2003

The novelty of improvisation: towards a genre of embodied spontaneity

David Alfred Charles

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, dcharl1@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations

Part of the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation


https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/76

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
THE NOVELTY OF IMPROVISATION:
TOWARDS A GENRE OF
EMBODIED SPONTANEITY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
David Alfred Charles
B.A., Roosevelt University, 1995
M.F.A., Western Illinois University, 1998
August 2003
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to those who started me on my journey as an improvisational artist and theatre practitioner: my New Zealand family, particularly my mother, Sheila, with her theatrical sensibility and limitless support and sensitivity; Logan Park High School’s Park Players under the expert guidance of Denise Walsh, the first and most tireless amongst my many theatre teachers; David Best for his countless gifts and acts of faith; and those from Dunedin Theatresports, Stayci, Martin, Patrick, “Stripy Socks,” “Yuppies Anonymous” and by association Keith Johnstone, who infected me with my life’s passion and set me on my spontaneous path to America with a strong sense of north.

Thank you to the numerous dear friends who gave me a second home in America throughout my various degrees and jobs. To Yolanda, JoAnn, Irene, Shannon, Naomi and Melanie, the women who made Chicago warm even during winter. To the Western Illinois men, Gene, Ray and Sonny, the ever-supportive Nancy and Sherry, and my MFA compatriots for their guidance and good humor, especially Doug, Margaret (Max), Stacie, Adam, Jason, Kimmarie and Harry. To my recently acquired Boekhoff branch of the family for their constant encouragement, and to my current Southern friends, fellow doctoral students and close approximations thereof (Tim) for asking how the writing was going and staying around long enough to hear my answer!

Thank you to the countless fellow improvisers, actors and students that I have been lucky to encounter and with whom I have shared the stage and classroom – in particular the casts and classes that have let me experiment and tinker, most recently The
Improvisors, Rhonda and the various casts and crews of *Making It Up As We Go Along*, the Playhouse wonders, and my Theatre 3900 students and friends.

Thank you to my doctoral instructors, mentors and role models, the Ph.D. faculty and support staff at LSU, who have ceaselessly helped me to discover and articulate my passions and dreams, and to Jenny and Les in particular for unfailingly embodying intellectual excellence, artistic rigor and unparalleled humanity both inside and outside the classroom. I cannot possibly express my deep gratitude to you both for your immense impact on my life as an artist, scholar, teacher and person. Additional thanks to Jenny for so skillfully and patiently steering me through the process of writing and revisions and curing me – almost – of my love of the double-dash – it’s much appreciated!

Finally, thank you to my wife, Heather, who fell for an actor but was none-the-less willing to marry a doctoral candidate. Without your love, laughter and constant uplifting, life would ultimately have little meaning. Thank you for being the consummate spontaneous partner.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ iii

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER

1 READING INTO BAKHTIN’S NOVEL: EXPLORING A NEW WAY OF SEEING .............................. 1

2 SURVEYING THE FIELD OF IMPROVISATION: SPOLIN, SPACE AND SPONTANEOUS PLAY ................................................................. 20
   Boyd and Spolin: Returning the “Play” to Theatre ........................................ 23
   Of Streets, Tents, Laundromats and Bars ...................................................... 29
   Creating Something Out of Nothing: Space Transformation and Semiotics ................................................................. 52
   Negotiating the Great Divide: The Spatial Boundaries of Performance ...... 67
   Conclusion: The Ideal Space ......................................................................... 77

3 MORENO’S THEATRE OF OPENING NIGHTS: IMPROV IN THE HERE AND NOW ......................................................................................... 79
   An Improvised and Unpredictable View of Time .......................................... 84
   Reflecting Our Time: Specificity, Adaptability and Newspapers ................. 89
   An Act With Presence/Presentness: Masks, Clowns and Players of the Moment ..................................................................................... 105
   The Blessings and Curses of Disposability: Improv’s Historical Challenges ................................................................................ 120
   Conclusion: A Timely Utterance ................................................................ 130

4 A PROSAICS OF THE PEOPLE: AMATEURS, OUTCASTS AND BOAL’S SPECT-ACTOR ................................................................................. 134
   Putting the Populace in their Proper Place .................................................. 137
   Giving Voice Through Embodiment: Boal and the Spect-actor ................. 155
   Embracing the Amateur ............................................................................... 168
   Membership from the Margins: Improvisation and Inclusivity ................... 180
   Conclusion: The Prosaic Partnership ........................................................... 189

5 DIALOGIC FORM AND FREEDOM: STRUCTURING THE CONVERSATION .................................................................................................. 192
   Leading the Way: Sidecoaches, Jokers, Directors and Conductors .......... 199
   Following the Rules of the Game: Texts, Taxonomies and the Birth of Long-Form ................................................................................ 213
   Structures with Character: Physical-Based Frames ..................................... 231
   Considering the Bigger Picture .................................................................... 243
Conclusion: A Disordered Order ................................................................. 251

6  CARNIVAL, CHANGE AND BOUNDARY BLURRING: THE POLITICS
  OF IMPROVISATION ............................................................................. 254
  The Power of the Carnival Satirist: Taking Laughter Seriously .......... 258
  Improvising Between the Lines of Art, Politics and Life ................. 274
  The Political Ends of the Means .......................................................... 296
  Challenging the Conserve and Censorship ....................................... 307
  Conclusion: The Changing Tide ......................................................... 318

7  CONCLUSION: COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY AND THE NOVELTY
  OF IMPROVISATION ............................................................................. 321

REFERENCES ............................................................................................. 330

APPENDIX: TIMELINE OF IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE ......................... 354

VITA ............................................................................................................. 371
ABSTRACT

Improvisation has often been viewed and valued in terms of its service and resemblance to scripted traditions of theatre. Such a stance seriously undermines the significance and impact of this global performance modality, and has resulted in improvisatory modes being largely ignored or downplayed in modern historical accounts of theatre. This dissertation examines improvisation on its own terms, seeking to understand its unique features, functions and potentials, while freeing it from the heavy shadow of its scripted counterpart. To this end, the theories of literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, provide important methodological guideposts and allow the silhouette of the improvisational impetus to take form. Through the application of Bakhtin’s concepts of the chronotope, prosaics, polyphony and the carnivalesque, and his overarching schema of the genre as a way of seeing and experiencing the world, the communicative event of improvisation is revealed to be strikingly similar to Bakhtin’s preferred model, the modern novel. In this manner, the “novelty” of embodied spontaneity is uncovered. This heightened understanding of the improvisational impetus is considerably enriched through a detailed consideration of a diverse field of spontaneous movements that span numerous regions, periods and socio-political contexts. In addition to more widely recognized theatrical movements, such as the Roman mime, Italian Commedia dell’Arte, Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed, Viola Spolin’s Theatre Games and Keith Johnstone’s Theatresports, the inclusion of lesser known (and marginal) practices, such as Japanese renga, Nigerian Apidan and Jacob Levy Moreno’s psychodrama, further elucidates and complicates improvisation’s generic qualities.
CHAPTER 1

READING INTO BAKHTIN’S NOVEL: EXPLORING A NEW WAY OF SEEING

We consider the creation of the polyphonic novel as a huge step forward not only in the development of the novel, but also in the development of the artistic thinking of humankind. It seems to us that one could speak directly of a special polyphonic artistic thinking extending beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre – Bakhtin (Problems, 270).

It's always new, it's always different, it's always learning something […] Improvisation seems to have an extra dimension to it – Michael Sanderson-Green of Perth Theatresports (quoted in Foreman and Martini 106).

It is difficult to define theatrical improvisation without resorting to a description of what it is not. Western models of drama almost exclusively assume a scripted or textual point of origin or inspiration; improvisation, on the other hand, rarely shares this approach to generating the performance event. Scripted theatre typically involves revision, study and rehearsal over an extended period of time before culminating in the somewhat predictable theatrical product to be consumed; spontaneous theatre, while often equally rigorous and dependent upon the accumulation and deployment of learned skills and experience, seldom affords revision and is largely inconsistent in its outcome. Conventional script-based drama traditionally sets itself clearly aside from everyday behaviors and customs, and marks itself as a distinct and separate event that is to some extent standardized structurally and recognizable in its appearance; improvisational modes of performance, to the contrary, may often elide such distinctions and barriers,
blending willfully into the complex fabric of society and abandoning artistic homogeny for multiplicity of form and style. Although such distinctions allow the essence of improvisation to take shape, as a largely non-textual, non-repeatable and non-isolated mode of performance, it is more problematic to accurately characterize what theatrical improvisation is. Many definitions invariably refer back to Western assumptions based on scripted practices. Correspondingly, improvisation is often primarily valued or recognized as either a contributory influence for a text-centered style of performance, or as an aberrant (and inferior) variation of this exemplar model. In this manner, synonyms for this spontaneous methodology of theatrical creation and performance include non-scripted theatre, oral performance and pre-literary drama. Each nomenclature points to the world of scripted theatre as its primary referent, defining itself fundamentally as what it is not: scripted, textual or literary.

Improvisation has an undeniably close artistic relationship with its scripted counterpart. Several of the most esteemed periods of Western dramatic literature have been accompanied or heralded by equally prolific improvisational movements. According to Aristotle, “Both [Greek] tragedy and comedy had their first beginnings in improvisation” (36). Roman dramatic literature flourished within an analogous tension, coexisting with the highly improvisational mime (and to a lesser degree, pantomime). Similarly, the Italian-born Commedia dell’Arte exerted enormous influence on the shape of European comedy, providing artistic impetus to some of the most celebrated Western playwrights of all time. Jonson, Moliere, Goldoni, Gozzi and Shakespeare all received inspiration from this pervasive spontaneous form. Hamlet’s warning to the traveling players shows that this playful impetus even surfaced within the scripted realm: “let those
who play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them,” Hamlet advises *(Hamlet*, III, ii, 40-42). The modern period has witnessed a rise in the employment of improvisation as a means of collaborative text creation: South Africa’s Athol Fugard, England’s Mike Leigh and numerous American “radical” theatre groups in the 1960s utilized this alternative methodology as a means of envisioning a more democratic way of creating art and arguably reinvigorated the art of the playwright in the process.

While the influence of improvisational modalities and techniques on written drama has become increasingly recognized, this has often been at the expense of acknowledging spontaneous theatre’s own inherent (and independent) value or import. For example, though Aristotle notes the existence of improvisational performance forms prior to the creation of text-based drama, this earlier spontaneous theatre is captured in a teleological narrative. “Starting from these natural aptitudes, and by a series of for the most part gradual improvements on their first efforts,” he writes, “men eventually created poetry from their improvisations” (Aristotle 35). Improvisation, in this emblematic narrative, provides the crude material for a more advanced form. The free-spirited playfulness of improv has been predominantly viewed in this light, as a starting point for something more advanced, a source of material for a more discernible artistic enterprise, or an undeveloped and incomplete energy awaiting later polish and perfection. Again, improv is viewed in terms of what it is not: it is pre-, non-, and un-.

A teleological and subsequently belittling view of improvisatory theatre has been equally endemic in the West, where the (recorded) history of theatrical improvisation has been somewhat intermittent, and the continents of Africa, Asia, and South America, where more continuous traditional forms have been widely dismissed as being primitive,
“unevolved” or only distantly related to a more developed (read Western) mode of performance. In the latter locales, composition modalities have often sought to regulate this undesirable fluidity in a form of artistic colonialism. Non-scripted modes are given authority and worth only after they are co-opted, reformed or manipulated into more recognizable (read Western) scripted events. For example, in 1969 the South African Government published *Performing Arts in Africa* in which there was only one reference to an indigenous (read non-Western) performance mode (see Graham-White 180). This publication’s level of inclusion would suggest erroneously that little performance existed prior to European settlement and embodies a destructive colonizing view of improvisational theatre that devalues it largely for its apparent lack or incompleteness – a reductive and dismissive position that is only recently becoming recognized and addressed.

This study seeks to unapologetically recognize, evaluate and celebrate improvisation on its own terms by articulating what this spontaneous process of performance *is* rather than what it is *not*. Rather than viewing this artistic impetus in relation to its service to the scripted realm – where it is used, with great effect, as a training tool for “legitimate” actors, mode of text creation, and strategy for character and text enrichment – improvisation is considered as a worthy means and ends in and of itself. Eschewing models of *applied* improvisation that exploit the tools of spontaneity for more product-bound results, focus is placed squarely on the mode of *pure* improvisation that embodies, as Smith and Dean succinctly note, “the simultaneous conception and performance of a work” (3). Employing Smith and Dean’s simple definition as a modest starting point, improvisational theatre is considered herein as
performance that willingly and deliberately unites the processes of artistic creativity and 
presentation within a single moment. “Pure” improvisation happily displays its very 
moment of creation, which is, in turn, an integral attribute of the performance event as a 
whole. Subsequently, improv’s immediacy and generative drive are ideally lauded and 
pursued within the theatrical act itself, rather than relegated to a subsidiary or hidden role. 
A more nuanced and detailed description and definition of the improvisatory impetus, 
complete with a heightened appreciation of its unique strengths and communicative 
potentials, emerges through the following comprehensive analysis of its manifold 
manifestations.

Independently evaluating the importance of spontaneously derived theatre seeks 
to undermine the predominant and dismissive view of improvisation as inferior or 
subordinate to its scripted counterpart. Jonathan Fox comments on this pervasive 
reductive stance, writing, “In considering ‘improvisation,’ there is a definite connotation 
of second best associated with the word, according to which one is distinctly at a 
disadvantage when one has to improvise, be it a poem or a solution” (Acts, 94). 
Arguably, the etymology of “improvisation” itself bolsters such an unfavorable 
disposition, denoting the “production of anything off-hand” or “any work or structure 
provided on the spur of the moment” (OED). Consequently, improvisation implies a 
sense of deficiency or a makeshift reactive methodology to be employed only when more 
rigorous, planned or secure approaches are unavailable. From the Latin root, provisos, 
which means to see ahead, improvisation takes on a negative prefix thereby designating 
the “unforeseen” (Coleman 43-44). Improvisation’s resulting unpredictable artistic drive 
is placed squarely at odds with the finalized theatre text and accordingly retains, in the
eyes of many, its original negative and fear-inducing connotation. Even Chicago’s
Second City, debatably North America’s flagship improvisational institution, primarily
views improvisation as a tool for sketch development, thereby minimizing the latent risk
of the modality’s potential foray into the unforeseen. Until recently, as former owner
Bernard Sahlins expresses, Second City considered improv almost exclusively as “a
functional device to achieve a goal other than itself. Just as fencing is” (quoted in Sweet
187-188).

Sahlins ironically espouses an establishment position when he comments that
improvisation fails most of the time “as a coherent theatre piece” (Sahlins 136). His
remarks reflect and explain in part improvisation’s under-representation in historical
treatments of theatrical performance: many practitioners simply view spontaneous theatre
as largely inadequate when compared to the realization of written or “set” dramatic
works. By standards of predictability, universality and highly wrought plot devices,
improvisatory modes admittedly provide relatively unpromising sites of analysis. They
rarely seek the stasis of the published text, prefer to communicate primarily with those
immediately present rather than all of humanity, and often disregard the importance of
linear plots, well-crafted protagonists and unified thematic or conceptual visions.
However, improvisational practitioners rarely address or seek to remedy these perceived
“shortcomings” as these are not the frames through which spontaneous theatre judges
itself. Improvisational theatre actively chooses not to emanate from or gravitate towards
the text; it is not merely an approach unable or waiting to do so. Subsequently, it is only
when improvisation is considered afresh as more than a garnish or unrealized energy, and
rather as an “art from that stands on its own” (Halpern et al. 14), that its true potentials
and artistic gifts can be understood and most powerfully employed at the site of performance and beyond.

In order to circumvent, then, the problematic shadow that the scripted realm of performance has exerted over this alternative spontaneous modality, this study employs the less predisposed insights of a related artistic field and the framing analytical lenses contained therein. A helpful (and positive) template for the further articulation of the improvisatory spirit can be found in what may at first seem an unlikely source: the discipline of the modern novel as formulated and championed by Russian-born Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Bakhtin’s work as a literary theorist provides a series of important methodological tools that facilitate a powerful reconsideration and depiction of the improvisational impetus, extricating spontaneous theatre from the imposed predispositions and limiting assumptions of the scripted event.

First and foremost amongst Bakhtin’s applicable concepts is the frame of the genre. For Bakhtin, the concept of genre does not limit itself to the realm of literature – his elected site of research. Genre is not merely a tool with which one can divide or categorize various artistic endeavors. Instead, the principle of genre has a more encompassing grasp: it is a way of seeing, a mode of perception, or in the words of Morson and Emerson, “a specific form of thinking, a way of visualizing the world” (307). Theatre, in general, has a certain affinity with this view of genre, as is reflected in its etymological root, *teatron*, which designates a “seeing place.” The theatre is a venue where communities gather to gain collective insights and propagate meaningful truths, dreams and visions. Each genre, according to Bakhtin, provides a unique and particular way of seeing and experiencing the world, complete with its own “combinations of

7
specific blindesses and insights” (ibid. 276). Applied to the current field of study, Bakhtin’s frame of genre assists in the exploration of improvisation’s essence, its peculiar tendencies or “extra dimension.” While it is highly difficult (and perhaps inadvisable) to attempt to trace the outer boundaries of a practice that is as multifarious and centrifugal as theatrical improvisation, Bakhtin’s various lenses enable the core generic qualities and inclinations of improv to take shape. Furthermore, such an analytical approach not only facilitates a greater appreciation of improv’s artistic and aesthetic commonalities, but also exposes the way in which this style of performance views, engages and ultimately seeks to impact the greater socio-political world, for as Frost and Yarrow fittingly comment, “Improvisation is not just a style or an acting technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in many different spheres; an independent and transformative way of being and doing” (13).

Bakhtin’s preferred “way of seeing” is made manifest in the modern novel, particularly that of his paradigmatic author: Dostoevsky. Within this novelist’s pages, Bakhtin perceives an artistic world with “rigorous unfinalizability and dialogic openness” (Problems, 272). Dostoevsky’s works are not only revolutionary in a literary sense, but as Bakhtin’s definition of genre suggests, also provide a template for a new way of perceiving and experiencing the world at large. This new generic view provides a “special polyphonic artistic thinking extending beyond the bounds of the novel as a genre” (ibid. 270). Bakhtin posits the novel as an artistic site that embodies a quality of unrestrained creative potential where unfettered voices engage in free and fruitful interplay and spontaneous interaction. Dostoevsky, in Bakhtin’s view, attains artistic preeminence for his ability to allow this emergence of numerous self-governing and
actualized characters within the pages of the novel. The novelistic genre, therefore, becomes an exemplar (perhaps utopian) model for communication and creativity itself. Defined by its unique spatial and temporal attitude, its elevation of a common (non-poetic) language and subject, pursuit of a dialogic discourse, and subsequent anti-authoritarian political agenda, the novel provides a potent model for artistic expression.

Although several historians have considered the appropriateness of Bakhtin’s theories in terms of the scripted dramatic event, their highly pertinent ability to uncover and describe the heretofore-elided characteristics of improvisational theatre remains virtually untapped. Yet, as this dissertation explores, each of these novelistic tendencies, encapsulated in Bakhtin’s global concepts of the chronotope, prosaics, dialogism/polyphony and the carnivalesque respectively, ably describe and give shape to the spontaneous theatrical impetus, providing a helpful uniting impetus through which to consider an otherwise highly fragmented artistic discipline. In the dialogic spirit of Bakhtin’s theories, this process of simultaneously exploring the genres of improvisational theatre and the polyphonic novel also has considerable reciprocal value. Firstly, a thorough examination reveals the unmistakable “novelness” or “novelty” of improvisation, thereby allowing a fresh appreciation of this movement’s nature and worth when it is no longer viewed as subservient to the scripted realm. The independent genre of improvisational theatre, complete with its considerable communicative potential, finally emerges. The resulting generic clarity serves as this study’s primary objective. Though of lesser importance, this comparison also sheds noteworthy light on these very Bakhtinian concepts themselves, suggesting an (perhaps ironic) affinity to the experience
of Bakhtin’s privileged novel and an alternative embodied site for their ultimate realization.

Spontaneous forms of performance have occurred in a vast array of geographical, historical and cultural contexts, and every effort has been made to reflect this immense diversity in the selection of modalities that serve as primary examples. The transient face of improvisation undeniably poses significant challenges. Much improvisatory performance leaves little if any evidence of its existence as it does not place a high value on permanent art products. As a result of this defining tendency, many focused examples are taken from the modern period where records or direct experience of performances are more readily available. Similarly, as many spontaneous movements are marginal and receive little critical attention, the level of documentation freely available has often unavoidably dictated the level of inclusion. North American practitioners, in particular, have increasingly and carefully self documented their own practices, thereby permitting a greater (disproportionate) degree of analysis. However, alongside more widely recognized Western movements, such as the Compass, Second City and ImprovOlympic, a multitude of international practices that may or may not have been previously considered under the rubric of theatre and/or improvisation are included. To this end, forms such as Japanese renga poetry, South Korean Madang, South American Newspaper Theatre, the Mexican carpa, Nigerian Apidan Theatre and Kenya’s Kamĩrĩthũ Cultural Center serve to further represent and illuminate the far-reaching multi-cultural scope of improvisation. Numerous other performance traditions, such as Theatresports, Playback Theatre, Community Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and psychodrama, have also taken on remarkably international profiles, reflecting both their host regions (Canada,
America, Asia/Africa, South America and Europe respectively) as well as the varied cultures in which they have made a home. These movements provide particularly rich sites of investigation as they move between socio-political contexts. As the accompanying timeline of improvisational theatre attests (see the Appendix), this often-overlooked performative impetus has irrefutably appeared across an impressive spectrum of regions, times and cultures. This eclecticism, though seemingly daunting, reflects the significance of the improvisatory mode, while the focused application of Bakhtin’s novelistic lenses allows the generic commonalities of these diverse movements to emerge and mutually enrich and engage one another. In addition to summarizing these multiple movements, the timeline also assists a greater appreciation of how these spontaneous traditions have coexisted and informed one another, and provides an overview of the important moments, forms and practitioners contained herein as well as a brief sampling of pivotal moments in general theatre history for comparative purposes. As this study does not adopt a chronological methodology, it is hoped that this resource will assist the reader in contextualizing and situating less-familiar practices as they are encountered in the following thematic Bakhtinian analysis.

Chapter Two begins the exploration of improvisation’s novelty with an examination of Bakhtin’s chronotope, concentrating specifically on the use of space (the improvisatory where) as it is manifested in the improvisational endeavor. The central metaphor of “play” is introduced through the teachings of Neva Leona Boyd and her artistic descendants, Viola Spolin and Paul Sills. The state of play, with its emphasis on experiencing the details and opportunities of the current corporeal site, is particularly pertinent to the world of improvisation, which shares much terminology and spirit with
this recreational field. The comparison between sporting and improvisatory play is followed by an outline of the various types of space employed in the pursuit of the latter. Dominant trends in the selection of performance sites are examined, particularly the movement’s inclination towards street performance, itinerant portable “stages,” non-traditional co-opted locales and the use of adapted spaces, and improvisation’s less-prevalent relationship with more traditional theatre establishments is briefly summarized. The Invisible Theatre work of Augusto Boal serves as a primary example here for its subversive use of spaces and sense of masked theatricality. This modality provides a particularly interesting illustration of improvisation’s complex negotiation with its host environment and the ways in which performers can utilize physical potentials to a transgressive end.

Spatial issues receive further treatment in an examination of how space in general is employed by the craft of the improviser. Space is revealed as being highly generative and fluid during the process of improvisational performance, whether through the use of Spolin-inspired “space” (or imaginary) objects, the redeployment and contextualization of found objects – as is seen in the work of Keith Johnstone and Improbable Theatre’s production of *Animo* – or a combination of both of these traditions, as is witnessed in Comedysportz and Playback Theatre. The improvisational “semiotic sign” is subsequently uncovered as being highly malleable and connotative, a tendency magnified by a recurring affinity with Jerzy Grotowski and his poor theatre aesthetic. Finally, Chapter Two explores the way in which the spatial boundaries of performance are negotiated and crossed, thereby heightening the considerable physical openness of most improvisatory modes. Employing Richard Schechner’s definition of environmental
theatre, introduced earlier in the chapter, improv is shown to assume an attitude of sharing space between audience and performer, creatively exploiting the entire site. This dynamic is made concrete through a discussion of South Korean Madang Theatre. These articulated spatial tendencies allow the consideration of the ideal improvisational space, and completes the first half of my Bakhtinian chronotopic analysis.

The second complementary component of Bakhtin’s chronotope is that of time, the focus of Chapter Three. The groundbreaking work of theatre practitioner Jacob Levy Moreno serves to enrich the understanding of improvisation’s temporal tendencies. Spontaneous theatre, performance in the here and now, he argues, purely exists in the present, as this is both the form’s moment of birth and death. Recognition of this atypical and promising dynamic, the state of “improvisatory time,” affords a particular appreciation of improvisational theatre as essentially immediate and unpredictable. Contrary to Bakhtin’s image of the agelasts, improv’s chronotopic view is that of changeability and provisional truths. This way of viewing time emphasizes historical and socio-political forces that coalesce on the spontaneous stage. Therefore, improvisation is revealed to be highly situated and contextualized; it tends to reflect the peculiarities of its specific historical surroundings and does not strive to attain timelessness. The ability to adapt in order to best manifest the distinctiveness of this specific now is reflected in the tradition of Newspaper Theatre, a spontaneous mode explored in depth by Boal and Moreno. Improv’s contract with the present, or its sense of “presentness” (to employ Bakhtin’s term) also embodies a particularly fruitful dynamic when combined with the mask, an icon that simultaneously connects its wearer to the traditions of the past, while propelling him/her into a state of heightened awareness of the now. The mask work of
Keith Johnstone and Jacques Lecoq is examined to this end, and the figure of the clown as the ambassador of the present is exposed as an extension of this temporal training tradition.

Although an extra measure of attention to the present undoubtedly affords immeasurable creative opportunities, this fleeting existence in the present moment is not without its unique challenges and pitfalls. This “disposable” form of performance, which values process over product, is often marginalized or is largely invisible to the theatre historian and critic. Improv’s deliberate disappearing act results in part from its aversion to the creation of set artifacts, a trend witnessed in the ubiquitous but scantily recorded tradition of the Roman Mime. Similarly, improvisation’s adaptability places it at risk in the modern world, as market forces seek safer and reproducible art-products. In this context, its ability to change to suit the times threatens the loss of its very improv-ness. An understanding of these temporal tensions further elucidates improv’s chronotopic blueprint. Chapter Three concludes with a consideration of another Bakhtinian concept, the utterance, and its applicability to the improvisational event. Both forms of communication are revealed to be unique, unrepeatable and highly enmeshed in their historical and cultural context.

Chapter Four introduces a new Bakhtinian global principle: the prosaic. Bakhtin’s work did much to elevate the heretofore-dismissed realm of the populace and those corresponding art forms that embraced and reflected a proletarian or populist energy. Whereas the previous two chapters considered the where and when of improvisation, Chapter Four maps the improvisational who and for/with whom. While the way in which improvisation engages and intersects the communities in which it is...
found is complex and manifold, certain trends can be discerned. An increasing level of involvement can be charted, ranging from the more conventional (Western) approach of David Shepherd’s initial work with the Compass, to the more inclusive modalities of Playback Theatre and Johnstone’s Life Game, and the even greater elevation of the prosaic player in the Community-Based Theatre tradition. Completing this progression, Boal’s “spect-actor” is discussed in depth as the paradigmatic prosaic persona, particularly on the stages of Forum and Image Theatre. This transgressive and active participant, Boal posits, serves as an antidote to the prevalent Aristotelian-based model of performance (and catharsis) where spectators are purged of the desire to pursue change and isolated from the means of theatre production.

In addition to a survey of the external trends of participation the internal profile of improvisational troupes is considered, as are the polar and competing pressures of amateur-friendly inclusivity and the professional-based desire for standards and refined aesthetic. Furthermore, improvisation’s claim to represent the disenfranchised is examined. Concentrating specifically on the artistic voices of women, a section of society who have suffered historically from widespread under-representation in the conventional theatre, these performers are frequently shown to find a more accessible home in the spontaneous realm. Isabella Andreini and her work with the Italian Commedia dell’Arte and the Kawuonda Women’s Theatre of Sigoti (Kenya) illustrate this tendency, while an analysis of the position of women in modern North American comedic improv reveals that this potential for inclusiveness, though plainly evident, is not always exploited to its fullest. The exploration of the improvisational who culminates in
an image of perhaps the ideal participant relationship that embodies the possibility of a truly prosaic and respectful partnership in the realm of performance.

Improvisation possesses the ability to house a vast array of voices and positions. For Bakhtin, this sense of multiplicity finds expression in the terms dialogism and polyphony, the latter serving as the perfected realization of the former. These systems exemplify a sense of highly interactive, engaging and referential language – a modality that finds fitting embodiment in the improvisational site. Chapter Five pursues the various ways in which these (prosaic) voices are united, or how the performative “conversation” is structured. There are several dominant devices and dynamics employed by the practitioners of spontaneous theatre, namely the use of leaders, textual or game-based rules, characterizations and stereotypes, and overarching philosophical systems. Each of these modalities is examined in depth. The importance and functionality of leadership is discussed in terms of Spolin’s sidecoach, Boal’s joker, Moreno’s director and Playback Theatre’s conductor, with the Boalian Rainbow of Desire system and modern practice of Psychodrama receiving focused attention.

Codified rule systems are considered through a detailed examination of the Living Theatre’s chart-based production of *Paradise Now*, the utilization of a highly complex and detailed linguistic taxonomy as seen in medieval Japanese Renga poetry composition sessions, and the resilient and revolutionary long-form frame of ImprovOlympic’s Harold, as originated by Del Close and Charna Halpern. Physical-based structures provide the next area of study. This structuring device is illustrated in the character masks of the Commedia dell’Arte, stereotyped roles of *Tony ’n’ Tina’s Wedding* and Gary Izzo’s Interactive Theatre, and historically generated personas of Plimoth
Plantation’s Living History. The fourth and final frame is represented by the holistic improvisational codes of Spolin, Close, and most particularly Johnstone, as seen in the highly influential and representative philosophy espoused in his Australian-derived Ten Commandments of Theatresports. Each structuring system is revealed to embrace fluidity and malleability in the hands of its advocates, thereby enabling a productive tension between spontaneous freedom and form through an embracement of structural openness and provisionality.

Bakhtin’s vision of the carnivalesque, with its overt political dimension and sense of irreverence, serves as the fourth and final global concept and provides key insight into an exploration of the why of improvisation. Chapter Six asks, what particularly unique potentials lie dormant in the world of spontaneous theatre, and why do practitioners elect this modality for their work? Several aspects of the carnival emerge as containing potentially potent political power. The role and importance of laughter and the carnival satirist, for example, is explored both in more traditionally comedic forms, such as the work of Sills, Spolin and Second City’s Bernard Sahlins, and in those that tend towards the dramatic, such as is the case with the mature work of Moreno, Playback Theatre and Acting Out. The Church Ladies for Choice provides an especially pertinent example of laughter’s ability to upset the status quo and disrupt monologic discourse. Improvisation also shares the carnival’s innate ability to transcend and blur an eclectic array of boundaries that often separate the player and audience, the various arts and social sciences, and the realms of art, politics and life. Three significant forms attest to this political tendency: Moreno’s sociodrama with its merging of art and healing efficacy, Boal’s Legislative Theatre that posits spontaneous interplay as a means for changing and
While these carnivalesque impetuses are undoubtedly political in their playfulness, a consideration of the Venetian theatrical war between Carlo Gozzi and Carlo Goldoni asks the question whether it is safe to assume that such a stance is *necessarily* or fundamentally radical in nature. This historical moment reveals that the tools of improvisation may be used to various political ends. Despite its capability for articulating both radical and conservative agendas, improv is seen as being inherently subversive (in its purest state) in its inclination towards change and questioning inherited answers and customs. This predisposition is explored in relation to Moreno’s concept of the conserve, the communal store of knowledge, which, while providing an important access point to tradition, can also hamper originality and creativity when viewed as the unquestionable final word. Improvisation’s ability to combat, evade or obstruct censorship, the most rigorous personification of the conserve, is investigated as a form of carnivalesque breach, and the political vigor of this change-centered style of performance is advocated. Whether within the creative mind of the individual or within the socio-political sphere, improvisation offers an alternative means for exploring and exploiting untapped or repressed human potential.

Finally, Chapter Seven serves to tie the various threads of this study together, exploring the overall appropriateness of Bakhtin’s global concepts to the site of improvisational performance, and elevating this theatrical modality as an alternate (and perhaps more fitting) manifestation of Bakhtin’s favored generic qualities. Despite Bakhtin’s distaste for the (scripted) theatre, clear parallels can be drawn between his
literary studies and the improvisational impetus. In addition to solidifying this spontaneous “way of seeing,” improvisation is presented as an complementary model for creativity itself, privileging the specificities of the here and now, the prosaic wisdom and insight of the everyday, the dialogic interplay of the collaborative endeavor, and the laughter-infused, optimistic carnival-inspired commitment to questioning, overturning and change. Subsequently, the defining features of this embodied genre of spontaneity are explicated, improvisation’s true novelistic likeness is unveiled, and this generic way of seeing and experiencing the world and art is ultimately brought into focus.
CHAPTER 2

SURVEYING THE FIELD OF IMPROVISATION:
SPOLIN, SPACE AND SPONTANEOUS PLAY

Every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope – Bakhtin (“Forms,” 258).

Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly – Spolin (Improvisation, 4).

Bakhtin develops the concept of the chronotope to encompass his theories and preferences in regards to “time space” (the literal meaning of “chronotope”). The rubric “expresses the inseparability” and “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin “Forms,” 84). In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” a hierarchy is explored in which historical and biographical time and social space gradually emerge and express themselves in literary form. As Bakhtin outlines, early literary works perpetuated very different notions of worldly experience. For example, the Greek Romance is defined as “an alien world in adventure time” (ibid. 102), the work of Apuleius and Petronius, or the Adventure Novel of Everyday Life, is characterized as “scattered, fragmented, deprived of essential connections […] and] not permeated with a single temporal sequence” (ibid. 128), while the Ancient Biographical Novel exhibits an historical reality which is “deprived of any determining influence on character as such, it does not shape or create it, it merely
manifests it” (ibid. 141). Each literary model, then, reflects and reifies a specific perception of the relationship between space and time.

Bakhtin’s trek through the development of the novel culminates with the Novel of Historical Emergence. Whereas antecedent genres overtly generalized, ignored, distorted or disjointed the spatial/temporal plain, this latter “way of seeing” the world privileges and recognizes real historic time. Furthermore, this gained historicity individualizes human experience through differentiation; people are no longer repeatable or transplantable from environment to environment. In short, the novel has become contextualized. In this modern mode (epitomized for Bakhtin in the writings of Dostoevsky), the world is seen as being created by real and specific people who are, in turn, affected by a nuanced socio-political landscape. As Morson and Emerson note, this chronotope has a “rich understanding of ‘freedom,’ ‘initiative,’ and ‘human potential’” (411-2). Individuals are no longer subsumed by the universal, generalizing or diminishing qualities of the earlier grand narratives. They continue: “For a truly chronotopic imagination, then, time must be understood in its interconnection with specific space, and space must be understood as saturated with historical time” (ibid. 416-7).

Through his chronotopic analysis, Bakhtin reveals the heightened artistic potentials of a mode in which discriminating specificity and contextualization are embraced. Although his privileged chronotope resonates when applied to the site of improvisational theatre, the time-space relationship in the spontaneous event is situated to an even greater degree. For while the Novel of Historical Emergence portrays a previously unheard of accuracy in its depiction of the there and then, situating itself in a
detailed terrain, the genre of improvisation wrestles with the here and now – not only reflecting the immediate world around it, but also often adapting to it in a moment-to-moment negotiation, or potentially even seeking to alter its future course completely. To return to Morson and Emerson’s observation, such a relationship adds new levels to the true “chronotopic imagination.” In terms of space, it is environmental, adaptive, transformative, and site-specific; its temporal qualities embody immediacy, presentness, disposability, impermanence and non-repeatability. It is a theatre of presence, truly existing in the moment of its inception.

This complex relationship between improvisation and “time space” is a core component of the spontaneous theatrical tradition and therefore warrants further investigation as “a chronotope is a way of understanding experience; it is a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions” (Morson and Emerson 367). As such, improv’s negotiation with the physical and temporal universe also reveals an ideological stance or vantage point from which the world is viewed, complete with ethical and political ramifications (to be discussed in depth in Chapter Six.) The where and when, it is revealed, are not incidental features, but core components of the generic form. A discussion of this complex and fundamental relationship from a spatial perspective serves as the focus of this chapter; temporal issues will be considered in Chapter Three. Spatial dynamics of particular interest include improvisation’s spatial affinity to Boyd’s depiction of the sports-field and world of play, the dominant trends and features of common performance locales (such as the street corner, the itinerant’s mobile stage, co-opted venue and adapted location), the improvisational tendency to view space as plastic and malleable with the resulting
semiotic richness of the “poor” theatrical experience, and finally, the ability and willingness of improv to break through the fourth wall and exploit the latent potentials of the entire physical performance site.

Boyd and Spolin: Returning the “Play” to Theatre

Spatial attentiveness to the moment is a key feature of play theory, a discipline that owes much to the works of Neva Leona Boyd (1876-1963). Boyd, working in Chicago in the early 1900s, was a vocal advocate for the untapped potentials of play in the social development and growth of children. As Paul Simon notes, while play is as “old as time” and has typically maintained a central role in the social process of culture building, this relationship became strained during the 18th and 19th centuries. He writes: “with the growth of cities and the Industrial Revolution play became subordinate to other life emphases” (“Philosophy,” 22). This subordination was, according to Boyd, accompanied by a lack of appreciation as to the true value of such behavior: in the American education system of the day, play was largely viewed in a limited manner, often simply as a tool for physical well being or mere distraction. Boyd, however, posited that, “Play seems to offer a more complete release of the emotional life of youth than any other activity” (Boyd 39). For her, play was instrumental in developing well-adjusted and socialized citizens – it was a methodology for education that offered far more than the previously perceived health benefits. To meet the scarcity of material available on the subject, she began to systematically collect and record various games from the numerous cultures with which she interacted, resulting in her first publication in

---

1 Major practitioners and improvisatory movements are underlined in the text when they are first considered in depth or provide a key illustration of the current chapter’s focus.
1914. She also hypothesized as to these games’ intrinsic connection to art and drama: “Play and art use the great essentials – intelligence, imagination, aesthetic feeling, sensitivity, spontaneity, originality, and productivity,” she writes. “The player and the artist create a tangible thing regardless of the fact that it may be composed entirely of intangibles – the song, or the game for instance” (ibid. 87).

While Boyd hinted at the value of play and games for the theatrical realm, it was her student, Viola Spolin (1906-1994), who explicated an artistic system based on this approach. As Spolin’s reflections on the potentials of space are key to this study, a brief survey of her work will serve to position her in the overall field of spontaneous theatre. Lovingly referred to by many as the “High Priestess of Improvisation” (Coleman 23), Spolin’s teaching stems largely from her work with Boyd. Spolin propels her theatrical players into the present action and moment, the here and now, uniting each participant with his/her fellow game players. Games (and the resulting scenes) are centered around a philosophy of problem solving, a common focus that is both educational (in terms of training those exploring) and structural (in that it gives the resulting journey shape.) The role of side coaching is key. The teacher-director uses this method of interacting with those engaged in play, encouraging them to tap into their intuition (or X-area) thereby reacting “naturally” and without imposed subjectivity or bias – that is, players are first and foremost concerned with the game’s inherent problem, and not their own performance or characterization. Focus remains firmly planted in the space of performance. The side coach, in this system, is a fellow player, also actively engaged in the process of collaboration and discovery, as Spolin advocates a teaching environment

---

2 The figure of the sidecoach is explored in greater depth in Chapter Five.
that is free from approval/disapproval and traditional power hierarchies.³ This collaborative stance, then, evens the playing field as all are focused on the solving of problems rather than the exchange of pre-learned “information.” Emphasis is on the mutual process and the mode is truly experiential. Spolin is overtly skeptical of character and acting which she believes serve as barriers to honest interactions in the moment, and also of relived emotion and overt subjectivity, which she personifies negatively as psycho-drama, a form that she considers to be at the service of the individual rather than the immediate presence of true play in the here and now. Initially her work focused on young children and the amateur performer, although it has now found a place as a performance strategy for training programs and (semi) professional groups alike⁴, particularly through her son, Paul Sills (b.1927-), who has applied her findings to the endeavor of scene/text creation.⁵

Spolin’s doctrine of play is unambiguous: “Were they acting? Get them to play,” she prods (Improvisation, xiii) [Italics in original]. In her preface to the second edition of her highly influential Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques, she lists three core ideas that frame her approach, the third of which is:

³ This revolutionary pedagogic model is considered further in Chapter Six.
⁴ Coleman provides a list of professional companies that have been directly influenced by Spolin’s strategies. It includes the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Open Theatre and El Teatro Campesino – see Coleman 24.
⁵ Sills says of his mother’s games: “I used them as a group formation device, as a way of working to make an acting company. To get the actors to play together, to relax in each other’s company. Wherever I have worked, they’re integral, Viola’s games” (Coleman 22). As much of Sills’ work directly continues the legacy and philosophies of Spolin, it is chiefly dealt with in this study under the rubric of its initial originator. Sills’ impact as a disseminator and teacher of improvisation has, however, been considerable in its own right. Gussow writes, “Along with Lee Strasberg, Mr. Sills has become one of the most influential forces on American acting” (3), while fellow innovator, Del Close, says of him, “I would have to regard him as the master […] as a master craftsman. I was his apprentice, in effect,” (Sweet 151) and actor Richard Libertini refers to him as the “Grotowski of Comedy” (Coleman 21).
The need for players to get out of the head and into the space, free of the restricted response of established behavior, which inhibits spontaneity, and to focus on the actual field – SPACE – upon which the playing (energy exchange) takes place between players. Getting out of the head and into the space strengthens the player’s ability to perceive and sense the new with the full body. (ibid. liii)

Spolin’s favored chronotopic modality values highly the necessity of the “actual field” or present space. It is in this realm that spontaneity and the intuition may reach full fruition. Her writings restate this opinion variously: again from her *Improvisation for the Theater*, “The intuitive can only respond in immediacy – right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us” (ibid. 4); in *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor*, “Play, for when you do, blood circulates and energy is released into the space, touching and connecting you with everything in that space” (5); and finally from *Theater Games for Rehearsal*, “Acting requires presence. Being there. Playing produces this state. Just as ballplayers in any sport are present in the playing, so must all theater members be present in the moment of playing, in present time” (3).

This metaphor of the sports player is central to Spolin’s philosophy, and the accompanying language of the sports field has come to be used almost universally in terms of the improvisational event (particularly in North American and European traditions): scene structures are known as games; participants are referred to as players and encouraged to pursue a sense of play in their interactions; explorations are conducted with an eye to discovering the inherent “game within the scene.” Comedysportz, an American franchise of improv troupes, has literally taken the metaphor wholesale as its commercial image. Included in this sense of play and playfulness is the recognition that

---

6 Here Spolin also cites the importance of present time, a feature supported by the writings of Jacob Levy Moreno to be more fully developed in the next chapter.
such activities occur in real and present time and space; the here and now is the
chronotope of the game. “Play is always a here-and-now endeavor,” Interactive Theatre
practitioner Gary Izzo writes (Art, 13). On the sports field, one doesn’t pretend to engage
in an action in a different locale or period; the player acts in the immediate given
circumstances, using and adjusting to them as is deemed necessary in the real time of the
action. This spirit is so important to Spolin that it begins her – somewhat lengthy –
definition of improvisation: “Playing the game; setting out to solve a problem with no
preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment
(animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem […] setting object in
motion between players as in a game” (Improvisation, 261) Cf. (Lone Actor, 160). The
game is inextricably linked with its site and incorporates all the elements at its disposal.
Improvising, as a form of game playing, shares this characteristic and is consequentially
seen as “openness to contact with the environment and each other and willingness to
play. It is acting upon environment and allowing others to act upon present reality, as in
playing a game” (Improvisation, 25).

Spolin is not alone in her efforts to harness the theatrical potential of the game. In
addition to the numerous American (and in particular, Chicago) traditions that have taken
direct inspiration from her teachings – such as the Second City, the ImprovOlympic and
the Annoyance – many other key improvisational figures adopt parallel positions.
Working independently, Keith Johnstone, founder of the international movement of
Theatresports, similarly arrives at the importance and latent opportunities of play. He
observed the overwhelming difference in the behavior of children stemming from

7 Spolin’s distaste of “character” should be viewed in this light, as she considers that it may serve as a block
between the player and his/her honest actions in the space.
institutionalized “play/recreation” and “work/education” modalities: “One astounding thing was the way cowed and dead-looking children would suddenly brighten up and look intelligent when they weren’t being asked to learn,” he comments. “When they were cleaning out the fish tank, they looked fine. When writing a sentence, they looked numb and defeated” (Theatre, 21). Play, for Johnstone, continues to provide an alternate pedagogy to hard-working and serious concentrated study and echoes Boyd’s discovery of the untapped wealth of the playful spirit. Clive Barker concurs in his Theatre Games when he notes that, “children learn more in the playground and the street, than they do in the gymnasium” (64). Furthermore, Playback Theatre innovator, Jonathan Fox, shares in this belief and through his work in schools, has attempted to validate children’s “feelings of play” (Fox and Dauber 13). It is not coincidental that improvisational practitioners often refer to children in their definitions of their art and explanations of the resulting pedagogy; many view the spontaneous spirit as one that calls upon the playfulness and child-like behavior of pre-indoctrinated youth – for example, Lyn Pierse of Australian Theatresports writes: “Improvising is instinctive. It is play. Like children, we use our imagination to spontaneously play, making everything up as we go” (39).

Other key improvisational figures who share this terminology include Brazilian activist Augusto Boal who entitled his pivotal “arsenal” of theatrical tools as Games for Actors and Non-actors, thereby nodding to this tradition, and Eugène van Erven whose collection on Asian theatre of liberation, The Playful Revolution, similarly acknowledges this joyful spirit in less conventional theatrical forms. Additionally, the ubiquitous clown, who has appeared throughout history and across the globe in varied guises, as shaman, jester, satirist and mime, is a professional “play”er in the true spirit of the term,
as s/he must “‘find the play’ in the immediate context” (Frost and Yarrow 69). Finally, Adam Blatner also highlights this impetus as being a central component of Jacob Moreno’s later work when he observes: “Psychodrama in some ways may be thought of as a kind of highly refined play therapy” (Blatner Foundations, 90). The far-reaching influence of play theory and game-based behavior in the improvisation movement is unmistakable.

Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope and its ontological insight, coupled with Spolin’s (Boyd-inspired) influential image of the game that accesses the hidden possibilities of the current space or “here” in real time, provide a solid methodological lens for determining the overall spatial tendencies of the improvisational impetus. The integral features of this defining relationship with locale and history can be given shape through an examination of improv as it is concretely manifested. To this end, let us consider spatial characteristics and the ways in which space is intersected, incorporated and transformed in the endeavor of spontaneous performance.

**Of Streets, Tents, Laundromats and Bars**

Improvisational theatre has historically coincided with, and exploited, traditional performance venues. Notable examples include the Ancient Roman mimes performing within the amphitheatre’s orchestra, the Parisian residence of a much-acclaimed Commedia dell’Arte troupe from 1662-1697, and Carlo Gozzi’s elaborate fiabe of the 1760s. It is generally agreed, however, that the increasing dominance of the professional theatre led to a corresponding decline in improv’s ability to coexist on the commercial stage. Frost and Yarrow observe that, “the tradition of improvised play-making
disappears with the development of the enclosed, plush and decorous theatre space during
the eighteenth century.” They continue, “The rise of the director, too, contributes to the
disappearance of the tradition” (9) Cf. (Smith and Dean 11). Commercial and financial
pressures, the ascendancy of professionalism in the arts, and an increasingly divergent
purpose and mode of operation have often nudged improvisational practitioners to pursue
less conventional performance spaces in the Western sense of the word (yet, perhaps,
more traditional performance spaces in a global context). While in recent years some
successful excursions have been made into the mainstream, with groups such as
England’s Improbable Theatre performing successfully in New York’s Jane Street
Theater, such commercial locales are still far from the norm for the tradition as a whole.
Internationally, improvisation can be seen occurring in venues that more closely resemble
those described by Richard Schechner in his “Six Axioms For Environmental Theater.”

Environmental Theatre, as defined by Schechner, embodies several attitudes
towards the physical space in which it locates itself, and his sixth axiom stating that
“[t]he text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production”
(Enviromental, xli) [All caps in original] reflects a certain affinity with the
improvisational tendency as a whole. In terms of space, Schechner makes three
assertions that are particularly valid in this context: that the performance tends to occur in
the entire locale (xxviii), that “focus is flexible and variable” (xxxvi) [All caps in
original] and that performance locales include “found spaces” or those transformed for
the purposes of production (xxx).

Player saturation of the performance space is a common motif in spontaneous
theatre, with performances either literally or figuratively encompassing the entirety of the
available location: players may stroll into the area customarily reserved for the audience (if such a performer/spectator dichotomy still exists), or the creative threshold may be extended to include those who would often remain in a more traditional and passive observer capacity. An example of the former tendency can be seen in Balinese dance-theater, of which Schechner writes: “The space of the performance is defined organically by the action […] Unlike orthodox Western theater where the action is trimmed to a fixed space, this Balinese dance-theater creates its own space as it is being performed” (ibid. xxviii-xxix). This impetus loosely embodies Smith and Dean’s notion of “Real Space” which is “entrained only by the limited possibilities of movement during the passage of the piece” (49). Figurative auditorium inclusion can be seen in Western short-form traditions – such as Theatresports and Comedysportz, that incorporate audience suggestions thereby spilling into the house – or community-seeking forms, such as Playback Theater, psychodrama and many indigenous oral traditions, that actively strive to represent and present those in attendance. In both literal and figurative examples, the potential for creation is not limited to behind the proverbial proscenium arch, and all participants are involved, to some extent, in shaping the shared creative event. This level of activity results in Schechner’s flexible focus, as audience-participants engage in isolated or individual experiences of the overall occasion. Flexible focus is particularly common in participatory models of theatre, such as Interactive Theatre (Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding, Dinner Murder Mysteries) and Living History (Renaissance Fairs, Plimoth Plantation, Astors Beechwood) where spectators are free to engage players on a one-to-one basis.
In terms of “found spaces,” Schechner’s designation serves to describe the vast majority of performance locales used in the pursuit of improvisation. Such a description is also culturally situated—throughout history much performance has exclusively occurred outside the domain of custom-built auditoriums. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o notes of pre-colonial Kenya, “drama was not performed in special buildings set aside for the purpose. It could take place anywhere—wherever there was an ‘empty space’” (239). In such instances, where the dominant performance tradition is not invested in the removal of theatrics from the world of the everyday, all improvisation could be construed as occurring in found spaces. In cultures where conventions have been established that segregate and isolate the means of performance, the resulting venues are predominantly dedicated to a mode of production that proves to be at odds with improvisational play. Often formalized theatres are inhospitable to the overall goals and philosophies of improvisation, inappropriate for its methods, or overtly unwelcoming to its practitioners and intended audience.

Whether, then, for cultural or socio-political reasons, improvisation has rarely chosen to house itself in the same “enclosed, plush and decorous theatre space” as its scripted relation. Correspondingly, Schechner’s concept of “found space” is helpful but limited in its ability to illustrate the rich variety of preferred performance sites. In a search for chronotopic clarity, I will investigate four distinct trends that emerge in terms of space, considering improvisation as it is found in the uncertainty of the street, the eclectic venue of the itinerant or traveling performer, the co-opted domain of the “other,” and the adapted non-traditional locale.
The concept of street performance, in the same manner as “found space,” is a problematic term as it can denote rather different characteristics and opportunities depending on whether one is speaking of a nomadic/communal society or a densely populated industrialized city. “The notion of street theatre literally defies the logic of developing countries and is basically an inaccurate description,” Dale Byam observes. “[S]treets are perceived as by-ways erected to encourage European trade and connote tools of development and movement away from communalism. Seldom is African performance referred to in this manner” (231). Here the literal street may very much be associated with those institutions or traditions that improvisational practices seek to combat, or may be geographically ancillary to the communities engaged in performance and therefore an inappropriate choice of venue.

Another problematic issue is a tendency to idealize street performance sites, imbuing them with qualities of liminality and unobstructed freedom; this too can be a misleading stance. It is questionable as to whether any truly public space exists in the industrialized world: “Space is always controlled by someone and exists somewhere, so is inevitably marked by a particular class or race and not equally accessible to everyone,” Jan Cohen-Cruz writes in the introduction to her Radical Street Performance. “Public space has shrunk as private enterprise has taken it over for commercial purposes” (2). Kevin Mattson, in “Reclaiming and Remaking Public Space: Toward an Architecture for American Democracy,” reiterates the appearance of this trend in urban development noting the rise of the mall and gated communities, a practice that minimizes community areas that are not controlled or highly influenced by commercial interests.
While the very form and function of the street is contested, this imperfect term shall serve here to denote performance locales that Cohen-Cruz defines as “porous” (an apt synonym, perhaps, for improvisation itself.) Street performance exists in locales where boundaries are consistently negotiated – between public and private, player and character, attention and apathy, performance and life. The appearance of street players seemingly invites the “participation of all who pass” (Cohen-Cruz *Radical*, 6); locales are often spatially delineated merely by the presence of the players themselves, although surprising set elements may accompany the event, such as the puppet theatres of Bangkok’s *Maya* company (Van Erven *Playful*, 216-226). As Schechner attests, “To allow people to assemble in the streets is always to flirt with the possibility of improvisation – that the unexpected might happen” (“Street,” 197). Street theatre, with its borrowed “stage” and possibly unsuspecting audience, must embrace this unexpectedness in order to survive, or at the very least, adopt a mode of performance that can thrive under such circumstances.

As is the case with many street performance traditions, Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre (founded in 1963) revels in both the limitations and opportunities of this difficult terrain with its “textless collages of images” (Van Erven *Radical*, 63). He writes:

> Puppet theater is the theater of all means. Puppets and masks should be played in the street. They are louder than the traffic. They don’t teach problems, but they scream and dance and hit others on the head and display life in its clearest terms. Puppet theater is an extension of sculpture. A professional sculptor doesn’t have much to do but decorate libraries or schools. But to take sculpture to the streets, to tell a story with it, to make music and dance for it – that’s what interests me. (Quoted in Bell “Louder,” 272-273)

---

8 This concept of boundary blurring, and its political ramifications, is discussed further in Chapter Six.
Subtlety and nuance can fall victim to the street, particularly when improvisation takes the form of the parade, a genre which does not seek to hold an audience’s attention for any extended level of time; however, as Schumann’s exuberant work reveals, a boldness of performance style, fine-tuned aesthetic, succinctness of message, and participatory festiveness can amply compensate. His oversized characters, crafted visual narratives and irreverent playfulness create a powerful performance experience. Furthermore, Schumann views such a performance venue as a political choice, as it exists (at least relatively speaking) outside the strictures of the dominant regimes, in particular the overt commercialism of professional theatre. In terms of American performance, Arthur Sainer suggests that this (re)discovery of the street characterizes radical theatre of the 1960s in general (48).

Although the political dimensions of improvisation serve as the focus of a later chapter, it is worthy of brief note here that numerous practitioners have shared Schumann’s view that electing to perform in the street in itself can constitute a political act. Two examples illustrate the potential power of this choice. Joi Barrios notes that the 1970s and 80s were a period of considerable artistic activity in the Philippines as the struggle for national democracy gained strength. During this time of unrest and dissatisfaction, “theatre artists moved out of the confines of theatre buildings to perform in the streets” (Barrios 255). The porous quality of the street was viewed as a tool for combating the Marcos dictatorship through active engagement with an audience that were less likely to attend more secluded (and controlled) spaces. The transitory nature of the street also provided a possibility for social commentary that would have been impossible in the established and regulated playhouses.
Schechner provides the second example when he argues that the student-led uprising in China’s Tiananmen Square of 1989 is an example of “direct theatre.” He defines this genre as occurring when “large public spaces are transformed into theatres where collective reflexivity is performed, and fecund and spectacular excesses displayed. Parades, mass gatherings, street theatre, sex, and partying – everything is exaggerated, ritualized, done for show” (“Invasions,” 102) Cf. (“Street,” 204). While such behavior may be viewed by some as marginal in terms of its relationship to theatre (perhaps less so to improvisation as this is truly aesthetic behavior in the here and now), and one must be mindful to appreciate and acknowledge the very real and brutal consequences of this action, the political potency of the student’s chosen stage is clear. The oppressive force that met this reclaiming of the “public” street reflects the overall significance and danger that this performance locale often affords.

Performances in parks and other common areas can also be considered under the “street theatre” rubric, as they embody a similar temporary quality, and also negotiate space with an audience that may or may not fully expect or accept the appearance of the performers. Companies such as the San Francisco Mime Troupe, founded in 1959 by Ronnie G. Davis, and the later work of Peter Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre after its move to Vermont in 1970, often exploited such open locales. Hanon Reznikov, co-director of the Living Theatre (a company who has also explored this realm) posits, however, that park performance does differ in “feel” to the often-uncertain atmosphere of the street:

There’s an Artaudian feel to performing on the sidewalk or on a street that’s quite unlike the protected feel of the park, which is a homo ludens space, a play space […] You’re doing something that runs counter to the accepted or expected notion of what a sidewalk is for. There’s a tension
produced by your passage through it that the audience perceives, that excites them. (Quoted in Rosenthal “Living,” 157-159)

In reality, street theatre’s relationship with power structures can be considerably more nebulous than that embodied in city parks and preserves which, in a manner similar to large-scale parades and carnivals, typically involves at least nominal approval from governing agencies if it is to continue unmolested. But the selection of such spaces on the part of the performers, whether street, park or field, is informed by a similar aesthetic and view of theatre’s function in society. Though the political message may vary radically – from the overt anti-establishmentarianism of America in the 1960s to the often denigrating and condescending African Theatre for Development movement of the mid-1900s colonial period⁹ – the underlying belief is the same: a type of audience and audience relationship is found here that is not easily encountered in less open environs. In many situations, such as in the streets of a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, this may be the only way to reach a targeted audience (see Conquergood 228.) Furthermore, while it would be an inaccurate simplification to suggest that all performance in such locations is subsequently improvisational in form, it is nonetheless fair to conclude that the vast majority of street play is only truly successful if it is able to happily harness and relish the unpredictability that results from the transience of this public encounter. Extreme variables in terms of audience focus, response and participation, and, in many instances,

---

⁹ Kerr writes of this essentially didactic form: “a few imaginative development officers and extension workers went a stage further [than lectures and written explanations] by introducing the notion of local-language improvised dramas to reinforce by role play the status and role changes necessary for the transition from subsistence to cash-crop farming” (31). Later, with the emergence of moralizing or propaganda plays, the trickster hero (often in the guise of the hare) was transformed into the image of a progressive farmer (ibid. 32). While the objectives of such projects were often focused on the advancement of the intended audience, performance hierarchies frequently (inadvertently) reified marginalizing power dynamics. As Byam remarks, audiences retained a level of passivity in the performance equation: “Unfortunately, the performances were not shaped by the community but rather by extension workers who gathered the information. The audience, though attentive, reaped neither short- nor long-term rewards from the exercise” (Byam 234).
the disputed right to engage in such dramatic behavior in the first place, all pose certain challenges to the would-be practitioner who seeks service or fulfillment in this type of venue. A certain level of spontaneity and ability to exploit fluidity in performance is clearly an important tool to this end. Street theatre, then, is most engaging when those involved accept, incorporate and value the participatory and transitory porosity that is indicative of this performance site.

While some improvisational performances are best suited to the streets or similarly porous locales, other modes are more varied in their choice of venue and are essentially traveling or itinerant traditions, seeking audiences in a considerable array of locations. The traveling performer is almost certainly as old as the concept of theatre itself, and represents the second form of spatial relationship explored in this chapter. The necessities of finding an audience and securing a living were surely keen motivators to pursue opportunities wherever they may arise, and while few assumptions can safely be made across historical and cultural divides, the need to secure a living from one’s profession is a strong commonality. As such, this tendency towards eclecticism recedes into the distant past, and can be clearly seen amongst the Ancient Roman mimes, perhaps the first improvisers for whom even remotely helpful historical documentation exists.

Little can be definitively ascertained in regards to the staging practices of the Roman mimes; the first permanent theatre building in Rome, the theatre of Pompey, was not completed until 55 BC, well after the popularity of the mimic tradition had reached its heyday. Prior to this date Erika Simon speculates that the “numerous performances took place on movable stages, which were influenced by the South Italian phylakes’ wooden
Booth or trestle stages, “a portable raised platform with a rear curtain (or siparium),” were probably widely-used, and signify an important spatial consideration of this type of theatre, namely the ability for a troupe to take its “stage” with it on the road (Vince Companion, 38). The existence of references to privata mimi indicates that private performance spaces were also used, and Richard Beacham posits that market places and public squares also provided fitting venues (Theatre, 32). Perhaps the only safe generalizations concerning these practitioners are that their venues were varied, temporary and makeshift. Even upon the arrival of the permanent stone theatres, Allardyce Nicoll surmises, “these mimes performed on a rude platform erected in the midst of the orchestra in front of the permanent stage” (Masks, 106), suggesting that after the arrival of permanent theatre structures, the improvising mime still retained a level of impermanency in their staging practices.

During the medieval period it would appear that the vast majority of secular improvisational performance continued to occur under such temporary conditions. With the scarcity, if not complete lack, of permanent theatres, little opportunity for steady artistic employment, and a general religious climate that was unfavorable to much performance across Europe, the itinerant strolling player was undoubtedly the norm of this period, rather than the exception. Ronald Vince posits that such medieval artists may be the direct theatrical descendants of their ancient Greco-Roman forbears, the professional mimes, buffoons, jesters and minstrels, who peddled their talents “at courts, in homes of the wealthy on special occasions, in public squares on market days and

---

10 Much hypothesizing of the mimes, in fact, rests on the later performance tradition illustrated on the phylax vases to which Simon refers.
holidays, even outside the holy precincts of churches” (Companion, 185). Regardless of the source, medieval traditions do share the Roman mime’s transient performance conditions. The Germanic scôp serves as an example of this mode:

travelling from court to court, he sang elegies or told tales of heroic deeds and legends to the accompaniment of a harp or other stringed instrument for the enjoyment of those assembled for a hall-feast […] It is not possible to define neatly when minstrelsy turned to playmaking. Many of the early entertainers probably used a variety of skills—dancing, acrobatics, and singing, as well as mimicry and tale-telling. (Ibid. 353)

While his audience was perhaps more consistently elite, the lifestyle of the scôp still undoubtedly involved considerable travel and the ability to adjust to both the spatial and artistic demands of his varied hosts. Similar versatility is revealed as we move into the Renaissance Period and the emergence of the Commedia dell’Arte (from the 1540s onwards.) As the popularity of such troupes grew, they engaged in prodigious tours, traveling far afield from their Italian roots into countries such as Spain, England, and France; in the latter a favored Commedia troupe would receive an exceptional modicum of venue stability with a semi-permanent Parisian theatrical home.

This mobility has continued into the modern period. As this spatial dynamic is defined by its impermanence and impromptu locale, it will suffice to conclude that throughout the history of performance, such a choice has been prolific for the economic reasons suggested above, namely that players went to where the work was. Evidence of such an impetus exists the world over. We see it in the 18th century carpas or tent shows

---

11 The theory of an unbroken tradition of popular comedic performance dating from Antiquity through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and modern period has been voiced by many – most notably, Nicoll’s study of the Commedia dell’Arte and its origins. Similarities in performance style definitely exist, such as the stereotyped characters, plot devices, and scenic and costume elements, but these may as easily be accounted for by the peculiarities of the comedic impetus wherever it emerges. The use of physical exaggeration and caricatures, humorous reversals and misunderstandings, and the incorporation of recognizable and satirical visual devices are equally commonplace in comedic traditions that developed without any contact to these ancient precursors.
of Mexico that reemerged with force in the 1930s when “collapsible, barn-like carpas, show tents that were drawn on trucks and even mule carts from suburb to suburb and from village to village, quickly set up in the main square or out in the middle of the street, a presage of a coming fair” (Broyles-González 248). During the 1900s, traveling theatres emerged across the continent of Africa, with companies such as the Yoruba Traveling Theatre, and “[g]riots [storytellers] often moved throughout villages and towns retelling myths and legends to those who stopped to listen or who invited them in” (Byam 232). The Mobile Theatre based in Tiruvallur, India and affiliated with the Association of the Rural Poor (ARP), performs scenario-type plays in which, K. V. Madan Mohan explains, “[o]nly the characters and general story line are set. The rest we improvise on the basis of what people tell us about the local conditions in the village where we want to perform” (quoted in Van Erven Playful, 135). As the volume of available examples attests, the ability/need to travel and the improvisational impetus are particularly well suited to each other. Whereas street traditions must allow for the unpredictability of how space will be negotiated in performance, the itinerant must adapt to the immense variety of spaces encountered on the road and be able to overcome the continuously shifting physical conditions.12

Many spontaneous movements in the past have needed to adopt the life of the itinerant in order to survive unpredictable social and economic pressures; a noteworthy trend in the modern period is that some companies philosophically chose such an existence, foregoing the pursuit of a permanent theatrical address, or supplementing a home base operation with the philosophically informed decision of mobility. Just as

---

12 Cultural conditions also clearly provide challenges and opportunities for this performance modality. This aspect is considered further in the next chapter.
Schumann and Davis sought to engage their audience in the street and similarly public spaces, several contemporary movements view theatre as a service to communities that do not traditionally have access to the means of production. During its union-affiliated years in particular (1965-1967), El Teatro Campesino performed in union halls, on the back of a flat-bed truck, and on the dirt roads of Californian migrant camps in order to serve its audience, thus embodying characteristics of both street and itinerant traditions. The worldwide rise of Community Theatre\textsuperscript{13} in the 1970s and 80s (also known variously as theatre for education, popular, grassroots and community-based theatre) is committed to “democratizing access to art making” (Cohen-Cruz “Motion,” 101), and as such, has traveled extensively to “prisons, senior centers, unions, schools, churches, daycare centers, facilities for people with physical and emotional challenges or terminal illnesses” (ibid. 100). Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas of Playback Theatre, a movement devoted to service through the sharing and performance of personal narratives, have pursued similar diversity (see Fox \textit{Acts}, 207 and Salas \textit{Improvising}, 133). Fox, expressing the sensibility of this tendency as a whole, writes, “If oppressed persons can be defined as those who have nowhere to tell their story, our mission has been to provide a space for anyone and everyone to be heard” (\textit{Acts}, 6). Often, to be truly effective, companies have found that the silenced or disenfranchised communities must make available the literal physical spaces themselves. In terms of psychodrama, perhaps the form most geared towards community service, Blatner observes that performances may also take place at the site of actual conflict – or \textit{in situ} – as the need arises (\textit{Acting-In}, 3). In each of the above

\textsuperscript{13} This term denotes the modern theatrical modality whereby facilitators create custom-made productions for and with target communities. The resulting performance events are participant-driven and represent the voices of those involved in the collaborative process of creation. This definition (used throughout this study) distinguishes this style from the North American practice of the same name that consists of amateur productions of canonized or conventional theatre scripts.
instances, the economic imperative has been supplanted with an earnest desire to take the means of theatre to the very places it is needed; so while the ancient improvisational mobility of the mime, troubadour, jester and scôp remains, it is important to note the underlying motivating factors may be quite different. Space is more deliberately selected with an eye towards creating theatre where it is needed, a paradigm shift perhaps from performing here in our space to serving there in the sphere of the community. Consequently, mobility and adaptability characterize the itinerant use of improvisational space.

