I would go dead weight, so he couldn't lift me. So he couldn't do his tricks. And he did those things (that I do) like being still, and rolling, and so in a way it was a real challenge — and I give him credit for making himself vulnerable. For me, it was my territory. But for him, it wasn't.*

Similarly, if a theatre company operates the star system, and the 'lead' actor expects to get the 'large' parts, improvisations may stall. Things just may not go that way. An ensemble requires a fluid, primitive democracy to operate in which players respond to the needs of the evolving situation and take whatever role is appropriate. Likewise, the role of the director, choreographer or conductor has to be re-evaluated since improvisation is the form least accessible to having meaning determined by an offstage presence. It's in the spirit of ensemble that

performers claim the freedom of decision-making. In this they begin to appropriate the tactics and knowledge of directors, choreographers and playwrights instead of being beholden to them. Perhaps any re-conceptualised director role might be limited to composing structures, giving advice and nudging.

But the challenge of self-organisation without directorial authority imposed, and without fixed-player function roles in place, is not inconsiderable. As Joan Littlewood observed, 'To introduce chaos, you have to be very organised.' Littlewood was a strong director who used improvisation

'Joan has talked a lot about developing artists rather than actors through impro — actors who were creative artists who could think on their feet and respond to any given circumstance . . . Shows such as *The Hostage* were largely improvised as the company only started with several pages of script. Sometimes shows were changed on a nightly basis as happened with *You Won't Always Be Top*, which led to the prosecution by the Lord Chamberlain.'

Nadine Holdsworth

extensively in rehearsals and always looked for innovative ways to introduce unpredictable elements into performance. She would trust that the company onstage could problem-solve to handle the provocations she introduced.

One strategy for self-organisation lies in a substitution of shared operational values for conventions of status or authority. In other words, performers work to find a shared aesthetic or philosophy that guides their decision-making on stage. The challenge, however, lies in finding a way to accommodate both dark and light, both Dionysiac and Apollonian energies. It's not enough to commit to a set of social values in the way that a political party or interest groups might. To use the stage as a means to promote social idealism in a simplistic way, drains theatre of its essential fire. It can't become about 'demonstrating' ethical behaviour. Mick Napier's comments, quoted earlier, stress how improvisers being *only* 'supportive' simply leads to ineffectual dramatic scenes. 'No, the most supportive thing you can do is get over your *pasty self* and *selfishly* make a strong choice in the scene.'⁶² These comments find strong echoes in the world of dance. Jo Blowers: *'Another one of the paradigms is a particularly careful, bordering on precious, very definite etiquette about "taking care" of each other. And sometimes – and I know for myself – it can get over-respectful, and it's not surprising that "release dancers" or "contact dancers" get called the Pyjama People. Because of the softness and the confluence. Because it's so democratic, you just wish someone would get in there and do something obscene . . . Although it's a wonderful aspiration and a fantastic state of being; it is very holistic from that point of view – all of that I entirely applaud, but there are times in performance when you think, "Well, this is an opportunity to bring this to a broader picture and the reality of life . . ." That's when it gets exciting and interesting to watch, when it gets combative, and instinctive. Because that is so much truer to the life we're leading.'*

Improvisation culture has to find a way of incorporating or being able to work with not just conflict but the rough, discordant, baser elements of performance. These colours need to exist on the palette as well as the pastel, harmonious tones. But this isn't an argument for just being selfish.

Rick Nodine: *'I've had the experience of improvising with people who don't do the listening half. They do the action half. You go on stage with them and they're dancing constantly.'*

Gaby Agis: *'And they might be doing really amazing dancing.'*

Rick: *'But I might as well not be there.'*

Gaby: *'Ego!'*

Rick: *'I don't know whether it's ego or fear, but as they whizz past you, you feel like putting your hand out as you might stop a bus and saying "Excuse me, but if you could slow down for a moment maybe we could get on the same bus?"'*

Gaby: *'And you know what they become? They become solo improvisers . . . But to be part of an ensemble – that's tough.'*

Of course the improviser is drawing from selfishness. It's a great source of energy and desire. But unless the selfishness is offered generously, the actor loses the ability to receive information through skin. If the eyes and the skin don't receive, then it's only the blood and nerves pulsing.

The task of redefining roles in this new context must mean several things – one of which is inventing scores that allow performers to bring forward dark energies without a sacrifice of values. Such structures must involve understandings about the restrictions and freedoms of role-playing. The work of Jackie Walduck offers a possible template, based as it is on the mechanics of music improvisation. Andrew St John's development of archetypal characters within dramatic improvisation offers another. Details of this are offered in the lexicon. Shows such as Fluxx's *Spiriting for England* offer an idea about dramatic character through the use of an evolving chronology, each character having a time line mirroring the audience's own. Within live art, Franko B, Forced Entertainment, Station House Opera and other companies simply bypass any idea of character, finding roles out of time-based or structural procedures. By removing role from character, performers are no longer trapped by any association with conventional understandings of 'what normally happens'.

TENSION

Improvisation is an organised fight. The removal of any element of struggle or rivalry runs the risk of the medium becoming simply a song of praise to the human spirit. In the theatre, the audience is engaged (usually) by the tension created from uncertainty over the outcome of the event. This happens in different ways. In conventional theatre there is *pretence* that the outcome is uncertain. In improvisation, it really is.

