

Improvisation is an art-form that involves 'getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning' (Halpern et al, pp7). Many theorists and well-known improvisers have attempted to direct and explain this mode of performance, dissecting issues like mistake-making, blocking, originality and the connection between performers and their audience. Improvisation is a tool that can heighten a performer's presence if they develop their ability to be authentic and reactive to their fellow performers. This skill also deepens a performer's capacity to connect with their audience because when performers are seen enjoying themselves, working together and producing unbelievable work on stage, the audience is mesmerised.

Charna Halpern, co-founder of *ImprovOlympic*, with her late mentor Del Close, taught one of the most iconic improvisational structures, the Harold, which has shaped our understanding of modern improvisation. The pair say they created a '*Theatre of the Heart*, a theatre where people cherished each other to succeed on stage' (Halpern et al, 6.46). To them, improvisation is more than just a theatrical technique: it's a way of life. With improvisation, Halpern states that she's 'not teaching comedy, [she's] teaching communication' (12.24) This consideration of greater world influence has enabled Halpern to use her skills in communication for the greater good, where 'at the request of the American Embassy to Cyprus she worked with Greek and Turkish Cypriots to help foster peace agreements, and most recently travelled to Switzerland to work with the particle physicists who created the Large Hadron Collider, which people feared would create a black hole. Charna got them to work together' (Cusp) This exemplifies the power of improvisation as a means for connection and understanding, that can only strengthen a performer's presence and communication with their audience.

Similarly, Yoshi Oida and Lorna Marshall have acknowledged the way that improvisation mirrors the real world, explaining that 'real life is full of unexpected events, and constantly takes you in unusual directions' and that therefore a 'performance should have the same freshness.' (Oida et al, pp78) There is a lot to be said about considering how the real-world impacts theatre and performance, and arguably the more we acknowledge our environment, our bodies and our relationships to other humans, the more present we can be in the space. With more to say on improvisation's relationship to reality, Halpern remarks that all people are 'expert improvisers' in that we 'go through life every day without a script, responding to our environment, making it up as we go along' (Halpern et al, pp7). This shapes the perception of improvisation as a complex art-form that can take a performer through all walks of life.

Likewise, Keith Johnstone, inventor of *Theatresports*, puts forth idea that 'in reality everyone chooses more or less what kind of events will happen to them by their conscious patterns of blocking and yielding' (Johnstone, pp100), directly applying some key improvisational terminology to real-life. Because of this, Johnstone believes that humanity's habit of blocking life's offers is exactly what causes audiences to pay to see other people accept these offers on stage. Johnstone's advice and teachings on improvisation have often been applied to people's personal lives, learning about fear, imagination, and mistakes. For example, he states that 'the motto of scared improvisers is 'when in doubt, say "NO".' We use this in life as a way of blocking action.' (Johnstone, pp94). In life and on the stage, Johnstone urges us to be brave and say yes.

One of Johnstone's main points is the effect of educational institutionalisation on our imagination, and how the improviser must act against this learned mediocrity. He

believes that 'imagination is as effortless as perception, unless we think it might be 'wrong', which is what our education encourages us to believe. Then we experience ourselves as 'imagining', as 'thinking up an idea', but what we're really doing is faking up the sort of imagination we think we ought to have.' (Johnstone, pp80) Being able to unlock your true imagination from institutional chains is incredibly important to improvisation because this is where we draw our offers in a scene. Johnstone believes that 'the imagination is our true self' (pp105), highlighting the importance of being authentic as performers. A key issue with a performer's attempt to be authentic is that 'many students block their imaginations because they're afraid of being unoriginal' (Johnstone, pp87), yet arguably what makes us original is ourselves because no two people are the same. A performer that strives after originality rather than authenticity 'takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre.' (Johnstone, pp88), inhibiting them from being able to perform at peak presence.