The third spatial relationship adopted by the improvisational endeavor to be considered is the co-opted or subversive use of what could be characterized as unfriendly or truly non-traditional locales. This type of improvisation has been performed under several banners – undercover, hit-and-run, lightning plays, guerilla theatre – but it is most widely known as Invisible Theatre, a genre closely affiliated with Augusto Boal (b.1931-). Boal’s prodigious work serves as a major focus of this investigation, and subsequently his overall philosophy warrants brief consideration here. Few modern practitioners have had the enduring impact and profound influence of Boal, a Brazilian (turned international) director, playwright, activist/artist, educator, performance facilitator and one-time parliamentarian. As the creator/founder/compiler of countless exercises and game structures, which collectively make up the “arsenal” of his Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal has pursued increased audience involvement and empowerment within the theatrical event. He seeks to return performance to the people, popularizing the tools of the actor and enabling his participants to use the staged event as a means of self-discovery and as a rehearsal space for political action. Happily crossing the artificial
boundaries of art, politics, therapy and education, Boal seeks an active audience who co-create and adapt the largely improvisational performance event; this participatory ethos is embodied in his foundational notion of the “spect-actor.” As his research continues through various modes, such as Newspaper Theatre, Invisible Theatre, Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, the Rainbow of Desire, and most recently, Legislative Theatre, Boal has steadily moved away from the conventional unidirectional actor-audience relationship, privileging, instead, the knowledge held by the communities he serves, rather than the didacticism of arbitrarily prefabricated solutions. His work favors the physical over the verbal, the experiential over the theoretical, and collaborative process over dictated product. With established training centers in France and Brazil, and countless other companies across the globe building on his dramatic and humanitarian legacy, Boal’s idealistic and energetic pursuit of liberating the human body and mind from all forms of oppression continues to adopt new forms and modes to meet the needs of the communities it encounters.

Boal’s early work with Invisible Theatre has perhaps the most unique spatial approach and characterizes the notion of space cooption. Street theatre and itinerant players may perform in a variety of locales, but they generally draw attention to their own theatricality, thereby metaphorically transforming the public square, field or street corner into a theatre of sorts; Invisible Theatre, on the other hand, takes place in a similar array of sites and yet deliberately masks its own constructedness. These performances are not accompanied with tents, trestle-stages or elaborate costumes, but rather seek to blend into

---

14 This theatre practitioner, a melding of the spectator and actor, serves as a focused example of Chapter Five.
15 Each of these improvisational theatrical movements is defined and considered at length in subsequent chapters.
the chosen environment, to co-opt the dominant behaviors practiced there and reframe them towards a critical and subversive end. Boal developed this form of theatrical warfare in the early 1970s while working in Argentina and cut off from the resources that the commercial theatre can afford. In his autobiography he recalls:

> With my students, I prepared scenes for the street based on a law that allowed any hungry person to go into a restaurant, however luxurious, and eat and drink whatever they liked, dessert and wine excepted; on showing their identity card, they could leave without paying. (Hamlet, 303)

Few people knew of this law (and it was not upheld by the authorities) yet Boal saw in it the potential for an Invisible encounter. The resulting scenario involved several undercover performers secretly staging an event in an expensive restaurant where a meal was consumed but the diner/actor was unable to pay. This player then offered to work in various positions at the hotel in order to pay for the meal, but as the paycheck of each suggested occupation (gardener, waiter…) was named, it was revealed that the cost of his meal was considerably higher than any possible wage to be earned in any reasonable amount of time. Consequently, through a stimulation of discussion and debate, the students revealed the enormous gap between the wages of hotel workers and the exorbitant prices on the menu, thereby emphasizing the disproportionate distribution of economic resources. In such a manner, Boal advocates the performance of “ultra-realistic scene[s] acted out in a public place to provoke reactions from passers-by” (Van Erven Playful, 19). In contrast to street theatre that tacitly invites the audience to suspend disbelief or enter into a sense of play with the performers, “Invisible Theatre is public theatre which involves the public as participants in the action without their knowing it” (Jackson Games, xx). Adrian Jackson, a Theatre of the Oppressed director and translator of Boal’s works, continues his definition:
[It] is a way of using theatre to stimulate debate, getting people to question issues in a public forum. It might be compared to ‘agit-prop’ street theatre, with the essential difference that the audience is free to take up any position it wants, and has no feeling of being preached at. (Ibid. xx-xxi)

The performers may enter the performance locale with a specific “statement” in mind in terms of the issue at play, but the very invisibility of their presence allows the “audience” to assume any stance it sees fit. Boal urges, “actors are able to incorporate into their acting and their actions the intervention of the spectators” (Boal Theatre, 144), so both engaged parties may (at least theoretically) change each other. As is the case with Boal’s later developments, Invisible Theatre is less concerned with preaching an answer than it is in raising a pertinent question suited to the particular locale of performance.

Despite Invisible Theatre’s blurring of art and life in its secretive co-opting of unmarked theatrical territory, Boal is insistent that such acts constitute theatre: “One point must be clearly understood: Invisible Theatre is theatre; it must have a text with a scripted core, which will inevitably be modified, according to the circumstances, to suit the interventions of the spect-actors” (Games, 6). This position is not without its problems; as the performance frame is disguised, so too are the protections that are (ideally) customarily afforded the player. This disguise is unmistakably the essence of the event: “It is always very important that the actors do not reveal themselves to be actors!” Boal declares, “On this rests the invisible nature of this form of theater” (Theatre, 146-147). He reiterates elsewhere, “One should never explain to the public that Invisible Theatre is theatre, lest it lose its impact” (Games, 16). Boal does acknowledge that safety is an important and difficult issue with this theatre mode. Invisible behavior is generally designed to be transgressive and push the boundaries of perceived normalcy.
Such unruly behavior, from the purview of the establishment, is synonymous with crime. During a disruptive traffic-stopping picnic on a busy street in Stockholm protesting the lack of truly public space for pedestrians, police intervention forced participants to become “visible” as players (see Boal *Games*, 14-16). This line between art and life is particularly delicate in a form where “the improvised scene becomes reality. Fiction penetrates reality. What the protagonist had rehearsed as a plan, a blueprint, now becomes an act” (*Rainbow*, 185).

Boal defends the morality of performed acts that refrain from declaring their own theatricality. “I believe invisible theatre is moral because first, we never lie – that is, we use incidents that are not only possible but that happen frequently […] It’s a planned action, but it’s a real action” (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 229). Improvisational performances tend to pursue efficacy, seeking not only to comment on the world, but also to change it. Just as perpetuating expected behavioral codes within a chosen environment reifies the dominant hierarchy, “an unexpected subversion of ‘normal’ behaviour” (*Games*, xx) performed improvisationally offers new potentials or perspectives. Issues of morality in such circumstances are heavily dependent upon whether or not one is invested in the continuation of the status quo. As Boal reveals, the means of Invisible Theatre pursue an alternative spatial relationship and see a unique potential for quiet change in this approach:

Big rallies are for people who are already convinced. You make a manifestation of force and many people see that you are strong, and by seeing the support those who are undecided may join along. The other way, like doing invisible theater, reaches very few people. But it modifies people’s opinions. That man whose opinion was changed goes home and talks to his family, and he goes to a bar and talks to his friends. (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 232) Cf. (Cohen-Cruz *Radical*, 119)
Invisible Theatre does not usually seek mass stationary audiences, but rather privileges intimate venues where discussion and interaction may easily proliferate into the world at large.16

A major related contemporary movement worthy of including here is the radical theatre experiments of American companies in the 1960s. Productions such as the Pageant Players’ *Laundromat* play of 1966 exhibit a similar dynamic: performer-customers “begin to quarrel among themselves [about US aggression in Vietnam] in front of legitimate customers who become, unknown to themselves, audience members” (Sainer 18). Robert Head’s *Kill Viet Cong* also incorporated this hidden spatial orientation, variously inviting passersby to “kill the enemy” (a performer) at the Port Authority Bus Terminal (ibid. 49), or surreptitiously humming “The Star-Spangled Banner,” before crescendoing in full voice (Schechner *Environmental*, xxxv-xxxvi). These productions also co-opt public space for non-traditional performances in which the line between art and life, stage and auditorium, player and passerby, is deliberately left indeterminate.

Adapted spaces comprise the fourth spatial tendency of improvisational performance. These venues consist of more permanent (pre-existing) structures that are altered in order to meet the needs of the players. Whereas nomadic and agrarian cultures tend towards open venues, such as village common areas, courtyards and fields, industrialized nations rarely afford the opportunity for theatre companies seeking stability to find permanent residency in comparative quarters, if any such open space even exists. Consequently, in North America and Europe, in particular, improvisation troupes have

---

16 For additional examples of Invisible Theatre see Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 21, Boal *Games* 6-9, and Jackson *Games*, xx.
adapted to locations previously designed for other purposes. “Often the constructed venues for improvisation are not the conventional or mainstream ones,” Smith and Dean observe, “they may be cafes, community centres, bookshops or pubs” (51). Pubs and restaurants have particularly dominated the Chicago tradition. The Compass, the forerunner of Chicago improv, initially existed in these makeshift conditions, (coincidentally?) resembling the Brechtian cabaret of co-founder David Shepherd’s ideal. (This style of décor has continued with the Compass’ offspring, the Second City.) Andy Duncan would later say of the Compass, “Physically, there was very little about the Compass that was seductive. It had a kind of Brechtian alienation about it” (Coleman 103). The American Comedysportz short-form franchise, founded by Richard Chudnow in 1984, explicitly pursues this type of venue with its national policy never to pay rent but to “find a gate and food and drink split with a local bar or restaurant” (Seham 94). The considerable frequency with which American troupes ally with venues of this ilk has led Keith Johnstone to dub the U.S. strain of improvisation (somewhat unflatteringly) as “bar-pro” (Storytellers, 5).

Johnstone’s description is not unfounded: alcohol and (particularly comedic) improvisation typically go hand in hand. Fiscal considerations are key. As with Comedysportz, many companies exist in tentative arrangements with hosting businesses that expect profitability in the form of bar sales in return for a space to play in. Scott Markwell remarks, “Liquor has always been necessary for the survival of comedy clubs, and besides alcohol can enliven an audience” (22). Improvisational shows are rarely able to demand the same ticket prices as more conventional theatre fare, making bar sales pivotal for these enterprises to break even. For many, the casual atmosphere that
accompanies such an arrangement reiterates improv’s (Spolin/Boyd derived) sense of play. Nick Napier, of the Annoyance Theatre, hints that a philosophical stance may also be associated with this phenomenon in his program notes:

Let us have fun. Let us laugh. Let us smoke cigarettes and drink alcoholic beverages. Let us be stimulated by an experience on stage. Oh God, let us have a party and invite the world. That is why it is called a ‘play.’ It is not called a ‘bore,’ or a ‘tedium,’ or a ‘too long.’ It is a play. So let us play, let us play so hard our tits falls off. (Quoted in Seham 125)

Again, echoes of Brecht’s smoker’s theatre can be seen, in addition to a deliberate irreverence toward “traditional” audiences and theatre experiences. Bar-pro does not seek to replicate the commercial theatre in its tone, mode or behaviour. Adapted venues allow and invite audience interplay, with their often-claustrophobic seating, stages that frequently literally spill out onto the house, and audiences “lubricated with beer” (McQuaid 10).

However, the Bacchus-inspired audiences common to the adapted space are not entirely unproblematic, and as Smith and Dean note, it is easy to romanticize the advantages and communal opportunities afforded by these locations (51). Schechner’s concept of flexible and variable focus is not always desirous, and audience members may overwhelm productions that require a more conscientious or discerning clientele. Some traditions, such as Comedysportz, privilege the entertainment potentials of improv first and foremost, and thrive under these often-arduous conditions. But other groups can become frustrated with a bustling environment that requires a broad performance style more akin to that of Schumann’s puppets to keep attention. David Bourn, of London Theatresports, paraphrases a typical performance dilemma: “In a pub, if you ask audiences to suggest jobs, they always shout out ‘prostitute.’ You don’t get that in the
theatre. When people aren’t drunk, they don’t tolerate a lot of smut” (Rampton “Comedy,” 43).17 Paul Zuckerman of Chicago City Limits, adds “In a club, you’re always required to do your ‘A’ material, that’s why eventually you want a home base where you can also develop” (David 23). Nuance in material, the development of storyline, and the ability to take artistic risks, can fall prey to the bartender’s call. While the street, tent and co-opted venue present obstacles of unpredictability, attention and safety, the more stable adapted locale is not without its own unique challenges.

Conventional theatre establishments also house improvisation on occasion and thereby warrant mention in this consideration of spatial dynamics. In opposition to Comedysportz which tends towards the bar scenario, Johnstone’s Canadian-based Theatresports movement gravitates towards venues with more traditional theatre trappings. The Loose Moose Theatre, the Calgary flagship institution, offers such an environment. “Part of the magic of Loose Moose is that it is a theatre fully equipped and mainly used for improvisation,” Lyn Pierse writes. “Stability of tenure has enabled improvisors to incorporate all elements of lighting, sound and scenography within the improvised scene. Lighting operators make offers as well as yield to those given by players” (390). On her home turf, Australia, Theatresports has been played (to capacity crowds) in high-art venues such as the Sydney Opera House. Though largely itinerant in nature, England’s Improbable Theatre Company tours shows, such as *Life Game* (conceived by Johnstone), into traditional proscenium-style venues. Chicago’s Free Associates, (founded by Mark Gagné in 1991, a former Comedysportz player) also actively sought to merge the freedom of improv with the materials of the commercial theatre. Productions such as their acclaimed Tennessee Williams-inspired *Cast on a Hot* 

17 See also Rampton “Comics” for examples of imbibed punter’s odd and somewhat unhelpful suggestions.
Tin Roof, involved full costumes, music and lighting effects as Gagné favored “a more theatrical setup” than the majority of Chicago work (Kozlowski 57). On the extreme end of the spectrum, Japanese renga poetry sittings of the Muromachi period (c. 1336-1568) offer an example of improvisation in a truly elite setting. Some of these chained-verse collaborative composition sessions took place in a freestanding kaisho that was specifically designed and purpose-built for the gathering. Yet even when improvisation finds its home in formalized venues, it rarely perpetuates conventional binaries, and as discussed below, the act of creation is seldom reserved for those who stand behind the “proscenium.” More traditional venues, then, are typically utilized in less traditional manners.

The range of improvisational venues is now defined, with performances occurring in street, temporary/portable, co-opted, adapted and conventional locales. This diverse array of spatial possibilities is unified considerably when one considers not only what spaces are chosen, but also how these spaces are used. For while the site of performance is considerably varied, certain trends are evident as to how these spaces (and space in general) are manipulated. Commonalities can be ascertained in the nature and significance of space objects, the preferred means of production, and privileged infractions of the stage/auditorium divide. Let us, then, explore these chronotopic features of the improvisational event.

Creating Something Out of Nothing: Space Transformation and Semiotics

Theatre can be considered a transformative event, though, depending on one’s elected style, the manner and purpose of this transformation differs. In realism, the
framing of the stage presents objects that, through the magic of suspended disbelief, can actually become otherworldly, representing distant times and places and allowing a tradition of theatrical escapism. Alternatively, in the tradition of Brecht, the symbols and manifestations of daily life can take on a new and revealing significance through the process of alienation whereby they are seen again as if for the first time through powerful juxtaposition or recontextualization. Brecht’s estranged object privileges heightened criticism and evaluation over illusionary make-believe. Regardless of agenda, folklorist Petr Bogatyrev posits that this ability for transformation is the central feature of the theatre and serves as its particularly unique artistic way of seeing. As Marvin Carlson summarizes, “There all aspects of material reality, especially the actor, become something different […] The spectator is aware of the actor both as person and as character and thus both a living person and as a system of visual and aural signs” (Theories, 408) Cf. (Elam 7). The fluidity of improvisational theatre, with its tendency to adapt to the immediate environment and to employ all available resources in pursuit of expression, can be a particularly transformative event with peculiar semiotic richness and depth.

Several modern improv practitioners and theorists explore the theme of semiotics and transformation. Frost and Yarrow consider improvisation as “a dynamic principle operating in many different spheres; an independent and transformative way of being and doing” (13). Jerzy Grotowski casts his performer as an agent of transformation: “By his controlled use of gesture the actor transforms the floor into a sea, a table into a confessional, a piece of iron into an animate partner” (21). Boal’s notion of the aesthetic space reflects a strong belief in the transforming ability of theatre and writes at length:
The aesthetic space is the creation of the audience: it requires nothing more than their attentive gaze in a single direction for this space to become ‘aesthetic’, powerful, ‘hot’, five-dimensional (three physical dimensions, plus the subjective dimensions of imagination and memory). In this space, all actions gain new properties – dichotomisation, plasticity and tele-microscopy: the actor in this space is dualised (he is himself and he is the character); the objects no longer carry their usual daily signification, but become the stuff of memory and imagination; and every tiny gesture is magnified, and the distant becomes closer. \textit{(Legislative, 72)}

As Boal observes, the simple act of a performance drawing attention to itself invites heightened perception and more complex and nuanced sign-systems.

The American (Chicago) school of improvisation is based largely on a doctrine of performance as space transformation. Neva Boyd notes that this plasticity, to use Boal’s term, is inherent to the child whose sense of play is predicated on the game of pretend in which objects become things other than they are (Boyd 132). Spolin further explicates this observation when she unambiguously declares: “The heart of improvisation is transformation” \textit{(Improvisation, 39)}. For Spolin, however, concrete objects themselves are no longer imperative in the act of transforming. “Implicit in all the Spolin games had always been Viola’s concept of the body as the source of creative intelligence and the idea that space could be used as a substance as creatively as clay” (Coleman 291).

Spolin’s player is characterized as not only an actor engaged in the present space, but also as one who is able to use nothing other than this space to create from. The art of Spolin’s player, Coleman writes, “consists purely of players tossing the [imaginary] ball to each other, communicating the invisible, sharing and transforming empty space” (ibid. 27).

Spolin’s son, director/teacher Paul Sills\textsuperscript{18}, continues the tradition and has employed these

\textsuperscript{18} Mel Gussow refers to Sills as “the man who almost single-handedly evolved improvisation into a performance art form. The qualifying ‘almost’ allows for the significant role of Mr. Sills’s mother, Viola Spolin, who invented modern ‘theater games’ and has been, for several generations, the godmother of the movement” (3).
performance techniques to effect in his Story Theatre. In an interview with Laurie Ann Gruhn he comments, “Stage space is capable of transformation—with out mechanical scene changes—as we knew from working with Viola Spolin at Second City” (Gruhn). Contemporary improvisation audiences can still see this creative impetus at play on the stages of Chicago’s Second City and ImprovOlympic (among numerous others.) Bernard Sahlins, former owner of Second City, notes the company’s performance aesthetic: “Our only scenery consisted of six of the bentwood chairs. We were equally parsimonious with costumes, deciding that only the elements of costume were compatible with our vision. An army jacket was enough to suggest a general; a white coat, a doctor…” (37) Cf. (ibid. 141). Here a metonymic approach is adopted, common to many folk performance traditions, whereby a specific symbol represents a larger concept or institution. Despite these sparse physical elements, Sahlins attests that “with just words and our great actors, there is pure theatre magic on that stage” (41). A former player, Gilda Radner, confirms the immense potential of such a tradition:

My dad used to say he loved watching children play because they created worlds out of nothing. Like, if you interrupt a kid who’s playing—which is a horrible thing to do—and ask him, ‘What are you doing?’ he says, ‘I’m in this castle, and these are the stairs coming down and the queen’s up here.’ That’s what we did at Second City. What did we have? A revolving doorway, two other doors, and six or seven chairs. And we could make them anything we wanted. (Sweet 368)

Spolin’s tradition of manipulating space enables the construction of complete worlds. Radner’s words also reiterate the affinity such improv traditions have to the world of play and child-like imagination.19

19 Radner continues to note that this magic is peculiar to the live stage event. She observes, “It’s difficult to do that [transform space into anything] on television. Television is too literal. Billy Murray, Dan, and Belushi are writers on Saturday Night, and sometimes they find they can’t do a piece on the show they could have done at Second City because they can’t use the audience’s imagination properly on TV” (Sweet
ImprovOlympic, an improvisation company devoted to the development and performance of long-form works\(^{20}\), adopts a comparable performance strategy to Second City (though its mode is somewhat different – Second City has historically favored using pure improv as a means of developing sketch material rather than as a performance style in its own right.) The acting manual propagating ImprovOlympic’s philosophy, *Truth in Comedy*, notes, “Players who commit to the environment respect all objects created on stage as though they were real, because once the performers bring them into existence, they are real” (Halpern et al. 103). A great deal of teamwork is used to create environments that appear and reappear during the course of an evening’s performance. Those players not currently engaged in the onstage action often assist from their visible stations along the upstage wall with “sound effects, musical underscoring, or other aspects of a scene’s environment” (Seham 52). Co-founder Charna Halpern clearly prefers this Spolin-inspired creation of space objects to the use of traditional props: “Since real props cannot be transformed, they become a burden: when actual physical props are sitting around on stage, they limit the improvised creation of other props” (Halpern et al. 125).

Keith Johnstone adopts a counter view, preferring instead the creative act of reinventing the purposes of real objects to meet the needs of scenic explorations. In terms of performance ideologies, this is a key difference, separating Johnstone and his theatrical offspring from the Chicago-based traditions.

---

\(^{20}\) Second City director/teacher Michael Gellman is credited with coining the term long-from improvisation to differentiate practices that seek sustained pieces that may extend over an act or full evening from short-form work that typically consists of smaller disconnected games or scenic units. Long-form performances are typically connected by thematic, plot or character elements that bind the scenic or game units together. See Kozlowski 102 and 120.
In every American city you can see improvisers performing with just a few chairs: not even with a desk, or a table, or with a door to slam on the way out. I blame this on mime-influenced ideas, and on ‘bar-pro’ (impro in bars where the stages are usually minuscule). Whenever possible I surround the players with tables covered with junk – a golf-cart, beds and bedding, wheelchairs… (Storytellers, 5)\(^{21}\)

The use of found objects offers a different kind of creative opportunity than Spolin’s empty space. “I like to work with a heap of props at the side of the stage,” Johnstone writes. “[T]heir transformations can be magical. A bench can become a canoe; a sofa can become a pool to dive in to; a boat can be up-ended and used as a shrine” (ibid. 306).

Sign-systems are highly provisional under these circumstances, providing numerous opportunities for Brechtian commentary. Game structures that exploit this dynamic include Most Uses of an Object (ibid. 366), Props (Pierse 273), Antiques (Johnston 129) and It’s Something Else (Schotz 92-93), all of which encourage players to imaginatively use objects in unexpected, and typically humorous, ways.

England’s Improbable Theatre, founded in 1996 by Phelim McDermott, Julian Crouch and Lee Simpson, embodies the amazing creative possibilities of such an approach with their debut piece *Animo*. Hour-long shows are improvised using a random array of materials assembled particularly for that specific performance. Non-traditional players, such as “designers, makers, puppeteers and musicians” may join the performance and add in the creation of what, member Crouch calls “chaos magic” (McDermott *Animo*), where humans and set pieces often exchange traditional functions. They describe the resulting production as follows:

Newspapers become swans, bristle brushes become creatures from the swamp and actors are constructed before your very eyes. A fascinating and hugely entertaining insight into a theatre process that engages the

\(^{21}\) “Impro” is the standard form of abbreviation for improvisation (rather than “improv”) in Commonwealth nations. For consistency, improv is used in this study unless this alternative appears in a direct quote.
imagination of the audience like no other. Drama, comedy, pathos, music, singing, dancing, mask making, spectacle; anything can happen in Animo and anyone might appear, but whatever else it is Animo is a space to experience improvisation as alchemy; transforming the everyday into the sublime. (Animo) [Italics in original]

The semiotic potency and complexity of their work is immense, as space, objects and actors are reduced to their most basic constituent elements of form, strength and malleability and are subsequently used as raw resources for the unfolding play. Animo is also an excellent realization of Schechner’s observation that the setting of technical elements in production should not be viewed as sacred. “If human performance is variable (as it most certainly is [particularly in improvisation]), then a unified whole—if one is looking for that—will be better assured by a nightly variation of technical means” (Environmental, xxvi). Animo allows all those participating to create anew and blurs the roles of those who are traditionally seen onstage and those who remain in the backstage shadows.

Each transformative approach has its own advantages.22 The potentials of mimed work are truly vast, if not limitless, but result in fewer staging possibilities (a mimed ladder cannot truly hold weight, a mimed door cannot mask a reveal, a mimed rope cannot become a true scenic element). On the other hand, concrete objects allow for a playfulness, serve as independent sources of inspiration and allow for amusing semiotic complexities, but will always be finite in number, and may stall explorations as they are secured or removed (it does not take any real time for an imagined set to be struck or

22 Jacques Lecoq is perhaps unique in that his training system embraces both types of object transformation. His early training utilizes mime: “The improvisation is mimed: in this way sensitivity to objects is renewed and many objects can be conjured up without the encumbrance of a single real object” (31). Real objects are introduced later during commedia work: “Objects here are not just props, they facilitate the development of rich fantasy. That is why we never mime objects; we make genuine use of them” (ibid. 115).
assembled.) To some extent, the use of imaginary or real scenic elements is undoubtedly
influenced by the selected performance venue: space objects would be ineffectual in the
hustle and bustle of Bread and Puppet’s street parades that are essentially visual works; a
well-stocked collection of suitable props would prove cumbersome and impractical on
the frequently petite and crowded stages of bar-pro establishments. Some companies
walk the divide. Comedysportz, for instance, utilizes an assortment of real hats and
costume pieces but tends to create space objects to stand in for needed prop and set
elements, a compromising policy that Andy Goldberg also recommends in his Improv
Comedy (see Goldberg 66). Some Playback companies incorporate various fabric
swatches into their performances, recreating them as costumes or props as deemed
necessary. Other practices have less definitive stances: psychodrama characteristically
incorporates the materials readily at hand or that reflect the preferences of its session
leader (Blatner Acting-In, 5). Generally speaking, however, with the exception of troupes
dedicated to a realistic mode of performance, such as Invisible Theatre, Living Histories
and Murder Mysteries, improvisation not only transforms the nature of its venues for the
purposes of its work, it also adopts an attitude of plasticity in its materials of production.

As a result of this transforming/creative energy, improvisation employs highly
malleable and connotative signs that invite fluid, complex and provisional semiotic
readings. Few signs (if any) are presented as bearing fixed, denotative meanings; signs
may be quickly recycled into the event and subsequently redefined in their new context as
necessitated by the demands of the moment. Frost and Yarrow describe this very
different type of sign that is native to improvisation:

In impro situations, the chair could become an umbrella, a bicycle, the
horns of a bull; the pose could suggest a child being told off, a person
sheltering from a storm and dying to go to the loo, praying and so on. The sign ceases to denote and becomes the possibility of infinite connotation; it opens out to the play of significance. (60)

This possibility of multiple meanings also assumes a political dimension:

[T]his kind of activity is doing at least three important things at once: showing that signs are arbitrary, helping us to play with them, and getting us to experience that we make meanings with the body as well as with the mind. It is also a mediation between structure and freedom, between memory and imagination, between the given and the created. (Ibid. 60)

Thus the resulting playfulness on the part of the performers invites and engenders a similar pursuit on the part of the participant-observers. As no fixed meaning is implied, and a spirit of play is fostered, audience members are also invited to explore alternative readings to the material they are viewing. Semiotic analysis, then, suggests that the improvisational event is characteristically “writerly” for its audience (a concept explored by Roland Barthes); in such a charged and ambiguous environment of shifting signs, the audience, too, is positioned as creative agents forming individualized meaning systems from the assembled elements. While it has been suggested that performance in general invites such an audience response (by the Prague Semioticians in particular), Frost and Yarrow argue that this tendency is particularly pronounced on the improv stage. The “spectator is active, too – and more than usually so when watching something improvised,” they remark. “The act of decoding information implies the creation of new, often unsuspected or unintended meanings out of the signals received. The audience does not only ‘read’ the performance – in a very real sense it ‘writes’ it, too” (167). This heightened level of engagement, accompanied with the thrill of the unknown and lack of didacticism, embodies, for many, the intoxicating appeal of improvisational performance in general.
Plasticity in production materials is accompanied, in many instances, by a developed aesthetic that closely resembles Jerzy Grotowski’s (1933-1999) concept of a “Poor Theatre” – though perhaps few Western practitioners would necessarily site him as an influence directly. Through his experiments in theatrical form and function, Grotowski arrived at a view of performance that centered firmly on the role, and unequalled importance, of the performer. In his highly influential *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), he described the investigative process:

> By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion. (19)

He defined the theatre that embodied all of these superfluous design elements as the “synthetic” or “rich theatre” – a theatre “rich in flaws;” such theatre also served as the antithesis of his work which was embodied metaphorically and literally by a process of *via negativa*, the eradication and stripping away of excess (ibid. 17-19). “The acceptance of poverty in theatre,” he observed, “stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form” (ibid. 21). While much of Grotowski’s work incorporated textual elements heavily, this thought process also led him to acknowledge, “[i]n the evolution of the theatrical art the text was one of the last elements to be added” (ibid. 32), and may have prompted his later paratheatre period of 1969-78 (see Schechner and Wolford 207-251). A certain philosophical bond with improvisation lies quietly under his work, particularly in regards to the actor and his/her use of space.
Purging theatrical excess was crucial to Grotowski’s vision. In a modern world with escalating technologies and an expanding movie and television industry, the place of theatre was (and is?) in question. One approach, adopted by the epic theatre amongst others, was to introduce these new devices and effects onto the stage, co-opting them in the name of live performance; Grotowski assumed an opposing position:

The theatre must recognize its own limitations. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique. Thus we are left with a ‘holy’ actor in a poor theatre. (41)

The essence of the theatrical exchange, for him, was the embodied communication between the actor and audience; scenic elements could be created merely by the skill of the actor’s craft and the willingness of the audience’s imagination. This is Grotowski’s theatrical magic: “Everything needed for the production is there in the performance space throughout, objects are transformed simply by the actor’s use of them” (Frost and Yarrow 85).

Artistic parallels to this valuing of the inherent richness of essentially empty space abound. Indian theatre practitioner and activist, Safdar Hashmi, supports Grotowski’s stance. “Let us be very clear on this,” he writes, “[t]heatre cannot be dependent on the frills and trappings which surround it. Drama is born with force and beauty in any empty space whether square, rectangular or circular. The play comes alive whether the spectators are on one or all sides, in darkness or in light” (34). With his company, Janam, Hashmi pursued the development of a street aesthetic that reflected this belief and was in keeping with the ruggedness of its venue. Jonathan Fox notes that non-scripted theatre in general, tends toward Grotowski’s ideal. Summarizing this genre’s constituent elements he lists: “preferring a theatre of action and the senses over a theatre of words; creating
collectively; seeking an intimate involvement with audiences; and choosing to be
‘poor’—i.e., performing with a minimum of cost and technological sophistication” (Acts, 67). According to Smith and Dean, the dance tradition contact improvisation is also
linked to the ‘poor theatre’ ideal, incorporating bare performance spaces, an absence of
props and embracing the stance that “an actor is nothing but one ‘who works in public
with his body’” (124).

Once again, the motivations for such a philosophy of material minimalism are not
identical. Economic factors continue to exert considerable influence in situations where
performers are amateurs, of meager means, or itinerant in nature and must be able to
transport their theatrical wares, in some instances, by foot. Edgar Snow’s observation of
a Chinese Red Theater group’s performance in the 1930s was undoubtedly of a troupe
with such extremely limited financial means, providing perhaps the most profound
embodiment of a poor theatre. Yet, as he noted (though somewhat condescendingly),

What surprised me about these dramatic ‘clubs’ was that, equipped with so
little, they were able to meet a genuine social need. They had the scantest
properties and costumes, yet with these primitive materials they managed
to produce the authentic illusion of drama. (29)

People’s theatres, when the people themselves have limited resources, are bound to
reflect this fact in their work, deliberately or not, for as Fox concludes, “Nonscripted
theatre will always be somewhat rough-hewn; a theatre of service will always be pulled
down by the grubby realities of everyday life” (Acts, 214).

For Boal, a poor theatre is an aesthetic choice and is represented in his concept of
a “joker scenography,” a mode of performance that exhibits an unmistakable affinity with
Brecht’s principle of estrangement. In Legislative Theatre, Boal defines the style:
The function of ‘joker scenography’ is also to allow the audience to see and not merely look. If they look at an actual telephone on stage, they won’t see a telephone; but if they can see an object (larger or smaller, or different colour or texture from a ‘genuine’ phone) representing the absent phone, then they will see the absent phone. Things which are as they are are not seen; we only see absences. (76)

A poor aesthetic in Boal’s view, then, allows the audience to experience the represented reality in an enhanced manner, encouraging an analytical stance or, at the very least, enabling common objects and ideas to be seen in a new light. Set elements, to this end, must be given “an ‘aestheticising’ treatment; they should not, cannot, look like objects we would encounter in daily life” (ibid. 75). This may be accomplished by simple means: “Often it is enough to stick some coloured paint on objects for them to be ‘joker scenography’ – that is, scenography which simultaneously reveals the origin of the object and its present usage” (ibid. 76). The aesthetic importance of this practice is clear, but Boal also hints at an ethical dimension. As his improvisational performances are often held within oppressed and beleaguered communities, as is particularly the case with his work in his native South America, he acknowledges an artistic responsibility in selecting the means of production. “[W]e are working with poor communities,” he writes, “our shows should neither seem nor feel expensive. All the set materials must be made out of recycled or re-used objects” (ibid. 75).

The Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), an extremely successful organization that has been largely responsible for the proliferation of community-based theatre in Asia, is more explicit in its ethical motivations for assuming a policy of poor theatre. Founded in 1967 as the result of an M.A. thesis hypothesizing such an institution by Cecilia Reyes Guidote, the company’s work initially consisted of adaptations and translations of Western plays (Van Erven Playful, 33). From the mid 1970s onwards,
PETA developed a more indigenous voice, and created a resilient workshop structure that through schooled leadership enabled communities to collaboratively engage in the process of making art. Brenda Fajardo, the company’s chief designer, has described the resulting performance strategy as an “Aesthetic of Poverty.” She explains: “How can an artist claim to be socially responsible when he mounts high-cost productions during times of deprivation?” (ibid. 37). Fajardo explicates PETA’s position further:

What is initially a by-product of material poverty becomes an expression which results from [the artist’s] sensitivity to the world around him. The artist begins deliberately to choose particular nuances and tones of color and texture that would express the qualities that he perceives around him—economic deprivation, cultural pollution, senseless violence. He evolves a new art which is authentic because it expresses life which happens to be poor; thus ‘the aesthetics of poverty’ . . . implies that there is a sense of beauty which belongs to people who live in a condition of material deprivation. (Ibid. 38)

Under Fajardo’s practices, artistic and ethical goals culminate in a mutually reinforcing theatrical approach: PETA’s aesthetic consequently embodies a respectful empathy with its intended audience and actively pursues a form of expression that attains a developed sensibility without abandoning an equally attuned humanitarian responsibility.

To reiterate, then, while many improvisational practitioners adopt a “poor theatre” approach to their art and use of space, they do so with varying motives: Grotowski’s findings were largely based on a search for returning theatre to its essential qualities, itinerant or amateur performers may have no viable economic alternative, Boal arrives at a similar end in search of an alienating aesthetic, and the Philippine Educational Theater Association does so in an effort to adopt an ethical performance stance.

Improvisation does exist on the other end of the production spectrum. In addition to the practitioners who have sought a more overtly realistic theatrical treatment,
mentioned above, there are several other “rich” movements that deserve mention here in order to maintain a balanced view of how improvisational practices manipulate the physical elements of performance. Carlo Gozzi’s *fiabe*, that incorporated improvisation specifically in the lower-class characters, were lavishly ornate in their staging practices, reflecting the 18th century tastes of the day.\(^{23}\) The more successful and renowned Commedia dell’Arte troupes, in general, became increasingly opulent in their theatrical accoutrement as their means and reputations soared. Also, European courtly entertainments of the medieval period were staged as displays of conspicuous consumption. Elements of regal festivities were undoubtedly improvisational in nature. Vince writes of these 14th century entertainments:

> Because different planners organized each aspect of the festival, and because of the unorganizable contributions of wandering entertainers, the resulting festivity would all too often present an eclectic character. Increasingly, though, regulation of the course of events for reasons of protocol, diplomatic policy, or artistic effect, could lead to the production of a series of interlinked performances. This kind of multiple entertainment should perhaps be seen as the most complex dramatic achievement of the later medieval courts. (*Companion*, 80)

Until the rise of the unifying designer/director, spontaneity and adaptability on the part of the amassed players were, in all likelihood, prized qualities and coexisted with a flamboyant and luxurious production ethic. Gradually this free-spirited impetus was transformed into the *Masque*, a highly designed event in which spontaneous elements were probably all-but vanquished.

There are several examples, then, of improvisation enjoying considerable material means, though the unpredictability and subsequent danger of spontaneity can eventually become problematic with sponsoring institutions privileging control, consistency, or

\(^{23}\) The political agenda behind Gozzi’s ornate theatricality as a reactionary response to the innovations of fellow Venetian Carlo Goldoni is examined in Chapter Six.
commercial viability. History attests that these “rich” relationships eventually become reinvented, strained or broken. Thus the unbridled mumming, disguising or masquerade becomes the choreographed masque, the popular and satirical commedia becomes the scripted comedy of Carlo Goldoni, and the unpredictable scenarios of the Compass becomes the slick produced and reproducible sketch-comedy revues of Second City. As improvisational traditions diverge from a transformative “poor” model, almost without exception, the true level of creation-in-performance tends to decline as the negative economic or institutional repercussions of artistic inconsistency or failure become increasingly severe. The comparative fixedness of “rich” modes does not afford the same semiotic fluidity that improvisation relishes.

Negotiating the Great Divide: The Spatial Boundaries of Performance

With an appreciation of how space is selected, the transformation of that space is enabled, and the dominant means of production are chosen, this consideration of the spatial elements of improvisation continues with an evaluation of the way in which the performance space is used. The specific nature of the player-spectator relationship (and the blurring of these roles) is the subject of a later chapter, and so will not be dealt with at length here. However, the manner in which these theatrical participants physically negotiate the performance locale assists in the understanding of improvisation’s chronotopicity; spontaneous theatre is not only defined by its use of space, but by the ways in which it characteristically shares the space. To facilitate a nuanced understanding of this trend, spatial considerations to be articulated include the physical limits of performance, tendencies to continuously or sporadically break the “fourth wall,”
incorporation of the whole site and its defining features, and the culminating pursuit of informality in audience/performer exchanges.

Schechner’s “Six Axioms” have already been noted in terms of improvisation’s selection of space, but also provide insight as to how these spaces are defined and shared by the participants. His second axiom of environmental theatre stating, “All the space is used for the performance” [All caps in original] (Environmental, xxviii) expresses a common attitude towards the performance locale. Often the boundaries of the selected space are fluid and constantly in flux. A predominate image of outdoor acts, where the outer limits of performance is especially indeterminate, is that of the circle drawn in the proverbial dirt/sand or formed by the amassed observers. Joel Adedeji describes the Apidan or Alarinjo (traditional Yoruba traveling theatre) in just these terms: “No raised platform was necessary for any of these performances. An open space was all that was needed. A ‘circle’ was always formed by the spectators as they assembled around the open space (arena) to watch the show” (“Alarinjo,” 237) Cf. (Byam 232).

Vince considers this human threshold to be a common staging element of folk drama, a genre marked by the seasonal or ritual performances of amateurs in non-realistic hero combat, sword dance or wooing plays (Companion, 126). In this tradition, the stage is often simply defined by the call to “make room,” suggesting a highly provisional arrangement between player and spectator. This spatial give and take continues through the playing itself:

The line between playing space and viewing space is not strict, and performers wait on the sidelines, possibly amid standing members of the audience, until their turn to enter the play. At the end of the play, the audience may join in the performers’ dance, or the performers may join the audience in eating and drinking. (Ibid. 129)
As Vince notes, the blurring of “stage” boundaries is potentially accompanied by the equal blurring of the participants’ roles, with the event itself culminating in the entirety of the space being used indiscriminately by both parties.

Shamanistic traditions, in which representatives of the community undergo performative transformations in an act of service and focused efficacy for those gathered, share the porous relationship of the folk drama. While Western performance has been marked by the increasing separation and isolation of the spectator – moving from the crowded streets, to the controlled courtyards, private theatre booth, movie theatre and finally, private living room couch or computer terminal – shamanistic traditions retain a vigorous publicness, as it is from this communal sharing of space that they gain their power. Frost and Yarrow describe the shaman’s “theatre” as follows:

The shaman’s space is not enclosed. His theatre is the space around him, and his stage is his own body. The limits of that space are defined, as in all open-air performances, by the backs of the furthest attenders. There is an invisible boundary line behind the person furthest away from the performer who is still paying attention to him […] The onlookers, sharers in the event, will crowd together around him, supplying him with the energy of their concentration and belief, and rhythmically reinforcing his act of transformation. (170)

The shaman’s “invisible boundary” necessitates that those present assist in both the definition of the space and also of the performance itself. In a very real sense, sensually, dramatically and psychologically, the entirety of the venue is instrumental in the effectiveness of the event. All of the space is actively engaged. The Apidan troupes, mentioned above, serve as a continuing contemporary example, although a changing cultural landscape has slowly corroded the potency of the shamanistic elements of
performance as has been the case with many increasingly marginalized indigenous forms.24

Folk and shamanistic performances in open environments do not typically have to contend with inherited theatrical structures imposing only partial utilization of the available space. In Western contexts, where stage performance dominates (even in street and adapted locales) in order for improvisation to utilize the entire venue it must contend with a stage/auditorium dichotomy, whether the space is truncated by an actual proscenium, or by an inherited and pervasive audience expectation. Some practitioners have explored custom-built stages to allow a more open exchange: Moreno is credited with designing one of the first theatres in the round in order to create a more socially inclusive experience (see Blatner Foundations, 17). “The open stage,” he declares, “goes hand in hand with the open [spontaneous] play” (Moreno Theatre, 99). And yet, typically even conventional theatre spaces with architecturally delineated areas of performance and reception redefine themselves in the improvisational endeavor. Few players allow the performance to remain exclusively behind the fourth wall.

Examples of physically breaking the fourth wall can be seen in the most rigorously structured improvisational projects, even if such instances are sporadic or highly programmed into the overall shape of the show. (A consideration of metaphoric breaches has been included above.) Rupert Holme’s The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1985) is a tongue-in-cheek musical rendition of the incomplete Dickensian novel, rife with a “rambunctious, vaudevillian spirit” (Rich “Edwin,” C21), that weaves together scripted (and composed) elements with an improvisational edge. Considerable audience interplay abounds throughout and climaxes with an elaborate system of vote taking to determine

24 Apidan Theatre serves as a focused example of Chapter Six.
the identities of Drood’s murderer, the detective Dick Datchery, and an (often) oddball combination of lovers to cap off the evening. The performances open with cast members, posing as Victorian actors of the Music Hall Royale, mingling in the auditorium, soliciting votes, sharing company gossip, and engaging in impromptu repartee. As the scripted and musical elements become dominant, action returns primarily to the stage. However, improvised banter continues throughout, chiefly instigated by the show’s Chairman (played by George Rose in the New York opening), who continues the inclusive convention as he variously encourages, bullies and cajoles the audience in true music hall fashion (Fein “Refitting,” C4). As the show culminates, pausing abruptly mid-song to acknowledge the supposed moment of Dickens’ untimely death, players return to the house once more as the audience is allowed to share suspicions and ultimately vote on the play’s outcome. As the play unfolds, then, focus moves continually from the stage to the auditorium and back again, creating an atmosphere of participation and playfulness.

Other scripted/improvisational crossbreeds, such as Shear Madness, Flanagan’s Wake and Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding, pursue similar strategies to include the entire theatre (or in Tony’s case, church and reception hall) in the unfolding performance. The performance space is rarely, if ever, allowed to remain separated into two distinct zones.

Short-form improvisational shows, characterized by their brief (1-5 minute) scenic structures or games that are not connected into a thematic whole, are largely dependent on regularly stepping (if not leaping) through the fourth wall. Viola Spolin is credited with first introducing to America in 1939 the device of soliciting suggestions from the house on which to base scenes, thereby creating “a truly visceral partnership between players and audience” (Stavru). This is now a mainstay of most short-form
practitioners – Comedysportz, London’s Comedy Store Players, Sills & Company, Theatresports – although the latter’s founder now professes that he never imagined that every scene would start in such a fashion (see Johnstone Storytellers, 26 and Foreman and Martini 22).25

Short-form is also spatially embracing for more extended periods as dictated by some of the stock game formats at the disposal of the players. Formats embodying this impetus include Sound Environment, The Expert, Ask the Audience and Audience Story. Sound Environment, for example, involves the players creating a highly physical scene to which the audience adds the “Foley track,” improvising fitting environmental noises for the onstage players (Pierse 136). While the players are still largely responsible for steering the story and shaping the action, the audience can have a very real impact on the outcome; they are very much co-creators in the scene and can, according to their collective whim, assist or hamper a team’s efforts.26 Short-form structures, then, offer the potential of opening the circle of performance for an extended period of time. In addition to specific game requirements, short-form always contains the very real possibility that players may, without notice, chose to endow the audience as a rainforest, play a scene in the house as fellow spectators at a fictional event, or enlist an observer’s

25 Audiences are often warmed up in preparation for this participation, and to this end may be invited to sing the national anthem, perform a Mexican wave, or yell out their middle name. In these moments, the stage truly expands to the back wall of the house as everyone in attendance is invited to become a part of the theatrical action and playfulness.

26 The Expert involves a multi-headed “expert” – formed by team members speaking in alternating words, one word each – tackling (usually somewhat ridiculous) questions garnered from the house (Johnston 257). Further story involvement can be afforded by Ask the Audience (variously Options or Pick-A-Path) in which the action is periodically halted and audience members are invited to provide the next progression, whether it be the identity of a character, the next line of dialogue, or a secret to be revealed (Atkins 101-102). Finally, Audience Story invites a random audience member to narrate their day, resulting in a staged recreation (United Theatresports 14). Variations on this format may add a handle – such as incorporating gibberish, opera or a nightmare scenario – or may even directly place the volunteer him/herself in the stage action.
aid in meeting the needs of a scene. The house is never truly off-limits, and the audience is often seen as an environmental element that is rife with performance possibilities.

Whereas bar-pro exploits its assembled patrons as potential assistants, wherever improv performance takes place, in an open outdoors setting or the confines of an adapted or theatrical hall, it is site specific and subsequently tends to incorporate the surroundings into the event. Smith and Dean characterize this tendency as a complementary manifestation of improvisation: “When artists work with materials as they find them in the environment, rather than deciding to build something specific in a particular place; or when they interact or ‘collaborate’ with the environment; they are improvising” (116). The greater location is often a source of inspiration or opportunity for the improviser, whether this is the surrounding natural elements or the human bodies of the assembled crowd (the latter being, as we have seen, the most important spatial consideration for much intimate bar-pro work.) This relationship reflects an “environmental” sensibility as posited by Schechner, in which “the given elements of a space—its architecture, textural qualities, acoustics, and so on—are to be explored and used, not disguised” (Environmental, xxxiii-xxxiv). This tendency reflects a transformative reciprocity in terms of space: the improviser transforms the space (as noted above) while the space simultaneously transforms the improviser. For some activist/improvisers, this engagement with the location is the event. Through such a lens, “Greenpeace might well lay claim to being the largest and most successful guerrilla theater of all” (Durland 68).

27 The producers of Edwin Drood were struck with this very issue when the show moved from its original outdoors venue at the Delacorte stage to a conventional Broadway house; the spatial relationship of the piece had to be renegotiated considerably – see Lipsius “Edwin,” 13, Rich “Edwin,” C21, and Fein “Refitting,” C4.
Jonathan Fox cites this inclusive attitude towards one’s surroundings as a defining feature of his “Preliterary Drama Paradigm.” This theatrical orientation seeks attunement with the environment, and is “very much in nature rather than apart from it.” He continues, “The actor’s effort was not to surpass nature, nor to ignore it, but to find an intersection with its hidden powers” (*Acts*, 35). Fox views this as a fundamental difference between scripted and improvisational theatre. “Literary theatre leans towards a controlled, constructed environment; nonliterary theatre, towards letting nature in” (ibid. 53). All the manifestations of nature may not be equally welcome: Snow records a group of meandering goats providing unexpected comic relief during the performance of a Chinese Red Army troupe (26), while Conquergood remarks on the occasional dog who wandered across his Thai refugee stage (228). However unanticipated or seemingly obtrusive, improvisation invites the very real potential of such incidents as it does not seek to remove itself neatly from the here and now. Much of its joy comes from its tacit acknowledgment of its immediate surroundings: the noise of the streets, the changes in weather, or the uproarious laughter of a spectator. Scripted closed theatre, particularly in the realist/naturalist tradition, seeks to escape these spatial realities; improvisation, at the very least, winks at them, and more often than not seizes upon them as grist for the creative mill. In this sense it does not claim to control the space outright, but shares it knowingly with the elements and those assembled. Here is the seed for Schechner’s desired end of the accursed “bifurcation of space” (*Environmental*, xxvi).

This porous spatial dynamic results in an encompassing mode of performance that can be best described as informal or playful, a style that returns us to the fundamental principle of Boyd and Spolin in terms of space and presence. An ability to change as the
lived reality dictates, and preference for spilling out into the house, necessitates an atmosphere that would be most unwelcome in the cloisters of high art. Improvisation counters escapist anonymous theatre sobriety with earthy sweating whimsical (often literal) intoxication. It is not unusual for an improvisational event to be compared to a sporting match, and with good reason; the level of audience involvement is typically comparable, as is the festive atmosphere. It is also not coincidental that two of the most widely known variants of short-form bare the word sport in their trademarks: Theatresports and Comedysportz. The former international movement (on which the latter strictly American franchise is firmly based) sought its inspiration directly from the world of live sports. Johnstone recalls of his early career in England:

Theatresports was inspired by pro-wrestling, a family entertainment where Terrible Turks mangled defrocked Priests while mums and dads yelled insults, and grannies staggered forward waving their handbags (years passed before I learned that some of the more berserk grannies were paid stooges). (Storytellers, 1) Cf. (Winn “These Games”)

Drawing from this athletic world of high theatrics, Johnstone craved a different kind of audience engagement. To him, the audiences to be found in the established theatres were “like whipped dogs by comparison, sitting on their hands, wondering if they should like what they’re seeing” (Winn “These Games”). In opposition to this trend, Johnstone’s Loose Moose Company was eventually founded in 1977 with Mel Tonken in Calgary, Canada. “In my theatre,” Johnstone remarks, “as soon as you come in you can smell the popcorn. We don’t want anything cultural going on here. Theatre is highbrow. We’re not!” (Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 25). Seham vividly describes a similar picture of

---

28 In 2001, Comedysportz franchised a youth company in Chorley, Lancashire, thereby extending its scope beyond the continent of North America to a limited degree. This move is atypical. Theatresports, however, has assumed an international profile since its inception.
Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre, perhaps the most aggressively informal of the major improv schools of thought.

The Annoyance carnival leaks off the stage to include the audience, as patrons smoke, drink, and lounge on the theatre’s decrepit sofas and armchairs. The troupe’s symbiotic relationship with its cadre of passionate fans creates another element of carnival, the permeable boundary between performer and spectator. (124)

This carnival spirit can transform even traditional venues. Frank Rich’s review of Edwin Drood observes, “the atmosphere in the theater becomes as merry as that of an unchaperoned auditorium of high-school kids. Such are the additional surprises in the songs prompted by the plebiscite that the company and audience become united, as intended, in the joy of theatrical invention” (“Edwin,” C21).

As the form and power of the carnival serve as the focus of Chapter Six, one final example of improv’s informality will be sufficient here. Madang Theatre of South Korea epitomizes the playfulness and spatial spirit outlined above. The genre’s name literally signifies “open square,” or “meeting place,” the preferred traditional venue of the form. Eugène van Erven describes Madang in The Playful Revolution as an “agitational street theatre based on traditional folk drama and western agitprop” (98). Spatially, it resembles Vince’s description of folk performance in that the lines between player and spectator are continually negotiated. A parallel also exists between Madang and the ideals posited in Schechner’s “Six Axioms:” “[i]t has some resemblance to the dramatic form and treatment of space implied by the term ‘environmental theatre.’” Its basic scenario changes from venue to venue, adapting to the political particulars wherever it is performed” (ibid. 107). Here we see an inclination towards mobility, adaptation and environmental incorporation, all key tenants of the spatial manifestation of improvisation.
Madang exists palpably within its concrete and present world; it is unmistakably engaged in Spolin’s active presence.

The overall aesthetic of Madang is best described in Van Erven’s own words.

The performances are extremely informal. Spectators get totally involved in the show, often encouraging the performers with cries of support. All the characters address the audience directly and spectators talk back without inhibitions. There is a great deal of improvisation. Sometimes, if an actor forgets a line, the narrator-drummer prompts, and the audience laughs. The performers are purposely presented as non-superhuman. They are like the average spectator. (Ibid. 110)

The entirety of the locale is engaged in such a performance; players are not sequestered from spectators; a shared spirit of participation and mutual creativity pervades. The permeability of performance boundaries (another theme that will be more fully addressed later) defines the act, between stage and auditorium, performer and participant, and finally art and life. The frequent blurring of this last binary has made Madang a particularly powerful political vehicle. “[M]any madang performances succeed in getting the audience in such a state of ecstatic frenzy that they are spontaneously transformed from spectators into slogan-chanting political demonstrators,” Van Erven observes. “Many mass demonstrations are therefore initiated by madang performances” (ibid. 98).

Conclusion: The Ideal Space

Hazel Smith and Roger Dean imagine the ideal improvisation performance space in their Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945. They write that the ideal features of this hypothetical venue should include:

flexibility, mutability, multiplicity, and continuity; and all these features should be open to control by the improvisors themselves. They should also be arranged such that there is no necessary division of function
between audience and performer, so that performers can choose the degree of control they permit the audience. (261)

Although each specific performance site will undoubtedly exhibit its own unique combination of these features, the preceding spatial/chronotopic analysis reveals that these qualities are already to be found in good doses in the array of locales surveyed here. Flexibility is seen in the choice of space – the unpredictable street or common, portable trestle-stage or tent, co-opted restaurant or Laundromat, bustling bar or spilling stage – and the way in which players adapt and accommodate the peculiar dynamics of their chosen home. Mutability and multiplicity are witnessed in the typical selection and transformation of “poor” production elements, either mimed or real, and the corresponding semiotic richness, with provisional meanings being made and discarded individually by player and spectator alike as the creative endeavor creativity imbues old materials (and ideas) with new contexts. Continuity reflects the absence of physical boundaries in the improvisational endeavor, its seamless connection to life and the environment from which it draws its muse and energy. Lastly, Smith and Dean speak of the merging of audience and performer, a goal improvisation meets with its breaking of the fourth wall and its active engagement of all those present, in the here and now, in a playful, informal collaboration. For while one can imagine the theoretical perfect performance venue, the chronotopic lens of improvisational theatre provides an ability to view all space as inherently malleable and porous and thereby fit for spontaneous play.
CHAPTER 3

MORENO’S THEATRE OF OPENING NIGHTS: IMPROV IN THE HERE AND NOW

[T]he power of time is a productive and creative power. Everything – from an abstract idea to a piece of rock on the bank of a stream – bears the stamp of time, it is saturated with time, and assumes its form and meaning in time – Bakhtin (quoted in Morson and Emerson 413).

The brain itself is used as the repertoire. The [spontaneous] theatre is a theatre of first nights only. We believe in it. It goes to the bedrock of the real substance of the theatre – Ariadne, Berlin, December 1924 (quoted in Moreno Theatre, 103).

This analysis of improvisational performance continues with a consideration of time. Temporality provides the second inseparable component of Bakhtin’s chronotope and thereby illuminates improv’s generic “way of seeing.” As Bakhtin comments in the opening quote from “The Bildungsroman and Its Significance in the History of Realism,” human experience is inescapably shaped and given meaning by and in time.

Consequently, themes of impermanence, aging and death are oft-recurring motifs in the canon of dramatic literature. Yet, as Bakhtin’s chronotopic examination of the novel reveals, the very concept and artistic depiction of time is not universal or fixed. Each genre adopts a defining stance that manifests and perpetuates various historical notions, such as stasis, progress, fragmentation or distortion: each mode provides an ontological system for seeing and experiencing the world.

Improvisation has a particularly interconnected and multifaceted relationship with time. Whereas fixed texts may seek to capture moments for later recreation, either in the
minds of the reader or the eyes of the viewer, spontaneous theatre exists only in time.

Smith and Dean define the most distilled variant of the form, pure improvisation, as that which “takes place at the intersection of performance and creativity,” and they note that there are two consequences of this orientation. Firstly, the event “takes place within a defined time frame,” and secondly, “it occurs continuously through time, at speed, and does not involve revision” (26): therefore, improv occurs only within a pre-established moment, in which it uncontrollably and irreversibly moves forward. As Janet Coleman, Compass historian, remarks, “There are no ‘what ifs’ in improvisation: the beat goes on” (303). These qualities result in a temporality that Smith and Dean refer to as “improvisatory time,” (27) namely that the performance is in real time: the seconds ticking on a spectator’s wristwatch are completely synonymous with those on the performer’s. Of the spontaneous player’s task, they write: “The improvisor makes a succession of choices in performance which cannot be erased, so everything (s)he does within the performance must be incorporated into the whole. This involves an attentiveness to the present moment, so that creativity is a response to the here and now” (ibid. 26). Improvisation can only exist under these circumstances – inseparably connected and dependent on this place and this (passing) time.

Romanian-born theatre practitioner and later “father of psychodrama” (Dayton 5), Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974) is credited with coining the term “here and now” (Sternberg and Garcia 15), and his early work with the Theatre of Spontaneity in Vienna actively pursued an understanding of the unique opportunities of improvisation’s “nowness.” Carl A. Whitaker writes of Moreno in the preface to a collection of his works: “He almost single-handedly discovered the power and significance of the Here
and Now moment and the spontaneous creative encounter” (viii). Working in Vienna during the early 1920s (notably, three decades before Chicago’s Compass, a group often heralded with bringing improvisation back to the modern theatre) Moreno’s experiments were groundbreaking though steeped in an ancient tradition. Drawing strength from a largely reactionary position, he viewed the spontaneous as a powerful antidote and alternative to “legitimate” theatre. His distinction between the two rests on a specific perception of time and its importance in the performance event. “The contrast between the theatre as we know it and the spontaneity theatre lies in the different treatment of the moment,” he writes.

The former endeavors to present its products before an audience as definite, finished creations; the moment is ignored. The latter attempts to produce the moment itself and, at one stroke, to create as integral parts of it the form and content of the drama. (Theatre, 37)

This stance reiterates my working definition of improvisation as “the simultaneous conception and performance of a work,” (Smith and Dean 3) and highlights Moreno’s fascination with the “now” as a site of creativity.

In addition to scripted theatre’s inattentiveness to the moment and its relative closedness, Moreno views such work as essentially being concerned with any time other than the present:

The dramatic work, at the moment when it was created during the fleeting moments of the past, was not even then a thing of the present because it was not meant for the present. It was directed towards a future moment – the moment of its performance on the stage – and not towards the moment of its creation. A spontaneous performance presents things only as they are at the moment of production. It is not directed towards any past moment nor is it directed towards any future moments. (Moreno Theatre, 37)
Many modern practitioners may take issue with Moreno in terms of improvisation’s ability to impact the future – a potential Moreno himself recognized and exploited as his explorations moved him into the realm of psycho- and sociodrama.¹ Yet the vast majority of improvisers share Moreno’s commitment to and fascination with the present moment. In language that echoes Bakhtin’s concept of chronotopicity, Moreno asserts: “Every thing, form or idea has a place, a locus, which is most adequate and appropriate for it, in which it has the most ideal, the most perfect expression of its meaning […] The legitimate theatre is a theatre as if – out of locus. The true locus of the theatre is the theatre for spontaneity” (ibid. 18). Just as Bakhtin viewed the novel as approaching chronotopic perfection with the historicity of Dostoevsky, Moreno views the theatre as being an art form best served by a doctrine of immediacy and presentness. For while the conventional theatre is “at its best, dedicated to the worship of the dead, of dead events – a sort of resurrection-cult” (ibid. 18), the spontaneous theatre offers the potential of more meaningful living and creative encounters. Scripted theatre, viewed through this criterion of its relationship with time, cannot fully manifest the inherent potential of performance to engage true immediacy, to capture the essence of the now.

Though Moreno’s rhetoric concerning scripted theatre may seem unduly harsh, and it is not the focus of this investigation to diminish the value of such set performance work in an effort to elevate the spontaneous, Moreno’s observations concerning the temporal tendencies of both forms are cogent. The script is invested in a closed and sealed historical moment, and even when contemporary productions may seek to shed a local light on a previously latent sub-textual message, theme or opportunity, these amendments still essentially form part of a hermetic system. The act of creation is in the

¹ These movements are discussed at length in Chapter Five and Six respectively.
past, whether in the age of the author, or the rehearsal process of the production team, and consequently, the abilities to embrace the present are limited, both in terms of the socio-political matrix in which the performance is situated, and the actual moment shared between the walls of the theatre building. The production necessities of the scripted endeavor diminish the viability of true spontaneity and creativity (in performance), the privileged components of Moreno’s work. Therefore, in terms of Moreno’s outlook, such theatre is an act of 

re

creation rather than creation. His vision of theatre, in comparison, is a theatre of continuous opening nights. Each performance is a creative event; each evening offers the potential of truly engaging, and being affected by, the commonly shared present; each moment is an active negotiation of the here and now.

As Moreno asserts, the privileging of present time is clearly an important and constituent element of improvisation: the immediate present is this mode’s source of inspiration, the moment of both its birth and its inevitable death. This unavoidable flirtation with creation and mortality fosters a series of unique temporal attitudes for the improviser and his/her craft. In stark opposition to most commercialized practices that seek art products, consistency, universality and predictability (in many ways, qualities that seek permanence and timelessness), improvisation pursues radically different ends. The theatre of opening nights eschews such efforts at longevity and immortality. Instead, it proposes a view of time in performance that encompasses and embraces immediacy, presence and presentness, creativity, specificity, non-repeatability and impermanency. A detailed examination of these various qualities uncovers the contours of improv’s temporal essence and completes the blueprint for the overall chronotopic tendencies of the improvisational impetus. Contrary to the tradition of scripted theatre, improvisation
will be revealed as essentially concerned with the present moment, embodying the prized qualities of immediacy and unpredictability. Improvisation’s ability to reflect and react to its particular historical/temporal locale is also explored, specifically through the mode of Living Newspaper developed by Boal and Moreno. Furthermore, this contract with the present is examined in terms of Spolin’s “improvisatory time,” and illustrated by the mask work of Keith Johnstone and Jacques Lecoq that seeks to enable the player to access the newness of each improvisational encounter. Finally, the disposability and impermanence of spontaneous performance is viewed in terms of improv’s problematic relationship with the past and future as it escapes accurate documentation and invites cooptation by the very systems it evades.

An Improvised and Unpredictable View of Time

Improvisation has a profound potential in its commitment to the current moment: it is immediate, unpredictable and constantly in flux, allowing ample room for the present to inspire, impact and shape events concurrently on the stage. Most practitioners would agree with Nigel Curtain Smith, of Hobart Theatresports, when he remarks, “What I like about impro is it is very immediate. It can deal with concerns that concern us right now” (Foreman and Martini 110). Few other artistic modes afford such an opportunity.

Bernard Sahlins, of Chicago’s Second City, concurs: “One of the joys of the review form is its immediacy,” he writes. “With a review scene, an idea conceived in the morning can be seen on the stage that night” (44). There are some limitations to Sahlins’ approach. In the Second City-style improv-generated revue show, such material may become at least loosely set before its debut before an audience (and then, if successful, is typically
repeated frequently in later performances): in the free-form theatre of spontaneity, however, this sense of immediacy is magnified in its equally immediate manifestation. Form and content are particularly compatible in such a moment. Both are fluid and dictated by the peculiarities of the here and now; both are willing and able to change at any given moment.

Unpredictability, anathema to the scripted realm, is of necessity integral to the world of improvisation. The continual relentless motion of time, the resulting inability to revise or correct, and the beckoning uncertainties of the unmapped terrain of performance, all hurtle the improviser (and spectator) into the unknown. Del Close, improvising pioneer and co-founder of ImprovOlympic, links this charged state of mutual uncertainty with the image of the sporting match, a common metaphor that embodies much of the impetus of spontaneous play as revealed in the prior chapter. Jeffrey Sweet recalls Close’s description:

In both improvisation and sport, what grips the audience is the fact that the outcome is truly in doubt. The players in both have, through arduous training, developed skills with which to deal with the unpredictable; but these skills cannot tame the unpredictable, they can only give the players a better chance of not being routed by it. And in both, the audience’s enthusiasm is a major part of the experience. (xxxix)

As Close’s observation uncovers, improvisers do not tackle this daunting task unaided. Developed listening skills, teamwork and trust exercises, and a heightened awareness and understanding of scenic construction and dynamics, all assist the player in his/her journey into the unknown. Yet regardless of these tools the unpredictable can be a fearful prospect on any given night. For Johnstone, the ability to bravely face this inevitable fear is the factor that separates the experienced improviser from the novice. He writes,

---

2 The specific structural elements and devices employed in the craft of improvisation that help form and shape the performance event serve as the topic of Chapter Five.
“Brilliant improvisers step willingly into the void of the future: dullards who master this trick are no longer dullards” (*Storytellers*, 82).

While the unpredictability of the moment may incite levels of fear on the part of the performers, it is also largely responsible for the excitement often found in the audience. All those present are acutely aware that there is no guaranteed outcome for the performance or, in script/improv hybrids, there is a tacit knowledge that the path of the journey is highly flexible and contingent upon unexpected turns or events. The resulting risk, this flirtation with theatrical disaster, forms much of the genre’s appeal. Peg Jordan, viewing a Ruth Zaporah dance-improv show comments: “You’re hooked because you don’t know where she’s going or what lies ahead; there is no road map. This performance has never been done before, and will never be repeated. It’s a second-to-second unfolding – just like life, no guarantee, no sure bets” (Jordan “Zap!”).

Improvisation provides no assurances as to consistency or result. Unlike most artistic aesthetics, failure – or at the very least, its looming potential – is accepted and its fearless pursuit lauded. “Failure is inadmissible in a literary-technological society,” Jonathan Fox comments, “but in oral culture—in the world of improvisation, of putting it together in the crucible of the moment—the tangible possibility of failure is what makes success possible. Failure is not the poison but the spice of oral composition” (*Acts*, 96). An acceptance of this risk typically separates oral/spontaneous forms from their scripted relations, for as improvisation has become increasingly connected with commercial product-centered interests, this inherent risk has been viewed as less acceptable. For example, when *From the Second City* performed on Broadway in 1961, producer Max Liebman reportedly disallowed improvisation in front of the critics for fear of its
unpredictable essence (see Sweet xxxi). Preference for the predictable tugs improvisation away from its roots and eventually results in spontaneity’s antithesis: the script.

This variable unfolding of action and in-the-moment discovery form the nucleus of the improvisational encounter, and as Janet Coleman posits, enable a different sort of comedy to emerge from that experienced in the conventional theatre. Writing of the Compass, her words hold true for the form as a whole: “Because the improvisational actor is trained, against his every acculturated impulse, to relax in the moment onstage without knowing what will happen next, the comedy that emanated from improvisational theatre was one of behavior, not jokes” (280). Improv can be viewed as a comedy of collusion: there is an unspoken appreciation by the audience of the unique temporal forces imposed on the player. This shared knowledge and appreciation of the risk results in mutual enjoyment as emerging and unexpected elements are utilized and mastered (or escaped.) In many cases there is also an equally liberating element of recognition – a reveling in watching another surrogate face an unknowable future, a savoring of witnessing familiar awkward situations and the resulting spontaneously discovered tactics employed to overcome them, or a pleasure in observing newly-minted strategies or tendencies that may reveal one’s own private inhibitions or foibles.

Game Show, an off-Broadway production that premiered in 2000, combines script and spontaneity, and exploits the entertainment potential of this “unforeseen” dynamic. The show incorporates scripted behind-the-scene vignettes with real audience-solicited contestants competing in a game show parody with prizes. Performances welcome the utilization of this sense of the unexpected, particularly as the contestants are pulled blindly into the world of the play. The director, Mark Waldrop, speaks to the advantages

---

3 The comedic nature and power of improvisation is considered more fully in Chapter Six.
of this approach: “Involving the audience in theater again is a way to recreate that sense of a story’s unpredictability that conventional theater – where we always seem to know the outcome – has largely lost” (quoted in Lemon AR5). In this production much humor is elicited from the unpremeditated reactions of the contestant audience-members as they are moved through the structure of the show. As is the case with improvisation on all occasions, the illusion of the first time is replaced by the reality of the first time; the recreation of an event is supplanted by the creation of a new experience. This relatively simple distinction can generate a rather different collaborative theatrical environment.

