

THE ROOTS OF AMERICAN IMPROVISATION:  
PLAY, PROCESS, AND PEDAGOGY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2011

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the ways in which the art of American improvisation, as it developed in Chicago, operates as a catalyst for liberating creativity in the individual. I have traced its historical roots to the work and theories of three first-generation American women: Neva Boyd, Viola Spolin, and Josephine Raciti Forsberg. Boyd was a kindergarten teacher at the beginning of the twentieth century who championed the significant role that “directed play,” particularly in the form of games, takes in the personal and social development of the individual. Viola Spolin, also known as “the high priestess” of improvisation, was trained as a social group worker by Boyd. Spolin built on Boyd’s theories and created games, known as the “Spolin Games,” for teaching improvisation. In 1963, she published *Improvisation for the Theater*, a foundational text for acting and improvisation teachers. Josephine Raciti Forsberg, who was trained by Spolin, is a theatre practitioner and teacher, whose contributions to the art of American improvisation have been greatly overlooked. Forsberg also established the first, and for many years the only school, dedicated to teaching the art of American improvisation, The Players Workshop of The Second City.

In this dissertation, I have particularly focused on Forsberg’s influences, curriculum, and exercises. In creating this narrative, I have used personal interviews with Forsberg and her unpublished notes, *Something from Nothing*. Forsberg’s notes do not

provide a theoretical perspective, so I have supplied a framework, making the connections between her exercises and the theories and individuals who influenced her and her work. Lastly, in extending the discussion of the transformative nature of improvisation, I explore the link between creativity and improvisation from a cognitive process perspective.

## Acknowledgements

An improvisation is not successful unless the contributions of all the players are acknowledged. In this spirit, I would like to thank my first improvisation teacher, mentor, and friend, Josephine Raciti Forsberg, for generously sharing her time, her story, and her work throughout the writing of this dissertation. She has been a source of inspiration and support since my first day as a member of The Players Workshop of The Second City.

I would like to express my gratitude to my committee members: My advisor, Jane Bowers, for graciously agreeing to serve as Chair of my dissertation committee; Dan Gerould, with whom I share an appreciation of comedy and melodrama; and Claudia Orenstein for her thought provoking comments and advice.

I am particularly indebted to my colleague, Andrea Balis. I thank her for her understanding, patience, critical comments, and genuine concern. Without her, I would not have been able to complete this process.

I would like to express my gratitude to Marvin McAllister. Dr. McAllister, whose door was always open to me, helped me discover my passion as a scholar, a teacher, and a practitioner.

I am thankful to Gloria Waldman for being there with her unfaltering support throughout the process of completing this project.

I am grateful to all my students for playing so hard and so fully and for letting me play with them. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

I am profoundly and eternally thankful for Jeff Michalski, my fellow player, friend, and partner, who has been a source of encouragement, inspiration, and

understanding since we first played together as improvisers in The Players Workshop and in the St. Vitus Dancers. I thank him for sharing his insight, his expertise, and his knowledge of the art of American improvisation.

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## Introduction

In 1973, I was a somewhat shy, nineteen year old girl living on the south side of Chicago and working as a secretary at the Chicago Transit Authority. I had never heard of Second City and had no idea who Josephine Raciti Forsberg was. “Improvisation” was not part of my lexicon. I had grown up a first generation American in an Irish Catholic home where each one of us was assigned a particular role to play from which we should never stray. I did not like my prescribed role, which fell along a traditionally gendered and working class line; I wanted to be an actor and performer. I had known this for as long as I can remember. So, when a co-worker told me that he was going to be taking “acting” classes at The Players Workshop of The Second City, I asked if I could go along. I could not know at the time that this choice would have a major impact on my life.

During my two years with Forsberg, I performed in *Land of the Stage II*, one of her Second City children’s theatre productions. This show was structured so that children would be exposed to the theatre as a form of popular culture, as well as an introduction to Forsberg’s beloved Shakespeare. Forsberg’s children’s shows also included audience participation and the playing of traditional games, such as “Going on a Lion Hunt.” In addition, I was a performer in many of the revues at the Players Oe, Forsberg’s small cabaret-style theatre housed in a Unitarian Church in Chicago’s Old Town. Lastly, with four male players with whom I had taken classes, I became an improv-comedy performer in *The St. Vitus Dancers* comedy troupe. Every weekend, we played the comedy clubs in the Chicagoland area. I stopped studying with Forsberg when I was hired to play Frenchy in the National Tour of *Grease*.

As an improvisation student and practitioner, I experienced, first hand, the transformative and empowering aspects of this art form; however, I had never questioned how or why improvisation served as a catalyst for “self” development. I only knew that I had become a good actor and performer. As an acting and improvisation teacher, I began looking for answers. In my search, I found explanations in Erving Goffman’s work on interaction ritual, in the play and games theory of Neva Boyd, in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s work on creativity and flow, in the literature of the humanistic psychologists and Transactional Analysis, and in neuroscience and the human cognitive processes as discussed by various creativity scholars. I came to understand that the transformation that players experience is based in the improvisation structures and not in some mystical powers. By focusing on problem-solving and responding to the actual stimuli being presented in the moment by all the players and by the environment, transformation and liberation from old schemas and old dysfunctional habits are possible. As the “high priestess of improvisation,” Viola Spolin, stated:

The energy released to solve the problem, being restricted by the rules of the game and bound by group decision, creates an explosion—or spontaneity—and as is the nature of explosions, everything is torn apart, rearranged, unblocked. The ear alerts the feet, and the eye throws the ball.<sup>1</sup>

The entire organism is engaged in improvisational work. There is no mind-body separation. There is only “unicity.”

This dissertation, then, examines the ways in which improvisation, as it developed in the United States, particularly in Chicago, operates as a catalyst for liberating

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<sup>1</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 3rd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 5—6.

creativity in individuals. Through the games, exercises, and interaction rituals that improvisers use in their ensemble work with both the onstage players and the audience players, an environment where individuals may feel safe to experiment with new ways of being is created. In other words, this dissertation strives to answer the question: how does improvisation, with its emphasis on problem-solving, group process, and agreement, free individuals from their “inner censors,” thus allowing a personal transformative experience to transpire in a public theatrical setting?

In order to address this question, I have used Josephine Raciti Forsberg and her work as exemplars. I have not chosen to do this simply because Forsberg was a teacher who had a positive impact on my life. Forsberg’s contributions to the development of the art of American improvisation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been greatly overlooked. Although she established the first school in the United States dedicated to teaching the art of American improvisation, she is only included in the discourse by former students or relegated to a footnote as the woman who was “effectively ousted” from her status as “the first tier of official Second City training.”<sup>2</sup>

Forsberg contributed to the development of American improvisation as an art form that began in the first half of the twentieth century with Neva Boyd’s work in the field of play therapy theory. Her approach also reflects the positive, self-actualizing component of the art of American improvisation that her teacher, and the “high priestess of improvisation Viola Spolin argued was meant to free players from the cultural bonds

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<sup>2</sup> Amy Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 36.

that have led to the repression of spontaneity in socialized adults. Spontaneity, Spolin believed,

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.<sup>3</sup>

Forsberg agreed with Spolin's theory and built on it by uniting improvisation techniques and classical, Stanislavskian actor training techniques with theories of psychology, particularly Transactional Analysis. She successfully put her system into practice in her classes and in the producing arm of her Players Workshop of The Second City: The Children's Theatre of Second City and The Players' Oe. She established workshop and performance environments where players were taught that relationships flourish through a "give-and-take" of power, that taking risks and responsibility leads to peak performance experiences, that responding to stimuli in the "Now" rather than resorting to old schemas and bad habits leads to self-actualization, and that taking care of the other person is the best way of ensuring that you will be taken care of. Forsberg strove to give her students the tools for becoming successful theatre artists and human beings. For the most part, she succeeded.

In exploring the transformative nature of the art of American improvisation, this dissertation does several things. First, it looks at improvisation's historical roots in the beginning of the twentieth century in Chicago, as well as its theoretical roots in social and educational reform. Second, it places Forsberg in the historical narrative by providing information on direct and indirect influences on her approach to teaching the art of

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<sup>3</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 4.

American improvisation, as well as an analysis of her curriculum. Third, it provides insight into the biological and cognitive processes involved in practicing the art of American improvisation. Looking through these lenses provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which improvisation functions as a collaborative art form and a catalyst for liberating an individual's creativity.

Chapter One, "The Roots of American Improvisation: Neva Boyd and Viola Spolin," discusses the development of the art of American improvisation. This chapter begins with a focus on the importance of Neva Boyd's foundational theories of play therapy and social group work, as well as the social and educational reforms that characterized the early years of the American twentieth century. Boyd's work sets the ground rules for improvisation as a collaborative endeavor, not only between the onstage players, but also between the players and the audience. Boyd, a settlement house worker and pioneer in the field of social work, "was a proponent of the modern play movement, which emphasized the importance of recreation in socializing individuals."<sup>4</sup> Her interest in the educational value of play began at Hull House, a settlement on Chicago's West Side, and reached its apex at Northwestern University. In 1927, after having established several training programs for social workers, the fiercely independent Boyd agreed to become a faculty member in Northwestern's Sociology Department. She retired in 1941; however, she continued to teach and lecture on the use of play as a means of improving social relationships until her death in 1963.

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<sup>4</sup> University of Illinois at Chicago, Special Collections Finding Aids, accessed June 2007, <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services/rjd/findingaids/NBoydf.html>.

Boyd championed the social benefits of play, believing that “its essence is psychological involvement and spontaneous activity for its own meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Boyd theorized that,

Activity in which reciprocal responsiveness via play is dominant provides a basis of unconsciously acquired understanding of “self and others.” Such play activities serve not only as a means of creating universality and humanizing sensitivity but also as a means of giving organized constructive expression. The medium of expression and the degree of unconscious, interpersonal reciprocity evoked among the players influences the development of character.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, play is a useful tool that leads players, through social interaction ritual, to an awareness of the “self” and the “self” in society. Boyd believed that play provided “an effective way of communicating with hard-to-reach individuals.”<sup>7</sup> She also believed that directed play results in positive transformations for the individual and, by extension, for the community.

Directed play is defined by activities or games organized by a set of rules that are agreed upon by all players, not a disembodied authoritarian voice, and based on stable patterns. Boyd’s concept of directed play does not mean that play lacks the important “happifying” element<sup>8</sup> that takes the focus off competition and places it on fun. Indeed,

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<sup>5</sup> Neva Leona Boyd. *Play and Game Theory in Group Work; a Collection of Papers*, edited by Paul Simon (Chicago: Jane Addams Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1971), 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Austin, introduction in *Handbook of Games* (New York: Dover Publications, 1943), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Boyd, *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 84.

she believed fun was perhaps the most important part of the experience. Moreover, the rules in directed play do not lead to “an imitation of play,” which Huizinga argues is the result of “play to order.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, within these organized structures the players are liberated through the discipline of adhering to a particular pattern of behavior and not to an authoritarian voice. In other words, directed play gives the players a sense of autonomy and agency because they freely agree to play by the rules. Boyd believed directed play set the stage for the physiological, psychological, and social transformation of the individual.

Chapter One also looks at Viola Spolin’s role in the development of the art of American improvisation. In “Play as a Means of Social Adjustment,” Boyd states, “playing a game is psychologically different in degree but not in kind from dramatic acting.”<sup>10</sup> In her archives, housed at the University of Illinois at Chicago library, there is literature on drama, games and drama, and play and drama.<sup>11</sup> In her *Handbook of Games*, one of her first publications, she includes a chapter on dramatic games. However, as David Alfred Charles points out in *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity*, there are only hints of the “value of play and games in the theatrical realm”<sup>12</sup> in Boyd’s theories. It was her student, Viola Spolin, who adapted

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<sup>9</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: J. & J. Harper Editions, 1970), 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> University of Illinois at Chicago, Special Collections Finding Aids, accessed June 2007, <http://tiger.uic.edu/depts/lib/specialcoll/services/rjd/findingaids/NBoydf.html>

<sup>12</sup> David Alfred Charles, *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity* (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2003), 24.

Boyd's theories on play therapy, codifying them in *Improvisation for the Theatre*. This book, first published in 1963, has become a foundational text for actor training in the United States. Spolin, who lived and studied with Boyd from 1924 to 1927, credits her mentor with providing her with the tools she needed to be a successful teacher and group worker:

an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing. The effects of her inspiration never left me for a single day.<sup>13</sup>

In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin also acknowledges Stanislavsky<sup>14</sup> as providing her with insights “at sporadic times” throughout her life; however, in a 1987 taped interview, she recants, saying that she knew nothing of Stanislavsky because she was not a theatre person. She was a group worker. Lastly, Spolin also recognizes the role her family played in the development of her games. She informs that their weekly games of charades contributed to her “Word Game,” an exercise used for developing material for scenes.

Spolin began developing her own theories as a teacher and supervisor of creative dramatics with the WPA Recreational Project in Chicago. Her initial approach was non-verbal and non-psychological, leading to improvisation structures, also known as

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<sup>13</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, vii.

<sup>14</sup> Frost and Yarrow assert that Konstantin Stanislavsky might be assumed to be “the originator of the modern use of improvisation, at least as a rehearsal and training device” (15). This use of improvisation is applied, meaning, as Hazel Smith and Dean Rogers point out in *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts Since 1945*, that it is used “towards the formation of a subsequent live performance which is no longer improvised” (pp. 27–28). Improv comedy troupes use improvisation techniques to create scenes or revues that will eventually become scripted pieces to be presented before an audience.

organizational structures, that served as a catalyst for liberating players from what Spolin refers to as “the subjective pretend/illusion response.”<sup>15</sup> Spolin’s approach to improvisation differs from the European tradition of actor training whereby improvisation is used to spark actors’ imaginations and to aid them in relating situations from their own lives to the play, thus bringing a vitality to a scene, as well as to their characters. This use of improvisation, however, does not necessarily ask the performers/actors to interact or work as an ensemble. It is a rehearsal technique. The approach that developed in the United States, particularly in Chicago, stresses interaction and the development of relationships between the players and the players and audience.

Spolin’s success with employing game structures as a tool for theatre training for children, amateur actors, and non-literate immigrants eventually led to demonstrations as to how improvisation actually worked. This led to taking audience suggestions, which has become the defining element of American improvisation, or what is also known as Chicago-Style Improv.

Chapter Two, “Josephine Raciti Forsberg: A Catalyst for Understanding The Connections Between Life, Theatre, and Improvisation,” focuses on Forsberg and the influence that the Human Potential Movement had on her approach to teaching improvisation. In 1971, Forsberg established the first school dedicated to teaching improvisation, The Players Workshop of The Second City. She provided the training for the majority of Second City performers, produced Second City’s children’s shows, and was responsible for Second City’s touring company. In 1981, she worked with David Shepherd, a friend from the early days of the Playwrights Theatre Club and Second City,

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<sup>15</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 49.

developing Improv Olympiad. The concept was further developed by a former student, Charna Halpern. Halpern recalled in a 2000 article on Forsberg that she was concerned that her former teacher would be upset about the new competition. Forsberg's response to Halpern was: "Just go ahead and do it. There's room for everybody out there."<sup>16</sup> Forsberg believed that we teach students "to go somewhere and do something with what they learn."<sup>17</sup>

In 1985, Andrew Alexander, a Canadian businessman, and one of the driving forces behind SCTV, bought Chicago's Second City. Alexander wanted to create an in-house training center; he wanted, Forsberg asserted in a 1997 interview, The Players Workshop. Forsberg refused and "he opened up his own training center."<sup>18</sup> In 1987, The Second City Training Center was established. Forsberg's nephew and protégé, Martin de Maat, was asked to head the new training center. Forsberg was asked to be an artistic consultant, but her heart was not in it,<sup>19</sup> and she eventually dropped out. In addition to de Maat, other former students of Forsberg's, such as Jeff and John Michalski, were also instrumental developing Second City's Training Center. The Michalskis brought their

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<sup>16</sup> Charna Halpern quoted in Sara Burrow's "She Wrote the Script for Chicago Improv," *News-Star*, July 12, 2000, Section 2, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg quoted in Sara Burrow's "She Wrote the Script for Chicago Improv," *News-Star*, July 12, 2000, Section 2, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Jack Helbig, "Anything But Retiring," *Performink* 1997, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ben Winters, "Whose Name Is It, Anyway? A Second City Pioneer Fights For A Piece Of The Improv Business She Helped Build—And A Little Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 2000, accessed May 21, 2011, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2000-12-03/features/0012030379\\_1\\_viola-spolin-second-city-paul-sills/4](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2000-12-03/features/0012030379_1_viola-spolin-second-city-paul-sills/4).

knowledge of Forsberg's approach and curriculum. De Maat brought his eighteen years of experience in the Forsberg improvisation family business and Forsberg's curriculum.

Initially, The Players Workshop continued to thrive. Alexander sent performers to Forsberg to be trained in the basics of improvisation. The Second City Training Center took on the responsibility of teaching advanced improvisation performance techniques. However, in 1992, Second City also began offering beginning classes. By this point, the only mark of Forsberg's association with Second City was the inclusion of the name in her corporation title: The Players Workshop of The Second City. Second City, her one-time artistic home, became a competitor, as did Improv Olympic (IO) and The Annoyance Theatre—both enterprises established by former students. By 1997, Forsberg workshop participants dwindled to about 125 students. As Ben Winters reports, "Those who wanted to study in the glow of Second City's mystique now found their way not to Players, but to the Second City Training Center."<sup>20</sup> In 2000, Second City also wanted to stop Forsberg from using "Second City" as part of her name. Ultimately, as reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, "the prospect of losing even a symbolic connection to the world's most famous comedy theater was too distressing for Forsberg to accept, and Second City decided not to press its claim."<sup>21</sup>

Forsberg and her daughter, Linnea, turned the managing director responsibilities of The Players Workshop over to Steve Roath, a former student. Roath seemed to save The Players Workshop by establishing a corporate division; however, his management style contributed to its demise. The once only-game-in-town for training in the art of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

American improvisation, the woman who had trained thousands and thousands of performers, who had been a major force in promoting improvisation as an art form, ultimately lost her position as the leading authority. The Players Workshop of The Second City, which had grown into a successful family business, could not compete with Second City, the corporation. Even Forsberg herself is slowly being erased from improvisation's historical narrative.

Chapter Three, *Something from Nothing: Forsberg's Praxis, Overview of The Players Workshop Exercises*," provides an insight into Forsberg's workshop approach and an analysis of her curriculum. In considering the skills that her students would need to acquire in order to be successful theatre artists, Forsberg created a cohesive six-term curriculum. Each term had specific learning objectives and exercises to support these objectives. Forsberg drew on Spolin's foundational work and the "Spolin Games"; however, she also created many of her own exercises, which she developed by observing and learning about the blocks that inhibited creativity. She designed some of these exercises based on her experiences as a theatre artist herself and some on her knowledge of psychological and behavioral theory, as well as her desire to help her students acquire life skills.

Forsberg began outlining her approach in her unpublished notes, *Something From Nothing*. These notes do not provide an analysis of her exercises or a clear insight into her theory; rather, *Something from Nothing* is an outline of exercises and the order in which they should be introduced to the students. Chapter Three places these exercises within a theoretical framework that highlights the significant role improvisation plays in

the development of theatre and performance skills, as well as the development of the “self.” It also reveals that there is a fine line between art and therapy.

Chapter Four, “Creativity and Improvisation: The Cognition Connection,” explores the link between creativity and improvisation from a cognitive process perspective. This chapter focuses on the role that tolerance and/or intolerance of ambiguity plays in the creative process and particularly in the art of American improvisation. In looking at the tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity, this chapter considers the impact one’s “inner censor” has on the creative process and the importance of understanding the authoritarian voice that Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg believed hindered the growth of the individual. Creativity scholar, Mark A. Runco, states that individuals who are tolerant of ambiguity possess the ability “to deal with the ill-defined nature of problems that have creative potential” and “to tolerate a range of options that should be considered.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, individuals who can tolerate ambiguity are open to possibilities and can easily adjust to change. In the art of American improvisation, where “not knowing” is a persistent state of being, tolerance of ambiguity is critical.

In addition, this chapter looks at the role that divergent and convergent thinking skills play in the improviser’s creative process. Although divergent thinking is often privileged in discussions about creativity because it is related to generating ideas, convergent thinking is also paramount in improvisation. It is not enough to produce a wealth of ideas; the players must explore them, or “land” on one theme, albeit probably for only a short period of time. “Landing” is a term used in improvisation that simply

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<sup>22</sup> Mark A. Runco, *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice* (Boston: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), 297.

means heightening a moment and mining it for all its worth before moving on to a new discovery. Therefore, it is important to consider the role that both skills play in improvisation.

The art of American improvisation is based in the “holistic understanding of the human personality”<sup>23</sup> as more than a pathological entity. Improvisation demonstrates that human beings are capable of transformation given the right circumstances and environment. Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow argued that neurosis may indeed be rooted in self-punishment stemming from guilt; however, “growth and improvement can [also] come through pain and conflict.”<sup>24</sup> The process of improvement is played out in improvisation work. The concentration on solving the problem provided in an improvisational structure, Spolin argues,

performs the same function in creating organic unity as does the game and generates great excitement by constantly provoking the question of procedures at the moment of crisis, thus keeping all participating members open for experiencing.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, her “Orientation” exercises were created to bring “the first organic awareness of self, object, and environment to the student.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Boyd also argued that through play, the “self” would be transformed psychologically, physiologically, and socially, creating a whole, healthy “self.” In her work, Forsberg has focused on the

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<sup>23</sup> Donald Moss, *Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology: A Historical and Biographical Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, 3rd ed. (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1999), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

awareness of the “self” and the importance of creating exercises that help students recognize blocks so that they become conscious of who they are and how to channel that “self awareness into an expressive facet—mental, emotional, sensory, kinetic—then the awareness can help them make right selections.”<sup>27</sup>

In looking at the art of American improvisation and the theories and movements that had an impact on its development, I posit that it is the focus on the structures of improvisation and the emphasis on improvisation as a collaborative art form that makes it an instrument of transformational experiences occurring in a public theatrical environment. Using Forsberg’s work as an exemplar for this argument not only elucidates the power of improvisation, it also places her within the history of this art form.

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<sup>27</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, as quoted in Richard Tanis, “Jo Forsberg, Second City’s Den Mother,” *Chicago Daily News*, October 11–12, 1973.

## Chapter 1

### **The Roots of American Improvisation: Neva Boyd and Viola Spolin**

The art of improvisation as it developed in the United States in the twentieth century does not have its roots in theatre. The origins of improvisation lie in social group work, which developed out of the social settlement house movement in the early decades of the century. During this period, educators and social reformers were embracing new and innovative ways of approaching teaching and learning, both formally and informally. The American psychologist and educator, John Dewey, was arguing for “the organic connection between education and personal experience,”<sup>1</sup> but not just any experience. For Dewey, “democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience,” while “methods of repression and coercion or force” destroy community.<sup>2</sup> Dewey believed that competitive games could be a valuable educational tool because they required participation, which resulted in a shared experience for the players. He further argued: “Those who take part [in games] do not feel that they are bossed by an individual person or are being subjected to the will of some outside superior person.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, games as a learning tool support collaboration and community rather than the subjugation of the individual as an autonomous “self” and as a member of the group. Friedrich Froebel, the German educator and creator of the kindergarten, believed that play was vital to the development of children and adults: “A child that plays thoroughly,

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Touchstone, 1938), 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

with self-active determination...will surely be a thorough, determined man, capable of self-sacrifice for the promotion of the welfare of himself and others.”<sup>4</sup> Froebel promoted the education of the “whole child,” believing that the way to accomplish this was through nature’s way of developing both the child’s mind and the body—through play.<sup>5</sup> American educators embraced Froebel’s approach to education, with its focus on directed self-activity. They then expanded and improved upon the original idea by connecting it to humanitarian purposes.<sup>6</sup>

The social reformer and founder of Chicago’s Hull House, Jane Addams, believed education to be the foundation for democracy and used her settlement house as an environment where community members could receive an informal education. Hull House, founded in 1889, contained a gym, theatre, art gallery, music school, boys’ club, auditorium, kindergarten, nursery, clubrooms, and art studios. As a cultural center, Hull House provided play and social activities for children, youths, and adults.<sup>7</sup> Its workers had a belief in the process of community building and, as Bertram C. Bruce reports,

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Froebel, *The Education of Man*, translated by W.N. Hailmann, A.M. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 55.