A key conceptual issue of improvisation, as an inherently un-rehearsed style of performance, is the idea of mistakes. Halpern believes that with the right mindset there can be no mistakes in a *Theatre of the Heart*. She believes that 'when performers truly commit to a scene, they take care of each other. Whenever someone makes what appears to be a mistake on stage, the others will immediately justify it and weave it into the pattern of the entire work. More often than not, those "mistakes" become valuable contributions to the piece.' (Halpern et al, pp23) The possibility of making a mistake would normally put a performer's connection with their audience at risk. However, if performers adopt this mindset of *no wrong answers*, then they immediately lower the chances of forcing the audience out of the scene. Similarly, Oida and Marshall recognise

the importance of a good mindset, believing it to be wrong for a performer to ‘say that if the exercise falls apart, or fails to develop, it is the other person’ s fault. This kind of thinking isn’t helpful. The fault isn’t in the other person; if exercise collapses it is the fault of both actors.’ (pp80) When performers work together and take mutual responsibility for a scene, not only can they avoid the appearance of any ‘mistakes’ but can perform at their strongest and most creative levels.

Perhaps one of the only real mistakes that can be made in improvisation is referred to as *blocking*. This term can be defined as ‘anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner’s premise’ (Johnstone, pp97). A refusal to accept a mistake and incorporate it into a scene is arguably a block. Equally, to neglect one’ s environment can shatter a performer’ s connection with their audience as ‘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, pp63) If a performer doesn’ t adhere to their environment, it can shatter the illusion for the audience and shift their focus away from the content of the scene. A true mistake in improvisation would be to block an offer made by your fellow performer or to ignore the space created in both the performer and the audience’ s mind.

Having a strong connection between performers is one of the greatest ways to connect with an audience. Johnstone believes that ‘the interest to the audience lies in their admiration and delight in the actors’ attitude to each other. We so seldom see people working together with such joy and precision’ (Johnstone, pp96) which highlights how the caring nature between performers is key for drawing in the audience. Likewise, Oida notes that ‘because the actors are really enjoying their exchanges with each other,

the audience begins to find the same pleasure in watching and listening to them.’ The idea of presence and authenticity largely affects a performer's ability to connect to their audience, because ‘improvisers can be relaxed and natural, knowing that if they are sincere, the audience will be more receptive to them. Audience members laugh at things they can relate to, but they cannot empathize if the performers are insincere.’ (Halpern et al, pp13) This means that if a performer can tap into their true self, they open up in a way that gives audiences a way into the action. Oftentimes improvisation can be a magical experience for the audience, as improvisers can become ‘oracles on stage, answering the great questions of the universe, one word at a time, leaving audiences chilled and astonished. Audiences have witnessed the group mind linking up to a universal intelligence, enabling them to perform fantastic, sometimes unbelievable feats. It only happens when the group members are finely attuned to each other, but it almost seems like they are tapping into the same universal consciousness that enables individuals with special abilities.’ (Halpern et al, pp56) Halpern refers to this phenomenon almost like the idea of a higher power, yet it all stems from the performers’ relationships to each other, making this a fundamental aspect of improvisation. Harboring a strong relationship with your fellow performers, with an attitude of accepting offers can make a performer appear ‘supernatural; it's the most marvellous thing about improvisation: you are suddenly in contact with people who are unbounded, whose imagination seems to function without limit.’ (Johnstone, pp100) This further emphasises the importance of connection to produce a successful performance.

Improvisation is a complex art-form that enables performers to be extremely present and connected to their audience. Experts such as Halpern, Johnstone and Oida

have a lot to teach improvisers about themselves and the power of perception. Improvisation can be a tool that can be used in real-life scenarios as a way of connecting with others and communicating ideas efficiently. When performers learn to connect with their true selves and with each other, they can reach their true potential. There is a lot of power in a performer's ability to control their mindset. If they attune themselves to a sensitive, genuine, and bold way of thinking, then their performance has the capacity to amaze.

Journey Through the Module:

This module has been extremely impactful on myself as a performer and in general. Throughout the units I have developed many skills such as: self-acceptance, physical presence, and dealing with mistakes. Prior to this module, physicality was something that never felt extremely important during performance, as the use of language was something I was led to believe was the crucial communicator. However, by becoming more in touch with myself, I learned 'that the mind, the body, and the emotions are inextricably linked to each other' (Oida et al, pp59) and therefore to neglect any sense of physicality was a discredit to the sense of presence I could create. This idea of presence stemmed from my self-confidence journey. At the start of the module, I cared a lot about how the other performers would perceive me and I was very critical of myself, which often directly impacted my ability to perform. By getting more in touch with myself during every game and activity, I learned that when I just allowed myself to exist authentically and stopped blocking myself, I could achieve almost anything. Throughout the process, there were

many opportunities to make mistakes and to learn how to deal with them. However, the more I began to trust myself, connect with others and enjoy what we were doing, the less it felt like *mistakes* mattered.