The consequences of embracing fear and the unexpected are not limited to merely expanding the domain of comedy, or breathing new life or freshness into a scripted commercial endeavor. Poststructuralist theorist, Natalie Crohn Schmitt, explores the impact of such an approach to art and life. “In improvisation, actors do not reveal characters or move through predetermined actions, rather, they make choices to get from moment to moment,” she contends. “We are to view the world as something that we make at each moment, as we make ourselves” (118-119). A quiet socio-political power underpins such an approach to theatre and time. Schmitt views improvisation’s perception of the world as being changeable, fluid and provisional. As reflected in the improviser’s enterprise, results are not known in advance, multiple options are continually available, and solutions are always contingent. Contrary to authoritative conceptions of time that seek to perpetuate systems of control and stasis, improvisation exudes an ability and thirst to embody and represent change. This potential is explicit in the very act of performance itself. Representing the counter view, Bakhtin draws a
connection between a doctrine elevating stationary time with authority and rigidity in *Rabelais and His World*.

[O]ld authority and truth pretend to be absolute, to have an extratemporal importance. Therefore, their representative (the agelasts) are gloomily serious. They cannot and do not wish to laugh; they strut majestically, consider their foes the enemies of eternal truth, and threaten them with eternal punishment. They do not see themselves in the mirror of time, do not perceive their own origin, limitations and end; they do not recognize their own ridiculous faces or the comic nature of their pretensions to eternity and immutability. (212-213)

These manifestations of authority fight the passing of time and deny the future. The “agelasts” seek timelessness, as do their modes of art. The theatre of spontaneity, on the other hand, where every performance is simultaneously an opening and closing night, embraces mutability and places itself knowingly and willingly in the rapids of time. Where the “agelasts” gloomily strut and seek eternity, the improviser cheerfully dances in the present (and passing) moment of the here and now, well aware that they are engaged in an act of transience.⁴

**Reflecting Our Time: Specificity, Adaptability and Newspapers**

Improvisation’s explicit relationship with the present brings us to the next temporal quality to be discussed in terms of chronotopicity: the inclination for spontaneous works to be highly specific and situated. The predominant view of time as a variable and generative creative agent, rather than a fixed closed system, encourages and enables a high level of adaptability. This malleability, in turn, promotes a reactive relationship to one’s social and political landscape. Generally, players do not seek to escape from this experienced day-to-day reality under a battle cry of universality or

⁴ The political ramifications of this way of seeing will be developed further in a consideration of improv and Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque in Chapter Six.
textual purity; instead this local milieu becomes a rich source of inspiration for the performance event, much as the physical site may prompt creative discoveries and environmental spatial relationships as discussed in Chapter Two. Just as Schechner believes that a truly environmental performance should seek harmony with its locale, noting, “[a]n environmental theater design should not be blindly imposed on a site” (Environmental, xxxvi), so too should an improvisational performance seek accord with its (socio-political) time. For Alistair Campbell, this shift in the temporal site of theatre distinguishes the spontaneous from its “dead” relative: “Theatre which talks about things that happen to someone else with no active identification with its protagonist is neither theatre nor education. It is mere propaganda” (55). In improv, scripted timelessness is supplanted by spontaneous timeliness.

Examples of “situatedness” run the gamut. In the modern period, short-form and long-form traditions, by their very solicitation of audience suggestions, invite contemporary issues and concerns to emerge that will then serve as the basis for exploration. Depending on the preference of troupe, these “ask-fors” may be either essentially comedic or more psychologically complex. Johnstone, recognizing this potential for diverse content, offers some simple advice to would-be players: “Be knowledgeable about current events” (Storytellers, 369). Truly any current event might be offered from the house. Long-form, in particular, has the ability to tap into the shifting social currents of its audiences, as much of these works, such as ImprovOlympic’s Harold,5 involve riffing on an obtained theme. These explorations are often initiated with onstage “brainstorming” exercises amongst the players, such as the Rant, personal monologues or choral creations

5 This groundbreaking structure is examined in Chapter Five.
(see Halpern et al.). Artistic conditions permitting, unspoken tensions currently at play in the “collective consciousness” of the room can be uncovered. Fox’s Playback Theatre offers similar opportunities in its assortment of unlinked audience-inspired stories that may be either offered, or gain added significance and meaning, in light of current issues. This movement also states in its mission an avowed commitment to presenting these stories within their unique circumstances: “We in Playback Theatre embrace the unfolding of life and the inherent spontaneity of persons & communities within their cultural, social and political contexts” (International Playback).

Traditional modes further support this trend. While some critics have questioned the true spontaneous nature of the Commedia dell’Arte, there are many examples of extraordinary adaptability, especially when one considers the daunting cultural barriers that this international movement must have faced. In the 1589 Diario of Giuseppe Pavoni, acclaimed actress Isabella Andreini is recorded as having accommodated a French princess in her audience with laudable finesse. In Andreini’s mad scene “among other things she began to speak French, and to sing various French ditties, which gave inexpressible pleasure to the Most Serene bride” (quoted in Andrews 192). Duchartre, in his pivotal consideration of the movement, remarks, “The players drew freely upon the life of the day for their material, making use of the customs and frailties of all classes” (18), further suggesting the site-specific adaptability of which we speak. It is little

---

6 Lecoq argues, for example, “in fact it was not improvised at all […] the performances were handed down from father to son in a highly structured fashion” (Lecoq 115). As the movement aged over the centuries, it is highly likely that some spontaneity was lost during performance. Goldoni’s reforms in the mid-seventeenth century were largely fueled by his opinion that the form was becoming so set that audiences could almost speak along with the characters’ lines. See Chapter Six for an in depth analysis of Goldoni’s efforts and those of his theatrical rival, Carlo Gozzi.
wonder that this tradition enjoyed such longevity as it was consistently able to meet the needs of its day, a quality that the equally prodigious Greco-Roman Mime must have shared in order to survive the whims of the Roman Republic and Empire, and the resulting radical fluctuations in the political climate and audience expectations.  

Although the vast majority of spontaneous forms incorporate locality and historicity into performance, this is specifically the raison d’être of Living Newspaper traditions – variously Alive Newspaper, Newspaper Theatre and Dramatized Newspaper – that are examined in some depth here. The notion of providing an embodied representation of current news has recurred throughout the twentieth century. John Casson, in his article, “Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy,” comments that this “global, creative, revolutionary theatre” movement was particularly pervasive between 1919 and 1940 and may be indebted to the experiments of Russian futurists (120). As he uncovers, there is a varying degree of spontaneity in the movement: the work in Austria

7 More rigid improv disciplines and modes also incorporate a heightened sense of context. Renga poetry, an extremely codified Japanese practice, calls for specificity and a reflection of the current mood or the inspiration of the composition in the hokku – the opening verse assigned to the guest poet of honor (Horton 462). Later verses may also make use of elements present during the composition process. In more recent times, Shear Madness, “an audience-participation lampoon full of over-the-top stereotypes and topical references” (Hurwitt 38), provides another example of even a comparatively closed form seeking to ally itself with the local atmosphere. Based on Swiss playwright and psychologist Paul Pörtner’s Scherenschnitt of 1965, an “interplay” designed “to demonstrate how people can misperceive reality,” (Kingston “Perm”) Marilyn Abrams and Bruce Jordan created “a cutting-edge murder mystery” (Hyman “Audiences”). Part of the charm and success of the work, currently the longest-running nonmusical play in American theater, is its interactivity and the local color it assumes in its various manifestations across America (and England, where it has run under the alternate name Scissor Happy.) Co-producer, Jordan, notes, “[t]here’s a lot of topicality, there’s a lot of improvisation. It’s much more a comedy than a mystery,” and that, depending on the venue, “[t]he humor also gets updated to fit what’s in the news” (ibid). So while it incorporates a heavy textual component, the performance is still somewhat fluid and malleable, particularly in the latter sections when audience members shout out questions and decide upon the murderer of Isabel Czerny. The opening portions of the script are not only tailored to its venue, but also leave room for current conditions, with optional spaces for amendments noted in the script, such as “comment on traffic or unusual conditions of the day” (Pörtner 7), dialogue cues to acknowledge the home town “of a large group in the audience” (ibid. 14), and invitations for a “timely reference” perhaps concerning the recent marriage of a celebrity (ibid. 17) [Italics in original]. Later sections, combining a strategy of shuffling pre-written or suggested character responses with truly improvised banter, provide further opportunities for topicality and timeliness.
by Moreno in this field was purely improvisational, whereas America’s Living Newspapers of the Depression Era commissioned by the Federal Theatre Project were entirely scripted affairs. Many companies undoubtedly combined both elements, as was the case with the extremely successful Soviet Blue Blouse troupes, the first of which was founded in 1923 by Boris Yuzhanin, a teacher of journalism. The company toured from his home base in Moscow and wore its defining blue blouse as its basic costume, through which the performers “showed solidarity with the factory workers who wore loose blue smocks” (ibid. 108). Robert Leach describes their work in *Revolutionary Theatre*:

> The style of acting resembled the old troupes of strolling players and was often rooted in improvisation based on character types. Because the news changed day by day the actors often had only time to agree on the form of the sketch before going on stage, and performing in the open air they frequently had to cope with interjections and heckling from the audience. On one occasion an agitator interrupted the performance to announce the defeat of Denikin. The audience burst out cheering and the actors improvised a scene of Denikin dancing, then being chased off by Red Army soldiers. (84)

This style of presentation was so effective that it “spawned innumerable Blue Blouse groups abroad, in England, France, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, China, U.S.A. and Germany” (ibid. 169). Edgar Snow, in fact, reports on an example of such a troupe touring with China’s Red Army in the 1930s (see Snow 29). Other examples of this mode include its incorporation into the work of Chicago’s Compass in 1955 (Sweet xxiv; Coleman 99), and an appearance among South Korean performance troupes as a means of “alternative news coverage” in the 1980s (Van Erven *Playful*, 105). The range and potential of this form can be appreciated more fully through a detailed study of two major practitioners’ work in the field: Augusto Boal’s *Newspaper Theatre* and Jacob Moreno’s Dramatized Newspaper allied with his Theatre of Spontaneity.
Boal’s experimentations with increased historicity began with the development of the “Joker System” at the Arena Theatre of Sao Paula, Brazil between 1968 and 1971. It first surfaced in his production of *Zumbi*, a dramatic metaphor telling of “the Black Republic formed by slaves who freed themselves” (Boal *Hamlet*, 243). This work introduced the Joker who functioned both inside and outside of the performance text and served as “a contemporary and neighbor of the spectator” (Boal *Theatre*, 175). The meta-theatrical figure of the Joker straddled the world of the play, existing within the performance event without suspending knowledge of contemporary issues. Therefore, pertinent political news or oppressions, as were inclined to occur frequently in Boal’s Brazil, could be immediately juxtaposed against the primary text during the course of the production. The treatment of the text itself was also somewhat fluid: “no character would be the private property of any one actor. All had the right to play any character, men in women’s roles and vice versa. Actors were detached from characters, which passed from one actor to another” (*Hamlet*, 241-242). The Joker, however, served a particular pivotal temporal position in his/her role as interrupter of the stage action, and as master of ceremonies, explainer, director of the scene, stage-manager, like the Kabuki’s *kurogo* – he could play any character, when necessary. He explained hidden meanings. The Joker – always the same actor – represented us, Arena. This was the beginning of the dialogue with the audience, which I would later develop fully with the Theatre of the Oppressed. (Ibid. 242)

The “magical, omniscient, polymorphous, and ubiquitous” function of the Joker (*Theatre*, 182) imbued a hitherto unheard of site-specific relevancy to scripted work with the designated purpose of always searching for potential links to this current time and place. The system maximized performance flexibility in order to “assure reflection of the performance in its moment, day, and hour, without being reduced to the hour, the day, or
the moment” (ibid. 185): the Joker, unlike the (all?) scripted characters with their knowledge focused exclusively on the fictive past, “knew about our time and, when in the past, had a consciousness of the future” and was a true “citizen of the here and now” (*Hamlet*, 249).

Though revolutionary in its own sense, the Joker was still somewhat a servant of the pre-written text. While allusions, comparisons and historical connections were emphasized to effect, the true improvisational and satiric power of Boal’s experiments found more compelling form in his work with Newspaper Theatre.8 Whereas the Joker System used an outsider to illuminate the current potentials of an essentially textual, albeit experimental, event, Boal’s Newspaper Theatre endeavored to use journalistic texts as the raw material for performance, uncovering biases, heightening ironies, and debunking state-sponsored myths of objectivity. In tone, it was satiric and irreverent; in spirit, it was radical and pedagogic, striving ultimately to give the tools of the theatre to the people. Other Living Newspapers, particularly when state-run, were often propagandistic or, as in the case of Russia, “used as a form of recruitment, encouraging men to volunteer to go to fight at the Front” (Bradby and McCormick 47). Under Boal’s stewardship, the form pursued empowerment of the populace through raising an understanding of what was often left out of the news. Developed by the Nucleus Group of the Arena Theatre, and gaining its first performance under the title *First Edition* in Santo André (1971), the mode “consists of several simple techniques for transforming daily news items, or any other non-dramatic material, into theatrical performances” (Boal *Theatre*, 143). The material for performance, which as Boal notes above need not be

---

8 Boal’s Joker would soon be similarly freed in Image and Forum Theatre work. These two forms are examined in Chapter Four, while Boal’s modified Joker figure serves as a primary example for Chapter Five.
limited strictly to the popular press, was gathered each morning, rehearsed each afternoon, and subsequently performed each evening (*Hamlet*, 281).

Improvisation was key to the process and eventual performance, and is cited as perhaps “the most commonly used technique” which “can be done from a basic outline or not” (Boal *Legislative*, 243). The performance tools, in general, aimed to reveal certain inherent tendencies and biases of the written medium, and highlighted the importance of context and placement. Boal observes, “the placing of each piece of news [within the newspaper] gives it a very particular weight” (ibid. 235), typically assigned in support of the dominant (ruling) class’s ideology and agendas. He elaborates:

> What is more important: the fate of the Brazilian team in the World Cup or the government’s lack of concern for the fate of millions of peasants dying of hunger in north-east Brazil? The headlines of the papers are plastered with the national team’s goals, rather than with photos of infant mortality, an area in which Brazil leads the world. (Ibid. 235)

Performance techniques recontextualize and alienate such editorial choices, satirically revealing the political agendas hidden within the pages of newsprint. There are many tools that can be employed in this service:9 Crossed Readings involve the recombining of materials in such a way that previously hidden contradictions or distortions are revealed – the report of an elite dinner menu is read against news of infant deaths in San Juan from malnutrition (Boal *Legislative*, 241); Text Out Of Context estranges the text, creating irony through a stark stylistic or parodic choice that allows a reconsideration of the facts presented (Boal *Theatre*, 143); Simple Readings merely remove an article from its placement in the paper to be read aloud with earnestness – a luxurious governmental reception menu is read during times of widespread rationing amongst the common people (*Legislative*, 238). In each theatrical situation, meaning is enriched through an active

---

9 These approaches are summarized in Boal *Theatre*, 143 and Boal *Legislative*, 238-245.
engagement of the generalizing texts with the individualizing and site-specific locales of performance. Contextualization becomes a fierce improvisational weapon for Boal’s arsenal.

It is important to stress that Boal’s approach is also pedagogic on many levels: it teaches that newspapers are political tools, raises awareness and the ability to “‘read’ newspapers correctly” – that is, critically (ibid. 236) – and, perhaps most importantly, provides the very tools for continuing community theatre production. Following Boal’s Santa André experiments, over 30 Newspaper Theatre groups were formed: “We would write our shows and, two hours later, they were ready for the audience. Instantaneous Theatre, lightning quick. Then we helped them to do their own show,” Boal recalls (Hamlet, 282). Here are the germinating seeds of what would become Boal’s greater mission as manifested by the Theatre of the Oppressed arsenal of games, namely, to enable communities to create meaningful and purposeful theatre for themselves, to be involved in the process of production rather than mere bystanders observing its result, and to ennoble the act of theatre in the service of humanity. The Newspaper Theatre allowed communities to use performance to express and explore their own contextualized place and time rather than the newspaper’s often universalized and timeless image of the world propagated with covert and repressive political intentions.

As Daniel Feldhendler examines in his “Augusto Boal and Jacob L. Moreno: Theatre and Therapy,” there are many similarities between the works of our two archetypal Newspaper practitioners. Initially, Moreno’s work contained a considerably more aesthetic component, and included a strong focus leveled more squarely on the reinvigoration of the theatre rather than the empowerment of various dispossessed
communities – though one could argue he originally sought this change within the theatre as opposed to popularizing theatrical tools outside the conventional institution. Moreno’s voiced dissatisfaction, outlined in the opening of this chapter, stemmed from what he felt was a sterility in traditional theatre that was due in no small part to it being confined to scripts (Blatner *Foundations*, 17). Moreno responded with his Viennese *Theatre of Spontaneity*, which sought to bring about “a revolution of the theatre” (Moreno *Theatre*, a). His goals were embodied in four objectives that are provided in his account of the same name, *The Theatre of Spontaneity*:

1. The elimination of the playwright and of the written play.
2. Participation of the audience, to be a ‘theatre without spectators.’ Everyone is a participant, everyone is an actor.
3. The actors and the audience are now the only creators. Everything is improvised, the play, the action, the motive, the words, the encounter and the resolution of the conflicts.
4. The old stage has disappeared, in its place steps the open stage, the space-stage, the open space, the space of life, life itself.

(Moreno *Theatre*, a) Cf. (Feldhendler 90)

Moreno’s agenda reads as a blueprint for the improvisational endeavor: there is no text, an inclusive mode of performance is sought that breaks down divisions between player and spectator, the event is creative rather than reproductive, and environmental and innovative staging practices are sought.

Initially working with children (as did his contemporary Boyd in America), Moreno’s professional theatre premiered in 1922, and featured prominently his Living Newspaper (initially under the title of Dramatized Newspaper):

the group of actors put on spontaneous plays as suggested by the audience, did some public ‘re-enactments’ of daily news using a technique called ‘the Living Newspaper,’ [and] improvised on themes. […] After a few

---

10 As his career continued, particularly in the United States, Moreno’s focus would eventually become almost exclusively therapeutic and community-based, providing precedence for Boal’s later work.
weeks, and good reviews from the press, the theatre really took off.  
(Marineau 72) Cf. (Feldhendler 90)

Moreno’s Theatre of Spontaneity had “the task of serving the moment […] All concrete 
questions exciting the public at the moment, trials or debates in congress may be brought 
before the auditorium of the theatre for spontaneity and re-experienced” (Moreno 
_Theatre_, 77). Utilizing material garnered from the daily newspapers enabled heightened 
relevancy in terms of performance content, and Moreno’s choice of congressional 
examples above indicates the greater socio-political frame of his discovery. Apparently, 
deVICES similar to Boal’s were used in order to examine these current issues and 
suggestions from various perspectives (Sternberg and Garcia 10), although Moreno’s 
WRITINGS on the subject are less codified. The use of such contemporary material afforded 
Moreno another equally important opportunity: it proved the spontaneous nature of the 
event for the audience, a factor that seemed to be of equal importance during his early 
work. Casson comments on this motivating principle, noting: “Central to Moreno’s 
developing ideas was the concept of spontaneity: Moreno explained that the idea of using 
the news of the day as a source for the Theatre of Spontaneity was to counter the 
suspicion of critics who supposed, when the performance was successful, that the pieces 
were rehearsed” (“Living,”110). This position is reiterated in Moreno’s book on the 
movement and states, “The dramatized newspaper has another asset from the point of 
view of an art of the moment: the absolute evidence of true spontaneity it has for the 
onlookers” (_Theatre_, 38). In this manner, the device of the newspaper was at least 
partially introduced as a means of testing and proving the virtuosity of the player, a 
theatrical privileging of the performer and performance that differentiates it from Boal’s 
similar work nearly fifty-years later.
Nonetheless, the incorporation of the here and now, the standard mode of operation for Moreno’s theatre, was not without its greater social impact, and it would be inaccurate to characterize this device as purely being in the service of proving creative originality and true spontaneity. “The theatre for spontaneity, being freed from the clichés of form and content, can organize its repertory in agreement with the audience which it faces,” he writes. “The theatre will again be able to stir men up to heroic deeds” (ibid. 77). For Moreno, this radical new changeable form contains an equally radical social potential, its connection to the present moment providing a particularly inspiring power. Furthermore, such performance reintroduces an “old-new” mission to the “poet-dramatist,” namely “the immediate contact with the people” (ibid. 80). A strong element of service and social obligation informs such a stance, particularly when one notes that these people are not any collection of people for Moreno:

The audience theatre is a community theatre. It is the community from which the dramas spring and the actors producing them, and again it is not any community, a community in abstracto, but our village and neighborhood, the house in which we live. The actors are not any people, people in abstracto, but our people, our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors… (Ibid. 28)

Here we see Moreno’s unambiguous desire to find sincere, personalized, present communication within his theatre. This quest for true interpersonal connection in “improvisatory time” would also later lead Moreno to pursue advances in the fields of socio- and psychodrama, in which theatre and therapy coexist in the service of group cohesion and (inter)personal development.11

11 Moreno attributes the discovery of this untapped therapeutic potential to a particular encounter with an actress, Barbara, during a performance of the Theatre of Spontaneity in which assigned role-playing within the show was used to help facilitate offstage interpersonal problems (see Moreno Psychodrama, 5 and Fox Essential, 210-212 for accounts of the complete story.)
Despite minor differences in terms of the initial overriding motives behind their Newspaper Theatre work, both Moreno and Boal developed a similar sense of value for this theatre of opening nights. Both practitioners perceived a potential in embracing the specificities of the here and now as a creative endeavor, and understood the social and personal growth that could be accomplished through such a mode. Boal explored the value in sharing the tools and vision of theatre making with the community at large, thereby enabling an active process of investigation and recontextualization of the news as it was provided to them. In this manner, Boal redrew how communities could view and portray themselves against the dominant news coverage, valuing the experienced here and now of those assembled as equally (if not more) newsworthy. Moreno tapped the social power of this new spontaneous theatre for its enhanced and meaningful interaction, and went on to explore the gifts of performance in the realm of psychotherapy and role-playing. Subsequently, the source of material gradually shifted from the stories of the papers to the stories of the players, an approach continued by his wife, Zerka, and related practices such as Playback Theatre. Clearly, the importance of a specific context is strongly evident in the work of both Boal and Moreno and informs their mutual efforts to individualize and situate the performance event to increasing degrees throughout their respective careers.

Newspaper Theatre tends to serve local communities, but its greatest improvisational strength, namely the adaptability to give increased attention to host locales and pertinent historical pressures, has also enabled several other spontaneous movements to assume international profiles. As noted above, this is a particular asset of the Commedia dell’Arte, which flourished from the sixteenth century onwards. Smith
and Dean comment, “Improvising enabled the commedia to accommodate a wide range of entertainers including buffoons, tumblers and dancers. It was also a way of adapting to different dialects in different places: this would have been virtually impossible through scripted drama” (11). This malleability has led to numerous historians privileging the physical components of the movement over the verbal, such as Michael Anderson in “The Law of Writ and the Liberty,” a position that may have inadvertently minimized the contributions of the verbally-based characters, such as the Lovers, an issue that will be taken up here at a later point. Certainly, however, this fluid form did take on the characteristics and needs of its host nations, but while physical elements undoubtedly contributed widely in these “translations,” one must not underestimate the communicative value of verbal, emotional and attitudinal signs that are capable of transmitting, perhaps ambiguously at times, beyond language barriers.

Two modern improvisational practices serve as fitting additional examples of international adaptability, displaying an ability to respond to and capture the historical/temporal influences of their host cultures. Theatresports is played across the globe and takes on slightly different forms to represent the specific cultural/social needs of its setting. Kathleen Foreman notes in her oral history of the genre that it is “intriguing that theatresports reflects where it is. It becomes a […] mirror of the culture, or the microculture, that it settles in” (Foreman and Martini 205). In Australasia, for example, the form adopted a rather different guise than its North American inspiration. Lyn Pierse recalls the early years of Theatresports Down Under, and observes that while North American franchises were on the whole small, amateur-driven affairs, the Australian strain of the movement began with a comparative bang, using professional and well-
known players performing in relatively major venues (12). In this variation, strict time categories were formed to group the various games into one, two and four-minute rounds, a timekeeper, compère and musician were incorporated, as were teams with strong identities and captains, and eventually Mintie scrambles (mint taffy candy throw-outs into the audience) and anthem singing became prominent features (Pierse 5; Foreman and Martini 100). Consequently, the shows took on a local flavor (literally, in terms of the Minties) and reflected the social surroundings. In Australia and New Zealand, Theatresports inexplicably struck a cultural nerve during its inception in the 1980s. Pierse comments, “Overseas Theatresports players marvel at audiences of more than 1000 at the New Zealand National Finals in Christchurch, and 2000 at grand final performances in Melbourne and Sydney, and at the size and popularity of the Down Under Theatresports in Education program” (15-16). Theatresports’ innate ability to respond to a newly situated here and now was largely responsible for this successful relocation.

Playback Theatre offers a second modern example of improvisation’s ability to adapt internationally. Casson compares it to the Living Newspaper tradition: “Fox’s Playback Theatre is the current theatre form—which has now spread around the world—that comes closest to Moreno’s idea of spontaneous theatre: a dramatized newspaper for the people’s stories” (“Living,” 121). Fox’s indebtedness to Moreno on many levels is clear: in addition to gaining inspiration and intellectual resources from Moreno’s therapeutic theatre work, Fox also edited a collection of his mentor’s writings and received financial support for the first year’s rent of his original rehearsal space from Moreno’s widow, Zerka (see Salas Improvising, 10). In 1980, members of the original
company conducted workshops in Australia and New Zealand – a moment that original company member, Jo Salas, considered as a major turning point: “For the first time, Playback was more than our own group” (ibid. 13). Since this initial excursion, Playback has assumed an international profile and has adapted with relative ease to numerous settings. Fox theorizes as to the reasons behind Playback’s ability to adjust: “Playback’s grounding in ritual is perhaps a reason why it can flourish in many different cultures, with different artistic and social traditions” (Fox and Dauber 129). This considerable adaptability also affords Playback the capacity to engage truly timely issues as they emerge in the sociopolitical landscape.  

Problems can arise, however, as representatives move from locality to locality and may suggest some limitations when outsiders (in particular) seek to tell the stories of insiders. Salas notes just such an occasion in Australia when a story enactment session was conducted that was replete with, what at first seemed to be, trivial animal imagery (Improvising, 26). She concludes, “Stories are inseparable from the context of their telling: and the contextual details are as significant as those of the stories themselves” (ibid. 25). Salas indicates the valuable insights and significance of context, knowledge of the here and now, but also highlights the resulting burden of responsibility for acquiring such knowledge placed on a facilitating player who does not share the inherited

---

12 Salas writes of such instances where the immediacy and receptiveness of Playback permitted timely encounters, such as with “land miners and Aboriginals in Western Australia,” at the “Fourth United Nations Women’s Conference in Beijing”, “in Israel with immigrants from the Middle East trying to find their place in their new homeland,” and “with gang members in inner-city United States” (Improvising, Preface).

13 Obviously there is no guarantee that an insider will necessarily represent a specific time and place with greater sensitivity, artistry or purity of motive. Yet, as current ethnographic approaches recognize, there are unique complexities concerning representation when stemming from those who have observed rather than experienced a cultural matrix (see Emerson et al. 1-11).
experiences of the group. The ability of improvisational forms to adapt, and their resulting tendency towards cultural specificity, does not in and of itself guarantee that the subsequent performances will reflect a nuanced understanding of the host culture. In other words, the defining potential for reflecting this time and place is not always fully realized. The resulting responsibility is, in fact, a common concern of numerous Community-Based theatre practices, such as PETA, whose methodology employs a policy of “exposure” to host cultures so as to avoid generalizing assumptions (see Van Erven Community, 21).

An Act With Presence/Presentness: Masks, Clowns and Players of the Moment

Acknowledging the lessons and experiences of the past and squarely facing the unknown of the future, the improviser must form a contract with the present, for it is in this temporality that his/her art resides. “In pure ‘impro’ there is no past, only the immediacy of the present. There is only action, not re-enactment” (Frost and Yarrow 114). For Spolin, this notion is expressed as present time, and it is in this state that one may access personal insight. “In present time a path is opened to your intuition, closing the gap between thinking and doing, allowing you, the real you, your natural self, to emerge and experience directly and act freely, present to the moment you are present to” (Lone Actor, xiii). Paul Sills reiterates his mother’s teachings and terminology, “One must enter present time to encounter one’s real, natural self” (“Foreword,” x), and elaborates on this desirous state of being. Quoting Spolin he offers:

14 The various manifestations and techniques of leadership explored in the improvisational endeavor, including those employed in Playback Theatre, receive further consideration in Chapter Five.
15 This is also a common ethnographic tactic. Lindlof writes: “the success of observing depends on what the observer learns through participation” (Lindlof 135).
Do not think of present time as clock time but rather as a timeless moment, when all are mutually engaged in experiencing and experience, the outcome of which is yet unknown. You’re right there; you’re connected and / you don’t know what’s going to happen and that’s where the spontaneity is, and that’s where the joy is, and that’s where the happiness is and that’s the everlasting, the never-ending spiral. (Ibid. x-xi) Cf. (Spolin *Rehearsal*, 3)

This temporal locale, the source of spontaneity and joy, is not the domain of the player alone. Ideally, Sills posits, the aforementioned mutual engagement can and should include the audience in this state of presence. “When it [improvisation] works, it seems to be a very liberating experience for an audience […] It brings them into moments of actual present time; there’s a coincidence of events, and they’re present.” (Bennetts 1).

In this view, the players and audience are connected in common time. Coupled with the prior chapter’s discussion of how a common space is shared between all those in attendance, the mutually reinforcing interconnectedness of this chronotopic site is emphasized. Both time and space actively seek to unite the players and spectators.

Bakhtin explores the topic of presence in his treatment of the novel (our model genre) and develops the notion of “presentness,” a term roughly synonymous with Spolin’s use of present time. Elite art forms such as the epic provide Bakhtin’s oppositional model of time: “the world of high literature in the classical period was a world projected into the past, on to the distanced plane of memory, but not into a real, relative past tied to the present by uninterrupted temporal transitions” (Bakhtin “Epic,” 19). The ideological repercussions of this view were significant; authoritative “truths” took much of their weight and force from “a distanced and distant image” (ibid. 20) sealed in this closed, unquestionable and unknowable “time.” The popular mask and the rise of the modern novel embody the counter temporality. Of the tradition of masked
players, the Atellan Maccus, Italian Pulcinello, and Italianate French Harlequin, Bakhtin writes, “[t]hese are heroes of free improvisation and not heroes of tradition, heroes of a life process that is imperishable and forever renewing itself, forever contemporary – these are not heroes of an absolute past” (ibid. 36). These players do not employ their skills in the service of an ancient and timeless past (though they may have inherited traditions or material from these periods); rather, they are servants of the present, dedicated to the specific time and place in which they perform. This perception of time is extremely significant for Bakhtin and is central in his notion of “novelness,” the unique artistic characteristics that have elevated the novel in his eyes to chronotopic eminence. He observes, “[t]he present, in its all openendedness, taken as a starting point and center for artistic and ideological orientation, is an enormous revolution in the creative consciousness of man” (ibid. 38). Improvisation clearly shares this spirit, reflecting its literal embodiment of Bakhtin’s preferred literary genre.

The masked players to which Bakhtin refers offer an interesting example of temporal tendencies, being situated in an ancient tradition while also serving a contemporary end. The site of the mask player, simultaneous ambassador of the past and present, embodies a particularly rich illustration of improvisation’s temporality, and so is considered here in depth. Anthropologist Harry Shapiro comments on the longevity of the mask tradition, noting it as “among the oldest items in our present culture” and tracing its origins as “far back as the Upper Paleolithic Era, perhaps 50,000 years ago” (26). Elizabeth Tonkin observes that the appearance of masks has been equally diverse geographically, appearing in one form or another on all the world’s continents (225). And while European cultures have often demonized and suppressed its appearance and
potentials, particularly in the name of religion, Tonkin also hints at the mask’s inextricable link with human culture and identity even in less “mask-friendly” societies, noting “[t]he English words person and persona derive from persona, the Latin word for ‘mask’” (ibid. 225).

In the West, there has been particular hostility to mask “trance states” corresponding to an elevation of the intellect over spontaneity (Johnstone Theatre, 149). Regardless of this perception, the mask has often been linked closely to the dominant theatre traditions. In fact, one could make a case as John Bell does that in Western theatre, “the great moments of theatrical renaissance are initiated with a return to the mask” (“Rediscovering,” 180): he cites the Ancient Greek’s tradition of masked performance, the rise of the commedia during the Renaissance, and the cooption of African and Asian staging traditions in the 1970s as examples of this interconnectedness and indebtedness.

It is a relatively simple task to outline the importance of masks in the development of humanity as a social animal, and in terms of time, one can clearly acknowledge their longevity and ancient origins. The way in which masks are used, however, and the purposes and belief systems in which they are situated, are extremely multifarious and defy simple generalizations due to the complexities and nuances of their host cultures. Sears Eldredge provides five major functions of masks that aptly reveal this variety. In brief they are: the mask-as-frame (giving significance to the wearer or represented), mask-as-mirror (suspending actualities and allowing a contingent reality to surface), mask-as-mediator (enabling a transition or co-existence), mask-as-catalyst (stimulating change during times of transition), and mask-as-transformer (allowing a
process of transformation and (re)uniting) (Eldridge 4-5). Reflecting this diversity in purpose, the spatial-temporal features of each function are also somewhat unique. Clearly there is typically a ritualistic component informed by tradition and a (perhaps increasingly challenged) belief in efficacy that unites the participants with those who have engaged in such behavior before, thereby giving meaning to both the past and one’s current place in the flow of time. The very perception of time in some cultures, however, complicates even this generalization. For example, in the Yoruba belief system, “past, present and future are blended and conceived of as a unity, experienced in one and the same moment” (Götrick 114). Götrick notes this same relationship with space, “A body, existing in space […] can be seen as harbouring more than one human consciousness […] The spirit thus exists in several places simultaneously, and one body is a receiver of several spirits simultaneously” (ibid. 114). To speak of presence or presentness in such a cultural paradigm cannot exclude an acknowledgement of simultaneity, the ability to also consider oneself actively in the past and future. Nonetheless, one can appreciate that in such moments the mask ably blurs boundaries, an improvisational impetus in its own right. 

In the last century, the mask has become not only an assimilated feature of conventional performance but also an increasingly common tool in Western modes of actor training and experimental process-based works, and it is in this capacity that we shall consider it here. While masks have been used for the protection of the performer, often literally covering their identity in times of crisis or instability (see Van Erven *Playful*, 46; Schechner “Street,” 197; Barrios 261; Boal *Hamlet*, 268), many practitioners have also recognized the power of the mask to uncover the player’s ingrained artifices

16 This particular inclination towards blurring boundaries serves as a major focus of Chapter Six.
and creative blocks. In her instruction manual, *Mask Characterization*, Libby Appel asserts: “With the mask acting as a ‘permission-giver,’ the actor can do anything, be anyone. He can plumb deep into his resources and tap his soul, imagination, and experiences. By covering, the actor uncovers” (xiv). Frost and Yarrow echo Appel’s sentiment: “a mask *liberates* the actor. The mask suppresses so many facets of the actor’s habitual stage-self in order to liberate other, deeper, creative resources. It suspends the judgmental self” (125). In this manner, the mask can be seen as a device for freeing the player from his/her personal past and the accompanying habits and blocks that prevent artistic growth and creativity. This seemingly contradictory ability of the mask – to variously cover and liberate, connect to the past and open the potential of the present – will be considered further in the representative teachings of Keith Johnstone and Jacques Lecoq.

The career of English-born Keith Johnstone (b.1932-) parallels that of Viola Spolin in its breadth and influence on modern Western improvisation. Although many Americans may be less immediately aware of his work, his theories and practices have influenced (and led to the creation of) major American companies and improvisers, and his impact on the countries of the Commonwealth, in particular, has been considerable. A former director/play-reader for the Royal Court Theatre, member of the trailblazing improvisational Theatre Machine, and Professor Emeritus of the University of Calgary, Johnstone is perhaps best known for his work with the Canadian Loose Moose Company, a theatre which he co-founded in 1977. From this base, Johnstone has developed several spontaneous vehicles. These include: Gorilla Theatre, where players alternate directing

---

Eldredge credits this development of mask improvisation training to Jacques Copeau and his subsequent students – see Eldredge *Mask*, 17.
each other for bananas and the right to take the coveted gorilla home with them; Micetro, a form that pits individuals against each other for audience applause until only one “micetro” remains; and Life Game, a structure that consists of the interviewing and re-telling through improvised action of an audience member’s life. His trademark creation, however, is undoubtedly Theatresports, a model based on the wrestling matches of his youth which sees teams of improvisers competing through the playing of various structured short-form games for scores awarded by a panel of judges (the exact form varies slightly depending on its home nation.) The impact of this latter movement has been truly international, with teams having performed on every continent except Antarctica, in locations as diverse as Brazil, Japan and Zimbabwe, though its greatest following has built across Europe, Australasia and North America. In the latter locale it also provided the template for Richard Chudnow’s Comedysportz.

Similar to Spolin, Johnstone is an advocate of play and process, and proposes an alternative model of learning and education – based in part on his earlier experiments to literally teach in a manner that valued the completely opposite pedagogic strategies of his own educational experiences (see Johnstone Storytellers, xi). Johnstone’s work differs from Spolin’s in that, while physical, it tends to privilege narrative and story building, in addition to status and relationship explorations. While Spolin taps the potentials of space, Johnstone encourages play to unlearn harmful and limiting institutionalized energies, therefore freeing his players to effortlessly follow their immediate impulses, tap their subconscious and trust the subsequently released ideas. Creativity stems more directly from within (and between) the players than from the field of play itself.

Theatresports practitioners, Lynda Belt and Rebecca Stockley emphasize this view of
creativity’s wellspring: “The whole focus in the spontaneity work is to relearn the ability to say and do the first thing that comes into our minds” (81). Johnstone seeks to eradicate each individual’s editor thereby allowing a truly immediate and unfettered reaction to the present moment.

The importance of the mask for Johnstone is highlighted by its prominence in his pioneering work, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979). The mask has a power for Johnstone, an ability to transform and transcend. He writes, “one really feels that the genuine Mask actor is inhabited by a spirit,” (143) alluding to these powers, and “[t]o understand the Mask it’s also necessary to understand the nature of trance itself” (ibid. 144). Johnstone’s view of the mask is predicated on the shamanistic qualities still elevated in many indigenous cultures. He recognizes a peculiar power to the mask, although he acknowledges that this power is meaningless unless believed on the part of the wearer. To this end, players are carefully (perhaps uncharacteristically coercively) instructed. Johnstone creates the correct tone by

assuring them [the students] that the Masks are *not* dangerous, that whatever happens I can handle it, and that all that matters is that they must take off the Mask when I ask them to. The more I reassure them the more jumpy they get, and by the time they come to take a Mask many of them will be trembling. The skill lies in creating the correct balance between interest and anxiety. (Ibid. 165)

Johnstone characterizes this resulting trance-like state as a form of letting go, shedding the trappings of our consistent personality, allowing the “possession” to take place (ibid. 153).18

---

18 Elsewhere, Johnstone acknowledges almost a Platonic “noble lie” that leads players to believe they are merely receptacles for an outside source of creativity, when Johnstone truly holds that this source is of the player him/herself – see Johnstone *Theatre*, 78.
Here we return to the concept of heightened presence and an almost Brechtian rediscovery of the potentials of this immediate moment. Johnstone’s masks, and one could argue his model improvisers, “aren’t ‘pretending’, they actually undergo the experiences” (ibid. 182). The current moment is the mask’s “creative starting point,” to recall Bakhtin’s phraseology. This creative process embodies a “childlike sense of discovery” (ibid. 171): everything is new, freed from its limiting and inherited assumptions of meaning and significance. He explains, “[a] new Mask is like a baby that knows nothing about the world. Everything looks astounding to it, and it has little access to its wearer’s skills. Very often a Mask will have to learn how to sit, or bend down, or how to hold things” (ibid. 168). This reacquired naïveté makes Johnstone’s masked performer the “present” player par excellence. For Johnstone, this playful “presentness” also provides an interesting insight as to the potential reason for the use of masks in the performances of the Commedia dell’Arte. He contends that the use of masks was necessary for the successful protracted interplay and spontaneity of these characters, noting “that Masks improvise for hours, in an effortless way. It’s difficult to ‘act’ a Commedia scenario at any high level of achievement. Masks take to it like ducks to water” (ibid. 181).

Jacques Lecoq (1921-1999) and his highly influential French training school also see the mask as an effective tool for the development and releasing of creativity. His rigorous two-year program begins and ends with mask work, starting with the use of the neutral mask, and culminating with the red nose mask of a very particular type of clown.

---

Frost and Yarrow agree: “masks are childlike by nature – always eager to meet, and learn and do new things [...] So the actors should be childlike (never childish) too, and begin simply by putting them on and seeing what the mask suggests to them” (119).
As is the case with Johnstone and Spolin, sports, games and play figure as key sources of inspiration for Lecoq’s methodology. “I came to theatre by way of sports,” he writes.

I adored running, but it was the pure poetry of athletics which attracted me most: the contraction or elongation of the runners’ shadows thrown by the sun slanting across the stadium when the rhythm of running sets in. This physical poetry had a powerful effect on me. (3)

His philosophy is also reminiscent of Grotowski’s theory of *via negativa*, as is seen in his description of the training system employed at the Parisian International Theater School of Jacques Lecoq (founded in 1956):

> We have to divest the students of some of what they have learned, not in order to diminish their store of knowledge, but to create for them a blank page. In this way they can be awakened to that far-reaching curiosity that is essential if they are to discover the quality of play. (Ibid. 27)

The importance he places on this mode is unequivocal: “A true understanding and knowledge of theatre inevitably requires a profound experience of play” (ibid. 97).

Earlier in the same work he quips that his school’s motto could be, “Be quiet, play, and theatre will be born!” (ibid. 35).

The neutral mask serves as Lecoq’s students’ entry into their theatrical research and discovery. As Frost and Yarrow are quick to observe, neutral in this instance, does not indicate a blankness or passivity, “it is highly charged. The body has a wide range of available resources; neutrality engenders a state in which they are ready to go into play, but not programmed to operate in a predetermined way” (66). The mask enables, as with Johnstone, “a position of primal naïveté, a state of innocent curiosity” (Lecoq 29), and therefore, a heightened sense of presence. Lecoq explains further: “Essentially, the neutral mask opens up the actor to the space around him. It puts him in a state of discovery, of openness, of freedom to receive. It allows him to watch, to hear, to feel, to
touch elementary things with the freshness of beginnings” (ibid. 38). Lecoq’s mask propels its wearer into the here and now, this very moment of being, allowing a renewed sense of experiencing, a reengaged imagination and access to what Frost and Yarrow characterize as a “potent organic knowledge” (117). In Lecoq’s words, echoing a familiar sentiment expressed above, “The neutral mask, in the end, unmask!” (Lecoq 38).

Lecoq’s two-year program ends with the discovery of each individual’s clown, a character embedded in each player’s coming to terms with him/herself. Lecoq’s work with this mask is particularly noteworthy and has impacted the field as a whole: internationally renowned clown, Avner Eisenberg, has said of him, “[h]e has established clowning as one of the cardinal points in the compass of theatrical style” (quoted in Jenkins AR1). For Lecoq, the clown is a revealing figure; this persona “brings out the individual in his singularity. He gives the lie to everybody’s claim to be better than the next person” (Lecoq 149). While Lecoq notes the tradition of clowning duos and trios, the solo clown holds an especially tentative temporal position. This individuated and abandoned figure is a manifestation of the moment, pursuing a unique relationship with the audience and time. “Unlike theatre characters,” Lecoq observes, “the contact the clown has with his public is immediate, he comes to life by playing with the people who are looking at him. It is not possible to be a clown for an audience; you play with your audience” (ibid. 147). Consequently, the successful or skilled Lecoq clown cannot exist in the past, enmeshed in a stock of tricks or collection of comic pranks. “The centre of this work is learning how to be at home on the stage – even when the clown has nothing to fall back on except himself, his audience and what can be created between them in the
moment of performance” (Frost and Yarrow 23). The clown is immediate and adaptive, creating anew based on the demands of the now, always “in a state of reaction and surprise” (Lecoq 146), and serves as an ambassador of the present. This unavoidable unpredictability, incomparable receptiveness, and unparalleled childlike attentiveness to the now lead Frost and Yarrow to declare clowning as “one of the purest forms of improvisation. None of the things the clown does are ever guaranteed” (69).

The mask is a complex icon, but Johnstone and Lecoq reveal that it can be used as an effective means for entering “improvisatory time,” enabling the veiled player to forego past conclusions about his/her world in lieu of an alienated reinvestigation of that world as it presents itself now. Both practitioners have implicitly exploited an irony within the mask’s potential, namely that the artifact or product of the mask may link its occupant to an ancient or ritualized tradition, whereas the process of the mask and its transformational abilities can thrust the player into the present. One can, by no means, state this temporality of masks universally; in fact, Mircea Eliade argues the contrary position, placing the mask in an “ecstatic time, removed from the here and now” (524-525). Yet, in terms of modern improvisational trends, the mask’s potential for concentrating the creative potential of the present moment is unquestionably strong and may suggest the need for an overall reevaluation of how such traditional figures have been considered in terms of temporality.

As the present moment is improvisation’s uniting site of creation and performance, its central appearance in the writings of major practitioners is commonplace. Each tradition, in its own way, encourages the masked or unmasked player to attune him/herself to the opportunities of this very moment, to be truly present
and involved in the here and now. Echoing Jonathan Fox’s alliance of improv with oral modes of performance and composition, Paul Sills posits, “One way of looking at improvisational theater is that it is part of the oral tradition, that it is connected with story-telling, anecdotes, and any form of speaking in the present in front of an audience” (Sweet 21-22). Oral traditions, such as praise and Xhosa poetry, certainly demand this aforementioned ability to exist in present time. Sills’ use of Spolin Games, incorporating stock devices such as slow motion or gibberish randomly into the flow of play, reproduce this quality by encouraging heightened responsiveness on the part of his performers. This course of action is pursued in an effort to avoid an escape into the intellect and its accompanying removal of the action from this very moment (see Stavru). Likewise, Halpern and Close’s philosophy at ImprovOlympic (IO) highlights the importance of keeping one’s focus on the now: “If a player is planning ahead and thinking about the direction he wants the action to go, then he isn’t paying attention to what is going on at the moment” (Halpern et al. 71). This approach likens improv to ping-pong rather than chess: in the former, one must be reactive and immediate; in the latter, one may plan, strategize and separate oneself from “improvisatory time.” “Stay in the moment,” Truth in Comedy reiterates, “What is happening now will be the key to discovery” (ibid. 79).20

Even modalities that involve an element of reproduction, where past events are improvised before an audience, stress the importance of “presentness.” Among Adam Blatner’s list of psychodrama techniques is included the goal to “[d]eal with situations in the past or future as if they were happening in the present moment, the here-and-now”

---

20 Word-at-a-time story exercises provide an excellent example of this doctrine: players must narrate a story – providing one word each in sequence – to form complete thoughts and sentences. Experience attests that any effort to plan ahead or lapses in concentration result in the story collapsing. (See Johnstone Storytellers, 131-34; Halpern et al. 75; Pierse 122-23; Atkins 36; Johnston 193; Belt and Stockley 85.)
In the therapeutic theatre, observations of the actual performance may often be more revealing (and ultimately helpful) than the distanced information contained therein. Boal fosters a similar approach in his Rainbow of Desire techniques, a methodology that has much in common with Moreno’s earlier work. Adrian Jackson summarizes this tool from Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed arsenal:

> When a participant tells a story from their past, we concentrate on their telling and their presentation of that story, here and now, in the present; we observe and comment on what we are witnessing, which we know is happening, not what happened in the past, which we only have one person’s word for. ([Rainbow](#), xxiii)

Furthermore, interactive theatre, which often situates itself in a detailed portrayal of an historical site, also privileges the current reality within this schema, and typically exploits the opportunities afforded by occurrences in the present. These interactions may take the form of audience questions (Plimoth Plantation), identified behaviors/actions (Murder Mysteries) or assumed audience personas (Renaissance Festivals). Each performance becomes enriched by the combination of the set or systemized structure with the peculiarities of this particular audience’s choices and actions. In this manner, the past and present, fixedness and fluidity, coexist.

An important distinction should be made here between similar terminology concerning presence used in the improvisational endeavor and that of the scripted theatre. Frost and Yarrow write of the player and presence in the spontaneous event:

> Acting occurs in the present tense. It is experienced in the moment of its creation, the actual present – the ‘now’ of the performance. That is another reason why we speak of the good actor as having ‘presence’ – his concentrated attention fills the space, and fills the time. (113)

The modern realistic/naturalistic mode of performance, in the tradition of Stanislavsky and his progeny, employs identical metaphors in its pursuit of character and has utilized
improvisation in the rehearsal process, particularly in the form of the etude (see, for example, the comparison made in McKittrick C7). The introduction of unscripted play into this process occurred around 1911, according to Paul Gray, and was initiated by Stanislavsky’s trusted friend and associate Leopold Antonovich Sulerzhitsky (Frost and Yarrow 17). The resulting Method, and variations thereof, while seeking to capture an illusion of the “first time” (presence), has a very different relationship with the moment (present). Coleman defines the use of improv in this scripted context as “only a dissecting tool to find life between the lines in the performance of a written play” (25), and quotes Spolin as retorting, “their work is in the head and mine is in the space […] they were in the past. I believe in present time” (ibid. 31). Moreno, with characteristic bluntness, elaborates on the differences further:

The theatre for Spontaneity has no relation to the so-called Stanislavski method. Improvisation in this method is supplementary to the aim of playing a great Romeo or a great King Lear. The element of spontaneity is here to serve the cultural conserve, to revitalize it. […] He limited the factor of spontaneity to the re-activation of memories loaded with affect. This approach tied improvisation to a past experience instead of the moment […] We realized that we cannot liberate the actor from clichés by improvisation, and then fill him again and again with clichés, the clichés of Romeo, King Lear of Macbeth. (Moreno Theatre, 100-101)

So although one may draw parallels to both scripted and non-scripted traditions which seek to heighten the player’s onstage experience, the desired ends of these techniques are quite distinct. On the one hand, an engagement in the here and now is pursued as a creative act, a process-geared collaborative mode of discovery, while on the other, it is designed to facilitate sustainable recreation ultimately in the service of a director’s (playwright’s/producer’s) vision. Spontaneous theatre personifies presence in this very
moment; scripted theatre seeks an accurate (and seemingly alive) presentation of a moment gone by.

**The Blessings and Curses of Disposability: Improv’s Historical Challenges**

The direct consequence of improvisation’s commitment to complete presence in the now, coupled with its heightened contextuality and site-specific choices, is that it emerges as a highly transient form of theatre. In fact, in many situations, it would seem more accurate to describe it as a *motion* rather than a form. Due to its prevailing emphasis on process – for many practitioners, the process is the only real product *per se* – improvisation is a truly non-repeatable enterprise. With the exception of improv-script hybrids, which gain a certain measure of safety and commercialism in their base texts that enable a somewhat sustainable production, improvisation is unavoidably fleeting. Forms or game structures may provide a certain degree of assistance in sculpting any given performance, but the generated content is unique to the night. Subsequently, improvisation has an extremely limited shelf life. This existence only in the moment of creation is both a blessing and a curse. It adds to the uniqueness of the event, which, for many, is a draw for the mode as a whole. Bay Area Theatresports’ (BATS) former artistic director, Paul Killam, assumes such a position:

> Many people find their jobs isolating. They feel out of control. In improvisational theatre they have a modicum of control over what happens. And there’s excitement because each performance is unique. Audiences feel they’re in on something special that will never happen again. (Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 22)

In Jean Baudrillard’s world of simulacra, where floating images have become increasingly disconnected from any sense of authenticity and origin, the improvisational
event offers relief: those assembled may claim and enjoy authorship of the common experience as they impact the very art product they are consuming.

But non-repeatability can also be a curse, particularly when one considers how improvisation has been viewed by the theatre world in general. Ben Brantley, in his review of Improbable Theatre’s *Life Game*, sympathetically observes a common dilemma: “The show is nearly impossible to review in any conventional way” (Brantley E3). Smith and Dean concur: “there has been a tendency amongst critics and the academic community at large to undervalue these kind of works because, particularly when improvisation takes place in performance, they are non-repeatable, unfixed and transient” (5-6). The difficulties in assessing spontaneous performance have challenged the reviewer and historian alike, and resulted in a certain degree of marginality for the impetus as a whole. Politically, this stance may admittedly afford certain opportunities. There is an ability to comment from outside the dominant structures that may be lost upon being deemed complicit with the very institutions under scrutiny: many companies in the modern period have been reluctant to accept or pursue state funding for this very reason, in addition to an accompanying fear of the necessary compromises that may be expected in their methodology or work ethic. Funding almost always requires tangible results: improv consistently rebuffs finality and is difficult to quantifiably measure. Economically, the repercussions of this intangibility can be harsh. Forms such as Playback Theatre, Community-Based Theatre and therapeutic/theatrical crossovers, often defy simple categorization and may result in lost financial opportunities or considerable hardship for the players involved. While artistically most practitioners would appreciate

21 Jonathan Fox attributes this slighting of non-traditional oral modes to a staunch literary mindedness on the part of most theatre critics – see Fox *Acts*, 197. Elsewhere he observes that this unfavorable attitude has slowly begun to soften in the last decade (Fox and Dauber 120).
greater acknowledgement of the aesthetic value of their works, generally it is the access to consistent resources that is chiefly craved, resources that in most countries are only made available to Art with a capital “A” and not improv quietly serving the little “i’s.”

The unavoidable ephemeral nature of spontaneous theatre has led many artists to underscore the very qualities that alienate the mode from the legitimate theatre. Stressing improvisation as a distinct system of artistic expression, practitioners seek to carve a new performance terrain, emphasizing the temporal qualities of disposability, transience and impermanence. Improvisation does not valorize a view of creativity consisting of refinement and review in search of a perfected product; instead, the fruit of improvisation should be consumed in the moment. Images of disposability are common in the language of the form. Frost and Yarrow note that Johnstone’s Theatre Machine has “thrown-away form, it is disposable theatre, ideas and memories get re-cycled and the best is really best because it comes out of the moment; and sometimes you were just ahead of them” (58).22 This “disposability” is clearly to be viewed as an asset: it “is simply an acceptance and a celebration of the central fact of performance – the ephemeral act or co-creation between actor and spectator ‘in the moment’” (ibid. 58). Johnstone reiterates this position in his later modality, Theatresports. In reference to the technicians and their duty to make their own creative choices, he prods: “‘No one’s complaining about you!’ I say. ‘You’re supposed to make several screw-ups per match. Theatresports is disposable theatre! What does it matter if you damage a few scenes?’” (Storytellers, 63).23 Paul Dooley, of

22 Keith Johnstone, Ben Benison, Roddy Maude-Roxby, Ric Morgan and John Muirhead officially founded Theatre Machine in 1967, although they had previously worked together at the Royal Court Theatre in London (Smith and Dean 212).

23 Earlier in the same work Johnstone identifies another benefit of disposability, noting that the great advantage of the Judge’s ability to honk off a scene in a Theatresports match is “that dead scenes are given a quick burial” (Johnstone Storytellers, 13).
Sills & Company, makes a similar assertion in regards to his Spolin-based work. “In the games, there’s no attempt to polish or perfect anything,” he states. “Once it’s done, it’s off into the ether. This is, in a sense, a lot more original [than Second City-style shows]; there’s a kind of excitement and danger you don’t find in other work” (Bennetts 1).

Numerous other examples support this rejection of the commodification of art. Improvisation does not seek timelessness, as is deemed attainable in the artist’s product, but values the process and its view of time in motion. “The improvisor engages with process and change rather than permanence […] Improvisation is concerned with processes rather than products, it is social rather than solipsistic” (Smith and Dean 25). This overriding temporal philosophy reappears frequently throughout the work of major advocates for the spontaneous form. Representing the American tradition, Boyd asserts, “The essential factor in play is the process of playing. The value of play is in itself, not in acclaim or evaluation, monetary or otherwise, of its outward form” (79): Spolin explicates the stance further, “Our constant concern then is to keep a moving, living reality for ourselves, not to labor compulsively for an end-result. Whenever we meet, whether in workshops or in performance, in that meeting must be the moment of process, the moment of living theater” (Improvisation, 18).

Johnstone similarly advocates removing the stigma of pursuing product from the improv event: “If the process is good, I assume that the end-product will be good,” he remarks (Storytellers, 339). Each performance mode has its own unique potentials: for Johnstone, assuming good process is a worthwhile end in and of itself and stops him from

---

24 Van Erven provides a particularly poetic example of disposability in the South Korean Madang tradition. Following the Binari [drum and dance session], the Pansori-style chant [“rural one-man folk opera”] begins: “The Pansori chants at the beginning of the madang performance list the grievances of the oppressed and their hopes for their future. This list of wishes is written on a parchment scroll, which is burned at the end of the Binari. The ashes rise symbolically to the sky” (Van Erven Playful, 108).
“believing that an improvised scene has ‘quality’ [only] if it resembles a written scene (as though improvisation were just a step on the road to conventional theatre)” (ibid. 339). This process-based system offers new artistic possibilities that are often under-appreciated when viewed through the lens of the scripted practice. Each tradition’s chronotopic matrix is suited to a different end, and yet, as Johnstone observes, the repressive comparison of the forms is pervasive. “People often think of improvisation as like the harpsichord – a not-yet-invented grand piano, as if it’s on the way to something else […] But you can get effects that you can’t get in straight theatre” (quoted in Lavender “Whose”).

Moreno reaffirms the damage that narrowly constructed visions of art can have on the spontaneous. While his chosen form “offers no immortality” and embraces a “love of death,” he recognizes the tendency “to depreciate the experience of adventure in lauding the product” (Moreno Theatre, 46). Boal, in characteristic fashion, suggests that this dichotomy of product and process is not coincidental in its typical alignment with the social positions of oppressor and oppressed respectively. Jan Cohen-Cruz summarizes his theory as follows: “the bourgeoisie can present finished images of their world because it exists; those dissatisfied with this world will make a theatre that is unfinished, a rehearsal for reality” (Radical, 143). In this light, the transience and motion of the improv event, with their knowing wink at unstoppable time, may contain the seeds of pulsing optimism in the face of congested persecution.

Two important tensions emerge from the above template concerning improvisation’s relationship with the past and the future. Looking backwards, the very qualities that define the spontaneous endeavor in terms of time – its adaptability,
specificity and transience – make it all but impossible to trace. Looking forward, commercial pressures to make permanent and marketable the gifts of improvisation risk destroying the very qualities that make this movement unique. Its tendency to adapt could, in effect, destroy its anti-product essence.

In terms of historical difficulties, one can consider the Roman Mimes, a theatrical movement of surprising longevity that emerged around 211/212 BC.\textsuperscript{25} Despite truly prodigious performances, very little detailed information remains concerning this pivotal improvisational tradition, particularly in terms of the performative aspects of their art, such as staging practices, the selection of material and the dominant structures (if such a thing existed) that steered and shaped the performances. While a small amount of archeological evidence is available, specifically the aforementioned \textit{phylax} vases, the modern historian is faced with an almost deafening silence in any effort to comprehend such spontaneous forms.\textsuperscript{26}

Obviously the sands of time exasperate this difficult situation, but this tendency of loss is prevalent in modern practices also. J. C. de Graft’s “Roots in African Drama and Theatre” speaks to this issue: “the most successful results of experiments in the performing arts within folk cultures […] are shortlived: they fade out of memory, sometimes almost as fast as the least successful, together with the techniques that made them possible” (12). The continent of Africa is replete with oral performance modes that fall easily within the purview of this study, yet as historian Anthony Graham-White

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See Beare 141; Bieber 159; Brockett 58; Duckworth 13.
\item Philological evidence is of limited help, providing at least the range of performance styles (see Nicoll \textit{Masks}, 83).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
attests, “What is lacking is not drama, but descriptions of it” (14). David Kerr notes that pre-colonial theatre, in particular, “has not been very thoroughly researched” (2), resulting in a tendency towards descriptions “built up partly by guesswork from the way the forms have survived into the colonial period” (ibid. 9). Continual marginalization of these modes by modern critics and historians perpetuates this cycle of silence and threatens a truly historical understanding of the importance of improvisation across time. As Smith and Dean note in their study of modern practices, they “cannot investigate past improvised works of which no embodiment remains” (45).

The reverse side of this issue is the future of improvisation. A continuing trend to exploit modern technological means in the performance event, while providing the often-craved records of embodiment sought by Smith and Dean, also introduces new competing agendas and dynamics. Several spontaneous forms have developed relationships with the mass media, television in particular, a move that is divisive amongst practitioners. Boal notes that his Forum Theatre – a Theatre of the Oppressed form to be discussed shortly – has been aired on Canadian television (Hamlet, 337), while in Quebec, the Ligue Nationale D’Improvisation (National Improv League) has enjoyed over a decade of television coverage (Clark “Comedians”). Televised improv shows have also appeared in Italy, Sweden and Belgium, and England’s Whose Line Is It Anyway? enjoyed ten years of international syndication until being picked up by American producers in 1998.

Whose Line actually originated as a British radio show, a format later explored again with

---

27 Coleman also notes a scarcity of records for early American movements, writing, “Unlike America’s other spontaneous native art form, jazz, there is a paltry recorded history of the early improvised theatre” (300).
28 Grotowski writes of the transient nature of acting in general: “Acting is a particularly thankless art. It dies with the actor. Nothing survives him but the reviews which do not usually do him justice anyway, whether he is good or bad” (44). As improvisation is peculiarly actor-centered, this tendency and difficulty is further magnified.
*The Masterson Inheritance*, a full-blown, half-hour comedy-drama that used “no script, no rehearsals, just an audience and a couple of microphones” where listeners could make suggestions that altered the course of events (*The Masterson Inheritance*).

Improv’s relationship with the mass media is tenuous at best, and challenges many of the chronotopic features outlined above. Television is a different medium with different needs and preferences that too-often provides an ill fit for the improvisational impetus. Whereas the live improv event takes place in continuous “improvisatory time,” with no potential for revision or corrections, modern television seldom (if ever) operates under these circumstances. *Whose Line* producer, Dan Patterson, notes that each half-hour televised show is actually a compilation of the best work created over a two-hour performance (Clark “Comedians”), thereby revealing the important proclivity for editing. Poniewozek refers to a similar process in HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* where several takes of an improvised scene are recorded and then selectively pieced together for the final airing (76). Even live television events, by their very nature, assert certain constraints that effectively serve to edit the creative process. Speaking of her time with America’s *Saturday Night Live!*, Gilda Radner remarks, “People ask if we improvise on *Saturday Night*. Well, we can’t. I mean, you can bite your foot, but if there’s no camera on you, then it doesn’t do any good. And you can’t change lines because they base camera shots on them” (Sweet 369). Additionally, while risk and the potential for failure is an accepted, if not lauded, component of the live event, this element is often minimized or erased completely for television. Paterson discusses these limitations: initially *Whose Line* often included guest players amongst the ranks of its four performers but this practice was discontinued as “[n]ew people need four or five shows to come up to speed,
and we can’t afford that now; expectations are so high, you don’t have the chance to fail” (quoted in Cavendish 20).

Other significant differences further strain the improvisatory impetus. Spontaneous theatre is an experiential event, an unrepeatable shared moment between a specific community gathered in a specific time and place; broadcast improvisation seeks a mass removed audience, with a packaged and reproducible product, that is not connected or responsive to the communities in which it takes place. It is undeniable that televised improvisation, in particular, has led to a resurgence in the attendance of live events (see Dunpry “Improv Comedy”); however, these two modes are generally only distantly related. Boal and Moreno both firmly acknowledge profound differences. Boal writes,

Television – as it currently exists – is the opposite of art, since the artist is a person who helps us to see what we tend only to look at, and to listen to what we tend only to hear […] Television, by contrast [to the true art/artist], blinds and deafens us. Television is the antithesis of psychoanalysis. (Legislative, 81)

Clearly, according to Boal, each genre has a separate way of seeing. Moreno, speaking of the filmic mode, strengthens this stance:

Like the book, when it is in its merchandise situation – which is to say, being read by someone – makes the presence of the living personality of the author unnecessary, the film, too, suppresses the actual process which brought about its existence. For the film – just as the book – the moment has no meaning; it has been robbed of its primary creative function. Both can be repeated indefinitely, just like a gramophone record. They follow the principle which is characteristic for all cultural conserves, the suppression of a living, creative process. (Theatre, 54)

Captured improvisation is no longer creative in the moment; it is essentially an act of reproduction that can be replayed over and over again. The core chronotopic characteristics are irreversibly altered in such a mode: fluid moving time is replaced with
closed timelessness, generative creativity is removed from the moment of experience, and adaptability and site-specific community are all but banished.

These challenges for spontaneity are not restricted to its relationship with the screen and can also be seen in the developing trend of improv-as-product. Here improv becomes a tool for the creation of a defined commodity that is, to some degree, reproducible. This tendency is made apparent in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious examples can be seen in the text-improv hybrids that seek to combine the perceived danger of improv with the predictability of a scripted core – *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *Shear Madness* all fall under this rubric. Second City represents a less obvious trend in its choice to mount a camera into the ceiling of their performance space so that a tape could be made of every set to facilitate material and player development (see Sweet xli). This incorporation of technology reflects the company’s inclination towards polished product. Developed sketches are archived in such a manner and are therefore available for future tours and events. Here improv largely becomes a means to an end. Comedysportz, as Amy Seham reveals, is also aggressively aware of its marketability and profitability. Seham expounds upon the underlying business philosophy that separates Comedysportz from its source, Theatresports:

The individual games […] in Theatresports] can still be fairly process-oriented. Johnstone used the idea of a sports tournament as a structure for involving the audience and creating a shape to the performance, but he was also interested in telling stories and pushing boundaries. Chudnow’s ComedySportz, by contrast, used the sports analogy to structure foolproof entertainment. (87-88)

Chudnow’s franchise-owner’s manual includes suggested sure-fire comic *lazzi* to incorporate into the various game structures, further reflecting an interest in what one
might call improvisational “quality control.” There is little embracing of potential failure in such a stance. Improv is also being used increasingly in the business sector, to promote product development and new strategies for success (see “Crash Course” and Crossan “Improvise”).

Most “purists” recognize these potentials for improvisation but would agree that they are either radically different in spirit or a poor use of the powers that spontaneous theatre can offer. Paul Sills reflects: “Of course, you can apply improvisation to television and commercials and the like, and you’ll get results, but I think it’s a little like using a diamond to stop a bottle” (Sweet 23). Seham concurs that most Chicago players “agreed that real improvisation was incompatible with television. Television would never capture the spontaneity, audiences wouldn’t feel the connection, and network executives would never take the chance” (221). Improviser Rebecca Stockley holds a similar view, adding that improv on television “loses its freshness and immediacy” (Foreman and Martini 91). Yet the commercial pressures on modern practitioners are considerable and while spontaneous theatre, by definition, is impermanent and fleeting, the security and acclaim afforded by improv-as-product compromises are alluring. It is apparent, then, that improv’s ability to reflect and adapt to the dominant conditions is equally challenging in both a consideration of its past incarnations and an appreciation of its future course.

**Conclusion: A Timely Utterance**

Time, for Bakhtin and Moreno alike, is clearly a productive element. For Bakhtin, a greater appreciation of historicity and an understanding of the rich potential of
present time, with its constituent openendedness and immense human possibility, mark the state of novelness and his preferred chronotopic view of reality. For Moreno, a theatre embodying this temporal spirit, connected to the here and now, seeking creation over recreation, promises to fulfill the true locus of live performance. For both men, presence and context is imperative. Moreno eloquently expresses the impact of their common view:

We may not forget, though, however much we may learn in the course of time, however accurate our sociometric knowledge of certain sections of human society may become, that no automatic conclusions can be carried over from one section to another and no automatic conclusions can be drawn about the same group from one time to another. Each part of human society must always be considered in its concreteness. (Fox Essential, 21)

As Bakhtin extols in his Novel of Historic Emergence, space is seen as social, and time is considered historical and biographical. This particular view of time as adaptive, in perpetual motion and variable is central to such a chronotopic state. Improvisation is uniquely able to embody and exploit this dynamic in its pursuit and embrace of unpredictability, true in-the-moment creativity, transience and disposability. This is the improvisational “way of seeing.”