<sup>5</sup> Friederich Froebel and Emilie Michaelis, preface to *Froebel: Materials to Aid a Comprehension of the Work of the Founder of the Kindergarten*, translated by Emilie Michaelis (New York: E.L. Kellogg & Co., 1887), 11, Google eBook edition.

<sup>6</sup> For a more extended discussion of the connection between Froebel’s theories and American education, see *Readings in the History of Education: A Collection of Sources and Readings to Illustrate the Development of Educational Practice, Theory, And Organization*, edited by Ellwood P. Cubberly (Boston: Houghlin Mifflin Company, 1920), 766.

<sup>7</sup> The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago © 2005 Chicago Historical Society. The Encyclopedia of Chicago © 2004 The Newberry Library, accessed June 2008, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/615.html>.

understood the significance of supporting “the wholeness of both individuals and the community.”<sup>8</sup> Hull House, where the humanness of human beings was recognized and community building was privileged, is appropriately the birthplace of what we know as American improvisation.

The development of the art of contemporary American improvisation can be found in the work and theory of three women: Neva Leona Boyd, Viola Spolin, and Josephine Raciti Forsberg. Throughout her career as a social work and teacher, Boyd focused on the intrinsic value of play, particularly structured games, as a tool that supported the development of the individual regardless of physical, emotional, or mental challenges. She devised programs, both for children, adults, and teachers, built on the idea that community and cooperative play supported individual transformation. Boyd’s theory of play and her belief that games are a catalyst for transformation became the foundation on which Viola Spolin, the “mother of improvisation,” built her theory of creativity and her practical approach to teaching theatre arts. Forsberg, Spolin’s student and a classically trained actor, learned Spolin’s techniques and expanded on many of the original “Spolin Games,” particularly focusing on teaching acting techniques, theatre arts, and creativity. In addition to Boyd’s and Spolin’s work, Forsberg was also influenced by Transactional Analysis and Zen Buddhism.

This chapter places Boyd and Spolin in the historical context of the development of the art of American Improvisation. Furthermore, in looking at the theory and practice

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<sup>8</sup> Bertram C. Bruce, “From Hull House to Paseo Boricua: The Theory and Practice of Community Inquiry,” Presented at the conference, Philosophy of Pragmatism: Salient Inquiries, in “Section 3: Moral Theory, Law, Society,” held at Babe-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, September 26–29, 2007, 3.

that Boyd developed as a social group worker, we begin to understand why improvisation, as it developed in the United States, is a collaborative art form. In addition, this chapter highlights Spolin's contributions to improvisation. Spolin used improvisation as a vehicle for teaching acting, performance, and theatre arts. She also understood it as a means of liberating the individual from the cultural constraints that blocked creativity.

Neva Boyd was born in Sanborn, Iowa, on February 25, 1876. As a first generation Scots-Irish-American, she grew up knowing the value of an independent and pioneering spirit as modeled by her farmer-parents, a way of being that would serve her well in her professional life. She became, Paul Simon writes in his biographical sketch, "one of a small group of women who devoted their careers to the social ills of the times and the development of a systematic discipline of formal education."<sup>9</sup> At the turn of the century, she enrolled in the Chicago Kindergarten Institute where she began her exploration of the transformative powers of play. Although Friedrich Froebel had already developed and published theories about the importance of incorporating play into early childhood education, Simon states that Boyd was first in emphasizing "the important relationship between play and the social education of children."<sup>10</sup> Upon completing her studies, she moved to Dallas where she managed a kindergarten. By 1904, she was supervising a kindergarten program at Welcome Hall Settlement in Buffalo, New York. Four years later, Boyd was back in Chicago where she began demonstrating her play

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Simon, introduction to *Play and Game Theory in Group Work: A Collection of Papers* by Neva Boyd, edited by Paul Simon (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Campus, 1971), 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

methods at social settlement houses.<sup>11</sup> The most famous of these social reform institutions was Chicago's Hull House. The Hull House mission, Jane Addams reported, was to "aid in the solutions of life in a great city, [and] to help our neighbors build responsible, self-sufficient lives for themselves and their families."<sup>12</sup> Because community was paramount to the success of Addams' vision of a beneficent democracy, Addams and the social settlement workers lived, as well as worked, at Hull House.

The concepts of community, empowerment, and mutual aid, the underpinnings of the social settlement movement, were, according to Simon, "particularly hospitable in philosophy and program to [Boyd's] views."<sup>13</sup> Boyd believed that working together as a community benefitted both the individual and the group as a whole. In an undated document, "Individual and Groups: Dynamic Mutual Influence in Human Groups," she wrote:

While it is true that in the human group the individual benefits, or at least gets satisfaction from his own contribution, there can be little doubt that the product of the whole is the source of greatest satisfaction and benefit to all members.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>12</sup> Jane Addams Hull House website, accessed July 7, 2008, <http://www.hullouse.org/aboutus/history.html>. See also Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House with Autobiographical Notes* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), Google eBook edition.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Simon, introduction to *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Neva Boyd, "Individual and Groups: Dynamic Mutual Influence in Human Groups," Boyd Archives at the University of Illinois at Chicago Campus Special Collections, Box 7, Folder 8.

In other words, the effort of the group buoys the individual, and the individual's involvement contributes to the group's success. However, as Dewey points out in *Democracy and Education*, the group must be working for a common end, a goal communicated to each individual and a goal in which each individual is invested.<sup>15</sup> For Boyd, play, particularly the playing of games that have agreed upon rules and stable structures, created an environment where goals are openly communicated and shared.

In 1909, the West Chicago Parks Commissioners hired Boyd as the director of informal social activities at Eckhart Park, one of three small parks designed to provide “breathing space and social services for the congested tenement districts.”<sup>16</sup> As the Eckhart Park “social worker,” Boyd maintained her focus on group socialization, organizing social clubs, dances, and dramatics, as well as other play activities. Her approach to recreational activities countered the prevailing model, which placed recreation in the domain of physical activity valued solely for its use in dispersing energy and often privileging competition. Boyd argued against competitive play that offered extrinsic rewards and any form of play that pitted people against one another rather than bringing them together as a social group. This is not to say that she completely rejected the idea of competition. She understood that competition held the potential for positive, collaborative experiences, as long as the games were designed for personal growth, were not based in false values, and privileged fun:

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<sup>15</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Chicago Park District website, “Eckhart Park,” accessed August 1, 2010, [http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/parks.detail/object\\_id/e01d6006-540f-4632-9820-4239a4bc8ae2.cfm](http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/parks.detail/object_id/e01d6006-540f-4632-9820-4239a4bc8ae2.cfm).

[Competition] contributes to one's understanding of himself and provides the conditions for becoming a better player without undue self interest. The game, however, must be fun and fun must in general supersede competition. Subordinate to fun, then, competition intensifies both fun and cooperation, but when distorted by extraneous rewards for winning, competition tends to create the reverse of all positive potential values. Should competition be overemphasized in the game, the players may become so tense that they prevent humorous situations from arising. Although in competition conflict may and possibly should be sharp, it need not become personal but become a channel for mutual enjoyment. Should conflict in competition in a game become personal, it may become a channel for ill will.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, competition can be a positive force if it meets certain criteria.

If the competition is secondary to the excitement of playing the game, then the benefits of cooperative play are highlighted. If the competitive elements that are inherent in any game contribute to the “moving spirit of the whole group,”<sup>18</sup> which Dewey asserted leads to a cooperative experience for players, then competition can have a positive influence on both the individual and the group. Furthermore, if competition supports the individual in discovering new personal strengths, then it can be a constructive force as well. As contemporary scholars Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett point out in “An Exploratory Model of Play,” some games are played to help the individual “maintain the high level of physical skill necessary to cope with the natural environment, and they are performed...to keep one's control over the health and

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd, “Values in Games: Competition,” Boyd Archives, Box 5, Folder 73.

<sup>18</sup> John Dewey, *Experience & Education*, 54.

efficiency of the body.”<sup>19</sup> In this instance, the individual is testing herself, striving to reach a peak performance level and in the process, discovering her strengths, as well recognizing limitations that need to be overcome. She is competing with the self rather than against an “other.” Participating in the game as a means of measuring one’s skills and talents is the reward and plays a role in motivating the individual to master more difficult games or problems.

In “Extrinsic Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation in Education: Reconsidered Once Again,” Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan report on the outcome of their research on the effects of extrinsic rewards in education. Their data support the belief that extrinsic rewards “tend to undermine intrinsic motivation for the rewarded activity.” They caution educators to “think carefully about when and how to use rewards” and suggest that rather than “focusing on rewards for motivating students’ learning, it is more important to focus on how to facilitate intrinsic motivation.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, incentive systems, or setting up competitive models, do not support motivation and do not necessarily benefit the individual. In *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium*, Csikszentmihalyi asserts:

*Intrinsic rewards*, which are derived from the activity itself, are undermined when the person is also given *extrinsic rewards* such as praise or money.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennet, “An Exploratory Model of Play,” *American Anthropologist*, 73 (1971): 51

<sup>20</sup> Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan, “Extrinsic Rewards and Intrinsic Motivation in Education: Reconsidered Once Again,” *Review of Educational Research*, 71 (Spring 2001): 15.

<sup>21</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 301.

For Csikszentmihalyi, an intrinsic reward for which individuals strive is a state of being that he calls “flow.”

When an individual is in a state of “flow,” nothing matters except the doing of the activity. Experiencing “flow” is beneficial because, as Csikszentmihalyi states:

It has the potential to make life more rich, intense, and meaningful; it is good because it increases the strength and complexity of the self.<sup>22</sup>

In considering competition from the perspective of personal achievement and the fact that it can afford the individual opportunities to experience “flow,” we get a better sense of why play, particularly games, possesses the power to transform the individual. The rule-bound action system of the game, asserts Csikszentmihalyi, contributes to the experience:

[It] provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. [In addition,] concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous.<sup>23</sup>

Csikszentmihalyi’s conclusions support Boyd’s assertions about play and the power that structured games hold. Csikszentmihalyi argues that games can serve as catalysts for “flow.” Boyd believes that games serve as catalysts for personal transformation on a social, psychological and physiological level.

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<sup>22</sup> Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990), 70.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Prior to Boyd's appointment at Eckhart Park, physical education teachers generally were responsible for directing physical activities, such as formal sports and calisthenics.<sup>24</sup> The program Boyd developed challenged this model and a different concept of the playground began to emerge. The West Chicago Park Commissioners voted to continue Boyd's program, assigning "social workers" to each individual playground. As a result of this recognition, Boyd decided that a professional training program in informal recreational leadership was needed.<sup>25</sup> In 1911, the Chicago Training School for Playground Workers, the first school of its kind in the United States, and most likely the world, opened its doors. Course offerings included folk arts and dances, drama, games, and play theory with an "emphasis on physiological and psychological significance,"<sup>26</sup> hallmarks of Boydean theory. In addition to course work, students were required to do field work in a settlement house or playground, a requirement designed to reinforce a student's understanding of the need for community and mutual aid. The Chicago School for Playground Workers closed its doors in 1914 when Boyd was transferred to the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy to head their Recreation Department. The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy school operated until it was incorporated into the University of Chicago in 1920.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Simon's introduction to *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> For more biographical information, see Simon's introduction to *Play and Game Theory in Group Work* and the "Social Welfare History Project" website, accessed May 12, 2011, <http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/people/boyd-neva-leona/>.

By this point, social work was already moving beyond its settlement house roots to professionalization; it was becoming an academic discipline requiring serious study. Therefore, according to Simon, it was essential for small, independent schools to become identified with large universities.<sup>28</sup> Yet, Boyd resisted incorporation into a formal “social work” academic program. In 1920, when the School of Civics and Philanthropy became part of the University of Chicago, Boyd’s Recreation Department was not absorbed. Instead, she became the head of the newly created Independent Recreation Training School of Chicago. Although this incarnation of Boyd’s training program was known as Hull House School, and although Jane Addams sat on the advisory board, the Recreation Training School was technically its own entity.

Boyd’s decision to remain a training center rather than move to a university may have been based on a desire to maintain the integrity and mission of social group work. Albert S. Alissi points out that the early social reformers “emphasized personal growth and social development, citizen involvement, democratic participation and association,”<sup>29</sup> and highlighted the need to maintain membership within the community that they served. In addition, as social group work became identified with social work, its focus on individual development and societal change lost its significance. According to Alissi, “casework, which relied so heavily on psychoanalytic theory, came to influence the professionalization process.”<sup>30</sup> Boyd may have feared that being absorbed into a formal

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>29</sup> Albert S. Alissi, “Social Group Work: Commitments and Perspectives,” in *Perspectives on Social Group Work Practice*, edited by Albert S. Alissi (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 17.

university setting at this point might have changed the emphasis of social group work from a practice of process to an object of study.

At Hull House, as in earlier versions of her training centers, Boyd developed a rigorous curriculum that drew on the benefits of both abstract theory and the significance of experiential learning through hands-on fieldwork. In this training, the role of the leader as immediate participant was emphasized. It is not extraordinary, then, that Boyd herself, oversaw her students' practical work. In Boydean theory, the group leader's direct participation as a member of the group, rather than as an authoritarian disembodied voice, is paramount. Boyd was modeling for her students the ways in which a worker, and a leader, interacts with individuals within a group and the group as a whole.

Boyd's approach to teaching reflects her approach to social group activities and her belief in the power of group processes. In "Development of Group Integration in Clubs: Association and Integration," she insists that an integrated group, working as a unit, could

give greater support progressively over a period of time, to an individual member in need of it, than its members acting as individuals could give him because they can bring their united power to his support and in addition, because the members of the integrated group tend to develop consensus readily, they can adjust their efforts to his needs progressively in the process of their activities.<sup>31</sup>

When the individuals in the group become a community that works collaboratively, the group's potential grows exponentially. According to Albert S. Alissi, "It would be hard to

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<sup>31</sup> Boyd, "Development of Group Integration in Clubs: Group Momentum," Boyd Archives, Box 2, Folder 21.

exaggerate the importance of group process.”<sup>32</sup> In “The Social Group Work Tradition,” Alissi lists the advice that group workers share with one another: “The group is greater than the sum of its parts”; “Start where the group is at”; “Don’t do for the group what it can do for itself”; “When in doubt, do nothing”; “Leadership comes from within the group”; and “No leader has more authority than the group allows.” Perhaps the most important phrase is: “Trust the process.”<sup>33</sup>

Although Boyd, once again, created a successful teaching and learning environment that promoted community, creativity, and collaboration, the Recreational Training School eventually ran into financial difficulties. In 1927, she accepted an invitation to become a faculty member in the Northwestern University Department of Sociology and the school was closed. In a letter to her friends, she wrote:

We shall miss the freedom and informality we enjoyed at Hull House as we gathered round the table in the cooking room or dusted the floor in the gym with our clean middies but let us dry our tears with the comforting picture of a monthly check we haven’t had to scramble to provide, with the fact that the whole office routine is fading out of my program and that there is no summer term for me. . . I hope you all realize that my latch string will still respond to your gentle pull for always and always, Neva L. Boyd.<sup>34</sup>

As a faculty member at Northwestern, Boyd saw her courses, her theories, and her methodologies being taught in a rigorous academic setting, and in a way that she had

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<sup>32</sup> Albert S. Alissi, “The Social Group Work Tradition: Toward Social Justice a Free Society,” in *Social Group Work Foundation Occasional Papers* (Connecticut: Social Group Work Foundation, 2001), 19. Digital Commons@UConn. [http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/sw\\_op/1/](http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/sw_op/1/).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>34</sup> Boyd, *The Theory, Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 15.

envisioned: as a partnering of theory and practice. She remained at Northwestern until her retirement in 1941; however, she continued to teach and lecture on the use of play as a means of improving social relationships until her death on November 21, 1963.

Throughout her life, Boyd championed the social benefits of play for children, as well as those institutionalized for any perceived deficiencies in meeting social norms, including mental and physical illnesses. Boyd witnessed and understood, Ruth Austin informs us, that play provides “an effective way of communicating with hard-to-reach individuals,”<sup>35</sup> individuals with a variety of blocks that hinder free expression, inhibit creativity, and prohibit them from participating openly in the play experience. These obstacles, often rooted in a variety of dysfunctional and destructive experiences, as well as physical challenges, are manifest in the individual’s behavior in a myriad of ways, such as aggression, bullying, showing off, or isolation. A larger problem arises for the individual when these behaviors are either condemned or condoned by authority figures, such as parents, coaches, or teachers. Both negative and affirmative responses to behavior inform the individual about her identity, the role she is expected to take on, as well as what is expected of the individual and what the individual should expect when interacting with others.

In Boydean theory, group leaders do not focus on the precise cause of blocks, problem behavior, or challenges. They focus on creating a play environment that contributes to “building up” individuals rather than pathologizing them. To accomplish this, group leaders, as Boyd emphasizes, must be “free to control and [to] experiment to a

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<sup>35</sup> Austin, introduction to *Handbook of Games*, 2.

considerable degree by controlling the environment.”<sup>36</sup> In this context, controlling the environment is better understood as organizing the playing space. In other words, the leaders or facilitators have the power to shape, but not to dictate, the interactions between game players so that the activities provide opportunities for the participants to test new behavior in order to develop new schema, new ways of perceiving and of behaving in the world. The Boydean concept of leadership, regarding the roles of both teachers and play leaders, is based on a constructive and collaborative model. For Boyd, leadership was more than a position of power; it was “primarily the calling into action of possibilities not yet born...concern for the *becoming* rather than the *is*.”<sup>37</sup> The role of the leader, then, is that of a facilitator who strives to create an open, fair playing space that holds the potential for providing participants with opportunities to transcend present limitations.

A leader accomplishes this task through bona fide participation. In “Observations of the Leader in Play Activities,” Boyd stated:

When the [play] observer is also the adult leader and a participant, he is in a position to contribute to the sensitivity and insight as it is related to the behavior of the players and at the same time is in a position of being able to effect developing changes in other players. This method is more effective than is teaching confined to verbalization, for in the long course of playing with a group, it enables the adult leader to stimulate the player at the instant most propitious for his needs, for development and for correction.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Boyd, “Method and Theory,” Boyd Archives, Box 1, Folder 4.

<sup>37</sup> Boyd, “Problem Solving and Leadership,” Boyd Archives, Box 7, Folder 116.

<sup>38</sup> Boyd, “Observation of the Leader in Play Activities,” Boyd Archives, Box 7, Folder 114.

As a participant, the leader challenges the other players to strive for their personal bests and encourages participation and creative approaches to solving problems. In addition, the leader ensures that the element of fun is maintained throughout the play experience.

In his discussion of play rhetoric, the play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith points out:

Most educators over the past two hundred years seem to have so needed to represent playful imitation as a form of children's socialization and moral, social, and cognitive growth that they have seen play as being primarily about development rather than enjoyment.<sup>39</sup>

Although the notion that play is functional is apparent in Boydean theory, she also understood that ultimately, the transformative power of play, whether for social, moral, or cognitive growth, is marked by laughter and fun.

The group leader takes on the responsibility of maintaining the excitement of playing a game while also ensuring that the sense of order in the game is upheld. Order in the game does not suggest that moments of chaos do not arise. Indeed, a great many discoveries are made in moments that are seemingly out of control. What appears to be chaos are often authentic spontaneous reactions to environmental stimuli. Spontaneous reactions are not filtered through any "inner censors" because they happen in the moment; therefore, they are generally authentic reactions. Boyd described spontaneity as "dynamic, organism-as-a-whole-environment behavior,"<sup>40</sup> which leads to moments when an individual experiences relief and growth:

In the course of spontaneous play the inner feelings, qualities, etc., are objectified behaviorally, and cause-effect

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10–11.

<sup>40</sup> Boyd, *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 82.

relations are so restricted in time and space and the actions of the individuals reacted to so immediately that his shortcomings, should there be such, and the inducements to overcome them and/or achieve, results in self realization.<sup>41</sup>

The royal road to spontaneity and self-realization is found in play-forms that are organized by a set of rules agreed upon by all players and based on stable patterns.

In games, the sense of order emerges from playing within the rules of the game and responding within the boundaries set by those rules. In *Free Play*, musician and improvisation theorist Stephen Nachmanovitch asserts: “A commitment to a set of rules (a game) frees our play to attain a profundity and vigor otherwise impossible.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to point out that there is power in limits, for “without them art is not possible.”<sup>43</sup> For Boyd, the limits set by the rules of the game, or what she called “play-behavior patterns,” support the development of a disciplined way of being and of interacting. Here, discipline does not connote rigidity. Discipline is a way of using the rules, or forms, to release creativity and individual expression. As Nachmanovitch points out, “Form used well can become the very vehicle of freedom, of discovering the creative surprises that liberate mind at play.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, Boyd believed that the discipline needed to play a game leads to spontaneity.

Boyd’s claim that spontaneity is rooted in rules and structures seems anathema to the idea of free expression or play. Yet, it is the rules that ultimately liberate the player.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 84.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 84.

The limits set by rules, conventions, and/or behavior patterns serve as a point of concentration and are, from Boyd's perspective, a way of directing play without dictating how to play. Inherent in directed play is an element of problem solving, which supports the individual, with the help of the group, in using both her body and mind. In addition to developing problem solving skills, which can simply mean learning how to navigate the rules of a game or learning to play cooperatively, the individual has the opportunity to learn how her behavior affects others through the immediate feedback from fellow players. Members of the group do not hold back when someone breaks the rules, calling out the transgressing individual on her unfair behavior. In his seminal text on play and culture, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga pointed out that the rule breaker "threatens the existence of the play-community" and, therefore, must be cast out of the game.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Boyd argued, players also generously "acclaim another's good play or victory."<sup>46</sup> This behavior is particularly evident in team sports when a player scores one for the team.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey argues that simply introducing play and games into the educational environment is not enough: "Everything depends upon the way in which they are employed."<sup>47</sup> In other words, using games in a non-directed way does not benefit the group or the individual. Without a point of concentration, the playing of the game is meaningless. He goes on to state:

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<sup>45</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Boyd, Boyd Archives, Box 6, Folder 87.

<sup>47</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 230.

To have the same ideas about things that others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same meanings to things and to acts which others attach.<sup>48</sup>

Once a shared focus is introduced into the game, then an environment where meaningful interactions can take place is created. For Boyd, the structured patterns in games represent the shared focus, which serves as the catalyst for authentic and meaningful interactions for the players. She pointed out:

[The game structure] not only largely determines the general pattern of interpersonal relations of the players as related to the game per se but also the interpersonal reciprocity as by-products of the play situation as expressed in overt action and gesture as well as in verbal communication such as ejaculations, repartee, and “small talk,” all of which has important influence on the development and discipline of the individual emotionally, somatically, and socially.<sup>49</sup>

The game structures evoke participation and provide purpose.

Purpose, here, is not considered from the adult ethical point of view that demands placing a moral value on the process of play, such as defining it as a child’s form of work, an “imitation of adult activities” that is done in preparation for the future.<sup>50</sup> Purpose, here, does not relate to the adult need to increase the player’s “willingness to pursue the other things that the adults require of them.”<sup>51</sup> In our context of play and games, the player’s purpose, or point of concentration, during the process of playing the game,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>49</sup> Boyd, “Structure in Games,” Boyd Archives, Box 5, Folder 72.

<sup>50</sup> Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 43.

means accepting the challenge to fully engage with the group in collectively solving the problem presented by the rules of the game. A positive by-product results, according to Boyd, “when purpose is constructive and functions freely.”<sup>52</sup> When this occurs, then learning occurs.