The improv unit was one of my favourites because it was arguably my first opportunity to open up and play with the other performers. This is the period in which I experienced the most personal growth in confidence, authenticity, and presence. I learned that it is nearly impossible to create a successful scene when you are trying to save face or cater to people's perceptions of you. This is where I unlocked the ability to allow myself to be my truest self, to tap into my imagination and say 'yes' to things I would normally be too anxious to accept, which is an important mindset that I took with me through the whole module.

Admittedly, my favourite improvised scenes were with my friend Becky, which is a testament to how being authentic and comfortable with your fellow actors can allow a performance to blossom. One scene which was very well received was when we had the location of a hair salon, and we were having a typical chat. I then made the offer that we were in a simulation which we both instantly took and ran with, repeating snippets of our conversations, rewinding, and jittering. I always felt like I could be brave when improvising with Becky because we had a strong level of trust, and I genuinely knew that any offer she made would be one I'd want to take. This experience of letting go and having a laugh set the foundations for how I would tackle the stand-up unit.

The stand-up unit was challenging in the sense that I had to further connect with my most authentic self. In our first session we had to discover our personas, which is

something I struggled with at the start, having always had trouble with my self-image. However, once we discussed which scenarios we felt the funniest, I remembered how much fun I'd had with Becky and connected with lots of happy memories of belly-laughs with my friends and flatmates. This realisation is what established my persona's relationship to the audience. It took a very long time to build my confidence up enough to face the stage alone, as I was fully responsible for my performance. To begin with, each time we had to stand in front of the group and talk for a minute, I gave in to feelings of social anxiety and struggled to make eye-contact and form connections with the audience. One time I got up to speak for two minutes and my mind blanked; I felt like I was crumbling in front of everyone, oversharing with them directly that I felt really anxious and couldn't look anyone in the eye, ultimately having a mental breakdown. This was a serious blip in my journey that I knew would take a lot of work to overcome.

The first time we were able to test out our material was a big turning point. During this rehearsal, rather than allowing myself to be called up unexpectedly, I volunteered to go next. This simple choice is what I believe allowed me to embody a strong sense of confidence that carried through to my set. It enabled me to be fully present and unapologetic about my true self because my *body* was confident, therefore so was I, and therefore my persona was too. I was pleased to hear that some of my peers were surprised at how present I was on stage despite standing still, which I think was due to how I'd allowed myself to connect my reality with my performance. This newfound ability to be authentic and confident was a pleasure to perform which likely made it more enjoyable for the audience as well, connecting with the positive energy I was exuding.

The audience also said that they felt included in the 'bitch session', that the relationship between us was clear, and that my persona was funny and cohesive.

Masks was something I found very challenging because of the increased focus on physicality and emotion within myself. My main difficulty was dealing with the interconnectedness of energy and emotion, in combination with the importance of *being* the mask. The experience of having to authentically perform the happy mask was something I struggled with because at the time I was struggling with my mental health. It was a hard realisation that the sad mask felt more natural and achievable because of my tendency for low energy and negative feelings. However, I chose to embrace it and learn more about how a lower energy and slower pace worked well for this emotion, and as I started feeling better, how increased energies enabled counter-mask. I was able to carry through the playfulness and instinctiveness of the previous units into the preparation for this assessment. Having one performer in mask and one not, showed the importance of narrative and how the masks lend themselves to childlike identities. It felt more natural to strip characters back to emotional infancy and improvise scenes that allow these feelings to come to fruition. For example, having a strop or crying or laughing or dancing were things that seemed acceptable to fall back on when interacting with another performer.

The idea of communicating and connecting with the audience felt very significant as we moved into the final unit on participatory theatre. I learned how the relationship between the performers and the audience has changed throughout theatre history and that it can actually be categorised into different frames. It now seemed more important than ever to focus on the audience experience and how the meaning making process was going to take place in our performance. We came up with a fun idea for a theatrical

justice system that convicts theatre-people of ridiculous crimes. We workshopped a script over the break which we used in our first rehearsal. It felt like we had quite a solid idea of what we were going to do in this piece until we had an audience to interact with for the first time. The nature of bringing audience members up to the stand and improvising cases for defence and prosecution was a playful and clear structure. The audience felt like they were really involved in the meaning making process under these conditions. They also made suggestions about how else we could get them to feel more involved. For example, we could give them an opportunity at the start to come up with their own theatre-related crimes that we could then convict other audience members for. This meant our initial focus on the written narrative was rightly called into question, and from that point we shifted our focus onto increasing the opportunities for participation that would allow audiences to feel equally responsible for the performance and that could also lead to more moments of comedy.