Boal considers the different chronotopic qualities of Hegel’s categories of epic and dramatic poetry: “in dramatic poetry the spectators are transported to the time and place where the action occurs – that is, they are in the same time and space as the characters, and hence are able to experience empathy, the present, living emotional rapport,” he writes. Therefore while “Epic poetry ‘recalls’; dramatic poetry ‘relives’” (Theatre, 87). One could continue his train of thought and argue that his Theatre of the Oppressed, and improvisation in general, does not recall or relive another time, but rather
lives the action in this time and place, in the shared moment of the event’s participants.

A further step is taken along Bakhtin’s path to chronotopic perfection.

While conventional theatre characteristically seeks reproducibility and the commodification of a product that may be mass marketed and experienced, improv theatre revels in its nowness, its unique spur-of-the-moment combination of immediate locale and site-specific impetuses. Consequently, in addition to powerfully representing Bakhtin’s favored chronotope, the improvised event is also comparable to another Bakhtinian concept: the utterance. An utterance is a single speech act, an individual unit of communication. Bakhtin writes: “as an utterance (or part of an utterance) no one sentence, even if it has only one word, can ever be repeated: it is always a new utterance (even if it is a quotation)” (“Problem,” 108). As such, the utterance typifies the contextualized moment and innately reflects the continual passing of time. Synonymous with spontaneity, it exists only in the moment of its creation and performance, is transient and impermanent. Even if one were to simply repeat an utterance, its new framing alone would alter its nature. Furthermore, Bakhtin elaborates, it is a generative event: “An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (ibid. 120).

Although Bakhtin’s utterance serves to describe all speech-acts, and by association, all theatrical events, improv theatre actively recognizes and seeks this sense of contextualization and perpetual creation. Conversely, scripted theatre often labors under the (false) assumption that individual audience members can (should) have the same experience of the same text on any given night, or that a certain level of
performance consistency is desirable and attainable. In lieu of chasing stability, permanence and timelessness, Moreno’s Theatre of Opening Nights is content with a fleeting existence captured only in the memories of the participants. This timeliness is the defining chronotope of improvisation – its unique relationship with space and time. It is truly theatre of the here and now. My chronotopic analysis began with Spolin’s exploration of space and play; I conclude with her son, Paul Sill’s, musings on spontaneity and time: “The irony is that the art which is most exciting today is impermanent and not meant to last except as an act of love […] It just comes out between people. It doesn’t want to be written down. It passes in the moment and disappears” (Sweet 21). A consideration of these people who are served by improvisational theatre in the here and now provides the next area of focus.
CHAPTER 4

A PROSAICS OF THE PEOPLE: AMATEURS, OUTCASTS AND BOAL’S SPECT-ACTOR

For the prose artist the world is full of other people’s words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear – Bakhtin (Problems, 201).

Art is immanent to all men, and not only to a select few; art is not to be sold, no more than are breathing, thinking, loving. Art is not merchandise – Boal (Theatre, 109).

“Prosaics” is a term coined by Morson and Emerson to describe two related concepts that feature prominently in Bakhtin’s work. Firstly, it “designates a theory of literature that privileges prose in general and the novel in particular over the poetic genres” (Morson and Emerson 15). While many theories exist extolling and elevating the dynamics of elite “poetic” language, Bakhtin was groundbreaking in his efforts as a literary theorist to pursue an understanding and appreciation of the everyday – the language of the proverbial street. This communication, Bakhtin argued, was equally alive, varied and worthy of study; this was the world captured and celebrated in the pages of the modern novel. The second designation of “prosaics” is used to describe a “form of thinking that presumes the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, the ‘prosaic’” (ibid. 15). This lens incorporates the vision of the first element, but raises the concept to a “global” proportion. It is an ideological platform, an overarching schema or reoccurring motif that holistically represents Bakhtin’s artistic view. Morson and Emerson use this neologism in its second capacity as the subtitle of their survey of Bakhtin’s theory:
Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics. It is in this second all-encompassing sense that the term is used here.

The concept of the prosaic is informed by Bakhtin’s favored chronotopic arrangement embodying historicity and contextualization. The poetic pursuit seeks a language of universality and objectivity: the poet rejects experienced situatedness “in order to write in a language that is timeless—timeless in the sense that it does not call attention to its specific historical shaping as the point of view of one, merely partial, kind of experience” (ibid. 320). Indeed, for Bakhtin, the poetic seeks one totalizing language and assumes communication beyond the nuances of a specific socio-political terrain. In terms of chronotopicity, it defies change, motion and context: “any sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination of one’s own language is alien to poetic style,” he argues, “and therefore a critical qualified relationship to one’s own language as but one of many languages in a heteroglot [multi-linguistic] world is foreign to poetic style” (“Discourse,” 285). Poetics seeks to impose a strict order: prosaics, alternatively, recognizes many-voiced chaos and mess.

Bakhtin praises the novel as a vehicle suited to a distinctly prosaic understanding of language and the world. In opposition to poetry’s depersonalization and generalizing, the novelist is capable of speaking “the language of specific passing days” (Morson and Emerson 320). Furthermore, while poetics predominantly reifies the realm of the elite and its inherited knowledge, prosaics prefers less austere surroundings, placing itself in the service of the common and stressing “ordinary events as the most important” (ibid. 32). Bakhtin, and those in his “circle” who shared similar sensibilities, such as Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev, proffered the everyday as “a sphere of constant
activity, the source of all social change and individual creativity. The prosaic is the truly interesting and the ordinary is what is truly noteworthy” (ibid. 23). The common and everyday world, they discovered, offered its own source of knowledge – a prosaic wisdom – embodied metaphorically in the novelist’s employment of the fool. “[T]he author needs the fool,” Bakhtin writes:

by his very uncomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality. By representing stupidity, the novel teaches prose intelligence, prose wisdom. Regarding fools or regarding the world through the eyes of a fool, the novelists’ eye is taught a sort of prose vision, the vision of a world confused by conventions of pathos and by falsity. (“Discourse,” 404)

The fool, and his/her common language and estranged naïveté, is able to penetrate convention and tradition, and offer new insight and a new, satiric, way of seeing.

The novelist, according to Bakhtin, is positioned optimally to exploit this revealing dynamic and to capture the latent wisdom of the heretofore-overlooked populace. Assuming a stance allied with his prosaics, then, would value the everyday and common over the rarified and elite, esteeming the language and lives of the people, the commoners, the amateurs. A survey of the “who” of improvisation – those who create and experience the event of performance – indicates an unmistakable commitment to this philosophy of the prosaic, and serves as the focus of this chapter. The varying degrees of popular involvement in the performative event are traced, from more conservative modes, such as Shepherd’s Compass, to the most comprehensive, as witnessed in Boal’s spect-actor. The position of the prosaic performer is also explored in terms of his/her acceptance within the improvisational theatre companies themselves, and the tension between issues of amateur collaborative and professional experience is outlined. Lastly, improvisation’s willingness to embrace the wide cross-section of
society is tested in terms of its inclusiveness of historically under-represented voices, in particular those of women. In this manner, the prosaic nature of the spontaneous player is uncovered.

**Putting the Populace in their Proper Place**

Spontaneous theatre embodies an egalitarian approach to performance. The vast majority of improvisational movements seek personalized interaction with their host communities. Issues of aesthetic and artistry are accompanied by equally held concerns such as representation, efficacy and service. Therefore, the improviser’s tendency towards highly context-specific and situated performance locales such as the street, field, café or neighborhood hall, reflects a commitment to diverse communities and community building. This popular orientation is further revealed in the way in which members of these communities are engaged in the very act of theatre making. Whereas conventional theatre tends to present theatre for or on behalf of an audience, improvisational theatre generally plays with or is generated from those in attendance. In addition to refraining from elite locales and modes of production, it also renounces the larger-than-life subjects of most “great art,” it is a blank page/stage on which the stories of those present may take form. Improvisation celebrates the commoner, the populace, the everyman and everywoman; it elevates the language and lives of the artistically dispossessed to the level of art. The precise role of the participants may vary, from inspiration, beneficiary or source material, to actor, artist or educating partner, but Bakhtin’s privileging of the prosaic can be seen throughout. Let us trace this progression of involvement, moving from genres that tangentially incorporate community participants, to those that are
essentially participant-driven. This process simultaneously charts a theatrical journey
from practices most closely resembling conventional modes, to collaborative encounters
that are the greatest departures.

Several practitioners have explicitly enunciated their focused dedication to the
theatrical elevation of the plebeian while (unintentionally) assuming stances that are at
crossed purposes with their ideals. David Shepherd (b.1924-), co-founder of Chicago’s
Compass (and by extension, Second City), the ImprovOlympic and the Canadian Improv
Games, serves as an example of this first limited embodiment of the improvisational
“who:” improvisation that casts the audience as the beneficiaries of a prosaic purpose.

By all accounts, Shepherd was truly a visionary in search of a popular theatre. Influenced
by the Italian Commedia dell’Arte, Brecht and the European cabaret, Shepherd sought a
populist theatre dedicated to the unvoiced masses (see Sweet xvi, Markwell 17,
Kozlowski 12.) Writing three years before the debut performance of the Compass in
1955, he penned:

I think that any theatre written for the working class will have to use
simpler forms than those of the contemporary theatre, which is an
expression of the middle class. I don’t believe you can keep a working-
class audience awake during a play written in the style of Ibsen or Arthur
Miller. (Quoted in Coleman 47)

An improvisational mode of performance that incorporated the above traditions and a
Newspaper Theatre mentality provided Shepherd’s desired form: a “physically and
creatively agile theatre that would turn the latest headlines into hot, fresh plays for the
masses” (Adler “The ‘how’”).

The methodology at least partially decided, Shepherd sought his “who,” the
populace for whom his popular theatre, the soon-to-be Compass, was designed.
Unfortunately, this search would prove to be largely thwarted: upon taking his proposal to the stockyards and steel mills, Shepherd discovered that his intended collaborators weren’t particularly interested (Sweet xxi), a problem he would face again years later in 1981 when forming the ImprovOlympic (see Seham 46). “The stockyards wouldn’t have me,” he succinctly remarks (Sweet 4). In response to his lack of success, Shepherd turned his attention to the city of Chicago – a decision that would irreversibly alter the course of North American improvisation. Here a manifestation of his dream was to be realized, though it was to be substantially different in nature than he had initially envisioned. Compass player, Roger Bowen, recalls, “Instead of starting a workers’ theater, his improvisational concept became the basis of a rather sophisticated medium for college graduates” (ibid. 26). Jeffrey Sweet further emphasizes the disparity between Shepherd’s ideals of a people’s art and the resulting theatre: “Inevitably, much of the work performed on the stages of both [the Compass and Second City] fell short of or even contradicted these ideals” (ibid. xxxvi).

Shepherd’s improvisational form was unquestionably revolutionary, particularly when coupled with the theatrical skills of Paul Sills and the pedagogy of Viola Spolin. In terms of a prosaic vision that privileged a distinctly proletarian perspective, his efforts were less successful. Tensions are apparent in Shepherd’s choices that embody a common dilemma in spontaneous traditions seeking to uplift marginalized areas of society: although Shepherd sincerely sought to serve the proletariat, he was clearly not a member of its ranks. Described by Tony Adler as an “old-money leftist” (Adler “The ‘how’”), Shepherd’s great aunt was Alice Gwynne Vanderbilt (see Coleman 44). Consequently, while Shepherd sought to give voice to the “underclass,” he adopted
(unavoidably) a somewhat patriarchal position in relation to those he wanted to serve. This can be seen in his observations of working-class “tastes” cited above and Coleman’s characterization of him as a man who “had a love for the authentic, the nonactor, the noble savage, the amateur” (ibid. 48).¹ Shepherd wanted to create a theatre on behalf of a people he did not really know. Prosaic in intent and spontaneous in form, Shepherd inadvertently reproduced an elite institutional structure: as an outsider it was difficult for him to avoid a paternal speaking for or speaking to position.

Theatre-in-Education, Devised Theatre and experimental movements (of America’s 1960s in particular) have faced a similar challenge: how does an outside artist represent without cooption? How does a well-intentioned observer elevate the common language without claiming it as a means towards an elite end? How does a well-intended visionary create a theatre for a people who may not neatly fit his/her idealized vision? Therefore, while Shepherd’s objectives were undoubtedly prosaic in theory, they were revealed as imperfect at best in practice. Ironically his dreams were redirected to serve a diametrically opposed ideology, namely that of the highly commercial and professional Second City.

In an effort to better serve the populace, some improvisational practitioners have sought to include their subjects more fully in the performance event itself. An effective manifestation of this approach can be seen in the heartfelt crafting of content taken from those to whom the performance seeks to give voice. In this manner, a collaborative spontaneous theatre is generated; the community gathers in a common space for the

---

¹ Shepherd himself would later say, “The problem with Compass was I lost track of the fact that what I was trying to do was based on the audience, not the performers. I forgot all about the audience. I should have been building audiences out there—training audiences how to improvise and direct and write and get into the act” (Sweet 9).
sharing of stories expressing the everyday and prosaic. Though the means of production may still be largely at the service of a group of outsider artists, the focus of the event is very much on the community members. The everyday teller or volunteer becomes the metaphoric hero or heroine in such an encounter. Two representative traditions that engage prosaic content are Playback Theatre, a story-based event inspired by Moreno’s teachings, and Life Game, a long-form performance mode developed by Theatresports’ Keith Johnstone.

Playback Theatre, “a postliterary theatre that has affinity with ancient ways” (Fox Acts, 5), was founded in 1975 by Jonathan Fox in Dutchess County, New York, and seeks to give earnest voice and embodiment to the stories of the communities in which it finds itself. Drawing from J. L. Moreno’s work in psychodrama, and inspired largely by oral traditions and indigenous practices of storytelling, Playback groups use personal stories taken from the audience as the starting point for sound/movement images (reminiscent of Boal), thematic explorations, and scene-based recreations. Now represented internationally (it is practiced in approximately thirty countries, including Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Hungary, Pakistan, Japan and Israel), the movement seeks catharsis, empowerment and communication, typically privileging intimate settings and audiences and giving dramatized voice to those with a story, any story, to tell. A “conductor” elicits personal narratives from the assembled group, inviting audience members to join him/her in the “teller” chair and to select from the awaiting company those who are to play the central figures in this shared snapshot of life. Staging devices are deliberately simple, with minimal costume and set elements; often merely blocks and well-chosen pieces of fabric serve this purpose. The conductor weaves the structure of the event, guiding the
various participants through moments of music, images or sound pictures, and played
(and perhaps replayed) scenes. The Playback ritual-infused experience consisting of part
theatre and part therapy is posited, as the title of Fox’s survey of the movement and its
place in history suggests, as an “act of service,” and seeks to generate an event that is
active and engaged. Uneven or pedestrian at worst, intensely invigorating and poignant
at best, it is relentlessly inclusive, context-specific, and in the moment.

Playback Theatre’s raison d'être is to share the stories of those assembled, and
consequently, fittingly embodies Bakhtin’s concept of prosaics. Fox states, “the whole
Playback idea was based on the premise that any story was appropriate” (*Acts*, 117),
thereby emphasizing the all-encompassing grasp of the form: elite content is abandoned
in favor of the everyday stories of the community. The performance event in Playback
Theatre is *literally* dependent upon those in attendance: those who are often silent or
silenced in the traditional theatre become the subjects of the action, providing the very
material and inspiration for a one-of-a-kind enactment. Theatre customs are reinvented.
Volunteer “tellers” break the convention of the fourth wall by sitting within the frame of
the stage, narrating a moment from their lives and finally observing and commenting on
the resulting aesthetic dramatization. Conversation shifts back and forth between “stage”
and “house,” and sincere connections between fellow participants, player and spectator
alike, are sought. Practitioner Fe Day stresses the importance of these interchanges:
“particularly value the time during which members of the audience talk to each other,”
she writes (85). Other lauded qualities include seeking “the greatest diversity in the
tellers” and “participation of as many people as possible in the performance rather than

---

2 See Fox *Acts*, 217-261 for a transcription of a typical performance. The conductor figure is considered in
more depth in the next chapter.
the domination of the performance by a certain group or type of people” (ibid. 85-86). Occasionally, audience members are also recruited to serve as fellow performers (see Salas Improvising, 13), although those in the regular troupe generally embody the majority of needed characterizations.

While many improvisation schools solicit audience material for comedic purposes, Playback is significant in that these stories are not perceived as loose frames through which the players can display virtuosity. Here, performers earnestly seek to represent their storytellers, and strive to plumb the hidden depths and significance of even the most apparently simple anecdote. Key to this discipline is the notion of respect: “Playback Theatre offers a non-judgmental forum for the sharing of personal stories,” (Salas Improvising, 111-112), Jo Salas, a founding company member, remarks. “Respect is a cornerstone. No one is exploited or ridiculed or demeaned” (ibid. 112). Such a treatment enables an overall sense of validation for all those concerned as well as an appreciation of commonality, when discovered, and an embracement of the humanly peculiar. “There is a definite educative value element here—about validating experience, about telling, about acting, about inclusion, about taking risks, and so forth—both through and around the stories” (Fox Acts, 51). A crafted aesthetic coexists in a fruitful tension with a humble sense of service for the Playback practitioner: “the ideal fulfillment of playback’s promise” for Salas being “the ephemeral, magical fusion of artistry and humanity” (“What is ‘Good,’” 34).

*Life Game* explores a similar dynamic. Johnstone has described his trademarked form as “a strange communal ritual which usually generates a lot of warmth” (Johnstone quoted in Lavender “Whose”). Initially developed by Johnstone at his Canadian Loose
Moose Theatre in 1984, *Life Game* was later fully mounted and produced by England’s highly imaginative Improbable Theatre in 1998, and toured the United States two years later.³ Performances consist of an audience member, often pre-selected though not rehearsed, narrating the story of his/her life on stage. This “guest” receives polite prodding from a “mercifully tactful interviewer” (Brantley E3) who engages in “part psychiatric probing and part gossipy intrusion” (Kuchwara “Everyone”). As pivotal or particularly resonant events are recalled within the narration, the remaining seven company members simultaneously and spontaneously re-enact the given scenarios, incorporating the full means of the theatre. As Jesse McKinley reports, in addition to each guest providing new material for the performance,

> the actual dramatic methodology also changes from night to night. Sometimes the troupe might act out a guest’s first kiss with puppets; other times the guests might actually play themselves in a scene. Sometimes, the guest literally plays God talking to an actor playing the guest. (McKinley AR5)

*Life Game* was conceived, in part, to tackle Johnstone’s growing perception of a general lack in the emotional/volitional content of modern improvisation. “Good impro can make you laugh, we love it, but soon the content is forgotten,” Johnstone observes. *Life Game*, however, addresses this trend. “Good scenes from the Lifegame stay with you always. They haunt you” (quoted in McDermott *Lifegame – The Background*). For while Johnstone’s other theatrical creations, such as Theatresports and Micetro, do not necessarily *exclude* the potential for deeper explorations that reflect the wide diversity of human experience (particularly when compared to more commercialized short-form modes), in performed reality, content is often limited and may be somewhat trivial.

³ It is primarily this company’s work with the form that will be considered here – all reviews refer to various performances of *Life Game* by the Improbable Theatre in England and the United States.
Short-form shows often develop a certain staccato rhythm that is unfriendly to the subtleties and legato ebb of the dramatic. *Life Game*, an early venture into long-form, provided a template whereby the full complexity of the human experience could be dramatized and savored.

Fox’s Playback movement and *Life Game* have much in common. Both forms pursue a comparatively dramatic style, an often-overlooked field in contemporary North America where all Improv is typically assumed to be Improv Comedy. (This pervasive prejudice led the producers of Improbable Theatre’s touring show to advertise *Life Game* as “spontaneous theater” – see McKinley AR5.)

*Life Game* is also founded on the principle that every life has a story to tell and that the theatre provides a uniquely powerful medium in which this exploration can take place. Simi Horwitz notes this as the “unspoken notion” of the show (see Horwitz “Invasion,” 21). Structural devices and production considerations chiefly distinguish these two forms. Improbable Theatre describes their Jane Street Theatre production in New York:

*On a chair, on a stage, someone is interviewed about their life. People, places, events, memories. Everyone has a story to tell and in Lifegame those stories can be told. Storytelling, visual theatre, live music and object animation combine to dramatise the details of a life.*

In this particular production of the form, Improbable Theatre brings their trademark ingenuity and plasticity of performance previously witnessed in their debut work, *Animo.* Though Playback similarly incorporates music and assumes a transformative

---

4 This is not to suggest that *Life Game* does not skillfully and deliberately elicit considerable humor from its obtained material. Hettie Judah, of the *London Times*, notes: “It takes a while to get used to improvisation being used for dramatic rather than comedic purposes […] There is much intentional comedy, but above all the evening is strikingly poignant” (Judah “Added”). Maggie O’Farrell of *The Independent* also speaks of the eclectic style: “*Lifegame’s* format engenders dizzying leaps between confession, memoir, impromptu acting and comedic improvisation” (6).

5 This work is considered in Chapter Two.
and “poor” attitude to its sparse production elements, Improbable Theatre does so with featured finesse. Also, Playback does not seek to capture any explicit connection between the enacted stories that are offered from numerous different tellers from the audience. Instead, a general mood or theme may implicitly and organically emerge during the course of a performance as each obtained story adds a new element or perspective to the overall conversation. Life Game, on the other hand, is considerably more narrative, a signature feature of Johnstone’s work. Performances progress in a linear fashion throughout the life of one volunteer: the arc of life itself provides the frame for the show and the players use craftsmanship to steer the evening towards a more traditional (albeit unknown) climax. Another notable difference is that of venue and performer status: Improbable Theatre is undoubtedly a professional affair – particularly in its New York incarnation – complete with polished set, lights and music, each improvising alongside the teller and performers. As discussed below, Playback aggressively retains an amateur allegiance.

Despite some superficial framing and production differences, the dominant sensibility of Life Game and Playback are virtually synonymous: a valuing of the common and the prosaic, the language and experiences of the everyday. Life Game practitioners also clearly pursue Playback’s policy of respect for those they represent. Players acknowledge both the vulnerability of an “unknown” putting forth his/her story, and the subsequent responsibility incumbent upon them to provide a sympathetic rendition of the resulting narrative. “Time and again,” reviewer Elysa Gardner writes, “the actors reminded the night’s sendup that he didn’t have to reveal or take part in
anything that made him uncomfortable” (5E). Improbable player, Lee Simpson, notes: “We give our guests their dignity. They can veto where a story goes, and we are sensitive to those feelings” (Horwitz “Invasion,” 23). Tellers may also utilize a bell or buzzer to stop or start the action, suggest amendments, adjustments, or to indicate the “truthfulness” of the improvisers’ choices. Ben Brantley aptly captures the pervasive tone of the evening: “there is a glowing gentleness about ‘Lifegame,’ a curiosity coupled with respect, that keeps it a healthy distance from a tabloid sensibility” (E3). He continues, “Indeed, what makes ‘Lifegame’ so appealing is the clear sense that its performers are there not to show off their obvious talents but to provide a frame for others. It is as selfless-seeming a slice of show business as I have ever witnessed” (ibid. E3).

Improbable Theatre’s Phelim McDermott provides a moving account of the realized power and sincerity of the form:

This 91-year-old guy we interviewed in Leeds told some amazing stories. He thought he’d escaped being called up during the war, and then they raised the age. He had to leave on the day of his wife’s birthday. He said: “I gave her a present, took her to work and got on the train, not knowing if I’d ever see her again.” We did a kind of Brief Encounter-style rendering of this scene, and it was so moving. At the end he thanked the audience. I think he felt that his story was being validated. (Quoted in Lavender “Whose”)

Elsewhere, McDermott summarizes the event from a player’s perspective and writes of: “[t]he thrill of storytelling in a theatrical space charged with both the mystery of the unknown and a curiosity and desire to know about each other” (McDermott *Lifegame – The Background*). The success of this project to sympathetically and artistically elevate

---

6 The use of “sendup” here is interesting and possibly reflects the reviewer’s ingrained view of improvisation, namely that it is used to satirize or make fun of its subject. *Life Game*, however, treats the audience narrator as an honored guest and does not seek to gain entertainment at his/her expense so much as with his/her assistance. The satiric potential of the improvisational impetus is discussed in Chapter Six.
the common to the realm of art is hinted at by a reviewer who simply notes, “Ordinary folk have never seemed like so much fun” (Kuchwara “Everyone”). Prosaic praise indeed.

While *Life Game* and Playback successfully incorporate stories solicited from an audience “everyman,” the theatrical event, by and large, retains its binary structure of performer and spectator. *Life Game* may include a representative figure that symbolically stands in for all those present, and Playback may sporadically engage an audience member in its scenic elements, but both forms essentially represent prosaic content in a poetic form (to use Bakhtin’s distinctions.) These modes are clearly improvisational (to a high order) and renegotiate spatial relationships, thereby challenging conventional norms. Yet, in terms of involvement and privileging the art of the everyday, more complex manifestations await as the general populace gains sympathetic voice and actual embodiment: our everyman and everywoman can also be involved as an actor in the conventional sense of the word, that is used to fulfill the vision of a director; he/she can serve as an artist who is able to explore his/her own vision; and finally, this prosaic player may ultimately serve as an artistic partner or fellow participant who is self-governing and an equal collaborator in an exchange of knowledge.

Moreno and Spolin provide two examples of the common actor.\(^7\) The tendency to promote the value and worth of the non-professional can be seen throughout both practitioners’ careers: both have worked extensively with children and the marginalized and view spontaneity and creativity as elements that essentially exist within us all. While Moreno’s Theatre of Spontaneity apparently involved some community players during its

---

\(^7\) As both Spolin and Moreno serve as focused practitioners in prior chapters, this consideration will be brief. Refer to Chapter Two and Three respectively for additional information.
early development in the 1920s, his psychodrama strictly served this section of society and completely “eschewed actors as a separate group” (Fox Acts, 65). He “discovered that we are all actors on the stage of life, and at the same time he exposed a great deal of our endless stage phobia” (Whitaker, viii). Moreno writes of his therapeutic theatre practitioner:

In the therapeutic theatre an anonymous, average man becomes something approaching a work of art—not only for others but for himself. A tiny, insignificant existence is here elevated to a level of dignity and respect. Its private problems are projected onto a high plane of action before a special public […] The world in which we all live is imperfect, unjust, and amoral, but in the therapeutic theatre a little person can rise above our everyday world. Here his ego becomes an aesthetic prototype—he becomes representative of mankind. On the psychodramatic stage he is put into a state of inspiration—he is the dramatist himself. (Fox Essential, 59)

Although a somewhat condescending tone lurks in the background of his assertions, Moreno’s commitment to the potential of a popular performance mode is unquestionable. For Moreno, spontaneous theatre can be used as a tool for the elevation of those who are often overlooked by the world of art; the marginalized individual’s experience innately has the richness for an aesthetic exploration. Also of unique importance for Moreno is the belief that this exploration, or performance of “act hungers,” has a therapeutic quality in and of itself.8 This strong emphasis on efficacy and healing has resulted in Moreno’s work being overlooked by theatre historians in general.

Spolin and the short-form traditions stemming from her work also pursue a prosaic view of art that perceives theatre as a tool for all. “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise,” she asserts in the opening of her handbook (Improvisation, 3). Halpern concurs, “Anyone can improvise,” but adds, “like any game, if the players don’t learn and

8 Sternberg and Garcia define act hungers in Sociodrama: Who’s in Your Shoes? as “strong drives to fulfill some needs or desires, such as to act playfully, or assert one’s independence” (5).
obey the rules, no one will play with them” (Halpern et al. 34). Most modern training centers strive to uncover this latent improviser in us all, indicating an allegiance to the amateur (a quality to be considered below.) Spolin and Sills, however, engaged in a noteworthy experiment that dispensed with formal instruction in lieu of true unchartered discovery in the moment. D. E. Moffit describes their Chicago Game Theater experiment of 1965:

Open only one evening a week, the theater sought to have its audiences participate directly in Theater Games, thus effectively eliminating the conventional separation between improvisational actors and audiences who watched them. The experiment achieved limited success, and the theater closed after only a few months. (Moffit) ⁹

Regardless of the venture’s impact, an important assumption is evident: both practitioners held a firm belief that average audience members were truly capable of creating their own theatre. For Spolin and Sills the improv theatre could truly adopt a prosaic persona. Sills summarizes the position: “improvisational theater can use anyone where he is. So you can take any group of people and get into it, get them going with each other, and then they can entertain a crowd of people who’ve never seen them before” (Sweet 20). ¹⁰

There is a clear intensification in the incorporation of the everyday participant in this work of Moreno and Spolin. Playback and Life Game elevated prosaic content; psychodrama and Game Theater also raised the prosaic player him/herself to the stage, acknowledging an inherent and universal artistic potential. But these latter endeavors do

---

⁹ Sills provides a slightly different account of the longevity and success of this venture – see Sills Story Theater, 7 and also Coleman 291, London, and Sweet 11. It is rather difficult to truly assess the success of such an innovative movement that did not primarily pursue commercial viability. Viewed under the lens of conventional theatrical expectations, Playback and Community Theatre could be accused of similar “failure.”

¹⁰ This belief in the creativity of the improv amateur is pervasive today. Consider, for example, McQuaid’s Boston review of spontaneous theatre that culminates in: “Do you want to try improv at home? Here are a few basic structures, or games, that you can play with a handful of friends” (McQuaid 10). This attitude can be seen as a direct descendant of that espoused by Boyd and Spolin.
not complete the elevation of the theatrically dispossessed. Both modes still manifest a predominantly one-way artistic relationship. Moreno’s director/therapist and Spolin’s director/side-coach are the primary sources of knowledge and insight. Subsequently, these figures are primarily responsible for shaping the overall event. It should be stressed that both practitioners embrace pedagogic equality, and that their writings indicate a commitment to minimizing status differences between leader and participant. And yet the very presence of a designated therapist or side-coach, regardless of how supportive or ancillary, holds the potential for a degree of outsider mentality. This is particularly the case when less experienced leaders, who do not share these innovators’ acute sensibilities, hold these roles. In this sense, the plebian participant often assumes a position akin to that of a conventional actor and on some level, despite rhetoric to the contrary, is placed on a lower rung of the performance ladder. Certain structures or methodologies are preordained: particular styles or approaches are favored. This is not to imply that such a relationship is in and of itself necessarily counter-productive; in fact, the vast majority of modern improvisation exists under such circumstances. However, the potentials of this prosaic mode of performance achieve a more perfect fit elsewhere: the populist artist and partner await.

Community Theatre traditions further develop the populist contribution to the theatrical equation. Although scripts often result from the communal work undertaken by practitioners of this form, these documents are typically porous and temporary in nature and do not serve as the desired product or artifact. On the contrary, such scripts are often mere byproducts or one step in the performance cycle, with equal, if not greater, emphasis being placed on the highly collaborative and improvisational process of

11 The structural advantages and opportunities of such leadership are examined further in Chapter Five.
involvement before, during and after the demarcated “production” element of the experience. As with the above examples, prosaic content is found within the host communities. However, these stories are not subsequently enacted by visiting players; instead, “[t]he stories that form the basis for its scripts come straight out of life and are presented unapologetically, sometimes literally on a street corner, by the very people who live them.” (Van Erven Community, ix). Van Erven describes the defining features of the movement:

[It] is united, I think, by its emphasis on local and/or personal stories (rather than pre-written scripts) that are first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre under the guidance of outside professional artists – who may or may not be active in other kinds of professional theatre – or of local amateur artists residing among groups of people that, for lack of a better term, could perhaps best be called ‘peripheral.’ (Ibid. 2)

Community Theatre may seek assistance or leadership from experienced artists, as Van Erven notes, but the movement is defined by its participant-performers. This single feature, in fact, distinguishes Community Theatre from Theatre for Development traditions where material is shaped and presented by outsiders.

The Kenyan Kamĩrĩthũ Cultural Center of the 1970s serves as an example of Community Theatre and its prosaic potentials. Led by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, the soon-to-be controversial Center “attempted the feat of popular empowerment through an adult literacy program” (Byam 234). The program witnessed the improvisational exploration of many stories that represented the lives of the participants, and eventually resulted in a collaborative production in 1977 of Ngeekha na Ndeenda [I Will Marry When I Want].\footnote{Van Erven describes the resulting play as the first major work in one of Kenya’s indigenous languages and notes that while the two group leaders, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ, are nominally credited} The nine-month rehearsal period seems to have taken on the
characteristics of improv performance itself with the process proving to be as influential and important as the perceived outcome. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o describes the pervasive mood as open and democratic, with community members making suggestions, providing instantaneous feedback, and on occasion, stepping into the action and replacing fellow players to show how something should be done (see Ngũgĩ 243 and Van Erven Community, 174-175). Initially, Ngũgĩ notes, this methodology was forced upon them “by the empty space but it was also part of the growing conviction that a democratic participation even in the solution of artistic problems, however slow and chaotic it at times seemed, was producing results of a high artistic order and was forging a communal spirit in a community of artistic workers” (242). By the time of the play’s debut on October 2nd, its workshop process had “directly or indirectly affected the entire Kamiriithu community of 10,000” (Van Erven Community, 175).13

The success of the collaboration was considerable and the impact serves as both a testimony to the power and danger of Community Theatre. All those involved shared an unmistakable sense of pride and involvement: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o reflects:

I saw with my own eyes peasants, some of whom had never once been inside a theatre in their lives, design and construct an open-air theatre complete with a raised stage, roofed dressing-rooms and stores and an auditorium with a seating capacity of more than a thousand persons. (Quoted in Byam 235)

The sense of connection to this occasion is emphasized by the events of one afternoon’s performance:

---

13 It is important to note that spontaneous qualities persisted within the performance itself – as is often the case with this modality. For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o writes: “during one performance some actors, unrehearsed, had the idea of climbing up the trees and joining the singing from up there” (240).
I remember one Sunday when it rained and people rushed to the nearest shelters under the trees or under the roofs. When it stopped, and all the actors resumed, the auditorium was full as before. The performance was interrupted about three times on that afternoon but the audience would not go away. (Ngũgĩ 243)

This accomplishment, ironically, did not go unnoticed. Community Theatre, Van Erven notes, “can serve as a confidence-boosting medium that enables the ‘subaltern’ (or ‘other’; or ‘marginalised’; or ‘migrant’; or ‘excluded’; or ‘disempowered’) to speak for themselves as artists performing in the here and now” (Community, 257). However, elevating the voiceless and celebrating the common can seriously threaten the stability of the status quo. Approximately six weeks after its opening, the Kenyan government revoked the license permitting gatherings at the center. The Film and Stages Act of 1963 “stipulated that a government licence was required for public performances that charged admission” (ibid. 172.) Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o was imprisoned early the next year, Ngũgĩ wa Mĩriĩ was forced into exile in Zimbabwe where he created the related Community Based Theatre Project (CBPT), and the Kamĩrĩthũ Cultural Center itself was eventually closed and then razed in 1982.

It is obviously difficult to summarize a movement as polymorphous as Community Theatre, but the above example vividly reveals the inclination to perceive those engaged in the creation of art as fellow collaborators. The community player serves as inspiration, storyteller and actor/artist. While the issue of leadership reappears, Community Theatre is marked by its dedication to serve local interests and concerns, and as Van Erven’s description above demonstrates, these leaders are often insiders, drawn from the members of the locality itself. The progression of prosaic representation solidifies. The Compass sought to represent a proletariat that was largely excluded from
shaping the performance event; Playback and *Life Game* served the populace through the sympathetic treatment of garnered stories within more conventional theatrical parameters, providing a meaningful and aesthetic treatment; Spolin and Moreno recognized the creative ability of the masses and invited the tellers onto the stage, but similarly shaped the prosaic voices through leadership, example and agenda; finally, Community Theatre, operating at its optimal level, enabled marginal sections of society to develop the means to express their own prosaic wisdom, utilizing their own voices, bodies and artistry. This last model of the collaborator brings us to the realm of perhaps the prosaic participant par excellence: Augusto Boal’s spect-actor. As a paradigmatic example of the prosaic player, we will consider this theatrical personage and his/her kin in some depth.

**Giving Voice Through Embodiment: Boal and the Spect-actor**

Augusto Boal discusses the development of his theatrical player in his autobiography, *Hamlet and the Baker’s Son: My Life in Theatre and Politics*:

> When I started out in the theatre I was speaking about myself, my neighbourhood. I knew the truth: I doled out advice. But I discovered that you could not liberate anyone by occupying their space, taking their decisions. I systemised TO [Theatre of the Oppressed] in such a way that the oppressed might make their own theatre – not I talking on behalf of the oppressed nor I talking about them. (338)

In many ways, Boal’s everyman practitioner devolves the conventional theatrical model, returning the modern passive audience member to his/her more active and participatory past. He notes, “In the beginning, actor and spectator coexisted in the same person,” *(Rainbow, 14)* with people singing together in the open air. “It was a celebration in which all could participate freely. Then came the aristocracy and established divisions: some persons will go to the stage and only they will be able to act; the rest will remain
seated, receptive, passive – these will be the spectators, the masses, the people” (*Theatre*, ix).

The Aristotelian notion of catharsis crystallizes Boal’s theory of increased audience passivity and represents this pervasive tendency in much conventional modern theatre. In the Aristotelian tragic model, empathy serves as the dominant bonding force between the stage and the auditorium. According to Boal, empathy can be viewed as “the emotional relationship which is established between the character and spectator and which provokes, fundamentally, a delegation of power on the part of the spectator, who becomes an object in relation to the character: whatever happens to the latter, happens vicariously to the spectator” (*Theatre*, 102). The result of this empathic connection is clearly a “disempowering and tranquillising” state for Boal (*Rainbow*, 71). Whereas ancient theatrical models of dithyrambic song, feasting and carnival were purely participant driven, an act of experience rather than observation, the Aristotelian modality is controlled and controlling:

> the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators: people who act and people who watch – the party is over! Secondly, among the actors, they separated the protagonists from the mass. The coercive indoctrination began! (Boal *Theatre*, 119)

The theatrical exchange was no longer between an assembly of equal participants: the Aristotelian model involved the masses being coerced by the State – a dynamic reified and made manifest in the chorus’s indoctrination at the hands of the hero. The resulting plays functioned as a “‘purifier’ of the citizen” (ibid. 56). In *The Rainbow of Desire*, Boal defines the embodiment of this “coercive theatrical form” (71).14 “In Aristotelian

---

14 Boal provides four definitions of catharsis here: medical, Morenian, Aristotelian and that of the Theatre of the Oppressed. The former two are included here for purposes of comparison: Medical catharsis is
catharsis, what is being eliminated is always the hero’s tendency to violate the law, whether human or divine [... The spectators] purify themselves of their desire for transformation since, in the fiction of the performance, they have already experienced that transformation” (ibid. 71). Obviously, for those who are content with the status quo and the values presented in performance, such a cathartic experience is not only desirous, but also considerably useful. The audience pities the hero’s fate, fears a similar downfall, and therefore remedies their own behaviors and desires so as to avoid befalling a similar fate. But, as Boal declares, this is not all that is purged: “I am against Aristotelian catharsis because what is purified is the desire to change society” (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 27).

Boal’s Theatre of Oppression stands in direct opposition to the above model of theatrical segregation and disempowerment. However, the Aristotelian mode pervades modern theatre:

“It appears in many and varied shapes and media. But its essence does not change: it is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists. If this is what we want, the Aristotelian system serves the purpose better than any other; if, on the contrary, we want to stimulate the spectator to transform his society, to engage in revolutionary action, in that case we will have to seek another poetics! (Boal Theatre, 47)

This alternative system, Boal’s prosaics if you will, seeks a new form of catharsis. Aristotle’s mode in its purest form purged the audience’s desire to act. Boal’s theatre, on the other hand, encourages and incites them to action. Its goal is “to create disequilibrium which prepares the way for action. Its goal is to dynamise [...] it produces

defined as that which “seeks to eliminate something which has its origins within or outside the individual, and which produces in him a sickness” (Boal Rainbow, 70). Boal’s definition of a Moreno-styled catharsis is somewhat vague: “what is expelled is, in a kind of way, a poison. We can say its goal is the happiness of the individual” (Boal Rainbow, 71). In reality, Moreno and Boal have much in common in this area of their work, particularly as Boal moved into explorations, such as the Cops in the Head, that sought therapeutic ends.
a catharsis. The catharsis of detrimental blocks!” (Boal Rainbow, 72-73). For, as Adrian Jackson observes, catharsis is “not the sole province of the controlling group; […] it is a weapon that can be pointed in either direction” (Rainbow, xxi).

The “spect-actor” [spectator/actor] stands as the centerpiece of this new system of theatre. This figure no longer blindly allows a surrogate to perform in his/her stead. As Boal’s experiments progressed through Joker Scenography, Invisible and Newspaper Theatre into his work with Image and Forum practices, his willingness to allow the perpetuation of a conventional spectator/actor relationship diminished. By the early 1970s, he had already determined categorically that,

‘Spectator’ is a bad word! The spectator is less than a man and it is necessary to humanize him, to restore him his capacity of action in all its fullness. He too must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators. All these experiments of a people’s theater have the same objective – the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world. (Boal Theatre, 154-155)

Boal’s spect-actor, consequently, is a powerful exemplar of a prosaic performer: the voice of the people voiced by the people. His later publication, Games for Actors and Non-Actors, whose very title suggests this non-elitist reclamation of the theatre, provides two fundamental features of this new theatrical player: “spect-actors must be the protagonists of the dramatic action and these spect-actors must prepare themselves to be the protagonists of their own lives. That is the most important thing” (242). The retained ability to act is imperative, both on and off the stage.

Boal’s first spect-actor emerged spontaneously to meet the needs of a specific moment. The formative event occurred in 1973 during a Peruvian performance of Simultaneous Dramaturgy (alternatively Simultaneous Playwriting.) Although audience
input influenced this style of improvisational performance, the roles of player and observer were still quite distinct. Boal describes the structure:

we would present a play that chronicled a problem to which we wanted to find a solution. The play would run its course up to the moment of crisis – the crucial point at which the protagonist had to make a decision. At this point, we would stop performing and ask the audience what the protagonist should do. Everyone would make their own suggestions. And on stage the performers would improvise each of these suggestions, till all had been exhausted. (Rainbow, 3)

On one particularly propitious day, Boal conducted the exploration of a scenario in which a young woman discovered her husband was having an affair. The resulting performance dramatized an investigation of successful courses of action for the wife/protagonist. The performers, despite their best efforts, were unable to accurately improvise the suggestions of an older woman in the audience. Eventually, after much frustration, Boal “invited her to come up on stage – fantastic transgression – and [suggested the woman] show, herself, what she had in mind” (Boal Hamlet, 309). This in-the-moment choice proved to be pivotal in Boal’s career and, one could argue, has informed all his subsequent work. In his autobiography he writes, “I grasped that it was not just that woman whom I couldn’t understand; I couldn’t understand anyone, ever. The word pronounced is never the word heard. When she came into the scene, I could see what she was thinking” (ibid. 309).

This newfound utilization of the audience possessed immense potential: “when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place” (Rainbow, 7). This was the birth of the spect-actor – the prosaic player. Boal recalls, “From then on, I adopted Forum Theatre as a way of

---

15 The woman’s solution was to give the offending actor embodying the dishonest husband a sound beating – and then forgiveness. For a more detailed account of this incident see Boal Rainbow, 4-7; Boal Hamlet, 205-207; Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 22-23.
working, always explaining that the spectators are free to do what they wish . . . apart from beat up the cast!” (*Hamlet*, 207).

**Forum Theatre** has since become a major theatrical weapon in Boal’s arsenal, and according to Sharon Green is perhaps the most commonly used Theatre of the Oppressed structure today (see Green 50). As the initial vehicle for the spect-actor, a brief outline will facilitate an understanding of how these roles of audience and actor are successfully merged in Boal’s theatrical endeavor. The influence of Boal’s earlier Simultaneous Dramaturgy can be seen as this structure provides the basic frame for the event. A situation or concern is discussed amongst the host community and serves as the impetus behind the creation of a ten- or fifteen-minute sketch that embodies the issue at hand. This scene may be rehearsed and more-or-less scripted, an instantaneous improvisational scenario, or a combination thereof (see the sample script “Family” in Boal *Legislative*, 195-207.) Upon the completed performance of the scene, typically designed to culminate in the sympathetic protagonist being overwhelmed by the forces acting against him/her, a Joker (or facilitator figure) questions those in attendance as to whether or not the present outcome is successful or desirous. As Boal notes, “At least some will say no” (*Theatre*, 139). The scene is then replayed from the beginning, reenacting the same series of choices that led to the protagonist’s final predicament. But now the audience may stop the action at any time and “any participant in the audience has the right to replace any actor and lead the action in the direction that seems to him most appropriate” (ibid. 139).

The “rules” of Forum are fluid. As is the case with all of Boal’s theatrical tools, he not only permits permutations to allow for local conditions, but also actively encourages such a methodological attitude. Generally speaking, spect-actors are
expected to replace the protagonist who serves as their initial representative in the scene. (For this reason, many have noted that Forum is particularly suited to environments with homogeneous audiences – see Green 51-52 and Fisher 190.) After announcing, “Stop!” they should, with the minimum of delay, “say where he or she wants the scene taken from, including the relevant phrase, moment, or movement. The actors then start the scene again from the prescribed point, with the spectator as protagonist” (Boal *Games*, 20). As new spect-actors enter the scene, onstage players strive to perpetuate the different forms of oppression that they are exerting on the “hero/heroine,” spontaneously adapting to the choices of the new player. “The game is spect-actors – trying to find a new solution, trying to change the world – against actors – trying to hold them back, to force them to accept the world as it is” (ibid. 20). If a spect-actor should happen to be successful in his/her tactic, volunteers may replace oppressors so that new forms of resistance may be unmasked and explored. It is important that insurmountable problems, those where the only possible course of action is violence or defeat, are not dramatized, as these tend to “drive people against a wall of resignation” (ibid. 225); however, Boal does not advocate a simplified or unrealistic representation of lived reality. Forum is not a theatre of trite formulated answers: “Let them express their own solutions,” Boal asserts (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 23). Furthermore, let these solutions be enacted, or as Boal writes, let them serve as “a rehearsal for future action. In the present, we re-live the past to create the future” (*Legislative*, 9).

Boal’s spect-actor emerges from this Forum template as an empowered theatrical agent: “the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think

---

16 Boal cites instances of rape, battery and forcible abduction by armed policemen as examples of pure physical aggression that may only be effectively combated with equally physical solutions. Subsequently, such situations are ill suited to the Forum modality (*Games*, 225).
in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the
dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself
for real action” (*Theatre*, 122). Subsequently, Boal’s populace is elevated into the realm
of art makers, providing source material, representation and prosaic wisdom. The form
fosters a belief in the common individual's power to create theatre and change. They are
not “merely the inspiration for or the consumers of the show. The people are active; they
make the theatre” (Boal *Legislative*, 234).

Integral to this reclamation of theatre in the name of the people is the concept of
choice. Boal clearly seeks to avoid coercive elements in the Forum structure:

> all the spect-actors know that they can stop the show whenever they want […] Even if they stay on the sidelines, even if they watch from a distance, even if they choose to say nothing, that choice is already a form of participation. In order to say nothing, the spect-actor must decide to say nothing – which is already acting. (*Games*, 244)

Such a stance avoids the pitfalls of much experimental theatre that, in seeking to address
audience passivity, demands a level or style of involvement that may bully those present
into engaging in acts that they would otherwise find inappropriate or unnecessary. “In
the Theatre of the Oppressed no one is compelled to do anything they don’t wish to do,”
Boal declares (ibid. 62). He reaffirms this position elsewhere: “Not intervening is
already a form of intervention: I *decide* to go on stage, but I can also *decide* not to; it is I
who choose” (*Rainbow*, 72). As is typically the case with improvisational forms,*potential* involvement is often a more truly inclusive stance. To *demand* participation on
the part of one’s audience is as equally coercive as to perpetuate their passivity. To *allow*
participation ultimately values and respects the individual’s right to choose for him/herself
and esteems their self-knowledge.
In addition to prosaic freewill, two other defining tendencies are evident in Boal’s spect-actor: theatrical transparency and a preference for body-knowledge over reason. Theatre of the Oppressed forms assume a specific pedagogical stance that privileges the selfless sharing of the tools of theatre. The spect-actor is not prevented from claiming and brandishing the means of performance for him/herself. Performance is not posited as the special province of an elite few, the “talented,” trained or self-promoting. Whereas conventional modes often hide the means of theatre – rehearsals are in private, performers are seen as elites with special talents, technical components are masked – Theatre of the Oppressed adopts a position of complete transparency. Boal writes, “We believe […] that the most important characteristic of the theater which addresses itself to the people must be its permanent clarity, its ability to reach the spectator – appealing to his intelligence and sensitivity – without circumlocution or mystification” (Theatre, 72).

The improvisational event is not a magical encounter. It does not seek to impress those present with virtuosity alone, or amaze them with incomprehensible acts. Just as the physical means of the spontaneous theatre are “poor,” valuing creativity and imagination over technical wonderment, the human elements are equally simple and stripped of pretension. Boal declares, “I believe that all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilize them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it” (Theatre, 122) Cf. (Green 53). Boal provides a fitting metaphor of the player as friendly magician: “as artists, we should be like the magician who performs his magic tricks and teaches others how to do them. I like magic tricks: I do them; I am a teacher and like to teach them” (Hamlet, 340).
This belief in sharing the tools and power of theatre recurs throughout Boal’s work. His earlier experiments with Newspaper Theatre (discussed in Chapter Three) sought to demonstrate “that theatre can be practised by anyone […] anyone and everyone, whoever they may be, can defend their ideas by various means, and theatre is one of them” (Boal Legislative, 236). Alistair Campbell of England’s Boal-based Breakout company remarks that Forum is “simple, accessible, unpretentious […] and, above all, based on transferable skills and techniques” (56). Similar transparency and transferability appears in other major improvisational schools. Van Erven notes that one of the main aims of the Philippines Educational Theater Association (PETA) is to be “nonthreatening and transparent” (Playful, 24). To this end,

> [t]he instructors try to convince the participants that with a minimum of training and practice they could conduct their own workshops for other members of their community or for neighboring villages and towns. The workshop participants then frequently decided to form their own community theatre group. (Ibid. 28)

Work on *Ngeekha na Ndeenda* at Kenya’s Kamĩrĩthũ Cultural Center (as discussed above) also adopted an open and unpretentious air. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o recalls, “The open auditions and the rehearsals with everybody seeing all the elements that went into making a whole had the effect of demystifying the theatrical process” (242). Private rehearsals, he posits, are part of a Western education system that “practices education as a process of weakening people, of making them feel they cannot do this or that – oh, it must take such brains! – In other words education as a means of mystifying knowledge and hence reality” (ibid. 242).  

---

17 It is interesting to note that the process employed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and his collaborators employed several Boalian elements. See Ngũgĩ “Language,” 243 and Van Erven Community, 174-175. The potential damage of conventional Western educational modes is considered further in Chapter Six.
The second defining pedagogical feature of Boal’s spect-actor is a general privileging of the physical bodily experience over an intellectual or theoretical musing. Another Theatre of the Oppressed form, Image Theatre, serves as the strongest example of this tendency. Developed contemporaneously with Forum during Boal’s Peruvian exile, “Image theatre was born because my Peruvian students spoke forty-seven mother tongues […] as they made images, the techniques were born, from the simplest, the image of word, to the complex introspective techniques” (Boal Hamlet, 310). Again, the form is malleable and so defies a comprehensive description. In its simplest manifestation it consists of a thematic or issue-based exploration facilitated by the creation of three consecutive images through the sculpting of the players’ bodies (once again led by Boal’s Joker figure.) The first actual image pictorially displays the situation as it is presently lived; the second ideal image shows the most favorable alternative or outcome as deemed by the group; the third and final transitional image suggests how players, and by extraction society, may move from the present to the desired future. As Jackson notes, language is not necessarily excluded from this mode, and may be added during a series of “dynamisations” in which the static images are put into motion (see Jackson Games, xix); however, the form is essentially non-verbal in intent and emphasis.

Although Image Theatre represents the most extremely physical of Boal’s practices, it does reflect a common trend within the world of improvisation: the physical

---

18 Joi Barrios provides a description of an Image Theatre staging in the Philippines: “Augusto Boal’s image theatre proved to be an effective means to discuss the boycott campaign during the 1984 parliamentary elections. The play, performed in front of a department store, relied heavily on the participation of the audience. Actors presented three images of the political situation: the present, the ideal and a transitional image. Volunteers were then asked to change the images as they wished – adding or subtracting characters, changing their positions or acting the roles themselves. This way, the audience ‘wrote’ and ‘performed’ the play with the actors serving as facilitators for a discussion of issues” (Barrios 259).

19 This mode, according to Jackson, also provides the basic vocabulary for Boal’s subsequent Rainbow of Desire work (Rainbow, xx). This later derivative mode is addressed in Chapter Five.
is frequently esteemed over the verbal. Jackson notes the underlying assumptions of Image Theatre: “that images can be closer to our true feelings, even our subconscious feelings, than words, since the process of ‘thinking with our hands’ [refers to sculpting oneself and others] can short-circuit the censorship of the brain, the ‘cops in the head’ placed there by society or personal experience” (ibid. xx). The body, then, can offer direct experience and a more immediate and for Boal, perhaps universal (as problematic as that term has become) means of communicating.20

This preference for physical exploration and self-actualization is expressed consistently throughout Boal’s writings. He recounts his general process: “When one would exclaim, ‘It’s not possible like this; I think that . . .,’ he was immediately interrupted: ‘Don’t say what you think; come and show it to us.’ The participant would go and demonstrate physically, visually, his thought, and the discussion would continue” (Theatre, 136). Physicality informs and embodies Boal’s aesthetic. Of his Rainbow of Desire work he writes, “All the techniques presented in this book are aesthetic techniques, that is, sensory, artistic techniques […] An image must be constructed, created, in an aesthetic climate, a climate of sensations, emotions, sounds and movement, and not uniquely in the medium of words” (Rainbow, 149). Daniel Feldhendler summarizes Boal’s position as such: “Boal calls the qualities of this space aesthetic in that they are experienced sensually; knowledge, for him, is gained through the senses, not through reason. In theatre we see and hear, therefore we understand” (94). Prosaic knowledge is accessed through the body.21

20 He does acknowledge that the subsequent images are not necessarily universal in their meaning – see Boal Legislative, 78.
21 This emphasis of the sensual reflects Bakhtin’s highly physical concept of the carnivalesque. This global concept serves as the focus of Chapter Six.
Again, numerous other practitioners reflect Boal’s belief in the superiority of “body learning.” Spolin advocates an experiential approach. “We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything” (Improvisation, 3). Later in the same work she reaffirms her philosophy: “This can be considered a non-verbal system of teaching insofar as the student-actor gathers data within a first-hand experience” (ibid. 21); and again, “Remember that a lecture will never accomplish what an experience will for student-actors” (ibid. 38). Irving Wardle characterizes Johnstone’s work in a similar vein. Writing of Johnstone’s early days at the Court Theatre in England, Wardle writes, “Johnstone’s all-important first move was to banish aimless discussion and transform the meetings to enactment sessions; it was what happened that mattered, not what anybody said about it” (9). Grotowski was particularly concerned with the actor’s body as a communicative device (see Frost and Yarrow 84), while the body also holds a privileged position in Moreno’s psychodramatic activities. Practitioner Adam Blatner comments, “One of the advantages of enactment is that the nonverbal behavior as well as the words spoken are demonstrated which adds a great deal more information than a lengthy and detailed narrative or inquiry” (Foundations, 7). Finally, this allegiance is (not surprisingly) particularly strong with movement-based forms. Peg Jordan discusses Ruth Zaporah’s methodology:

For Zaporah, the body is a workshop, a teacher, a means for disclosing archetypal dimensions. Her students are individuals from every walk of life: actors, dancers, mime performers, teachers, theatre students, psychologists, nurses and so on. The actors learn how to act ‘from’ their bodies, rather than carting around their bodies as an afterthought to a central performance by the mind […] Zaporah says her training ‘awakens spontaneity, expression and a sense of self.’ (Jordan “Zap!”)
Throughout, common corporeal experience is valued above removed theoretical thought. The prosaic player is a truly embodied performer.

To summarize, Boal’s spect-actor provides a powerful manifestation of the prosaic spirit. Those in attendance during Forum and Image Theatre events are elevated to the realm of artists. The resulting performance provides a venue for their stories and solutions to unfold. While the performance event may include outsiders, particularly the Joker who serves to moderate the event, it is (ideally) the insiders who control the selection of material, strategies for action and possibilities for change. An embodied, transparent approach to art is fostered – meanings are experienced and rehearsed physically, oppressions are discovered and new tactics employed. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed provides a privileged place for the prosaic voice, while his spect-actor emerges as the re-empowered player.

**Embracing the Amateur**

This analysis of prosaic performance has hitherto focused on those participants engaged at the performance site itself, largely considering the masses that the improvisational troupe encounters and how these people are incorporated into the event. A parallel study, however, must be conducted as to the “who” of the practitioners, those who make up the core of the performance companies, or, to return to Boal’s metaphor, the magicians who are willing to share their tricks. For while many practitioners seek to include their prosaic public in the performance event, modern troupes also adopt a similar approach in terms of their own membership ranks. A recurring tenant of contemporary improv is the belief perpetuated by several companies that *anyone* is capable of
performing. In such cases, training centers or company philosophies support the notion of the amateur player, believing that with some enhanced understanding, guidance or (un)training, the stage is available to all. Therefore, improvisational theatre can be seen as synonymous with a theatre of amateurs where the motives for involvement are rarely financial or vocational. Yet this inclusive spirit must often find a delicate balance with efforts for professional standards and conduct. An examination of this difficult tension further illuminates the silhouette of the prosaic player.

The concept of the amateur performer is central to the majority of short-form improvisation franchises. One could hypothesize that this dedication to the everyday performer can be traced to improv’s earliest North American manifestations when Boyd and Spolin formulated their theories of play and performance through working with immigrants and children. Regardless of the source, short-form is generally a contact sport, inviting all those involved to release their own latent performer within. Johan Huizinga observes of the sporting world: “with the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost […] The spirit of the professional is no longer true play spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness” (197). This analysis holds true for the world of improvisation, and many companies aggressively maintain an amateur status to avoid such a loss of playfulness. For example, for largely philosophical reasons players at Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre forego payment for their playing. According to Amy Seham, Annoyance’s Mick Napier was convinced that money was the “root of Second City’s and ImprovOlympic’s fall from grace” (148). To combat this feared outcome of improvisational hypocrisy and to “maintain their purity of motive, Annoyance members are never paid to perform. They
remain amateurs in the classic sense of those who love what they do” (ibid. 125). South Korean Madang practitioner and activist, Hwang Sok-yong, concurs that money and professionalism can fundamentally alter the nature of improv performance. “A lot of spontaneity gets lost in commercialism. We feel that, more than acquiring professional performing skills, we need to retain the powerful vitality of the people” (quoted in Van Erven Playful, 104).

Improvisation invites participation. It would be simplistic to suggest that its tools are freely available to all – in Western traditions, training can often be quite expensive, and access to the most coveted of performance slots, such as Second City’s Mainstage, is extremely competitive and selective. However, the eclectic array of those who find a home within performance companies suggests a level of accessibility that is atypical of modern theatre in general. Johnstone describes the demographic of his Loose Moose company in Canada: “Loose Moosers are computer experts, or doctors, or pizza cooks, or City workers, and so on. Few of them intend to earn a living using their impro skills, and nor do I encourage it…” (Storytellers, 6). Joyce Doolittle distinguishes this prosaic spirit as being particularly strong in Theatresports, especially when compared to the more rigorously professional – and less improvisationally inclined – Second City. She notes, “[T]here are more entry points for ordinary people—more tolerance for amateurs—in theatresports” (11). Johnstone explicitly favors this stance, seeking companies that reflect the character and are composed of members from the host communities. “When theatresports is captured by actors,” he writes, “they almost always isolate it from the
community, but I prefer it when there’s a mix of actors and ‘real people’” (Foreman and Martini 64). The amateur forms a constituent element of the Theatresports experience.

The modern Chicago improv scene is almost exclusively made up of these “real people.” As Rob Kozlowski observes, “In Chicago, there is little or no money to be made in theatre but this is simply an accepted way of life” (46). Just as Annoyance Company members forego payment, so too do ImprovOlympians: “Actors are almost never paid for their performance work […] Most ImprovOlympians have day jobs, and some even have demanding fulltime careers—yet they make time for improv as their primary avocation” (Seham 56). Improvisation classes and workshops regularly contain a widening cross-section of society, and while some of these players undoubtedly see improv as an entry-point to future careers and stardom (an angle often pushed heavily in advertising materials circulated by the major training centers), for many others the goal is a more personal sense of fulfillment. “Although most [Chicago improvisers] do not make a living improvising, a great number of players see their art form as a crucial element of their identity,” Seham writes (ibid. 38). The collaborative event provides a sense of community and a place for the sharing of personal stories and narratives.

The importance of amateur status looms largely for Fox and his Playback Theatre. During the formative period of the movement in the mid 1970s, he encouraged company members to retain a lived alliance with the world they sought to represent. Fox recalls this philosophy:

---

22 Lyn Pierse, in her description of Theatresports’ initial years in Australia and New Zealand, recalls that many detractors of the movement found this mix of “professional” and “amateur” actors particularly unappealing. Of these critics, she writes, “They rejected Theatresports as a form of theatre. They thought it crass that amateur and professional players performed side by side, and were disgusted by the mob mentality of the vocal audience who yelled and scrambled for lollies. One critic likened a Theatresports performance to a Goebbels rally” (11).
We followed certain principles. For example, I told my actors that I never wanted them to do this work more than half time, because I did not want them to share the fate of many modern actors, forced to become exotic, hothouse flowers, with brilliant colors and severe pruning; instead I wanted them to live in the world and be like their audiences, men and women of common work, family responsibilities, and civic duty. (Acts 2-3)

Maintaining amateur status has a reciprocal meaning here, both providing access to the rite/right of performance, while also continuing one’s connection to the greater community. Fox recognizes a similar impetus in Albert B. Lord’s study of Croatian oral poets where “the great singers came from all walks of life, rich and poor, and all had other occupations” (ibid. 25), and clearly took inspiration from such traditions. Consequently, he posited the need for a “citizen actor, who performs as needed by the community, then melts back into the social fabric” (ibid. 214). Partner, Jo Salas, explicates the qualities of this actor further: “The process is effective at almost any level of skill on the part of the actors. All that is needed is respect, empathy, and playfulness” (Improvising, 7). Therefore, while our earlier analysis suggests that in performance audience members have not attained full creative mass, the prosaic profile of Playback is heightened by its inclusive attitude towards the performers themselves.

The related and antecedent practices of psycho- and sociodrama are also preconditioned on amateur involvement, giving little value at all to professional craft or training. Moreno expounds, “In a theatre for spontaneity the cast is the whole audience – not only a few professional actors” (Theatre, 32). Sociodrama, in particular, with its emphasis on interpersonal and group dynamics as opposed to individual hunger acts, elevates the common player and values. As is the case with Boal’s spect-actor, participant experience is valued over audience-perceived aesthetic although the latter
quality is still a consideration. Sternberg and Garcia describe the system in *Sociodrama: Who’s In Your Shoes?* Sociodramas, they note, are “performed by members of groups, everyday people, not actors” (3). Furthermore, “It is important to mention that theatrical training and/or interest in theatre are unnecessary for sociodrama. The modality is not meant to train actors but rather draws on a person’s innate need and ability to learn with one’s whole body, mind, and intuition” (ibid. 8). Sociodrama’s player is avowedly amateurish and prosaic.

One final example will serve to underscore the amateur aesthetic that recurs throughout improvisational theatre. Contact Improvisation, a movement-based experiential mode developed by Steve Paxton in the early 1970s, also actively pursued amateur participation. “[I]t was one of the ideals of contact improvisation that it be accessible to trained and untrained alike; in this respect it was like a sport” (Smith and Dean 123). Among its many radical elements and attacks on the formalized characteristics of ballet and high art, Smith and Dean observe, “it conveyed a postmodern sense of self in stressing the idea of the dancer as an ordinary person and the continuity between everyday movement and dancing. It was in principle non-hierarchical in that all the dancers had equal status, and it required curved movements rather than erect posture” (124). Several practitioners have actively used this performance platform as a means of opening the world of art to sections of society that are often excluded. Phil Tushingham and Laura Kearnes of the University of Plymouth advertise contact improvisation “workshops inspired by a fascination with the benefits of touching, with special reference to blind and disabled people” (Mock 20). Posters announce “a shared experience of movement, where able and disabled bodies meet, move and dance together” (ibid. 20).
The amateur-centered desire for inclusivity and interconnection with one’s community often finds resistance with an equally pervasive force: the desire for standards, professionalism and the possibility or necessity of earning a living. In the ancient period, professionalism provided perhaps a modicum of stability. The creation of the performer’s guild, the Artists of Dionysus, in 277 BCE indicates recognition of some of the arts, although the Greek Mimes were notably excluded from amongst its ranks. The Commedia dell’Arte movement is more clearly a professional affair: among the accepted translations of its name is “the comedy of the profession” (Lea 3). Kenneth and Laura Richards describe the style’s orientation more fully, defining the commedia as “an organized, commercially sophisticated business operation, engaged in full-time professional players bound together in legally constituted companies for the purpose of marketing plays for a living” (197). In terms, then, of professionalism, the commedia may well be the zenith. Few modern companies have been able to truly follow this model and live off their improvisational exploits alone. ²³ In Chicago, for example, Second City only offers living wages to Mainstage members for work that is, not coincidentally, created from improvisation. Several other companies, such as ComedySportz, provide box office percentage deals, which though occasionally lucrative, are seldom dependable.

The majority of improvisational movements exist between the complete amateur status of the oral poet and the professionalism of the commedia player. Negotiating between these polarities can undoubtedly be problematic and each company experiences their own unique dilemmas in determining who will have access to the resources

²³ Frost and Yarrow speculate that Johnstone’s “anarchistic improvisational troupe” (Seham 36) Theatre Machine has been the “only [modern] professional company to present performances which are ‘totally’ improvised” – see Frost and Yarrow 56.
generated from performance, or, as is more often the case, what choices will be made in order to secure the necessary funding and means for performance. Generally speaking – with some notable exceptions such as the Free Associates, Noble Fool Theater and London’s Comedy Store Players – as players move towards professionalism, the improvisational nature of the work becomes more structured, predictable and exclusive. Professionalism and commercialism often dictate the necessity for product, anathema to the freest of improvisational spirits.

This slippery slope of professionalism can be seen in the development of this chapter’s opening example, Chicago’s Compass. Instrumental to the theatre’s development was the teaching and philosophy of Viola Spolin. At first, according to Seham, Spolin was displeased to discover that “her process-oriented exercises were being used by the Compass Players to create a commercial performance product” (10). Eventually, the project gained her support and she provided a month-long workshop for the players. However, as veteran improviser Del Close comments, “the use of her work was slightly misplaced in a professional theater company” (Sweet 152). Spolin’s work, he notes, was primarily “aimed at the amateur and personality development” (ibid. 142); the Compass and its offspring, were more concerned with generating art products. Subsequently, while inspired by Spolin’s teachings, the Compass players began to develop their own sensibility and approach to producing material. Success additionally complicated the picture: “With success, the amateur company grew increasingly professionalized. Material ceased being improvised: success led the performers to ‘freeze’ whatever worked” (London). Initially, the Compass had consisted primarily of University of Chicago students and amateurs, but as the demands of the theatre grew,
those with day jobs no longer could meet the rehearsal requirements demanded by the increasingly overwhelming performance schedule. Matters complicated further:

the spirit of ensemble, strong at the start, diminished as the owners called for repeating what worked with the public. Professionals were brought in from New York. The unevenness of unrehearsed material resulted in decreased live improvisation, until improvisation became more a means of developing material in private rather than interacting in public. (Fox Acts, 73)

These imported professionals, including Elaine May, Mike Nichols and Severn Darden, naturally brought a new set of expectations, attitudes and techniques. They were quite literally thrown into the performances with little or no training or access to Spolin and her games. Coleman recognizes another limitation: “In performance the professionals had far more to protect than the amateurs. Among them, there was an urge to make the play more perfect, to get the action going, to sharpen up the scenes” (137). Product overshadowed process, individual success weakened collaborative spirit, and professionalism eclipsed the prosaic. When the Compass moved to a new performance venue, The Dock, in November 1955, the last amateurs receded with the remaining company members now belonging to Actor’s Equity, America’s union for professional stage actors (see Seham 15; Coleman 139). Professionalism, in this case, slowly displaced the original amateur essence of the event, further isolating the theatre’s reality from Shepherd’s prosaic vision.