Ensuring that goals, structure, and purpose are connected with the play experience does not prevent it from also being a “happifying” event,<sup>53</sup> which is crucial in creating a liberating experience for the individual player, as well as the group. Nor does having a purpose or a goal necessitate rigidity and a lack of spontaneity and freedom of expression; it also does not lead to what Huizinga calls “play to order,” which can only be described as “a forcible imitation” of play.<sup>54</sup> Rather, within organized play-forms, such as dance, sports, songs, games, and drama, the players are liberated through the discipline of adhering to a particular pattern of behavior that serves as the spine, or securing scaffold, of the interaction process. This disciplined approach to play fosters spontaneity, which is crucial for a transformative experience to occur. Boyd asserted:

[Spontaneity] is a well spring of free self-initiated action [that] works wonders in human beings. When you get a stimulating situation, such as a play situation, along with free action, potentialities are actualized.<sup>55</sup>

If players are not allowed the freedom to solve their own situational problems while working within the structure because the coach or leader rigidly controls the interactions

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<sup>52</sup> Boyd, “Values in Games: Purpose,” Boyd Archives, Box 6, Folder 96.

<sup>53</sup> Boyd, *Play and Game Theory*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Boyd, *Play and Game Theory*, 115.

from the sidelines, creativity and intellect are hindered. Molding well-trained children, protected from the dangers of deviating from social norms, produces inhibited, rigid, intolerant adults who find it difficult to think outside the box or feel comfortable with ambiguity. Thus, there is a price to pay for censoring or suppressing the explosive spontaneous moments that occur in authentic play.

The value of play is found within the process of playing the game because that process requires finding solutions through experience and through action, as opposed to drawing conclusions from a distance through abstract thinking. Solving problems through play behavior in games, Boyd asserted, “gives direction to thinking, organizes and focuses it.”<sup>56</sup> The experience of moving through the process of solving the problem, through discovering the solutions through trial and error, particularly within group play, supports the psychological growth of the individual through group feedback. The individual becomes aware of better solutions based on the response from fellow players. In addition, the game, which can be made up of several scenarios created by the same structures and rules, allows for rapidly changing moments of interaction. Therefore, a player can quite feasibly experiment with several different methods of solving the same problem, or problems, that arise from the initial challenge. A player then begins to develop divergent thinking skills, which is critical to the creative process.

Because problems are worked out in a game, the fear of making a mistake is subsumed by the “happifying,” spontaneous environment. In addition, if the group leader has created an environment that is positive and excludes language that projects a negative identity onto any of the players, the participants will feel comfortable taking risks. Risk-

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<sup>56</sup> Boyd, “Problem Solving: Introduction,” Boyd Archives, Box 10, Folder 182.

taking, within the structure of the game, holds the potential for growth. Nachmanovitch discusses the power that can be found in mistakes:

...[M]istakes are of incalculable value to us. There is first the value of mistakes as the raw material of learning. If we don't make mistakes, we are unlikely to make anything at all. . . mistakes and accidents can be the irritating grains that become pearls; they present us with the unforeseen opportunities, they are fresh sources of inspiration in and of themselves.<sup>57</sup>

This opens up a world of possible choices, resulting in the individual finding a myriad of ways not only to solve the problem, but also to experience the method that feels right to her and to know that her choices are optimal based on the reaction of fellow players and a sense of harmony within the self.

By learning what is right through personal experience and through awareness of the effects of one's choices/actions on others, the individual's sense of self becomes more complex. According to Csikszentmihalyi, this complexity "is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*."<sup>58</sup> In other words, the individual player experiences her own personal potential—perhaps performing beyond personal expectations—through solving the problem while, at the same time, becoming an integrated member of the group by working with and becoming aware of others. When the player becomes focused on solving the problem within the game, letting go of old habits and working through blockages, unconsciously, these two diverse concepts of the self—the self as individual and the self as a member of the social group—merge and the player experiences "flow." When "flow" subsides, when the game is concluded because

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<sup>57</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 41.

the problem has been solved, according to Czikszentmihalyi, “one feels more ‘together’ than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general.”<sup>59</sup> This new sense of self, this product of the play experience, is carried over into everyday situations. The individual, then, is not only transported through play; she has experienced a transformation through participation within the group.

A contributing factor to the growth and liberation of the individual is the discipline involved in play. In Boydean play theory, the rules, structures, and frames of cultural reference that create play-forms serve as the source of inherent, covert discipline, creating an environment for the players that appears to be objective. The play leader works at maintaining the fun factor and stable structure by participating in the games and adhering to the game rules—in other words, by modeling behavior. This discipline set by the rules of the game contributes to both the stabilization of the nervous system and to the social adjustment of the person.<sup>60</sup> This is not to say that Boyd believed that games should serve as therapy or as an explicit treatment for problem behavior.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, she argued against pointing out a player’s deviant behavior because “anything which calls the attention of the child to the value of play or to himself introspectively identifying him with good or bad is defeating to the value of play.”<sup>62</sup> Pointing out flaws, or labeling behavior as good or bad, inhibits both the player and play’s transformational and

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>60</sup> Boyd, “Discipline,” Boyd Archives, Box 6, File 96.

<sup>61</sup> Boyd, Boyd Archives, Box 6 File 87.

<sup>62</sup> Boyd, Boyd Archives, Box 6, Folder 96.

“usefully adaptive” powers.<sup>63</sup> Behavioral issues are usually quite effectively addressed by the group. The player who ignores and bends the rules, as Huizinga points out, becomes the spoilsport who shatters the play-world<sup>64</sup> and is ostracized by the group for repeated offenses.

In *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois asserts that play produces nothing tangible: “neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind.”<sup>65</sup> He goes on to point out that when the game is over, the situation prevailing before the game was initiated is restored. In other words, no transformation occurs. Huizinga asserts that play is an activity that is an interlude, an adornment. Its purpose is “external to immediate material interests or the individual satisfaction of biological needs.”<sup>66</sup> These views of play speak to the concept of carnival, a period of time and space set aside by a community and marked by a temporary dissolution of the social order. When the carnival is over, the status quo is restored. Yet, as Richard Schechner asks, “how can this be?”<sup>67</sup> On a metaphysical level, when the interlude of play has come to a close, according to Huizinga, a treasured memory is created, which becomes tradition.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, in

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<sup>63</sup> For an in-depth discussion of “play as progress,” see Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Ambiguity of Play*.

<sup>64</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, translated by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>66</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

<sup>67</sup> See Schechner’s discussion of the non-productivity of play in *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), 11–12.

<sup>68</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 10.

considering the connection between play and ritual, Huizinga argues that at the end of a sacred performance, when the time and space allotted for playing out the sacred game have expired, the effect of the playing “continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community.”<sup>69</sup> The product from the playing of—or acting out of—rituals is the prosperity of the group. Boyd observed the by-products of play, arguing that playing games transforms the individual:

The psychological attitude of play constitutes a unique condition for compelling meaningful action. And this action results in physiological and social adjustment.<sup>70</sup>

Play is a catalyst for personal transformation, for experiencing “flow,” and for finding the path to peak experience and self-actualization. This is the wealth that the individual garners from the play experience.

Neva Boyd’s play theory and teaching techniques are a reflection of her time and place in history. During the Progressive Era, activists and reformers were seeking ways in which they could address the social ills they believed were plaguing America, such as health hazards, working conditions, and equal rights for women, as well as addressing issues of class and ethnicity in order to create a cohesive American society.<sup>71</sup> For Boyd,

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>70</sup> Boyd Archives.

<sup>71</sup> For more information regarding progressivism and the Progressive Era, see *Progressivism And The New Democracy*, edited by Sidney M. Milkis, Jerome M. Mileur (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) and “Learn About the Progressive Era,” on the Digital History website, <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/progressivism/index.cfm>, accessed May 16, 2011.

play-forms, such as games, dancing, sports, and dramatics, served as a catalyst for individual transformation through group process. She believed that social group activities comprised of stable patterns and rules both introduced and produced “normal” play behavior, which could then be translated into socially adjusted behavior by the individual, albeit unconsciously. As an educator, she created training programs and curriculum that bridged theory and practice and that highlighted the transformative power of play. Over the course of her life, she taught many students; one of the most renowned is Viola Spolin. Boyd’s work is the foundation on which Spolin built her improvisational approach to teaching theatre and performance, an approach that does far more than introduce theatre arts to professionals and “lay” people. Like Boyd, Spolin’s theory and techniques open the path to individual transformation through group process.

Born in Chicago in 1907, Spolin grew up the fifth of six children in a “tradition of family theatre amusements, operas, and charades.”<sup>72</sup> Her Russian-Jewish father, Constantin Belachakovsky, was rechristened Make Mills at Ellis Island when an immigration officer noticed that he was carrying a copy of John Stuart Mills, *On Liberty*, and directed Belachakovsky to “Make It Mills.”<sup>73</sup> Her youngest sister, Beatrice Lees, was an innovator in improvised dance movement. An older sister, Irene, was in the field of social work. At eighteen, although she had not finished high school, Spolin enrolled in Boyd’s Recreational Training School at Hull House, an experience that inspired her

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<sup>72</sup> D.E. Moffit in *Notable Women in American Theatre*, edited by Alice M Robinson, Vera Mowry Roberts, and Milly S Barranger (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 816.

<sup>73</sup> Janet Coleman, *The Compass: The Improvisational Theatre That Revolutionized American Comedy* (Chicago: New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990), 29.

throughout her life. As a Boyd student, Spolin remembers “long physical workouts in large spaces”:

We’d run for hours...We learned all kinds of dances...I knew practically every folk dance in the whole world. We had to know everything about every game, including table games. We learned to set up a game room. We used to go to camp for two weeks. We ran track, we shot arrows, we threw discus, we swam, we boxed. Nothing was *theory*. We *did* everything.<sup>74</sup>

This type of training was perfect for a young woman who had difficulties in a traditional school environment. Under Boyd’s tutelage, Spolin flourished. By the time she was nineteen, she was married to Paul Silverberg, a half-Irish, half-Jewish pharmacist who changed his name to Sills when World War II broke out. She had two children with Sills: William became a math professor, and Paul, the founder of The Compass and Second City. By the time she became a Chicago Works Progress Administration (WPA) Recreational Project Director in 1939, she had remarried and was a working mother. According to Coleman, Neva Boyd had directed Spolin to this job, which paid ninety dollars a month:

I tell you it was great. People were B-R-O-K-E, honey. I was so excited when I got the job, I ran around the block.<sup>75</sup>

Her new job required her to teach drama in poor, inner-city neighborhoods. Her second husband, Ed Spolin, was also employed by the WPA as a set designer.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Viola Spolin, as quoted in Coleman, *The Compass*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Spolin, as quoted in Coleman, *The Compass*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> See Coleman’s “The High Priestess” in *The Compass* for more biographical information on Spolin.

While serving as a teacher and supervisor of creative dramatics with the WPA Recreational Project at Hull House, Spolin began developing her own techniques based on the need to communicate across the cultural and ethnic barriers that she was encountering within the WPA project.<sup>77</sup> During her tenure with the unit, she “struggled to equip the participating men and women with adequate knowledge and technique to sustain them as teacher-directors in their neighborhood work.”<sup>78</sup> The games became a means of communicating with her trainees and the adult immigrants and their children who were participating in the recreation project. Because of the difficulties Spolin was encountering in this situation, she could not simply become the authority figure responsible for pouring information into the heads of her trainees. In 1970, Paulo Freire described this approach to teaching as the “banking” concept of education. The “banking” concept deprives the learner of experiencing moments of creativity and transformation.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, this approach to teaching and learning had not benefited Spolin when she was a student. As Boyd’s student, Spolin had learned that games provide a means of touching those individuals who are hard to reach. So, when she encountered teaching and learning problems, she drew on her training in games:

The games emerged out of necessity. I didn’t sit at home and dream them up. When I had a problem, I made up a game. When another problem came up, I just made up a new game.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Moffit, 816.

<sup>78</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, vii.

<sup>79</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New rev. 20th-Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 72.

<sup>80</sup> Spolin in Barry Hyams, *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1974.

Spolin understood the games as creating an environment where “direct knowing” was privileged.

For Spolin, “direct knowing” is acquired through an individual’s experiences and through a continuous process of directly experiencing the environment through the senses. In other words, an individual has a particular understanding of something because she has experienced it on both an intellectual and physical level. Spolin asserts that “direct knowing” is the pathway to the intuitive. This pathway is accessible to all; however, it becomes hidden when authority figures label the individual as a good or bad person or a smart or slow learner. The individual learns not to trust her experiences because an authority figure has discounted them. Many teacher-directors feel compelled to play the role of expert, donning a mask that sends a signal to their students that, as authority figures, they are untouchable, unapproachable, and superior, while asking their students to be open, to trust, and to take risks. Performing the culturally constructed roles of teacher-director-subject to student-actor-object, rather than directly engaging and interacting, discourages self-reflection and suppresses self-awareness for both teachers and students, and prohibits a transformative experience from occurring.

Spolin’s pedagogical approach asks the teacher-director to engage with the intuitive, also referred to as the “X-Area,” because it supports the student in her process of discovering and experiencing an authentic sense of “self.” She encourages teacher-directors to consider the intuitive as an area beyond the known,

that area of knowledge which is beyond the restrictions of culture, race, education, psychology, and age; deeper than the “survival dress” of mannerisms, prejudices,

intellectualisms, and borrowings most of us wear to live out our daily lives.<sup>81</sup>

By approaching the teaching and learning environment as a “free” space where authentic interactions can occur, both the teacher and student can move beyond role playing and contrived behavior. The master-disciple binary becomes irrelevant. Students and teachers alike can move beyond the need for approval and/or disapproval, with the focus being correctly placed on the process. The experience for all, then, can be transformative because habits and automatic responses are revealed and new ways of being and relating can be explored, adopted and practiced. The transformation occurs organically through the playing of the games.

In addition to acknowledging the influence of Boyd’s game and play theory, Spolin also cited Stanislavsky as a theatre resource to which she had turned sporadically throughout her life.<sup>82</sup> It is not surprising that Spolin drew on Stanislavsky’s work since, as Frost and Yarrow point out, he is assumed to be “the originator of the modern use of improvisation, at least as a rehearsal and training device.”<sup>83</sup> In *The Compass*, Janet Coleman also reports a connection between Spolin and Stanislavsky:

Both Spolin and Stanislavski [sic] use improvisation as a vacuum cleaner for the left brain of the actor. Both teach process of what is called “the secondary concentration” to disconcert and free the actor from the intellect, the monkey, the predictable, the script, the word.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, xlvii.

<sup>83</sup> Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (New York: Palgrave, 1990), 15.

<sup>84</sup> Coleman, *The Compass*, 25.

In her chapter, “The High Priestess,” Coleman informs us that Spolin attended a couple of Stanislavsky System classes taught by a Chicago actor. For Spolin, these classes highlighted differences in hers and Stanislavsky’s approaches. Spolin saw Stanislavsky as focusing on the past while she was focused on the present. Coleman further points out that Stanislavsky’s objective was building a character while Spolin’s “aim was the emergence of character as it is spontaneously manifested in the format of a game.”<sup>85</sup> In a 1987 interview, Spolin distanced herself from Stanislavsky’s influence, stating that she had simply read his book:

I didn’t know his system until I was well out into the world. And I was not in theatre per se. I was a group worker...recreation. So, I learned folk dancing and hundreds of games.<sup>86</sup>

The degree to which Spolin was familiar with Stanislavsky’s System is irrelevant. Although both did use improvisation, they used it quite differently. As Frost and Yarrow point out, the Russian approach “strives to keep its intentions ‘upstage of the footlights,’ inside the scene.”<sup>87</sup> Spolin’s approach disregarded the boundary between audience and actor. Ultimately, Boyd had a stronger influence on Spolin’s work than did Stanislavsky. Boyd’s play theory, which privileged learning through direct experience, and her focus on the importance of the discipline involved in playing games with stable patterns and structures, are the foundation of Spolin’s work as a theatre educator and director.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 31–32.

<sup>86</sup> Viola Spolin, interview source unknown: Viola Spolin discusses her work in a 1987 interview, accessed August 3, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mil3d9oD\\_Uk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mil3d9oD_Uk).

<sup>87</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 47.

In the 1950s, Spolin saw her theories put into practice in the professional theatre when her son, Paul Sills, and David Shepherd established The Compass, one of the first store-front theatres in Chicago. Coleman asserts that creating an improvisational theatre was David Shepherd's idea. Shepherd had wanted to establish an American popular theatre that addressed the issues of the community in a manner that would cross all levels of society. "It was his intention," Coleman states, "to start 'the theatre in my head' in a 'culturally deprived' area of America."<sup>88</sup> The theatre in his head was a "quasi-Brechtian prototype," using a unique approach to creativity and actor training that was unusual in the 1950s.<sup>89</sup> The deprived area of America was the South Side of Chicago. The group of actors with whom Shepherd and Sills established The Compass was not, according to Shepherd, "interested in the fine psychological delineation of character that is typical of modern realistic theatre—the Stanislavsky Method."<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, unlike the Method made popular by Lee Strasberg and the Group Theatre in the 1930s, Shepherd was more interested in a company of actors who were more improvisational. He wanted a company that was a cross between Commedia and Brecht. He envisioned a theatrical environment where the audience members could smoke and drink while enjoying improvised performances. The Compass performances would, like Commedia, "be based upon scenarios which could be hung up backstage like the 'platt' in an Elizabethan theatre."<sup>91</sup> Ultimately, The Compass would dissolve and re-emerge as the mecca of improvisation

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<sup>88</sup> Coleman, *The Compass*, 47.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 56. Stanislavsky's theory of acting is actually called the "Stanislavsky System." "The Method" is Lee Strasberg's acting theory.

<sup>91</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 52.

cabaret theatre—The Second City. Spolin played a key role in the training of actors and performers involved in both The Compass and The Second City.

From 1946 through 1955, Spolin directed the Young Actors Company in Hollywood. In 1955, she returned to Chicago to conduct workshops for Paul Sills' theatre company, the Playwrights Theatre Club. Although Sills had already introduced theatre games into his rehearsal process for such plays as *The Typewriter*, *Leonce and Lena*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, in order to create the cohesiveness needed to establish the first professional, improvisational theatre, he brought Spolin in from the West. Spolin led an intense month-long workshop, teaching her improvisational techniques to dozens of Chicago actors. Ultimately, out of about seventy or eighty participants, twenty were chosen. This pool of newly trained improvisational actors would contribute to a theatrical environment that would explode with creative energy, an explosion that both Spolin and Boyd had witnessed time and again in their game-based group work.<sup>92</sup> From 1960 through 1965, she worked with Sills as a workshop director for Second City while continuing to develop her own improvisation and game theory. In 1963, she published *Improvisation for the Theater*, the seminal text for theatre arts teachers. In 1965, she and Sills co-founded the Game Theatre, an experimental theatre that included audience participation in the games. Spolin first introduced the concept of soliciting audience suggestions, the hallmark of contemporary American improvisational theatre, in 1939 at a Hull House performance. Eventually, Spolin moved to California and Josephine Raciti

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<sup>92</sup> For a more in-depth history of the origins of The Compass, see Jeffrey Sweet's *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of The Second City & The Compass Players* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2003).

Forsberg ran the improvisation workshops. Spolin passed away in her California home in 1994.

Viola Spolin built on Boyd's theories of the role of the group leader, the effects of competition, the social group process, and the transformative power of play, incorporating these Boydean concepts into a system that created a direct learning experience for individuals in theatre arts, particularly acting and performance. Her codification of Boyd's work and her translation of Boyd's use of structured games in directed play into theatre games opened the door to those who perhaps had a desire to perform but were hindered by fears of "not being good enough," of "never learning how," or of "not having the talent" to become a performer. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin claims that talent is only a small part of the equation in performance:

Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become "stage worthy."<sup>93</sup>

These words reflect Boyd's position that everyone is capable of actively participating in play, particularly structured games, because the forms are universal. Like learning how to play a game, becoming stage worthy is simply a process that begins with the experience of experiencing.<sup>94</sup> If the environment promotes direct experience, and if the individual is open to the experience, a space that supports teaching and learning is created. The environment, Spolin believed, "will teach everything it has to teach."<sup>95</sup> For Spolin, an individual's involvement with the environment occurs on three levels: the intellectual, the

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<sup>93</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 3.

<sup>94</sup> See Spolin, "Creative Experience," in *Improvisation for the Theater*, 3–4.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

physical, and the intuitive, with the intuitive, the “most vital to the learning situation,” often being neglected.<sup>96</sup> In other words, in order for a deep learning or transformational experience to occur, an individual must connect with her environment on more than an abstract level; she must be engaged holistically.

The Spolin games are designed to support an individual’s holistic engagement through the development of “an organic awareness of self, space, and environment.”<sup>97</sup> The awareness of self, space, and environment is achieved by playing the games as a social group. The social group approach, in conjunction with sensory awareness exercises, establishes the playing space as one where participants, as both individuals and group members, focus on a particular element within the immediate environment. For example, in “Tug-of-War,” the “space” rope becomes an object upon which the entire group focuses. Using the rope as a focal point helps to alleviate success/failure anxiety for each player because the players work as a team to create the rope, to maintain the illusion that everyone is playing with the same rope, and to actually play tug-of-war. This particular game relates directly to an example that Dewey uses in *Democracy and Education*. He describes working together as follows:

To pull at a rope at which others happen to be pulling is not a shared or conjoint activity, unless the pulling is done with knowledge that others are pulling and for the sake of either helping or hindering what they are doing.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>97</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 51.

<sup>98</sup> Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 36.

In Spolin's version, all players, using an invisible rope, must be aware of one another's efforts and must fully engage in the task so that their team has a chance of winning. She pointed out that

if players do not leave this game with all the physical effects of having actually played tug-of-war (i.e., warm, out of breath, pink cheeks, etc.) you may be sure that they were pretending!<sup>99</sup>

In other words, the evidence of full engagement is found in the response of the body.

“Tug-of-war” also helps players develop a heightened awareness of others and of other bodies in space. This awareness leads to spontaneous, authentic physical responses to the movements and sounds of the other players. In addition, each player must have a heightened awareness of her own body in space, how she is moving in relation to the other players, and in relation to the “space” rope, as well as the effect her body has on the space and the other players. Furthermore, through the playing of this seemingly simple game, players learn that working interdependently removes, as Spolin asserts, “all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open[s] the way for harmony.”<sup>100</sup> A sense of harmony is experienced because the player has fully engaged in the game, spontaneously responding to the demands of the task, and she is “at one” with the group. This “at oneness,” or “attunement,” denotes social awareness, which Daniel Goleman asserts,

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<sup>99</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 63.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another's inner stage, to understanding her feelings and thoughts, to "getting complicated social situations."<sup>101</sup>

Social awareness can lead to social facility, which supports "effective interactions."<sup>102</sup>

The Spolin games promote organism harmony by requiring players to involve all their senses at all times. Although ultimately beneficial, many players are initially resistant to focusing on sensory awareness or find it difficult to do this. For example, in an exercise designed to help players develop a heightened sense of their own bodies, "Feel Self With Self," students new to the Spolin approach complain that they cannot do the exercise because of the side-coaching. They report that the sound of the side-coach's voice becomes dominant, leaving them unable to experience "themselves" and their bodies. Students who can only focus on the sound of the voice rather than on the experience of the self are probably more auditory oriented. In *Differentiation Through Learning Styles and Memory*, Marilee Sprenger points out that students who are auditory learners often have difficulty concentrating because they are hyper-sensitive to sound. Sprenger thinks of auditory sensitive individuals as blind, asserting "they often don't see what others do."<sup>103</sup> In order to fully engage in the games, these individuals must hone their other senses. In contrast, other players rely quite heavily on their sense of sight, which creates its own problems. In *The Viewpoints Book*, a guide to using improvised movement as a performance training and rehearsal tool, Anne Bogart states:

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<sup>101</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 84.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>103</sup> Marilee Sprenger, *Differentiation Through Learning Styles and Memory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: 2008), 104.