Assessment Reflections:

Improv

I learned a lot from the assessment for this unit because a lot of things didn't go the way we would've liked. Becky and I were given the location of 'Airport' and the line 'The plane is delayed'. When I heard our prompts, I remembered how I had said in rehearsals that an airport would be a difficult location because it didn't feel like there was much room for an interesting narrative. In addition, I felt the line was a set-up in itself which made it more challenging to make another offer that we could build a scene

from. Admittedly, this was just how I felt about the prompts and not that they were actually impossible, but nonetheless I didn't feel excited about it before we started. We ended up committing to quite incompatible characters: I was annoyed and depressed at the thought of being late and was rude to Becky's weird and flirty character. We both just sat in the airport, establishing a weird encounter but neither of us could find a sense of jo ha kyu and found ourselves working very hard within the scene to keep it moving; revolving around tension, comedy and the relationship. We'd limited our options of where to take the scene, and feeling particularly low that day, I found myself acting out of sorts and blocking Becky's offers.

I was disappointed with this because it felt very different to how Becky and I normally created scenes in rehearsals. Many times, I felt an immediate gut feeling of where to take the line, e.g. 'Stop poking me'. This line, with the location of a hotel, gave me an instinctual idea from the get-go that would take us down the route of a funny-horror scene where I would eventually get poked by a ghost. This initial burst of intuition was never essential for a good scene, but it often gave me the energy to keep the scene moving, build on offers and find the patterns in the narrative.

Stand Up

For this assessment I based my set on my flatmates- in particular one of the girls I live with who I named Tricey (Beatrice). I created a persona that was rude but in a way that felt like I was *punching up*. I treated the audience like a friend, in particular my flatmates who I complain about themselves to, because I felt like this specific scenario was where

I felt my funniest. I established a connection with the audience by looking at them and listening into their laughter, which energised my set even more.

In the final rehearsal I had forgotten a large chunk of my set towards the end. When this happened, I found a good escape-line that could end my set without it looking as if I'd forgotten what I was meant to say. This helped me to realise that as long as you believe in what you're saying and you're present, you will find the words to get you out of any *mistakes* that could happen. Luckily, I didn't have to use this technique in the final assessment, but it was valuable to have in the back of my mind.

Masks

For this piece, Jiayin and I decided to tell a love story inspired by Taylor Swift's *You Belong with Me*. By going for clear archetypes in a wholesome and predictable love story, we were able to focus more on performing our feelings and internal monologues rather than focusing on an original narrative. We mutually agreed a rough storyline and then started improvising the smaller scenes. From that we intensified our moments of counter-mask, practiced speaking our thoughts and made note of different states of tension. The scene felt successful because of the audible reactions from the audience; 'aww'ing at the conclusion of our characters admitting their love for each other. We tried to allow as many opportunities as possible for audience connections throughout: *clocking*, waving, and sharing secrets with them. It was important for me to take my time and remain composed throughout, as not to over-act any dialogue but also to establish my sad persona.

Participatory

There were many ways in which our participatory assessment felt like a success: the audience seemed to really enjoy themselves, participants felt very comfortable to get involved and the atmosphere and energy between ourselves and the audience was exciting. We discovered a mutual taste in comedy that we all felt very connected by, giving a strong sense of relationship between us as performers that could draw the audience into our world. By making our characters as ridiculous as possible it made it difficult for audience members to believe they could truly embarrass themselves more than we already were, making it a welcoming environment for them to be silly with us. There were moments in the piece that lacked clarity, such as the distinction between Becky and I as defence and prosecution, along with the casual use of scripts which could be ironed out through further rehearsal. This didn't feel like it affected the overall experience for the audience as our incompetence and stupidity was the framework of the characters and performance.

In conclusion, this module has massively increased my capabilities as a performer and has unexpectedly transformed the way I live my life. There is such a strong relationship between what I've learned as a performer and what I've learned about myself and life as a whole. Some key lessons include accepting myself as I am, the ecstasy of accepting offers and joking with friends, and the importance of presence and connection.

Works Cited

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