The balance can be struck between the amateur and trained actor. Access to the means of theatre for all is important, but the success of this event is often largely dependent upon the skill or experience of a professionalized element. In Boal’s theatre, a trained Joker with a developed sensibility and acute awareness of the performance’s needs is a necessity. Those actors portraying the oppressors in the Forum scenario must
also have a degree of training to fully anticipate and accommodate spect-actors while focusing and heightening the particular form of oppression they are embodying.

Berenice Fisher adds, “forum actors needed professional skills both to maintain character during improvisations and to sustain forum performances when the feelings that inspired them had faded” (189). Boal recognizes that some basic stagecraft is also called for, as Theatre of the Oppressed characteristically seeks a political and aesthetic component. He writes, “the actors must be dialectical, must know how to give and take, how to hold back and lead on, how to be creative” (*Games*, 237). Kozlowski bemoans a lack of such stage technique in Chicago improv in general:

> In improv classes in Chicago, virtually no attention is paid to the picture of the actor on stage. Rarely, if ever, are improvisers told how to breathe on stage, how to project their voices, stand up straight. So much is concentrated on the rules of improvisation that what’s lost are the basic tenants of acting in front of an audience. (98)

Much of Johnstone’s work requires this developed stage awareness that Kozlowski craves. Johnstone’s Micetro format is highly dependent on skilled players, particularly in the roles of the two directors who shape and side-coach the onstage action. “The problem with Micetro is that it needs brilliant directors,” he writes. “Train some, and Micetro will be the most pleasant and least stressful of all impro forms for the players” (*Storytellers*, 54).

As these examples clearly illustrate, improvisational events require some degree of experience and skill development. It is a trap to believe that in embracing the amateur improvisation completely abandons the skills of the trained performer. Smith and Dean consider this fallacy: “All improvisations have in common the fact that they are a

---

24 Johnstone’s related Gorilla Theatre, where players exchange roles as players and scene directors, is described as being particularly designed for “experts” (*Storytellers*, 49).
particular type of procedure which requires skill and practice. This is often obscured in
discussions which suggest that improvisation is an unprepared sequence of events which
are entirely spontaneous” (26). Just as improvisation involves a dance between form and
freedom, so too does it necessitate a compromise between skill and experience, training
and in the moment passion, professional craft and prosaic vigor. Community Theatre
provides an apt closing portrait of how these two impetuses can fruitfully coexist.

Jan Cohen-Cruz provides an insightful account of the Community Theatre
movement in her article, “Motion of the Ocean. The Shifting Face of U.S. Theater for
Social Change Since the 1960s.” She posits that while Community-Based Theatre
evolved from the theatrical experiments of the 1960s, it represents a fundamental sea
change in terms of the perception of those sharing the event. Much theatre of the 1960s,
though well intentioned, replicated patriarchal models in which theatre was performed for
those communities the artists wished to serve. Subsequently, overtones of didacticism,
paternalism and infantilism were pervasive. Boal writes of just such an experience with a
peasant audience where he and his troupe preached revolution with their prop weapons.
Upon an earnest invitation from an audience member, Virgilio, for the actors to join the
farmers in the uprising, Boal realized the hypocrisy of his position. “It was then that
Virgilio pondered the fact that when we, the genuine artists, talked of giving our blood
for a cause, in fact we were talking about their blood, the peasant farmers’, rather than
our artists’ blood, because we would go back to our comfortable homes” (Hamlet, 194).25
Boal discovered the falsity of speaking in the language of the people – of co-opting their
prosaics – while not truly sharing their journey and, perhaps more importantly, risks.

Virgilio’s observation of this problematic separation of the players’ message and deeds,

25 This story is told at length in Boal Rainbow, 2-3.
emblematic of an “outsider” modality of performance, heralded Boal’s discovery of the necessity for theatre to provide speech from rather than for the community, eliding the distinction between theatre senders and receivers.26

Community Theatre recognizes this potentially limiting power relationship and similarly sought, in part, to give true voice to groups who remained marginalized and isolated from the 1960s avant-garde. Key to this reinvigoration of the theatrical event was “the proposition that anyone with a vested interest in the community had as legitimate a claim—or maybe a more legitimate one—on the stage than a professional actor” (Cohen-Cruz “Motion,” 99). Sharing the stage space also recognized the power of embodiment: “the process of making performances can be more personally and politically efficacious than watching the product of other people’s discoveries” (ibid. 101). While exulting the ideal of the amateur player, Community Theatre simultaneously exults the potential worth of the professional, although this role is redefined to reflect the specific focus of the form: this mode unalteringly celebrates its constituents over its facilitators. Citing Linda Frye Burnham and Steve Durland’s High Performance, Cohen-Cruz notes, “Instead of being viewed as an isolated individual genius, the artist (or artists) serves as a cultural catalyst, an integral part of a larger process of social intervention and transformation” (Quoted in “Motion,” 100). Thus, the amateur player and professional artist can coexist in the improvisational endeavor, though in the most prosaic conditions the experience of the latter is merely used as a conduit for the heightened expression of the experiences of the former.

26 This new (dialogic) mode of interaction serves as the focus of the next chapter, while the political significance of this stance is discussed in Chapter Six.
Membership from the Margins: Improvisation and Inclusivity

As a direct result of improvisation’s prosaic nature, its involvement of those assembled and fond embracement of the community amateur, spontaneous theatre forms are comparatively inclusive modes of performance. While the scripted theatre tends toward capital intensiveness, requiring considerable means and subsequently financial risk, improvisation requires little more than the labor and time of the individuals involved. Alistair Campbell provides the rallying cry of the mode: “all we need to make theatre is each other” (63). David Coplan, writing of indigenous African performance in particular, notes that this tendency makes theatre the most accessible strain of all the arts because “it is not tied to complex, capital intensive, institutionally controlled technological media” (151). In South America, Boal’s improvisational work actively exploits this quality of labor intensiveness; he writes, “[v]ery often the groups who practise Forum Theatre are poor groups, with limited economic resources” (Games, 235). For modern Western practitioners this increased level of access also holds true. Rob Kozlowski observes of the Chicago style, “improv theatres don’t have to worry about production costs […] improv theatres don’t have to worry about maintaining a budget for building sets, renting costumes, or finding that early twentieth-century phone that’s crucial to the play they happen to be putting up” (131). Oral historian Jeffrey Sweet concurs: “It’s cheap. You don’t have to pay royalties; it can be set up quickly and then produced for next to nothing” (quoted in Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 22).

In order to highlight improvisation’s ability to provide a mode of performance for otherwise underrepresented sections of society, one need look no further than its historic inclusion of female performers. Jane de Gay notes in her article, “Naming Names: An
overview of women in theatre, 1500-1900” that during the earliest period of her study, “few cultures permitted women to act or sometimes even to sit in audiences at the theatre” (25). The vast majority of scripted theatre’s history has marginalized and silenced the voices of women performers and authors alike. Pervasive practices such as cross-dressing, dramaturgical exclusion and gendered barriers to the means of production have served to isolate public professional performances and insure their continued control and distribution from a typically patriarchal position. Oral and spontaneous traditions, on the other hand, have tended to reflect greater diversity, both including and receiving considerable crafting from female participants. For example, Ancient Greek and Roman mimes included women among their numbers – an important defining feature of the forms as a whole. Women also found acceptance in many (continuing) oral and spontaneous traditions, such as Zulu Praise Poetry, among the Akunyungba (chorus) of Yoruba Apidan theatre, and as the binukot (lead chanter) of the Philippines. Three specific traditions will be considered in greater depth here in terms of their inclusion of female performers: the Italian Commedia dell’Arte, the Kenyan Kawounda Women’s Theatre of Sigoti, and modern North American improv troupes.

Isabella Andreini (1562-1604) emerges as the paradigmatic commedia actress of Renaissance Italy. Contemporaneous poet Tommaso Garzoni writes of her:

[T]he gracious Isabella, dignity of the scene, ornament of the stage, a superb spectacle no less of virtù than of beauty, has so illuminated the style of her profession, that while the world lasts, while the centuries endure, while times and seasons have life, every voice, every language, every cry, will echo the celebrated name of Isabella – Tommaso Garzoni, 1585 (McGill 64) Cf. (Nicoll Masks, 237).

Ending numerous centuries of women’s absence from the professional stage, Andreini arrived as “the Leading Lady or (in every sense) Prima Donna” (Andrews 190). As the
above tribute attests, the female players left quite a mark on their audiences. Women performers played without the distinguishing leather masks of the vecchi (old men) and zanni (servants), characters that feature prominently in the visual representations of the movement, receiving instead their greatest acclaim in the role of the innamorati (lovers). The significance and contribution of these commedia women, however, has often been overlooked or minimized by historians who tend to favor their masked companions. Indicative of this stance, Winifred Smith writes, “Of the tiresomely monotonous lovers around whom all the other personages circle, there is no need to say more than a word here […] they were in short in the commedia dell’arte just about what the academicians had made them in the written comedies, centers of the plot and mouthpieces for love speeches” (9).27 Such assessments have done much to erase the impact of these women innovators.

Despite narratives to the contrary, the importance of the female performers is becoming increasingly recognized. Historian Ferdinando Taviana claims, in fact, that “the improvising actor is, par excellence, the Actress” (quoted in Anderson “The Law”). Women were clearly participants in the genre from its earliest years. While the first extant company contract from Padua, dated 1545,28 bonds together an all-male group, within two decades evidence exists of female membership. Donna Lucrezia of Siena is a signatory of a Roman contract of 1564 and Richard Andrews notes that she was a “full partner” in the enterprise (see Andrews 258-59, n.65).29 Three years later, in 1567, we have the first record of actresses serving as troupe leaders. Two troupes competed in the

27 Other equally dismissive or diminishing opinions can be seen in Nicoll Masks, 236; Nicoll World, 107; Oreglia 116; Kozlowski 9; McKee xiv; Wylie 57.
28 For a translation of this contract see Rudlin 14-15; Richards and Richards 44-46; Oreglia 140-143.
29 See also McGill 61, and Scott.
Duchy of Mantua, one of which was “directed by an actress whose stage name was
‘Flaminia’, and the other run jointly by a ‘Pantalone’ (possibly Giulio Pasquati) and the
actress Vincenza Armani” (Andrews 169) Cf. (McGill 61). This level of participation is
all prior to the first recorded commedia-related performance of 1568 by Massimo Troiana
da Napoli.\textsuperscript{30}

Andreini and her predecessors, then, were undeniably and inextricably linked to
the rise of the movement. However, the radical nature of their appearance was
accompanied by an equally radical change in the way in which femininity was manifested
on stage. Portrayals of women in the literary traditions were extremely limiting. In her
study, \textit{Gender and the Italian Stage From the Renaissance to the Present Day}, Maggie
Günsberg characterizes the ways in which women were dramatized in the male-
dominated \textit{commedia erudita} (scripted) tradition. She writes that while “lower-status but
freeborn female characters are allowed to participate in the plot and display wit and
intelligence,” the “higher-status female characters, in descending order, are absent,
present in a peripheral role, or are allowed partial participation” (27). For reasons of
decorum and convention, women characters often had male stand-ins “ventriloquize”
their thoughts (ibid. 47), or were “effectively idealized out of all dramatic existence” and
consequently had “no access to speech whatsoever” (ibid. 45). As Günsberg and Jane
Tylus reveal,\textsuperscript{31} few spaces were deemed socially acceptable for women, and therefore,
theatre that sought decorum and verisimilitude was bound by the same restrictive
conventions that repressed women’s freedom of movement and speech in the everyday

\textsuperscript{30} For a translation of this description see Orellia 4-10; Smith 103-109; Richards and Richards 48-52;
Rudlin 48-52.
\textsuperscript{31} See Tylus´ article, “Women at the Windows: Commedia dell’arte and Theatrical Practice in Early
Modern Italy.”
world. The Commedia dell’Arte not only provided greater access to the means of theatre, it also provided a space that was considerably more fluid and open. Women characters were no longer limited to serve as puppets for male playwrights, and the spontaneous nature of performance itself allowed the potential for satiric commentary and playful parody. Evidence of women, such as Isabella Andreini, holding considerable autonomy and rising to positions of leadership – many decades before a similar scripted counterpart would emerge in Europe – suggests that improvisational forms offer the unique potential of involvement for previously marginalized groups.

The Kawuonda Women’s Theatre of Sigoti in Kenya provides a supporting example. Informally established in 1967, early performances consisted primarily of the women members telling each other stories and occasionally engaging in song and dance during common breaks from work (Van Erven Community, 192). From the 1990s onwards, the women begin to adopt a Community Theatre methodology, with the previously narrated shared stories taking on a more performative aspect. Van Erven describes the general approach:

One of the women begins to tell a story during a natural break from work, after which they collectively decide to turn it into drama. They cast the parts by consensus by the narrator, as the story’s owner, has a decisive role and functions as a director. Blocking is done by arranging props in a makeshift set and positioning characters within it. Then they improvise scenes. Songs and dances serve as beginnings, endings, scene transitions, and throughout as a background soundtrack. The Kawuonda women improvise as many different versions as they think necessary, sometimes recasting or changing dialogues to try out alternative suggestions from a group member […] The women perform their plays at public functions and sometimes use the same process for off-limits in-house improvisations on more delicate women’s issues. (Ibid. 193)

As is the case with much Community Theatre, while a loosely composed (oral) text is utilized as the frame for performance, a great deal of flexibility and room for spur of the
moment creativity is retained. Van Erven tells of a performance in which a burst of unanticipated laughter prompted the event to depart radically from its projected path and seek a highly impromptu ending (see Van Erven *Community*, 200). Such choices seem to be an inherent strength of the mode.

The ability of these women to create together is made all the more remarkable and powerful when considered in light of their cultural context. The women players inhabit a particularly marginalized position in Sigoti-Ramogi where social and ceremonial power is traditionally in the hands of a council of male elders. Their spontaneous performances allow the development and sharing of a uniquely female voice that would otherwise remain silenced. Theatre provides the tools for an important communicative event: “community theatre serves as the medium through which the young communicate their concerns to the old, the men to the clan at large, and the women can tell their husbands, sons, and daughters things they would not (yet) be free to say in their own private domains” (ibid. 185-186). Kawuonda’s treasurer, Helida Molo Odongo, discusses the significance of the group’s work:

> it gives us strength and happiness to talk in front of people. Drama also teaches us how to dialogue with men. If a woman stays at home she may have more problems. When we come together, we can share our problems and give each other comfort. It gives women courage to talk in public. It enhances women’s freedom. (Quoted in Van Erven *Community*, 192)

Consequently, such inclusive prosaic movements, in addition to enabling diverse access to the means of theatre, can serve as an artistic sanctuary. In this case, the Kawuonda women are able to “explore strategies of domestic survival and communal development,” while developing and supporting a “cultural binding force” (ibid. 201). Theatre, in providing a prosaic voice, can also provide empowerment.
Modern improv has also served as a venue for women’s voices to be heard in an otherwise often patriarchal artistic landscape. Women artists – such as Neva Boyd, Viola Spolin, Josephine Forsberg (Players Workshop) and Charna Halpern (ImprovOlympic) – have been extremely influential in shaping the North American movement in particular. But as Amy Seham explores in her thought-provoking *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, issues of gender in Chicago-style improv are quite complex. While there is ample potential for inclusiveness, in reality, troupes often wrestle with issues of misogyny, heterosexism and gender imbalance. Simi Horwitz summarizes the situation: “The world of improv has always been largely white, middle-class, and male” (“Improv-ing,” 26). This trend dates back to America’s earliest comedic improv at the Compass: Coleman writes, “The experience of the [Compass] women was of being dominated by the men” (216). Seham elaborates on the pervasive dynamic: “As with many avant-garde or radical movements, the Compass Players often used women as metaphors, decorations, or enabling support characters rather than fully equal subjects. Few women attracted to the Compass found the artistic home available to the men” (13). Though women were present and included, such work did not truly allow self-actualization: some voices clearly dominated the theatrical conversation at the expense of others. Inclusion was not without its own limitations.

Over the last decade in particular, the recognized potential of improvisation to represent diversity has become increasingly pursued and realized. In 1992 the Free Associates, who were founded with a firm desire to be more women-friendly and less sexist, opened *Hear Me Roar*, a seven-woman cast revue which “attracted a great deal of attention from the Chicago area press as one of the first improv projects to address the
issue of women in improvisation” (Seham 177). A year later, Annoyance’s Mick Napier sponsored Chicago’s first course on women in improv (see Seham 154-155).32 The first all-women improv team appeared on the ImprovOlympic stage in 1996. The brainchild of Katie Roberts and Stephanie Weir, this new team named “Jane,” tackled many gendered assumptions among improvisers — not the least being the widely whispered view (predominantly amongst men) that women just “aren’t funny” or “don’t make good players” (see Seham 100).33 Player Stephanie Benjamin speaks of the experience:

“Performing with women gives us the chance to work at a slower pace and explore our shared experiences, like going through puberty, body image, and food. Those are very common improv subjects for us. Women in the audience have told us they’ve never seen our insights voiced in any mixed-gender improv group” (Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 26).

“Jane” members found that they were able to assume higher status characters,34 play cross-gendered roles and initiate scenes more forcefully in the absence of men. Seham observes that the troupe was extremely successful: many members later served as coaches or were recruited for Second City shows (see Seham 73).

32 Australian Theatresports’ Deb Collins conducted a similarly themed workshop six years earlier.
33 Cultural Critic Philip Auslander writes in Presence and Resistance, “Our society […] stigmatizes the funny woman. Joke telling is a male preserve because humor is linked with power: women are supposed to be the objects of jokes, not joking subjects” (205). The explorations of groups such as Jane, have done much to challenge this stigma.
34 Lyn Pierse writes of a 1990 Australian workshop designed to explore this very issue of women and status choices in performance. Conducted with both men and women in attendance, all those present were challenged to endow women as holding the highest status in each scene. She writes, “Our aim was to promote the idea that players, irrespective of their sex, should strive to serve a scene function as a priority, whether it be high or low status; and that women are as capable of playing and as entitled to play top status as men” (303). An interesting discovery was made in that both male and female performers inadvertently made choices that perpetuated disempowerment of the woman characters. Status serves as a unique improvisational concentration for Johnstone as he believes an understanding of this power relation found in all human interaction affords a direct route to theatrical action. He writes, “Status is a confusing term unless it’s understood as something one does” (Theatre, 36) Cf. (Johnstone Storytellers, 219). Subsequently, exploring status and power relations in itself can create the scene, as the balance of control “tilts” or is contested. See also Johnstone Storytellers, 94-100. This improvisational tool is particularly suited, as Pierse attests, to the examination and questioning of gender dynamics on the stage.
Jane’s achievement, in conjunction with the emergence of similarly inspired all-women teams such as New York’s Flying Queens and Heartless Floozies (David 23) and New England’s Boston Creem, (McKittrick C7) suggests that modern spontaneous traditions are not only continuing to include women, but are also (finally?) allowing the development of a more gender-sensitive mode of prosaic performance. Seham’s work, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway: Beyond Second City*, traces this journey of women in modern Chicago-style improv through three “waves,” starting with the more limited gender portrayals of the Compass and early Second City, to the second wave of often-unrealized potential of the ImprovOlympic and Comedysportz, and finally the most promising third and current wave as manifested by the Annoyance, Free Associates and various “identity” troupes. It is interesting to note that while, as Seham observes, much Chicago improv-comedy is still gender imbalanced, other improvisational modes do not suffer from this inequality. Fox comments, for example, that Playback Theatre typically attracts disproportionate involvement from women (*Acts*, 93). The tide is turning however. Perhaps a true indication of gender progress in Chicago-styled improv is seen in the recent adjustments of its most paternal embodiment, Second City. After decades of fielding Mainstage and touring teams of four men and two women, a gender-balanced cast was finally adopted in 1996. This move has also afforded more interesting voices and dynamics to emerge as touring company women have adopted pre-created roles initially embodied by men (see Seham 201 and 206). Work has also been conducted at Second City to include greater racial diversity in the company, although producer Kelly Leonard comments that currently efforts to more fully include women’s voices have been more successful (see Weber “Industrial Strength,” E1).  

35 Second City supported/raised troupes such as GayCo and Oui Be Negroes (the latter of which emerged
It is important to note that while improvisational forms tend to assume more inclusive stances than their scripted counterparts that they are also manifestations of the communities that they serve. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect that such modes can completely transcend their chronotopic settings. Subsequently, as Seham’s study effectively reveals, troupes often perpetuate and reflect biases or blindesses that are evident in the host culture. However, as the Italian Prima Donnas, the Kawuonda Women and modern all-woman troupes illustrate, the labor intensive nature of improvisation allows repressed groups to claim the tools of theatre as their own and challenge restrictive or domineering perceptions. Seham writes that in spite of (lessening) white hetero male dominance of the Chicago comedic tradition, improvisation still “provides a valuable means of creating original material—particularly for women and marginalized people whose lives and histories are underrepresented in mainstream performance” (xxii-xxiii). This is particularly the case as those formerly excluded from the theatrical event rise to positions of leadership and creative autonomy. When inclusion alone does not allow marginalized voices full freedom, improvisation offers the ability to create one’s own company of stories – an important and unique power that is only beginning to be fully tapped in the modern world of theatre.

**Conclusion: The Prosaic Partnership**

Several trends emerge in this chapter’s pursuit of the improvisational “who.” Spontaneous theatre engages primarily in a prosaic exchange, an elevation and celebration of the common, the everyday, the simple. The spontaneous event is rarely

---

from a Second City Minority Outreach Program) speak to this tendency. See Kozlowski 65-66, Seham 191-196 and Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 26.
unidirectional, unlike its scripted relation. Boal defines this fundamental difference: “Conventional theatre is governed by an intransitive relationship, in that everything travels from stage to auditorium, everything is transported, transferred in that direction – emotions, ideas, morality! – and nothing goes the other way” (Legislative, 19). An appreciation of one’s audience, an earnest incorporation of their stories and experiences, and the recognition of the artist in us all, creates a new theatrical relationship. In fact, as Boal’s prosaic spect-actor affirms, the improviser rarely performs for, or as a substitute for, those present. Ideally, the conventional audience is activated, engaged and included. The performance becomes a partnership, collaboration, and aesthetic discourse. Jonathan Fox writes of Playback Theatre:

> The concept of discourse implies exchange between equals, and there is an implied belief in playback theatre that if we speak and listen to each other in this deep way, good will come of it. In a playback performance, we are all experts, in that we all have stories with potential answers embodied within them—this holds for the youngest child, the humblest adult, the most wizened elder. (Fox and Dauber 120)

The improvisational audience is treated with respect and their knowledge and experiences are esteemed and valued, if not used as the raw material of performance.

Eugenio Barba writes of an accidentally elicited artistic discourse in southern Italy in 1974. The Odin Teatret, in retreat, engaged in an impromptu open-air performance at the request of the local community that was aware that some visiting “artists” were in town. Upon concluding the ad-libbed show, the Italians responded, “Now you must hear our songs” (187). The next several months resulted in numerous spontaneous exchanges between communities sharing their cultural and aesthetic knowledge – their Bakhtinian prosaic wisdom. This is, perhaps, the ideal: a meeting of equals, each with a story to tell, each given a place in which to tell it. Improvisation
provides just such a possibility. Improv, at its most inclusive, wraps its arms around the community at large and listens to all its voices. Subsequently, not only is the theatre space democratized, shared by actor and audience alike, but so too is the process of theatrical discovery, “rendering the relationship between actor and spectator transitive” (Boal Legislative, 67). In this model, the everyman and woman truly becomes an equal in the theatrical event; the intransitive poetic and impersonal monologue has been supplanted by transitive prosaic dialogue. The way in which this dialogue is shaped and negotiated serves as the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

DIALOGIC FORM AND FREEDOM: STRUCTURING THE CONVERSATION

A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence – Bakhtin (Problems 252).

Del said to us, when you are onstage at Second City, you can always get all the attention, you can always steal the focus and be the funny one. Just stick your finger in your nose and you can get focus. But to equal the other people on stage—to give them their moment and then take yours and go back and forth—that was the much more difficult and greater thing. To really have a game of catch with somebody is the true excitement of improvisation, and it’s so much more rewarding – Gilda Radner of Del Close (quoted in Sweet 367).

In addition to chronotopicity and the prosaic, dialogism emerges as an important global concept for Bakhtin. While the chronotope distinguishes the favored temporal and spatial artistic site, and the prosaic impetus identifies the elevated common subject and participant of the event, dialogism embodies the preferred mode of communication. Dialogism is a complex term, and as Morson and Emerson observe, represents three major overlapping principles that recur in Bakhtin’s work. Firstly, it refers to the internal dialogism of the words contained in every utterance. As “[n]o speaker is ever the first to talk about the topic of his discourse” (Morson and Emerson 137) it follows that “[e]very utterance is by definition dialogic” (ibid. 131). All communicative events between speakers and receivers involve “addressivity” (Bakhtin Speech, 99), and are referential to prior acts of embodied discourse. This is, in fact, how words communicate, through a dialogue with the present and past, as referents to prior speech acts, and as reflections and
redeployments of earlier speakers and listeners. All embodied utterances are dialogic in this sense of the word as they are quotational. Secondly, Bakhtin uses dialogism as a qualitative measurement for considering the comparative density, complexity and power of a communicative (artistic) act. According to this definition, discourse can be ranked in terms of its respective monologism or dialogism (see Morson and Emerson 147). Monologic modes include single-voiced discourse, typified by direct unmediated discourse. In this mode there is no intention to have another voice present or cited, it is speech without intentional quotation marks. Occupying the middle of the scale are passive double-voiced events, such as unidirectional “stylization” where another voice is co-opted in typically sympathetic service of the new discourse, and varidirectional parody where one privileged voice critiques another in an oppositional fashion. True dialogism (in its second sense) is reached with active double-voiced discourse: in this dynamic one voice no longer dictates or contains another. Bakhtin writes, “In such discourse, the author’s thought no longer oppressively dominates the other’s thought, discourse loses its composure and confidence, becomes agitated, internally undecided and two-faced” (Problems, 198). The third usage of dialogism refers to an overall view of truth and the world, a generic “way of seeing” that, while incorporating the prior visions outlined above, clearly esteems active double-voiced discourse as its purest model.

This consideration of the improvisational endeavor enlists Bakhtin’s preference for dialogic communication as a global perspective and in its second sense as the oppositional paradigm to monologic discourse. Boal recounts a story of a psychiatric patient’s effort to define the concept of dialogue. After much thought, the patient offered, “when there are two people talking on their own” (Legislative, 4). Bakhtin’s
view of dialogic communication seeks to amend this sense of individual isolation in which language is variously self-serving, monologic or impotent. Boal’s patient acknowledged the pervasive incommunicativeness of speech acts and their subsequent ineffectiveness. Contrarily, Bakhtin (and Boal) seeks the condition of heteroglossia, an exchange of multiple languages representing multiple subjectivities and speakers. Yet the mere presence alone of different perspectives is not the ultimate aim. These voices must have a particular relationship to one another. Languages do not dominate or silence each other in Bakhtin’s exemplary communicative engagement. Rather, these various stances interact freely and independently; unified and totalized meaning surrenders to multiplicity. Ideal discourse, then, is not merely the presence of many voices, or heteroglossia, but specifically the event of many voices speaking to one another as equals. This is the abovementioned process of dialogizing, the enrichment of discourse through enabling unmediated exchange between free communicating partners. Discourse that attains this communicative ideal becomes polyphonic, or “dialogized heteroglossia” to employ Bakhtin’s terminology to its fullest. Polyphony emerges as the ideal mode of artistic language.

Again we return to the site of Bakhtin’s favored genre, the novel, as it is this artistic form that he perceives holds the truest potential for dialogized discourse. Of his model novelist, Bakhtin writes, “Dostoevsky […] creates not voiceless slaves […] but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him” (Problems, 6). Furthermore, “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels […] a plurality of
consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world” [Italics in original] (ibid. 6). Novelistic discourse, according to Bakhtin, in its finest incarnation embodies polyphony. Voices are free to exert their own unique stances and are not trapped in a totalizing (monologic) narrative wielded at the service of an all-knowing author. “In Dostoevsky’s novels, the author’s discourse about a character is organized as discourse about someone actually present, someone who hears him (the author) and is capable of answering him” (ibid. 63). The state of polyphony allows and encourages surprise, the confrontation of the unexpected, and the tentative negotiation of the unexplored. The novel’s characters are able to exert their own free will and are not mere vehicles for the artistic agendas of the author.

There is an unvoiced irony in Bakhtin’s preferred vehicle for dialogism, namely that individual authors generally conduct the novelistic enterprise. On the one hand Bakhtin recognizes that “Dialogic relations have a specific nature […] They are possible only between complete utterances of various speaking subjects (dialogue with oneself is secondary, and, in the majority of cases, already played through)” (“Problem,” 117). On the other, he observes of Dostoevsky’s novels, “Every act a character commits is in the present, and in this sense is not predetermined; it is conceived of and represented by the author as free” (Problems, 29). Bakhtin’s novelist, somewhat uncomfortably, must seek to mediate the various voices of his/her characters without capturing them in a monologic discourse.

the freedom of a character is an aspect of the author’s design. A character’s discourse is created by the author, but created in such a way that it can develop to the full its inner logic and independence as someone else’s discourse, the word of the character himself. As a result it does not fall out of the author’s design, but only out of a monologic authorial field of vision. (Ibid. 65)
This is a problematic dynamic. How can a single author truly enable free will amongst his/her artistic creations? How can heteroglossia strictly become dialogized through the crafting of a single captured novelistic treatment? Bakhtin provides little guidance, writing simply that a polyphonic author must “broaden, deepen and rearrange” his/her own consciousness “in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousnesses of others” (ibid. 68).

The pursuit of dialogism, when considered in terms of the performance event, with its many participants and creative agents, provides a better polyphonic fit. Patricia Suchy observes, “acting itself is prima facie a heteroglot condition” (118), though she adds naturalistic acting approaches, in particular, tend to serve a monologistic end in representing the unified voice of the director or playwright. Michael Bristol concurs that uni- and vari-directional discourse is inherent in acting as “[t]he appropriation and misappropriation of the speech of another is the very raison d’être of acting and of the audience’s interest in what an actor does” (113), while Graham Pechey cites Brecht’s work as a specific example of “radically novelised drama – dialogised indeed to the point of polyphony” (58). Whereas scripted theatre may, in the tradition of Stanislavsky, seek to serve one voice or, in the case of Brecht, allow a relatively limited dialogue between the performer and playwright, the spontaneous theatre offers immense dialogic potential. The improvisational event, where individual and truly independent voices are embodied and authorial vision is actively negotiated between the participants, provides even more fruitful possibilities in terms of novelistic polyphony.

Overtones of dialogism – the overt privileging of engaging other voices as equals in the creative endeavor – abound within the works of key improvisational practitioners.
The very social nature of play and its interactivity provide a dialogic basis for the North American Boyd/Spolin tradition.¹ Spolin writes, “The techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating” (Rehearsal, 5) and her games, in no small part, seek to enable each player to develop his/her own voice in tandem with his/her fellow improvisers. Paul Sills more explicitly calls upon the notion of dialogue:

> True improvisation is a dialogue between people. Not just on the level of what the scene is about, but also a dialogue from the being—something that has never been said before that now comes up, some statement of reality between people. In a dialogue, something happens to the participants. It’s not what I know and what you know; it’s something that happens between us that’s a discovery. (Sweet 19)

“Reality is shared,” (ibid. 17) he writes: it is a conversation. Coleman posits the potential influence of the University of Chicago and its Hutchins Plan on early American improv at the Compass.² With its unconventional Socratic atmosphere, “where doubt was a virtue and all assumptions were questioned” the Compass’s university home “was extremely receptive to the uncertainties of improvisation” (112). Seham also recognizes this communicative quality in Compass founder David Shepherd and describes his vision as seeking “a political community theatre that would fight class oppression through dialogic interaction between actors and ‘real people’” (7).

Johnstone employs dialogism in his definition of dramatic action as “the product of ‘interaction,’” defining interaction as “a shift in the balance between two people”

---

¹ Andrew Miracle writes of play, “Inherent in virtually all of the literature on play and communication is the assumption that both phenomena are social. Even the play of a child alone is often interpreted as play with a fictionalized character or a make-believe playmate” (61).
² This innovative style of education was the brainchild of Chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago from 1931 to 1951, and was largely inspired by the medieval university of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Kozlowski 10). As Coleman notes, Hutchins and the basic model of the system “had no distrust in youth” (3) and subsequently “it was unextraordinary for a twenty-one-year-old at the University of Chicago to have a Ph.D” (ibid. 4). Coleman’s further observation that the “Hutchins system called for dialogue, not for lecture,” (ibid. 5) reflects a certain affinity with Paulo Freire and Spolin’s teachings.
(Storytellers, 77), and Playback Theatre’s Jo Salas’ “conversational” view of improv with its “constant reciprocity of offers” (“What is ‘Good,’” 26) evokes a similar comparison. Community Theatre traditions, drawing from the teachings of Paulo Freire, seek to elicit true dialogue with their communities (Van Erven Playful, 21), as does the later work of the Living Theatre (Rosenthal “Living,” 151) and Guerilla (Invisible) Theatre, such as that conducted by Marc Erstin (Cohen-Cruz “Motion,” 98).³ Daniel Feldhendler observes that both Moreno and Boal seek a dialogic theatrical engagement that is “an authentic encounter among humans” (90). Boal’s work, in particular, is replete with dialogic images. “Theatre is this energy [of the gaze] passed from one actor to another, between the two of them” (Hamlet, 146), he writes. “It is not what each person creates in isolation, but the thing they make together […] the smallest theatrical unity is two people” (Legislative, 49). He also uses the term explicitly to describe the overall mission of his work: “The Theatre of the Oppressed, in all its various modalities, is a constant search for dialogical forms, forms of theatre through which it is possible to converse, both about and as a part of social activity, pedagogy, psychotherapy, politics” (ibid. 4).⁴

The above survey amply reveals that the improvisational event is undeniably dialogic in its privileging and incorporation of many voices, a condition signified by the heteroglot. Yet, as Bakhtin dictates, polyphony is only achieved when these personas are able to exhibit free will and are not captured, manipulated or severely pruned in the service of a dominating, singular authorial presence. The manner in which improvisation frames performative discourse to this polyphonic end is more complex, for while Bakhtin posits unmediated discourse as the ideal mode, freedom must coexist with structure in the

³ Erstin defines Guerilla Theatre as “Theatre-which-pretends-not-to-be-theatre” (Vincentini 217).
⁴ See also Cohen-Cruz Radical, 14; Jackson Games, xxi; Boal Games, 60; Boal Rainbow, 27; Boal Legislative, 49.
performance event. This search for multiplicity within spontaneous unity serves as the focus of this chapter. In the absence of the form of Bakhtin’s preferred novel, how does this embodied discourse take shape? How do form and freedom coexist in the multivoicedness of spontaneous performance? Structuring devices to be considered include: the varied incorporation and utilization of leaders, the employment of “texts,” frames and codified systems, character-based modalities of scenic exploration, and finally, philosophical or holistic improvisational codes.

**Leading the Way: Sidecoaches, Jokers, Directors and Conductors**

Experienced leadership plays an important role in many improvisational traditions. The consideration of amateur/professional tensions discussed in Chapter Four reveals that spontaneous theatre must often carefully walk the divide between all-encompassing experience and selective artistic aesthetic. In order to meet these challenges and assist in the creation of an inclusive and meaningful artistic event, many improvisational forms employ the services of a skilled moderator or facilitator. Whether Spolin’s sidecoach, Boal’s Joker, Moreno’s director or Fox’s conductor, these figures have much in common. Rather than seeking to capture the voices and experiences of those in attendance, these theatrical figures serve as dialogic enablers. Rarely do they strive to promote a particular vision or monologic encounter. Instead, their skills and structural embellishments serve to maximize the emergence of diversity and polyphonic representation. Each unique type of leader is considered below in turn in an effort to appreciate this recurring structural component of improvisational theatre.
Viola Spolin’s vision of the sidecoach clearly emerges from her work with Neva Boyd who, according to biographer Paul Simon, “introduced the importance and significance of leadership in play” (“Philosophy,” 23). Boyd writes of this playful relationship: “The teacher must be one of the group, a person of much wider life experience than the children but with no more right to domineer than they, no right to do more than put into every situation that which works for justice and the rights of all” (44).

This legacy of experiential equality, where all participants and their experiences are valued equally, continues with Spolin and her artistic descendants. She describes her preferred working (playing) climate as “[l]iving, organic, non-authoritarian” (Improvisation, liii). In such a locale, the role of the teacher/director is radically redefined from its more conservative stance as a promulgator of knowledge, transforming during workshops and rehearsals “into a fellow player” (Rehearsal, 9) Cf. (Improvisation, 30). Ideally, this newly adopted stance can be equally liberating for all those involved.

If permitted to do so, [the] theater workshop will allow personal freedom and equality to flower. For when individuals of any age know that what they are doing is contribution and service to a project and not imposed authoritarianism pushing them about, they are free to release their humanness and make contact with those about them. It is a thrilling moment, indeed, when the child accepts us, the adults, as peers within the activity! (Improvisation, 257)

The playing field is leveled and all voices – child and adult alike – are encouraged to interact freely.

Spolin’s sidecoach is an instrumental contributor to this desired environment of playfulness and equality. She refers to this role as “one of the generating facets (energizers) of the theater game process” (Rehearsal, 10). Literally, the sidecoach serves a pedagogic function by analyzing the needs of scenic explorations in process, and
providing (verbalized) suggestions or additions as the exploration unfolds to help players interact effectively. In *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor: A Handbook*, Spolin depicts the process: “Side coaching is a guide, a directive, a support, a catalyst, a higher view, an inner voice, an extended hand, you might say, given during the playing of a game to help you stay on focus” (7). There is clearly a traditional directorial component here. “It is the voice of the director seeing the needs of the overall presentation,” Spolin writes. However, this is merely one aspect of this pivotal relationship. She continues, “at the same time it is the voice of the teacher seeing the individual student-actor’s needs within the group and on the stage. It is the teacher-director working on a problem together with the student as part of the group effort” (*Improvisation*, 29). Spolin’s performance mode is unambiguously collaborative and the process of play does not seek to serve a monologic directorial vision. Accordingly, sidecoaching is not employed to steer the participants to a pre-selected end other than, perhaps, the event of performance itself. “Sidecoaching brings you on stage with your fellow players, who are also swimming upstream toward performance. By allowing yourself to enter the role of sidecoach you and your players become part of the growth process simultaneously” (*Rehearsal*, 10).

The sidecoach is truly one of the players, holding a pedagogic role nonetheless, but in a redefined way. Spolin explains: “Side-coaching alters the traditional relationship of teacher-student, creating a moving relation. Side-coaching allows the teacher-director an opportunity to step into the excitement of playing (learning) in the same space, with the same focus, as the players” (*Improvisation*, 28). Players are not taught by the sidecoach, so much as everyone learns through experience. Such a dialogic relationship is made possible, in part, by the very nature of the improvisational event
where outcomes are more provisional and less preordained than in more conventional settings. The sidecoach’s concern is the perpetuation of an enabling process rather than the creation of a particular product. Coleman reiterates this point: “Since each [Spolin] game presents an acting problem with infinite solutions, there is no ‘right’ way to play a theatre game. So the sidecoach, whose job, no less than the players, is to keep following the focus, unlike a director, has no preconceptions of an outcome in his or her head” (27). Generally speaking, the sidecoach’s primary responsibility then is to encourage a sense of heightened focus on the “point of concentration” or game/problem of the scene. Structurally, s/he encourages players to engage with each other in the activity of the common game, promoting embodied discourse and action around the task at hand while keeping the participants from “wandering off into isolation within a subjective world: it keeps one in present time, in the time of process. It keeps each player aware of the group and the self within the group” (Improvisation, 29).

Johnstone’s various improvisational practices represent a complementary utilization of the sidecoach figure who first appears in the guise of his earliest onstage directions with England’s Theatre Machine. He recalls, “When the Theatre Machine strayed into ‘old material’, I would head them off, not because they were ‘cheating’, but because fresh material is more exhilarating” (Storytellers, 25). Sidecoaching is a key device in the Theatresports laboratory and Lyn Pierse notes that it is a “most active and effective method of improvisation teaching,” particularly when employed by an experienced practitioner (42). Pierse’s description of the process reflects a similar sensibility to that espoused by Spolin:

Sidecoaching can be an intensive and exhausting process because the coach needs to be ‘in the moment’ with eyes on the focus of every offer,
every step of the way […] The role of the coach is to build players’ belief and confidence, assess their energy, interpret their body language and literally coach on the spot with the scene […] The aim of sidecoaching is to maximize the potential of players’ ideas rather than introduce the coach’s. (Ibid 42)

Again issues of equality, self-discovery and experiential learning (rather than handed-down solutions) are stressed.5

This structural system is also employed in various Johnstone-inspired performance formats. In Theatresports, the role of sidecoach may be incorporated into the judges’ duties – the panel of three “celebrities” ostensibly ranking the efforts of the competing teams thereby determining the night’s overall winner (see Johnstone Storytellers, 323-324). Similarly, the related short-form variant, Danish Game, where a series of challenges are issued and met by rival teams, incorporates an Ombud (host) who is largely “responsible for making sure that the match runs efficiently” (ibid. 331). Australasian Theatresports often employs the services of an emcee and/or timekeeper who, depending on the type of event, may also assist and guide the teams in their work. Judge, Ombud and emcee alike may assume sidecoaching duties by addressing the needs of the players or the overall structure of the show with an eye to facilitating a more focused or successful event. In Johnstone’s Gorilla Theatre, the importance of the sidecoach becomes more pronounced: this performer “stops the scene, rewinds it, asks players to take a different offer or make a different choice, disqualifies or replaces players, and generally directs them through the scene, calling it as it plays. Players take

---

5 Among Pierse’s suggestions for effective sidecoaching are, “talk as little as possible during the session. Allow players to have a practical experience rather than describing the experience to them” (43), “encourage players to express their own culture” (ibid. 44), and “Encourage natural laughter. Most laughter is constructive. Permit it. Encourage it. Laugh too!” (ibid. 45). This advice reiterates the importance of cultural context, and the central role of laughter, discussed at length in Chapter Three and Six respectively.
turns performing this function throughout the performance” (Pierse 391). Regardless of the involvement level, both Spolin and Johnstone’s sidecoach figure privileges the experience and creativity of the player over his/her own, and serves to facilitate the development and articulation of the multiple voices involved in the production. Both sidecoaches seek to “dialogize heteroglossia” by shaping and focusing the theatrical exploration.

Boal’s Joker serves as a second example of improvisational leadership. Adrian Jackson discusses the significance and meaning of the Joker’s identity:

The word ‘joker’ refers to the joker in a pack of cards, and has no link with the idea of playing jokes. The joker figure is, in various different contexts and combinations, the director, referee, facilitator and workshop leader; in the context of Forum Theatre, the joker is the person who acts as intermediary between audience and performers, and is attached to no one party – just as the joker in a pack of cards belongs to no one suit but floats between them. (Games, xxiv)

Elsewhere, Jackson amends his concept of the Joker as facilitator to that of “(in Boal-speak) a ‘difficultator’, undermining easy judgements, reinforcing our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action or frighten us into submission or inactivity” (Rainbow, xix-xx). This notion of the Joker as neutral or inclined toward disrupting simplistic grand narratives provides another model of dialogic intent. Boal’s “cultural animator” (Boal Legislative, 3) does not seek to didactically impart wisdom, but rather earnestly aims to inspire debate. As Boal remarks, “The joker is not the president of a conference, he or she is not the custodian of the truth; the joker’s job is simply to try to ensure that those who know a little more get the chance...}

---

6 Paul Sill’s sidecoaching role in performances by Sills & Company (1986) was similarly high profile – see Bennetts 1.

7 David Diamond, in his article “Out of the Silence: Headlines Theatre and Power Plays” offers a differing perspective in this regard, noting that “The joker, or intermediary between the play and the audience, parallels the trickster in Native [Canadian] imagery” (Diamond 38).
to explain it, and that those who dare a little, dare a little more, and show what they are capable of” (*Games*, 21).

Boal’s dedication to facilitating the empowerment of his participants’ voices is further emphasized when one considers the “almost obligatory” rules for his Joker’s conduct (see Boal *Games*, 232-4). He explicitly discourages any attempts to coerce or manipulate the audience. Efforts to prematurely or naively draw conclusions (or monologize) the explorations of those present are similarly frowned upon. Furthermore, the Joker must cede his/her right to forcibly govern the event or overtly shape the action. “Jokers personally decide nothing,” Boal instructs. “They spell out the rules of the game, but in complete acceptance from the outset that the audience may alter them” (ibid. 232).

As with Spolin’s sidecoach, the Joker’s primary aim is to encourage and heighten involvement and to magnify or acknowledge tensions or inconsistencies as they emerge through the play. To this end, the Joker dissuades “magical solutions” to complex performed problems – such as the proverbial discovered winning lottery ticket (ibid. 233) – and serves largely as an instigator through the deployment of focused questioning. “[T]he joker must be Socratic – dialectically – and by means of questions, by means of doubts, must help the spectators to gather their thoughts, to prepare their actions” (ibid. 234). Boal’s Joker assists in the shaping of thoughts, but does not seek to impart or dictate their meaning. His/her role is to stimulate the enacted discussion, not to direct it to a predetermined answer.

Boal’s *Rainbow of Desire* techniques reveal a particular affinity to the valuing of multivoicedness or heteroglossia. Exploiting the tools of his earlier Forum and Image Theatre practices, Boal’s new “psycho-therapeutic arena” (*Rainbow*, xix) was
developed during his period of exile in Europe during the early 1980s. He recalls the
process in his autobiography:

In Europe, I started hearing about species of oppression not discussed in
Latin America: loneliness, isolation, emptiness, lack of communication –
very different from strikes, shortage of water, hunger and violence, but . . .
many people were committing suicide because they could not cope with
these things [...] I felt obliged to invent new techniques that could help the
victims of these forms of psychological torture to theatricalise their
oppressions, in order to understand them and fight them. (*Hamlet*, 324)

The resulting basic structure resembles the sociodramatic work of Moreno and Fox’s
Playback Theatre, incorporating improvisations where the volunteering protagonist
physically manifests his/her “individual, internalised oppressions” (*Jackson Rainbow*,
xviii) through the use of his/her own body and those of the assembled players. “Cops in
the head” – oppressive agents or images that negatively impact the individual’s available
courses of action – are thereby made concrete. Particular human agents, such as the
individual’s father or a specific priest, embody hitherto abstract societal pressures or
sources of oppression, such as one’s family or the church (see Boal *Rainbow*, 136-137).
Images are often created manifesting the various oppressive voices. These portraits are
then manipulated and ultimately challenged, dissected or redressed.

The site of Boal’s Rainbow work is the individual protagonist who “must exercise
the functions of dramaturg and director: she must compose the scenario, point out the
conflicts and the psychological characteristics of the character, and suggest the main
movements – the markers – of the scene” (ibid. 67). However, the process of this
technique embraces heteroglossia in its embodiment and particularization of the various
influences acting upon the protagonist, a dynamic the Joker/director seeks to articulate.
Sharon Green considers this form to be an advancement from Boal’s earlier explorations
for this reason. She notes that the Rainbow of Desire “moves away from the dynamic of one oppressor and one oppressed to explore the multitude of voices, personae, and forces that act together to create oppressive conditions” (53). Boal’s earlier work posited a multi-voiced audience of spect-actors while providing a typically singular image of monologic oppression. The development of the “cops in the head” techniques allowed the exploration of an equally complex and multifaceted enemy.

Additionally, the dynamised images explored in the work also allow and encourage a dialogic encounter: “Here there are no misreadings, only multiple readings, and the readings most wildly at odds with each other are often the most fruitful and revealing” (Jackson Rainbow, xx). Again, the Joker/director figure does not necessarily seek to combat these inconsistencies and complexities, favoring instead an approach of questioning and complicating rather than answering and reducing. Through analogical induction,8 the process of individuals personally identifying with the scenarios and images explored, players seek to engage themselves in the discourse, thereby heightening the overall interactivity of the event and encouraging the many voices of both oppressors and oppressed to meet and debate.

The Joker of Boal’s Rainbow of Desire has much in common with the related figure of the director in Moreno’s psychodrama: a third example of dialogic structuring through leadership. Psychodrama, a therapeutic methodology incorporating the language and devices of theatre, was invented by Romanian Jacob Levy Moreno and given shape by him from the 1920s onwards, primarily in the United States. This mode continues strongly today, after his death, guided largely by his wife and former co-author, Zerka

---

8 Boal writes of this concept: “The function of analogical induction is to allow a distanced analysis, to offer several perspectives, to multiply the possible points of view from which one can consider each situation” (Boal Rainbow, 45).
Moreno, among others. Casting the former psychological “client” anew as the “protagonist,” psychodrama privileges the embodied stage as a locus on which problematic issues and dynamics are enacted; “Psychodrama involves the staging of a problem in life as if it were a play” (Blatner *Acting-In*, 1). Explorations are often public and highly interactive, with the protagonists or auxiliary performers possibly coming from the audience itself. All those present, regardless of their status in the “play,” however, have the common goal of (public) healing in mind.9 The tools of psychodrama, such as role-playing, reversals and the encounter session, have become increasingly borrowed and utilized by numerous other disciplines (often to different ends), while its core tenants and drive have assumed international proportions with presence across the globe in countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Portugal, Korea, Estonia, Macedonia and Slovenia.10 In this sense, Moreno’s impact on the way in which therapy is manifested is profound and far-reaching. The psychodramatic impetus is optimistic and group-oriented, seeking to illuminate and address fractures in the individual as s/he intersects with the world at large. This model is also based on an embodied and active notion of creativity, allowing participants to explore new more productive behaviors in reaction to old limiting impetuses.

Few theatrical treatises have considered psychodrama’s dramatic or improvisational affinities and borrowings, in part due to the movement’s focus on healing and efficacy (perhaps a sad commentary on conventional theatre’s increasing

---

9 See Fox *Essential*, 129-153 for a detailed transcription of a work session.
10 Blatner provides an extensive list of the countries in which psychodrama has been explored – see Blatner *Foundations*, 34-35.
ineffectualness in these realms.)\textsuperscript{11} In fact, theatre practitioner and psychodrama therapist alike mutually reinforce this divisive boundary: Adam Blatner asserts, “One thing that psychodrama is not, however, is merely a psychologically infused dramatic novel or theatrical piece” (\textit{Acting-In}, 9). Frost and Yarrow provide precedence for this study with their more unifying view: “Impro and psychodrama are both about transforming what seems impossible, or inexpressible: disclosing it, not running away from it, releasing its negative or damming energy” (146). As Blatner outlines elsewhere, Moreno’s own language, and earlier innovations with his Theatre of Spontaneity, points to an intimate connection:

[\text{Instead of patient, the person whose problem is the focus of an enactment is called the ‘protagonist.’ The person facilitating the enactment is the ‘director.’ Other people who help as supporting players are ‘auxiliaries.’ Other people present who witness the action are lumped together as ‘the audience.’ And the locus for a psychodramatic exploration, at least during the action phase, is ‘the stage.’} (\textit{Foundations}, 2-3) Cf. (Fox \textit{Essential}, 13) (Dayton 8)

Moreno’s director figure provides a fitting example of dialogism through leadership while simultaneously revealing the unequivocally theatrical side of psychodrama’s improvisational impetus.

The focus of the director is unquestionably on the protagonist/subject and the performance event seeks to validate and facilitate the “act hungers” of this participant. Moreno’s therapeutic model was radical in its re-situation of the psychodramatic players.\textsuperscript{12} In traditional therapy models, the subject came to the expert therapist who

\textsuperscript{11} Blatner includes in his list of challenges faced by psychodrama the observation, “It was hard for people to imagine that such a superficial endeavor [theatre] could be turned into something healing” (\textit{Foundations}, 42).

\textsuperscript{12} Blatner writes, “From the period of 1940 through the mid-1960s, psychoanalysis held a hegemony in psychotherapy, but Moreno’s action methods served as one of the major alternatives to the relative passivity of traditional psychiatric treatment” (\textit{Acting-In}, 181).
possessed the curative tools. In the psychodrama model, the therapist/director and patient/protagonist seek remedy and expression together. For example, Moreno writes of the auxiliary egos, those players enlisted to represent the needed personas for the protagonist’s explorations, “[t]hey are extensions of the director, exploring and guiding, but they are also extensions of the subject, portraying the actual or imagined personae of his life dream” (Fox Essential, 15). These functionaries are enlisted in the service of both director and protagonist alike. Clearly, the director brings more clinical experience and knowledge of the field to the equation, just as Spolin’s sidecoach and Boal’s Joker do. Moreno observes that the director “enters as a participant-actor, armed with as many hypothetical insights as possible, into the spontaneous activities of the subject, to talk to him in the spontaneous languages of signs and gestures, words and actions, which the subject has developed” (ibid. 17). However, the director does not seek a monologic discourse: “Moreno considered everyone in a group to be an agent for the healing or helping of everyone else” (Blatner Foundations, 3). Blatner refers to this shaping philosophy as mutuality, a concept he defines at length:

The principle of mutuality is an implementation of the more basic principle of humility and refers to the idea that the director must be guided by feedback from the protagonist. When the director makes a suggestion that the protagonist feels is unhelpful, the protagonist must be free to express his feeling, and must know that the director will openly listen to the objection and be willing to change […] Because each individual has a unique set of abilities, temperament, past experiences and goals, help must be individualized. (Acting-In, 112)

Director and protagonist are both creative agents and a dialogic model of therapy is fostered in which the voices of all the participants are esteemed. Players formerly cast as passive patients are empowered as agents of potential healing for both themselves and
others; their voices are engaged in the therapeutic-theatrical event where they both lead the director (Dayton 9) and are given framing structure by his/her experiences.13

The fourth and final example of dialogizing leadership emanates from the teachings of Moreno but provides perhaps a more aesthetic therapeutic model. Playback Theatre’s structure is highly dependent upon the successful negotiation of its conductor for its artistic potency. Fox notes that all Playback performers must acquire a rather diverse set of skills: “a good playback actor and leader must be skilled in a triad of roles—as an artist, a host, and a shaman” (Fox and Dauber 127). He explicates each role further: “It is an objective of the artist to entertain and delight the audience; the host to establish trust and put people at their ease; and the shaman to engender an atmosphere of enchantment and even confusion as a stepping stone to entering what has been called the ‘other thought’” (ibid. 128). The Playback conductor, however, inhabits a particularly challenging position in the overall event, responsible for an array of interpersonal and structural procedures and dynamics. “Playback’s purpose is always to bring people together,” Jo Salas writes, “to affirm the individual and the group. Without mastery of the conductor’s role, this fundamental goal cannot be achieved” (“What is ‘Good,’” 28). Fox characterizes the overall task of this “half-director, half-actor” figure: the conductor “communicates directly to the audience, invokes the Tellers [audience-members who share their personal stories], is a link between the teller and the actors and has ultimate authority for beginnings and endings. The conductor is more than anything else a conduit

---

13 Salas refers to the considerable value of this empowerment when the related Playback ritual is used with psychiatric patients. She writes, “It is extremely therapeutic for a patient to realize that she can help by taking on a role in someone else’s story. Suddenly, she is someone with gifts to give, no longer defined only by her deficits” (Improvising, 123).
– for words, feelings, energies” (Acts, 121). In short, in the Playback performance, “[t]he buck stops at the conductor” (ibid. 129).

Though one could consider that a great deal of power lies in the hands of the conductor figure, it is perhaps more accurate to characterize this as a great deal of responsibility. While Fox suggests that Spolin’s model of leadership equality is naïve (ibid. 168) – an indication, perhaps, of its imperfect fit with the artistic rigors of his own chosen form – Fox allies his conductor with this tradition of dialogic leadership, drawing parallels with relatives in other non-scripted theatre modes, such as the clown, Boal’s Joker, the therapist, teacher-director, emcee and coordinator (ibid. 121). The conductor’s work involves assembling the performance event from various available components, moving from enacted or “played back” scenes (the namesake function of the form) to structures such as Pairs, Tableau Stories and Fluid Images. Furthermore, s/he serves to facilitate the maximum involvement of those present, an unmistakably dialogic function. “[T]he conductor needs to manage (control) the man who wishes to tell too much, so that there will be space for others” (Fox and Dauber 131). Within the performance, the conductor actively seeks a position of multiplicity, enabling as many different and distinct voices to emerge as possible. Playback’s nonlinear model that foregoes a grand narrative or overarching plot is particularly inclined to the heteroglot, and the conductor’s

---

14 In particular Fox has issue with Spolin’s pursuit of complete equality between teacher and student. Fox feels that such a stance denies the inherent “otherness” of the teacher figure and does not acknowledge the complex power arrangements that a leader must traverse in an effort to create a democratic process.  
15 Salas defines each of these stock devices. Pairs are “two contrasting or conflicting emotions going on at the same time” in an audience member, embodied by sequential pairs of players, one standing before the other, each assuming a physical manifestation of one half of this conflicting feeling, therefore creating an emotion unit together. “Theatrically, pairs serve the function of providing a peak of intensity, a change of pace from the much longer and sometimes wordy process of enacting scenes” (Improvising, 39). Tableau Stories involves a series of frozen images portraying a narrated series of events (ibid. 41-42). Fluid Images incorporate short, abstract aggregates of sound and movement that express audience members’ responses to the conductor’s questions” (ibid. 31).
position of inclusivity, balancing structural concerns with a sincere effort to allow
everyone to share any story, promotes an infinite array of potential intersections and
dialoguing. “The conductor does not try to conceal these connections between the
dramatic and social,” Fox observes, “but to the contrary, points them out when he or she
is aware of them” (Acts, 49). The conductor promotes Bakhtinian active double-voiced
discourse and provides selfless leadership to this end. In keeping with his/her
counterparts – the sidecoach, Joker and director – the conductor is, to quote Salas,
“generous” (“What is ‘Good,’” 25) with a shamanistic focus that “resides in others” (Fox
and Dauber 129), providing helpful structure so as to give voice.

Following the Rules of the Game: Texts, Taxonomies and the Birth of Long-Form

The leaders in the above models clearly exist in complex and rich events and also
make use of other structural devices in order to facilitate the dialogic event of
performance. While selfless leadership can serve to enable participants to raise their
voices in embodied discourse, so too can the defining framing devices. Just as the
theatrical sites are porous, so too are the collaborative models employed, whether they
are (oral or written) texts, codified linguistic systems, or game/frame structures. These
systems, rather than acting as totalizing or reductive forces, generally seek to serve as
impetuses to conversation, providing a performative blueprint or outline as opposed to a
d dictated or anticipated end. Ranging from the metaphoric or inspirational “chart” of the
Living Theatre’s Paradise Now, to the extreme codification of Japanese renga poetry’s
taxonomies and the malleable ludic structure of ImprovOlympic’s long-form Harold,
improvisational structures pursue, with various degrees of success, the artistic balance of form and freedom, design and inspiration, unity of vision and multiplicity of voices.

At first glance it may appear that one cannot truly speak of texts and improvisation within the same breath, as they appear to exist on diametric ends of the performance spectrum. However, spontaneous performance often exploits texts of both a written (outlines, scenarios, text fragments) and oral (inherited, traditional) nature as important catalysts for improvisatory play. Such a performance stance is not necessarily without its limitations, and may not always achieve the greatest degree of Bakhtinian dialogism (in its second sense.) Yet, elements of parody, stylization and quotational performance practices permit an enriched dialogic dynamic. In this sense, script/improv hybrids, such as the aforementioned Shear Madness, The Mystery of Edwin Drood and Game Show, while not serving as exemplars of polyphony, since firm pre-established narratives undoubtedly steer the performance event, nonetheless display an inclination towards the inclusion of multiple voices. Other written texts are deliberately constructed as more fluid and malleable entities, such as the scenario of the Commedia dell’Arte pinned backstage during performances. Historian Pierre Duchartre describes this textual device as “a little heap of ashes left from a great and spectacular fire” (50). Scenarios clearly do not represent the details and finesse of the performance event. These are not the artworks themselves but the tools of an artwork: “their original merit lay not in the subject or text, but rather in the proficiency of the troupe that interpreted them” (ibid. 50). Acting Out, a New Hampshire program developed in 1989, employs the scenario form to a more overtly dramatic end (see Cossa et al 16), as does Boal’s work that often calls for scenarios in the initial stages of his Forum encounters (see Boal Legislative 54-55).
Written texts also provide raw material for several short-form games, such as Actor’s Nightmare (Pierse 245), Headline (Johnstone Storytellers, 365) and Playbook (Goldberg 176), which are dialogic in their efforts at recontextualization and parodic interplay.

Traditional and oral texts offer similar structural support. Within the Playback event, vocalized stories generated in performance serve as oral scripts. Salas observes that this textual element is crucial to the show’s structure while also stressing nonetheless an accompanying sense of freedom: “In Playback, unlike some other forms of improvisation, we do at least know the rough outline of the story. Still, we don’t know exactly how it is going to go until it is happening” (Improvising, 54). Johnstone’s Life Game receives formulaic assistance in a similar fashion as the recitation of the guest’s life story, guided by the show’s interviewer, provides an oral blueprint for the unfolding action. Reviewer Michael Kuchwara remarks, “Good improvisation needs structure, a framework in which the performers can be as freewheeling as possible. [Interviewer, Lee] Simpson provided that framework” (Kuchwara “Everyone”). Flexible collaboratively derived oral texts serve as the basis for most Community Theatre productions: traditional spontaneous performances, such as Nigerian Apidan Drama and South Korean Madang, largely rely upon preestablished inherited methodologies that should be considered under this rubric as well. To a certain degree all improvisational performance can be said to employ some form of ritualized text, as it is the combination of familiarity and artistic novelty that dialogically define the performance event. Theatre is recognized as such through its perpetuation of societal frames and customs that have been previously accepted as performative. Salas notes, “In Playback Theatre, ritual means the repeated structures in time and space that provide stability and familiarity,
within which can be contained the unpredictable. Ritual also helps to summon the heightened perception of experience that can transform life into theatre” (Improvising, 104). As Salas reveals, familiar orally transmitted structures frequently provide the means through which spontaneity can emerge.

One final example will serve to illustrate both the considerable diversity of improvisational textual elements, and the challenge that such frames can provide in terms of dialogism. Julian Beck and Judith Malina founded the Living Theatre in the mid 1940s and it is now “internationally known as the longest extant avant-garde theatre company” (Rosenthal 150). Initially production work, while experimental, was predominantly script-based in nature. By 1968, however, “the writer had largely disappeared as a major force” (Sainer 310), a change in orientation underscored by their landmark production, Paradise Now. This was the company’s first work to directly seek audience participation. Aldo Rostagno describes the production:

This play is a voyage from the many to the one and from the one to the many. It’s a spiritual voyage and a political voyage, a voyage for the actors and the spectators [...] The revolution of which the play speaks is the beautiful, nonviolent anarchist revolution. The purpose of the play is to lead to a state of being in which nonviolent revolutionary action is possible. (170-171)

This description reveals certain impetuses common to the improvisational endeavor. The play is a voyage, implying an emphasis on process rather than product. This voyage occurs in many overlapping locales (spiritual, political, artistic), thereby exhibiting the tendency to blur boundaries (a concept discussed in the next chapter.) A clear purpose and desire for action is demarcated, signaling a search for theatrical efficacy, and this action unites all those participants in attendance, revealing an inclination towards porous and inclusive ideals. As Smith and Dean remark, improvisation was seen not only as a

216
performance mode for Beck and Malina, but also as “an important political tool: they were keen to provide ways of encouraging the audience to engage with them as part of their program, which was the journey towards revolution and the establishment of collective, non-competitive endeavour” (210).

The guiding form adopted by the Living Theatre for their production of *Paradise Now* is rather unique in that it is a pictorial chart signifying the various stages of performance. “The chart is the map: it depicts a ladder of eight rungs, a vertical ascent toward permanent revolution. Each rung consists of a Rite, a Vision, and an Action, which lead to the fulfillment of an aspect of the revolution.” (Rostagno 170). This “map” is undeniably complex – consisting of eight progressing rungs designated by Roman numerals (informed by Hassidic teaching of the ladder between man and heaven), I Ching Oracles, ten holy attributes of the Kabbalah (and one above) corresponding to various body parts, colors (symbolizing the move from darkness to light), Chakras (centers of power) and “confrontations” (the stumbling blocks preventing actions and the necessary force to overcome them). To elaborate, the first rung or stage of performance, “Good and Evil,” consisted of the following elements. The *rite* was that of Guerilla Theatre and included the utterance of phrases such as “I am not allowed to travel without a passport” and “I’m not allowed to take my clothes off.” The corresponding *vision* was the death and resurrection of the American Indian, in which peace pipes and images of human totem poles were deployed (and destroyed), with the *action* consisting of players speaking from among those assembled on the auditorium floor.16

16 Other details of this rung include the physical focus of the feet, the I Ching Oracles of progress, inner truth and the marrying maiden, the color black, Asana Yoga, the Kabbalistic Sefirah of the Kingdom (Malkuth) and the confrontation of culture and aesthetic assault.
Despite this extraordinarily interwoven blueprint, *Paradise Now* sought a level of interactivity and engagement with its audience. Beck and Malina, for example, assume a dialogic doctrine in describing the ideal relationship between player and spectator.

If the public begins any sort of enactment or initiates any movement, speech or dialogue, the actors then join with the spectators in giving support to the scene that the spectators are playing. If this digresses from the revolutionary theme or from the plateau to which we have been brought by the Rite and the Vision, the actors then try to guide the scene back to the meaning of the Rung. If the public is extremely passive and unresponsive, the actors will initiate spontaneous/improvised action. Having initiated an action, they will again wait for the public to take it up. (Malina and Beck 45)

However, also within this credo can be seen the shadows of (albeit well-intentioned) coercion. In opposition to many improvisational forms, the structure of *Paradise Now* is not particularly flexible and while discourse is sought, there is a strong investment in the specific projected progress of the piece. Despite its non-traditional “chart” text, elements of monologism remained – a shortcoming noted by audience-member Ronnie Johnson in New Haven: “In that play you created a situation and then you didn’t deal with it. You didn’t let people deal with it either. You went back to the script, like a Broadway play. You can’t expect people to swallow it” (Neff 46). Subsequently, *Paradise Now* provides a powerful example of the need for provisionality in performance, regardless of the specific nature of the oral, written or pictorial text, if true polyphony is to be achieved. It is not the form of the text but the manner in which it is used that allows such a relationship with one’s audience. In the improvisational performance, radical structural departures from the conventional playbook may nonetheless perpetuate dynamics of monologism, although, as the below example of renga poetry reveals, complexity itself does not necessarily banish spontaneity.
In addition to textual frames, improvisation can find structure (and freedom) through linguistic means. This is particularly the case with traditions that are predominantly verbal in nature. Modern analysis of oral poetry, led by the studies of Parry and Lord and their work with Croatian singers, provides a fitting example of improvisational performance that employs a linguistic structuring system: the oral-formulaic process. This methodology “depends on creation by the performer during the act of performance” (Finnegan “Oral Poetry,” 121) and largely replaces a formerly held view that much oral poetry was essentially memorized and recomunicated verbatim. Lord writes, “An oral poem is not composed for but in performance […] Our singer of tales is a composer of tales. Singer, performer, composer and poet are one under different aspects but at the same time. Singing, performing, composing are facets of the same act” (13). Subsequently, oral poetry manifests the improvisational spirit, incorporating and accessing the peculiarities of the here and now in the event of simultaneous composition and delivery. Examples of this mode include Chinese lyric poetry, Xhosa panegyrics, Sumatran narrative songs, and the izibongo of the South African “itinerant bard” (Dhlomo 34). Coplan’s description of the latter modality captures the essence of the art as a whole: “Each performance employs standard, previously composed, and improvised verses in fresh combinations, and no two recitations are precisely the same” (156).  