The way we use our eyes in daily life entails looking for what might satisfy our particular desires. . . . Like a hunter after prey, our vision is narrowed down to a preconceived series of possibilities.<sup>104</sup>

In other words, privileging sight actually reduces the player's vision, resulting in a way of playing that is limited and stereotypical. Regardless of which sense a player initially favors, the Spolin sensory awareness exercises help her become cognizant of what she privileges and what she neglects. By learning to engage all the senses and then by using all the senses, players gain a greater awareness of their bodies and their bodies in space; they come to perceive themselves as unified organisms. The mind and body become connected and respond to stimuli as one unit.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to favoring any one of the five senses, some individuals privilege language. Relying on words in playing a game can be a way of resisting full engagement; the "storytellers" create a barrier between themselves and other players using their virtuosic verbal skills. To address this form of resistance, Spolin developed "gibberish" games. These games require players to use "shaped sounds," rather than language, to communicate with other players, thus forcing individuals to develop organic responses to stimuli. The players must then communicate through showing and not through telling. In other words, they must "do." The experience of "doing," of using physical activity to communicate with others, supports, energizes, and enhances the process of learning. As Ruth Middleman points out in *Non-Verbal Method in Working with Groups*:

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<sup>104</sup> Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2005), 31.

<sup>105</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 146.

Through the doing kinds of activities the individual first learns and experiences a sense of himself with all his innate potentialities as a creative and expressive person.<sup>106</sup>

In other words, through “doing,” the individual begins to discover other parts of her identity, or ways of being. She becomes a participant in the game and in the interactions with others by acting and reaching out with her whole being rather than reacting and withdrawing from the experience by relying on an old habit that blocks engagement. The process of the “doing” opens the door to the intuitive and encourages creativity. Spolin asserts that this approach, the engagement of the whole organism, frees “the student-actor for the learning process and [inspires] communication in the theater with dedication and passion.”<sup>107</sup> When this occurs, the individual cannot help but respond to the “explosion” that frees her from behaving in a culturally and socially prescribed way.

In Spolin’s approach, the teacher-director ensures that players engage fully and “keep their eyes on the ball,” which means remaining focused on the acting problem that has been presented. This task is accomplished through side-coaching, which is a way of continually reframing and refocusing the players’ process of solving the problem. Spolin believes that side-coaching “gives players self-identity within the activity and allows functioning at a fresh moment of experience, and further, it makes the teacher-director a fellow player.”<sup>108</sup> Spolin’s concept of side-coaching is directly related to Boyd’s theory of the group leader’s role as a non-authoritarian participant/observer. Boydean theory

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<sup>106</sup> Ruth Middleman, *Non-Verbal Method in Working with Groups* (New York: Association Press, 1970), 78.

<sup>107</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 41.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–9.

holds that the group leader facilitates a transformative experience for the players by calling into action possibilities and discoveries. According to Boyd, the leader must be more concerned with “the *becoming* rather than the *is*.”<sup>109</sup>

Spolin’s leader, the side-coach, must be hyper-aware in order to choose the opportune moments in which she physically jumps into the game. This physicality cannot, however, be a demonstration of how to solve the acting problem. The “How,” Spolin cautions, must be organic:

It must happen at the actual moment of stage life (Right now!) and not through any pre-planning. Pre-planning how to do something throws the players into “performance” and/or playwriting, making the development of improvisers impossible and presenting the player in the formal theater from spontaneous stage behavior.<sup>110</sup>

The side-coach enters the game where it is at the moment and plays through the process with the group. In addition, she must carefully choose her words, using language that is non-judgmental, non-labeling, and non-analytical. This is critical because, as Spolin points out, judgmental and authoritarian language can prevent “direct experiencing,” and can promote the “approval/disapproval” syndrome, resulting in a player following a command that must be obeyed rather than experiencing the moment. Spolin suggests using phrases such as “share your body,” “share your voice,” “write with a pen, not your fingers,” “take a ride on your own body.”<sup>111</sup> Through physical participation and inclusive verbal communication, the side-coach is also modeling ways of interacting and

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<sup>109</sup> Boyd, “Problem Solving and Leadership,” Boyd Archives, Box 7, Folder 116.

<sup>110</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 35.

<sup>111</sup> For a more extensive list of phrases, see the “Glossary of Side-Coaching Phrases,” in *Improvisation for the Theater*, 374.

communicating on a social level, covertly asking each player to be aware of the way the group is interacting and how the “self within the group”<sup>112</sup> interacts. The model of behavior becomes one of “I-Thou,” one “self” relating to another “self,” rather than one of “I-It,” one “self” relating to another as an object or as the means of reaching a goal.

The teacher-director establishes an environment where “I-It” relationships are privileged by pitting players against one another either by providing extrinsic rewards or making comparisons. In this environment, the negative aspects of competition pollute the playing space, replacing free and spontaneous responses and experiences with behavior that demonstrates a need to attain a higher status by using other players. According to Spolin,

When competition replaces participation, compulsive action is the result. Sharp competition connotes to even the youngest the idea that he or she has to be better than someone else.<sup>113</sup>

As a result, a player is reacting to the tension in the environment rather than responding, as Spolin asserts, “with his or her ‘total organism within a total environment.’”<sup>114</sup> However, when the side-coach creates an environment where an “I-Thou” relationship is emphasized, competition takes on a different tone. The negative aspects of competition are de-emphasized, such as “tearing other people down or develop[ing] defensive

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<sup>112</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 29.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Spolin does not include a footnote; however, “total organism with a total environment” should be attributed to Boyd.

attitudes,”<sup>115</sup> and the players learn that they need one another in order to enjoy the experience. Spolin asserts,

when a player realizes that he or she cannot play tag without someone to tag him or her, or when a baseball team can look at another team not as the opposition, but as fellow players, then both teams become part of the whole (in harmony), giving and taking towards mutual fulfillment—playing!<sup>116</sup>

When players perceive that they are playing together and that the atmosphere is one of mutual support, then they are in harmony with their environment, which includes the playing space, the other players, and the “self.” Most importantly, each player perceives the other as “my You,” rather than what Martin Buber refers to as “a loose bundle of named qualities.”<sup>117</sup>

In *I and Thou*, Buber asserts that the basic word pairs, “I-Thou” and “I-It,” “establish a mode of existence.”<sup>118</sup> When one’s way of being in the world is based on the “I-Thou” word pair, she enters into a dialogic relationship with the other whereby there is a confirmation of the other’s existence and of the other’s intrinsic, rather than instrumental, value. Both the “I” and the “Thou” are then free to encounter one another with their whole beings through authentic interactions. The significance of the encounter, as Maurice Friedman points out, is that which occurs between the individuals rather than

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<sup>115</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 11.

<sup>116</sup> Spolin, *Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 67.

<sup>117</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 59.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

“what goes on within the minds of the partners in a relationship.”<sup>119</sup> In discussing what occurs when individuals come together to play Spolin’s games, Paul Sills quotes Buber: “The heavenly bread of self-being is passed between man and man.”<sup>120</sup> Sills goes on to state:

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. As I say, you can’t make this discovery alone. There is always the other.<sup>121</sup>

In highlighting the mutuality of the interaction or discovery, both Friedman and Sills are speaking to interactions that are occurring in the space “between” two independent subjects, resulting in an authentic, open engagement. This space “between” is sometimes referred to as intersubjectivity, or the intersubjective experience, and is a by-product of improvising. In her discussion of intersubjective experiences in improvisation, Pamela Meyer asserts that intersubjective experiences create a shift in individual’s perceptions, which she describes as “a transformation from “self-consciousness” to “self- and other-awareness,”<sup>122</sup> as well as an appreciation for the group.

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<sup>119</sup> Maurice Friedman, “Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogue Of Voices and The Word That Is Spoken,” *Religion & Literature* 33 (Autumn, 2001): 25.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Sills quoted in Jeffrey Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away* (New York: Hal Leonard Corporation, rpt. 2000), 19.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>122</sup> Pamela Meyer, “Learning Space and Space for Learning: Adults’ Intersubjective Experiences of Improvisation” (paper presented at Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, May 20, 2006), 3.

Because Spolin was trained as a social group worker, she understood the powerful potential for transformation that group processes hold. Her approach supports the development of a dynamic relationship between the individual and the group. According to Spolin,

A healthy group relationship . . . demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution.<sup>123</sup>

In other words, the individual is required to engage and interact, but is supported in maintaining her own identity. Echoing Boyd, Spolin asserts: “a group should never be used to induce conformity, but as in a game, should be a spur to action.”<sup>124</sup> The “spur to action” is found in the focus of each game, which takes the onus to be clever off of the individual and places it on the group and the organic process in which all the players engage. Spolin advises that in “remembering that process comes before end-result, we free the student-actors to trust the scheme and help them solve the problems of the activity.”<sup>125</sup>

Trust is developed and reinforced by the players through the process of group agreement and through a variety of experiences where players demonstrate that they will indeed not leave a fellow player stranded, or “pimp” one another. The experiences are created through a process of solving problems as a group. The “Spolin Games” require

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<sup>123</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 10.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

individuals to come together as a group to agree on the three key elements of the scene, the who/what/where, and to accept the rules and focus of the game. According to Spolin,

The combination of individuals mutually focusing and mutually involved creates a true relation, a sharing of a fresh experience. Here old frames of reference topple over as the new structure (growth) pushes its way upwards, allowing freedom of individual response and contribution. Individual energy is released, trust is generated, inspiration and creativity appear as all the players play the game and solve the problem together. “Sparks” fly between people when this happens.<sup>126</sup>

The “sparks” that fly are the manifestation of the players re-forming into themselves through spontaneous play.

Spolin’s experience as a social group worker played an invaluable role in the way she developed her approach to teaching theatre arts. Although not specifically trained as a theatre practitioner, she was a master teacher and her contribution to theatre and to theatre arts pedagogy is unmatched in theatre history. Not only did her techniques influence experimental, political, and avant-garde theatre; her games have also been used in nursery schools and graduate schools, in drama schools, in psychodrama settings, and in business. Under Boyd’s mentorship, Spolin learned to harness the power of play and to give it shape as a pedagogical tool that not only guides theatre arts teacher-directors, but that also serves as an instrument of transformation.

Both Boyd and Spolin witnessed the transformative power of play, games, and the group process manifested in behavior. Both women knew that games changed individuals socially, psychologically, and physiologically. What they could not see at the time was just how deep the games affected the physiology of the organism, including the brain. It

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 24.

was not until the last decade of the twentieth century, with the introduction of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology, that scientists could begin to map the human social brain. The idea that there is a “social brain,” Goleman points out, is fictitious: “The zones of the brain interconnect with dizzying complexity.”<sup>127</sup> However, using the concept of a “social brain” is helpful in understanding why group work is a powerful tool for transformation.

Particularly pertinent in gaining a deeper understanding of the power of Spolin’s improvisation games is the discovery of a class of premotor neurons, known as mirror neurons, that discharge not only in the individual carrying out an activity, but in individuals who observe the activity. Gallese, Eagle, and Migone point out that researchers have proposed that “this mechanism could be at the basis of a direct form of action understanding,”<sup>128</sup> which speaks to the way we communicate. These researchers assert that when an individual observes another’s expression, an embodied simulation occurs. The doer and viewer, they argue, share a body state, resulting in “the activation of a neural mechanism shared by the observer and the observed that enables experiential understanding.”<sup>129</sup>

In addition, Gallese, et al, consider embodiment theory regarding the effect that action-related language has on neural structures:

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<sup>127</sup> Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 323.

<sup>128</sup> Vittorio Gallese, Morris N. Eagle and Paolo Migone, “Intentional Attunement: Mirror Neurons and the Neural Underpinnings of Interpersonal Relations,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 55 (2007): 133.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

When individuals listen to action-related sentences, their mirror neuron system will be modulated. The effect of this modulation should influence the excitability of the primary motor cortex, and hence the production of the movements it controls.<sup>130</sup>

In other words, neurons are activated both by “visually-presented actions” and “acoustically presented action-related sentences.”<sup>131</sup> Kaplan and Iacoboni perceive mirror neurons as providing a basis for empathy,

a mechanism by which we can understand the actions of others by mapping the actions of other people onto our own motor system, thus allowing a shared representation of actions. Activating our own motor representation could allow us also to activate motivations and intentions that are associated with those actions. This “resonance” with another individual can also be viewed as a form of empathy. Not only do we understand what are the goals of another person, but we experience their intention and therefore their emotion when we watch them behave.<sup>132</sup>

The “resonance” to which Kaplan and Iacoboni refer can be related to Buber’s concept of human dialogue. Therefore, what occurs between “I” and “Thou” is not simply a matter of a metaphysical relation; a biological relation is created. Being in synch then occurs on both a metaphysical and physical level. The synching occurs through our “neural WiFi.”<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>132</sup> Jonas T. Kaplan and Marco Iacoboni, “Getting a Grip on Other Minds: Mirror Neurons, Intention Understanding, and Cognitive Empathy,” *Social Neuroscience* 1 (2006): 175.

<sup>133</sup> Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 41.

Spolin created a pedagogical approach to teaching theatre arts and stagecraft that encourages the development of a “neural WiFi” system shared by the group. Through the playing of games and the process of collective problem solving, individuals “login” to their local network comprised of all the players, which supports direct person-to-person, person-to-group, and group-to-person communications. Many of the games, such as those in the “Mirror Series,” are obvious examples of providing students with the opportunity to synch up. Mirror games require the players to actually face one another and reflect one another’s movements. By continuously practicing this game, players become attuned with one another to such a degree that it becomes impossible to discern which player is initiating and which player is reflecting. Because of advances in neuroscience technology and brain mapping, we can now understand this phenomenon not only as a demonstration of a particular talent or skill, but also as a physiological phenomenon.

Other games, such as “Play Ball,” are less obvious. In this game, the group divides into two teams. One team will be the players and the other will become the audience-players, those who sit in the house and observe. Just as they used “space substance” to create the rope in the “tug-of-war” game, the team that is playing uses a ball made of “space substance.” Working as a group, they must all maintain the size, weight, and shape of the invisible ball making it visible. As they play, observing one another’s physical movements, they begin to synch up, all seeing and feeling the same ball. The audience-players’ mirror neurons will fire in the same way as those of the onstage physical players. According to Gallese,

Although we do not overtly reproduce the observed action,  
our motor system becomes nevertheless active as if we

were executing that very same action that we are observing.<sup>134</sup>

Therefore, the audience players are as active as the team playing because their neurons are also firing. The whole environment, then, is alive and filled with active energy.

In addition to the playing of the games themselves, the language used by the side-coach plays a significant role in the creation of the neural WiFi. In their mirror neuron research, Tettamanti, et al., report:

In humans, action-related knowledge can be retrieved not only by action observation or by hearing action sounds, but also by understanding sentences describing actions. This raises the possibility that the comprehension of actions relies on the observation—execution matching system even when the actions are described using language.<sup>135</sup>

Thus, words do far more than provide the hearer or reader with information. Words also have a “resonance” and contribute to the intersubjective experience, the space “between” the players, which is where creativity is manifested.

In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Paul Sills’ lists many of the Spolin “sayings” that particularly resonate with him. One of these “sayings” explicitly states her belief that the playing of games provides a path toward discovering and knowing the self:

Theater games do not inspire “proper” moral behavior (good/bad), but rather seek to free each person to feel his or her own true nature, out of which a felt, experienced, actual love of neighbor will appear.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Vittorio Gallese, “The Roots of Empathy: The Shared Manifold Hypothesis and the Neural Basis of Intersubjectivity,” *Psychopathology* 36 (2003): 174.

<sup>135</sup> Marco Tettamanti, et al, “Listening to Action-related Sentences Activates Fronto-parietal Motor Circuits,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 17 (nd): 274.

<sup>136</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, xv.

The games do not require the player to respond to others in a “proper” culturally and socially constructed mode of behavior. The games provide a path to direct knowing through experience and experiencing. Each individual’s whole organism creates a spark in the group and the group creates a spark in each individual. Each individual creates harmony within herself and contributes to the harmony of the group. Each individual through participation in the group process develops a genuine approach to living life. Each individual learns the power of the word pair “I-Thou.”

The origins of what we can label the art of American improvisation lie in Progressive Era social group work practices that grew out of the settlement house movement. Settlement workers sought to address the needs of their fellow humans, which included food, clothing, and shelter, as well as the psychological and social aspects associated with personal growth. Social group workers sought to “maximize the well-being of the individual and improve social conditions” through the small group experience.<sup>137</sup> Neva Boyd turned to the power of play and structured games as a means of achieving these goals. As Alissi points out, “She continually urged group workers to appreciate the social values to be derived from spontaneous play and recreation throughout all stages of life.”<sup>138</sup> Boyd argued that games “used as educational nutriment, are well correlated with the growth and development of the players,”<sup>139</sup> and they have the

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<sup>137</sup> Albert S. Alissi, “Social Group Work: Commitments and Perspectives,” in *Perspectives on Social Group Work Practice*, edited by Albert S. Alissi (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 15.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>139</sup> Boyd, “Plays as a Means of Social Adjustment,” in *Perspectives on Social Group Work Practice*, edited by Albert S. Alissi (New York: The Free Press, 1980), 157.

power to transform the individual physiologically, psychologically, and socially. Throughout her career, she had witnessed these transformations in a myriad of environments, including mental hospitals. As her student, Viola Spolin learned that games provide a means of reaching hard-to-reach individuals. In her role as a Chicago WPA Recreational Project supervisor charged with teaching dramatics, Spolin used games as a pedagogical tool and ultimately codified them in *Improvisation for the Theater*. Spolin's pedagogy is based on a non-psychological, non-verbal approach that uses social group work techniques as handed down by Boyd. Because of her work, Spolin has been recognized as the "mother of improvisation."

Neva Boyd and Viola Spolin used social group work processes to educate and liberate individuals. In furthering the work of Boyd and Spolin, Josephine Raciti Forsberg added theories of psychology and Eastern philosophy. In addition, as the only one of these three women who are responsible for developing pedagogical practices for teaching the art of American improvisation, Forsberg also included Stanislavskian-based actor training techniques. Like her predecessors, in developing her approach and exercises, Forsberg sought ways to guide her students to the path of self-actualization through play, through games, and, for Forsberg, through the intersection of theatre, improvisation, and life.

## Chapter 2

### **Josephine Raciti Forsberg: A Catalyst for Understanding The Connections Between Life, Theatre, and Improvisation**

Josephine Raciti Forsberg is a theatre arts practitioner and teacher who dedicated most of her life to developing and promoting the art of American improvisation. Forsberg was introduced to the concept of improvisation as an art form by the “High Priestess of improvisation, Viola Spolin, in the 1960s. The two women formed a kind of master-student relationship after the publication of Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater*. According to Forsberg, she and Spolin spent hours “going through every exercise in the book to make sure that they worked.”<sup>1</sup> In evaluating the efficacy of the “Spolin Games,” the two women drew on their individual areas of expertise. Spolin, who was trained in social group work by Neva Boyd, brought her knowledge of games and her belief in the power of play as a means of tapping into the intuitive. Forsberg, an actor trained in the Stanislavsky and Moscow Arts Theatre tradition, brought her experiences as a professional theatre artist to the mix. The techniques and exercises that Forsberg ultimately created reflect the merging of both American improvisation’s roots in social work and pedagogy and improvisation’s other significant function as a performance/actor training tool.

As Forsberg found her own voice as a teacher of the art of American improvisation, she began creating her own exercises that reflected her time and place in

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, audio-taped interview by Meghan Duffy, Forsberg’s home, June 20, 2008.

history. In the late sixties, the Human Potential Movement<sup>2</sup> was in full force and Forsberg was an active participant. She believed that everyone was entitled to reach his/her fullest potential as a human being and as a creative artist. So, in addition to using her knowledge of the “Spolin Games” and her practical expertise as a classically-trained, professional actor, Forsberg began drawing on her studies in Zen Buddhism,<sup>3</sup> her work in psychology as a group therapy leader, her knowledge of Transactional Analysis,<sup>4</sup> and her experiences as a participant in the controversial Erhard Seminar Trainings, more commonly known as the EST seminars.<sup>5</sup> She did not, however, use her workshops as group encounter forums.

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<sup>2</sup> At the core of the Human Potential Movement is Abraham Maslow’s concept of self-actualization. Maslow believed that self-actualization is an ongoing process and that individuals need to make choices in their lives that support personal growth. For a more in-depth discussion of self-actualization, see Maslow’s *Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (ReinventingYourself.com, 1975). Google eBook edition.

<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to Alan Watts’ *What is Zen?*, Mark Watts states that it is a “method of rediscovering the experience of being alive” (ix). In his introduction to *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, William Barrett highlights the practicality of Zen and points out that the Western psychiatrists C.G. Jung and Karen Horney “became passionately interested in Zen for its therapeutic possibilities” (xxi). Both of these descriptions fit closely the Forsberg’s way of thinking about how the concepts of Zen Buddhism run parallel to the concepts of improvisation and how she could incorporate Zen teachings into her approach to teaching improvisation.

<sup>4</sup> Transactional Analysis (TA) is a social psychology developed by Eric Berne, M.D. Therapists who use TA focus on their clients’ present situations. See *Games People Play: The Basic Handbook of Transactional Analysis* (New York: Random House, 1964, reprint 2004) and the *International Transactional Analysis Association* website, accessed April 24, 2010, <http://www.itaa-net.org/ta/>.

<sup>5</sup> EST training emerged during the Human Potential Movement and focused on supporting the individual in transforming her life EST is thought to be a “fad” or “pop” psychology that is rooted more in hoax than in science. See William Warren Bartley, *Werner Erhard: The Transformation Of A Man, The Founding of EST*, 1st ed. (New York: C. N. Potter: distributed by Crown Publishers, 1978).

Her primary goal was always teaching theatre techniques and developing, promoting, and preserving the art of American improvisation.

Forsberg successfully put her system into practice in her classes and in the producing arm of The Players Workshop of The Second City: The Children's Theatre of Second City and The Players' Oe. Her pedagogical approach reflects the art of American improvisation's roots in the theories of Neva Boyd and Viola Spolin. She also distinguished herself from Boyd and Spolin by elevating and privileging the individual's creative voice. In discussing Forsberg's approach to teaching improvisation, George Wendt, a former student, states, she knew "what each individual person needed from her to progress."<sup>6</sup> Forsberg was able to address the needs of each student by establishing workshop and performance environments that were playful, focused, and student-centered. In her workshops, players were taught to create relationships, to reinforce the positive, to take risks, as well as responsibility, to function in the now, and to look out for the other person.

Unfortunately, Forsberg's contributions to the development of the art of American improvisation have been overlooked. This is due in part to her lack of publishing her work and to the fact that she her relationship with Second City deteriorated and that she was ultimately "ousted" from her position as the teacher who prepared players to become part of Second City's Mainstage and Touring Companies.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, providing information about her life and work is important to theatre history, the history of

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<sup>6</sup> George Wendt, as quoted in Ben Winters, "Whose Name Is It, Anyway? A Second City Pioneer Fights For A Piece Of The Improv Business She Helped Build—And A Little Respect," *Chicago Tribune*, December 3, 2000, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Amy Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 36.

improvisation, and to women's history. Yet, a second and more compelling reason for looking at Forsberg's approach to teaching improvisation is that her work deepens our understanding of improvisation as an art form, as a teaching tool, and as a way of life. We gain a greater understanding of the concepts of "give and take" in playing with one another, the struggles to uncover an authentic "self" through the process of improvising and engaging with others in the present moment, and the improviser's belief that improvisation is life itself. This chapter then uses Forsberg as a catalyst for exploring the transformative nature of improvisation. It also creates links to the theorists that both directly and indirectly influenced her, which is something that Forsberg has not done for herself.