Therefore the conflict needs to be authentic if not actually real. Augusto Boal once observed that the sight of two boxers entering the ring on crutches wasn't going to offer much of a spectacle. It's the same here; only a genuine tension makes the audience watch keenly. Who will win? What will be revealed? The opportunity to witness tension, embarrassment and difficulty in others is always engaging. Hanging used to draw huge crowds, a point well understood by reality television producers. This is not an argument for reinstating capital punishment but it is an argument for having something at stake when the drama begins.

Tension is essential. The dancer plays with tension in his body, exploring the submission to and fight against gravity. The exploration is made through movement; leaps, rolls, lifts and jumps that cumulatively realise choreography. It's not the only way: tension may be created through the expression of vulnerability, tenderness or affection. In such acts, the performer opens her or himself up for scrutiny. S/he shares something personal or intimate. There's a sense in the audience of a taboo being broken – because the action is taking place in public. Jo Blowers commented to me about Kirstie Simson's ability to really open herself up to the audience, to be willing to be seen as vulnerable in that moment of spontaneity. Kirstie has said, 'I really try to break down this whole presentational front – where the audience feels separate from what's going on onstage.'⁶³ In her performances, you understand clearly that Simson is chancing her arm, you feel for her but also with her. It's disconcerting but in some ways also reassuring because the predicament is so recognisable. You feel you are looking into that personality, or through it, to understand something of the person. When two dancers make a duet in that spirit, it's like pointing a flashlight into their relationship. Tension is created by pulling things away; masks, false constructions, layers of skin. It's Grotowski's *via negativa* and Brook's demolition process happening before you. The inevitable flicks of empathy leap from the auditorium to the stage.

Tension is always a staple element in music. In a discussion about this with Alison Blunt and Rex Horan, Horan commented, 'Tension features very consciously – in a variety of ways. There are clichés you can use to build and release tension. For example, if we're doing an improvisation together, as a bassist what I can do is what's called pedal. I can drop down to a certain note that plays a certain role in a key, and I can pedal while someone is going crazy on top with their music. And when I get

off that pedal note, and resolve it, there's a great release of tension. It's a fabulous moment. And that tension is caused by the audience expecting it to resolve and it not being resolved. Tension and release in music is about dissonance and consonance. It's about knowing an expectation exists and not allowing it to resolve for a long time.' This parallels a situation where a dancer consistently and repetitively explores the same routine, refusing to break it. Or within drama, a female character walks provocatively up and down in front of a passive but attentive male character. Who will speak first?

Comedy improvisation relies significantly on tension. It's what makes the joke work. The aim is to build and release tension in short bursts. But even if the joke is only a few lines long, if the *build* isn't there, the laughter doesn't come. If the improviser goes for the gag too early, the whole scene may be jeopardised. This is why a poor joke by a good comedian will work better than a good joke by a weak comedian. For the good comedian knows better how to build the tension, and thereby gets a better response from a weak 'pay-off'. This recognition echoes John Wright's assertion, quoted earlier: 'There are three areas to an action which I think are important to structure: one, the anticipation that something is going to happen – two, knowing where you are in the scene – the relief when it is happening – and three, at the end it's the pay-off. You feel differently to how you feel at the beginning.'

So how is comedy created improvisationally? Matt Elwell from ComedySportz offered this: 'What I would go back to is the definition of comedy as created when you manipulate surprise in the context of the familiar.' Comedy is really the defeat of the anticipated in favour of what is logical – but unexpected. The mind (of the spectator) is prompted to make one assumption but gets another instead. There's a surprise element but the pay-off is not ridiculous in the sense of being illogical, having no connection to what came before. Or it can work differently. A hypothesis is established which is bizarre but logical in its own terms. The pay-off comes through the elaboration of the hypothesis. Once Eddie Izzard has established the premise that wolves raised him, everything that follows is logical – in its own terms. It's ridiculous, but not absurd in the way of a sequence of non sequiturs would be. Beginners sometimes think that it's enough to be unexpected, and skip the logic. 'Where shall we go to eat tonight?' 'Cornucopia!' It probably sounded funny in the head. There's no tension built so there's probably no laughter.

Teaching at ComedySportz in Chicago, Elwell uses exercises like the Three Line Scene to teach about comedy. *'Basically, you and I are in a scene. You say a line, I say a line, and you say a line. That's the end. By this time, we know exactly what this scene is about . . . With the three lines, that gives you your familiar. That gives you a playing field. And then, how do you turn this, twist this?'*

But tension doesn't just function as an ingredient of comedy. It can be established early in the drama and rather than be released, it can be maintained throughout. The tension caused by Hamlet's determination to revenge his father's death is established early and concluded late. Alison Blunt outlined how this works musically: *'I'm thinking of Nyman or Reich: there can be a long build-up and the tension created over a long period of time. There can be small tensions between different chords pushing each other, cadences that don't quite resolve, but then there's an overall structure that resolves, like in the sonata form. You can use dynamics to create tension, you can use repetition of an idea, and you can have people playing in unison or in separate parts, more contrapuntally – so many ways. And it's the same in theatre.'* Within dramatic improvisation, long-form pieces tend to rely less on comedic patterns than on the use of narrative tension – how will this end? Keith Johnstone's work is all about story, about encouraging the adventurer-hero into situations of possibly dire outcome. In a context of this kind, re-incorporation plays a greater role as the conclusion of the adventure in some way recalls the beginning. Sherlock Holmes often recalls information gleaned by the private eye at the start of the chase, which suddenly has meaning at the end.