17 Ruth Finnegan outlines the linguistic structural properties used to assist the performer/poet in his/her craft. Prosodic elements are often employed, such as meter/metrical patternings (predominantly in European traditions), syllable counting (common among some Asian practices), rhyme (Malay quatrains and Fijian heroic poems), and/or tonal rhyme (Yoruba and Burmese modes.) Composition is further aided through the use of parallelism, “a type of repetition with variation in meaning or structure” (“Oral Poetry,” 123) which may also take the form of question and answer exchanges. Finally, distinguished language (metaphorical or figurative) and highly culturally and contextually specific musical accompaniment often serve to assist in performance. Jonathan Fox summarizes the resulting facets of the oral narrative style as:
Japanese *renga poetry*, an ironically well-documented and textually supported oral mode, serves here as a focused example, though by oral poetry standards it is anything other than typical. Renga (chain-link) poetry thrived during the Japanese Muromachi period (c. 1336-1568). With antecedents in the *waka* and courtly poetic traditions, and remnants in the modern haiku, renga provides one particularly improvisational link in a chain of Japanese poetic expression. In its simplest sense, it can be defined as a collaborative endeavor, a mode of expression in which a group of participants provide discrete poetic units, one after the other.

\[
\begin{align*}
Toki no ma no & \quad \text{Spring’s brief moment} \\
Haru ya mukashi ni & \quad \text{Soon will become} \\
Narinuramu & \quad \text{A thing of the past.} \\
Omokage kasumu & \quad \text{A hazy apparition—} \\
Ariake no tsuki & \quad \text{The fading dawn moon.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Quoted in Carter “Three,” 122)

Its building blocks are alternating sequences of 5-7-5 syllable and 7-7 syllable clusters that may reach completion after one such exchange, or continue until reaching a predetermined ending point, potentially ranging into the thousands of such units. During its “golden age,” renga sessions typically took the form of the *hyakuin* where one hundred sequences were linked. The underlying premise of these performances was relatively straightforward. Each subsequent poet was to add a new link that related to or was informed by the previous offering. In this manner, the individual links were designed so that any two consecutive parts made “an intelligible whole,” while any three parts did not necessarily embody such a unity (Sato 3). As Konishi remarks, “chain”

---

aggregation (repetitious in terms of themes, phrase and structures); concrete narration (dealing with events rather than concepts); performance as ritual; and performance as improvisation (see Fox *Acts*, 11-15).
renga then is a particularly fitting name for this linked-poetry tradition as “each link ‘touches’ only the one before and after it” (History, 89).

Renga exists amongst a sea of paradoxes: it resulted in esteemed poetic products but was essentially performative in nature;\textsuperscript{18} its ushin (serious) form was practiced by the elites of society while the mushin (comic) strain was enjoyed by peasants, reflecting an unusually broad spectrum of appeal. It privileged spontaneity and the ability to freely compose in the moment of the performance, yet simultaneously developed an unparalleled complexity in its codified linguistic rules. It is this last tension that is of particular interest here, providing a model of linguistic structuring through which remarkable creativity and dialogue was attained. Renga achieved initial imperial sanction with Nijō Yoshimoto’s (“the supreme arbiter of elegance in renga” – Hibbett 77) compilation of Tsukubashū, an imperial anthology, in 1357. This marked the ascendancy of the practice to the realm of a courtly art. What followed was a series of manuals seeking to elevate and standardize renga conventions. Yoshimoto was to provide the first, Ōan shinshiki, in 1372. After a wane in the form’s popularity, amendments to this original work were to follow with Ichijō Kanera’s Shinshiki Kin’an of 1452, Iio Sōgi’s Azuma Mondō of 1470 and Shōhaku’s comprehensive rulebook of 1501. The result of each renga master adding to and articulating the composition systems was the eventual comprising of what Carter describes as “perhaps the most detailed set of genre conventions in world literature” (“Rules,” 581).

\textsuperscript{18} Few historians have, in fact, considered the performative aspect of the tradition as an important constituent element, overlooking or minimizing that events were largely improvisational and dramatic in nature. See, for example, Keene “Dramatic,” 275; Keene “Comic,” 248; Konishi History, 461; Carter Road, 101. H. Mack Horton provides a welcome dissenting voice in his “Renga Unbound: Performative Aspects of Japanese Linked Verse.”
This “poetic legislation” (Hibbett 83) provided a centripetal force for the performative poetic practice that “kept the form from degenerating into a pastiche of improvisations” (Brower and Miner 415). Fundamentally, rules were concerned with issues of rarity and linking, and were designed to “enforce the principles of change and continuity” (Hibbett 81). Through the establishment of set lexical and thematic categories, and the consequent limiting of “occurrence, recurrence, and dispersal of words in those categories,” the rules aimed to ensure balance and variety (Carter “Three,” 120). Occurrence (or repetition) rules limit the number of times certain words may appear in a full renga sequence, with, as Shōhaku notes, “[a]ny striking or conspicuous word” being “restricted to one appearance in a sequence” (598). Recurrence (or intermission) governs how many verses must separate and isolate different instances of the same word or category – sun and moon, for example, must be separated by two verses. Dispersal (or seriation) determines the “number of verses in which thematic or lexical categories may appear in sequence” (Carter “Rules,” 584). More “suitable” poetic topics, such as spring and autumn, must continue for between three and five verses, whereas the less seemly seasons may be dropped after one (Hibbett 82). Though the principles are relatively straightforward, the nuances in application are formidable with each subsequent renga master further fine-tuning the details. In addition to almost

---

19 A certain dismissive tone is detectable here in Brower and Miner’s use of the term improvisation, although as their treatment is essentially a literary consideration, such a stance is perhaps not unexpected.
20 Lexical categories include mountains, dwellings, waters and falling things, while spring, love, travel and Buddhism are distinguished as themes – see Carter “Rules,” 592 and Konishi “Art,” 40-41 for more comprehensive lists.
21 Shōjun further advises that some words, such as the names of distant places, Chinese words and vulgarities should be avoided altogether (510), while other “alarming” words are limited to one appearance in a thousand verses, such as demon, tiger, dragon and woman (Hibbett 82).
22 Generally speaking, the closer in kind two images are, the further they must be separated within the sequence, though there are numerous exceptions to this simplification. For example, while “waves of blossoms” conflicts with both its constituent elements (Waters and Plants) and must therefore be isolated accordingly, “blossoms on the waves” inexplicably only clashes with words contained within the Water lexicon – see Shōhaku 616-617.
endless rules and exceptions governing how words may be used, renga language is also highly referential. Meanings and allusions often became set due to traditional usage in the imperial poetry collections. According to this tradition, “[t]he ‘moon’ of renga, regardless of the season in which the renga is composed, or in spite of an individual poet’s preference for the moon in summer, is always an autumn moon” (Konishi “Art,” 46).

The significance of this complex tradition to this study is twofold. Firstly, while the detailed chart and systemization of Paradise Now could be considered to have narrowed the possibilities of improvisational performance and introduced a monologic driving force, the unparalleled codification of renga’s linguistic properties does not seem to have become similarly rigid. Within this immense system of poetic legislating remained an extraordinary creative freedom, and while such rules inevitably, and perhaps deliberately, favored the courtly rise of the form and the renga master (chief practitioners who became professionalized and presided over the most austere composition-performances), the event itself maintained a surprisingly spontaneous air. Literary knowledge, considerable study and rigorous preparation were unquestionably needed for the more elite gatherings, but such work took place before the session began.23 The gathering at the renga performance site, the ba, was incontrovertibly extemporaneous. “The pace was too fast and the poetic moment too fleeting to consult reference matter,” Horton observes (468). Complementing a reverence for the past as represented in the canon or rules and set allusions is a very immediate and privileged relationship with the here and now. Sōgi, who Carter describes as “one of the most conservative of poets”

23 Several sources state that a minimum of twenty years is required to gain an adequate understanding of renga composition. See Miner 59; Carter “Three,” 125 n.32; Bower and Miner 417.
(“Lesson,” 736), recognized the pivotal role of the present. He writes in 1491, “[i]n
general it is true that a work is unlikely to succeed, no matter how respectful it is toward
the past, unless the present is also included” (quoted in Keene “Comic,” 251). The
practice of renga reveals that structural complexity does not necessarily reduce the
potential for improvisational potency.

Secondly, renga performance provides a particularly powerful example of highly
dialogic performance. This meeting of voices occurs on many mutually reinforcing
levels. Renga was undeniably a group affair. It is a “group creation,” a “group
endeavor,” a fitting member of a “medieval tradition that stressed community over
individuality.”

Though there are some accounts of individual composition practices, these are typically considered to be for training purposes: the renga event itself was
designed to be collaborative. As such, it stands as an exceptional medieval example of
dialogic creativity. It should be noted that participants were not universally deemed as
complete equals. Deference was traditionally paid to senior players before offering a
verse and seating was clearly stratified in the more formal gatherings. But, as a
contemporary, Kensai, notes, “[w]ithout being exalted, one mingles with the great”
(quoted in Horton 457). The site of renga performance was perhaps unusual in its variety
of voices, with many renga masters achieving artistic prominence from truly humble
origins. This dialogism between participants in the present is heightened by an extremely
referential relationship with the past; the frequency and specificity of allusions manifests
Bakhtin’s concepts of stylization and parody, as does the quotational quality of the

---

24 See Konishi History, 279, Keene Seeds, 933 and Carter Road, 4 respectively.
25 Carter writes, “solo work can only have been a very different creative experience, more introspective and
reflective, less a public performance than a private challenge” (Road, 101). See also Hibbett 80 and
Konishi “Art,” 33 n.1.
overall event. Finally, renga is also unusual in that it eschews storyline or narrative elements: it is, in Konishi’s words, a “symphony of images” (“Art,” 45). Bakhtin argues that dialogue cannot remain rich and open if it serves a plot: “a plot-dependent dialogue strives toward conclusion just as inevitably as does the plot of which it is in fact a component” (Problems, 252). Subsequently, renga with its multiple voices seeking aesthetic interconnections rather than story consistency, its continued conversation with the past and collaborative spontaneity in the present offers a particularly rich dialogic site.

Further supplementing textual and linguistic structuring systems, improvisation can also find form through the use of games and frames. Boyd defines a game as “a situation set up imaginatively and defined by rules which together with the prescribed roles, is accepted by the players” (47). Games differ from textual structures considered above in that “[n]o one knows the outcome of a game until one plays it” (Spolin Improvisation, 46). Whereas a text, scenario or “chart” typically steers the players towards a desirous outcome while allowing (ideally) some freedom with the specifics of the journey, a game provides an area of focus, a rule or a consideration that informs an exploration but generally allows both the process and final destination to be generated through performance. Boal refers to his Forum Theatre in this language, noting: “Forum Theatre is a sort of fight or game, and like all forms of game or fight there are rules. They can modified, but they still exist, to ensure that all the players are involved in the

---

26 Ossie Enekwe observes in “Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland” that there is “ample evidence in theatre history to show that linear plot is not essential to good drama, and that function determines the form of drama in every culture” (151). He cites the Doric mime, Commedia dell’Arte, Balinese Legong drama, Indian Sanskrit drama and Japanese Noh as other examples of non-plot focused theatrical traditions.
same enterprise, and to facilitate the generation of serious and fruitful discussion” (Games, 18).

The game is the modus operandi of short-form improvisation. Theatresports and Comedysportz consist of a series of team-generated performance games that are loosely strung together by a competitive skeleton. Each game provides the players with a specific challenge or focus. As Paul Sills notes, “If a theater game is presented freely and played freely, it has a gift to give. It’s a theater game. It gives you the gift of an entrance or an exit or a relation on a deeper level than you can ordinarily get” (Sweet 16). Players may perform with a physical challenge (such as in Contact where dialogue may only be spoken when characters are physically touching each other – Spolin Improvisation, 171), a verbal limitation (the game Alliteration requires players to begin as many words as possible with an assigned letter – Johnstone Storytellers, 362), or a unique staging requirement (Sit, Stand, Kneel and Lie calls for team members to each physically adopt a different one of these four stances during the scene – Pierse 250). In addition to providing a focus or obstacle for the scene, such game structures also enable a variety of scenic styles during the course of a performance event. The vast eclecticism of available options makes it unwise to attempt a detailed dialogic analysis. Suffice it to say that each format offers a specific manner in which the players and audience interact and share voice and that this diversity itself provides the potential for communicative richness and variety.

27 These are obviously only a small indication of the vast array of game types. Other common game categories or dynamics include music, gibberish, style/parody games, scene replays, status battles, endowments (where hidden information must be uncovered), interview structures, freeze tag and slow motion formats, narrative and rhyming scenes. The list of potential formats continues to expand as companies invent and reinvent games to suit their own needs and skills.
A frame is an overarching system or structure that seeks to unite an improvisational event and is used here to distinguish such a tendency in long-form modes. While long-form may incorporate short-form games, inserting a recognizable device occasionally into the flow of the performance, the frame provides the greater structure and gives shape to the event as a whole. Perhaps the most influential and widely known example of this type of structuring device was created by Del Close and Charna Halpern at Chicago’s ImprovOlympic during the 1980s and is known by the rather unlikely name of the Harold.\(^{28}\)

**Del Close** (1934-1999) has been described variously as “the most influential figure in the work since Spolin and Sills” (Kozlowski 4), “one of the three ‘titans’ of improvisational theatre” (Arbanel 6), “a complete original” (Coleman 229), “the legendary guru of pure improvisation” (Sahlins 102) and a “lifelong devotee of improvisational comedy” (Weber “Del Close,” B9). Weber continues to note, “Mr. Close was one of those show business legends whose influence was felt far beyond his limited fame” (ibid. B9). As an improviser he worked with the majority of early major American companies, such as the Saint Louis Compass, Second City and San Francisco’s The Committee, before teaming up with ImprovOlympic’s Charna Halpern in 1983 after her less successful partnership with David Shepherd dissolved. Close’s major contribution to improvisation, among many, was his elevation of the form to the unapologetic realm of art. Markwell writes, “Close was among the first to respect improv as something valuable in its own right, freeing the performers to come up with a new show every

---

\(^{28}\) The odd naming of the form was as a nod to George Harrison’s flippant response to a reporter’s question inquiring as to what his haircut was called (“Arthur”). Tim Kazurinski calls it “a dumb name for something really rather wonderful” (Halpern et al. 8). See also Kozlowski 28; Scham 49; Deixler “Honoring,” AR5.
night” (19). This notion was radical in its day, especially when considered against the prevailing beliefs personified by Bernard Sahlins at Second City.

Close couldn’t be more fundamentally at odds with the former king of improv. Where Sahlins sees improvisation as nothing more than writing by other means, Close sees it as ‘a doorway into something.’ Where Sahlins looks for the irony in a scene, Close claims to look for the transcendent. And where Sahlins finds nothing to justify an extended improvisation, Close envisions ‘complex, multi-character theatre pieces. (Adler “The ‘how’”)

While others sought to create material from improvisation, Close perceived a different potential. “The important thing is how good the show is onstage,” he remarks. “That’s still our point – not that we get the material through improvisation, but that we get a certain kind of material you don’t get any other way” (Del Close Resource: Quotes).

This generation of a different kind of material would reach fruition in his longstanding partnership with Charna Halpern (b.1952-).

Halpern’s first improvisational partnership netted a Theatresports-derived competitive format (see Seham 46). At first her efforts to start an improvisation company stemmed largely from what she rightly perceived as a lack of performance outlets for Chicago improvisers. During the early 1980s, “Spolin’s chosen surrogate” (ibid. 114) Josephine Forsberg and her Players Workshop was the only place in town that taught improvisation. Halpern’s improvisational interests had been piqued after reading Jeffrey Sweet’s Something Wonderful Right Away, which had, in turn, motivated her to attend a workshop offered by Paul Sills. She recalls, “Because there were so many improv groups at Players Workshop that had nowhere to play, I realized that if I did this [create ImprovOlympic] we could have a place to play anytime we wanted. This was what I meant to do” (quoted in Markwell 17). Her first attempt with David Shepherd was
unsuccessful as the two ill-suited innovators “developed separate visions” (Halpern et al. 3). Del Close proved to be more ideologically compatible, and this partnership soon resulted in an “innovative, surreal, and even quasi-religious mode of long-form improv” (Seham 39): the Harold.

This long-form trailblazer developed from Close’s earlier experiments with a loosely defined extended form of the same name in San Francisco and Halpern’s own innovation – the more structured Time Dash – that moved pairs of players through three successive scenic vignettes. Coleman describes the resulting combination as “an improvisational long form of jump-cut one-liners, short scenes, and monologues that could be created on the spot by an entire ensemble from an audience-suggested theme” (292). The structure, though fluid, is composed of three basic elements: scenes, games and monologues. Generally the Harold begins with an onstage brainstorming technique, such as a rant, series of monologues or choral exercise, in which the proffered audience suggestion is embellished and deconstructed. Material, ideas and characters developed during this curtain raiser loosely or tangentially provide the inspiration for all the material that follows. From this opening sequence, the first of three scenes emerges, typically with two to four players. These opening scenes primarily involve players establishing a relationship (Halpern et al. 140). Upon the completion of these three opening scenes, a game is played. Halpern and Close use this term in its more general sense, so while a short-form inspired game may find its way into the Harold, these games – which typically involve the majority of the 8-10 person team – may also just be the exploration of an emergent dynamic. Players may merely seek to uncover the latent game/dynamic of a group scene rather than apply a structure from outside. After this first game reaches
completion, the form returns to the three pre-established scenes (usually in order, although character combinations and locales may change.) The original relationship is explored, heightened or disrupted. Once again an all-player game (perhaps related to the first) serves as an interlude, the three scenes then reappear for a third and final time, coming to some form of resolution, with the event ending with a final full company scene or unexpected recombination of prior elements. Throughout the event, players may interject monologues that comment on, enrich or problematize the onstage action.

Although players may chose to artistically deviate from the above system (a noteworthy tenant of Close’s philosophy in general), the Harold structure provides a resilient template for performance and has basically remained intact after two decades of experimentation. The resulting event resembles a “kind of dramatic collage” (Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 25). Complex in subtleties, the structure is simple in intent. “One of the reasons the Harold is so brilliant is its inherent simplicity,” Kozlowski extols. “Building the basic structure of themes, patterns, and the Time Dash allows improvisers the freedom to explore the potential of improv, limited only by their own willingness to be fully accepting of what their fellow players explore” (69). Teacher/director Noah Gregoropoulos refers to the necessary skills as a way of seeing – recalling the central metaphor for this consideration of improvisation’s generic qualities. He observes,

> You just have to look. You have to open your eyes. It’s a way of seeing. Just like any of the arts are. That’s what makes it like life . . . you think of your life as a narrative when in fact it’s probably a lot more like a Harold . . . You don’t make order out of chaos, you see the order within the chaos. (Quoted in Seham 54)

---

29 For additional descriptions of the form in theory and performance see Halpern et al. 133-147, Seham 41-42 and Kozlowski 32-33.
Amelia David describes the nature of the resulting performance: “As they perform, they discover connections, interweaving their characters and stories to create a cohesive universe” (21).

The Harold’s structure of scenes, games and monologues provides a loose frame in which the players may explore and voice their own subjective stances. While ImprovOlympic pursues “groupmind,” a philosophical tenant that could be considered potentially totalizing or monologic in essence,30 the Harold offers ample room for negotiation and dialogue. Players serve simultaneously as individual and collective authors, seeking patterns in the ephemeral performances that express both their personal subjectivities and the shared experience of the group in the here and now. Seham identifies the practice of personal monologues that may be inserted at the players’ discretion throughout the performance as a particularly rich site for voicing difference (see Seham 69). The Harold, with its penchant for recycling previous material, also lends itself to considerable referentiality, thereby inviting the dialogic reclaiming and reframing of previously voiced or embodied ideas. Unlike short-form traditions, where material typically dies at the end of each 3-4 minute game, the Harold’s sustained exploration (sets average around 45-50 minutes) permits and encourages more complex dialoguing, both amongst the onstage participants and with/between the assembled audience. Form and freedom, once again, coexist in a creatively invigorating and dialogic relationship.

**Structures with Character: Physical-Based Frames**

While experienced and sensitive players can provide leadership, and written and oral systems offer unifying goals or rules, improvisational structure can also be provided

---

30 The possible political downfalls of this improvisational approach are dealt with in Chapter Six.
by the use of characters. Masks, stereotyped roles and recreated historical personas all offer a physical means for the mediation of various creative voices and are subsequently discussed here. Through spontaneous dramatic exchanges, pre-established characters, much like a text, can offer performers a blueprint to guide the creative event, serving as a structural frame of reference. Each character or mask embodies a set of expectations for both the performer and the observer alike, particularly when these participants share a common contextual or societal bond. Whether on a conscious or unconscious level, the mask dictates that certain behaviors are acceptable or commonplace, providing a character template that stimulates particular types of action: foolishness, gluttony, mockery, naïveté. Each type attracts certain styles of performance and a particular code of conduct while forsaking other performance possibilities.31 As noted in Chapter Three, masks in particular may offer a strong link to tradition and the past, placing the performer within a rich context, while equally spurring him/her forward into action focused on the here and now. In our current analysis this tension can be further enriched. Masks additionally provide the site for the dialogic negotiation of traditional form and improvisational freedom.

Numerous traditions employ the character mask as a means of engagement and structuring the improvisational event. The ancient Atellan Farce comprised of four such masked characters each with, as Nicoll provides, defining features: “Old Pappus, malicious Dossennus, greedy Maccus, and Bucco, stupid and talkative” (Masks, 74). Medieval disguisings featured a “mimed action and dancing by masked participants, which appeared in England after the prohibition of the popular mumming in the first third

31 Johnstone describes a modern example of a mask, Mr. Parks, transmitting identical characteristics between two isolated and unconnected wearers – see Johnstone Theatre, 165.
of the fifteenth century” (Vince Companion, 97), providing a relatively radical, and politically dangerous, freedom of activity within atypical societal parameters – hence its oscillating history of suppression and reemergence. South Korean Madang employs the masked character of Malttugi, “the rooted one,” who “traditionally represents the Minjung, the little people.” Van Erven tells of this player: “Even in the oldest Gut plays, Malttugi eventually always conquered the oppressive nobility with his common sense and slyness” (Playful, 112). Here the voice of the oppressed is esteemed in the guise of a masked representative. Peru’s Pukllay project of the late 1990s performed by the troupe Yuyachkani employs local Fiesta masks. Maskmaker Gustavo Boada describes the masks’ structural process: “the mask is an element that initiates an internal process in which the actor mobilizes sensations to produce, in the first place, an idea of space, and secondly, the actor’s vision of the mask: a special intuitive knowledge of what the mask can and cannot do” (Bell “Rediscovering,” 178). Luis Valdez similarly employed recognizable masks to structure his early work with El Teatro Campesino. Prosaic voice was facilitated through the creation of Esquirol, Patronito, Huelgista and Contratista – the scab, grower, striker and contractor personas respectively (Vincentini 175). All these traditions provide a tapestry of characters whose expected inclinations and relationships inform the unfolding action of the spontaneous event.

The remarkable longevity of the Commedia dell’Arte particularly serves as a testimony to the effectiveness of the mask as an improvisational structuring tool.33 Coupled with the scenario, the mask artistically defines this movement. For while the scenario changed from performance to performance, the pallet of characters remained the

---

32 The group’s name translates variously as “I am thinking, I am remembering” or “I am your memories, I am your thoughts,” depending upon the dialectal region (Bell “Rediscovering,” 169).
33 The early history of the Italian commedia movement is summarized briefly in Chapter Four.
same, with individual actors and actresses literally spending their entire careers embodying a singular mask: Giovan Battista Andreini, the son of Isabella and Francesco, is said to have played the lover Lelio until he was 73.\textsuperscript{34} The universe of characters – vecchi, zanni and innamorati\textsuperscript{35} – is rich and, in its simplest sense, embodies heteroglossia with numerous (literal and figurative) languages intersecting in the performance event, as a brief survey reveals. Pantalone, the “first old man,” traditionally spoke in Venetian dialect and possessed the “contradictions of senility” (Oreglia 78). He was “very avaricious yet a lover of pomp and splendor, wily yet rash; slanderous and quarrelsome, subject to sudden explosions of fury and vehement outbursts of curses and invective” (ibid. 78). The Doctor served as the second vecchi and was marked by his (highly dialogic) use of language, particularly the way in which he “pronounced pseudolearned harangues in dog Latin” (Scott 4). Typically portly or obese, he was a “member of all the Academies, a busy-body, a muddler and exceedingly presumptuous, he is a great wise- acre, expatiating on everything, for the most part inopportune” (Oreglia 84). A third common vecchi was the Captain, a satiric personification of the Spanish military. Fantastically boastful and a “supposed self-proclaimed Great Lover,” (Brereton 7) the Captain was always overtly cowardly in his actions despite his empty rhetoric to the contrary.

The servants are equally defined and grotesque. Brighella served as the cunning servant; he strove to embroil “as much as possible his master’s rivals and even, with pretended stupidity, his master himself and the heroine” (Smith 12). His craftiness is contrasted by the foolishness of the second zanni, Harlequin. Often serving as the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{34} See Rudlin 106-7; McKee xv; Nicoll \textit{World}, 108.
\textsuperscript{35} Old men, servants and lovers.
\end{footnotesize}
Captain’s companion, his true loyalties were to food. While the Captain wore a sword, Harlequin carried an emblem of the genre: the wooden slapstick. This patch-worked garbed “loutish peasant” (Richards and Richards 20) typically engaged in highly physical and acrobatic behavior rather than Brighella’s rakish wit and manipulation.\(^{36}\) Pulcinella Cetrulo also served the function of a zanni and embodied a slowness of mind with a sense of warm-heartedness and humanity. Typically portrayed with a hump, a beak-like nose and bird-like speech, this character was usually more elderly than his servant peers.\(^{37}\) The servants, as these brief descriptions attest, were equally “masked” or distinguished by their costumes and behavior as by their more literal leather visors.

The constellation of characters is completed with the lovers. Typically appearing under their players’ own name or a unique (and occasionally inherited) pseudonym, lovers wore the latest fashions of the day, a costume less suited to ready generalization. As noted in the previous chapter, the importance of these roles is often overlooked as male and female lovers performed without the leather masks of their counterparts. Yet, as Andrews argues, these characters should also be considered under this rubric, for although they performed with uncovered faces, they “kept the same name, costume, language and other exterior characteristics from one play or scenario to the next” (172). Such a stance provides a more inclusive definition of mask, employed here, namely a

\(^{36}\) Oreglia notes that Harlequin would later evolve (as all the masks did) and incorporate aspects originally assigned to the first zanni, becoming “credulous and diffident, a lazy-bones but also a busybody, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness, of awkwardness and grace” (56-7). Some masks also evolved to represent their particular host locality, such as the German character Hanswurst, portrayed by Joseph Anton Stranitsky and France’s Pierrot originated by Jean-Baptiste Deburau. The English puppet, Punch, is a similar cultural derivative – see Leach’s *The Punch and Judy Show*.

\(^{37}\) Though less defined as a species, and reciprocally less represented in the extant scenarios, there are also numerous references to female servants, or *zagne*. Kennard speculates that the usual commedia troupe arrangement was three women and seven men (*Masks*, 38). Such an organizational structure would partially explain the less unified servant types for women as troupe numbers may have required them, particularly during the earlier years of the form, to more consistently don the more pivotal role of a lover.
physically and vocally distinguishable character that remains consistent despite the numerous changing contexts in which s/he may appear. Within extant scenarios, Pantalone may change occupation, but his recognizable essence always remains the same, enough so that Shakespeare’s Lucretio could comfortably reference this figure by uttering, “beguile the old pantaloon” in *The Taming of the Shrew* (III, i, 37).

The verbal component of the Lovers’ performance, with its incorporation of elevated and often poetical rhetoric, is particularly noteworthy in our current consideration of structure and dialogism. Physical elements of buffoonery, slapstick and acrobatics are often emphasized over the equally important verbal elements of the Doctor’s parody of learned speech, the Captain’s empty satirical boasting, the dialectal stylization of the Venetian Pantalone, and the romantic versification of the Lovers. Yet both physical and verbal elements are integral to the form; physical *lazzi* are employed as readily as verbal citation and parody generated from the *generici.* Many companies also performed “regular” plays; subsequently, the potentials for quotational performance, particularly by the Lovers, are high as there was ready access to scripted and previously memorized material. Therefore, in addition to the physically stylistic and parodic actions that evoke a dialogic interconnectedness with the past, a high degree of verbal referentiality and linguistic density further enrich the multivoicedness of the event. As Commedia’s star waned in the 18th century, artists such as Carlo Goldoni would claim that the masks and scenarios had more or less become set and impoverished. However,

---

38 Anderson defines the *generici* as a commonplace book used by commedia actors in which they stored suitable “passages for memorization and adaptation to their own performance requirements” (Anderson “The Law”). In this sense it is a written/verbal equivalent of the stock of physical buffoonery devices and slapstick routines, or *lazzi.*
during its heyday, it is clear that the combination of the form’s loose scenarios and fixed masks provided ample room for creative and dialogic freedom.

Characters also serve as the performance focal point for several interactive improvisational modes. Mask traditions allow types to move relatively freely from one event to another while retaining a consistent level of familiarity; stereotyped roles are distinguished by their peculiarity and uniqueness to a specific setting or performance. Similar to the mask, however, such characters often rely heavily upon easily recognizable traits, particularly when these roles are involved in participatory modes where a certain common knowledge is desirable to facilitate audience interaction. Story elements vary widely, from the largely scripted *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding*, to the “primary activities” of Gary Izzo’s Interactive Theatre, and the biographical/historical emphasis of Living History. Each device, however, is designed to elicit structured exchanges with the event’s participants, thereby providing a polyphonic style in which the prosaic public is invited to literally find their own voice and, perhaps, character. Let us look briefly at each of these interesting structural examples and their respective use of characters, stereotypes and recreated historical personas.

First performed in 1986, Artificial Intelligence’s *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s Wedding* is an “audience-participation comedy lampooning working-class Italian matrimonial rites” (Erstein E3). Paula Span, in her *Washington Post* review, remarks that the production “falls somewhere on the theatrical scale between scripted comedy, extended improvisation and ongoing experiment in audience participation” (Span B1). Taking place in both a church and reception hall, audience members become “wedding guests” at

---

39 An exception to this observation is Moreno’s psycho- and sociodramatic models where, through role-playing, the protagonist essentially plays him/herself (or an aspect/reflection thereof.)
an elaborately theatricalized and improvisational ceremony. Conceived by Nancy Cassaro, the structure incorporates an overlapping assortment of text, scenarios and spontaneity. The “script” includes an overall outline/timeline of the performance, detailing important moments and dynamics for the overall shape of the day, as well as fully developed vignettes and detailed 1-2 page biographies of the over 20-person cast (See Cassaro et al.). However, in reality, the “cast” at any given performance is considerably larger. “Guests” are admitted with mock wedding invitations rather than conventional tickets, and the entire event is “painstakingly detailed to create a world the audience can enter” (Benton 5). Therefore, while Father Mark may recite a scripted ceremonial speech inviting those assembled to the wedding (see Cassaro et al. 57), much of the event is deliberately spontaneous. Cassaro’s remarks in her production notes highlight this aspect of the production. “The most important quality to look for when casting The Wedding is the actors [sic] ability to improv well, be natural and have a sense of humor” (ibid. 117).

Although the timeline and textual elements are of clear importance, Cassaro emphasizes the pivotal role of the detailed characterizations that people Wedding. “In effect, the audience creates the world with you—there is no fourth wall,” she advises. “Through the history sessions and the improvisations, you will create a history for your character that cannot be shaken by any audience member. It is important to have a pact amongst the company to never break character under any circumstances” (ibid. 118-119). The methodology truly encourages dialogic interplay with the audience: this is the defining feature of the event. Span observes that unlike Shear Madness and other improv/text hybrids, “Only at ‘Tony N’ Tina’s Wedding,’ […] does the audience
become, in effect, part of the cast” (B1). Benton concurs that the show deliberately walks “the aisle between reality and fantasy” (5); a dynamic echoed by Erstein who adds, “Invent an identity and relationship to the merging families and let the actor in you take over” (E3). Audience members are encouraged to enter the participatory spirit of the event. The well-prepared and trained improvisers (in character) endow the rules of the game to the paying guests as the event takes shape. Cassaro notes this dialogic process:

The wedding is new theater for most people. When was the last time you got to talk to Stanley Kowalski or have a chit-chat with King Lear? Cast members of the wedding are teachers of a new kind of theater. You must first have patience with all your friends who will insist on calling you by your real name […] Avoid the people who show you no respect. There will be a lot of other people who are willing to learn how to participate. (Cassaro et al. 135)

By the end of any given night, she remarks, “the majority of people are totally involved” (quoted in Span B1). Such character-driven forms provide a great deal of creative freedom for all those involved, merging multiple playful voices at the site of performance.

Recalling the philosophies of Boyd and Spolin, Gary Izzo defines the second character-based mode: “Interactive theatre is the art of play,” he writes. “There is no simpler or more accurate definition” (Art, 5). A style most commonly recognized in environments such as Renaissance Festivals, Interactive Theatre is less script-bound than Wedding and often unfolds over entire days. It is a form of theatrical emersion where players and audience alike role-play and create another, usually historically distant, world.

---

40 Some rules are explicitly laid out: “The reality is … yes it’s audience participation and the audience has a certain way it should participate. Don’t let anyone stay at the wedding who is inappropriately dressed [for example, as another bride or a nun]. They steal the focus” (Cassaro et al. 136).

41 Much Murder Mystery Theatre operates in much the same fashion, balancing storylines and character biographies while encouraging audience involvement. For example, Ian Wilkes’ Murder Tonight! Rehearsed Improvisations on a Theme is essentially a collection of settings and character histories.
or event. Audience members may join or leave the site at any time, thereby preventing the unified story arch of *Tony ‘n’ Tina’s* ceremony. Izzo also distinguishes this style from participatory theatre, such as *Shear Madness* and *Game Show*, noting that “the interactive play is no longer aware of itself as a play […] Audience members are merely fellow characters within the illusion” (ibid. 25). A common trope of the mode is that of cocreation: “The outcome of any scene may change completely depending upon the actions or response of the guest. These actions or responses continually alter the unfolding drama. The guest, as cocreator, is as responsible for the outcome as the actor” (Izzo *Acting*, xiii).

Interactive Theatre involves the utilization of instantly recognized stereotypes brought to life by the various performers. “It plays off the audience’s collective impressions or assumptions about the subject because interaction begins with the guests’ understanding of what surrounds them” (Izzo *Art*, 39). As Seham observes in her consideration of stereotypes in Chicago improv, playing to “collective impressions” can be problematic (see Seham 103). There is clearly a potential for the reification of harmful assumptions in this type of methodology, but Izzo adds that ideally “Interactive style also means stretching the audience’s perceptions for the sake of insight’” (*Art*, 39).42 Izzo provides the qualities desirous for these stereotyped personas. In addition to being specific and appropriate to the selected performance locale (Renaissance Fair, Old Western Frontier Town) characters should be extraordinary (intensified and magnified),

---

42 There is clearly and necessarily a selective process in terms of what is to be presented. He writes, “An actual recreation of an Elizabethan town would include oppression, bigotry, public humiliation, torture, disease, and an all-pervading stench. An interactive environment with real sewage running down the side of every street or with the sight of animals being slaughtered may impress those who enjoy shocking their audiences, but it would do little to encourage playful interaction […] our themes must retain an air of innocence” (*Art*, 37). Subsequently, as discussed in Chapter Six, depending on the particular perspective of the practitioners, the form may adopt a conservative (status quo) or radical (change-oriented) position.
fascinating (detailed and focused), identifiable (wearing its “exposition on its sleeve” – ibid. 65), approachable (both physically and emotionally), vulnerable (bestowing “control upon the guest” – ibid. 68), and likeable (does not pass judgments on the guests).\(^{43}\) Characters imbued with these qualities utilize “primary activities” typical of their stereotyped persona as foils to interaction and plot development. These structural devices are all designed to encourage and facilitate play and to spark the creative freedom of the guest. For Izzo, this invitation is the form’s particular strength:

> Each work of the theatre contains some kind of insight. The power of the theatre of the stage lies in its ability to deliver this insight through a vicarious experience. Interactive theatre actualizes the experience, making it felt all the more. The unique ‘message’ of interactive theatre lies in its ability to reintroduce the watcher to his or her own inner child. (Ibid. 17)

Interactive Theatre, in this view, provides a locale for voices to be freed and cocreation to thrive.

Living History modalities adopt a similar character-centered form as that of Izzo but employ it to a considerably different end. Whereas Cassaro and Izzo prioritize a playful creative experience, Living Histories follow a more overtly educational mission, utilizing improvisational performance as an effective and experiential pedagogic tool. This mode “refers to the practice of having costumed interpreters re-enact historic events or the activities of daily life in appropriated settings so far as practically possible” (\textit{First} and \textit{Third}). Massachusetts’ Plimoth Plantation serves as a strong example of the impetus.\(^{44}\) Formally incorporated as an “outdoor museum” in 1947 by Henry Hornblower II, the site initially assumed a more conventional approach to history,

\(^{43}\) See Izzo \textit{Art}, 61-69 for a detailed discussion of these characteristics.

\(^{44}\) Other Living History locations include Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia), Conner Prairie (Indiana), Beamish (Durham, UK), and Iron Bridge (Shropshire, UK). Rhode Island’s Astors Beechwood is a related site, blending Living History methodologies and improvisations with a tour-guide sensibility.
exhibiting artifacts and conducting lectures. In 1969, under the direction of James Deetz, the “living history metamorphosis” began (Living History) and by 1978 the program decided to whole-heartedly adopt a system of first-person interpretation. “In first person interpretation, interpreters assume the identities of historical individuals and present the re-enacted activities as ‘what we did back then’ or, if adopting the trope that the visitor has stepped back in time, ‘what we are doing now…” (The Evolution). This philosophical shift was due, in part, to the concurrent emergence of Social History, a new mode of history that viewed history prosaically, from the bottom up. Prior historical thought “which emphasized a generalized narrative of leaders and dates, was superceded by an interest in a new perspective on the past which sought to illuminate and understand the lives of ordinary people, previously overlooked ethnic groups and so forth” (ibid).

First person interpretation provides a particularly performative and interactive character-based event, and Plimoth Plantation notes that their specific modality is truly improvisational in nature (see First and Third). So while some may discount the theatrical merits of the form – Izzo, for example pens, “It is fascinating in its own way, but it is not drama” (Art, 37) – Living History clearly assumes a highly dialogic (and prosaic) guise as it interacts in the here and now.

Depending on the season, you may see a garden planted, cornfields being hoed, or the harvest brought in and stored. If you stop to talk with a householder, you may hear about issues of land ownership and payment of debt, or even the colony’s latest gossip. Each day in the Village is different and exciting and each colonist is an individual whose conversation will intrigue and entertain you. (Plimoth Plantation Backgrounder)

Role players, informed by a well-tuned historical knowledge, utilize characters as the conduits of exchange. The experience’s focus on education may differ from more overtly
theatrical modes, but its face clearly resembles the Commedia dell’Arte masks, *Tony ‘n’ Tina* well articulated cast members, and Interactive Theatre stereotypes. Each form uses distinct characterizations and relationships in order to structure and guide the performance event; each mode allows room for and encourages improvisational play and/or interactive engagement; each approach encourages dialogue, polyphony or dialogic complexity.

**Considering the Bigger Picture**

Whereas leadership, frames and characters often intersect in complicated fashions to provide structure and direction for the improvisational impetus, practitioners such as Spolin, Close and Johnstone combine these elements within a greater philosophical view of spontaneity. Accordingly, the smaller structural units discussed above are partial manifestations of a larger improvisational stance; they reflect a bigger picture of how creative voices can and should be combined. These shaping philosophies underpin and inform the act of collaborative creation, setting parameters and key principles in place for the dialogic dance of improvisation. So while the particular rules of a short-form game or long-form frame change to reflect the needs of the particular dynamic sought, improv philosophies remain constant regardless of the specific performance site. Several tenants are now commonplace, particularly in Western modes. Concepts such as acceptance (alternatively yielding or agreement) involve saying “yes” to the ideas of one’s scene partners. Story-building elements, such as shelving and re-incorporation (or callbacks) assist in shaping scenes as previously mentioned elements become reintroduced into the flow of the scene. These devices clearly have a dialogic agenda in their facilitation of
allowing disparate voices to emerge and be recycled into the event. Other philosophies are more individual to the various training schools of thought such as Spolin’s “WWW,” Close’s groupmind, and Johnstone’s Theatresports-inspired commandments.

Structurally much of Spolin’s work centers on the clear communication of a “who,” “what” and “where” – information that, once established, provides the ground plan for the resulting game. Given the relationships, activity and physical location, players are enabled to find a focus for a given scenario. As her career continued, Spolin began to perceive three more philosophical key ideas and dynamics that defined the improvisational spirit. In the Preface to the second edition of her improv manual she isolates the importance of belonging, equality and concentrated focus on the physical space and task at hand. Ideally, all players should be unified and “directly involved in the outcome of the playing,” she writes (Improvisation, liii). This group cohesion is aided by the desired ability “for players to see themselves and others not as students or teachers but as fellow players, playing on terms of peerage, no matter what their individual ability” (ibid. liii). This sense of equality is accompanied by a sense of responsibility: “Every actor on stage is responsible for everything that happens. If some actors are not aware of the stage picture, other actors must move them” (ibid. 147). Focus on the physical space, the here and now site of performance, further prevents the improvisational event from becoming solipsistic, needlessly intellectual or “in the head,” joining the players in a common task in “improvisatory time.” Although Spolin’s system privileges unifying the group’s voice, she is clearly opposed to this becoming a monologic endeavor: “The differences as well as the similarities within the group are
accepted,” she writes. “A group should never be used to induce conformity but, as in a game, should be a spur to action” (ibid. 10).

The concept of group agreement assumes a position of particular importance for Close and Halpern at the ImprovOlympic where it is known as “groupmind.” Kozlowski remarks,

 Truly the development of the group mind was one of the revolutionary gifts that ImprovOlympic gave theatre. There’s something awe inspiring, mysterious, magic about Harold that unites players into a common storytelling goal. A truly tested team no longer feels the hesitation of speaking up for fear of interrupting someone. (40)

Halpern elaborates on the philosophy:

 In the world outside of improv, the more minds that are involved in an undertaking, the lower the intelligence of the group – just look at the government (any government), or most TV and films that are created by committee! […] The situation is very different with improvisation […] Unlike the real world […] when a number of players are on stage, their intelligence is actually increased. The group intelligence is much more than the sum of its parts. (Halpern et al. 92)

Dressed in undertones of mysticism, the concept is not without its detractors, and as Seham aptly identifies, “it seems that the universal groupmind for which classic improv strives is too often simply the heterosexual white male mind” (xxvi). This limitation will be further explicated in the next chapter. Despite true imperfections in its application, the inherent potential for inclusivity and polyphony in such a performance mode is unmistakable. As is the case with all collaborative endeavors, some sense of individualism is ceded to the group: “Each improviser shares a small portion of responsibility for the piece on stage. They must focus their concentration on the work of the group – not the work of any individual” (Halpern et al. 39). Yet, the open spirit of dialogue is esteemed. “Treat others as if they are poets, geniuses and artists,” Halpern
writes, “and they will be” (ibid. 43). The philosophical tool is strongly geared towards inclusivity and an egalitarian view of art even if its employment is often far from perfect.45

Johnstone particularly privileges structure in his improvisational work. His central metaphor, however, does not involve trying to control the future, so much as seeking inspiration from one’s past. “The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards,” he explains. “He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still ‘balance’ it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them” (Theatre, 116).46 Johnstone favors the exploration of relationships, an understanding of power relationships through status work, and a modality of breaking patterns. As his work, in the guise of Theatresports, traveled the world, his core concepts coalesced in what have become known as “The Ten Commandments.” The specific origin of these improv guidelines is unclear, though it is known that Johnstone himself did not pen them. Emerging in Australia in the 1980s, they encapsulate much of the modern improvisational impetus, proving to be highly relevant and applicable to the majority of modern improvisational events. Consequently, these improvisational benchmarks fittingly serve as the primary focal point of this philosophical survey.

The Theatresports Commandments read as follows:

45 Mick Napier adopts a noteworthy counter view at his Annoyance Theatre, privileging the individual. Seham summarizes his philosophy: “He coaches them [students] to make powerful choices and stick to them, and tells students that strong commitment to their own idea (rather than immediate support for someone else’s) does support the scene. He teaches them to break the conventional rules of improv, focusing on character behavior instead of abstract structures. Much as in any other school of improv, he valorizes the instinctive over the intellectual” (153).
46 Halpern cites this image in her own work. “Improvisation is like steering a car by looking through the rear view mirror, according to British director Keith Johnstone. You don’t know where you’re going, you can only see where you’ve been” (Halpern et al. 57). Sahlins employs a similar notion when he suggests, “if you can’t find an ending, look at your opening” (171). See also Seham 53.
1. Thou shalt not block.
2. Thou shalt always retain focus.
3. Thou shalt not shine above thy team-mates.
4. To gag is to commit a sin that will be paid for.
5. Thou shalt always be changed by what is said to you.
6. Thou shalt not waffle.
7. When in doubt, break the routine.
8. To wimp is to show thy true self.
9. S/he that tries to be clever, is not; while s/he that is clever, doesn’t try.
10. When thy faith is low, thy spirit weak, thy good fortune strained, and thy team losing, be comforted and smile, because it just doesn’t matter.

(Pierse 7) Cf. (United Theatresports).

As Smith and Dean note, these performance guidelines “include provisions to make the improvisation focussed and yet flexible […] foster ideals of equality […] interactivity […] and attempts to break down self-consciousness” (214). Each commandment deserves analysis here in turn. Blocking (or negating) serves as the antithesis to accepting and is considered by Johnstone to be a “form of aggression” (Theatre, 94). Belt and Stockley explicate the concept: “Blocking is a perfidious, recurring problem which appears in the work of the best improvisors. They may block to stay in control, or to stay safe. Many beginning improvisors block because it gets a laugh and it feels good to make people laugh” (99). Blocking is equally pernicious in life. Boal parallels Johnstone’s language when he writes, “on stage, one lives. Society grumbles: ‘No, it is not so, no, you can’t, don’t do it, you don’t want it, don’t say it!’ Theatre, by contrast, is the art which says Yes!” (Hamlet, 332). Saying “Yes” (or preferably “Yes, And . . .,” thereby accepting and advancing) is the desired antidote to this tendency. Halpern agrees. “‘Yes, & . . .’ is the most important rule in improvisation (the corporate name for the ImprovOlympic is ‘Yes & . . . Productions’)” (Halpern et al. 46). Or in the words of Scott Markwell, “always take a risk to push the action forward” (22). The gifts of such

---

47 Frost and Yarrow consider this to be “the Second Cardinal Sin in improvisation” (110), the first being leaving one’s fellow player stranded.
an approach are immediate and transparent for Johnstone: “Those who say ‘Yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say ‘No’ are rewarded by the safety they attain” (Theatre, 92).

The second commandment, “Retaining focus,” is reminiscent of Spolin’s philosophy discussed above. It keeps the player outside of him/herself and encourages active dialogic engagement in the here and now. It also unites individuals as a team. This concept of teamwork is complemented by the third rule that supports the notion of improv as a truly group endeavor. To shine above one’s teammate is to allow oneself to be more important than one’s fellow player, and while players should obviously bring their particular strengths to the act of creation, Johnstone’s improviser must always be wary of becoming monologic. Mark Chalfant of Washington D.C.’s WIT (Washington Improv Theater) refers to the opposite more favorable approach as “giving the scene’s power to one’s partner and making sacrifices for the greater good of the sketch” (Toto “Improvisation”). Johnstone’s fourth breach of etiquette, the gag, is viewed as a similar anti-group attitude. “A gag is a laugh that you get by attacking the story,” he remarks (Storytellers, 125). Gagging provides a quick laugh for the teller, but often at the expense of another player or the journey of the scene as a whole. This tendency may also introduce a competitive element into the creative process that can easily erode group trust and cohesion.48

The fifth commandment reads, “Thou shalt always be changed by what is said to you.” Improvisation embraces change. This very simple statement reflects a strong

48 Although many improv traditions incorporate or are framed by a competitive element, most practitioners agree that this dynamic must not become the dominant force within the spontaneous endeavor. Boyd speaks to this point: “Subordinate to fun, competition intensifies both fun and cooperation, but when distorted by extraneous rewards for winning, competition tends to create the reverse of all positive potential value” (123).
commitment to dialogism. All voices are to be considered in the creative act, and each idea (or “offer” in the language of improv) should influence the overall conversation.\textsuperscript{49} This structural orientation embraces fluidity and multiplicity, and also heightens the power of interactivity. Each contributing individual has the latent power to impact the course of events; each player in the event has an obligation to be moved and altered from a predetermined course by the choices of others. It is also a call to action. “Instead of telling actors that they must be good listeners (which is confusing), we should say, ‘Be altered by what’s said’” (Johnstone \textit{Storytellers}, 59). Boal asks for such a stance from his artist: “Everything is subject to criticism, to rectification. All can be changed, and at a moment’s notice: the actors must always be ready to accept, without protest, any proposed action; they must simply act it out, to give a live view of its consequences and drawbacks” (\textit{Theatre}, 134). Johnstone believes that changing actors is a constituent element of the theatrical experience: “spectators want to see the actors in states of transition, and being altered by each other” (\textit{Storytellers}, 130). Waffling, the sixth guideline, is viewed negatively as it is, in large part, a tactic to forestall this sought action or change. Generally verbal in nature, it consists of a player postponing the growth of a scene by retreating into his/her head and is often symptomatic of fearing where a scene may go.

Johnstone is also an advocate for “breaking the routine,” another core concept with political ramifications to be discussed in the next chapter. On one level, this approach is highly practical in that it simplifies the process of creating story: “Breaking the routine frees the improviser from the treadmill of always needing a good idea,” he

\textsuperscript{49} Salas refers to the offer as “the technical basis for improvisation” (\textit{Improvising}, 162).
observes (Storytellers, 84). Through such a lens merely disrupting or altering the current dominant action can stimulate theatrical movement. Johnstone explains,

An improviser can study status transactions, and advancing, and ‘reincorporating’, and can learn to free-associate, and to generate narrative spontaneously, and yet still find it difficult to compose stories. This is really for aesthetic reasons, or conceptual reasons. He shouldn’t really think of making up stories, but of interrupting routines. (Theatre, 138) Cf. (Halpern et al. 81)

On another level, routine breaking is slightly more radical with its accompanying impetus to explore contrasts, divergences and unexpected combinations. Wes Borg of Edmonton’s Theatresports comments on this potential: “I think theatresports should always be a revolution of sorts – where people come and break the routines that other people find. Anything that shakes up reality is good” (Foreman and Martini 72).

Improvisation, correspondingly, creatively interrogates and critiques habit, “the great enemy of evolution” (Frost and Yarrow 3).

Wimping provides another negative model of behavior. “We wimp when we accept ideas but refuse to add to them” (Johnstone Storytellers, 114). While shining can be seen as striving to take more than one’s share of the scene’s energy, wimping revokes one’s responsibility to the collaborative effort. It can take on many forms, although the most common is perhaps the tendency to continually ask questions. Kozlowski includes this habit in his summary of Del Close’s “traps to avoid” (119). Vague questions rarely add to the scene, and, as Sawyer notes, “If an actor fails to add something, he is forcing the other actor to do more than their share of the creative building of the scene” (178).

The final two commandments speak to the overall energy of the improvisational event and characterize the desired mood. Johnstone believes in an effortless mode of creativity: “Imagination is as effortless as perception, unless we think it might be
‘wrong’, which is what our education encourages us to believe” (Theatre, 80). To be obvious, rather than clever, often reveals an individual’s true uniqueness or voice. Coincidentally, he references Bakhtin’s paradigmatic novelist as an example of this particular strain of creativity. “An artist who is inspired is being obvious. He’s not making any decisions, he’s not weighing one idea against another. He’s accepting his first thoughts. How else could Dostoyevsky have dictated one novel in the morning and one in the afternoon for three weeks in order to fulfil his contracts?” (ibid. 88). Trusting one’s instincts also allows total presentness in the performance space; ideas are not intellectually weighed and measured; actions occur as impulses. The joy of this process culminates in a spirit of communal play where competitive outcomes (the seemingly contradictory frame for Theatresports) are no longer important as ultimately, as in all true play, “it just doesn’t matter.” Judgments are suspended as a healthy sense of collaborative cooperation is privileged over an end-game result. The goal is not to win, but rather, to participate fully and effectively. It is this process that truly matters. Johnstone’s commandments focus the players on this task, as does Spolin’s in-the-moment philosophy and Close’s groupmind. Ultimately, then, carefree involvement is the bigger philosophical picture for all three practitioners and this focused pursuit in and of itself gives the event shape and structure. In this light, successful improvisation becomes synonymous with successful interactivity and nurtured polyphony.

Conclusion: A Disordered Order

Steven Carter characterizes renga poetry as possessing an “aura of disordered order” (“Rules” 583). This metaphor can easily be extended to the improvisational realm
in general, for although it is tempting to consider true spontaneity as being completely unharnessed, collaborative creativity is actually enabled and enriched through the various structures it employs – be it selfless and sensitive leadership, ludic and open texts or frames, recognizable masks and characterizations, or overarching philosophical systems of play. Simon summarizes Boyd’s position in terms of play and its relationship with structure: “it was her view in reference to random play, games or group activity that undirected, unorganized activity was rudimentary, meager, and impoverished” (“Philosophy,” 28). Structures bring the various participants together, allowing the meeting and sharing of multiple voices in a dialogic atmosphere. Structure ideally dialogizes heteroglossia, allowing disparate voices to emerge. Rules or guidelines ideally help unite the group in this mutual endeavor. “Rules are improvisation’s dirty secret,” Scott Markwell offers. “By playing games with prescribed boundaries, actors are forced to read between the lines and look for opportunities. Above all, you’re taught to trust your fellow teammate unconditionally” (19). Improvisation, then, must negotiate this creative tension between form and freedom: “Improvisation, while it deals in ‘no structure,’ can only proceed by means of a diligent adherence to structure” (Fox Acts, 146). Movement improviser Ruth Zaporah speaks of this relationship within her own work: “If I stay in my spontaneity and never express form, I lose control, go crazy, never progress, never succeed. My goal is to balance my instinct for spontaneity with my reverence for form” (Jordan “Zap!”).

The structures that improvisational forms utilize in their pursuit of collaborative creativity are marked, however, by one particularly important facet. With few exceptions (renga poetry and improv/text hybrids) these spontaneous forms are highly fluid and
provisional. In addition to encouraging polyphony, improvisation welcomes structural realignment and alterations. Bakhtin writes of his exemplar, “The great dialogue in Dostoevsky is organized as an unclosed whole of life itself, life poised on the threshold” (*Problems*, 63). Spontaneous theatre is similarly poised, gladly assuming a stance of openness and unfinalizability. Halpern voices the dominant view: “There are plenty of rules in improvisation […] However, one of the first rules is ‘There are no rules.’ Just about any rule here [in *Truth in Comedy*] can be broken *under the proper circumstances*” (Halpern et al. 34). In the final analysis, most improv traditions offer dialogic questions rather than monologic answers. Boal actively invites such an approach with his Theatre of the Oppressed: “in each country, people have to adapt the method to their own culture, their own language, their own desires and needs. TO is not a Bible, nor a recipe book: it is a method used by people, and the people are more important than the method” (*Legislative*, 120). Frost and Yarrow acknowledge this impetus as a defining feature when they observe “improvisation functions like a ‘ludic’ text […] Here the text refuses to ‘progress’ according to the expected rules […] Digressions become more important than chronological narrative” (177). Such digressions provide the very substance of the improvisational impetus. The political potential of this fluid view of structure and inclination toward prosaic polyphony serves as the final area of investigation.

Correspondingly, appreciating the *how* of improvisation, the dialogic richness of its multiple formulaic features, is further enhanced with an understanding of improvisation’s *why*.
CHAPTER 6

CARNIVAL, CHANGE AND BOUNDARY BLURRING: 
THE POLITICS OF IMPROVISATION

This [carnival] experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms – Bakhtin (Rabelais 10-11).

The role of the artist in the social structure follows the needs of the changing times:
- In time of social stasis: to activate
- In time of germination: to invent new forms
- In time of revolution: to extend the possibilities of peace and liberty
- In time of violence: to make peace
- In time of despair: to give hope
- In time of silence: to sing out
  – Judith Malina (quoted in Cohen-Cruz “Motion,” 95).

The model of the carnivalesque provides the fourth and final Bakhtinian global concept in this investigation of improvisation’s novelness. When viewed in conjunction with the chronotope, prosaics and polyphony, the carnivalesque gives further depth to Bakhtin’s ideal communicative event. It is important to state that these concepts are not without their contradictions and tensions. For example, as Morson and Emerson observe, in some ways Bakhtin’s depiction of the carnival is essentially antichronotopic. For while “[c]hronotopes measure norms and celebrate the prosaic regularities that make any given world, day after day, recognizable for the consciousnesses that live in it,” the carnivalesque mocks all possible norms and suspends definitions, thereby privileging a more universalizing and hence decontextualized impetus (87). However, behind the free-
The spirited tendency of the carnival lies Bakhtin’s most potent political posture. The carnival provides a liminal locale, to use Victor Turner’s phraseology, where these temporary suspensions of individuality take on an overtly political agenda. Subsequently, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque and its principal elements are utilized here as a lens with which to examine the beckoning purpose and power of the improvisational endeavor.

The spirit and potency of the carnival is the central theme of Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*. This mode of being is unquestionably subversive and radical in that it equalizes, for good or bad, all those engaged in its pursuit: Bakhtin writes, “all were considered equal during carnival” (10). Prosaic empowerment is clearly claimed through an oppositional disempowerment of the dominant powers. Carnival suspends “hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it . . . All distance between people is suspended” (Bakhtin *Problems*, 123). So while (as noted above) carnival may somewhat diminish the peculiarities of the individual, this generalizing stance also undermines the assumed and oppressive roles of the “agelasts,” those who seek to stand above the populace. Imposed systems of governance and rule are replaced with a prosaic wisdom and experience:

> The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized *in their own way*, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. (Bakhtin *Rabelais*, 255)

This experience is principally noted for its elevation of the sensual over the intellectual, and lived reality over the imagined or theorized, qualities espoused by key
improvisational practitioners such as Spolin, Moreno, Boal and Johnstone. Bakhtin’s description continues:

This festive organization of the crowd must be first of all concrete and sensual. Even the pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies, acquires a certain meaning. The individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. In this whole, the individual body ceases to a certain extent to be itself. (Ibid. 255)

Bakhtin’s carnival unites its participants, incorporating a “strong element of play” (ibid. 7). It is “playful, non-hierarchial and sensorily excessive” (Cohen-Cruz *Radical*, 167), a “form of eroticism which transgresses all ideologies” (Boal *Legislative*, 12). Behind the literal or figurative mask, the carnival player-participant transgresses, suspending normative codes of behavior in favor of the disruptive pursuit of physical play. Thus is created the physical, playful and political dance of the carnival.

Carnival unquestionably shares much with the emerging portrait of the improvisational spirit, as a brief summation reveals. Boyd writes of the mutually informing play dynamic, “In no other form of activity is the individual so free to indulge in what may be called rough behavior, noise, physical activity, and antics and to largely disregard conventional behavior, all of which fall within the cultural frame of reference” (85). Though Boyd is speaking of her own game-based studies, her observations also clearly hold true for the carnivalesque: both events indulge a wider array of behaviors than normally deemed acceptable. Nontraditional uses of space are constituent elements of both forms, as is a fluid sense of time (change is probable as it is largely unavoidable) and a decidedly participatory performance mode: “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (Bakhtin *Rabelais*, 7). In addition to supporting the prosaic voices of the masses,
Bakhtin also posits that the carnivalesque mode offers a glimmer of a second life, a momentary “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (ibid. 9). This potential realm is highly dialogic in nature with its tirelessly satiric employment and redeployment of the symbols of oppressor and oppressed alike. Bakhtin writes, “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Problems, 123).

This chapter further explicates the carnivalesque characteristics of improvisation, focusing particularly on the largely synonymous political stances and opportunities of these two performance modes. Firstly, carnival’s tendency toward comedic inversion is examined: “in the atmosphere of joyful relativity characteristic of a carnival sense of the world […] there is a weakening of its [reality’s] one-sided rhetorical seriousness, its rationality, its singular meaning, its dogmatism” (ibid. 107). Messiness supplants order, playful laughter combats seriousness, and surprise undermines control in the laughter-infused carnival. This process of irreverence is highly political in its attack on imposed order and its complementary exploration of alternative modes of behavior. Secondly, just as carnival suspends the boundaries between its participants and the objects of its satiric gaze, improvisation also assumes an essentially boundless energy, collapsing distinctions between the various arts (and social sciences), art and politics, performance and life, and the performer and his/her role. This impetus reflects a more permanent political commitment to challenging totalizing or unnecessarily limiting social distinctions and posits improvisation as an essentially efficacious modality: spontaneous theatre seeks action beyond the boards of the stage and is avowedly connected to the body politic and greater health of society. Thirdly, the political drive of carnivalesque performance is
explored, outlining the potential radicalness and conservativeness of these performed events as they engage in “the violation of the usual and the generally accepted” (ibid. 126). In particular, an investigation of the works and agendas of Venice’s Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi reveals that the powerful tools of improv may be applied to a variety of political ends. Finally, informed by Moreno’s theory of the conserve, improvisation is considered as a sustained carnivalesque breach – an impetus and embodiment of more lasting socio-political change. Characterized by the abovementioned belief in performative efficacy and manifested in a call to action, improvisation’s ability to resist and evade dominant power structures is viewed against a backdrop of state and internal censorship and persecution. Specifically, an alternative (radical) improvisational mode of education is outlined that dispels hierarchical approval/disapproval binaries. In this manner, improvisation’s carnivalesque “sense of the world” which “possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality” is revealed (ibid. 107). Just as the carnival offers a potential rupture from normative societal behaviors, so too does the improvisational mode of performance. And yet, as this analysis reveals, while innately political, this carnivalesque impetus may serve as a tool for oppression or freedom, coercion or liberation, stasis or change.

The Power of the Carnival Satirist: Taking Laughter Seriously

An elevated atmosphere of laughter and playfulness marks the event of carnival and improvisational performance alike. As Jerry Palmer observes in his Taking Humour Seriously, humor and laughter are key elements of most human communication to some degree. “[L]isten to any conversation and it is full of jokes, puns, humourous allusions,
[and] word play for the sake of it,” he writes (1). The carnivalesque event and much improvisation by association, however, serve as the exemplar of this all-too-human inclination. Bernard Sahlins comments on the nature of laughter in his speech celebrating the 40th anniversary of Second City, an institution Gilda Radner describes as a “university for comedy” (Sweet 363). Sahlins remarks, “The fact is, man is the only animal that laughs, and comedy’s major role is to evoke the laughter that celebrates our unity as mortal creatures” (105). He continues, “when we as a community laugh at the same thing, it’s a very special moment. It’s the realization of a desperate hope: the hope that we are enough like one another to sense one another and to be able to live together” (ibid. 106). Sahlins points to a serious political power contained in the laughter of an audience: it is not merely a byproduct of entertaining distraction. Within the carnivalesque spirit of irreverence lies a hidden strength. “Ironic truths are great levelers. Laughter makes equals of kings and commoners. That is why we [Second City] are the theatre without heroes. Laughter deflates the high and mighty and gives structure to our world” (ibid. 119). Laughter can clearly assume a political profile.

In the modern period, improvisation and comedy have almost become interchangeable terms. Jonathan Fox summarizes this prevalent outlook: “Improvisation, or ‘improv’ as it is often termed, means funny, means cabaret, means zany audience suggestions” (Acts, 73). In certain situations this conflation is not unwarranted or unsolicited. Richard Chudnow, founder of Comedysportz, deliberately takes advantage of and reifies this perception. His manual’s succinct definition emphasizes the value of laughter: “ComedySportz is a sport. It is a competition for laughs” (2). In this improvisational mode, scenes unflinchingly pursue the punch line in a performance style
Chudnow characterizes by the neologism *comprovisation*. “[W]hat I like to think that is,” he elaborates, “is a combination of comedy styles and methods of getting an audience to laugh and that includes comic acting, it includes improv, it includes mime, it includes acting, burlesque, slapstick—whatever you have to do” (quoted in Seham 87). Laughter, for Chudnow, is the ultimate and highly marketable goal of performance. Though Sahlins points to a more radical end, when economic determinants dominate laughter may function as an essentially conservative force. As Sahlins notes above, laughter can serve to unite a community as they share laughter expressing recognition or familiarity; on the other hand, it can also serve to marginalize or oppress the objects of the “joke,” thereby reinforcing negative and potentially harmful stereotypes, prejudices or bigotries. When art seeks to appeal to a mass mentality, as an economic imperative would dictate, it typically recreates a mass sensibility: in North America this economically informed posture normally assumes a white middle-class heterosexual male gaze. Seham observes this dangerous tendency in the quick-fire Comedysportz tradition of play where audience expectations often invite less-than provocative portrayals of less privileged positionalities. “Speed and spontaneity are often used as a rationale for stereotypes,” she writes. “More often than not, spectators applaud scenes in which their suggestions produce the expected jokes and relationships rather than original or innovative ones” (102).¹ Subsequently, “laugh-factories” often perpetuate the marginalization of minority performers whose best potentials for success seem to exist in the domain of the self-

---

¹ As Seham notes, this tendency can be particularly pronounced in gimmick or guessing based games, such as Chain Murder Endowments, that invite players to quickly appeal to the most obvious (and hence potentially damaging) stereotypical portrayals in order to communicate the necessary clues to their teammates and the audience. See Seham 102.
effacing cliché or caricature. Laughter in such cases, while undoubtedly political in nature, is anything but radical in its intent.

Though Chudnow’s franchise is by no means alone in adopting this “laugh at all costs” approach to improv,² this does not reflect the vast promise or depth of improvisation’s relationship to humor, nor does it adequately summarize the movement’s political potency. Other practitioners perceive a more overtly transgressive political potential, seeing laughter as a tool for exposing and questioning rather than as an alluring economic end in itself. Bakhtin himself places considerable value on this freeing strain of this phenomenon, noting, “[e]verything that is truly great must include an element of laughter. Otherwise it becomes threatening, terrible, or pompous; in any case, it is limited. Laughter lifts the barrier and clears the path” (“Notes,” 135). Laughter, for Bakhtin, is capable of disbanding preconceptions and opening the way to new possibilities. The instrument of this power is often Bakhtin’s clown performer, the prosaic dialogizer, who sounds forth “on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles” in an act of ridiculing “all ‘languages’ and dialects” (“Discourse,” 273). Bakhtin’s carnival clown aimed his/her parodic barb “sharply and polemically against the official languages of its given time” (ibid. 273), transforming old (timeless) truth and authority “into a Mardi Gras dummy, a comic monster that the laughing crowd rends to pieces in the marketplace” (Rabelais, 213). Laughter is undeniably a political act in such a context, reducing formerly esteemed institutions and norms to the subjects of ridicule and jest. Whereas the simplistic form of laughter exploited by several franchised companies finds humor in the perpetuation of negative depictions of the dispossessed or

² For example, Johnstone’s initial work with Theatre Machine adopted a similar stance, particularly with their production of Clowning that was, as its title might suggest, “essentially concerned with making people laugh” (Frost and Yarrow 57).
objectified, the more complex laughter of the carnival can assume a radical guise in its efforts to unmask and overturn portrayals of those who stand above the system as the objectifiers.

The exact purpose and nature of humor and laughter sought in the improvisational event varies widely between these two polar stances, the commercial (conservative) entertainment of Comedysportz, and the transgressive (radical) action of Bakhtin’s carnival clown. For example, several strains of laughter are distinguishable in the dominant comedic traditions. Sahlins writes of an audience “laugh of recognition” (44) as an important element at Second City, a position paralleled by Simi Horwitz’s generalization that the “Recognition of—and the ability to mimic—social types, subcultures, genres (literary, film, musical), and especially celebrities is an essential ingredient” of modern North American improv theatre (“Improv-ing,” 24). Here are echoes of a regressive or conformist political stance. But other modalities and schools of thought invite a more scrupulous comedic attitude. Spolin notes the deeper usefulness of laughter in her games system (see Spolin *Improvisation*, 320), while Halpern clearly distinguishes the style of laughter that is desirous at ImprovOlympic. Rather than joke-telling, which she refers to as the “most direct path to disaster in improvisation” (Halpern et al. 26), Halpern favors a truthful approach with “[h]onest discovery, observation, and reaction” (ibid. 15). These qualities, at least in theory, move practitioners towards a more sensitized and sensitive style. Johnstone similarly disdains “pointless laughter” opting for a more complex and nuanced strain that does not needlessly fall into the easiest of audience expectations.3 Tamara Wilcox-Smith of Interplay (formed in 1977) also

---
3 Diverse content and a no-holds-barred attitude facilitate this ideal. He writes, “Any theme in written drama, or popular with American talk-shows, should be acceptable as a theme for improvisers. If we avoid
prioritizes certain types of laughter. She notes, “One kind of laughter comes out of embarrassment, and the other out of surprise and a joyful realization about something […] We opt for the latter” (Holden C1). Sills complicates this binary even further, observing that the improv event is replete with numerous laughter-inducing possibilities: “the audience will laugh even if something isn’t joke-funny,” he comments. “They’ll laugh at surprises, they’ll laugh at discovery, they’ll laugh at something that’s apt” (Bennetts 1). Adler characterizes this more multifaceted understanding of laughter, where it is utilized but no longer fetishized as the one goal of performance, as a defining characteristic of the 1990s “new wave improvisers” in particular. He writes, “improvisation isn’t simply a means to a punchline; it’s a kind of walking meditation, a process of discovery…a way to get at and disclose everything they didn’t know they had in them—funny and otherwise” (Adler “The ‘how’”). Laughter in this context can become a touchstone for truth. Therefore, as a tool for reflexivity and revelation, improvisation can clearly be employed by comedic troupes toward truly innovative ends. In this manner, modern improv/sketch Chicago companies, such as Oui Be Negroes and GayCo, have led the way in exploring politically informed and charged comedy that comments on and elucidates rather than reinforces audience expectations.