Josephine Raciti Forsberg, a first generation Italian-American, was born in 1921 in the village of Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb on Chicago's west side. Although she did not come from a family of performers, theatre, in all its forms, was an important part of her childhood. Her Tuscan father Carmello, a highly educated and cultured Chicago businessman, who lost all his holdings in the Depression, introduced the young Josephine to the beauty and sophistication of opera. Forsberg's educated and practical-minded, hard-working Sicilian-American mother Maria, who worked on the family-owned farm, hated opera. She introduced her daughter to American popular culture in the form of vaudeville. Forsberg's older brother and sister initiated her into the world of Shakespeare, reading to her from Charles and Mary Lamb's children's classic *Tales from Shakespeare*. Forsberg remembers being overwhelmed by the stories and the characters in this book. In remembering the experience almost eighty years later, she is still excited:

What is this? I asked them [her brother and sister]. Oh, I must have been nine. Oh, my God, I love this. And I still have that book.<sup>8</sup>

Forsberg's already intense connection with Shakespeare was heightened when she began formally studying his work in her Oak Park high school. When she finally had an opportunity to see a fully realized theatrical production, she decided that being a Shakespearean actress would be her life commitment,<sup>9</sup> her life script.

At eighteen, Forsberg left her Oak Park home and moved to Chicago's culturally vibrant Lincoln Park area. In discussing her escape from her family home, she recalls,

There was something about Oak Park that was a little bit too conservative for me. So, I fully planned to leave Oak Park as soon as I was eighteen and graduated from high school. And I came to Lincoln Park in Chicago and I've lived here for fifty years, or more, I think.<sup>10</sup>

Out on her own, Forsberg enrolled in DePaul University's Theatre Department, where she studied acting with David Itkin, a former student of Stanislavsky. Itkin would be the first to introduce Forsberg to improvisation; however, this training would be quite different from the improvisational work to which Viola Spolin would introduce her over a decade later. Itkin's use of improvisation was based on the work of Stanislavsky's collaborator, Leopold Sulerzhitski, who first introduced improvisation exercises at the MAT First Studio Laboratory Theatre in 1911. Sulerzhitski's approach became "the rage

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Forsberg, "A Brief Bio of Josephine Forsberg," accessed August 23, 2009, <http://ericforsberg.com/improv%20and%20Jo.htm>

<sup>10</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, audio-taped interview with Meghan Duffy.

among the younger generation of actors and actresses”<sup>11</sup> who had been indiscriminately using a form of “proto-improvisation” whereby they would use their imaginations to project themselves into a role.<sup>12</sup> It was not until Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitski began going through the concepts of the “System,” much like Forsberg and Spolin had done when evaluating the Spolin approach, that the value of improvisation in actor training was fully acknowledged by Stanislavsky. However, it was still considered only a tool and not an art form in itself.

When considering the way that improvisation is generally taught and used, Forsberg’s daughter, Linnea, asserts that it is still a rehearsal tool, “part and parcel of creating a script. But it has other functions too beyond that.”<sup>13</sup> The other functions, which include liberating individuals from culturally prescribed roles and helping them to develop their own unique voices as creative artists, are often also referred to as paratheatrical. In describing the significance of paratheatrical work, Richard Schechner states that it involves “an intense personal experience.”<sup>14</sup> Schechner goes on to point out that paratheatrical work “borders on ‘the human potential movement.’”<sup>15</sup> In considering the roots of American improvisation, it does seem to fall into the category of the

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<sup>11</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 17. For more information on the Stanislavsky System in America, see Paul Gray, “Stanislavski and America: A Critical Chronology,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 9 (1964).

<sup>12</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Linnea Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy, Josephine Raciti Forsberg’s home, June 20, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

paratheatrical; however, unlike some notions of this type of work, and unlike using improvisation as a rehearsal tool, American improvisation is meant to be shared with an audience in a public performance space. Indeed, this is one of the very reasons that Forsberg also trained her students in performance techniques.

In 1943, Forsberg received her degree from DePaul and began her career as a working actor. She joined The Actor's Company in Chicago and believed that her dream of being a Broadway performer would soon be realized. She eventually met another member of the company who shared her passion for Shakespeare, Rolf Forsberg. Although Rolf's Swedish Lutheran mother did not approve of Josephine—an Italian Catholic who was also poor and older than her son—the two were soon married and expecting their first child. In 1955, after spending several years on the road with her actor husband and their young daughter, Linnea, Josephine became a member of Paul Sills and David Shepherd's Playwrights Theatre Club. She joined the company as an actor who would be performing in their summer Shakespeare Festival; however, because she was also a member of Playwrights, she participated in the workshops Spolin was running for all the Playwrights company members. Initially, Forsberg resisted the Spolin approach. She was, after all, a classically trained actor who “preferred the written word, Willie's written word.”<sup>16</sup> In a 1997 interview in *Performink*, she recalls her early experiences with Spolin's approach:

Where's my script, I want to know? Where's my director?  
Where are my words?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Interview with Irene Zabytko,” (Forsberg's personal documents), 1975.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Helbig, “Anything but Retiring,” *Performink*, May 1997, 7.

In keeping with her classical actor training, she viewed improvisation as a means to an end, with that end being traditional scripted shows. However, after spending months being hit over the head by Spolin—literally—Forsberg had, as she states, an “A-ha” moment and fell in love with the art form “because it was not only for the stage; it was the performance of life.”<sup>18</sup> This discovery had as profound an impact on her life as her introduction to Shakespeare’s work when she was a nine.

With the birth of her second child, Eric, Forsberg considered her days as an actress over. She knew that she needed to be able to provide a stable environment for her children, both financially and emotionally. Yet, she also knew that she needed to feed her love of theatre and to ensure that her creative “self” would not be lost:

When I was finished with being an actress—he [Eric] was born on the opening of Second City—I had to do something else, so I thought I would learn improvisation from Viola [Spolin]. I really fell in love with the art. . . . Because of my theatrical background, Viola was enchanted with me, because I knew a lot about the theatre and a lot about the stage. Anyhow I took her classes and I just loved them.<sup>19</sup>

She eventually became Spolin’s teaching assistant and the two of them went through every exercise in *Improvisation for the Theatre* “with a fine toothed comb”.<sup>20</sup>

I worked with Viola [Spolin] on what worked and what didn’t work. She was very worried about some exercises. We would do it, and I would tell her: there’s something missing in this. They can’t do it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Helbig, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

Spolin would often respond to Forsberg's "resistance" to the games as an actor training technique by telling her to just think about it. Forsberg did think deeply about the value of the games, considering how to fill in missing elements by using Spolin's games method and her own knowledge and experience as a professional actor. Through the processes of playing the games, exploring the efficacy of the games, and critically analyzing the structure of the games as a means of teaching theatre, Forsberg came to know Spolin's exercises inside and out. Because she had worked so closely with Spolin, she was the perfect person to inherit the workshops when Spolin moved back to California and Paul Sills moved on to other projects.

Second City hired Forsberg to run improvisation workshops for the Mainstage Company and to create the Second City Touring Company. She recalls her first days of running her own classes:

I was helping them [the cast members] figure out what this nascent art form was all about. They were all teaching one another and teaching the audiences, processing Spolin's lessons, fusing them with traditions of populist theater and political theater and comedy.<sup>22</sup>

By helping the performers grasp the concepts of an art form that was still in its embryonic state, Forsberg was serving as a catalyst for creativity rather than as an authority figure dictating the rules of the games. The pedagogical approach to teaching improvisation that she was developing exemplifies Boyd's theory of the role of the group leader who participates in the process with the group members rather than standing outside the activities as a disembodied voice of authority.<sup>23</sup> In addition, by considering cast members

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<sup>22</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg quoted in Ben Winters, "Whose Name Is It, Anyway?," 21.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter 1 regarding Boyd's theory of the role of the group leader in games.

as subjects who had agency in the process rather than as objects that should submit to her will, Forsberg was embodying Dewey's educational theory. For Dewey, "democratic social arrangements promote a better quality of human experience," while "methods of repression and coercion or force" destroy community.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, Forsberg's teaching approach also reflects Spolin's influence. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin asserts, "eliminating the roles of teacher and student helps players get beyond the need for approval or disapproval, which distracts them from experiencing themselves and solving the problem."<sup>25</sup> In her early workshops, whether by design or default, Forsberg worked as an educator in the truest sense of the word by drawing out that which was already within each participant.

In 1971, Forsberg incorporated her workshops, calling her new company The Players Workshop of The Second City. She opened her doors, which, at the time, were actually Second City's doors, to all individuals who wanted to learn the art of American improvisation. The participants, or players, came from all walks of life, some were aspiring actors and some were "lay" persons. By this point, Forsberg had developed a cohesive system of teaching improvisation based on Spolin's games. Ensemble work, or what Spolin referred to as "group expression," was emphasized in the workshops; yet, Forsberg also elevated and privileged the individual. To achieve this goal, she created exercises that supported the development of an individual's stage presence and self-efficacy. For example, in her "Character of Space" exercise, a player is given the opportunity to change the atmosphere of the playing space by simply calling out "me."

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>25</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, liii.

Changing the atmosphere simply means moving through the space in a way that might denote suspense, fear, or excitement. For example, when a player calls “me,” she may smile, jump up and down, and clap her hands to demonstrate an atmosphere of excitement. The moment “me” is called out, everyone else must stop, watch “me,” listen to “me,” and then reflect the new quality, or atmosphere, of the playing space, which in our example is excitement. In calling out “me,” the player is learning to take focus, as well as experiencing the power in being given focus by the group. This exercise is far more difficult and complex to do than it may seem. The “me” in this exercise is the unmasked player and not a persona behind which she can hide. This player, within the safety of the exercise, confronts her ability to accept the power position, albeit temporarily.

While the player calling “me” takes the power position, the other players are required, based on the structure of the exercise, to give the power over to the player calling “me” by stopping, giving focus, and demonstrating acceptance of the change by reflecting back “me’s” ability to transform the atmosphere of the playing space. By reflecting back the change, the group recognizes “me” as one who has the power to enact a transformation. Ultimately, as the exercise continues and all have had the opportunity to be “me,” the players experience themselves and one another as individuals who possess the power to initiate and participate in transforming the playing space. Forsberg labeled this back and forth of the power dynamic “give and take.” Through experiencing giving and taking, players come to perceive power as energy that flows from one individual to another rather than a position that is monolithic and motionless. Learning to “give and take” is an interpersonal skill that is as important in life as it is in performance.

Exercises such as “Character of Space” demonstrate to the individual that all she needs in order to be an agent of change is her “self” working cooperatively with the group. The clinical psychologist and scholar, James P. Trotzer points out,

the group atmosphere provides the opportunity for members to learn more about themselves because it gives them a more comprehensive social mirror to look into than individual counseling.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the experience of the group reflecting back an individual’s behavior is richer and perhaps leads to a greater understanding of oneself as an individual “self” and as an individual within a group. According to Trotzer, “individual change may actually be an easier process in group.” He goes on to point out,

In the development of our personhood, individual needs prompt interaction with and response from people in our environment. As a consequence of that interchange over time, we develop our individuality and our sociability.<sup>27</sup>

The group teaches the individual who she is and how to be in the world.

The idea that group work can have a significant impact on an individual has not changed over years. In the twentieth century, Boyd noted the impact of the group on the individual in her play therapy theory, pointing out the group games changed the individual socially, psychologically, and physiologically. Spolin also discussed the power of group participation and agreement as an antidote to competitiveness and to diffusing an individual’s need for approval/disapproval.<sup>28</sup> In the field of humanistic psychology,

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<sup>26</sup> James P. Trotzer, *The Counselor and the Group: Integrating Theory, Training, and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> Boyd and Spolin look at group work from the perspective of social workers. Forsberg looks at group work from both a social and a psychological perspective.

theorists tout the efficacy of group work as a path to self-actualization. For example, in “Self-Actualization Through The Group Experience,” the noted existential psychotherapist and educator, Dr. James Bugental, asserts,

the unique nature of man is expressed through his always being in relationship with his fellows.<sup>29</sup>

Another authority exploring the value of group work during the height of the Human Potential Movement, psychologist and educator Hobart F. Thomas points out,

the vitality and meaning of the group experience to the people involved seems to be directly related to the extent to which communication is based upon feelings and perceptions which can be experienced in the here and now.<sup>30</sup>

Early twenty-first century teaching and learning scholarship focuses on the efficacy of group work and its impact on unleashing brain power. In *The Harvard Education Letter*, Nancy Walser states, “Done right, group work can harness the natural propensity of humans to interact, and—most important—make learning for a wide variety of students more engaging, memorable, and equitable.”<sup>31</sup> Although there are often times when groups are dysfunctional, for the most part, it appears that both hard sciences and social sciences claim that humans are social beings.

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<sup>29</sup> J.F.T. Bugental, “The Third Force in Psychology,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 4 (1964): 23.

<sup>30</sup> Hobart F. Thomas, “Self-Actualization through the Group Experience,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 4 (1964): 42.

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Wasler, “Unleashing the “Brain Power” of Groups in the Classroom: The Neuroscience Behind Collaborative Work,” *The Harvard Education Newsletter*, 26 (May/June 2010), accessed March 5, 2011, <http://www.hepg.org/hel/article/465#home>.

Of course, not all groups, whether social in nature or a form of therapy, are right for all people. The same is true for improvisation workshops. Not everyone who participates in one necessarily develops a sense of self-awareness or experiences personal transformations. Forsberg points out that many of her students are unable to transcend prescribed roles or, in her words, to “get out of their heads.”<sup>32</sup> Getting out of one’s head means being in the “Now” and responding and reacting to the actual stimuli presented in that moment. For a transformative experience to occur, an individual must be open to the possibilities that new experiences hold and have the will to change. She must also have the courage to face the fear that often accompanies change and an impending loss of an old vision of one’s self. This process of self-discovery and letting go of one’s former self, or an “ideal” self, involves a degree of being able to tolerate ambiguity. Those who are intolerant of ambiguity remain rigid and resistant to developing new behavior or ways of being. In an attempt to relieve the stress that accompanies ambiguity, the intolerant individual becomes incapable of focusing and engaging in the present moment. As Spolin points out in her approval/disapproval theory, these individuals “lose the ability to be organically involved in a problem, and in a disconnected way [they] function with only parts of [their] total selves.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, because in the Boyd/Spolin/Forsberg approach, the leader does not take on an authoritarian role or dictate how the individual should play the game or behave, the individual who is intolerant of ambiguity may have a difficult time acting as her own agent. Individuals who are intolerant of ambiguity fall back on schema or behavior that is familiar and therefore helps them feel safe.

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<sup>32</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

<sup>33</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 7.

However, if the individual can manage to cope with her uneasiness, she will discover that the rewards far outweigh the difficulties. In “The Relationship Between Tolerance For Ambiguity And Need For Course Structure,” DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler state that the gains include open-mindedness, flexible thought processes, the experience of flow, and the discovery of one’s creative voice.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the individual who can tolerate the necessary amount of time spent in a personal liminal space will experience the personal transformation that accompanies self-discovery. In commenting on the power of improvisation in opening the door to self-realization, Linnea Forsberg states: “They [the players] realize things about themselves and that makes them know themselves better.”<sup>35</sup> Self knowledge is empowering in both improvisation and in life.

As Forsberg found her own voice as a teacher, she wanted to expand the boundaries of the art form by moving beyond simply teaching theatre techniques. She recalls saying to herself: “Wait a minute! We have to go into another area.”<sup>36</sup> Forsberg began taking psychology classes, became a Transactional Analysis group leader, and began studying Zen Buddhism. These new areas of exploration were rooted in the Human Potential Movement, which had begun after the Second World War and progressed through the anxiety-ridden fifties and tumultuous and rebellious sixties. Those who embraced the tenets of the Human Potential Movement believed in an individual’s right

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<sup>34</sup> Virginia M. DeRoma, Kanetra M. Martin and Maria Lynn Kessler, “The Relationship Between Tolerance For Ambiguity And Need For Course Structure,” *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 30 (June 2003): 104–109, accessed September 19, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Linnea Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

<sup>36</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

to reach her fullest potential and to become a self-actualized human being. Key players in the movement, such as humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May, focused on the health of the individual rather than on pathologies. Others, such as Alan Watts, looked to Eastern philosophies, specifically Zen Buddhism, as a means of reaching self-enlightenment. All believed that encouraging one to reach her fullest human potential, to become self-actualized, would result in social change that would benefit all humankind.

Self-actualization is at the core of the work of one of the founders of Humanistic Psychology, Abraham Maslow. Although Forsberg does not acknowledge any direct link between her approach to teaching improvisation and humanistic psychology, her desire to help her students learn “how to be in the world” fits nicely with Maslow’s concept. In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow explains his concept of humanistic psychology, which he calls the “Third Force,” as a coalescence of different philosophies:

I interpret this third psychology to include the first and second psychologies and have invented the words “epi-behavioristic” and “epi-Freudian” (epi=upon) to describe it. This also helps to avoid the sophomoric two-valued dichotomized orientation, for example, for being either pro-Freudian or anti-Freudian. I am Freudian, and I am behavioristic, and I am humanistic.<sup>37</sup>

In his description, Maslow highlights the basis of his humanistic approach to psychology as holistic. In *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*, Donald Moss describes Maslow’s vision of humanistic psychology as a focus on the whole person:

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<sup>37</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Arkana, 1993), 4.

Maslow envisioned humanistic psychology as a psychology of the whole person based on the study of healthy, fully functioning, creative individuals.<sup>38</sup>

Maslow's ideas are reminiscent of Boyd's theory of building up the whole organism. Boyd believed that games that required individuals to engage both physically and mentally set the stage for transformation.

In addition to changes occurring in the field of psychology, the Human Potential Movement served as catalyst for other body-psychotherapies and mind-body unification theories, such as bioenergetics, the Alexander Technique, Rolfing, the Feldenkrais Method, Gestalt bodywork, and yoga. The Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais, and yoga are foundational in most actor training programs. All three are holistic approaches that help an individual become aware of and change any "harmful habits" that affect the body. Harmful habits are generally associated with holding tension in some parts of the body, which is an indication of stress. F.M. Alexander developed his body awareness technique because, as an actor, he kept losing his voice due to excessive tension in his neck because of poor posture.<sup>39</sup>

In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky dedicates an entire chapter to the negative effects of muscular tension. Taking on the persona of Tortsov, the director of an actor training program, Stanislavsky teaches:

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<sup>38</sup> Donald Moss, "The Roots and Genealogy of Humanistic Psychology," in *The Handbook of Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology: Leading Edges in Theory, Research*, edited by Kirk J. Schneider, James F.T. Bugenthal, and J. Fraser Pierson (New York: Sage, 2001), 15.

<sup>39</sup> See "The Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique," accessed April 24, 2011, <http://www.alexandertechnique.com/fma.htm>.

You cannot imagine how damaging muscular tension and physical tightness can be to the creative process...in every instance it deforms the actor and prevents him from acting. But the worst of all is when tightness takes over the face and distorts it, freezing its power of expression, petrifying it.<sup>40</sup>

Unfortunately, when holding tension in certain parts of the body becomes a habit, the individual is unaware of its physical, mental, and emotional effects. The Feldenkrais Method<sup>41</sup> is designed to help the individual reach a level of self-awareness by knowing her body. In addition to relieving body tension and stress, yoga, which means to unify or unite, leads the individual to an awareness of body/mind/spirit. Forsberg, who had also been a dancer at one point in her career, understands physical movement quite well. There were some students whom she could help with movement and some that she could not. Forsberg sent those who needed specific physical corrections that she was unable to address to dance classes.

A significant contributor to the Human Potential movement that Forsberg does acknowledge as having an impact on her personally and on her pedagogy is the British philosopher and Zen practitioner, Alan Watts. Watts, who published several books and recordings on his concept of the world and the individual's place in the world, earned a reputation as an interpreter of Eastern philosophy for Westerners.<sup>42</sup> He is particularly

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<sup>40</sup> Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor's Work*, translated and edited by Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), 120.

<sup>41</sup> See "The Feldenkrais Institute" website, accessed April 24, 2011, [http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.com/about\\_feldenkrais/overview/?lid=nav\\_aboutfeld](http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.com/about_feldenkrais/overview/?lid=nav_aboutfeld).

<sup>42</sup> "The Alan Watts Story," Alan Watts...An Interactive Experience of the Story and Life Works of Alan Watts, accessed September 5, 2009, [http://www.alanwatts.com/aw\\_story.html](http://www.alanwatts.com/aw_story.html).

known for his writings on Zen Buddhism, a way of “being” in the world that resonates with the improvisation concepts and practices. Watts describes the Zen way of being as dealing “with a domain of experience that can’t be talked about.”<sup>43</sup> Forsberg relates this idea to her theory of improvisation:

Improvisation is experiential. It isn’t something you can read and pick up. You have to participate. You have to get on your feet.<sup>44</sup>

The “getting on your feet,” the experiencing, according to Forsberg, unlocks creative energy. Watts believes that “there is no way of defining the creative energy of the universe.”<sup>45</sup> This energy should never be an object, “discerned, figured out, or explained.”<sup>46</sup> It must be felt in the bones; it must become part of the self. Indeed, in her approach, Forsberg does not attempt an intellectual analysis of this process. She simply understands, both through her experiences as a teacher witnessing her students’ process and as a professional actor, that this energy opens the door to possibilities.

To help her students experience the myriad of possibilities available when this energy is unfettered, Forsberg created an exercise called “Power of Energy.” In this exercise, players engage with one another and themselves through sound and movement, creating fluid compositions that reflect one another’s uniqueness. As they move through the playing space, the players form smaller groups within the larger group. The smaller

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<sup>43</sup> Alan Watts, *Alan Watts on Zen*, accessed August 30, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGWdzFyOOFw>.

<sup>44</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy

<sup>45</sup> Alan Watts, *What is Zen* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), 44.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

groups eventually begin, blending their individual sounds and movements with that of the larger group. These groups within groups, moving and working together to create something using only their own bodies and voices in space, demonstrate the power of collaboration and highlight the interdependent nature of this art form. In other words, the creative and aesthetic expression is only fully realized through the mutual support and engagement of all. Once the group has filled the playing space with energy, at its most intense point, the exercise has been completed.

In this exercise, the individual player experiences the energy that has been tapped as a phenomenon greater than herself. It has been generated through the efforts of the group. This experience can lead the individual to give up what Watts calls the “hypnotic hallucination of himself as something separate from the world.”<sup>47</sup> The energy the individual feels, even if only temporarily, is limitless and is manifest by being “of” the group rather than simply “in” the group. As Watts points out in *The Book: On The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, “every individual is a unique manifestation of the Whole, as every branch is a particular outreaching of the tree.”<sup>48</sup> The individual is differentiated; yet, she is not disconnected. In other words, the individual experiences herself as a distinct being without being disconnected from the group. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addresses the concept of differentiated and integrated ways of being. He points out:

A self that is only differentiated—not integrated—may attain great individual accomplishments, but risks being

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<sup>47</sup> Alan Watts, *The Book: On the Taboo against Knowing Who You Are* (New York,: Vintage Books, 1972), 75.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

mired in self-centered egotism. By the same token, a person whose self is based exclusively on integration will be well connected and secure, but lack autonomous individuality. Only when a person invests equal amounts of psychic energy in these two processes and avoids both selfishness and conformity is the self likely to reflect complexity.<sup>49</sup>

In other words, the differentiated/integrated way of being characterizes a complex personality that is more likely to have greater experiences of the “self,” and therefore more likely to be open to the possibilities of exploring other aspects of the “self.” In improvisation, the other aspects of the “self,” the fuller “self” is apparent in behavioral transformations. For example, the individual who has primarily presented herself as shy eventually comes out of her shell.

Another important element of Watts’ teachings that relates to improvisation is the concept of “That art thou.” In a video entitled *Alan Watts on Zen*, Watts explains: “That is the word that is absolutely reality in Hindu philosophy.”<sup>50</sup> He goes on to say that we are “That,” we are absolute reality, except we are “That” only in disguise, and disguised so well that we’ve forgotten it.<sup>51</sup> In Watts’ view, Zen provides us with a direct way of understanding “That,” of understanding absolute reality. In this way, Zen helps us see into our own natures and to become enlightened, as well as awakened from the normal hypnosis under which we act.<sup>52</sup> When this state is reached, liberation/transcendence occurs. In *The Book*, Watts states:

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<sup>49</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 42.