When the improviser's eye is on the longer journey, jokes in the short term can be destructive. They may weaken the bigger pay-off. *'Jokes tend to be employed as a last-ditch measure by insecure players when they are worried that a scene isn't funny . . . Audiences appreciate a sophisticated game player. When a player listens and uses patterns that have developed in a scene, it can elicit cheers from an audience which are much more intoxicating than the laughs that result from a few jokes. Del Close remembers hearing famed comic Lenny Bruce talk on stage for 20 minutes without getting one laugh – and then suddenly tying together several trains of thought with one or two sentences, as the audience erupted in cheers at the brilliance they had just witnessed.'*¹⁶⁴

The short version of the big book on how to create dramatic tension improvisationally for the audience would probably go like this: There

are two ways. By setting up this question – 'What will happen?' or by setting up this question – 'What's the truth?' When the first question is asked, the audience is encouraged to feel the tension generated by the existence of possible multiple outcomes. But to achieve this, the actors need to spend time creating characters, relationships and dilemmas. If they commit to these elements, the audience empathises with the characters so the eventual outcome becomes important to them. There will be a sequence involving establishment, development of what's established, a change point or crisis, and some kind of resolution. That's the orthodox Western story arc. When the second question is asked, there is the establishment of a mystery that needs to be solved. The spectator is invited to speculate around possible multiple interpretations of the truth. The understanding is that one of these will be revealed as the 'real' truth. In a detective story by Agatha Christie, we expect to know at the end 'whodunnit'. (In films and plays less linear in their structure, such as those of David Lynch, there is no absolute definitive truth offered.) From the first model we get epic stories, myths, legends and dramas of conflict. From the latter we get murder mysteries, detective stories, ghost stories, and psychological tales. Improvising the latter is more problematic, because to resolve the mystery requires a more detached mind than is usefully available to the improviser.

There's an art in constructing dramatic improvisation that capitalises on the propensity of performers to create tension between each other. It's possible to instruct players in certain ways by the use of tasks or restrictions:

You meet a woman in a dentist's waiting room. In this scene, all you want to really do is play with her hair.

The point is to set a motivation that establishes tension without verbal argument. Scenes of a sexual or romantic content always lend themselves.

You have a grievance with your lover but you can't say what it is. Leave the expression of this grievance until the last possible moment. Start the scene without knowing what the grievance is.

To avoid the tension being broken, tell the other player not to pursue knowledge of the grievance, but to simply observe it and then get on with something else. Another example might be: 'You really

fancy this person but can't express it' or 'You have something difficult to confess to this person, but can't bring yourself to reveal it'. These are effective because they cause tension through establishing a gap between the text and subtext. The performer's preoccupation is with the subtext, yet the actor is 'obliged' to play the surface action on top. So there's a tension in the performer that infects the scene. The audience is drawn to watching what happens. If the scene works well, the audience will be engaged with both 'what the truth is' as well as 'what happens at the end'.

RESPONSIVENESS

If we define reactivity as what is felt through sensation or emotion, then responsiveness is what the improviser decides to do as a result of receiving this stimulus. Living on the stage moment-to-moment helps make responsiveness authentic. In other words, it more accurately reflects the performer's relaxed use of his or her own reaction as material. In a society that is increasingly preoccupied with either the future or the past – rarely the present – we're conditioned to be always thinking ahead or back. To *be here now*

is easier than it sounds. If you listen to soap opera on the radio, you'll be aware that characters are often responding to events that happened earlier or anticipating events to come. This tends to create a reassuring and gentle atmosphere in which difficulties are buttressed by the distance of time. 'Being in the present' in front of an audience can be disquieting for both parties. It's more comforting either to reflect or anticipate. One technique used by improvisers is that of 'disappearing the audience', simply kidding oneself the situation is more private than it is. The good improviser oscillates between registering and disappearing the audience.

'Going into your head' is the phrase used to describe *not* being in the present. In the head, the improviser is looking backwards or forwards. 'How did I get here? Was that a good move? Will it be a good move if

I go there?' Thoughts of this kind take the performer out of the present. 'Going into your head' means that the laser beam of attention is pointed the wrong way. It needs to point back into the physical and emotional dynamics that are occurring in the body. If not in this direction, then to other performers in the improvisation or to other sounds in the event.

Improvisers in different art forms often perceive *listening* as the key to present-time responsiveness. It doesn't mean listening to your thoughts, a process that will lead increasingly to detachment. It means tuning in, kinaesthetically as well as aurally, to what is occurring. Especially in mixed-art form work, 'People think they have to look for something, they have to "think something up". This will generally shift them in the direction of their own art form because their ideas most easily function in that domain. Whereas if you say "Look and hear what's there – and do it", that wouldn't necessarily suggest any particular art form.'