Oui Be Negroes was founded by Shaun Landry and Hans Summer in 1994 and received its first performance at Chicago’s Café Voltaire under this title that it would later adopt as its troupe name. Landry says of the troupe, “we wanted to develop our own comic voice. We’ve always has the feeling that improv was based on the urban and

popular themes like incest, terminal diseases, rabid Nazis, family crises, ex-lovers stalking us, racism, religious bigotry, and so on, the result is a toothless theatre that gums the spectators into pointless laughter” (Storytellers, 92). This (at least theoretical) inclination toward noncommercial unpredictability largely distinguishes Theatresports from its more “polished” offspring, Comedysportz.
suburban white male experience with lots of white male bonding. Improvisation came to be known as ‘a white thing’” (Horwitz “Improv-ing,” 26). Seham describes the work of the troupe as concentrating on “deconstructing stereotypical images of blacks on television, film, and in the news media” (119). GayCo premiered with Whitney Houston, We Have a Problem in Second City’s Skybox in 1997. This troupe also strives to combat negative images that are the typical comedic domain of more conservative practices. Kozlowski writes, “GayCo is a sigh of relief in the improv community in Chicago, which for years has been aggressively male and heterosexual” (67). Seham also recognizes this new empowered comedic perspective: “In mainstream improv, gay-themed humor rarely moved beyond stereotypes, presenting homosexuality from the perspective of straight fear” (204).

The improvisational importance of politicized laughter is not limited to those traditions that are essentially comedic. Across the “genre-divide,” laughter is also privileged in theatrical forms that may be traditionally viewed as more overtly dramatic in nature. Consider, for example, the array of healing and service based practices. Whitaker remarks that Moreno “developed the capacity to transcend stress and taught those people he worked with how to laugh at themselves (which Harold Searles calls the cure for schizophrenia)” (Whitaker, viii). A transcript of a Moreno-led work session reveals numerous outbursts of laughter from both the participants and audience (see Fox Essential, 129-153). Moreno clearly valued and nurtured this playful atmosphere, a fact reflected by his self-selected epitaph as “[t]he man who brought joy and laughter into psychiatry” (quoted in Blatner Foundations, 23). Sternberg and Garcia subsequently encourage laughter in the derivative sociodramatic sphere: “feel free to use your sense of
humor and playfulness and encourage that in group members,” they encourage would-be leaders. “We can all benefit from a good laugh. As the saying goes, ‘He who laughs, lasts’” (106). Though Salas is disdainful of misappropriating Playback as an essentially comedic form, she nonetheless notes the desired balance of accessibility and fun with depth and sophistication (Improvising, 1). Her account of the movement includes instances of appropriate and bonding “shrieks of laughter” from those assembled which acknowledged the tapped depth and poignancy of a particular shared moment (see Salas Improvising, 29). Acting Out practitioners share this belief in the appropriateness and usefulness of laughter in their similar issue-oriented work in schools. The movement’s workbook includes the observation, “We have come to believe that comic moments, even in the most serious scenes, actually can help the audience integrate the material presented” (Cossa et al 21). This is a common stance. In such contexts, laughter again adopts a more politically radical guise as it is essentially used to empower the previously excluded or silenced, such as the psychodramatic patient, traditional audience spectator or passive school student, rather than to revel in and continue their misfortune.

As this brief survey reveals, politicized humor is an integral component in the improvisational endeavor. Even though the specific manner in which laughter is elicited varies, this performance strategy is highly esteemed across a diverse spectrum of performance modes. The carnival, however, offers a very definitive comedic approach, and it is this highly satiric spirit – the comedy of transgressive inversions, distortions and grotesque exaggerations – that serves as my primary example of improvisation/carnival

---

4 Salas writes of the necessity for selflessness and earnestness in Playback performance and potential misuses of the techniques: “One such misapplication is the performance of playback in a comedic, entertainment manner, with little skill in sociometry or subtle communication on the part of the conductor, and insufficient respect for the story on the part of the actors” (“What is ‘Good,’” 29).
inspired laughter. Casson provides a helpful explication of this satiric impetus:

“Laughter not only relaxes us but also stimulates attention and engagement, empowering through satire and by debunking pomposity. While tragedy brings us closer to pain, comedy distances us, releases energy, freeing us to be playful” (“Living,” 119). To recall Boal’s model of Aristotelian catharsis, the tragic mode of performance and its desired notion of audience purgation is often deployed as a stabilizing or corrective force. Comedy, as Schechner remarks, assumes an essentially different stance: “The tragic mode is that of destiny while comedy is the mode of possibility” (quoted in Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 29). The free-wielding spirit of improvisational comedy provides the tools with which this possibility can be imaginatively and spontaneously made real, if only for a moment, and this is a compelling political act in and of itself.

Satire’s latent power rests in its ability and willingness to delve into this unexplored possibility, to question the unquestionable, to make prosaic laughter of poetic pretension, to irreverently trivialize the totalitarian. The Compass’ Roger Bowen notes that while the target of satire may vary, it tends to take aim at the grandiose and self-important. “I think, on the whole, satire tends to be an anti-establishment thing,” he remarks, “because it lets the air out of the big balloons and the people who are conservatives have an investment in those balloons” (Sweet 41). Satire subsequently bites acerbically at the heels of power. Kathryn Wylie characterizes the various masks of the Commedia dell’Arte as just such a “satyric” device: “The commedia masks embody a vision of a world turned upside down in which humor is generated by parody of the

---

5 Palmer defines satire as a genre of humor that “criticises or victimises someone or something” (7). The underlying assumption of most improvisational movements is that this is overwhelmingly a positive trait or that, in their specific case, it is employed against the “correct” targets. Whether or not such a tactic is inherently radical or laudable is discussed below.

6 See Chapter Four for a detailed description of this stance.
existing order – young triumph over old, the fool over his master – and in which blows, beatings, births, deaths, gross jokes, and swearing (all typical of the fecund ritual humor) abound” (57). In the commedia tradition, patriarchal heads of households, the pretensions and shortcomings of the “learned,” and the hypocrisy of the (Spanish) military serve as worthy targets that are subsequently embodied and satirized in the personas of Pantalone, the Dottore, and Capitano respectively. In its heyday, the commedia players donned masks in order to unmask institutionalized pomposity. The masks of the Yoruba Apidan assume a similar satiric quality. Joel Adedeji recounts the traditional story of the masks’ creation when disguised “ghost-mummers” haunted abandoned sites of Katunga, the ancient Yoruba capital, in order to thwart the King's (Alaafin Ogbolu) unpopular plan to move the seat of government. These “ghosts” attempted to scare off the King's emissaries (see Adedeji “Alarinjo,” 221-222). The resulting masks – Basorun, Alapinni, Asipa, Samu, Laguna and Akiniku – each satirize/represent an original councilor and a dominant accompanying physical characteristic.7 It is noteworthy that these characters emerged to redress the perceived improper use of power on the part of the King and that the masks’ actions sought efficacy: they wished to alter the King’s decision. David Kerr provides a similar example in the Okumkpa masked plays of the Afikpo people of Nigeria, where masks permit the possessed wearers to satirize all members of society (7).8 African performance traditions

7 Adedeji summarizes these as the hunchback, albino, leper, prognathus (with a protruding lower jaw), dwarf and cripple [sic] respectively – see Adedeji “Alarinjo,” 222. For a pictorial depiction of the Apidan masks see Graham-White 108. Apidan Theatre is considered in greater depth below.

8 Kerr describes, for example, an instance where such satire was aimed clearly at the power of a represented Catholic priest who was portrayed as greedy and hypocritical (see Kerr 50).
in particular, as Euba outlines in his examination of the archetypal Yoruba satirist Esu-Elegbara, seem inclined toward a highly satirical modality (10).9

The political strength of satire is particularly effective when aimed at monologic and totalizing targets. Jan Cohen-Cruz provides a powerful modern example of this blend of comedy, improvisation and politics in her article, “At Cross-Purposes: The Church Ladies for Choice.” First established in Pittsburgh, from where they later spread to Washington D.C. and New York, the Church Ladies for Choice were particularly active in the early 1990s. Consisting of “mostly gay men and a few straight women, all of whom dress as either ultra-feminine, church-going ladies or members of the cloth” (91), the group strives to provide a (comedic) counter presence at women’s health clinics during anti-abortion demonstrations. Employing (typically scripted but fluid) parodic songs that reframe or make explicit the stances of their opposition,10 highly spontaneous interplay and engagement with both friendly and unfriendly spectators, and an overtly theatrical/camp presence of stubby-faces, Sunday dresses and beads, these self-described “gals” are “high-spirited and tuneful, sashaying along to the music and playing right to the audience, flirtatious toward the escorts and passers-by and with an undercurrent of one-upmanship towards the antis [pro-lifers]” (ibid. 94).

Seham notes that this camp sensibility (also adopted by groups such as Chicago’s Free Associates and Annoyance) has much in common with Bakhtin’s notion of the

---

9 It is not coincidental that many of these examples of satire employ masks for, as Tonkin explains, “Masks can be the signs of or means to large-scale inversions in ‘rites of reversal,’ as when masters and slaves change places” (229). In addition to the mask’s ability to propel the performer into the present, connect him/her with the traditions of the past, provide a potential element of safety, and enable transformation and/or the signifying features of characterizations (as discussed in prior chapters), the mask’s innate tendency towards stylized exaggeration makes it a powerful satiric tool as it provides the means through which roles may be – at least temporarily – reversed and critiqued.

10 For example, the lyrics to the song “If You’re Happy and You Know It, Clap Your Hands” are variously reinvented as “If you think you own your womb, show me the deed,” or “If you want to get a life, be a wife” (quoted in Cohen-Cruz “Cross-Purposes,” 96).
carnivalesque. Incorporating “punning, masquerade, the questioning of norms, inverted hierarchies, and sexual humor” much as carnival does, “camp provokes ambivalent laughter, in which mockery is directed as much at the self as at the other” (Seham 167). The Church Ladies, however, are very serious about their mission and, though they bring a seeming light-heartedness to the picket line, they do not employ their subversive satiric tactics lightly. Humor is used to disrupt the desired monologic reverence of the anti-abortionists: “The Church ladies mimic the religious right as through a funhouse mirror, reflecting back their own version of the antis’ gestures, songs and clothing. When the lifters hold crosses up toward the Ladies, the Ladies hold up costume jewelry and make the sign of the cross back at them” (Cohen-Cruz “Cross-Purposes,” 95). Cohen-Cruz observes that in the face of such comedy, the “antis” often choose to leave the demonstration site. The addition of a camp/comedic/carnivalesque energy unsettles the desired authority of the antis for, as Cohen-Cruz aptly argues, “a straight man automatically becomes part of the joke when partnered with a comic” (ibid. 96).

The improvising satirist, as the Church Ladies reveal, serves as a transgressive performance figure. Frost and Yarrow observe rightly, “the improviser and the forms of his activity are powerful. Not merely because they stand outside the law; much more because he has the knowledge and the skills to fragment and reconstruct it” (178). Norms of behavior are estranged or refracted as humor and satire dialogize otherwise monologic discourse. The satiric improver “proposes alternative ‘readings’ of conventions,” employing “often apparently bizarre or scandalous variants” (ibid. 178). In opposition to Boal’s estimation of the Aristotelian model which proffers that “happiness consists in obeying the laws” (Theatre, 24), spontaneous theatre typically pursues efficacy through
transgressing or re-defining the dominant (artistic and socio-political) power structures. Through laughter and mockery, improvisation can upturn these hierarchical systems – the defining feature of Bakhtin’s street-inspired carnival. Vince provides an account from 1445 describing such a carnivalesque Feast of Fools that reflects this close resemblance in spirit:

Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of the office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the horn of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice there. They cense with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts; and rouse the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous performances, with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste. (Companion, 132)

Established order is subsequently inverted; expected behaviors are reversed – religious verse becomes wanton songs, incense turns to foul smelling stench, prayer gives way to gaming, and those normally held in esteem (priests and clerks) don the robes of those who traditionally hold the least power (women and panders).

Improvisation undoubtedly shares this sense of topsy-turvy playfulness in its boundless redeployment and recontextualization of the symbols of power and oppression. For example, Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre assumes a stance that is particularly allied with Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, as Seham explores in her description of the former. Citing Bakhtin she writes, “improvisation at the Annoyance Theatre is aggressively practiced as ‘the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions, [a feast] of becoming, change and renewal . . . hostile to all that was immortalized and completed’ […] The Annoyance Theatre embraces ‘carnival’ in all its
disorder and earthiness” (124). Kozlowski characterizes Mick Napier and his company’s work as “subversive,” “raw” and “immediate” (49-50) and notes that the ethos of the Annoyance can be best summed up in two (equally subversive and raw) words (see Kozlowski 146). No idols are sacred in such an approach to art; no figures or concepts are exempt from being satirically inverted and deconstructed. Boal casts his spect-actor as a similarly transgressive figure: “when the first ‘spect-actor’ comes on stage, he transgresses, like a member of a church congregation who takes the place of the priest and celebrates the mass himself” (Legislative, 74). Here the transgression is perhaps more aesthetic in nature, but the political power is nonetheless forceful. The aforementioned Kawuonda Women’s Theatre of Sigoti provides another example of the increased slippage afforded by the satiric edge of many improvisational performances. Van Erven comments on the radical inversion made possible in the work of these women: “The women visibly enjoy playing male roles, for it offers them an opportunity to satirize male behaviour and to speak foul language, which as women they would not normally be allowed to do in public” (Community, 194). Through playfully assuming the guise of the empowered, the satirist may also momentarily take on their privileges.

As the above improvisational sites demonstrate, the very transgressive act of spontaneous performance itself often enables an evocative inversion of power to take place. Through playfulness, laughter and satire, improvisation taps into the political energy of the carnival, overturning and suspending structures of submission and

---

11 Seham is quoting Bakhtin’s Rabelais, 10. She notes, despite the remarkable affinity, that the Annoyance has not deliberately molded itself on this concept – its founders are unfamiliar with Bakhtin and his theories.
12 Of the Annoyance’s late night show, Screw Puppies, Seham writes, “Shows are raunchy, and fearlessness and realness are valued to the point where actors may perform drunk, spit or urinate on stage, and sometimes draw from extremely personal and intimate experiences for subject matter” (129). This emphasis of sensual bodily experience is particularly in keeping with Bakhtin’s boundary-blurring carnivalesque.
oppression, thereby empowering the formerly powerless. These temporary breaches, many improvisational practitioners ardently believe, pave the way for more permanent political progress by imagining new satiric and equalizing possibilities. Boal’s Legislative Theatre, discussed below, provides an important example of this spontaneous spirit achieving permanent results. Comedy may clearly serve conservative ends when it reifies the oppressions of the marginalized; yet, the laughter of the carnival makes human the elite untouchables and undermines oppressive dogmas that evade questions and dialogic interplay; it removes the artificial institutionalized boundaries that stratify society, providing a comedic weapon for envisioning and instituting change. This empowering “way of seeing” is unavoidably political in its production of new meanings, images and imaginings as the carnival’s energy overturns strict order in favor of fluid and equalizing messiness.

Ultimately, all powerful tools may serve various ends. The medieval church, for example, eventually co-opted the Feast of Fools and other such popular ceremonies as a means of safely purging society of disruptive elements rather than as a way of instigating new systems of governance. Brief periods of abandon were permitted within strict timeframes so as to minimize the potential for the development of revolutionary fervor. Moreover, Frances Gray rightly remarks that the carnival’s play tends to reproduce gendered barriers for women. “Nowhere are sexual barriers, as opposed to class barriers, seen as being challenged,” she writes (31). The groupmind or prosaic wisdom of the street carnival is not without its own potential blindesses. Ideally, however, when such limitations are duly recognized within this impetus of play, the improvisational mode itself offers the means for its own redress as it satirizes those who would assume
privileged or oppressive stances even within its own midst.¹³ In inviting discourse, interplay and critical transgression of imposed order, improvisation equally encourages various marginalities finally to take “center stage;” it can therefore enable new voices to become the subject rather than the object of the joke as they assume the stance of the satirizer rather than the satirized.

The carnival, then, provides a liminal site of political inversion where pretensions are (often literally) stripped and dogmatic hierarchies are exposed. This typically temporary transgressive carnival spirit also assumes a more permanent political expression in the improvisational endeavor. Whereas the event of the carnival often assumes the shape of a momentary breach of society’s norms, enabling transitory and short-lived explorations of imaginative alternatives, improvisational practices provide the means through which these playful reinventions and political orientations can achieve a more sustained challenge to the status quo. The satiric inversions of the carnivalesque are accompanied by an equally subversive distrust and dismissal of regulatory boundaries that seek to exert control over the forms and functions of artistic expression. Therefore, while the carnival transiently allows behavior to step across the behavioral boundaries mandated by society, improvisation is avowedly political in its continuous assault of these divisions that seek to separate and isolate theatre from other artistic disciplines, political efficacies and prosaic systems of experience and knowledge. As spontaneous modes purposely cross and blur these artificial boundaries, they equally empower and

¹³ In modern improv, for example, a practice of “calling it on stage” is gradually emerging whereby rather than allowing heterosexist or misogynistic choices to dominant the stage action, players bring their own lived reality to the exploration. In this manner, if a female improviser finds that she is being overrun by a male scene partner, she might comment, “Gee, I can’t seem to get a word in edgewise here,” thus bringing her lived and theatrical reality to the scene. See Seham 118.
elevate their prosaic partners to seek action, redress and change in all aspects of their socio-political lives, thereby embodying a truly egalitarian world view.

**Improvising Between the Lines of Art, Politics and Life**

Bakhtin writes, “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance” (*Rabelais*, 7) Cf. (*Problems*, 122).\(^{14}\) Carnival’s freedom is polymorphous, taking on many fluid forms and typically defying simple classification. Distinctions and taxonomies tend to serve as methodologies of prioritizing and privileging, forming hierarchies of knowledge and marginalizing the less favorable while supporting the reification of a preferred monologic narrative. Carnival and improvisation alike recognize the artificial constructedness of such systems, and consequently, boundaries often serve as impetuses to questioning and action rather than as strict limitations or insurmountable obstacles.

Frost and Yarrow acknowledge this tendency, writing:

> Improvisation frequently has to do with breaking down barriers. Our conscious, rationalising ego operates within boundaries which afford security of behaviour and identity, and are useful in many contexts. But boundaries also inhibit, and the kind of ‘lateral thinking’ which arrives at new insights is precisely an example of the value of bypassing them and discovering a new shape to knowledge and experience. (156)

As discussed in prior chapters, improvisation is inherently porous and provisional: locations are shared, roles are redefined or redistributed, and rules predominantly serve as guidelines that may be bent or broken. Johnstone ably summarizes the improviser’s craft

\(^{14}\) Bakhtin’s anti-theatrical leanings are suggested here in his somewhat limited framing of the theatrical event (as fundamentally occurring behind footlights.) The irony of this view is explored in depth in Chapter Seven.
noting, “[w]hen a great improviser is inspired, all limits seem to disappear” (Storytellers, 341). These limits take on many forms, dividing actor and audience, the various artistic traditions, art and politics, performance and life, and the character and player. But while the nature of the boundaries differs, each of these limitations is viewed in a similar fashion – with carnivalesque irreverence. This distrust of closed systems, tendency to upset imposed order and desire to connect art more aggressively to life in all its varied manifestations, further enhances improvisation’s political thrust. The improvisational energy resists constraint and actively questions inherited wisdoms and structures. Let us examine, then, how each of these divisive boundaries is blurred and overcome in the improvisational event.

Improvisation’s ability to unite players and observers during the performance has already been discussed in some length, particularly in regards to the way in which space is communally shared (physically or metaphorically) and the prosaic identities of the various performers and spect-actors involved.15 Therefore, it will suffice here to study this tendency briefly in an exemplar setting. In much traditional African spontaneous theatre there is little desired distance between participants. Several performance surveys strongly emphasize this important component. Martin Banham writes, “African audiences are participating audiences—vocally and physically. To constrain this response is to kill the drama” (4). The involvement of spectators, by his account, provides a crucial dynamic. Adedeji expands upon this dialogic relationship:

The nature of folkloric drama is presentational rather than representational. Of particular importance to the structure is the use of music, song and dance not as interpolations but as an inherent and coherent form of the dramatic action […] Usually the audience serves as

---

15 See Chapter Two and Chapter Four respectively.
chorus and forms part of the structure and the general aesthetic layout.
(“Genesis,” 15)

Enekwe confirms that “African traditional drama are participative and celebratory,” (154) strengthening spontaneous performance’s bond to the carnivalesque, while Dhlomo includes this participatory characteristic in his outline of Bantu (South African) traditions: “Between the tribal spectators and the tribal performers there was no strict line drawn,” he remarks (45). All participants create meaning together. Coplan reaffirms this lack of distinct boundaries and isolates this tendency as a noteworthy feature of African (traditional) drama, a genre that is, in his view, “created in the absence of psychic distance between spectators and actors, audiences and dramatic action, reality and representation” (157). Graham-White adds, “performers often improvise songs satirizing and praising various spectators” (23) thereby suggesting that, in addition to enabling and assisting traditional improvisatory modes, audience members may, in fact, become the spontaneous topics of these works. Porous boundaries, in this instance, provide ample opportunity for both subversion and inclusion as the roles of performer and spectator are fluidly interchanged or embodied within the same participant. As these various historians observe, few divisions between performer and observer are viewed as sacrosanct in the majority of spontaneous/traditional African performances. Subsequently, the impact and political power of the performance event is not limited to those who stand behind the proverbial footlights. This tendency for a heightened and stirring social exchange has undoubtedly led to extremely repressive stances in regards to such performances during times of particularly authoritarian or inhumane governorship.

Improvisation also resists neat distinct classification in the realm of the arts. As a mode of performance, improvisation willingly (and simultaneously) gains insights from,
and provides newfound strengths for other disciplines. Theatre has always existed in a conglomerate state, exploiting artistic diversity in its incorporation into the overall performance event of its sister arts: music, dance, and design. In this sense, as an art form it is inherently and unavoidably “impure,” sharing the fruits of multiple disciplines and means of expression. Improvisation is rarely content, however, with being just theatre as it deliberately enters into the domains of other related fields. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed explicitly calls upon this disciplinary interconnectedness, with its integration of theatre, therapy, activism, and education. Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz note this breaking of boundaries as a particular strength of the form: “One of our fundamental attractions to TO,” they write, “is that it blurs false boundaries between these disciplines [politics, art, and therapy]; its philosophy and practices are in fact testimony to their inseparability when dealing with issues of change” (1). Boal speaks to the fundamental power and potential of such an all-encompassing view. “The TO did political events, it was politics; it withdrew into the intimacy of internalised oppressions, it was psychotherapy; in schools, it was pedagogy; in the cities, it legislated” (*Hamlet*, 316).

Boundaries and divisions are unimportant; Boal and his fellow practitioners employ their arsenal of tools wherever they may be deemed efficacious. Such “theatre” defies simple classification and containment. This is an overt political stance in its own right and one that has caused Boal considerable hardship and danger throughout his career.

In its modern incarnation, improvisation has particularly blurred the boundary between theatre and the healing artsootnote{Peg Jordan employs this apt rubric in her article on Ruth Zaporah, “Zap! On the Improvisational Edge.”}, and it is this fruitful transgression that serves here to illustrate the common trend of improv’s artistic dispersion and reciprocal inspiration. The idea of using drama as an aid in healing, as Blatner observes, is not a modern
discovery: “Indigenous healers, shamans, and traditional rituals often had dramatic elements associated” (Foundations, 12). Fox agrees, observing that the “fool has always had a sacred air about him” (Acts, 69). But in actuality, the dominant modern theatrical impetus has moved markedly away from this shamanistic past, particularly in the West. This pervasive desire for genre separation can be seen in Fox’s earnest claim that Playback Theatre practitioners are “often accused of doing therapy” (ibid. 206). The accusation is not unfounded for, as Salas testifies, “All playback theatre is broadly therapeutic in the sense that the process is potentially and ideally healing for all present, including the performers” (“What is ‘Good,’” 29). The underlying issue, however, is the broad assumption that theatre should not be therapeutic or, for many, that apparently theatre should not be useful in any non-aesthetic way whatsoever. Consider, for example, Graham-White’s somewhat typical distinction between ritual and drama: “The most basic distinction between ritual and drama,” he offers, “lies in the belief that a ritual will have consequences beyond itself. A ritual is functional: it is expected to produce results in the future. In a dramatic performance, on the other hand, expectations stop when it ends” (17). Much improvisation is peculiar in its atypical acknowledgment and reaffirmation of performance’s efficacy and the subsequent reconnection to the ancient tradition of the shaman. Spontaneous traditions, such as Fox’s Playback, unequivocally and unapologetically blur this boundary once more: “Healing and art are both integrally part of Playback’s purpose,” practitioner Jo Salas asserts (Improvising, 115).

17 Fox speculates that this attitude may, in no small part, stem from a perceived threat in conventional theatre circles. “I suspect” he writes, “above and beyond a politic purpose in publicly disavowing therapy, there exists a deep-seated fear of its implications, especially with regard to feelings” (Acts, 68-69).

18 Some practitioners do seek to differentiate their modes of performance by adopting more isolationist stances. Spolin is clear to distinguish her teachings from therapeutic and psychodramatic forms (Improvisation, 219-221, 230), as is Campbell with his Boal-based work (59). In a similar vein, Blatner posits that Playback Theatre is more aesthetic than psychodramatic – the latter being his chosen field of
Moreno’s therapeutic theatre provided the performance template for Fox’s innovations and so we shall return to this primary movement to further elucidate artistic boundary blurring and its efficacious political impact within the improvisational encounter. **Sociodrama** is a healing art that developed alongside Moreno’s psychodramatic form. Whereas psychodrama deals essentially with the act hungers of the individual, enabling therapeutic performances that allow new personal behaviors to be rehearsed and old cycles to be broken, sociodrama focuses its gaze more squarely on the group and the accompanying concept of sociometry, “a science dealing with the connectedness or lack of connectedness among people” (Dayton 42). Moreno expresses this paradigmatic shift:

The true subject of a sociodrama is the group […] It is the group as a whole which has to be put upon the stage to work out its problem, because the group in sociodrama corresponds to the individual in psychodrama […] The psychodramatic approach deals with personal problems principally and aims at personal catharsis; the sociodramatic approach deals with social problems and aims at social catharsis. (Fox *Essential*, 18)

In psychodrama, then, protagonists often play themselves, while in sociodrama, “group members take various roles with the clear understanding that the role then being played does not represent the actual stance of the player” (Blatner *Foundations*, 218), but rather stands in for a type of player or experience. So while both modalities involve the expertise (*Foundations*, 222) – while Sternberg and Garcia distinguish sociodrama as being more educational than therapeutic (6). Such efforts typically seek to highlight the uniqueness of the favored movement and to offset it from related practices, though often distinctions appear to be exaggerated or largely unimportant in nature. Most improvisational modes are clearly adaptable to the specific needs of those who employ them and therefore resist truly discrete classification.

---

19 In some ways one could connect Boal’s Forum and Image Theatre (and later Legislative) techniques with Moreno’s sociodrama, while the Rainbow of Desire explores a more individually centered approach more akin to that of psychodrama. Feldhendler makes just such a claim of Boal’s Forum Theatre in particular. See Feldhendler 89.
exploration of one’s role in society, sociodrama is used for “collective components”
while psychodrama serves “private components” (Sternberg and Garcia 5). 20

The modalities and devices of both Moreno-inspired forms are similar and so are
only briefly summarized here. After an initial group warm-up, where exercises such as
the Common Denominator Game serve to break the ice and stimulate frank discussion, 21
the group’s director (undoubtedly the inspiration for Fox’s conductor) determines the
performative desires of those assembled. Sternberg and Garcia outline the procedure and
terminology:

Among these themes are unresolved issues shared by group members, for
instance trusting a friend. They are called open tension systems. The
director also listens for what specific needs people have that can be
satisfied through the action of the sociodrama, for instance the need to
assert independence. These are called act hungers. Out of the open
tension systems and act hungers, one main issue crystallizes—for instance,
setting limits with friends. This issue, with which all group members
seem to be concerned, is called the shared central issue. (39)

The director then steers the performance, providing opportunities for those assembled to
explore their mutual act hungers through the structural stages of interviews, setting the
scenes, and shaping the played action. Unlike its derivative Playback, where specialized
players almost exclusively perform the required roles, sociodrama allows the audience
themselves to volunteer for these improvisational scenarios. Traditional performance
gendered boundaries are also blurred within this tradition for, as Sternberg and Garcia
note, “males can play females, and females can play males. Mentioning this to the group

20 Blatner alternatively distinguishes the two approaches as group-centered and protagonist-centered
respectively. See Blatner Acting-In, 11.
21 In this exercise players split into pairs or trios and take a few minutes to determine commonalities that
are not obvious facts, such as wearing glasses, but details that are unobservable to the naked eye. “Not
only are interesting similarities and differences uncovered, but also a sense of camaraderie develops during
their search for what they have in common” (Sternberg and Garcia 32). Variations given include finding a
problem they have in common, concerns they share, or issues connected to work. These bonds can then
serve as the steering theme of a sociodramatic session.
is often liberating. There is always someone who is eager to become more cognizant of the thoughts and feelings of the opposite sex” (45). As is the case with psychodrama, the form also encourages and exploits the use of role reversals and doubling as particularly effective therapeutic tools within the (re)enactments (see Sternberg and Garcia 58-61). These devices allow participants to step into someone else’s shoes or to view their own behaviors as an outsider, both socio-politically profound boundary-blurring tendencies in their own right as they encourage and facilitate shifts in perspective and the development of empathy.22

As is the case with all of Moreno’s work, theatre provides the governing paradigm and the event is essentially a spontaneous performance designed to facilitate the growth and healing of the group (or individual in the case of psychodrama.) Subsequently, Moreno’s focus is undoubtedly leveled at the greater community or socio-political site of engagement: the concept of healing is clearly synonymous with that of political growth and improvement. Performed action is key to his work. His wife and fellow innovator, Zerka, explicates this core principle: “he said for us to experience each other truly, we must both reverse our positions and enter into the subjectivity of the other mutually, not unilaterally. But the only way to do this is in action” (Moreno “Foreword,” xii). The sociodramatic impetus is indisputably theatrical, allied to more widely recognized movements such as Grotowski’s paratheatrical period (Frost and Yarrow 90), Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (Theatre, 150) and its progeny (Solomon 56), as well as more clearly derivative forms such as Playback Theatre (Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz 10) and

22 Moreno advocates a very particular form of two-way empathy described by the term tele that unites the patient and his/her double or stand-in. He writes, “It is this interaction process which I have called the tele phenomenon (like a ‘tele-’ phone, it has two ends). Empathy is a one-way feeling. Tele is a two-way feeling” (Fox Essential, 134).
Cossa’s Acting Out program (Cossa et al. 6). The form functions simultaneously as a healing and aesthetic art. This happy duality is stressed by Moreno’s early open therapeutic sessions that transgressed the prior normative behavior of engaging in therapy confidentially behind closed doors. “In the 1940s,” Blatner recounts, “he opened a studio on the Upper East Side of New York City where he worked with 30 or 100 or more people who attended on a weekend evening and paid a price equivalent to that of a movie” (Foundations, 47). Moreno clearly perceived a mutually advantageous relationship between theatre and therapy in such an act of reclaimed performance.

Practitioners Sternberg and Garcia observe, “Sociodrama emerged out of theatre. It can, through its unique methods, give back to theatre, helping it to renew itself spontaneously and creatively” (141).23 One could argue, however, that it never ceased to be theatre, and that it merely transgressed traditional boundaries that artificially delineate and separate types of performance according to prevalent power structures and preferences. To isolate Moreno’s work in this manner is to perpetuate the notion that theatre must not exert a social or political influence beyond the immediate site of performance. Yet, as Creative Alternatives actress Marilyn Chris attests, “Theater has such an obvious connection to the emotions that it can awaken in people in a way that no other medium can” (Fein “Theater as Therapy,” C13). The promise for these awakened feelings to find expression and manifestation within the greater socio-political realm is unmistakably considerable. Moreno’s “rediscovery” of this seamless fit merely speaks of

---

23 They continue to name three specific types of theatre experiences, Theatre Arts, Theatre Arts Education and Theatre-in-Education, as being especially conducive to the sociodramatic spirit (Sternberg and Garcia 141).
theatre’s boundless energy and reaffirms its all-too-often elided potential for efficacy within and beyond the stage.24

While Moreno’s work tapped the political power of performance for the healing and development of the society within a therapeutic setting, Boal’s most recent improvisational explorations with Legislative Theatre explicitly assume a more overtly public and socio-political persona, thereby further reevaluating art’s relationship and interconnectedness with politics. Although all of Boal’s work has undoubtedly taken on a political air, with its elevation of prosaic wisdom and the return of the stage to the masses, Legislative Theatre serves as an important movement here for its exceptionally thorough merging of art and politics. This movement seeks to make permanent the fleeting inversions and redistribution of power seen in the carnival’s satiric commentary. In Boal’s earliest theatrical treatise he had noted that, despite Aristotle’s claim to the contrary, “all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them” (Theatre, ix) Cf. (ibid. 39). As his career continued, however, Boal began an embodied investigation not only of theatre’s power to serve as a critique of politics, but also its equal ability to create and disseminate a new politics. In Boal’s words, he pursued “making theatre as politics rather than merely making political theatre” (Legislative, 20). He writes of this process of discovery:

Hamlet says in his famous speech to the actors that theatre is a mirror in which may be seen the true image of nature, of reality! I wanted to

24 Sarah Boxer reviews a theatrical offering that crosses the therapy/theatre divide in the opposite direction. Lisa Levy’s New York production “Psychotherapy Live! Psychotherapy as Performance Art” inverts the aforementioned dynamic by stressing the performative over the therapeutic. Baring only fake credentials, the performance assumes an irreverent (satirical?) whimsical tone in which Levy (whose day job is an art director in an ad agency) leads thirteen-minute audience-participatory sessions, in which “prizes” are awarded – such as Midal for the men, suckers and a “nude portrait of herself on a HealthRider exercise machine (for the most revealing patient)” (B7). Though largely tongue-in-cheek, Levy’s work is not without its own healing agenda. She says of her purpose: “I want to demystify therapy. I want to show that everybody has a lot of the same issues” (ibid. B7).
penetrate this mirror, to transform the image I saw in it and to bring that transformed image back to reality: to realise the / image of my desire. I wanted it to be possible for the spect-actors in Forum Theatre to transgress, to break the conventions, to enter into the mirror of a theatrical fiction, rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desires. This discontent was the genesis of Legislative Theatre, in which the citizen makes the law through the legislator. The legislator should not be the person who makes the law, but the person through whom the law is made (by the citizens, of course!) (*Legislative*, 9-10)

In this theatrical phase, performance is no longer merely reactive – it is also avowedly creative, posing new forms of political governance while commenting on the injustices of the old.

Boal’s Legislative Theatre began during the Brazilian elections of 1992, a socio-political ritual, he notes fittingly, that has “something of carnival about them […] The people dance and sing and parade and shout – and do everything under the sun, literally and metaphorically” (*Boal Legislative*, 12). Boal’s Center for the Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO), founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1989, was facing considerable difficulties and on the verge of collapse. Initially, the company became involved with the elections as a means of providing a fitting end to the group’s beleaguered existence. Soon, however, their campaign gathered sufficient steam and Boal, the party’s at-first nominal figurehead, realized that his Theatre of the Oppressed company might, in fact, be elected. “For the first time in the history of the theatre and the history of politics, there opened up the possibility of a whole theatre company being elected to a parliament,” he recalls (ibid. 15). Campaigning under the slogan *Coragem de ser feliz*, “Have the courage to be happy!” (ibid. 14), Boal’s theatricalized movement ultimately proved successful – in spite of an electoral system renowned for its corruption – with Boal winning the position of *Vereador* (Member of Parliament) for Rio de Janeiro for the period of 1993-1996. In
this revolutionary moment, the boundary between improvisational theatre and politics was truly erased.

Although Boal assumed the position of *Vereador*, he did not adopt an individualistic style of representation; rather his company promulgated a new mode of governance and legislative proceedings. Forming dozens of specialized groups (or cells) of constituents – “landless peasant farmers, homeless children, hopeless elders, black students, *favela* -dwellers, unionised factory workers, [and] battered women” (Boal *Hamlet*, 334) – appointed jokers conducted focused sessions of Theatre of the Oppressed. The tools of Forum Theatre were reinvented for a new mode of interaction: the Chamber in the Square. Boal comments on the differences between these two approaches: “A Forum Theatre show always seeks to understand the law behind the phenomenon. But with Legislative Theatre we go beyond this, trying not only to discover the law but to promulgate it in the Chamber. Or to discover it and modify it” (*Legislative*, 94). To this new end spontaneous explorative performances took place within a slightly more rigorous framework. Questions were posed with greater certainty, an indispensable legislative assessor familiar with the legal aspects of the matter to be debated was always present, written material pertinent to and contextualizing the selected issue was circulated within the targeted community beforehand, written documentation or “a resumé of the suggestions” (ibid. 91) was diligently recorded as an impetus to future change, and later feedback on the steps taken was provided in the form of a return visit to the performance locales (see Boal *Legislative*, 90-93). In addition to these heightened political components, Boal privileged a sense of theatricality as important to the overall process.
He writes, “the theatricality of the scene stimulates creativity, reflection and comprehension” (ibid. 93). His commitment to performance remained firm throughout.

This newfound political/artistic process resulted in its first “great and total victory” (ibid. 95) on the 22nd of November 1995 with the passing of Law number 1023/95: The Law of Geriatric Care. Prior to this piece of legislature, hospitals in Rio de Janeiro did not explicitly recognize the unique medical needs of elderly patients and subsequently care was often insensitive to the peculiar demands of this sector of society or was simply drastically inappropriate in nature. Developed from the performance exploration work of the Terceira Idade (Third Age) cell, municipal hospitals were henceforth required to offer specialist geriatric treatment. During Boal’s four-year term, thirteen such laws were created through the Chamber system, including a much-needed law for the Protection of Witnesses of Crimes – a victory he designates as the system’s greatest achievement (ibid. 159). In his autobiography he recalls proudly, “In Forum Theatre we wanted the population to express its desire. That was not enough […] we wanted them to transform that desire into law. Thirteen times, this was possible” (Hamlet, 335). Boal’s experiment reflects improvisational performance’s ability to rigorously and productively cross over (or return) into the realm of politics. While numerous practitioners have utilized theatre as a political act, such as those engaged in the radical theatre movement of America’s 1960s, Boal’s Legislative Theatre truly rethought the (imagined) boundary between these two spheres. Boal mused, “Someone

---

25 For a complete list of the legislature created through Boal’s Chamber process see Boal Legislative, 102-104. Boal also provides an account of one law that he attempted to write without the assistance of his TO methodology. Seeking to parallel the Western practice of accompanying pedestrian walk signals at busy crossroads with appropriate noises to assist the blind, Boal quickly had to revoke his petition when it was brought to his attention that Brazilian drivers were not as accustomed to stopping at red lights thereby placing blind pedestrians in considerable danger if such a system were to be introduced. Subsequently, Boal retorts, “I am a lawmaker who has never made a law!!!” (Legislative, 105).
makes the law: why not us?” (ibid. 337). Spontaneous theatre, in the form of his Chamber in the Square, provided the model for this political/artistic revolution, testifying once more to improvisation’s ability, in the spirit of Bakhtin’s carnival, to transcend imposed genre limitations and empower those whose creative voices are usually marginalized or ignored.26

Improvisation’s inclination towards boundary blurring is further witnessed in its mutually inclusive attitude towards art and life. Kozlowski views this perception as fundamental to modern improv in general. He observes that improvisational acting is “[u]nique among theatre disciplines in existing more as a philosophy of how to live rather than a philosophy of how to act on stage” (1). Improvisation does not seek to isolate itself from the everyday but rather wishes to inform and shape it. Randy Dixon of Seattle Theatresports reiterates this stance: “The thing that initially struck me is that the stuff Keith [Johnstone] is saying is not necessarily just applicable to improv. I think it is a way of life, a thinking philosophy. That sounds sort of cultish and strange, but it’s true. I’ve found that using some of those same principles in my life has helped me a lot” (Foreman and Martini 86). Belt and Stockley also hint at this life/art connection in the introduction to their Theatresports manual, remarking that improvisation “also teaches skills necessary to quality living: those of problem solving, increased communication kills, creativity, self-growth, self-discipline, team work and support” (1). Moreno shares this view. Movements such as his abovementioned sociodrama in no small way seek to enrich one’s everyday experiences. He observes, “my ideas have emphasized that creativity and

26 Boal was unsuccessful in his efforts for re-election in 1996 and, subsequently, the crucial funding for his methodology was lost (while in office, jokers were paid as members of his party.) He describes this situation as yet another possible development, writing, somewhat ironically, “We entered the new phase: Legislative Theatre Without Legislator!” [italics in original] (Legislative, 115).
spontaneity affect the very roots of vitality and spiritual development, and thus affect our involvements in every sphere of our lives” (“Foreword,” ix). This all-encompassing grasp of art and life also forms the basis of Boal’s work: “The Theatre of the Oppressed is located precisely on the frontier between fiction and reality – and this border must be crossed” (Boal Games, 246). For Boal too, theatre creates life: “To make culture is to invent the world so that it responds to our needs, our desires, our dream” (Legislative, 178). Improvisation spills out uncontrollably into the lived socio-political world, just as Van Erven’s description of the final stage of a Madang performance encapsulates.

The audience gets up and follows the shaman, dancing behind her and repeating her words [such as “Free the political prisoners”] in chorus. The awesome shouting, dancing, and drumming continue for up to half an hour after the planned performance. It is not difficult to see how madang plays often turn into spontaneous demonstrations, particularly when they are performed at universities. (Playful, 111-112)

Art and life coexist freely and playfully on such occasions. Such movements acknowledge and exploit the fruitful potential for performance to engage, intersect and inform the body politic as well as the realm of art.

This particular blurring dynamic of art and life is most vividly manifested in the figure of the improviser him/herself. The improvisational player often assumes an almost Brechtian stance simultaneously being and not being him/herself. Brecht’s poem, “On the Everyday Theatre” (c. 1930), describes such a mode of performance. He tells the story of a man re-enacting an accident scene on a street corner to various passersby:

Our performer there on the corner
Spins no such spell [of magical transformation].
He’s no sleep-walker you may not address,
Nor high priest at service.
Interrupt as you will.

27 This is particularly the case with Boal’s mode of Invisible Theatre. See Chapter Two for a detailed discussion of this boundary-blurring form.
Calmly he will reply
And when you have had your say
Continue his performance. (Brecht 7)

Brecht’s model player is able to step freely in and out of the performance, spontaneously alternating between the (re)created story and the world of the here and now. This fluid performance modality emerges in many improvisational endeavors and leads Smith and Dean to note that improvisation in general can “problematise the relationship between the actor and his role by eliding the two” (208). As the player exists simultaneously in both spheres, it clearly follows that his/her actions and choices concurrently impact these two realms of existence, the personal and the political. The player does not leave the lived reality of the socio-political world as he/she steps upon the artist’s stage.

Again a brief survey of dominant modes reveals the commonplace simultaneity of the improvising character/actor. Boal refers to this state of willful coexistence in his notion of his dualised spect-actor. “The spect-actors, real people, penetrated that aesthetic space: there they were dualised. They went on being who they were and they became characters” (Hamlet, 207). Boal’s player rarely ceases to be him/herself while pursuing a scenic exploration. When improvising, the spect-actor exists at the same time in both his/her current lived world and the aesthetic world of the play. For Spolin, the fictional world almost vanishes completely with actors relating to each other as players rather than as characters (see Spolin Improvisation, 234). In such instances, the line between art and life is truly negligible. Seham notes that this conflation of player and role has continued with most Chicago traditions. She writes, “Some schools of improv give considerable attention to techniques of character construction. Others ask performers to share their own personal memories and feelings. Most performance
emerges as a mix of these approaches, leaving little room to distinguish between actor and role” (xxvii). Close’s work falls into this latter category. Among the three fundamental “rules” developed by Del Close and Elaine May at the Saint Louis Compass is to “find the character in your own inclinations, never wear it as something outside yourself” (Markwell 18). Close perpetuated this style of performance at the ImprovOlympic and his Harold continues to afford an opportunity for highly personal performances, particularly within the device of the inserted monologues. Seham observes, “Players sometimes take this opportunity to perform a therapeutic expiation of painful or difficult personal issues—including sexuality, loneliness, and alcoholism—for an audience of witnesses” (53). Community Theatre allows a similar opportunity for life and art to mingle effortlessly. Translating the work of Stut Theatre’s Jos Bours and Peter van de Hoek, Van Erven describes this dynamic: “In community theatre people are what they act and act what they are. That is the basic principle the director needs to accept” (Community, 61). In this manner, the improviser often resembles Grotowski’s “poor theatre” actor who does not dress up or pretend so much as divest and reveal him/herself. Frost and Yarrow summarize this performance stance: the player “is not so much a character of the play, as the subject of the play. His skill may amaze us, but what moves

28 The other two rules cited by Markwell are “don’t dispute what’s been said (you’ve got to play along)” and “assume the active voice instead of the passive” (18). These principles are quoted with slight variations elsewhere. See Sweet 141-142, Coleman 225-226 and Kozlowski 27.

29 The role of the artist is also blurred in the improvisational event with the improviser assuming numerous roles that are often isolated in the modern theatre. For example, the Harold player is described as the combination of an actor, editor, director, scenic artist, sound effects creator and choreographer (Halpern et al. 117-131). PETA refers to its all-round committed artist as an ATOR, an acronym for Actor-Trainer-Organizer-Researcher (Van Erven Playful, 21), attesting to a similar conflation of interdisciplinary roles within the singular community theatre player. Likewise, Peg Jordan’s description of Ruth Zaporah as a dancer, actress, mime and master of improvisation further alludes to this spirit of the player holding several complementary and mutually reinforcing roles (Jordan “Zap!”).
us is the actor’s gift of himself” (86). This blurring approach to performance further emphasizes the political nature of the improvisational player’s art. S/he does not leave the real world (or her/his real identity) during the course of the improvisation. Instead of enabling escapism, an almost anti-political stance in its willful ignorance of the present circumstances, the act of performance is an extension of the player and subsequently retains its overt socio-political dimension.

One final detailed example will serve to illustrate improvisation’s carnivalesque ability to overcome needlessly restrictive and de-politicizing boundaries in performance. Nigerian Apidan Theatre embodies many of the blurring impetuses discussed above. This movement occupies a somewhat unique theatrical position on the African continent as it has been traced and to some extent documented through its lineage histories from the fifteenth century through to modern times (see Kerr 9). Its alternative name, Egungun apidan, reflects the profound influence of the religious sect of the same name (see Adedeji “Alarinjo,” 228), and today this bond between the secular and sacred continues, providing yet another variation of boundary blurring. Originating primarily as a form of patronized courtly entertainment, by the seventeenth century these masked performers had begun to take this form of spontaneous theatre to the masses. As links with the court further weakened, the nobility featured more prominently as sources of satirical reproach within the variety of sketches that composed each performance. The troupes became increasingly secularized and separated from their Egungun origins during the early nineteenth century when they became known by another title, Alarinjo, “a name which

---

30 Grotowski’s paratheatrical period particularly elides this distinction between performer and performed. For example, the Polish Laboratory’s Mountain Project discarded this binary completely, pursuing a doctrine of individual experience and complete participation from all those involved. See Schechner and Wolford 207-251.
originated as an abuse and which more or less picks them out and labels them as ‘rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars’” (ibid. 228). As is often the case, this sense of marginality was both a curse and a blessing, allowing an opportunity for the satirical criticism afforded the outsider as they are not directly responsible to the elders of any given community (Kerr 14), but also insuring a less than desirable degree of instability and lack of security as they moved from venue to venue.

A typical Apidan performance occurs in an open space, thereby allowing ample interaction between the performers, bata orchestra, chorus and the audience. Here we see a manifestation of the boundary blurring between audience and spectator. Götrick writes of a modern incarnation of the event: “Since the actors are constantly improvising on a given synopsis, spectators are able to take on the function of co-acting. For some dramas to become a success, such audience participation is almost a prerequisite” (40). The program of events consists of five stages that seem to have remained relatively consistent in modern times. These stages provide the general form of the performance. First, there is a ceremonial opening known as the Ijuba, which consists of a pledge and salute. It also appears customary for the Apidan to acknowledge their lineage and training, give reverence to the “unseen forces,” and also acclaim their own merits as performers. The opening is followed by the Dance – a ritualistic form of worship that is prone to eventually transform or become supplanted by a more sensual and “social” (participatory) counterpart. This section often culminates, according to Adedeji, in a display of physical prowess, such as an acrobatic feat. The third and fourth stages are described as the Drama, the former division emphasizing spectacle, while the latter is more akin to a

---

31 This description of the Apidan form is taken predominantly from Adedeji “Alarinjo,” 234-243 with additional support from Götrick’s Apidan Theatre and Modern Drama.
medley or revue, with comic sketches, music, dancing and singing as its staple elements.

Adedeji writes:

> The sketches were mainly improvised and capable of infinite changes. Their songs were topical and in most cases familiar. The dialogue included jokes and ribaldry. Lack of premeditation and any carefully worked out ‘scenario’ affected the shape of the masques as, sometimes, the enthusiasm of both the actor and spectator resulted in unrestrained indulgence in farce. (“Alarinjo,” 243)

While Adedeji indicates that there is only one cycle of the “Drama” sequence, Götrick complicates his model and suggests that there may, in fact, be several alternating sequences before the performance continues (see Götrick 108). Content also somewhat distinguishes these two sections, with the Spectacle typically concentrating on animal motifs featuring a solo performer, while the Medley/Revue incorporates more satirical, social and historical elements. Finally, the event concludes in a masque or “Idan Apare’le,” the most popular of which is the *Iyawo* [bride] *Masque*. Throughout, the performers wear highly elaborate costumes that cover them from head to toe, “completely concealing the man wearing it, thus creating an other-worldly appearance” (ibid. 38). A character mask and a device that makes the performer’s voice croaky and unrecognizable complete the transformation (see Graham-White 108 and Götrick 48).

This provides a rather sparse structural image of the Apidan event: an interactive and collaborative atmosphere marks the performance as a whole making greater detail elusive. Audience members are particularly active in the chorus or *Akunyungba* which is primarily responsible for the song element of the presentation – an essential unifying component of an otherwise “fragmented, episodic, and incomplete” form (Adedeji “Alarinjo,” 238). As noted in Chapter Four, women may serve a particularly crucial role in this capacity. In addition to this participatory inclusivity, Apidan theatre also
encompasses and unites multiple artistic tendencies, incorporating dance, music and song alongside presentational and satirical improvisations. These elements are all “overwhelmingly interwoven” (Ogunbiyi 12). In a manner reminiscent of Moreno’s sociodrama, efficacy and theatricality also coexist in ritualistic and game-like modalities respectively. The Yoruba terms Idan and Efe best describe these two strong impetuses that flow through the form. Idan means trick, wonder or miracle (Götrick 255) and embodies the serious and ritualistic (efficacious) components of the performance. These aspects of the event, represented most vividly by the ijuba and opening dance, are directed at superhuman powers. To a believing spectator, such moments maintain their original function, namely communicating “with powers out of reach of the common man” through the mediation of the priest-like performers (ibid. 116). Components that fall under the influence of Efe, defined loosely as joke or fun, exist alongside this ritualistic impetus. Efe is particularly evident in the sketches and the closing masque. Götrick describes this impetus as comic, humanistic and satirical (115). Sections dominated by this influence focus on earthly society and the communication “is clearly aimed at the audience” as opposed to the realm of the supernatural (ibid. 117). Performers during periods of Efe are subsequently perceived as impersonators and actors rather than priests or intermediaries. Although Götrick distinguishes between these two dominant performative spirits, Idan and Efe elements not only exist side-by-side but also simultaneously within the event, blurring distinctions between religion and art, ritual and

32 Banham notes this tendency as peculiar to African theatre in general. He writes, “African theatre is likely to contain and bring together diverse elements of entertainment and communication, including dance, music, mime, masquerade, song, etc. Its language can be verbal, musical or physical, and all at the same time. Divisions into such genres as tragedy and comedy may be confused by the ability of the African theatre to accommodate both together without destroying the integrity of either” (3).
politics, serious and comic, and as such, Apidan provides a powerful model of stylistic complexity and inclusivity.

Finally, Apidan also illustrates the improvisational tendency to willingly mix art and life. “The performance is not set aside as an event apart from everyday life,” Götrick observes. “There is no pretence as to the enacted event taking place somewhere else at any other time. The fictional as well as the non-fictional events of the enactment take place in the ordinary flow of activity. Consequently, there is no barrier between spectators and the characters” (41). The often-presentational style of performance also situates the Apidan player as a transgressive figure as he is capable of both donning roles and appearing as himself. Götrick also writes of this tendency:

The dramas are representational in that the actors assume roles. In some parts of the performance, however, there is no role-play. The actor then is not representing something or somebody else, he is what he appears to be, a religious Egungun masquerade. He is not acting like, or as, an Egungun; he is an Egungun, a ‘supernatural power concealed’, with all the properties of an Egungun such as the ability to communicate directly with the divinities. (40)

The Apidan event, then, serves as a compelling exemplar of the carnivalesque ability to transcend and redefine boundaries, merging player and spectator, simultaneously incorporating various performing arts and genres, enabling profane playfulness, sacred efficacious traditions and political satire, and mutually embracing performance and life, presentation and representation, character and player.

This ability to blur defining distinctions has not been without its own unique challenges. Specifically, it has complicated contemporary efforts to distinguish African performance modalities from everyday activities (see de Graft 3, Graham-White 14, and Adedeji “Genesis,” 5.) However, this malleability and seemingly boundless energy also
provides much of the strength and potency of the improvisational act as practitioners continually question, challenge and reassess the artificial limitations imposed by needlessly narrow or reductive orthodoxies. As a result of this blurring energy, spontaneous performance unavoidably and deliberately spills out into the realm of the body politic. Improvisation is not content merely to function as distraction or an isolated aesthetic experience. It reaches over boundaries, seeking socio-political efficacy as it freely engages its audiences in collaborative processes of healing, legislative redress and self-actualization. Embodying the carnival’s spirit of disrupting normative systems of control, improvisation rarely finds satisfaction with momentary breaches or contained departures from institutionalized regulations. Instead, the improvisatory “way of seeing” promotes a continuous political process of effectual engagement and renegotiation with the world at large.

The Political Ends of the Means

The above analysis reveals that, among other boundary breaches, improvisation often escapes willingly and knowingly into the domain of politics. In many instances, this connection is overt and fundamental to the practice as a whole. Boal’s work, as previously discussed, assumes such a stance: his Theatre of the Oppressed turns “the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions” (Boal Rainbow, 15). Jackson asserts that Boal’s arsenal of games pursues this dogged political path with “endless energy and relentless optimism” (Games, xxii). Schumann’s Bread and Puppet Theatre follows a similarly overt course. According to Bell, it is grounded in three consistent ideals that
include “an explicit acceptance of political content as a possible and more often than not necessary element of performance” (“Louder,” 273). Along with movements such as the Living Theatre, El Teatro Campesino and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, much experimental American theatre of the 1960s was uncompromisingly political with its accompanying use of improvisation as a process often “linked with ideas about politics and the need for social change and spiritual wholeness” (Smith and Dean 19).

Characteristic of this impetus, Julian Beck of the Living Theatre proclaimed, “We are a revolution disguised as a theatre” (quoted in Tytell 248). PETA’s work, in particular during the Philippine elections of 1986, also assumed this politically transparent guise (see Van Erven Playful, 45), while Finnegan notes that oral poetry, once perceived as a largely normative modality, frequently takes on a more combative political tone with poems “that express rebellion, put pressure on authority, or encourage change.” She continues, “[p]olitical and protest songs are common, and even panegyrics sometimes subtly admonish as well as praise” (“Oral Poetry,” 125-126).

Other practices operate on more intimate or contained political levels, such as Fox’s Playback with its focus on the immediate social needs of the present micro-community (Fox Acts, 213) and Moreno’s efforts to enable “the possibility of helping peaceful interaction on a small scale” (Moreno “Foreword,” xiii). Yet other styles quietly encourage socio-political sensitivity in their execution. Johnstone writes, “[a]ll stories are trivial unless they involve a moral choice” (Storytellers, 78), and further

33 The other two fundamental principles are “an embrace of puppet and mask theater as dramatic forms equal to or more expressive than realistic actors’ theater” and “a persistent desire to operate as much as possible outside the strictures of commercial entertainment as defined by late twentieth-century American capitalism” (Bell “Louder,” 273).

34 As Zerka Moreno observes, however, this assistance was given with a profound hope that it would eventually become a utopian “instrument for universal peace” (Moreno “Foreword,” xiii).
asserts that players are working badly together when they are “[i]gnoring moral implications” (ibid. 340). Here there are tones of embracing socio-political forces on the improv stage as morality and its societal repercussions are explored. Frost and Yarrow argue that the collaborative nakedness and vulnerability that accompany ensemble improvisation has an unmistakable and inherent political edge. “There is perhaps no more direct way of experiencing our mutual responsibility, and ultimately that is both a psychological and a political realization” (59).

As these brief examples attest, it is evident that improvisation can serve as a potent political tool or means. However, the specific ends of this performance modality are less transparent and thus deserve further scrutiny. Does improvisation assume a particular political profile? Is the improvisational impetus inherently predisposed to a certain societal agenda or course? Can improvisation be characterized as essentially radical or conservative in nature?

Jan Cohen-Cruz defines radical as “acts that question or re-envision social arrangements of power” (Radical, 1) and as Smith and Dean demonstrate, many practitioners consider improvisation as being fundamentally aligned with this definition. They write, “there seems to be a general consensus among critics that improvisation is intrinsically anti-hegemonic” (38). This radical notion reappears across the spectrum of improvisational practices. Green refers to Boal’s work in this manner, stating that Theatre of the Oppressed “offers the opportunity to reclaim the power of self-reflexive critique and to use theatrical tools for radical political practices” (48). Broyles-González adopts this tone in her consideration of the Mexican carpa, a form that has served throughout history as a “counterhegemonic tool of the disenfranchised and oppressed.
[… Its] periods of vigorous revival coincide with periods of social upheaval and popular distress,” she writes (247). Even more institutionally ensconced companies nod toward this tendency. For example, Second City’s Bernard Sahlins notes that an important revue feature to remember is “that the wit and effect of the parody goes down as the target goes down […] your parody form must be worthy because you are, perforce, reducing it anyway” (125-6). This philosophy on a basic level reflects an impetus towards toppling hierarchies or, at the very least, confronting and re-envisioning the entrenched symbols of the establishment. These approaches lead Frost and Yarrow to posit that much of the richness of improvisation stems from its latent ability to interfere with established norms and sequences and its correspondingly “constant readiness to challenge ‘the rules of the game’” (166).

However, as Seham adroitly examines in her *Whose Improv Is It Anyway: Beyond Second City*, beneath improvisation’s professed affinity with radical ends lies the often-unvoiced possibility for the conservative repression of difference. Therefore, while Seham notes on the one hand that Gagné and his Free Associates advocate “teaching improvisers to confront stereotypes that emerge [during performances] rather than depending on them” (227), on the other she uncovers that philosophies such as ImprovOlympic’s groupmind and other team-based modalities may ironically serve as a means of reifying potentially negative grand narratives. This tendency in Chicago-style improv, Seham observes, stems largely from problematic ideals first put forward by Spolin. Seham writes, “True improv, according to Spolin, must have no stars, nor may anyone impose any intentional message or political agenda on the organic truth that must emerge through group agreement” (ibid. 8). Following the group consciousness,
however, is not without its pitfalls. Contrary to Spolin’s apparently innocuous ideal of “organic truth,” most improv-comedy, in particular, “demonstrates that spontaneous group creation usually taps into reserves of shared references, received truth, and common knowledge rather than, as Spolin claims, challenging ‘old facts and information’” (ibid. xxi). Distaste for conscious intentionality may often serve as the covert battle cry for repressing marginalized groups whose “agendas” seem at odds with the dominant “experience.” Consequently, “Spolin’s (and Sill’s) theory that improvisation revealed universal truths often helped to reinforce the gender stereotypes that no-mindedly emerged in scenes” (ibid. 14). Specifically, this hidden dynamic exists within ImprovOlympic’s elevation of the organic group unconscious (ibid. 68) and Comedysportz’s slick sports overlay that “not only disallows transgressive performances, it actively produces normative ones” (ibid. 103).35 A more explicit testament to the malleability of improvisation’s politics can be seen in the eighteenth-century Italian theatrical war between Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi. In this instance, the tools of improvisation were unquestionably put to use in the service of a hegemonic cause.

Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) was born as a member of the upper echelons of the Venetian “common people,” and it was to this section of society that this “Italian Moliere” primarily owed his allegiance. As his prodigious career as a playwright

35 This tendency of reifying normative stereotypes also emerges in more “radically-inclined” practices. Boal’s analysis of a Swedish Image Theatre exercise in which players created portraits of “family” inadvertently recreates this dynamic when a lesbian couple’s image was met with resistance. Boal writes, “It was her family and she was happy with it. It wasn’t ‘the Swedish family’ but that did not matter to her” (Games, 171-172). Here, it would seem, “the Swedish family” serves as a totalizing metaphor that dismisses less universally experienced occurrences. Green notes, in fact, that much of Boal’s work is almost conditional upon a certain level of homogeneity amongst those in attendance (see Green 50-52), while Fisher notes that even these environments can be problematic as they tend to make invisible (and therefore reify) group assumptions and blindnesses (189). Playback Theatre can also fall into essentializing treatments. Practitioner Fe Day notes attempts to avoid this trap: “We often say that we are going for the ‘essence’ of a story. Yet, even (especially?) in saying that, we have to make sure that we are not depoliticizing the narrative and turning it into a [simplifying] myth” (87).
developed he proudly pursued and espoused a heretofore-excluded middleclass morality and ideology on the theatre boards.  The Commedia dell’Arte had long served as the dominant comedic mode in Italy, but Goldoni found it to be rather unsuited to his political (and literary) ends. “The comic theatre in Italy had for more than a century been so corrupt that it had become an abominable object of scorn for the rest of Europe,” he objected.

Nothing appeared on public stages except filthy harlequinades, dirty and scandalous love scenes and jokes, poorly invented and poorly developed plots, with no morals and no order, and which, far from correcting vice – the original and most noble purpose of comedy – fomented it instead. It made the ignorant lower classes, dissolute young men, and mannerless boors laugh, but it bored and angered people of culture and good morals. (Goldoni quoted in Emery 4)

To combat the commedia’s (carnivalesque?) fall from grace, Goldoni sought to make the stock of masked characters literary. Baldini characterizes the resulting task as “not so much the simple one of killing them off as the well-nigh hopeless one of putting new life into them” (xiii). Goldoni rejected the fantastical and farcical exaggeration of the increasingly caricatured commedia personas. He favored instead the detailed individuality and nuance of a radically new written drama, complete with an almost “anti-literary” and realistic employment of appropriate slang and vulgarisms (Steele 175). In his efforts to create highly specific reflections (and commentaries) of Venetian society as

36 Goldoni’s artistic output is truly impressive by any standards. During his lifetime he penned 5 tragedies, 16 tragicomedies, 137 comedies, 57 commedia scenarios for commedia troupes, 20 intermezzi, 13 dramas, 55 libretti and 3 musical farces (Riedt 10). Kennard refers to him as “the highest and most fertile dramatic genius Italy ever produced” (Italian, 65).
37 This artistic journey primarily began in 1747 with Goldoni’s residency at the Teatro San Angelo in Venice.
he viewed it, improvisation was necessarily banished in order to give precedence to his piercingly astute vision as a playwright.\(^{38}\)

Goldoni sought to (re) politicize the performance event by giving voice and sympathetic representation to the emerging values and tastes of the middle class. Within works such as *The Fan*, Goldoni stripped away the pretensions and self-importance of the old patriarchal order, emphasizing instead familial and societal bonds and interactions. Riedt aptly comments that when Goldoni “portrayed the protagonists of the dying feudal rulership as useless, he was as accurate as he was outspoken” (31). On the one hand, Goldoni could be considered conservative for his removal of improvisation and performer freedom and creativity from the stage and his corresponding elevation of the dramatic precepts of education and decorum steeped in the patriarchal traditions of antiquity. On the other hand, his comedic scripts esteemed an egalitarian sense of politics that “bestowed human dignity upon the lowly” (ibid. 33) through heartfelt, detailed and remarkably realistic portrayals of those previously lampooned or ignored in the theatrical enterprise. Goldoni innovatively peopled the stage with prosaic common folk rather than the vestiges of the nobility; his playwright’s pen gave voice to the former underrepresented section of society while satirizing the latter’s increasingly absurd political and societal inappropriateness, inverting the previously dominant dynamic made explicit in the masks of the commedia.

\(^{38}\) In *The Comic Theatre* of 1750, a play that in his own words serves as “less a comedy in itself than a Foreword to all my Comedies” (Goldoni *Comic*, 3), Goldoni’s character Tonino metatheatrically voices the result of Goldoni’s wide-ranging reforms. The play follows the thwarted efforts of a commedia troupe attempting to implement a Goldoni-styled scripted mode of theatre. “These character comedies have turned our profession upside down,” Tonino bemoans. “A poor player who has learned his craft in the commedia dell’arte and who is spilling out whatever pops into his head, now he finds himself forced to study books and say what somebody else has thought up” (ibid. 11-12). This was undoubtedly the intended effect.
Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), the “bizarre aristocrat” (Luciani 23), serves as the antagonist in this focused examination of improvisation and politics. Though considerably less prolific than his counterpart – his dramatic output consists of ten fables composed between 1761 and 1765 – Gozzi’s theatrical influence is nonetheless profound. In a very real and non-coincidental sense, Gozzi embodies Goldoni’s target of the useless and antiquarian Venetian nobility. Richards and Richards describe Gozzi as “the reactionary patrician defender of traditional styles and values” (285), while Kennard observes that he “personified and agonized in the crumbling of the old aristocratic Venetian order” (Italian, vii). A founding member of the Accademia dei Granelleschi or “Testicular Club of Venice” (DiGaetani 4), Gozzi became a self-appointed protector of the commedia and its ways of old. The comedic/literary reforms of the mid 1700s did not meet with his approval and were quick to draw his scorn. At first Gozzi’s criticism consisted primarily of pamphleteering spurred on by his fellow club-members: Goldoni was clearly his mark. In direct response to Goldoni’s charge that “He who proves not both theme and argument / Acts like the dog who barks against the moon” (quoted in Acton xiii), Gozzi temporarily retired his pen as a critic and picked up that of the playwright. In stark opposition to Goldoni’s middleclass sensibility and

---

39 DiGaetani cites his work as a forerunner of German Romanticism (11), Meyerhold and Vakhtangov viewed him as an inspirational model of “pure theatricality” (Emery 1), his plasticity in performance foreshadows surrealism and Brechtian alienation by more than a century (Bermel 310, Emery 9), and Baldini notes that in contemporary Europe his renown actually exceeded that of Goldoni (xxii).