<sup>50</sup> Watts, *Alan Watts on Zen*, accessed August 30, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The lowdown (which is, of course, the secret and profound view) on life is that our normal sensation of self is a hoax, or, at best, a temporary role that we are playing, or have been conned into playing—with our own tacit consent, just as every hypnotized person is basically willing to be hypnotized. The most strongly enforced of all known taboos is the taboo against knowing who or what you really are behind the mask of your apparently separate, independent, and isolated ego.<sup>53</sup>

Our controlling officer, or what Forsberg refers to as our “inner censor,” supports the perpetuation of the hoax and the continuous donning of the mask that keeps us disconnected from the environment and, in the case of improvisation, from the playing space and the other players. The mask-wearing, inauthentic “I” compels one to employ automatic behavior and to revert to prescribed roles, especially in situations where the individual feels threatened, situations that often have nothing to do with the present moment. The inauthentic “I” prevents the individual from self-discovery, self-expression, and ultimately self-actualization.

In her approach to teaching improvisation, Forsberg sought paths of enlightenment for her students by using and creating games and exercises that cultivate self-awareness and require authentic, in the “Now” engagements. For her predecessor, Neva Boyd, enlightenment is achieved when the individual becomes socially adjusted. For Spolin, enlightenment is the explosion of creativity that occurs when the individual taps into the intuitive. For Forsberg, enlightenment is the “A-ha” moment when the individual begins to play in the “Now” and to play either in spite of the fear or without the fear. To ensure that her students learned to silence their controlling officers, Forsberg

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<sup>53</sup> Watts, *The Book*, 12.

developed her own repertoire of side-coaching phrases: “Get out of your head. . .get into the environment.” “Where are you?” “What is your relationship?” “Get to it and do it.”

In addition to her Spolin foundation, Forsberg also drew on her work and experiences as a Transactional Analysis group therapy leader. Transactional Analysis, or TA, is a social psychology that was developed in the 1960s by the psychiatrist, Dr. Eric Berne. As had Humanistic Psychologist Maslow, Berne had become disenchanted and frustrated with the state of his field and began to explore alternative methods of psychotherapy. The key to TA, according to Berne, is the “unit of social intercourse” comprised of the transactional stimulus and the transactional response.<sup>54</sup> The stimulus is defined as occurring when a member of a social aggregation acknowledges the presence of others, either verbally or non-verbally. The response is the verbal or non-verbal reaction to the stimulus. Therapists using TA are concerned with the ways in which individuals interact with one another, so they look for behavior that is indicative of one of the three particular ego states, identified as either the Child ego state, the Adult ego state, or the Parent ego state.

Berne’s concept of ego states does not correspond with Freud’s three-tiered construct of the human psyche: Super-Ego/Ego/Id. Freud’s trinity is a theoretical construct that is not necessarily observable in the material world. As Tony White points out in “Freud And Berne: Theoretical Models Of Personality,”

Even though Freud (1940) defines the characteristics of the super-ego, ego, id in such a way that they could be directly observed, Rappaport (1959) says that they are not meant to be understood that way. For example, he says that purely ego behaviour can not be observed as such, because all the

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<sup>54</sup> Eric Berne, *Games People Play* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), 29.

three parts of the personality are involved in each behaviour. Therefore the super-ego, ego and id are not directly observable as discrete entities, thus they must be considered as hypothetical constructs.<sup>55</sup>

However, unlike Freud's abstract concept of the ego, Berne's ego states are immediately observable through behavior.<sup>56</sup> Freud's ego concepts might be thought of as focusing on the inner world of the individual while Berne's addresses the outer. Freud considers the individual while Berne's transactional contextualizes human behavior. TA focuses on the ways in which our "selves" interact as individuals within society and the ways in which our "selves" are manifest through behavior.

In *Games People Play*, Berne points out that the "simplest transactions are those in which both stimulus and response arise from the Adult ego states of the parties concerned.<sup>57</sup> The next in simplicity is the Child-Parent transaction. He uses the example of a fevered child asking for a glass of water, and the nurturing mother bringing it.<sup>58</sup> When individuals interact with one another in their Adult-Adult or Child-Parent ego states, the transactions are usually complementary. A complementary transaction is apparent when "the response is appropriate and expected and follows the natural order of

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<sup>55</sup> Tony White, "Freud And Berne: Theoretical Models Of Personality," *Australasian Journal of Transactional Analysis* (March 1980): 18–19, accessed May 2010, <http://netword.com/booksreborn>. See also, S. Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (Wiltshire: Redwood Press, Ltd., 1940); and D. Rappaport, "The Structure of Psychoanalytic Theory," in *A Study of Science*, edited by Kock (London: McGraw Hill, 1959).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>57</sup> Berne, *Games People Play*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

healthy relationships.”<sup>59</sup> Crossed transactions occur when an Adult ego state stimulus is met with a Parent ego state response. In crossed transactions, communication is halted until one party yields and the other accepts. In other words, communication is only restored when the individuals engage once again in a healthy “give and take” interaction between complementary ego states.

Using the TA model helped Forsberg identify blocks that were prohibiting her students, both actors and “lay” persons,<sup>60</sup> from moving forward. Focusing on her students’ physical cues, without drawing attention to the psychological or emotional basis for the difficulties in communication, allowed Forsberg to maintain a safe environment for her students. By stressing the significant role that “give and take” plays in propelling relationships forward, Forsberg is also teaching students how to identify and correct crossed transactions. However, these lessons are being learned unconsciously through the process of improvising. Forsberg keeps the focus on the transactions within the improvised scenes, through side-coaching, rather than on drawing attention to an individual’s psychological issues. Keeping the focus on the transactions relates to Spolin’s concept of “keeping the eye on the ball,” or the point of concentration in the game. Forsberg adds another dimension by identifying interactions/relationships as the “ball,” which is asking her students to consider the action of the scene and to be cognizant of who they are playing in the scene and what their relationships are to one another. In Forsberg’s approach, the “ball” is the development of vital and dynamic relationships within the scenes. Her belief that developing and identifying relationships

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>60</sup> “Lay” persons are individuals who are not performers or actors.

brings Forsberg's work even closer to Buber's concept of "I-Thou" than Spolin's approach does.<sup>61</sup> In focusing on building relationships in the improvised scenes by listening and accepting, the players move beyond viewing one another as a means to an end. In order to "make a scene work," they must fully engage in the process of play with one another and to see one another as subjects.

Forsberg's workshops, as is the case with many improvisation workshops, had a therapeutic value; however, they were not re-creations of the group therapy sessions she led while studying Transactional Analysis. Her primary goals were always teaching theatre techniques, preserving the art of improvisation, and creating new exercises that "had to do with life."<sup>62</sup> She used her knowledge and experience with TA to free her students so that they could find their creative energy and become authentic performers and individuals. The liberation from the "inner censor" that the student consciously, or unconsciously, experienced was rooted in understanding and conquering an exercise rather than on a forced introspection on an inadequacy. Forsberg did point out "harmful habits" that were holding the player back. For example, some students would keep their heads down, looking at the ground. Often, individuals who have acquired this physical habit are fearful of direct communication. Forsberg recognized this fear in some of her students, addressing it covertly through her side-coaching phrases. For example, during the playing of a scene, she would remind all the players to keep their focus on their relationships. By using language that related to the improvisational scene work, Forsberg avoided becoming the voice of a therapist in her workshops. As the players mastered the

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the significance of Buber in Spolin's work.

<sup>62</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

games, and worked on their physicality, being supported by Forsberg's side-coaching guidance and through the immediate responses to their initiations and physical movements in the scene work, they came to know themselves and to feel more comfortable with engaging one another.

Many students reaped benefits in their off-stage lives as a result of participating in Forsberg's workshops. They began to lose habits that were holding them back. Unfortunately, improvisation is not a cure-all. Forsberg acknowledges that she encountered students whom she could not reach. When she could not get through to a student in the workshops, she met with them one-on-one. Sometimes, she recommended professional counseling or suggested that a student remove herself from a destructive or dysfunctional relationship or situation. It was then up to the individual to take responsibility for changing her path or for writing a new life script.

Another important concept that Forsberg brought to her training from her experience with TA is that of life scripts. Eric Berne believes that scripts are created in childhood and influence the choices that individuals make throughout their lives. The individual's script is based on cues from parents, her orientation to the world, life experiences, which in the case of a child are limited, and cognitive development.<sup>63</sup> For example, when Forsberg was introduced to Shakespeare as a young girl, she decided that she would dedicate her life to his work, which she did—albeit not in the way in which she originally had envisioned. Once the script has been written, it is a difficult and complex matter to alter it or to discard it; however, a script can be changed, and

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<sup>63</sup> James R Allen, M.D. and Barbara Ann Allen, MSW, MPH, "Scripts: The Role of Permission," accessed September 6, 2009, <http://www.itya-net.org/TAJNet/articles/allen-scripts-perm.html#3>.

improvisation has the power to help individuals transcend the harmful or destructive elements of their scripts. Through improvisational work, individuals can create new scripts for themselves. Spolin had learned from Boyd and from her own work with games that individuals could be transformed and could transcend prescribed roles. Spolin asserts that an individual has the ability to re-form herself and can transcend the “limitation of the familiar.”<sup>64</sup> This notion precedes Forsberg’s concept of rewriting life scripts. For Spolin, being able to transcend prescribed roles, or rewrite one’s script, occurs when the individual taps into her intuitive:

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.<sup>65</sup>

Being able to reach the intuitive is important for both performers and “lay” persons. For Spolin, tapping into the intuitive supports an individual finding the power that is unleashed when an individual responds as her authentic “self.”

For Forsberg, rewriting the script and silencing the inner censor is also a matter of being spontaneous, of playing in the moment, being present with the other players in the space, creating a relationship with scene partners, and giving oneself permission to be sensuous. Forsberg relates being sensuous with allowing oneself to be alert to all the senses and being open to experiencing the positive effects that result from investing in one’s sensory awareness and a full penetration into the environment.

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<sup>64</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 4.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Forsberg's assertion that an individual must engage fully with the environment or must be open to all the possibilities for discovery that the environment holds reflects Viola Spolin's pedagogical theory. Spolin had asserted that the environment teaches the individual "everything it has to teach."<sup>66</sup> In other words, when fully engaging in the moment and with the actual stimuli being presented in that moment, the individual becomes aware of the myriad of possibilities open to her. She becomes aware of prescribed behavior and can then work on changing that behavior by changing the life script. In writing to Forsberg about her concept of life scripts, one of her former students states:

You used to always say, "If you don't like your life, get a new script writer. Don't just sit there. Do a rewrite." And on your own bad days, I'd find you in your office yelling (in fun, of course), "I don't like MY script. I need a new script writer." I must be a really slow learner because I only finally took your advice to heart about a year ago. . .and I must admit. . .it works. Life does get better if I work at it. Thank you so much for that bit of wisdom, for your friendship, for teaching me how to teach a wonderful art form, for encouraging me to write my first musical, and for lots of other good experiences that only you and your school and your energy could have made possible.<sup>67</sup>

Years after being introduced to Forsberg's work, this former student is still enjoying positive life benefits, both as an individual and as a theatre practitioner. He has incorporated what he learned in Forsberg's workshops into both his personal and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>67</sup> Doug Voegtle, entry on "The Jo Forsberg Karass" Facebook fan page, accessed September 28, 2010, <http://www.facebook.com>.

professional life. Furthermore, his remarks reflect the emphasis on process rather than product: “life gets better if I work at it.”<sup>68</sup>

Forsberg understood the value of improvisation in the development of the self as an autonomous agent and as a creative force. In fact, she dedicated a great deal of her career in developing the transformative aspects of improvisation. Yet, she never forgot her first loves, Shakespeare and the theatre. So, in addition to drawing on Spolin’s work, Transactional Analysis, and her belief in the philosophies and practices that grew out of the Human Potential Movement, Forsberg also used the training she received at DePaul University and her experience as a professional Shakespearean actor. By looking to classical actor training techniques, Forsberg drew on the European approach to improvisation while also maintaining the integrity of American improvisation as its own unique art form. By continuing to use the social work foundation of American improvisation in conjunction with the Stanislavsky style to which she was first introduced, she minimized the differences between the American and the European style of improvisation. In *Improvisation in Drama*, Yarrow and Frost equate the European style with New York and the American style with Chicago. Frost and Yarrow label the two different approaches to improvisation the New York Giants and Chicago Bears.<sup>69</sup>

The New York Giants relates to the origins of improvisation in actor training that emerged in New York when Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya were invited

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 45.

to create an American “counterpart of the MAT.”<sup>70</sup> The two broke up their responsibilities with Boleslavsky dedicating most of his energies to running The Lab’s repertory company and Ouspenskaya training the actors. In keeping with the Stanislavsky/Sulerzhitski use of improvisation, Ouspenskaya included improvisational exercises designed to help the student-actors work on characterization, live within the context of the play, become aware of mood (atmosphere), and overcome self-consciousness. Some of Ouspenskaya’s exercises were one-minute improvisations intended to help the student-actors develop and heighten their observational skills. Forsberg incorporated short improvisations into her training as well, calling them “spot improvs.” Like Ouspenskaya’s one-minute improvisations, Forsberg’s “spot improvs” help the players develop observational skills. However, she also uses these short improvisations to help the players heighten their awareness of the importance of “give and take” in moving an improvised scene forward. Furthermore, in a short improvisation, players must immediately become engaged; there is no time for story set up or “being in their heads.” One of Forsberg’s side-coaching phrases is “get to it and do it.” The “spot improv” requires players to do just that.

Another member of the Moscow Art Theatre who brought his improvisational techniques to the United States is Michael Chekhov. Chekhov was an extraordinary character actor, master acting teacher, and gifted improviser. According to Frost and Yarrow, Chekhov developed “Stanislavskian naturalism into the realms of the abstract,

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<sup>70</sup> Ronald A. Willis, “The American Lab,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 9 (Autumn 1964): 113.

and stress[ed] the creative force of the actor's imagination."<sup>71</sup> Central to Chekhov's work is the concept of Atmosphere. Chekhov believes that "Atmospheres enable the actor to create the element of the play and the part that cannot be expressed otherwise."<sup>72</sup> Every space has an atmosphere that defines it and gives it character. Therefore, there is no such thing as an empty space. Atmospheres, which should not be confused with personal moods, can be sad, joyful, peaceful, or angry. Although there may be several characters gathered together in a space, all of which have their own subjective moods or responses to the action of the scene, there is always an overarching objective Atmosphere that colors the space.<sup>73</sup>

Chekhov created several exercises designed to help the actor understand the concept of Atmosphere and how it informs a scene. In one exercise, he asks the actor to use a scene from *Hamlet* and to imagine an Atmosphere of tense foreboding. The actor is then advised to create an imaginary performance, going through each physical movement and vocal intonation of her character. Once the actor has explored the air of tense foreboding, she is advised to change the Atmosphere and begin exploring how the character moves and speaks in an environment filled with a different quality. Chekhov believes that imagining the characters moving through a specific Atmosphere inspires not

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<sup>71</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting* (New York: Quill, 1991), 28.

<sup>73</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Chekhov *On the Technique of Acting*, and Franc Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*, Routledge Performance Practitioners (London: New York: Routledge, 2004). See also, Chekhov, *The Path of the Actor*, edited by Andrei Kirillov and Bella Merlin (New York: Routledge, 2005); Rose Whyman, *The Stanislavsky System of Acting: Legacy and Influence in Modern Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Lenard Petit, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

the actor but the character that is being developed. He claims that the actor will suddenly realize that the images she created “truly have an independent life.”<sup>74</sup> Once the actor has gone through this exercise numerous times, changing the Atmosphere and imagining how her character moves in harmony within that environment, she can now begin to work in “real” time and space. Once the actor moves from the imaginary to the physical world, she will begin to make even more discoveries. The actor’s imagination informs her physical movements and the physical movements influence the imagination, a melding of body and mind. According to Chekhov, this process brings characters “into full harmony with the rest of the play and with other characters.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, the actor herself becomes the vehicle through which the imagination is manifest.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to teaching the necessary skills of “give and take,” Forsberg’s “Character of Space” exercise also introduces players to the concept of creating a sense of place, or Atmosphere, through their sensual centers. When a player calls “me,” she gives the playing space a character, or in Chekhov’s technique, an Atmosphere. Unlike Chekhov, however, Forsberg does not ask the players to first imagine the character of the space or to envision how they would move through the imagined Atmosphere before actually getting on their feet and doing it. Instead the players must “get to it and do it” by moving their bodies in a way that evokes the character of the space. Moreover, in Forsberg’s approach, the players, as individuals and as a group, are working together to create the character of the space and to transform the Atmosphere. Forsberg’s exercise

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<sup>74</sup> Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 30.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> For more details, see Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*.

begins with the individual and moves to a communal experience whereas Chekhov's Atmosphere exercises are rooted in a personal experience and remain with the individual. The collective aspect of Forsberg's "Character of Space" exercise reflects American improvisation's roots in social group work. Working together as a group, the players take cues from one another, playing with one another. However, we can also see the Stanislavskian/MAT actor training influence with regard to teaching the concept of Atmosphere. In *Something from Nothing*, Forsberg states that the character, or Atmosphere, of a space is essential in creating a theatre experience, both in improvisational and scripted work.<sup>77</sup> When a scene falters, she side-coaches, "go to your environment. Your environment will tell you what to do." In other words, like Chekhov, she sees the environment, or Atmosphere, as inspirational. As Chekhov writes: "Without atmosphere we are imprisoned on the stage."<sup>78</sup>

In her approach, Forsberg also addresses the concept of "memory." Memory in actor training usually refers to emotion or affective memory. This concept is often misused and misunderstood. Many amateur actors and "lay" persons believe "good" acting involves revisiting one's painful life experiences in order to produce authentic performances. Furthermore, they erroneously believe that actors must lose themselves in the emotions of the characters they are portraying, that they must become their characters. This concept of emotion memory is based on Stanislavsky's early theories on acting and on problems that arose in translating the Russian actor training concepts into

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<sup>77</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, unpublished notes, n.d., 14.

<sup>78</sup> M.G. "Chekhov on Acting: A Collection of Unpublished Materials (1919-1942)," *The Drama Review: TDR*, 27 (Autumn 1983): 60.

English. For example, in “Stanislavsky: Uncensored and Unabridged,” Sharon Marie Carnicke points out that when the Stanislavsky System was first introduced into actor training in New York, the Russian understanding of emotional memory became confused with Freudian psychology, popular in the U.S. but not adopted in Russia.”<sup>79</sup> Carnicke also asserts that there was a great deal of mythmaking occurring in the actor training classrooms in those early days. According to Jean Benedetti, Stanislavsky actually rejected the practice of asking an actor to consciously evoke “personal feelings that correspond to the character.”<sup>80</sup> Benedetti goes on to point out that the Stanislavsky System emphasizes “action, interaction and the dramatic situation which result in feeling with Emotion Memory as a secondary, ancillary technique.”<sup>81</sup> This is the type of memory work to which Forsberg introduces her improvisation students.<sup>82</sup>

To address the concept of Emotion Memory, Forsberg created an exercise called “Rubber Band.” In this exercise, the player snaps back to a prior experience that is triggered by the stimuli in the scene but that must also serve as a means of moving the scene forward. This prior experience is usually something that has occurred within the

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<sup>79</sup> Sharon Marie Carnicke, “Stanislavsky: Uncensored and Unabridged,” *TDR* 37 (Spring 1993): 29.

<sup>80</sup> Jean Benedetti, forward to *An Actor’s Work* by Konstantin Stanislavsky, translated by Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), xx.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>82</sup> In his “Method,” Strasberg made emotion the locus of his technique, using improvisation as a tool for the actor to work on herself (Paul Gray, “Stanislavski and America: A Critical Chronology,” *TDR* 9 (1964): 32). In *The End of Acting: A Radical View* (1992), Richard Hornby points out that this approach to acting omits Stanislavsky’s “Method of Physical Action” (5), and can lead to a self-absorbed acting technique (the Strasbergian Method).

improvisation, not a personal memory that is unrelated to the “Now.” In other words, while the player recalls a previous experience, she must remain focused in the present moment and on the process of playing rather than reflecting back on a personal experience that would remove her from playing in the “Now.” Using both the present and past within the improvised scene reflects both the Spolin and Stanislavsky techniques. Furthermore, it removes emotional recall from any direct connection with therapy. In summing up her perspective on the place of emotion in acting and performance, Forsberg’s states, “Going back to one’s previous emotional experiences is therapy. It should be done with a therapist.”<sup>83</sup>

Forsberg was teaching her students to be creative artists and performers in the workshops and in a theatre setting as well. Once a student became a workshop member, she was invited to perform each weekend at the Players’ Oe. The Oe was set up to reflect the coffeehouse culture of the early seventies. Audience members made a contribution when they arrived and could purchase coffee or tea to drink during the show while they sat at their small cabaret tables. The players were at various levels in their experience with improvisation; some players had participated in several workshops while others may have done only one class. In addition to the improvisations, some of the players did scripted scenes that had been developed through improvs while others had opportunities to demonstrate their special skills, such as singing or playing an instrument. Of course, a portion of the show was dedicated to improv games based on audience suggestions. Before each show, Forsberg had a brief meeting in the “green room.” At that time, she assigned games to the players that were commensurate with their level of experience and

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<sup>83</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

stage of development. The more experienced players might be paired with new players, which benefitted all. Forsberg also wrote and produced the Second City children's show that was cast with her students. Lastly, she produced scripted plays in which she also cast her students. All these performance opportunities required her students to use all the skills they were developing, including improvisation as an art form and improvisation as a rehearsal tool. The various types of shows she produced reflected her work in both the American and European traditions of improvisation.

Forsberg came to understand improvisation as an art form that fostered community through communication and collaboration—and not through competition—a belief she shared with Boyd and Spolin. The community she envisioned was a group of individuals who had the skills to create memorable experiences for themselves and for their audiences, whether the audience was in a theatre, an office, a courtroom, or a classroom. By observing her students during class, through their play, she saw the personal blocks that were preventing them from tapping into their own creativity. Because of her knowledge and work in Transactional Analysis, she was able to clearly grasp and define the emotional and psychological issues, or “hang ups” as they were called in the early seventies, that plagued some of her students. She also knew that there was a great deal of risk involved in living in the moment, in becoming aware of and then of overcoming the “taboo against knowing who you are.” Alan Watts sums up the fear factor involved in self-discovery work:

There is always *something* taboo, something repressed, unadmitted, or just glimpsed quickly out of the corner of one's eye because a direct look is too unsettling.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Watts, *The Book*, 4.

Furthermore, as Watts points out, “taboos lie within taboos, like the skins of an onion.”<sup>85</sup> This concept relates to improvisation and the process of self-discovery and self-actualization. When a player overcomes one fear, there is generally another one to take its place. It is an ongoing process.

Forsberg did not look at her students as peeling away layers from the outside. Rather when her students began their journeys with her, she considered them to be pieces of whole marble that needed sculpting. She did not, however, see herself as the artist; rather, she viewed each student as her own sculptor, chiseling away from the inside out. The marble in which each person was encased was the cultural constructs, conventions, and controlling censors from which they needed to break free. Some students found the strength and power to create, or to re-form, themselves. Others needed more help and more tools than Forsberg could provide.

The improvisational exercises that Forsberg developed were based on her knowledge of psychological theories, Zen Buddhism, Stanislavskian actor training techniques, and the foundational work of Boyd and Spolin. When creating new exercises, she kept in mind the importance of supporting her students on their paths to becoming performers, theatre artists, and explorers of the “self.” Her pedagogical strategy involved encouraging her students to create, to explore, and to heighten situations in which they were likely to find themselves, situations that had, in her words, “a similarity to life.”<sup>86</sup> This approach to improvisation allowed Forsberg to guide her students’ journeys and to instill in them a sense of control over their life scripts. Through improvisational work,

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>86</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 30.

infused with psychological theory and Eastern philosophy, her students learned that the scripts that were written for them, and by them, were not immutable; they could be reevaluated and reworked to reflect a new-found sense of autonomy. The outward manifestation of this personal agency is a lack of the self-consciousness that inhibits, or blocks, the player. In other words, the “inner censor” no longer controls the player’s creative voice.