(Guy Dartnell.) Responsiveness therefore begins with noting the auditory, visual or kinaesthetic stimuli that are present. (The comedian Ross Noble is always quick to observe anything distinctive about the audience or the set as soon as he walks on stage.) With these responses, the aim is to trigger the imagination so as to provoke its progenitive ability to spawn its own world within the world of the event. Then responses start to exist within that created, autonomous world. Keith Johnstone always argues that one cannot be held responsible for the content of one's imagination. Accepting this, there need be no concern about the breaking of taboos. Instead, one is looking for an immersion in this emerging material. It's not that detachment doesn't have a place. There are moments during any improvisation when detachment is vital, perhaps to recapture a sense of the whole. At this point the imaginative world is left, temporarily. The original *Commedia* players tended to be so immersed in their playing that, as soon as they came offstage, they'd rush to a list of scenes backstage to reorientate themselves. They needed that detached moment.

To achieve this necessary quality of creative responsiveness may be a matter of 'unlearning' something as much as 'learning' it – rediscovering a level of attentiveness we had as a young child. With that attentiveness came a fearless spontaneity. Johnstone argues that 'You can't teach spontaneity but you can remove the obstacles to spontaneity that have been put in the way of the child.'⁶⁵ One of the learned tendencies to be thrown overboard during this education is the felt need to justify

'To sit inside your own body while you know someone is watching you – the bottom line, that's a really very excruciatingly embarrassing place. Most people start disappearing the audience in order to do what we do.'

Wendy Houston

'You have to kill ideas – otherwise it would be like Salvador Dali's clocks.'

Keith Johnstone

everything before you do it. *'Great improvisers justify afterwards. Beginners justify first.'* The actor and teacher Andy Eninger pointed out to me in a workshop that *'You have to treat everything you're doing on stage as being absolutely the most perfect thing you could possibly do in that moment.'* This was a useful tip in finding the mindset that takes the improviser away from judgement and censorship.

Responsiveness, then, is about action that is consequent on awareness. However, the more aware the improviser is, the more the need to choose between different stimuli jostling for attention. At the beginning, at the time when the first chord on the piano is sounded, there's less material available so less need for choice. As material is produced, there is more necessity for choice. The purely reactive improviser who is afraid to choose between alternative elements of material may be driven by the need to make everything 'interesting'. So how do you choose what to respond to and what to ignore? Invariably, practice will bring you confidence to be more completely 'yourself' in making selections, forgoing the superficial desire – out of fear – to give the audience what you think they require. You should seek amongst the material at your disposal that which inspires you the most. Inspiration is profoundly personal. That's how it is.

JOURNEY

'When you meet a partner you might find you're initially listening just through touch, on a light level, so you're exploring the surface of the body. And how you create patterns and pathways through that light touch. Then you might find you really want to sink into a deeper level, into bones and into the centre of the body. And then you're looking at how weight can travel and how you can support each other. From there you might want to jump, find trajectories through space, to get airborne, and help each other find that.' (Robert Anderson.) Recently I was talking to an improvisation teacher who proudly told of how an improvisation started with the actor crying. I wondered how that had come about, and whether those tears weren't coming from somewhere else other than the stimuli of that improvisation. It made me think about journeys and how a more organic process might begin with the actor perhaps doing something

banal, and then making a journey from that point to a later point where a state of heightened emotion is discovered. This seems to me the natural journey, from surface to depth. In this approach, the performer finds engagement through a sensuous connection with the external world, and through this sensuous relationship, to feelings. Robert Anderson in the quote above isn't talking about a dramatic journey but about the journey of two improvisers meeting within contact improvisation practice. However, much of the same applies even though both the vocabularies and the end point are different.

The notion of journey is really an inversion of the idea of form. What the performer experiences as journey, the spectators experience as form. Some improvisers, particularly musicians, reject the notion of their responsibility for creating form except as created out of the dialogue between them. Their responsibility is the quality of that dialogue. They trust the form that emerges. So how does the emerging form have any kind of intelligence or craft about it? How can it speak to the audience if all the emphasis is on the journey? The question is particularly pertinent given the role played by accidents and mistakes that was discussed earlier. Such accidents, rather than swept away out of sight, are given prominence. Michael Ratte attempts to answer this question for music, and the answer might apply to other forms as well. *'What makes the coherence of improvised music actually possible is the fact that its movement depends on a particular kind of concern for what appears and disappears. Such is the concern of the improviser who plays in the full knowledge that each decision taken is irrevocable ... the concern expressed in the decisions that they throw into the music is reflected in each part as a presence which temporalises that part, and in the whole as a presence which temporalises the whole. It is this temporalisation that destabilises the identities, dissimilarities and differences of the materials and so determines the dialectic of coherence and incoherence in the music ... How does the irrevocability of decisions make the improviser present to the whole? It first appears through the link between two decisions. An action, which cannot be undone, is greeted by a context that shows up the fragility of the justification for the decision that led to it. This fragility, once registered, motivates a concentration of judgement in the decision taker. The lesson learned from the first decision is already part of the meaning of the second decision. In this way, the irrevocability of decisions makes the improviser ... responsible to the whole, not by taking decisions that have the whole in mind, but by being present to the whole, and taking decisions informed by this presence.'*⁶⁶

All improvisers require this 'presence to the whole', working with the notion that accidents and mistakes only exist as such if they are *not* treated as 'part of the whole.' In other words, they need to be considered as contributing material that is just as valid, if not more so, as material more deliberately and consciously arrived at. If this is accepted, subsequent decisions allow for acknowledgement and exploration of this 'unintended' subject matter. In this way the unintended becomes part of the fabric of the piece, as comedy, digression or even a central theme. (In dramatic improvisation, a note of caution can be made in respect of the relationship between the journey and the digressions that emerge whether from accidents or some other means. This is simply that too many digressions can render the main journey irrelevant. The kookiness of the accidental material may bring the improvisation alive, but too many kooks may spoil the plot.)