40 In his autobiography he recalls, “Goldoni, in particular, called me a verbose wordmonger, and kept asserting that the enormous crowds which flocked together to enjoy his plays constituted a convincing proof of their essential merit” (Memoirs, 181).
realistic character portrayals, Gozzi proffered a theatrical doctrine of fantasy and escapism in the form of his “poetical extravagances” (Gozzi Memoirs, 155), the fiabe.\textsuperscript{41}

Gozzi rekindled the theatergoers’ fictive imagination and encouraged a sense of playfulness and childhood wonder in his fantastical journeys that sought to entertain and enrapture (rather than represent and educate.) The prologue to his first offering, The Love for Three Oranges (1761), invited the audience to enter into a world of make-believe. The prologue’s speaker paints the scene: “Just be patient, my friends, and pretend that you are six years old again, in bed, sleepy, and your grandmother is telling you a story” (Gozzi Love, 16). The commedia masks are re-employed to this escapist end. Pantalone, from Gozzi’s The Raven of the same year, speaks of this wonderful return to childhood naïveté. “When I hear the word ‘wedding,’ I think back to all those fairy tales they used to tell me when I was a little boy, with the prince and the princess who got married and the wedding feast of turnip brew, skinned rats, and flayed cats, I think of that and . . . I’m a kid again” (Gozzi Raven, 29). Gozzi’s works sought to return his audiences to this childhood sense of awe, favoring fancy, fantasy and gleefully opening “wide the doors of wonderland” (Kennard Italian, 108).

Although Gozzi arguably adopted a more improvisational modality for his fiabe – The Love of Three Oranges was created as a scenario allowing the troupe to employ more freely the tools of the commedia – the political thrust of his work was far from radical, thereby challenging a blanket claim that all spontaneous theatre shares this orientation. Gozzi shattered Goldoni’s preferred “fourth wall,” choosing bold theatrical artifice over realism and stylistic eclecticism above unified craftsmanship. This openness and

\textsuperscript{41} Ultimately, this “dramatic assault” proved to be highly successful. Within two years Gozzi’s extremely popular works would force Goldoni (and the lesser playwright Chiari) from the Venetian theatrical battlefield.
dialogism are indisputably improvisational. However, while Goldoni favored a foreword-looking politics, celebrating the rise of the previously silenced, Gozzi’s content was avowedly hegemonic, seeking to retain the decaying vitality of a dying order. Goldoni’s privileged middleclass is notably absent from Gozzi’s fantasy worlds (Emery 11) as he did not wish to capture this emerging reality onstage. Gozzi’s theatre was that of wish fulfillment. Kennard writes, “As a protest against impending evils, he conjured a fantastic world in which his ideals might shine brighter than reality” (Italian, 115). To this end, improvisation existed tentatively in Gozzi’s hierarchal universe, with the commedia characters and their playful free-spiritedness finding a home predominantly within the essentially ineffectual lower echelons of his works. His largely scripted mouthpieces, the royalty and nobility, typically reap the rewards of each fable, retaining an unquestioned right to power and governance over the masses. Despite his claims to the contrary and his redeployment of the spontaneous commedia players, Gozzi’s politics were undeniably conservative, seeking to slow the liberating march of time. His agenda reinforced an artistic and political system of repression and hegemony. Goldoni’s scripted work, alternatively, assumed a more radical political power regardless of its loss of actor-centered spontaneity.

Subsequently, while it is tempting to define improvisation as inherently radical, the artistic battle between Gozzi and Goldoni exposes that the tools of improvisation may support normative political goals that more closely resemble Boal’s oppressive characterization of Aristotelian tragedy (see Boal Theatre, 155). Seham alludes to this chapter’s central metaphor, Bakhtin’s carnival, in her summation of Chicago performance modalities, writing, “Like carnival, improv is free play for those who assert that freedom;
but free play can turn into power games” (224). The site of improv is not immune to its own challenges and limitations (and those of its practitioners.) Free play is not necessarily free of negative or harmful assumptions.

Interactive Theatre practitioner Gary Izzo suggests the need for conscious decision-making in the creative event in order to overcome this potential coercion, and positions this factor as a core distinction between the improvisational play of children and that of adults.42 “The temenos [play-space] has an awesome power for creation in our lives, but, unlike children, we adults may choose, with wisdom, what we create,” he writes (Art, 16). Such an approach can enable an increased political awareness of the ramifications of collaborative creativity and offset Seham’s fears of further marginalization and disenfranchisement. When considering these less inclusive leanings, however, one must also acknowledge that such shortcomings often exist in a tableau of more complexly intersecting parameters. For example, while groupmind may stifle some emerging voices, ImprovOlympic and its ilk disseminate the heretofore-specialized tools of theatre to an increasingly divergent (amateur) community. Furthermore, such claims of radicalness and conservativeness obviously exist in a spectrum of relativities as both these terms gain meaning only in relation to other political stances. Clearly, then, one cannot safely speak of improvisation possessing an inherent political bias. Yet, there are certain recurring methodological tendencies that provide a truly radical (in Cohen-Cruz’s sense of the term) or question-prone potential, most notably improvisation’s privileged flirtation with change. This highly political attitude, in addition to improv’s satiric way

42 This stance can be seen to modify the “group consciousness” and “organic truth” models of largely unconscious spontaneity offered by Spolin, Sills, Halpern and Close, that may unintentionally encourage coercive or narrow-minded politics onstage despite these practitioners deeply held inclusive and tolerant politics offstage.
of seeing and tendency to blur restrictive boundaries, completes our consideration of the politics of improvisation.

**Challenging the Conserve and Censorship**

Moreno describes an important societal phenomenon that is pertinent to this study under the rubric of the *conserve*. This term defines the situated matrices that make up the dominant traditions and practices of a community. Within the conserve exists a set of expectations, normative behaviors and preferred codes of conduct that characterize and give shape and meaning to a particular field of knowledge. In this manner, the *social conserve* governs and mandates stereotypical roles, the *technological conserve* facilitates the canonization of scientific principles, while the *cultural conserve* determines the perpetuation of artistic aesthetics (see Sternberg and Garcia 125-126). Moreno posits that these interlaced systems of knowledge preservation serve two dominant purposes: “they were of assistance in threatening situations and they made secure the continuity of a cultural heritage” (Fox *Essential*, 39). Therefore, as Blatner notes, “[t]he conserve is, for the most part, a good and necessary thing, the basis for technique, courtesy, good habits, and much of civilization” (*Foundations*, 75). The conserve operates as a storehouse for the necessary knowledge of the community. It provides a tradition of behavior, or, in Boal’s terminology, serves as a transmitter of convention or created habit: “it is neither good nor bad in itself. We should not, for example, categorize as good or bad the conventions of the traditional naturalistic theater. They were and are useful in certain times and circumstances” (*Theatre*, 167).
However, while the cultural conserve is in itself “morally neutral” (Blatner *Foundations, 75*), its stabilizing force can become the anathema of creativity, particularly in the modern period where Moreno claims “cultural conserves have reached such a point of masterful development and distribution en masse that they have become a challenge and a threat to the sensitivity of man’s creative patterns” (Fox *Essential, 40*).

Spontaneity, specifically, operates within a dynamic tension between the conserve, with its inherent tendency towards tradition and the tried and tested, and creativity, with its pursuit of the novel and the new. For although the conserve as an inherited frame of reference and custom serves an important function in society, Blatner identifies that it can also become suffocating and limiting in the realm of creativity. “The problem comes from blindly relying on it as an authority or excessively clinging to it out of inertia, mental laziness, or the fear of the unknown” (*Foundations, 75-76*). The conserve, then, with its reliance on previously created *product*, can impinge upon the continual creative *process* that seeks new constructions and discoveries.

Moreno viewed his various performative modes – the Theatre of Spontaneity, Dramatized Newspaper, psychodrama and sociodrama – as means of reinvigorating these habitual assumptions, utilizing the conserve as a “spring-board to new ideas rather than the last word on any subject” (Sternberg and Garcia 127). Improvisational creativity is viewed in this light as a generative and change-oriented modality. Spolin agrees, noting that improvisation “creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings” (*Improvisation, 4*). Reacting against the conserve, improvisation allows and encourages ruptures and discoveries.
Subsequently, Moreno’s theatre of the present moment, the here and now, serves as a potential antidote for the conserve’s staunch empowerment of the past.

The most conservative manifestation of the conserve and its repressive potential is undoubtedly the institution of censorship. Existing in many different guises, censorship is typically employed as the servant of the conserve, disallowing nontraditional or subversive discourses that question or undermine the authority of the status quo. Improvisation has historically had a combative relationship with this spirit of control; this serves as a testament both to the political nature of improvisational performance, and the political repercussions of its presence in society. The tension between censorship and spontaneous freedom has been particularly marked in the history of British theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the mid 1800s until 1968 improvisation was effectively criminalized in England due to the Theatres Act of 1843 whereby the Lord Chamberlain was required to approve all scripts intended for performance. Such a script-centered perception of theatre necessarily excluded the potential for the disposable and immediate texts simultaneously created and disseminated in the improvisational endeavor. Such performances did not stem from a censorable document. These transient texts were truly uncontrollable, unpredictable and, as a result, highly undesirable in the eyes of the watchful censor. Working in the 1960s, improvisation’s subsequent disfavor and legislative exclusion provided considerable difficulty for Keith Johnstone and the pending birth of his Theatresports-style of performance. Johnstone writes,

We [William Gaskill and John Dexter] thought of replacing wrestlers with improvisors, but every word and gesture on the stage had to be approved ahead of time by the Lord Chamberlain, a palace official. Because it’s impossible to sue the Queen, there was nothing we could do, so theatresports was just a way to liven up my impro classes. (Quoted in Foreman and Martini 19)
This form of English censorship was particularly rigorous: “Even comedians needed Royal approval for every proposed word and ‘significant gesture,’” Johnstone remarks. “Had wrestling been recognized as theatre, every throw, posture and expletive would have needed permission” (Storytellers, 2). He laconically summarizes the stultifying state of affairs when he confesses, “It was embarrassing to have visiting Russians commiserate with us over our lack of freedom” (ibid. 1).

Despite Johnstone’s considerable difficulties with English censorship, improvisation has often served as an effective tool against this oppressive force. Frost and Yarrow fittingly note improvisation’s relationship to this controlling impetus. “The antonym of ‘improvisation’ is ‘censorship,’” they write, “because while improvisation represents the permission (and self-permission) for artistic expression, and the acceptance of one’s own as well as others’ creativity, censorship self-evidently stands for denial and refusal” (146). Johnstone’s challenges in England serve as an apt illustration of this oppositional dynamic: institutionalized supervision made improv “practically impossible” to present, at least in conventional settings (Johnstone quoted in Rampton “Comedy,” 43). However, while censorship and improvisation may occupy conflicting poles on this artistic continuum, improvisation also provides a powerful politicized method for combating and evading its counter controlling force. Consequently, while Johnstone was unable to achieve official sanction for much of his explorative work, the very marginality of improvisation afforded certain disruptive opportunities. For example, Johnstone’s work with the Theatre Machine, Clowning, was still able to find an audience, albeit under
Improvisation’s fundamental rejection of the set text with its implied fixed (and therefore controllable) meaning places it in a radical change-oriented position as “the censor’s nightmare” (Frost and Yarrow 146). Whereas censorship, with its vested interest in the perpetuation of the conserve or status quo, seeks stability, consistency and dictated meaning, improvisation contrarily assumes carnivalesque playfulness and unpredictability, foregoing the known for the possible or imaginable. In this sense, improvisation becomes a radical political choice, an embrace of change and provisionality over conservative reification and steadfastness. This heightened fluidity and accompanying discarding of the script pose peculiar problems to the product-centered focus of the censor. Subsequently, as Smith and Dean observe,

> Improvisation, in the form of scriptless performance, has sometimes been a very important means of evading the censor in extreme political situations where any explicitly political script would have been immediately banned. It has been used to this end by Athol Fugard in South Africa, in Poland by the Teatr Osmego Dnia in the seventies, and in South America. (20)

Judith Malina describes her work with the Living Theatre during its visit to Brazil in the 1960s, a location where censorship was as equally pernicious and stifling as that under England’s Lord Chamberlain. She recalls:

---

43 It is important to note, however, that Johnstone’s dream of a more mainstream wrestling-inspired team improvisation was not truly realized until after his relocation to Canada where censorship did not exert as equally an oppressive grasp. Severe censorship does not allow improvisation true freedom, although its resulting marginality does afford certain “underground” privileges.

44 Boal describes his problems with state-sponsored censorship during his early script-based theatrical career in Brazil. While he observes that upon occasion the “duel with the censor has it creative side” (*Hamlet*, 245), this often ill-educated “owner of the last word” (ibid. 256) also clearly silenced or quieted political voices of dissent. Boal tells a particularly humorous account of a censor who, finding issue with certain aspects of an otherwise sound play, requested to meet with the author so as to make changes – the play in question, however, was Sophocles’ *Antigone* (see Boal *Hamlet*, 262-263). Boal and his fellow
In Brazil, in the *favelas*, or shanty-towns, above Rio de Janeiro, *The Legacy of Cain* plays were performed in a clandestine manner, out of necessity. Everything that was performed has to be approved beforehand by the cultural commission. Hence, in the favelas we did not present a script. We came in, performed and left before the authorities could find us. […] We needed to move in and out quickly. We would also do theatrical exercises without words – we began one revolutionary play by scrubbing the floor of the piazza with actual soap suds. (Rosenthal 154-155)

Under such circumstances, an improvisational approach to performance allows practitioners to elude otherwise silencing regimes, escaping oppressive conserves through the deployment of spontaneous creativity. This critical potential is further enhanced by improv’s aforementioned inclination towards nontraditional performance spaces that often place it outside the immediate purview of conventional artistic forces and their moderators. In a similar fashion, Madang theatre, according to Van Erven, “is the only kind of [South Korean] political theater that is able to evade censorship because it is performed underground” (*Playful*, 105). This lack of finished texts or creative “products” can often serve as a particular strength of the movement then as it does not provide a suitable artifact for the censor’s (dis)approval: spontaneous playfulness inherently resists the fixedness required for the conserve’s critical red ink.

In addition to improvisation’s ability to evade state-sponsored censorship, this performance modality also facilitates the equal transgression of personal boundaries and habits. Improv’s unpredictable immediacy, as Seham attests, allows artists to simultaneously escape *external* and *internal* censors (xx). One could argue that internal mechanisms of control and suppression stem largely from their external manifestations – Boal’s Rainbow of Desire work is based largely on this assumption. Johnstone posits artists later abolished state censorship in 1968 through an act of collective civil disobedience (ibid. 266-267). For other examples of state censorship see Van Erven *Community*, 172, Ngũgĩ 239 and Casson “Living,” 113.
that the modern education system, in particular, instills a philosophy that encourages self-censorship and the repression of instinct over creative abandon and freedom. Rather than enabling personal discovery, “Teachers are obliged to impose a censorship on their pupils, and in consequence schools provide an anti-therapeutic environment” (Theatre, 105), ironically damaging rather than healing their charges. Reminiscent of Paulo Freire’s revolutionary unmasking of education as a banking system or means for the indoctrination of the conserve’s inherited “truths” (Friere 58), Johnstone holds the view that much formal education is “a destructive process” (Theatre, 19). Johnstone’s image of the atrophied child vividly encapsulates this stance:

Many teachers think of children as immature adults. It might lead to better and more ‘respectful’ teaching, if we thought of adults as atrophied children. Many ‘well adjusted’ adults are bitter, uncreative frightened, unimaginative, and rather hostile people. Instead of assuming they were born that way, or that that’s what being an adult entails, we might consider them as people damaged by their education and upbringing. (ibid. 78) Cf. (ibid. 25)

Psychodramatist Tian Dayton employs a similar language when she writes, “When we were children, no one needed to teach us how to play, but unfortunately, most of us managed to lose this self-affirming, nurturing ability on the rocky path to adulthood” (11), as does Gary Izzo when he observes, “As we grow to adulthood we lose some of our ability to play because we learn judgment, denial, and fear” (Art, 14). Conserve-powered drives are woefully effective (un)educational tools for the suppression of carnivalesque creativity. Many practitioner/theorists, such as Johnstone, Boal and Spolin, view improvisation as a political and pedagogic methodology and antidote to this institutionalized tendency to indoctrinate rather then inspire.
Spolin characterizes this internal form of censorship as the approval/disapproval syndrome that disables acts of free creativity. She explains, “Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily though the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive […] we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with other’s eyes and smell with others’ noses” (Improvisation, 7). As is the case with Johnstone’s programmed child, “Self-discovery and other exploratory traits tend to become atrophied” in the approval/disapproval mode of existence (ibid. 7-8), a censorious dictatorial process that, she notes, begins in kindergarten where normalizing codes of “what you should or shouldn’t do” are forcefully imposed (quoted in Coleman 30).

Emerging from an array of authoritarian personas, such as parent, teacher, employer and neighbor, Spolin warns the would-be improviser that “Approval/disapproval received from others has no doubt become your own and, without conscious realization on your part, is dictating and critiquing the way you do things, creating robotlike behavior in you with almost total loss of any insight” (Lone Actor, 109). Moreno adopts a similar terminology in describing an over-reliance upon the traditions of the conserve as “robopathy,”45 a condition Sternberg and Garcia define as “one of the greatest dangers facing modern humanity” that occurs when one approaches “life in a robotized way, not exercising one’s spontaneity” (124). This “self-censorship” binds the individual restrictively to the conserve, seeking only to replicate the truths contained therein. Sills outlines the harsh consequence: “People suffer from fantastic restrictions on their self-understanding or their ability to affect. They’re graded, stacked in categories of

---

45 Blatner says of this state: “When people become actively attached to conserved modes, social and psychological, when they live according to fixations and habits, they act as if they are programmed like a machine—a condition called ‘robopathy’” (Foundations, 82).
excellence, measured against all kinds of nonsense standards with the result that their personal selves are locked inside them” (Sweet 17).

The tools of improvisation offer the potential for escaping one’s internal censor just as they provide powerful tools for evading external institutionalized systems of control. In this way, a personal model for self-actualization and discovery reflects a larger political and societal modality for action and change. Improvisational spontaneity can provide a pathway away from the judgmental and disarming reach of the conservative status quo, permitting a boundless excursion into the untapped creative potential of the present moment. Sills views this as the fundamental goal of his mother’s theatre games: “In each of the exercises she [Spolin] selected, her voice can be heard intending to help us become present, liberated from what she called the approval/disapproval syndrome that keeps us in the past and obscures the self” (Sills “Introduction,” x). Johnstone employs his explorations towards an identical end, namely the eradication of the blocks imposed by a needlessly strict adherence to the inherited truths of the cultural conserve. “Johnstone’s initial concern was to unleash ‘the creative child’ inside the socialized adult—to enable artists, playwrights, and actors to be spontaneous and to overcome blocks to the imagination” (Seham 36). The internal manifestation of the conserve, with its esteem of past solutions, often elicits a fear of failure on the part of those who would seek creative alternatives. Johnstone notes this tendency in his own education: “In the end I was reluctant to attempt anything for fear of failure, and my first thought never seemed good enough. Everything had to be corrected and brought into line” (Theatre, 17). Exploiting tools such as distraction, overloading and enhanced speed, Johnstone’s games seek to short-circuit or bypass the “censor who
holds […] spontaneity in check” (ibid. 118). In this manner, self-judgment is suspended as the individual explores his/her own uniqueness and creative inclinations through following his/her own brand of obviousness. For Johnstone, the first thought is always a valid starting point for a spontaneous journey into the unknown.46

While it is difficult to distinguish an inherent political intent for the improvisational impetus, as the above discussion of the Italian commedia attests, a certain radicalism exists in improvisation’s unfaltering commitment to change through challenging the rigid conserve and bypassing efforts at censorship.47 Matt Walsh of the Upright Citizens Brigade describes Del Close’s attitude: “He was all about, ‘Show me something disturbing or new.’ His whole focus was, ‘Let’s do something interesting.’ He was about exploring and pushing the levels of improv” (Deixler AR19). Johnstone’s philosophy of breaking the routine echoes this stance (see Johnstone Storytellers, 84 and Halpern et al. 81), similarly pursuing new ways of looking at old situations. The healing arts clearly share this orientation, as it is the hope and belief in change that informs their methodology: Dayton posits psychodrama as a “way to change the self-defeating script, to reprogram old learnings through the creation of new experiences” (xviii), while Blatner summarizes Moreno’s perception of the mode as “an instrument of social change” (Foundations, 47). This too was the foundational precept behind Boyd and Spolin’s early work: “The utilization of games and play as media for producing change in the participants was always the central core of her [Boyd’s] philosophy,” Simon

46 Smith and Dean, in fact, characterize Johnstone’s overall improvisational philosophy as being based on the notion of “first thought best thought” (217). See also Belt and Stockley 81.

47 Goldoni’s dissatisfaction with the commedia takes on a different guise when viewed in this light. As the Commedia dell’Arte became increasingly set and allied with the artistic conserve, it ceased to be able to embrace and reflect the political changes brewing around it. Generally speaking, this dynamic is rather atypical as improvisation has more often assumed a marginal artistic status, particularly in the West where it would rarely be considered part of the established theatrical tradition.
remarks (“Neva,” 13). Much street theatre also seeks this end, drawing “people who comprise a contested reality into what its creators hope will be a changing script” (Cohen-Cruz *Radical*, 1). Furthermore, change and fluidity form the very bedrock of improvisational interaction itself: Fox lists this readiness for change, or the ability to “accept the idea of living constantly with the unforeseen,” (*Acts*, 81) as a constituent requirement of spontaneity.48

Bernard Sahlins writes, “To believe that our ideas are true and incontrovertible, that they represent the only path of truth, is to cut us off from change” (170-171). Improvisation is truly radical in its continual questioning and reevaluating of prior answers imbedded in the conserve. It embodies Lecoq’s concept of perpetual motion, described by Simon McBurney of England’s Theatre de Complicite: “The acceptance of constant movement […] flies in the face of all conservative dogmatism because it acknowledges that nothing is fixed, and it leads to the development of tolerance” (Jenkins AR1). This carnivalesque inclination towards fluidity and provisionality reflects the impetus’s anti-establishment leanings in its general opposition to censorious and controlling manifestations of the status quo. This tendency has led many to characterize the act of improvisation, as Frost and Yarrow observe, “as subversive in itself” (148) for improvisation does not blindly seek to reify the conserve but rather delights in the exploration of new possibilities. This dialogic, carnival-inspired freedom, where there is “no censorship of ideas and no fear of rejection” (Belt and Stockley 1), challenges structures that seek permanence, immutability and unquestioned authority. Further strengthened by an unmistakable affinity for action – “Theatre is action,” Boal proclaims

48 The other three signs of the spontaneous player, according to Fox, are vitality or an ability to “convey a sense of aliveness,” appropriateness to the given circumstances and environmental influences, and intuitiveness, which he defines as having “full access to his or her senses” (*Acts*, 80).
(Theatre, 155) – and optimistic in its firm belief in the power and possibilities of creativity, improvisation energetically upturns imbedded expectations and posits imaginative alternatives. This is its categorical political legacy and potential: a staunch belief that everything can and should be questioned and reevaluated, and that no institution, boundary or custom is immune from satiric, playful and political scrutiny.

Conclusion: The Changing Tide

Cohen-Cruz considers Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque: “Mikhail Bakhtin inspired a whole literature around carnival: was it an escape valve, serving to keep people in their place, or did the taste of a world more to the masses’ liking lead to change? (Historically both have happened)”(Radical, 4). While improvisation’s ends may vary, the spontaneous means indisputably offers a radical potential. Employing satirical laughter that tends to question or debunk dominant power structures, consciously blurring the numerous boundaries that serve to isolate and control the performative impetus thereby restoring its full usefulness, re-envisioning political hierarchies and theatre’s place and efficacy in society, and questioning and challenging the dominance of the conserve and its resulting distrust of the new, improvisation and carnival share many striking similarities. Both modalities are manifestations and instruments of transformation; both events transcend normative boundaries, if only temporarily, and unleash the power of the collaborative creative spirit. While the conserve clings to the old, the tested and the known, improv welcomes the new, the creative and the latent possibilities of uncharted experience.
Bakhtin writes, “Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals” (Problems, 123). Improvisation offers a similar performative site for the embodied exploration of human potential: its irreverence and comic optimism looks gleefully into the future rather than staunchly into the rigid customs of the past. Carnival and improvisation, then, are united by their mutual political commitment to change. Judith Malina’s portrait of the ideal artist, quoted in the introduction to this chapter, embodies this improvisational impetus. This spontaneous artist adapts to the given time, variously activating, inventing, making peace and giving hope, as society’s needs dictate. The improvisational impetus similarly seeks this radical and radically malleable stance. Disdaining isolation from the socio-political sphere, improvisation recognizes and embraces its own sense of politics and politicalness, whether in the form of the Church Ladies for Choice, Boal’s Legislative Theatre, Moreno’s sociodrama, South Korean Madang or Apidan Theatre. So while the specific agenda pursued by improvisational performance varies to suit the specific chronotopic needs of its host community, the essential political spirit of the mode can be seen as revolutionary in that its creative drive constantly explores variation and playful reinvention. This is the bond between improv and Bakhtin’s carnival, and as Schechner notes, the palpable connection between the vast potential of boundary-blurring spontaneity in both the aesthetic and political realms, for ultimately, “[t]he difference between temporary and permanent change distinguishes carnival from revolution” (“Street,” 204). Both events seek to unleash the tides of change, if only for a fleeting optimistic moment. Yet, as several of the above examples attest, such as Boal’s historic thirteen laws and Moreno’s commitment to personal and
societal healing, the political consequences of such spontaneous performative acts are capable of considerable lasting impact. The temporary site of improvisational performance can readily spill into the realms of life and politics and its unique way of seeing can enable prosaic wisdom and collaborative creativity to (re)shape the world it encounters. In this manner, the playful politics of the carnival can truly make manifest a “mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality” (Bakhtin Problems, 107).
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: COLLABORATIVE CREATIVITY AND THE NOVELTY OF IMPROVISATION

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction – Bakhtin (Problems, 110).

If theatre did not exist then perhaps this would be a good place to start if we wanted to invent it from scratch – Keith Johnstone of Life Game (quoted in O’Farrell 6).

Bakhtin’s belief in dialogic interaction suggests a certain affinity with the theatrical site of performance. However, the dramatic mode, when it appears in his writings, typically assumes a minor role that is almost exclusively antagonistic or oppositional to Bakhtin’s generic hero, the novel. He writes of the theatrical modality, the dramatic dialogue in drama and the dramatized dialogue in the narrative forms are always encased in a firm and stable monologic framework. In drama, of course, this monologic framework does not find direct verbal expression, but precisely in drama is it especially monolithic. The rejoinders in a dramatic dialogue do not rip apart the represented world, do not make it multi-leveled; on the contrary, if they are to be authentically dramatic, these rejoinders necessitate the utmost monolithic unity of that world. In drama the world must be made from a single piece. Any weakening of this monolithic quality leads to a weakening of dramatic effect. (Problems, 17)

The (scripted) dramatic model, for Bakhtin, is inescapably monolithic, and is subsequently the novel’s quintessential opposite. Dramatic dialogue, in Bakhtin’s schema, is totalized and one-leveled. There is no space in which the author’s voice may
meet and confront that of the character, an apparent necessity if a work is to be truly
dialogic. This notion is explicated further in “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity.”

Every participant in a dramatic dialogue expresses in direct speech […]
the author, on the other hand, finds no immediate expression. But all these
contending expressions of the characters’ reactions are encompassed by a
single rhythm […] which imparts a certain unity of tone to all the
utterances, that is, reduces all of them to a single emotional-volitional
denominator. (216)

The removal of the authorial voice from the discourse depletes the potency of
author/character interaction and the desired creative unfettered interactivity. In drama,
“to all appearances,” the author’s voice “is not in the discourse,” (Bakhtin “Problem,”
111) or perhaps alternatively, it is the uninterrupted author’s voice, though both stances
are equally monologic in essence. Hence, in the hierarchy of dialogic discourse types, as
outlined in Chapter Five, drama fares relatively poorly, dwelling largely in the domain of
the single-voiced. Whereas Bakhtin’s exemplar novelist, Dostoevsky, enables the
emergence of free and self-governing voices that engage their author in conversation
thereby embodying polyphony, “Pure drama strives toward a unitary language, one that is
individualized merely through dramatic personae who speak it. Dramatic dialogue is
determined by a collision between individuals who exist within the limits of a single
world and a single unitary world” (Bakhtin “Discourse,” 405). For Bakhtin, drama is,
accordingly, a site of collision captured within a singular language, while the novel is the
site of an unmediated exchange between multiple languages and voices.

Despite Bakhtin’s clear aspersions to the contrary, much of his theory of
novelness loiters expectantly at the stage door. The defining feature of theatre, namely
the actual presence of human bodies in historical space and time, is largely marginalized
or ignored in his arguments that seek to distance his communicative paradigm from the
players’ stage. But it is in this embodied sphere, rather than the isolated individual imagination of the solitary author, that the richest manifestation of Bakhtin’s preferred genre can be most fully realized; it is here that a novelistic “way of seeing” can be transformed into a promising way of being and creating. Moreover, improvisational theatre, with its literal co-authorship and multi-voicedness, provides a particularly rich embodied site of creativity that forestalls Bakhtin’s feared monologism and totalizing entrapment of potential multiplicity. Subsequently, this generic analysis not only explicates the very essence of improvisational theatre, but also suggests that this highly interactive and collaborative mode of performance may provide a truly polyphonic site of artistic and socio-political creation that manifests Bakhtin’s almost utopian vision.

Unequivocal parallels clearly unite the spontaneous theatre tradition with Bakhtin’s novelistic genre. Bakhtin lists three important characteristics of genres (such as Dostoevsky’s novel) that exist within the carnivalesque realm of the serio-comic. Of the first feature he writes, “their starting point for understanding, evaluating, and shaping reality, is the living present, often even the very day […] They exist] in a zone of immediate and even crudely familiar contact with living contemporaries” (Problems, 108). This chronotopic orientation also defines the improvisational impetus. In terms of space, improvisation utilizes the peculiarities of its host locales, employing streets, fields, nontraditional structures and adapted venues to full effect. This diversity in the selection of performance sites reflects a particular inclination towards the specific needs and opportunities of the current “here,” while the playful erasure of stage/auditorium boundaries allows and encourages “crudely familiar contact” with those involved in the rite/right of performance. In terms of time, highly-disposable improvisation embraces
and privileges the present moment, actively seeking to represent or respond to “the very
day” of its composition/performance while reflecting the nuanced socio-political matrix
in which it is situated. Improv’s nowness makes it avowedly contemporaneous, a quality
that is further emphasized by the movement’s intimate connection with the amateur and
the prosaic peculiarities as lived in the commonness of the everyday.

Bakhtin’s second serio-comic generic quality is the conscious reliance upon
experience and on free invention (ibid. 108). The theatre of spontaneity equally
personifies this proclivity. Improvisational modes typically favor embodied experience
over distanced viewing and hence strive to incorporate and give voice to the new stories
of their communities rather than reifying unquestioned inherited and universalizing
“Truths.” In this manner, the timelessness of the agelasts is abandoned in favor of the
free invention and playfulness of the prosaic. Through modalities such as Boal’s Image
and Forum Theatre, new site-appropriate wisdom is sought as theatre assumes an
inclusive stance, recognizing the power and necessity of speaking with rather than
speaking for those present. This heightened contact with varied communities enables the
pursuit and portrayal of equally varied voices and embraces the prosaic wisdom found
within this interchange. Improvisation subsequently serves a creative rather than a
recreative drive.

The process through which this interactive performative exchange takes place is
discussed in Bakhtin’s third generic feature, a “deliberate multi-styled and hetero-voiced
nature” that consists of “the mixing of high and low, serious and comic” and the wide use
of parodic or “inserted genres” (ibid. 108). Improvisational theatre, with its highly
collaborative and concretized process of production/performance, ably facilitates such a
polyphonic conversation. Structures tend to assume a fluid role, shifting and adjusting as the event of creation unfolds and actively encouraging questioning and re-examination. The forms and shaping devices employed by spontaneous modes – whether sidecoaching, textual blueprints, linguistic or game-based frames, character masks or philosophical directives or “suggestives” – retain an open orientation that acknowledges the necessity of provisionality and flexibility if emergent voices are not to be stifled. Though form is crucial to the improvisational endeavor, and gives shape and meaning to the event through its appeal to tradition and recognizable systems of experience and prior codes of performance, spontaneity is not suppressed nor abandoned in a truly improvisatory approach to art and life. Structure serves to assist discovery rather than stifle or contain it: rules provide guideposts or act as impetuses to action rather than as barriers or rigid constraints. Polyphonic complexity is further enhanced by the way in which these multifarious voices adopt and employ the methodologies of the politicized carnivalesque. A dominant tendency towards the parodic or satiric enhances this dialogic use of language through its redeployment of the signs of the establishment. Verbal and visual signs are highly connotative and quotational, and invite multiple semiotic readings and writings. This embodiment of the carnival satirist improvises across, and in spite of, artificial and restrictive boundaries of art, politics and life, thwarting the conservative stasis seeking grasp of the conserve. Laughter and playfulness disempower the status quo through a process of irreverence and transgressive recontextualization that recognizes and welcomes the (radical) potential for change.

Morson and Emerson summarize the importance of dialogism and polyphony in the novelistic genre, writing,
In a monologic work, only the author, as the ‘ultimate semantic authority,’ retains the power to express a truth directly […] By contrast, in a polyphonic work the form-shaping ideology itself demands that the author cease to exercise monologic control […] Polyphony demands a work in which several consciousnesses meet as equals and engage in a dialogue that is in principle unfinalizable. (238-9)

Bakhtin perceives and extols this dynamic in the work of Dostoevsky. He explains, “The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky’s finalizing artistic vision” (Problems, 5). Therefore, in order for a work to be truly novelistic, the characters contained therein must be wholly autonomous and capable of self-determination: “the author must be able to confront his characters as equals” (Morson and Emerson 239). In spite of Bakhtin’s extreme efforts to detach himself from the theatrical event, and his frequent use of drama as the antithesis to his preferred novelistic mode of artistic expression, his central concerns, precepts and world visions are supported and considerably enhanced when transported from the novel’s page to the spontaneous theatrical stage. The autonomous improvisational player is clearly more capable of a truly unique ideological stance than an author’s imaginings that inescapably stem from his/her self. Additionally, internal tensions between his various systems, such as those felt between the generalizing impetus of the carnival and the specifying drive of the chronotope, approach a state of balance when dialogized in the corporeal realm.

The improvisational mode of performance subsequently serves as a fitting embodiment of the novelistic drive and as a potentially rich genre or way of seeing. Improv is unveiled as an extremely rich communicative event that matches, if not exceeds, Bakhtin’s ideal. Boal discusses the invention of theatre as “a revolution of
Copernican proportions.” He continues, “In our daily lives we are the center of our universe and we look at facts and people from a single perspective, our own. On stage, we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, and we see ourselves as we are seen” (Rainbow, 26). Spolin perceives a similar dynamic of art as a tool for heightened and deepened perception. She remarks, “In any art form we seek the experience of going beyond what we already know. Many of us hear the stirring of the new, and it is the artist who must midwife the new reality that we (the audience) eagerly await. It is sight into this reality that inspires and regenerates us. This is the role of the artist, to give sight” (Improvisation, 16). Improvisation engages successfully in this process and gives this much-acclaimed and needed insight through giving voice and representation. An improvisatory mode of performance acknowledges the latent creative potential in each individual and returns the tools of the theatre to the people. Through selflessly sharing the theatre magician’s “tricks,” improv also poses as a model of collaborative creativity available to all, elevating the inherent dynamics of the here and now, esteeming the prosaic wisdom of its participants through including them earnestly as artistic partners, inviting structural malleability so as to afford a posture of inclusivity, openness and relatively unfettered discourse, while pursuing a playfully transgressive breach of controlling boundaries, systems and norms as reified in Moreno’s conserve.

Bakhtin notes, “A newly born genre never supplants or replaces any already existing genres,” but rather that the “effect of new genres on old ones in most cases promotes their renewal and enrichment” (Problems, 271). In this sense, this study’s explication of the genre of embodied spontaneity does not seek to supplant Bakhtin’s
novelistic model so much as to augment it, revealing its particular blindnesses, gifts and unexplored potentials. As the communal event of theatre continues to reevaluate and redefine its place in an ever-increasingly isolated (post)modern world, the dramatic genre may also reciprocally receive renewal from Bakhtin’s highly appropriate model of the novel with its inherent challenge of unfettered communication. The improvisational impetus in particular, as Johnstone notes above in his description of Life Game, may provide an apt starting point as theatre practitioners continue the age-old struggle of giving their art meaning and purpose. Improvisation offers an immense potential for community-building and collective communion. Characterized by the generic qualities of a malleable use of space, sharpened sense of presentness, prosaic sensibility, polyphonic freedom and orientation towards carnival-induced change, improvisational theatre is keenly brought into focus through the lens of Bakhtin’s novel. This study further reveals the ironic snugness of this fit, regardless of Bakhtin’s negative perception of the dramatic mode as a whole. Novelness, when applied to the dramatic realm, is uncovered as an equally vital expression of the theatre of spontaneity and thereby elucidates a deeper understanding of improvisation as an autonomous and valuable art form and mode of collaborative creativity: the true “novelty” and richness of this oft-neglected genre is finally unveiled.

“Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person,” Bakhtin writes, “it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Problems, 110). Improvisational theatre provides a promising corporeal site for this worthy search. Through its constant exploration of novelty and newness, its innate and tireless tendency to depart from dominating
structures thereby causing societal ruptures that reveal change is possible, improvisation offers a hopeful approach for seeing and shaping human experience and interaction.

Ultimately, it is this belief in human potential and the power of group creation and expression that, on and off the stage, defines and informs the improvisatory impetus and provides its greatest utopian drive. Through consciously abandoning the scripted model of product-oriented performance, spontaneous theatre embodies and pursues the heart-felt conviction that all “texts” are provisional, questionable and subject to the process of change.
REFERENCES


Breen, Robert S. *Chamber Theatre*. Ellison Bay, WI: Wm Caxton Ltd., 1978


Judah, Hettie. “Added Twist to This Life.” The Times (London) 19 May 1998.

Katritzky, M. A. “Actor-authors of the commedia dell’arte: the dramatic writings of Flaminio Scala and Giambattista Andreini.” Theatre Research International. 23.2 (Summer 1998): 142 (10).


*Licensed Theatresports*™ *Leagues throughout the world.* International Theatresports Institute. 10 Feb. 2003. <www.intl-thearesports.ab.ca/Licensed%20Leagues/Licensed_leagues.html>


347


Scott, Virginia. “‘La virtu el la volupte’: models for the actress in early modern Italy and France.” *Theatre Research International.* (Summer 1998) 23.2. 152 (7).

Second to None. Videocassette. Hosted by Jim Belushi. HMS Media, 1999. 57 min.


“These Games are Strictly for Laughs: Sport Meets Improv in Madcap Competitions Staged in Theatres and Clubs.” *Sports Illustrated* 73.22 (26 Nov. 1990): 10 (2).

# APPENDIX

## TIMELINE OF IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>EVENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th BCE</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>References to secular entertainers, such as court jesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Dithyrambic Improvisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
<td></td>
<td>Etruscan Dramatic Ceremonies/Dancing (dates uncertain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Atellan Farce, masked character-driven comedy with Bucco, Dossenus-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Manducus, Maccus and Pappus (dates uncertain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fescennine Verses, improvised abusive dialogues exchanged between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>clowns during harvest events (dates uncertain)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ludi Romani established by the Elder Tarquin (616-579)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.581</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Appearance of Dorian Mime in Megara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>534</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Tragedy contest instituted at the City Dionysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.449</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Definite separation of actor from dramatist with the inauguration of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the tragic actor contest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>448-380</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Aristophanes, Playwright and developer of satiric dramatic voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400s</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Hypothesized small troupes of mimes performing at banquets that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>included the presence of women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-325</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Phlyax vases depicting hypothesized mimic performers dated to this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>period, considerably later than the date of the mimes’ first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>emergence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>364</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Livy offers this as the date of the first Roman performance imported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from Etruria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>336</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Rule of Alexander the Great – beginning of Hellenistic Period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.335-323</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Aristotle’s <em>Poetics</em> noting improvisation’s role in the birth of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>drama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.325</td>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Theatre Dionysus erected with permanent stone form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Atellan Farce and Mime presented at Roman Festivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.277</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Artists of Dionysus in existence by this date, a guild of performers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>which notably excluded mimes from its membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.254-184</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Titus Maccius Plautus, Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.211/212</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>First clear reference to the performance of an <em>aged</em> Mime, Pompilius/Pomponius, in Rome’s Ludi Apollinares, suggesting that the mode was well established by this date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>195/185-159</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Publius Terentius Afer (Terence), Playwright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-75</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Atellan Farce becomes a literary form, <em>fabulae atellanae</em>, under Pomponius and Novius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Mime becomes literary form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68-5</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Horace states that Latin drama originated in improvisational Fescennine Verses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>First permanent theatre building in Rome at Pompey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Roman Empire. Mime reverts/returns to non-literary form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19BCE</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Horace’s <em>The Art of Poetry</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79AD</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Eruption of Mount Vesuvius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>Rome</td>
<td>Roman Colosseum opens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Bharata’s <em>Natyasastra</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>393</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Theodosius I makes Christianity the only lawful religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>398</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Council of Carthage – actors forbidden the sacraments of the church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>North Europe</td>
<td>Emergence of the <em>scop</em> – a singer/storyteller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>435</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Code of Theodosius restricts costumes of performers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>522</td>
<td>East Europe</td>
<td>Mime actress, Theodora, marries Emperor Justinian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>549</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Last definite record of a performance in Rome prior to the middle ages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>589</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Obscene songs and dances forbidden in church sanctuaries by the Third Council of Toledo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>692</td>
<td>Byzantium</td>
<td>Trullan Synod seeks to have all mimes and theatrical performances banned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>714</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Emperor Hsuan Tsung establishes the “Pear Garden,” a school for entertainers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>791</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Reports of secular entertainments in Charlemagne’s court from Alcuin of York.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>816</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Clerics forbidden to attend any performances involving actors or entertainers at the Council of Aachen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>900s</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Existence of professional storytellers connected with puppets and shadow play theatres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Earliest reference to a link-verse session in the <em>Mitsuneshū</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>962</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Establishment of the Holy Roman Empire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000s-1100s</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Organized troupes of <em>jongleurs</em> arise, particularly in Provence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1131</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Pope Innocent II bans participation in tournaments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1180</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>First appearance of the term “chain renga” in <em>The New Mirror</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1100s</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Emergence of the Feast of Fools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200s-1500s</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>“Age of Chivalry”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1207</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Pope Innocent III discontinues <em>theatrales ludi</em> in churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1234</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Pope Gregory IX bans dramatic performances in churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1264</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Pope Urban IV initiates the feast of Corpus Christi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300s</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>First appearance of the word “Mumming” to denote visits from silent and masked visitors who participate in gaming and role playing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1311</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Feast of Corpus Christi spreads as an observance bolstered by Pope Clement at the Council of Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1320-1388</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Nijō Yoshimoto, Renga Master and innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1321</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Minstrel troupes attain guild status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1336-1568</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Muromachi Period – the golden age of renga poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1357</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Yoshimoto’s <em>Tsukubashū</em>, the first imperial anthology of renga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1369</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Minstrel troupes attain guild status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1372</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Yoshimoto’s <em>Ōan shinshiki</em>, or <em>The New Rules of the Ōan Era</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1400s</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Yoruba Egungun masquerade drama emerges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1402-1481</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Ichijō Kanera, Renga Master and innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1414</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Vitruvius’ <em>De Architectura</em> rediscovered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1418</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Mummings forbidden in England, subsequent rise of Disguisings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1421-1502</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Iio Sōgi, Renga Master and innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1428</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Twelve of Plautus’ lost plays rediscovered by Nicolas Casanus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1443-1527</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Shōhaku, Renga Master and innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1445</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Domenico da Piacenza’s seminal treatise on dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1448-1532</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Sōchō, Renga Master and innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1452</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Kanera’s <em>Shinshiki, or Suggestions for a New Day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1453</td>
<td>Byzantium</td>
<td>Fall of Byzantium to the Turks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1465</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Printing press introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1479</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Mummings forbidden (again)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1480</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Spanish Inquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1486</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First court recording of disguising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1491</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td><em>Yuyama Sangin Hyakuin</em> composed by Sōgi, Shōhaku and Sōchō</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1495</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Sōgi’s <em>Shinsen Tsukubashō</em>, renga anthology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1496</td>
<td>-1542</td>
<td>Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1501</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Shōhaku’s comprehensive renga rulebook <em>Renga shinshiki tsuika narabi ni Shinshiki kin’an tō, or The New Rules of Renga Linked Verse, With Additions, Suggestions for a New Day, and Other Comments</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1507</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Earliest court record of Christmas Mumming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1511</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Mummings forbidden (yet again), and rise of the Masque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1512</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First recorded court masque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16th</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Fairs of St. Germain and St. Laurent feature varied entertainments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1542-1572</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Lockwood travels throughout England giving extemporaneous performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1545</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>First extant <em>commedia dell’arte</em> company contract in Padua between eight actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1547</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Feast of Holy Innocents suppressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1548-1624</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Francesco Andreini, Commedia dell’Arte player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1558</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>First public playhouse erected (in Valladolid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1559</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Elizabeth I forbids playwrights to treat religious or political subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1562-1604</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Isabella Andreini, Commedia dell’Arte player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1564-1616</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>William Shakespeare, Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1564</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>First extant women signatory of commedia contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1567</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>First record of women commedia dell’arte troupe leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1568</td>
<td>Bavaria</td>
<td>Massimo Troiana da Napoli’s account of a possible (but problematic) commedia performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1568-1583</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Zan Ganassa (Alberto Naseli) performs with commedia troupe across Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1568-1604</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td><em>I Gelosi</em> (“The Zealous Ones”), Commedia troupe of the Andreinis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1571-1588</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Commedia dell’arte performed sporadically in Paris, beginning with <em>I Comici Confidenti</em>’s performance before the King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1572</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Act for Restraining Vagabonds, requiring the licensing of all acting troupes by noblemen or Justices of the Peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1573-1652</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Inigo Jones, Designer who incorporated much commedia imagery into his Masques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1574</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Master of Revels, licensor of all plays, established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1586</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Friar Joao Dos Santos visiting a Chopi royal court (Mozambique) reports of marombes, or performing jesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1587</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Women first licensed to appear on the stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1590</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Speculated/Allegorical origin of Egungun Apidan at the court of Alaafin Ogbalu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1600-1660</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jodelet (Julien Bedeau), Commedia mask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1600</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Inigo Jones studies theatre in Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1603</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Speculated starting date for Kabuki tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1611</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Shakespeare’s <em>The Tempest</em> displays potential influence of Italian comic-pastoral scenarios (the Acadian plays)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1611</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Flaminio Scala’s collection of Commedia scenarios, <em>Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative</em>, is published, the first comprehensive collection of its kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1622-1673</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Moliere (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin), Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1629</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Formation of the French Academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Shogun forbids women on the Kabuki stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1641</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Louis XIII issues a decree to remove the stigma of acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1642-1660</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>English Commonwealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1661</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Actresses established on the stage with the return of Charles II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1662</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Commedia dell’Arte company finds “permanent” home in Paris, the first Parisian residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1667</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First recorded performance of an English harlequin within a dramatic work, Ravenscrofts’ <em>Scaramouch a Philosopher</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1673</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>French Commedia troupe performs in London under invitation of Charles II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1676-1726</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Joseph Anton Stranitsky, Commedia mask Hanswurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1676-1753</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Luigi Riccoboni, Commedia dell’Arte player and troupe leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1680</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Debut performance at the Comédie Française, Paris, the world’s first national theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Commedia troupe receives exception to Comédie Française’s monopoly on spoken drama performances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late 1600s</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Fairs introduce skits and commedia routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1692-1761</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>John Rich, Pantomime innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1697</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Commedia troupe expelled from Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1699-1769</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Gottfried Prehouser, Improvisational player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700s</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Emergence of German comic character, Hanswurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1702</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First attempt at English (commedia-inspired) pantomime with John Weaver’s <em>Tavern Bilkers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1707-1793</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Carlo Goldoni, Playwright and Commedia reformer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1708</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Vienna’s Karntnertor built, the city’s first permanent public theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1709</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Herculaneum rediscovered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1716-1780/3</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Comédie Italienne housed in the Hotel de Bourgogne, the second Parisian residence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1717-1783</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Feliz Kurz-Bernadon, Improvisational player</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1718-1719</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Francisque Moylin’s French Commedia troupe performs in London, under the engagement of John Rich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1720-1806</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Carlo Gozzi, <em>Fiabe</em> creator and Commedia advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1720s</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Pantomime emerges as the preeminent form of entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1727-1772</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Marie-Justine Favart, Comédie Italienne performer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1732-1799</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Beaumarchais (Pierre-Austin Caron), Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1737</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Licensing Act establishing censorship under the auspices of the Lord Chamberlain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1743</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Goldoni’s first comedy written entirely without a scenario, <em>A Lady of Charm</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Goldoni’s <em>The Comic Theatre</em>, a theatrical manifesto for reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1759</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Spectator’s banned from the French stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Parisian Fair Troupes relocate to the Boulevard du Temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1761</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Gozzi’s first <em>Fiabe, The Love for Three Oranges</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Beaumarchais’ <em>The Barber of Seville</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>National Assembly abolishes all theatre monopolies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796-1846</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jean-Baptiste Deburau, Originator of Pierrot Commedia mask</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800s</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Rise of the Burletta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1807</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Lord Chamberlain authorizes the opening of minor theatres in the city of Westminster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1816</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia becomes the first theatre in the world to install gas lighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Judy joins Punch (Commedia derivative) in the English puppet show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1819-1904</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Charles Morton, Music Hall innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid 1800s</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Beijing Opera becomes dominant theatrical form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1843</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Theatre Regulation Act abolishes the privileges of the patent houses and effectively criminalizes improvisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago erects its first permanent theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Astor Place Riot, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Darwin’s <em>Origin of Species</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Serfdom abolished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1867-1936</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Luigi Pirandello, Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Western influence ends the period of “pure” Kabuki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874-1940</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Vsevelod Meyerhold, Director and theatrical innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1876-1963</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Neva Leona Boyd, Play theorist and games pioneer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1879-1949</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jacques Copeau, Modern Commedia innovator and teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-1975</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Winifred Ward, Drama-in-Education pioneer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>World</td>
<td>International Copyright Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Jane Addams’ Hull House Community Center in Chicago founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895-1975</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Mikhail Bakhtin, Literary theorist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First performer in English history, Henry Irving, is knighted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889-1974</td>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Jacob Levy Moreno, Theatre of Spontaneity founder and psychodrama/sociodrama creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Moscow Art Theatre founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-1994</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Viola Spolin, Theatre Games innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>The Vienna Stegreiftheater (Ad Lib Theater) founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Neva L. Boyd organizes the Chicago Training School of Playground Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Actresses return to the stage of the Beijing Opera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Actor’s Equity Association founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Copeau’s <em>Essai de Rénovation Dramatique</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Copeau’s Prospectus on Performance Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1917-</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Zerka Toeman Moreno, Psychodrama innovator and developer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-1924</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jacques Copeau incorporates mask improvisation at the Ecole du Vieux-Colombier in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Boyd founds the Recreational Training School at Chicago’s Hull House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1998</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Paulo Freire, Educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1999</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jacques Lecoq, Clowning teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921-1923</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Moreno directs the “Theatre of Spontaneity” in Vienna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Blue Blouse Soviet Living Newspaper touring theatre company founded by Boris Yuzhanin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924-1926</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Viola Spolin studies at Neva Boyd’s Group Work School in Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1924-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>David Shepherd, Improvisational innovator and co-founder of the Compass, ImprovOlympic and Canadian Improv Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925-1985</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Julian Beck, Living Theatre co-founder and activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1925-</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Peter Brook, Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1925-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Robert Altman, Film Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>First play in an African language (Xhosa) published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1926-</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Dorothy Heathcote, Educational Theatre innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1926-</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Dario Fo, Politicized clown and playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1926-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Judith Malina, Living Theatre co-founder and activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1927-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Allan Kaprow, Happenings innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event/Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Paul Sills, Director and improvisational teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-1931</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Moreno directs Impromptu Theatre at Carnegie Hall, NYC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929-1989</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>John Cassavetes, Film Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Accra Dramatic Society founded – performance of improvised plays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1929-</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Franca Rame, Practitioner and playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Luigi Pirandello’s <em>Tonight We Improvise</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1931-</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed founder and theatre activist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-1951</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>The Hutchin’s Chicago Experiment at the University of Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1932-</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Keith Johnstone, Theatresports founder and improvisational director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1932-</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Athol Fugard, Playwright and Collaborative Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933-1935</td>
<td>Yugoslavia</td>
<td>Parry and Lord’s period of initial song collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933-1999</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Jerzy Grotowski, Director and theatre researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1934-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Richard Schechner, Director and theatre researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934-1999</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Del Close, Improvisational practitioner, teacher and ImprovOlympic co-founder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Unity Theatre opens, London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935-1939</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Federal Theatre Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1935-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Joseph Chaikin, Theatre practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Moreno’s original psychodrama stage built at Beacon, NY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1936-</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Eugenio Barba, Theatre researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1938-</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Collaborative theatre practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1939-</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Alan Ayckbourn, Playwright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939-1941</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Spolin serves as drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project which witnesses the first use of audience suggestions as the basis for scenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1940-</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Ariane Mnouchkine, Director and theatrical innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>Development of improvised radio plays in Northern Rhodesia by the Central African Broadcasting Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1942-</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Robert Wilson, Director and theatrical innovator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.1942-</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Jerome Savary, Grand Magic Circus founder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1942 America Moreno founds the American Society for Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama

b.1943- England Mike Leigh, Improvisational director and playwright

1946 America Living Theatre founded

1946-1955 America Spolin’s work with Young Actors Company in Hollywood

1947 America Plimoth Plantation, Inc. legally incorporated on October 2nd

b.1948- America Christopher Guest, Film Director

c.1949-2001 America Martin de Maat, Artistic Director of Second City’s Training Program

1951 Italy Lecoq creates the Theatre School of the Piccolo Teatro in Milan

America Short-lived televised series The Ad-Libbers featuring Jack Lemmon

b.1952- America Charna Halpern, ImproOlympic co-founder

1955 America Roger Bowen’s Enterprise scenario performed in “Tonight at 8:30” at the University of Chicago (May 14th and 15th)

Compass Theatre (founded by Paul Sills and David Shepherd) debuts with The Game of Hurt (July 5th)

1956-1971 Brazil Augusto Boal serves as director of São Paulo’s Arena Theatre

1956 France The International Theater School of Jacques Lecoq (Paris) opens

1957 America Compass in Saint Louis at the Crystal Palace under Theodore (Ted) Flicker

1958 England Lord Chamberlain prosecutes Joan Littlewood’s production of You Won’t Always Be On Top and wins

1959 America San Francisco Mime Troupe founded, R. G. Davis

Second City, Chicago, established by Sills, Sahlins and Alk (December 16th) with first show Excelsior and Other Outcries

1960 America An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May on Broadway (pulling from material developed at The Compass)

Cassevetes’ allegedly improvisational film, Shadows

1960-1963 America Ted Flicker’s The Premise in New York (opens November 22nd)

1961 America Bread and Puppet Theatre founded, Peter Schumann

LaMama Experimental Theatre Club founded, Ellen Stewart

From the Second City performs on Broadway

1962 England Second City troupe trades spaces with Peter Cook’s The Establishment

1963-1970 America Open Theatre, Peter Feldman and Joseph Chaikin

1963-1973 America Alan Myerson’s The Committee, San Francisco
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Spolin’s <em>Improvisation for the Theater</em> published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>First International Congress of Psychodrama, Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Théâtre du Soleil formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Odin Teatret formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid 1960s</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Gordon Vallins originates Theatre-in-Education in Coventry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>El Teatro Campesino founded by Luis Valdez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>National Endowment for the Arts established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spolin and Sill’s Game Theatre in Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Keith Johnstone’s “lecture performance” of <em>Clowning</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>Paul Pörtner’s “interplay” <em>Scherenschnitt</em>, later the inspiration for <em>Shear Madness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>El Teatro Campesino separates from the Farm Workers Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second City moves to its current home on North Wells Street, Chicago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Cecilia Reyes Guidote’s Philippines Educational Theater Association (PETA) founded, Manila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Kawuonda Women’s Group informally established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Theatre Machine performance at Montreal’s EXPO 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Grotowski’s <em>Towards a Poor Theatre</em> published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Censorship under the Lord Chamberlain abolished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Artistic Community strike and public disobedience ends censorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Living Theatre’s <em>Paradise Now</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Schechner’s “Six Axioms” published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Hair!</em> performed on Broadway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Performance Group formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>September 25-29, Radical Theatre Festival at San Francisco State College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968-1971</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Boal develops the Joker System at the Arena Stage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Dario Fo’s first production of <em>Mistero buffo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Video release of <em>A Session with the Committee</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969-1978</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Grotowski’s paratheatre phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>late 1960s</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Del Close develops the Harold with San Francisco’s The Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Paulo Freire’s <em>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</em> published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Living Theatre visits and is expelled from Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Grand Magic Circus’ production of <em>Zartan</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Théâtre du Soleil’s <em>1789</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Bread and Puppet Theater moves from New York to Vermont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1973</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona and John Kani explore collective text-creation and produce <em>Sizwe Bansi is Dead</em> and <em>The Island</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Boal’s <em>Newspaper Theatre: First Edition</em>, Santo André</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boal arrested, imprisoned and tortured under military regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>UNESCO Third World Theatre Conference, Manila</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>Josephine Forsberg founds Players Workshop (Chicago), the longest-running improvisational training center in America</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1983</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Del Close serves as director of Second City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>Miguel Rubio and Teresa Ralli form Yuyachkani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>Steve Paxton develops Contact Improvisation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Groundlings troupe slowly emerges from Gary Austin Workshops in Los Angeles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c.1972</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Boal develops and engages in acts of Invisible Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Grotowski’s first paratheatrical Special Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>UNESCO Third World Theatre Conference, Shiraz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>Boal begins development of Simultaneous Dramaturgy and Image Theatre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boal’s first “spect-actor” intervention – beginning of Forum Theatre techniques</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>Janam founded by Safdar Hashmi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>First Theatre for Development project undertaken</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973/4</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Second City Toronto opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Free Travelling Theatre founded by John Ruganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Boal’s <em>Teatro de Oprimido</em> (Theatre of the Oppressed) published</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Odin Teatret’s “bartered art” encounter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Shepherd’s first Improv Olympics experiment at Toronto’s Homemade Theatre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Jonathan Fox’s Playback Theatre debuts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1986</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>Boal’s term of exile from South America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Spolin Theatre Game Center established in Hollywood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Keith Johnstone and Mel Tonken begin Loose Moose Theatre Company (Calgary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Kamũrĩthũ Cultural Center founded, <em>Ngeekha na Ndeenda</em> debuts October 2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Stut Theatre opens, Utrecht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Interplay founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o imprisoned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>First public Theatresports match in Calgary, Alberta Ottawa-Carleton High School Improv Olympics founded which would eventually provide the prototype for the Canadian Improv Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Plimoth Plantation adopts first-person interpretation in the 1627 Pilgrim Village Jeffrey Sweet’s <em>Something Wonderful Right Away</em>, an oral history of Second City and the Compass, is published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Turnus Players (Theatresports) founded by Johnstone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Parisian Center for Theatre of the Oppressed (CTO, formerly CEDITADE) formally incorporated (March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Johnstone’s <em>Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre</em> published First full season of Theatresports at Loose Moose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>World</td>
<td>International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) founded by Eugenio Barba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>National Association for Drama Therapy organized George Todisco’s Chicago City Limits relocates to New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Australasia</td>
<td>Playback workshops held in Australia and New Zealand – Sydney’s Drama Action Center later adopts this performance modality as a core component of its training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Boston production of <em>Shear Madness</em> opens (Jan. 29) Bernard Sahlins becomes artistic director of Second City Keith Johnstone holds two-week workshop for Second City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Vancouver Theatresports League founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Maya Company founded by Santi Chitrachinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Second Session of ISTA dealing with “Pre-expressivity/Improvisation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Theatre Union (formerly Stree Sangharsh) founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>U.P.-Peryante founded by Chris Millado and Joy Barrios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Shepherd and Halpern found ImprovOlympic (Chicago)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Edmonton Theatresports founded Boal-inspired Headlines Theatre formed in Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Kamũrĩthũ Cultural Center outlawed (11 March) and razed (12 March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Boal leads Parisian “Cop in the Head” workshops, leading to the Rainbow of Desire techniques</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Theatresports Toronto founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Theatresports troupes emerge in Seattle and New York Second City e.t.c. Stage opens (Chicago) Improv Boston founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>The first Theatre of the Oppressed Workshop held at the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance (CPTA) festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Del Close joins Halpern and Chicago’s ImprovOlympic leading to the birth of IO’s signature long-form structure, the Harold Freestyle Repertory Theatre founded (originally TheatreSports New York)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>Wellington Playback Theatre founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Loose Moose Theatre Company begins work with Johnstone’s long-form <em>Life Game</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Comedysportz movement founded by Richard Chudnow in Milwaukee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Breakout Theatre-in-Education company founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984-1994</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago’s Improv Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First performance of Comedy Store Players (October 27th)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Rupert Holme’s <em>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</em> premieres at Delacorte Theater Hanon Reznikov becomes co-director (with Malina) of Living Theatre Bernard Sahlins sells his interest in The Second City to Andrew Alexander and Len Stuart, thereby becoming perhaps the first improv millionaire in the modern period Madison Comedysportz franchise opens Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Boal returns to Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>First public Theatresports games (Oslo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>First Theatresports matches in Christchurch (Court Theatre) and Auckland (Pumphouse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canada’s National Arts Centre’s support enables Canadian Improv Games to pursue a national profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre (Metraform) founded \nComedysportz franchises expand into Chicago, San Jose and Washington D.C. \nGroundlings East (later Gotham City Improv) founded in New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Theatresport “Lawine” forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Theatresports Olympic Tournament (Calgary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>First Comedy League of America National Tournament (Comedysportz) \nThe Spolin Games Players founded by Gary Schwartz, Los Angeles \nComedysportz Los Angeles forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Leigh’s High Hopes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-90</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>United Building Society provides three-year sponsorship for Theatresports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>Street performer and activist Safdar Hashmi is murdered, 1st January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Beginnings of Center for Theatre of the Oppressed in Rio de Janeiro under Boal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Acting Out program introduced in New Hampshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Theatresports Cranston Cup held in Sydney Opera House with audience of 2119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Theatresport LTT formed with first public performance the following year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>First National United Theatresports Secondary Schools Festival (Wellington)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989-2000</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Annoyance’s (Metraform) Co-ed Prison Sluts opens as Chicago’s first improvised musical (and later becomes the longest running musical in Chicago history)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>World</td>
<td>International Playback Theatre Network (IPTN) established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>International Challenge (Theatresports) hosted in Auckland as part of the Commonwealth Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Upright Citizens Brigade formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990/1</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Comedy Store Players Nationwide (Sell Out) Tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Televised series S&amp;M featuring Mike McShane and Tony Slattery \nPlayback Theatre York founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago’s Free Associates founded, <em>Cast on a Hot Tin Roof</em> opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Playback Theatre debuts at Budapest’s Theatre of Improvisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Second City establishes a corporate division and Minority Outreach Program, the latter under director Frances Callier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Manchester Playback Theatre founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-96</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Boal serves as Vereador (MP) for Rio de Janeiro and institutes his Chamber in the Square form of Legislative Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>School of Playback Theatre founded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ImprovOlympic’s The Family performs <em>Three Mad Rituals</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Second City Detroit opens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>First series of <em>The Masterson Inheritance</em>, Radio 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>The Nobel Fool Theatre Company (Zeitgiest Theatre) forms, <em>Flanagan’s Wake</em> (Chicago)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Oui Be Negroes</em> premiers at Chicago’s Café Voltaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>First Playback Theatre formed in Holland, Teruqspeeltheater Amsterdam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Legislative Theatre’s first “total victory” with the passing of Law no. 1023/95: <em>The Law of Geriatric Care</em> (November 22nd)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>ImprovOlympic finds a permanent home in Wrigleyville (Chicago)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dad’s Garage founded in Atlanta (holder of Theatresports franchise)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-99</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>ImprovOlympic’s first all-women team, Jane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Improbable Theatre founded, <em>Animo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leigh’s <em>Secrets and Lies</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Second City’s first gender-balanced mainstage troupe (under Mick Napier’s direction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chicago’s Second City’s SkyBox Theatre opens (later renamed as Donny’s Skybox)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guest’s <em>Waiting for Guffman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago’s Playground Theatre forms, America’s first improvisational co-op theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Whitney Houston, We Have a Problem</em> (GayCo) in Chicago’s Skybox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>The Spontaneity Shop founded in London and debuts with Johnstone’s Gorilla Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>The International Theatresports Institute founded – in charge of international licensing of Keith Johnstone’s improvisational forms (Theatresports, Micetro, Gorilla Theatre and Life Game)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Chicago Improv Festival founded (Frances Callier and Jonathan Pitts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Upright Citizens Brigade opens their own theatre in New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Television series <em>Instant Comedy with the Groundlings</em> airs on F/X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Israeli Playback Theatre Ensemble established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Improbable Theatre’s Life Game opens, Brewery Arts Centre, Kendel (20 March)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-2000</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Upright Citizens Brigade sketch comedy show on Comedy Central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-?</td>
<td>America</td>
<td>Hat Trick Production’s Whose Line Is It Anyway? U.S. series with host Drew Carey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1999 | America  | Black Comedy Underground’s (BCU) Kill Whitey at Skybox (the nation’s first all-African American improv-based troupe)  
Second City celebrates its fortieth year (December 16th) 
Chicago’s Playground Theatre finds permanent home |
|      | England  | Leigh’s Topsy-Turvy |
|      | Canada   | Televised series Improv Heaven and Hell airs |
|      | Scotland | Findhorn Playback Theatre formed |
| 2000 | England  | First Theatresports World Cup held in London with five countries in attendance 
Improbable Theatre’s Life Game tours to the U.S. |
|      | America  | First annual Funny Women Fest held at Chicago’s Playground (Aug.) Game Show Off-Broadway production 
Guest’s Best in Show |
|      | Canada   | Winnipeg Improv Festival (If…) founded |
| 2001 | America  | IO West opens in Los Angeles  
Johnstone’s Life Game airs on TNN  
Wayne Brady receives Emmy nomination for Outstanding Individual Performance In A Variety Or Music Program in ABC’s Whose Line Is It Anyway? 
Altman’s Gosford Park |
|      | England  | Comedysportz UK (the first non-American franchise) founded in Chorley, Lancashire in association with the Chorley Youth Theatre |
| 2002 | America  | ImprovOlympic officially becomes IO in accordance with prior legal agreement with U.S. Olympic Committee  
Annoyance Productions opens in new Lincoln Avenue space (Chicago)  
The Noble Fool Theater (re)opens in the Chicago Theatre District  
Lisa Levy’s New York production Psychotherapy Live! Psychotherapy as Performance Art |
|      | England  | Leigh’s All or Nothing |
| 2003 | America  | HBO’s Curb Your Enthusiasm wins Golden Globe for Television Series: Musical or Comedy Guest’s A Mighty Wind  
Chicago Improv Festival VI bestows lifetime achievement awards on Fred Kaz, Paul Sills, David Shepherd, Viola Spolin, Eugene Troobnick and Fred Willard |
David Charles is a native New Zealander and it is there that he first encountered improvisation in the form of Theatresports. A graduate of Chicago’s oldest improvisational training center, Josephine Forsberg’s Players Workshop, Charles has taught, performed and directed spontaneous theatre across the United States, including on the campuses of his three alumni colleges, Roosevelt University, Western Illinois University and Louisiana State University. Original improvisatory productions have included: short-form competitive shows such as Championship Improv (Lansing Community College) and Making It Up As We Go Along (Union Program Council/Lively Arts of LSU); parodic long-form structures including Insta-Musical: Just Add Water (RU) and The Lost Comedies of William Shakespeare: An Improvisational Romp Through the Land of the Bard (WIU); ensemble script creation with Ancient Ties: An Exploration of Motherhood (WIU, co-directed with Raymond Gabica) and The Human Endeavor (LSU); and serio-comic long-form productions such as Thou Shalt Not: A Postmodern Melodrama and E Pluribus Unum (The Improvisors, Baton Rouge). He has played as an ensemble member in Dunedin Theatresports, Chicago Comedysportz, Home Improvisation, Chicago Theatresports, Astors Beechwood (Living History), and The Improvisors. Charles has also worked professionally as a scripted actor with companies such as Wisdom Bridge Theatre, Shaw Chicago, Summer Music Theatre, Birmingham Children’s Theatre and the Illinois Shakespeare Festival. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Theatre at Rollins College and is working on the compilation of a comprehensive five-semester cycle of improvisational performance techniques.