Furthermore, a player grounded in his/her own “center” also displays a strong presence of mind throughout the process of creating a scene. The player’s center, which in actor and voice training means finding the inner and outer spaces where one is open, is actually a combination of five centers of being in Forsberg’s approach. She describes these centers as

- The Mental Center (expressed and unexpressed thoughts)
- The Emotional Center (feeling revealed and veiled)
- The Physical (visible action – verb active and passive)
- The Sensual (influence from the environment – highly feeling)
- The Sexual (various propositions of all centers)<sup>87</sup>

By drawing on the big five, in any combination, the player is functioning in the present moment, living in the “Now.” Living in the “Now” is often equated with impulsivity, acting without any thought whatsoever. In improvisation, nothing could be further from the truth.

Thinking of improvisational work in terms of composure rather than impulsivity is closer to the core of how an improviser enters and interacts with other players in the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 5. In discussing the “Centers,” Forsberg states that she needed a framework for helping her students overcome their creative blocks. Forsberg reports that her “Centers Concept” stems from her studies in psychology and her observations of her students: “If any of one of them is blocked, an individual’s creative expression is limited or blocked.” Josephine Raciti Forsberg, telephone interview with Meghan Duffy, May 15, 2011.

playing space. In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman points out that composure has “a behavioral side, a capacity to execute physical tasks (typically involving small muscle control) in a concerted, self-controlled fashion under fateful circumstances.”<sup>88</sup> Drawing on the gambling world to support his statement, Goffman cites Polsky’s discussion of a pool hustler:

The hustler must have “heart” (courage). The *sine qua non* is that he is a good “money player,” can play his best when heavy action is riding on the game (as many non-hustlers can’t). Also, he is not supposed to let a bad break or distractions in the audience upset him. (He may pretend to get rattled on such occasions, but that’s just part of his con.) Nor should the quality of his game deteriorate when, whether by miscalculation on his part or otherwise, he finds himself much further behind than he would like to be.<sup>89</sup>

The improviser is not creating a con; however, in a theatrical setting she is constructing an illusion, a scene that can only work if she has the skill to seduce the audience.

Although the improviser may appear to be out-of-control because the character and focus of the scene requires it, she is only using herself as the creative artist’s “medium” to render an illusion of chaos. The advanced improviser, who no longer needs to rely on tricks or one-upsmanship, who instead strives to integrate herself into a group scene, does not lose control or act impulsively. She becomes a responsible individual, responsible to the group as well as to herself. Forsberg instilled a sense of discipline and responsibility, both personally and professionally, in her students. A piece of wisdom she passed on to her students is: “If you take care of your fellow player, you will be taken

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<sup>88</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interactional Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 222–23.

<sup>89</sup> Polsky, as cited in Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 223. See also, Ned Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2006).

care of.” Furthermore, as Boyd and Spolin argue, the games themselves instill these qualities because the individual must adhere to rules and structures that are outside of herself. Responsibility and discipline promote self-actualization, which for Abraham Maslow means becoming fully human.

In *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Maslow explains that self-actualization means

experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption. It means experiencing without the self-consciousness of the adolescent. At this moment of experiencing, the person is wholly and fully human. This is a self-actualizing moment. This is a moment when the self is actualizing itself.<sup>90</sup>

Although, as Goble points out in *The Third Force: The Psychology of Abraham Maslow*,<sup>91</sup> Maslow believes that only older people, those who had collected many experiences and used those experiences to uncover a true self, were self-actualized, he also understood that becoming an actualized individual was a process. Throughout this process, individuals perform a dance, which involves both movement toward and a stepping away from reaching their fullest potentials. Maslow states,

There may be a movement toward defense, toward safety, toward being afraid; but over on the other side, there is the growth choice. To make the growth choice instead of the fear choice a dozen times a day is to move a dozen times a day toward self-actualization. *Self actualization is an ongoing process*; it means making each of the many single choices about whether to lie or to be honest, whether to steal or not to steal at a particular point, and it means to

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<sup>90</sup> Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 45.

<sup>91</sup> Frank G. Goble, *The Third Force; the Psychology of Abraham Maslow* (New York: Grossman, 1970), 37, accessed October 25, 2009, <http://abrahammaslow.com/books.html>.

make each of these choices as a growth choice. This is movement toward self-actualization.<sup>92</sup>

This process of self-actualization, as described by Maslow, is supported by improvisation; indeed, perhaps expedited by improvisational work. In each exercise and improvised scene the players are asked to confront their fears and embrace the risks of exposure, missteps, and miscalculations. If the teacher-director-facilitator has created a positive environment, the enjoyment and excitement that comes with discovering new abilities acts as a catalyst for further growth. When a player experiments with choices outside his/her comfort zone, she creates a myriad of opportunities for self-discovery and growth. This player can then listen to his/her own voice rather than the voice of the “inner censor” that is inhibiting and, at times, destructive. The player learns to make the choice that Maslow would say is “constitutionally right” for her.<sup>93</sup> This can prove to be empowering to the individual.

The concept of power is actually a double-edged sword. When it means having control over others, it can be oppressive and destructive. In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham discusses the negative side of power as it relates to gender, pointing out that needing to control scenes in improv comedy has led some male improvisers to “equate the libertarian self-expression of improv-comedy with roguish masculinity.”<sup>94</sup> Any elements of roguish behavior in improvisation could be attributed to inexperience on the part of certain performers, or an approach to improvisation that promotes competition

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<sup>92</sup> Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 45.

<sup>93</sup> Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> Amy Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 67.

rather than collaboration and community. This is particularly true when the emphasis is on being funny rather than the process of discovery. Although all teacher-directors maintain that improvisation is based in a “sincere and honest”<sup>95</sup> approach to the work, they are also often fostering competitive environments.

The concept of improvisation in some schools and troupes is based on a sports metaphor rather than on an artistic aesthetic, which we might liken to the Roman approach to performance (gladiators) versus the Greek approach to theatre (thespians). Amy Seham points out that the sports metaphor can rob some players “of the confidence to play.”<sup>96</sup> In discussing what she refers to as the second wave of improvisation, which she defines as a “reaction against Second City’s commercialism and perceived hypocrisies,”<sup>97</sup> Seham asserts that within the sports motif, the

traditional hierarchies of race and gender remain intact, and, indeed, are often intensified within subcultural communities. While second-wave improvisers sometimes found playful ways to challenge the status quo, they often acted to reinforce mainstream ideology.

In other words, negative power dynamics that are found within society are not transcended in the competitive sports approach to improvisation. Although the concept of group mind is an important tenet of improv-comedy as a sport, it can only work if an individual is considered to be part of the group by fellow players. Often, in groups, someone is chosen to be the scapegoat; many find it appropriate to exploit that individual,

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<sup>95</sup> Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual for Improvisation* (Colorado Springs: Merriwether Publishing, Ltd., 1994), 23.

<sup>96</sup> Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 37.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 31

to power over her in an aggressive way. The overly aggressive players argue that their behavior is acceptable because it takes place within the boundaries of the playing environment. The masculine, gladiator-performer overcomes the feminine, thespian-performer. This power dynamic is not necessarily gender specific. A woman player can be as aggressive and competitive as a male player.

In her workshops, Forsberg did not genderize the work or improvisation. This is not to say that no gender power issues were apparent, particularly in improvisations created by novice improvisers who compulsively cling to old habits and stereotypical ideas about character and relationships. However, Forsberg taught all her students to “call out” other players when they were not playing fairly.<sup>98</sup> Unlike some of the contemporary schools that use the idea of labeling one another in a scene, Forsberg taught her students that they had the right to choose who they would be in a scene. Through her side-coaching, she instilled in her students the courage to speak up and to take focus and to “give and take” the power within the improvisations.

Forsberg’s concept of power is closer to the way in which another key figure in Humanistic Psychology, Rollo May, perceives it. In *The Discovery of Being*, May reframes the concept of power, asserting that Nietzsche’s phrase, the “will to power,” means self-realization in the fullest sense.<sup>99</sup> In May’s theory of human growth, the “will to power,” then, becomes a constructive concept. It becomes, as May asserts, “a call to man to avoid the putrescence and to affirm himself in his existence with strength and

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<sup>98</sup> Players were to “call out” behavior within the context of a scene and not as a personal attack. The point was to alert players that they were not engaging in the scene or were perhaps negating all offers.

<sup>99</sup> Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 79.

commitment.”<sup>100</sup> The key words in this re-envisioning of power are strength and commitment. Thus, rather than holding a privileged position that sets the stage for roguish behavior, the individual is empowered by inner strength, as well as a commitment to making choices for growth. In other words, the “will to power” is not a matter of having power over another; it is not a matter of force. It is

an ontological category—that is to say, an inseparable aspect of being. It does not refer to aggression or competitive striving or any such mechanism. It is the individual affirming his existence and his potentialities as a being in his own right.<sup>101</sup>

Power, then, is a call to live, to take responsibility for our creativity, our talents, our fellow humans, and ourselves.

Power is not necessarily held in a central location; it is not something owned by an individual or specific group. Rather, it operates through a network, through a web of interdependence. In “Researching Actor Power: Analyzing Mechanisms of Interaction in Negotiations Over Space,” Roger Few points out, “social power is articulated through complex mechanisms including tactics of negotiation.”<sup>102</sup> This concept of power fits nicely within a theory of improvisation because it reflects the idea of a group working together to negotiate an environment where “give and take” is essential in creating the art. Although Forsberg would not necessarily choose the word power, one of the basic tenets of her method is the ability to “give and take,” both of which must be learned

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>102</sup> Roger Few, “Researching Actor Power: Analyzing Mechanisms of Interaction in Negotiations Over Space,” *Area* 34 (March 2002): 31.

through practice and self-reflection. The “give and take” between players, the flow of power within a scene, creates an empowering environment not only on the stage, but also in an individual’s life because she has discovered new strengths and has made a commitment to “get up and do something.”<sup>103</sup> Power in this sense, then, is a way of harmony rather than a display of aggression.

When harmony is achieved through “give and take,” through sharing one’s self through the creative process, one individual does not cannibalize another in order to gain status. There is only a flow of energy that is as palpable to the observer as it is to the players. All in the room are open to the experience. All understand that the moment is about everyone working together; it is about each individual using his/her whole being in collaboration and in communion with another to create something. That something is achieved through the process of chipping away at blocks and “inner censors” to sculpt something wonderful, to sculpt an authentic “self.” When a player realizes that she is, indeed, an empowered individual who can create a new life script, the “A-ha” moment occurs—a beautiful and electrifying experience that is part of the self-actualization process. Forsberg’s objective was to help her students experience as many “A-ha” moments as possible because each of these moments chipped away at the marble in which her students were encased. Each moment helped the individual player sculpt a new, or yet another aspect, of his/her “self.”

Josephine Raciti Forsberg’s approach to teaching theatre techniques and creativity through the art of improvisation was influenced by her time and place in history. Her approach to improvisation reflects the positive, self-actualizing component of

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<sup>103</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy.

improvisation that her teacher, Viola Spolin, argued was meant to free players from the cultural bonds that have led to the repression of spontaneity in socialized adults. Forsberg was influenced by the Human Potential Movement, a movement that asked us consider the health, rather than the pathology, of humans. She explored the questions: Who are we? What does it mean to be human? She created exercises that helped each student-player, regardless of the reasons for choosing to study with her, to discover and to use her own unique voice. She taught each of her student-players to listen to his/her inner “self,” the “self” that knows, the self that does not censor. Forsberg understood that self-knowledge is crucial in embracing one’s personal strengths. She made “the taboo against knowing who you are” irrelevant.

Self-knowledge supports an individual in discovering and understanding those old scripts that no longer work. Self-knowledge supports an individual in understanding why she may have creative blocks. Self-knowledge is a way of healing old wounds. Theatre is also a vehicle for healing wounds, wounds that a society or community have endured. Helping her students discover who they are and creating an environment for them that was safe and positive, an environment where the individual could uncover and heal old wounds, was yet another way that Forsberg connected improvisation and life. She taught her students to “follow the fear” because the space where fear and courage collide is where one’s humanity is found. It is also where we find art.

## Chapter 3

### ***Something from Nothing:* Forsberg's Praxis An Overview of The Players Workshop Exercises**

In 1971, Josephine Raciti Forsberg established the first school in the United States dedicated to teaching the art of American Improvisation, The Players Workshop of The Second City. When she began, she envisioned a curriculum that would take four years to complete; however, by 1977, she realized that a two-year program would better serve her students. Ultimately, she streamlined her workshops even more and created a cohesive six-term curriculum that could be completed within a twelve-month period. Forsberg's main objective in streamlining her workshops was getting her students' creative voices out into the world.

Each of Forsberg's eight-week terms has specific learning objectives with exercises that support each of the objectives. For example, one first-term learning objective is collaboration. To reinforce this objective, Forsberg uses a combination of exercises, including a traditional children's game, such as "A Tisket A Tasket." Using a children's game demonstrates the connection to Boyd and Spolin's foundational contributions to the art of American improvisation. However, Forsberg also created many of her own exercises, which she developed by observing and learning about the blocks that inhibited creativity. She designed some of these exercises based on her experiences as a theatre artist herself and some on her knowledge of psychological and behavioral theory, as well as her desire to help her students acquire life skills. Forsberg believes that

improvisation makes our lives better because it teaches us to cope and to see the beauty of the planet and its possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

Forsberg began outlining her approach in her unpublished notes, *Something From Nothing*. These notes provide an insight into her method of teaching improvisation; however, they only supply a rough sketch of her approach and of the exercises she developed. *Something from Nothing* includes the skills she believes all individuals need in order to unleash their creative voices and to become improvisers and theatre artists. Forsberg's notes do not provide an in-depth analysis of her work, nor do they include the Spolin exercises that she also used in her classes. This chapter provides an analysis of Forsberg's exercises as outlined in *Something From Nothing*, placing them within a theoretical framework that highlights the significant role improvisation plays in the development of theatre and performance skills, as well as a path for personal development and transformation. Furthermore, by illustrating the connection to personal development, this chapter reveals the fine line improvisation teachers walk between art and therapy. Improvisation is an art form, not therapy; however, like most art, it has a therapeutic value.

### **First Term**

Forsberg's first term focuses on building ensemble, trust, and communication skills. Learning to work as an ensemble is crucial for the workshop group because the art of improvisation is the manifestation of the intersection of individual and group creative expression. Improvisation is, Forsberg asserts, "an interdependent art form."<sup>2</sup> In other

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, telephone interview with Meghan Duffy, April 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 6.

words, the art of improvisation is never practiced in isolation.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, knowing how to maintain a sense of ensemble and creating a collaborative environment is critical to players both in classes and during performance. Although an improviser may find herself onstage alone, she is never playing alone; the audience is also always a player. According to Viola Spolin,

Exhibitionism withers away when the student-actor begins to see members of the audience not as judges or censors or even as delighted friends but as a group with whom an experience is being shared. When the audience is understood to be an organic part of the theater experience, the student-actor is immediately given a host's sense of responsibility toward them[,]which has in it no nervous tension. The fourth wall disappears, and the lonely looker-in becomes part of the game, part of the experience, and is welcome!<sup>4</sup>

Forsberg sees improvisers as seducers who draw audience members into the action of a scene so that everyone is “involved in the story that is being created.”<sup>5</sup> Improvisers, then, do not perform in front of an audience; they play with an audience.

The second objective, trust, is key in creating community and the collaborative approach to creativity that is essential in the art of improvisation. Learning to trust is an active process that involves embracing the risk of letting go of the need to control. In addition to letting go and relying on fellow players, learning to let go of controlling one's self and to trust in one's talents and abilities is critical. In discussing the concept of control—or the illusion that we are in control—musician and improviser Stephen

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<sup>3</sup> Forsberg's belief that improvisation is an interdependent art form echoes Boyd's foundational work with games and social group work process.

<sup>4</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 7.

Nachmanovitch cautions that an individual can never become one with her [creative] process unless she surrenders control. “Without surrender and trust [there is] nothing.”<sup>6</sup> Holding tightly onto the illusion that one has control inhibits creative flow.

The third objective, communication, is indispensable in Forsberg’s method because, as she states, “human creativity is grounded in communication, and people who learn improv are learning to communicate what is essential.”<sup>7</sup> “What is essential” is creating authentic engagements with the environment and with one another that transcend restrictive cultural schema and self-censorship. Communicating “what is essential” grows out of active listening and genuinely responding to what is occurring “in the moment” between the players. In *A Way of Being*, the psychologist, and one of the founders of humanistic psychology, Carl Rogers, states that an overriding theme in his professional life has been his “caring about communication.”<sup>8</sup> He continues:

I have wanted to *be* understood. I have tried to facilitate clarity of communication between individuals of the most diverse points of view. I have worked for better communication between groups whose perceptions and experiences are poles apart: strangers, members of different cultures, [and] representatives of different strata of society.<sup>9</sup>

This desire “to be understood” is universal, crossing all class, race, and gender boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Sara Burrows, “She Wrote the Script for Chicago Improv,” *News-Star*, July 12, 2000, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Carl R. Rogers, *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995), 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Throughout the six-term training, Forsberg strives to help her students erase their limitations through group process. The individual does not get lost in the group; instead, her unique voice begins to emerge through working collaboratively, learning to trust, learning to hear and understand fellow players, and learning to clearly articulate “who” one is. Forsberg’s first-term exercises support her students in developing an awareness of their own behavior, their personal schema, and their creative blocks through the development of sensory awareness, through self-reflection, and by recognizing the power in surrendering control, which is found in the concept of “give-and-take.”

At the beginning of their first Players Workshop class, students are asked to take a pledge. “The Pledge” sets up the positive, self-affirming atmosphere of the workshop. It is a recitation of affirmations, which psychologists who specialize in the treatment of trauma victims and post-traumatic stress disorder consider a powerful tool for developing a positive attitude toward the self and life. Dr. Tian Dayton, a psychodrama trainer who holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, states that the goals of affirmations are to:

1. Replace old negative messages with new positive ones.
2. Create an affirmative state of mind.
3. Create a positive self-image.<sup>10</sup>

According to Dayton, affirmations “trickle down into our subconscious and reprogram it for a positive, full and prosperous life.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, affirmations alone do not change an individual’s perspective. However, in conjunction with experiences that support the affirmations, an individual’s beliefs about herself can change.

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<sup>10</sup> Tian Dayton, *Drama Games: Techniques for Self-Development* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1990), 12. Kindle edition.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

In addition to setting the stage for changes in attitude about the self, “The Pledge” also serves as an initiation ritual that welcomes all participants into their new community of theatre artists and improvisers. Participating in “The Pledge” marks the individual’s transformation from a “civilian” or “lay person” to a player. Indeed, in *Something From Nothing*, Forsberg states that once the class begins, the participant “now becomes the player.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a welcoming ritual is as beneficial to an instructor as it is to a student. In *Active Learning through Drama, Podcasting and Puppetry*, Kristin Fontichiaro points out that welcoming rituals provide the instructor with her first opportunity “to set a positive, assertive classroom tone.”<sup>13</sup> The welcoming, or initiation, ritual also alerts students to the expectations of the teacher.

Forsberg created “The Pledge” because she wants novice players to reflect on their current perceptions about who they are and to begin to consider new and different ways of perceiving and witnessing their relationships with themselves, with others, and with their environments. In “The Pledge,” she asks the initiates to tap into aspects of their “selves” that have been repressed.<sup>14</sup> The language Forsberg uses is inclusive and positive and clearly articulates not only Forsberg’s expectations as a teacher, but also the expectations the players should have of themselves. She asks the students to repeat after her:

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<sup>12</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Kristin Fontichiaro, *Active Learning through Drama, Podcasting and Puppetry* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Josephine Raciti Forsberg, telephone interview by Meghan Duffy, December 2008.

## The Pledge

Everyone is creative.  
Everyone has talent.  
We will see what we are looking at.  
We will hear what we are listening to.  
Self-criticism does not come into this class.  
Beliefs about life are not a prison.  
Automatic behavior is over.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing in this pledge that an individual should find intimidating, or ultimately, unable to accept. Yet, reaching these goals are perhaps more easily stated than accomplished. Indeed, some students may never transcend the cultural and social ties that bind them to ways of being that do not necessarily serve personal growth or that move them along the path toward self-actualization. Forsberg's "The Pledge" can only serve as a tool that plants the seeds for self-reflection and possible transformation/transcendence.

In addition to the positive affects that speaking affirmations hold for individuals, Forsberg's welcoming/initiation ritual provides the new improvisers with the art of improvisation secrets. In other words, "The Pledge" tells the novices what they need in order to become successful players. The secrets are using one's sensory awareness (we will see; we will hear) and living in the moment (automatic behavior is over). In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner points out:

For a person to have access to performance knowledge is both a privilege and a risk. This attitude toward performance knowledge is a clear link between performance and shamanism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 235.

Through this pledge, and through all the exercises in which players will participate throughout their training, Forsberg is passing on her knowledge of the art of American improvisation so that her students may embody it, use it for self-expression, and build on it as creators and teachers of new improvisational forms.

By leading her students in the affirmation recitation, Forsberg places herself within this initiation ritual. She becomes part of the group, echoing Boyd's concept of the role of the group leader. Moreover, by actively participating in her students' first transformations from "lay" persons to improvisers/performers, Forsberg is taking on a shaman-like role. As with many teachers who are involved in transformational learning experiences, Forsberg would not agree with this designation; instead, she would say that it is the work and the will of the student that leads to transformation. Yet, in guiding her students through this initial rite of passage as a participant inside the ritual rather than a figure who is standing outside the activity, she is taking on the role of the "one who knows." Through this pledge, as well as throughout the entire time students participate in her workshops, Forsberg acts as a guide on the path to moments of enlightenment. The "A-ha" enlightenment moments that participants experience occur when the players understand how the exercises connect with the scenes that will be created, when creativity blocks disappear, and when moments of self-discovery are experienced. In her role as workshop leader/facilitator, Forsberg serves as a negotiator between a student's inhibited "self" and authentic, liberated "self."

After "The Pledge," Forsberg introduces the first exercise that focuses on sensory awareness. In this exercise she calls "Reflection," everyone participates simultaneously, walking through the room without speaking. Working as a group, the participants begin

awakening and heightening their awareness of one another, as well as that of the space in which they are playing. In her notes, Forsberg emphasizes that the entire class must walk “in and out of each other (not in a circle).”<sup>17</sup> Although she does not explain the point of this direction, walking in a circle can inhibit engagement with fellow players because the players have their backs to one another. In addition, by using a weaving pattern, the players begin working with different shapes and spatial relationships, which are important in learning to move freely in performance. The shapes and spatial relationships that performers use are modes of non-verbal communication that provide information to scene partners and to audience members. Furthermore, by experiencing the space through various shapes and relationships with the other players in the space, the novice players are developing their kinesthetic intelligence. They are learning to process information about themselves, the other players, and their environments by using their bodies.

During the walk, students are asked to keep their bodies in a neutral position. In *Acting Skills for Life*, acting teacher Ron Cameron states that developing the neutral state is “an important first step for the performer.”<sup>18</sup> He goes on to describe the neutral state as a ridding one’s self of “tensions, mannerisms, and personal quirks.”<sup>19</sup> In *Movement Training for the Modern Actor*, Mark Evans asserts.

Neutral body training produces changes in/on the body and to the experience of the body, changes in body use. These are changes that have a significant and gendered effect on

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<sup>17</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ron Cameron, *Acting Skills for Life* (Toronto: The Dundurn Group, 1999), 185.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

all student actors. . .The neutral body is a body reconfigured as an integrated whole.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the neutral body sets the stage for growth and integration regardless of gender. For Forsberg, the neutral position makes the individual open to stimuli and ready and able to receive and use it.