In concentrating on the journey rather than the form, the improviser forgoes some of the formal responsibilities that an actor in a written play has to honour the structure imposed by the playwright. There may well be key moments when attention to the form is required — for example when the *Commedia* player runs to look at the list of scenes, the dancer becomes aware of time constraints or the musician within a jazz context recapitulates the melodic idea. But a defining feature of this kind of dialogue-based improvisation is that normal time is suspended so that the journey happens within a kind of 'out of time' time. The paradox of this is that the performer, being 'out of time' hopes to achieve a heightened sense of being 'in the present'. It's no less than what the audience hopes for and expects, this dislodgement of time. By entering into spectating, the audience member puts aside time-bound considerations that dominate most of the day. Both sides hope for an equivalent experience to what Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan describes as 'stopping the world'. If the conceit fails, as it often does, the experience drags and everyone feels super-aware of slow time passing.

The use of repetition sets up interesting disconnections that aim to question our perception of time. One might assume that repetition holds a journey up. But this is to forget the changes that spectators go through as the piece repeats, and how their relationship to the material and to their own notion of time, alters. Adrian Heathfield puts it like this: '*One of the things I'm talking about in experimental forms of theatre and live art is this evident use of repetition, which is deliberately oriented*

towards destabilising the sense of "what is now". And saying, "Is this now a then or a new now?" This problematising of whether a now is really a now is interesting in terms of theatre and the politics of commemoration. Theatre is always an act of remembrance, even if it is an improvisation. It remembers the reality it portrays. The thoughts and acts that a performer brings in the moment of improvisation draw on a history, a personal and cultural reservoir of experiences and references that are remade anew in that moment. All theatre is this in some way. But some theatre unfortunately has an aspiration towards sameness, towards a finished version of reality. The question arises, how does the event close what it remembers, create a fixed rendition of it? This is where improvisation is interesting because it has the capacity to destabilise what is remembered and how it is remembered, to show history being remade, re-invented.'

If there are obstacles and difficulties within the journey, it may benefit the traveller. Too much ease makes time go slow. Improvisers need to struggle, with themselves and their own limitations, their craft, each other or perhaps the demands of the form. A struggle disarms the traveller and projects him or her, forcibly if need be, into an altered consciousness. '*Sometimes people feel good about a performance when all they've done is articulate their own clichés effectively — when the more interesting performances are the ones where the musicians are ill at ease with the situation and have to work very hard to try and overcome certain obstacles . . . The greatest impro performances — and this is true in all non-idiomatic approaches to group playing — can be where the musicians find it hardest to play with each other.*' (Simon Fell.)

RESTRICTIONS

The notion of restrictions is used across the art forms since, as Nachmanovitch says, '*Limits yield intensity.*' Structure in performance is, after all, simply the imposition of restrictions on performers. The nature of the restrictions may concern space, time, or the performers themselves — but their imposition makes structure possible. This may even be just one rule, as in 'You have to answer the question' in *Quizoola!* Stephen Nachmanovitch writes: '*One rule that I have found to be useful is that two rules are more than enough. If we have a rule concerning harmony and another concerning rhythm, if we have a rule concerning mood and another concerning the use of silence, we don't need any more. The unconscious has infinite repertoires of structure already; all*

it needs is a little external structure on which to crystallise. We can let our imaginations flow freely through the territory mapped out by a pair of rules, confident that the piece will pull together as a definite entity and not a peregrination.⁶⁷ In *Basprov* Sutton and Bill decided there would be just the one rule: the two fishing buddies had to stay in the fishing boat. They realised that not having the freedom to get out of the boat created stronger material. The significant single rule in Word and Action's Instant Theatre is that 'every suggestion offered by the audience must be included in the narrative and in the performance'. Betrayal of this rule is seen to invalidate the performance because it introduces censorship. The single rule is like a funnel; it directs the energies of the event down that funnel, and so creates an intensity that is more vivid and elemental.

In jazz, the restrictions might be expressed through adherence to a specific rhythm or key signature that forces the musician to find every possible variation available within that corridor. Players might restrict themselves to no more than slight embellishment of the melody. To do more than that, might be seen as claiming too much freedom. 'Lomnie Hillyer once commented on the combined effect of these practices after hearing a recorded rendition of the ballad "Alone Together" by his late friend, trumpeter Kenny Dorham. Rendering the piece with his warm, intimate tone, Dorham embellished the melody with spare grace notes and varied phrasing with subtle anticipations and delays . . . then, sighing, he shook his head as if covered his eyes with his hands . . . then, sighing, he shook his head as if making from a dream, and softly marcelled, "K.D.! To think he could say all that, just by playing the melody".⁶⁸

Free music improvisation eschews restrictions, yet within its own orthodoxy, assumes them through the proscription of rhythm, melody and tonality. Taboos such as these force the sounds to be found through texture and counterpoint. In dance, restrictions might be expressed as lines on the floor as in Trisha Brown's work, or expressed as the wearing of a tight dress, used by K.J. Holmes in her solo performance 'to push it in a certain direction to see what character emerged through the limitations.' Florence Peake uses rolls of paper in her performances, wrapping herself up and exploring how this restriction creates choreography through the struggle against the restriction.

When jazz musicians pick up a tune, that tune functions as a restriction. All jazz musicians know their way around a host of blues tunes or 'I Got Rhythm'. Musicians hold on to the sense of a tune, its

essentials, while pulling these around. It's not dissimilar with comedians and jokes. When comedians or comediennes have a joke to tell, they improvise around it but they need to preserve certain elements or it ceases to be *that* joke. You can see this in the work of comedians Eddie Izzard or Billy Connolly. In a particular set, either might use a certain narrative strand that provides an armature structure to a monologue, but will pull it around to find different variations each night.

But probably the essential lines will be kept. If a comedian ditches — for example — the punch line of a gag, probably it won't work. In Penn Jillette and Paul Provenza's film about what is considered 'the world's filthiest joke', a host of comedians all tell the same gag. There are many variations. However, very few mess with the punch line: 'The Aristocrats!' Chris Ayres argues that the best part of the film is when the joke is told at a Hugh Hefner party with many other comedians present — when 'the real laughter is to be found in the endless riffing on the joke's structure — and the insider knowledge of the anti-climax to come.'⁶⁹ The audience already know the punch line — what's interesting is the improvisation.

Neither dance nor theatre have an immediate equivalent to the jazz tune repertoire although the improvising of 'classic' stories might come closest as in Sheila's *Instant Odyssey* or Fluxx's *The Call*. In both these pieces an individual goes on a quest through a series of predetermined stages yet the interpretation of each challenge is consequent upon how the improvisers make decisions on the night. The nature of the challenges along the route might be informed by data provided by the audience. The piece is sectioned, just as a tune is sectioned by a sequence of head-solos-head in the jazz tune. The sectioning would most commonly be scene by scene. Alternatively one might look at 'classic' scenes that recur throughout drama; the goodbye scene, the betrayal scene, the reunion scene. In each case, certain dramatic actions are expected but the interpretation is always unique.

In the joke a man walks into a talent agency and says: 'Have I got an act for you!' The agent chews on his cigar: 'Oh yeah? Tell me about it.' Then comes a lengthy description of an unspeakably obscene act, or the enactment of same, which goes — in most variations — on and on and on. 'My God. Does this act have a name?' asks the agent. The visitor answers: 'The Aristocrats!'

In dance work, you could perhaps find a parallel in the kind of score that has a series of small scores within it, each one timed. To give an example, K.J. Holmes told me about a piece of hers that she toured with Karen Nelson. In this piece, each section had certain obligations that utilised both spatial and temporal restrictions. *'It was a very specific score. We did a duet unison at the beginning, then we split the stage up. She was downstage; I was upstage. And the lights played a big part. They would fade, they would come up on her, and she would do a solo. She was downstage right. They would fade on her, come up on me. I was upstage left. And then we'd come together. And then we'd start playing with this accumulation of imagery. And it was always in a time frame. Knowing how long you're going to do something creates a boundary.'*

It's the pushing against restrictions, while simultaneously being fenced in by them, that makes improvisation fascinating to watch. This relationship between improviser and restriction echoes and complements the constant effort of the performer extending him or herself to externalise imagery, and being reactive to that imagery once created. Some improvisers in the theatre misguidedly argue for a minimum of restrictions in that the freedom acquired will liberate them into a more creative, inventive, spontaneous world. But fit one of those actors into a sleeping bag or lock him in an onstage cupboard, and you will likely see some of his most inventive work.

POETICS

Following the separation of art forms that began probably at the time of our emergence from a hunter-gatherer society, each separate creative medium has developed its own poetics. For any single art form to achieve resonance it largely relies on the exclusion of other aesthetic vocabularies. The narrowness of any one vocabulary permits a degree of precision in the treatment of its subject matter. Arguably, however, artists from different art forms do have this in common: that the vocabulary of each is but a means to an end. This end is a desire to take recipients to an experience beyond the literal appreciation of the art work. A painting invites an experience more than simple acknowledgement of how the colours complement each other and the shapes echo life. A piece of dance more than the technique of the dancers. There's a hope that the construction of work propels the spectator/receiver into entering into recognising something greater; a

A Note on ESP and Mixing the Art Forms

The work of ESP (Experiments in Spontaneous Performance), which includes Rick Nodine, Danielle Allan, Rex Hossi Horan, Gaby Agis and Alison Blunt, along with myself in the team, began initially working with quite tight but complex scores in performance. After a year, these were abandoned and the group worked on conventions that could be activated by any artist during the performance. The scoring protocols adapted from separate art forms had proved ineffective in liberating any kind of new vocabulary. They relied instead on juxtaposing separate art form elements, like cake slices from different cakes packed together into one box. There was a recognition that new structures could only be arrived at by dismantling the old. Subsequent explorations were more scary but more productive since it was from a sense of insufficiency and an absence of safety-generating conventions, that more genuinely innovative work emerged. It also became possible then to return occasionally to more 'pure' single art form excursions. Emerging from this was the hypothesis that there were fundamentally two ways primarily for artists from different backgrounds to collaborate. The first, *complementarity*, allows a basis of accompaniment in which either one or other art form is in the ascendancy, or else two or more co-exist. The second, *synthesis*, moves the articulation of an entirely new vocabulary into pole position. Now there are elements of rhythm, movement, use of space and perhaps words or props, operative together but without the norms of their expression identified as belonging to any single art form. This kind of work operates closer to an abstract point on an imagined continuum between concreteness and abstraction, yet aims for accessibility. It involves a hard-to-define kind of rawness.

much bigger, more mysterious goose fair. At such moments, the precise context of the location where the piece is experienced and the precise nature of the time of that experience, become either less significant or resounds differently within the witness. 'Great secrets of the universe', as Del Close might say optimistically, 'are right there to be experienced.'

This is one of the difficulties facing performing artists rooted in any one art form, collaborating across different forms: they know that in their own work, the efficacy of their performed moment depends significantly on the exclusion of other art form elements. To overcome

this, the collaborators need to do one of two things: either to work complementarily, so ways are found for dance and music, or music and theatre, to sit alongside each other, or to work a more difficult passage: to boil away the differences between them so that the residue remaining, while emerging without the familiar characteristics of any one art form, nevertheless carries the heady intoxicant of any of them. Either task involves a lot of practice. Inevitably, much of this practice will be given over to the articulation and definition of a shared vocabulary. Just as two spoken languages over time borrow from each other and merge to the point where a new, identifiable language can be named, so too will the artists have to steal from each other while simultaneously pissing on sacred cows. In other words they have to give up the sacredness of some of their own practice, understood as rules or protocols, in order for elements of that practice to become pluralised within the group. As Marshall Soules articulates, *'Both improvising musicians and actors must lose their identities even as they find them, but they do so within a framework of productive constraints – the protocols of improvisation.'*⁷⁰

Inevitably part of this means starting to learn something of the next guy's perhaps quite unfamiliar art form, perhaps from the beginning. *'If you move territory, you start all over again,'* as Wendy Houston argued to me. Not that the achievement of single art form virtuosity should be a target. Rather the opposite. Average fluency is not just sufficient, any more than that might be a hindrance. Once cross-art form improvisation practice is seriously entered into, virtuosity needs to be redeployed away from mastery of the piano, the backflip or the monologue. Instead it needs to move into a different notion of ensemble where skill is employed to make others shine, emphasising the strain of a rough, common language. The skill becomes less about expertise than the craft of collaboration. Performers begin to perform functions that are supportive rather than virtuosic, perhaps even drawing back their default skills. John Miller Chernoff has talked about how African drummers relate to each other, and perhaps there's a point of comparison here. *'A drum in an African ensemble derives its power and becomes meaningful not only as it cuts and focuses the other drums but also as it is cut and called into focus by them. Rhythmic dialogues are reciprocal, and in a way that might seem paradoxical to a Westerner, a good drummer restrains himself from emphasising his rhythm in order that he may be heard better.'*⁷¹

But as indicated above, this means sacrifice, not just of the readiness to display skills but of the very way that you operate as an improviser. Trevor Lines is a bassist working with the mixed art form company, Fence Crossing. He outlined to me something of his learning curve in trying to engage with a dramatic improvisation practice that inevitably relied significantly on an idea of consensus. *'The business of "saying yes" / not blocking is very interesting, and hard! I suppose in a lot of my improvising activity we move forward by meeting one idea with another, and avoiding creating a flow of acquiescence (but when trying to groove, of course it is the opposite). I thought it would be easier, as jazz rhythm section work is all about supporting and complementing ideas that the soloist presents. It strikes me that I (like many people) am used to a mode of conscious thinking that is essentially dialectical in nature, which means avoiding becoming immersed in someone's idea in favour of critiquing it by applying a counter-idea, and although that may be very good if we are trying to work in a fast-moving scenario it is a better idea to shake that habit, or at least hold it back a bit.'*⁷²

In these contexts, congruence of intent must be more important than individual virtuosity, dedication to a shared idea more resonant than the simple act of collaboration. Working together with the ideal of collaboration gets you started, but soon a theoretical articulation about the kind of sacrifices involved will inevitably make the compromises involved in any such process, less painful. Not that they can be quite ever made to disappear.

Does this suggest poetics are dependent on idealism? Not at all, but in terms of ensemble work, to get the car started you need to put some petrol in. Without this the car fights with itself trying to work out what's missing and why there's the sound of screaming metal. When looking at the poetics of cross-art form collaborations, it may be useful to look at how separate practices relate to the idea of abstraction. Dance and music sit comfortably on the end of an imagined continuum. Neither medium needs words or verbal definitions to achieve an enhancement of operating protocols.

A performer moves across the room dragging a chair with slow, stylised moves. A performer plays a series of atonal phrases on a double base.

In these moments of performance, there is no necessity for the spectator to define context or meaning. However, if this was theatre, the

performer dragging the chair explains to the audience that this is the last chair in the house, which is being taken outside to the balliffs.

The player on the double bass is dressed as a clown; she speaks, welcoming us to the circus.

In this way the theatre performer traditionally seeks a reduction of abstraction for which spoken language is the most precise tool. Words and gestures that sign particular meaning open out certain possibilities of interpretation while closing down others.

My own works in cross-art form improvisation practice suggests that collaboration becomes easier within a more *abstract* territory, allowing musicians and dancers to determine protocols. If either comes into theatrical territory, the tendency is for the dancer or musician to fall into illustration or accompaniment. To some extent therefore, in a three-way collaboration it's the actors who need to move sideways and utilise themselves differently, within a vocabulary tending to the abstract. They need to become comfortable operating outside their comfort zone, entering into compacts with other improvisers where the traditional 'who, what, where' categorisations are ineffective or even disruptive. Most concretely, they need perhaps to resign allegiance to notions of character which more than any other convention, ties the exercise to a dramatic frame. This is not to suggest actors are unqualified for the transition since a developed improvisational intelligence can carry them through. Rex Horan: *'Even if people don't have musical training, if they're involved in this kind of action, what they bring with them is their own history of listening. If that history is informed and they've listened to what we accept as being a good improvisation and a solid-sounding thing that's either entertaining or challenging, and if they're a performer of integrity, then what they bring is of great value.'* Perhaps it's ironic that dramatic improvisers have to become the junior partners here, since theatre is traditionally viewed as a house to which other artists seek to gain entrance.

Companies such as La Gata from Colombia and Art and Shock from Kazakhstan, are already better placed for such collaboration given the non-verbal nature of their regular vocabulary. La Gata's use of folkloric performative elements such as the playing of birds, spirits and ghosts, and Art and Shock's drawing from the Russian clowning tradition, mean they are already versed in physical theatre styles. While the influence of Lecoq and other European teachers such as Philippe

Gaulier has filtered through to devised theatre practice as in the work of Complicite, it has not had a similar impact within the UK tradition of improvised theatre, which largely remains wedded to the Johnstone/Spolin influence. Improvised dance practice for its part, at least in the UK, has started to adopt some more identifiably theatrical elements. Performers stop and talk to the audience or talk to each other, and use props and costumes in a way to signal particularities of relationship. In dance especially, the sense of art form distinctiveness is beginning to dissolve, not least because of the influence of methodologies such as Action Theatre and the Kelman Group. It's for dramatic improvisers to follow.

For the reasons given above, the more heightened development of an improvised cross-art form language of poetics remains largely aspirational except within the territories of a few artists – such as those included in this book, of which Julyen Hamilton, Franko B and E.S.P. might be examples. Work of this kind is a young cat, yet we can talk about the trajectory of a growing up to a leonine maturity as this practice continues. By addressing concerns such as liveness, authority and transparency that are common to all performing art forms, there can start to be a levelling of art form differences. By looking at the protocols of improvisation rather than the art form priorities, the emphasis is switched away from art form definite-ness.

Current live art practice in particular throws everything into the pot for re-examination through an analysis of what actually constitutes performance. This work deconstructs prevailing ideas of what constituent elements ought to be relied on. In so doing, the work starts to define its own relationship with abstraction and definition. This is both its potential weakness and its strength, since the constituent elements have to be deconstructed and reconstructed in the process.

Emerging improvisational structures, informed by live art practice, need not be complex since complexity is characteristic of the higher developments of any one art form. They may involve a reduction, a stripping away to something elemental. They may be about revealing the *story* of the performers themselves, as they wrestle with the challenges of exposition. They also need to function as more than just utilitarian machines. They need to be able to house a poetics. For such work inevitably involves artists being pushed into challenges that reveal not their sufficiency but their insufficiency. In this context we can't ask spectators to be admiring of virtuosity but rather the courage of the

performers in their struggle to be transparent. Events may benefit from simplicity of construction since these may more effectively allow for multiple interpretations. In such cases, the performers make no pretence to be in charge of the meaning that is generated. Adrian Heathfield: *'If you looked at a lot of '90s experimental live art and performance, one of the things you'd say was that it was maximalist, that it tended to create density through plurality — lots of different things happening at the same time, lots of clash, lots of collage, a fragmented aesthetics. There's a confusion of playful possibilities. What interests me about this area of performance practice now is that it has returned to minimalist aesthetics. In the sense that it has stripped down the act to a bare set of relations, to a simple set of forms. However, it finds play inside this very minimal aesthetic. It's about the play of the elemental. Franko B's work is a good example of this. It isn't what you would immediately think of as either improvisational or playful. But through the conditions of the aesthetic that Franko creates you enter into an encounter which is, for me at least, incredibly vibrant and vital in its opening of meanings and possibilities. The way he's done that is to strip everything away and focus on the symbolic act, usually some form of wounding, and then the moment of the relation between the performer and spectator. Often in the long durational work, say Aktion 398 for instance, where he's in a room for a day and you get two minutes with him, the exchange, whatever that is, is completely improvised and unplanned. There aren't even any rules or structures around the relation. Anything can happen. He just does what he feels like doing in the moment. Often that's very little. But often what the visitors do varies greatly. Improvisation moves down to a very intense micro scale attention so that one is starting to think just about this moment, my eye to your eye, my breath next to your breath, my body next to your body. It's a very simple but complex thing.'*