Maintaining a neutral position is one of the most difficult tasks to accomplish when first beginning this work because it requires the players to let go of all physical gestures that close them off from other players, such as crossed arms or clasped hands. Closing-off gestures are, generally speaking, a defense against truly being in the space and being open to the possibilities that the empty space holds. Becoming comfortable with allowing oneself to remain open is related to letting go of fear and developing trust. Most students do eventually become aware of bodily habits that prevent them from fully engaging and do begin to enjoy a sense of ease when playing and moving in the creative space and interacting with other players. Evans believes that neutral body exercises “go beyond work on the body on a physical level and introduce the students to the inter-connection of the body and emotions.”<sup>21</sup> When a level of ease is reached, a player is open to the possibilities the empty space holds for discovery and creation and welcomes collaboration. According to Forsberg, she is truly on the path to becoming stage worthy.

At the beginning of the “Reflection” exercise, players are asked to acknowledge each other’s presence by looking at one another rather than by communicating verbally. Taking away the crutch of language requires the player to rely on reading physical

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<sup>20</sup> Mark Evans, *Movement for the Modern Actor* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

communication signals. Cameron refers to non-verbal communication skills as body language. He understands reading body language as a “skill in understanding an entire range of human emotions and moods.”<sup>22</sup> Learning to read and understand others’ physical cues heighten one’s social communication skills and supports the development of social awareness. In *Social Intelligence*, Dr. Daniel Goleman asserts that

Social awareness refers to a spectrum that runs from instantaneously sensing another’s inner state, to understanding her feelings and thoughts, to “getting” complicated social situations.<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to state being socially aware is not sufficient; one must also have a social facility, which “builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective, interactions.”<sup>24</sup> Well-developed social awareness and social facility domains, as described by Goleman, support the development of empathy, attunement, synchrony, influence, effective self-presentation, and concern.<sup>25</sup>

As the exercise continues, the players are asked to close their eyes while they are still walking. Although working with closed eyes in actor training is often used for addressing trust issues, Forsberg’s “Reflection” exercise is meant to help students heighten their awareness of the space and to use other senses to navigate. As with asking students to engage with one another without the crutch of language, this exercise requires students to relinquish their reliance on sight, a dominant sense. Anne Bogart clarifies the

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<sup>22</sup> Cameron, *Acting Skills for Life*, 197–8.

<sup>23</sup> Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 84.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>25</sup> See Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, for a more complete discussion of the components of social awareness and social facility.

purpose of exploring without depending on sight in her Viewpoints training, another form of theatre/acting training that draws on improvisation. Bogart believes that by taking

the pressure off the eyes to be the dominant and primary information gatherer...the whole body [then] starts to listen and gather information in new and more sensitized ways.<sup>26</sup>

In Viewpoints training, students are not asked to completely close their eyes; instead, they learn to use what Bogart has termed “soft focus,” which simply means taking in the entire space by using one’s peripheral vision.<sup>27</sup> Forsberg, who was developing her method years before Bogart, takes this idea one step further by guiding her students into an amplified, highly environment-sensitive way. As students walk in space, interweaving with one another, listening becomes more intense, heightening their awareness of their position in space and their distance from or proximity to others. Forsberg likens this exercise to walking a tightrope:

There is no separation between the rope and the walker. You cannot think yourself into staying in balance. It takes intuitive sense.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, by temporarily eliminating the sense of sight, this exercise serves as a means of sharpening the student’s concentration.

When the players have solved the problem of walking blindly and have at least made an attempt at becoming attuned with the environment, they are instructed to open

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<sup>26</sup> Bogart and Landau, *The Viewpoints*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> In Viewpoints training, there are moments when participants are asked to close their eyes completely. For example, while standing in a circle, participants are asked to close their eyes and do a perfect jump together. In order to accomplish this task, everyone must be in tune with one another. It is a very difficult feat.

<sup>28</sup> Forsberg, telephone interview with Meghan Duffy, December 2008.

their eyes and to test their sensory awareness through a series of questions: Are they where they imagined themselves to be? Did they become more alert as they moved through space? How did solving the problem of this exercise manifest in their bodies? There is no judgment as to whether or not the players are right or wrong in their assessments. They are asked to simply make note of any discrepancies or congruencies and to reflect upon what they had imagined and what had actually occurred. They are then instructed to continue walking in space with eyes open. Now, as they move through space, they stop when they encounter one another, greet their fellow players, and give their first names. Repeating the first name of the person with whom one is experiencing an encounter marks each interaction. This portion of the exercise continues until everyone in the class has interacted with one another.

After everyone has participated in the greeting, or interaction, ritual, all sit in a circle, and the last element of the “Reflection” exercise is introduced. The players are instructed to “make groups of two.” Although “work in pairs” is actually the more conventional way of giving this direction, there is something significant about asking students to “make a group” rather than to “work with someone.” Forsberg states that she prefers “make groups of two” because this phrase leads players to consider the dynamics of “different group formations, different shapes, and different interactions.”<sup>29</sup> Within the larger circle created by the entire class is a smaller shape created by two bodies in space and in play with one another, as well as their spatial relationship to the whole group. Furthermore, asking the players “to make” groups, regardless of size, is a way of asking

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<sup>29</sup> Forsberg, interview by Meghan Duffy, December 2008.

them to create or, as *Webster's Dictionary* describes, "to cause to exist"<sup>30</sup> various shapes within their environment resulting in a space that they have transformed by using their bodies. Forsberg's approach engenders empowerment because the players are learning that they can bring something into existence; they can create something from nothing. Furthermore, her approach promotes and privileges creativity through play. Forsberg believes that "the most important activity for the player is to play like a child again,"<sup>31</sup> for it is through pure childlike play that the imagination is released. Forsberg's belief in the power of play is similar to both Boyd's and Spolin's and demonstrates that the roots of the art of American improvisation, at this point in its evolution, were not lost.

The participants in the two-person groups share their autobiographies with one another. When the interviewing ends, the circle once again opens up, resulting in yet another transformation of the space using the body. Each player then introduces her partner to the whole group, communicating the information provided by her partner. Superficially, this exercise is a type of icebreaker that helps the players begin to learn about one another. On a deeper level, it accomplishes at least three things: 1) Any discomfort that the novice player may have about speaking about herself is alleviated because her partner has taken on that responsibility; 2) There is a sharing of information, which results in an opening-up method of communicating. In *Improvisation and the Logic of Exchange in Socially Embedded Transactions*, McGinn and Keros describe opening-up improvisations as including the "free exchange of private information by both

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<sup>30</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/make>.

<sup>31</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 4.

parties and sincere attention given one another's ideas in the discussion."<sup>32</sup> This type of transaction, or engagement, is based on reciprocity, or in the language of improvisation, give-and-take. A dyad based on reciprocity promotes trust and ensemble building because there is a sense that all parties are fully engaged and all parties are being mutually honest;<sup>33</sup> 3) the players learn that active listening is crucial in developing relationships and in communication.

The next exercise, "Build A Story," builds on the foundation created in the sharing of the personal stories exercise. "Build A Story" takes the players from a one-on-one relationship, where listening is crucial, to a group relationship, where the need for active listening is heightened. It also demonstrates how the players can work collaboratively as a creative group by being in the moment, by listening, and by making a contribution. The physical shape of this exercise is the same as the "Reflection" circle. A player, who may be chosen by Forsberg if there are no volunteers, begins to tell a story; however, it is preferable for players to begin to initiate on their own. The initiator of the story only says a few lines, stops, and then turns to the player to the left, who continues the thread, saying a few lines, stopping, and then turning to the player on her left. The exercise ends when everyone has had the opportunity to contribute.

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<sup>32</sup> Kathleen L. McGinn and Angela T. Keros, "Improvisation and the Logic of Exchange in Socially Embedded Transactions," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 47 (September 2002): 453.

<sup>33</sup> See McGinn and Keros, "Improvisation and the Logic of Exchange in Socially Embedded Transactions," for a complete discussion of three types of transactions: opening-up improvisations (logic: full, mutual honesty), working-together improvisations (logic: cooperative problem-solving), haggling improvisations (logic: competitive attempt to get best possible deal for oneself).

“Build A Story” is another seemingly simple game; however, it is often one of the most difficult exercises for players to grasp. In order for the group to successfully do this exercise, each member must be fully engaged at all times with all the players, as well as with the words being spoken. In addition, they must work as a group to create a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, as well as a sense of logic. Novice players often try to disrupt the story in order to demonstrate their intelligence or to prove to the group how funny they are. Some players make incoherent contributions that do not add to a unified story because their active listening skills are not developed or they simply do not know what it means to listen.

In his book, *Improvise*, Mick Napier, a former student of Forsberg’s nephew, Martin de Maat, discusses how “*merely* listening” was quite problematic for him when he was first learning to improvise. For him, being told to listen inhibited him onstage:

I certainly learned to shut up and listen to my partner, and I guess it was noble, but it rendered me passive and motionless on stage. It was another opportunity to think, to get in my head. Listening didn’t help me at all at first.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, through doing, the foundation of improvisation, Napier began to understand how actively listening actually worked to his advantage. He learned that listening provides him with “valuable opportunities to say or do something relevant.”<sup>35</sup> In *Improvise*, which includes a short section entitled “Listen to Your Partner,” Napier mockingly points out that listening is supposed to be altruistic; however, the insight he gained about listening, ironically, is that it benefitted him. Napier misses the point that in actively listening rather

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<sup>34</sup> Mick Napier, *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

than acting “as if” he were listening, he became fully engaged with his partner, which led to richer creative opportunities. Eventually, he did experience a crystallizing moment when he finally understood that *merely* listening told him nothing about what he had to do in a scene: “Listening as a way to respond to given information through my characters is a whole different thing.”<sup>36</sup> Active listening is key in good communication and vital in improvisation.

Forsberg’s “Build A Story” exercise is similar to Spolin’s “Building A Story” games. In Spolin’s games, the players sit in a circle and one player begins telling a story. The teacher-director, or side-coach, takes on the responsibility of conducting the story by randomly choosing the sequence of the players and/or instructing the players to “Stop mid-phrase!” or “Stop mid-word!” or use full sentences.<sup>37</sup> In Spolin’s approach, the stakes are high for the players because the facilitator/teacher is in control of the game process. A player has no idea when she may have to contribute, so she must be actively listening. Forsberg’s approach puts the responsibility with the players from the beginning. Although she also side-coaches to keep the players focused and the game moving, shaping the story belongs to the players.

The last exercise Forsberg introduces in this first class is actually a children’s game. In *Something From Nothing*, Forsberg states that she uses a children’s game because it “prevents the mind of the player [from wondering. The game is meant] to keep all other thoughts out of their heads.”<sup>38</sup> She suggests using “A Tisket A Tasket,” “Merry

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>37</sup> See Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 166 & 381–82.

<sup>38</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 13.

Go ‘Round,’ or ‘Kitty in the Corner.’” Traditional children’s games are an inventive and creative way of introducing the novice players to the concept of “concentration of attention.” The players are already familiar with the games and their rules; therefore, they are liberated from their self-censor, which leads to a full engagement in the game and with the other players. All participants are given the opportunity and permission to enjoy the “happifying” element of play while learning an important performance technique. Students, who may have been judging their work in the sensory exercises in a negative way, now have an opportunity to redeem themselves. By using a traditional children’s game to teach this element of performance, Forsberg has connected Boyd’s foundational work with the traditional acting techniques that she knew her students would need to be successful improvisers, actors, and performers.

Furthermore, by using a traditional children’s game, Forsberg not only provides her students with a fun relief from the intense sensory work; she also introduces them to the experience of freely playing in the moment and of giving over their full attention to a physical activity. Both of these concepts are important in improvisation. Forsberg, who was trained by a former student of Stanislavsky, David Itkin, knows that learning to be in the moment and to fully engage in a physical activity are important in actor training. Forsberg’s calls this being in the “Now.” Stanislavsky refers to this as “concentration of attention.”

In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky states, “an actor must have a point of attention. . . The more attractive the object the more it will concentrate the attention.”<sup>39</sup> In

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<sup>39</sup> Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82. For more information on Stanislavsky’s  
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the case of using a children's game, the object on which the players focus are the rules of the game. In her discussion of "concentration of attention," Sonia Moore, whose actor training techniques are based on the Stanislavsky System, points out,

[an actor must give] maximum attention to the physical action and to all that his imagination is able to build around it. A concrete thought and a concrete physical action will hold the actor's attention. Fully concentrated attention depends on the thorough execution of the physical action.<sup>40</sup>

The process of playing the game relates to the "thorough execution of the physical action." According to the renowned actor and master acting teacher Michael Chekhov,

the actor who can concentrate well makes a stronger impression upon the audience because all his acting becomes clearly shaped, sure, and explicit. Vagueness disappears in his behavior on the stage, and his presence on the boards grows more and more impressive.<sup>41</sup>

In other words, full engagement and concentration on the activity of the moment results in clearer communications and connections with the audience and fellow players.

As the first term progresses, Forsberg introduces her students to stagecraft, which encompasses the technical aspects of performing. Her first explicit stagecraft exercise is called "Stage Composition." In this exercise, the class is divided into two groups; one

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concept of "attention," see also, Stanislavsky, "Concentration and Attention," in *An Actor's Work: A Student's Diary* (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Charles McGaw, Kenneth L. Stilson and Larry D. Clark, *Acting is Believing* 10<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor: Digested from the Teachings of Konstantin S. Stanislavski*, 2nd rev. edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 33. For more information on Stanislavsky and physical action, see Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky In Focus: An Acting Master For The Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Chekhov, *On The Technique of Acting*, 11.

group becomes the stage-players, the physical “doers,” and the other the audience-players, the active observers, with each group choosing a leader. Within the playing space, which can be a stage or an area marked off as the playing space, the stage-players create a “theatre” environment. This “theatre” space includes the neutral playing space where the players will perform and a seating area where the audience-players can witness the “onstage” action. The performing players use the empty playing space to create a variety of shapes by moving amongst each other, focusing on changing heights, directions, tempos, and spatial relationships, solely through physical movement. When the audience-player leader calls stop, the onstage players must then, with minimal movement, create a visual composition that is “appealing and likeable to the audience.”<sup>42</sup> Through their applause, the audience-players alert the onstage players that they have successfully solved the problem of creating an aesthetically pleasing picture where everyone is seen and everyone can see. Forsberg then directs the onstage players to take a company bow since this exercise is considered to be “the first time the players perform for each other.”<sup>43</sup> This exercise/performance, created solely through the use of bodies in space, introduces the players to working as an ensemble, to creating an aesthetically pleasing stage picture, and to embodying a performance ritual—taking a company bow.

An evaluation of how the onstage players accomplished their creative task ensues. The evaluation component is not a moment to personally criticize one another; it is a time to support fellow players in becoming aware of their inherent sense of stage composition and of their blind spots. According to Forsberg,

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<sup>42</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 15–16.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Evaluation is *not* criticism. It is *not* judgment of what was done or how the viewer *would* have done it. It is the value of what the players did. What was weak and needed more support? What was strong and worked? What awareness and exercise was needed to strengthen the weak moments? What was not useable in the scene? The unusable in a scene takes energy from the strength of the scene. Like a plant needs pruning in order to bloom, creativity needs editing to flourish. Were the players on stage placed in *relationship* to each other that made it appealing and likeable?<sup>44</sup>

In other words, the evaluation component is not a chance to point out subjective preferences. Instead, it is an opportunity for all participants to review what they have been learning and to articulate the process they are both observing and experiencing. In addition, the players learn how to critique, not criticize, in a way that is supportive, as well as learning the language that is specific to theatre and to improvisation to discuss what they are doing and how to discuss what they are observing in abstract terms. Until players are able to reflect back and articulate, in the appropriate language, the techniques being taught, they do not have a complete understanding of the art form. Moreover, if they are simply parroting back what they hear other players state in the evaluation process but are unable to do it themselves, then they do not completely understand the exercises or the art form.

A concept that is often difficult for novice players to understand and to do is that of working collaboratively. Improvisers work as a cohesive, creative group of individuals by striving to reach agreement within a scene. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin notes that group expression rests on all players reaching agreement, which removes “all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of competitiveness and open[s] the way for

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<sup>44</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, p. 16.

harmony.”<sup>45</sup> Without agreement, the group does not function as a group. Instead of working together, some players vie for personal attention, using other players to elevate their status within the group while less aggressive players become reticent and refuse to participate. Instead of creating open relationships and communicating as a group, which promotes trust and respect, players who struggle with the concept of agreement become hagglers, relating superficially from behind a mask or at arm’s length, thus inhibiting the discovery process.

McGinn and Keros, who have conducted research on improvisation and the “micro-processes underlying socially embedded transactions” in markets report that hagglers are competitive and “attempt to get the best possible deal for [themselves].”<sup>46</sup> Hagglers, they inform, persuade rather than listen. They make demands “rather than exploring alternative means of coming to a mutually agreeable solution.”<sup>47</sup> The hagglers privilege themselves and their goals rather than community and collaboration. For the renowned improvisation teacher, Keith Johnstone, hagglers would be considered blockers, individuals who refuse to accept another’s offer. Johnstone perceives blocking as aggressive and as preventing the action of a scene from developing.<sup>48</sup> In the marketplace, blocking or haggling may be the right path to take. In improvisation,

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<sup>45</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> McGinn and Keros, “Improvisation and Logic of Exchange in Socially Embedded Transactions,” 455.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.

<sup>48</sup> Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 94–95.

haggling, blocking, focusing solely on one's own goals in a scene is deadly; it is anathema to improvisation.

The improv comedy schools that emerged in the 1980s began teaching novice players a short-cut to help them with the concept of agreement called "Yes, &." Charna Halpern and Del Close, the founders of IO (formerly Improv Olympic), describe "Yes, &" as the principle whereby players agree with one another "to the Nth degree." If one player asks a question, "the other [player] must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small."<sup>49</sup> According to Halpern, Close, and Johnson, "a player knows that anything he says on stage will be immediately accepted by his fellow player, and treated as if it were the most scintillating idea ever offered to mankind."<sup>50</sup> "Yes, &" builds trust, respect, and ensemble; yet, it also has limitations.

"Yes, &" is based on the transmission of information and primarily on verbal communication. Using "Yes, &" as the foundation for an improvisation sets the stage for narrative-based scenes and requires the players to justify and structure all information in order to create a coherent story. According to Gary Schwartz, the President of The Spolin Center,

The effect of dealing with information and structure leads to often needing to freeze the action, and ask the audience to make sense out of what they are seeing. The audience or director then adds new information or an adjustment and the scene continues. Many times, freeze is used to [give

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<sup>49</sup> Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 46.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

actors a chance] to ‘make something different’ from the onstage action.<sup>51</sup>

Players who focus on sticking to the “Yes, &” rule can end up spending much of the time that they are playing a scene “in their heads” struggling to manipulate information that is not necessarily congruent with the action being played out or filling in blanks for the audience. Although “making sense” of what is transpiring in a scene can be exhilarating, it can also stifle free play. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out that in evaluating our actions, we cannot achieve flow. According to Csikszentmihalyi, in life, “we keep interrupting what we do with doubts and questions...in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic.”<sup>52</sup> If players must continually check in, they cannot experience the joy of organic and spontaneous play.

In discussing the introduction of the “Yes, &” rule into improvisation training, Forsberg cautions against relying on it as a means of reaching agreement. According to Forsberg, “Yes, &” can “throw players into stories that are treacherous.”<sup>53</sup> She sees this shortcut to agreement as contributing to posturing, superficial engagement, and storytelling that comes from “lay ons,” which means that one player is imposing something on her scene partner. In a sense, it might even be considered a form of coercion. In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham recounts a problem she encountered during an improvisation with her group Snazz ‘n’ Guffaw. She and her other

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<sup>51</sup> Gary Schwartz, “The Trouble with Yes, And...,” accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.spolin.com/troublewithyesand.htm>.

<sup>52</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 54.

<sup>53</sup> Forsberg, telephone interview with Meghan Duffy, April 2009.

troupe members had been taught the “Yes, &” rule, which she states worked well for them in theory but not necessarily in practice:

I was to play a scene with Patrick one of the leaders in the troupe. When the MC of the show asked the audience to suggest a location for the improvised scene, someone shouted, “Sultan’s harem!” I entered the stage miming a notebook and pen, intending to be a reporter who had come to interview the sultan. But before I had time to speak, Patrick shouted, “Wife! On your knees!”<sup>54</sup>

Although Seham had initiated an action, that of coming in with a notebook and pen, Patrick ignored what she had brought to the scene, taking control of the sketch. Seham characterizes her partner’s action as a power play. Wanting to demonstrate that she was a good improviser who plays by the “Yes, &” rule, even though it meant sacrificing her own creative voice, Seham dropped to her knees, allowing herself to fall victim to a “lay on.” In analyzing the dynamics of this scene, Seham acknowledges that she might have resisted her scene partner’s power play; however, she explains, “the moment passed too quickly, and my instincts reverted to the rules of the game and to the same conventional narrative that Patrick and I both knew.”<sup>55</sup>

Forsberg’s approach to teaching agreement is based on the concept of “acceptance and adjustment,” which is far richer than the trading-of-information based “Yes, &” rule that emerged in later improvisation training. Forsberg introduced “acceptance and adjustment” into improvisation training in the early 1970s as a technique to help her students grasp the significance of taking in what is being offered and building on it. As described by Forsberg, in the two-part “Acceptance Exercise,” one player “initiates an

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<sup>54</sup> Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, xii.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

instant environment and action” while a “second player accepts” and then “adjusts to the creativity.” The second player must then add to “the stimulation.”<sup>56</sup> The moment the players accomplish this, the scene is over. In the second part of this exercise, the first player initiates by creating an “instant environment and action”; however, this time, the second player does not accept or adjust to the first player’s creativity. Instead, the second player must use “the environment created by the first player”<sup>57</sup> and initiate a new action. The second player is now taking the first player’s initiation and building on it, or adapting it, to create something new that is rooted in action and not simply in a trading of information. The second player uses the environment created by the first player because the new action, or adaptation, must in some way relate to the first initiation.

Asking players to take an initiation and build on it, or adapt it, helps novice players understand the process of discovery in scene work and helps them to begin to understand that there must be a sense of logic to what they are creating. For Forsberg, “logic is a reasoning process of element to element, beginning with a premise which continues through thought and action.”<sup>58</sup> The creative logic in the improvisation is generally based in the environment and in the relationships being created by the players in the moment. Creative logic does not mean the players are attempting to create a scene that is close to dramatic realism. As Forsberg points out, “there is a stage logic and a life logic. [In improvisation and theatre], “we bounce out of life into a stage logic.”<sup>59</sup> Creative

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<sup>56</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

logic in this sense is closer to what Johan Huizinga describes as what occurs during play. Play, according to Huizinga, is neither “ordinary” nor “real” life. “It is rather a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own.”<sup>60</sup> This temporary sphere created by the players in an improvised scene is a “magic world” with its own sense of logic. As with the play world described by Huizinga, “it contains its own course and meaning.”<sup>61</sup>

After each player has had an opportunity to initiate, accept, and adjust, the players work in groups of three and do a set up for their scenes by agreeing on a Who/What/Where. They will now create longer scenes, focusing first on accepting and adapting while striving to bring the scenes to logical conclusions. In the second set of scenes, they start with a shared activity, such as building a campfire. The three players move the action of the scene along by continuing to accept one another’s initiations and by building on each initiation, both verbally and non-verbally. For example, player one may shiver, lamenting the cold weather. Player two then starts picking up wood to build a fire. Player three joins in the activity and states, “Make sure you get dry kindling.” Player three, still shivering, says, “Please hurry.” Throughout the scene, the players’ discoveries and initiations must maintain a sense of creative logic, and they must stay within the reality of the world that all three have created collaboratively. The focus throughout is total acceptance and adjustment until the scene comes to an organic, logical conclusion.<sup>62</sup> Rather than literally saying yes and then providing more information, the players are

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<sup>60</sup> Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 20.

saying yes to one another's initiations by accepting the offer and are then building on one another's creativity by adjusting to what has been offered and/or by discovering something new within the offer. A new discovery from our example is that player one may hand player three a jacket in order to keep her warm.

Agreement through "acceptance" is definitely linked to Spolin's work as it relates to the players finding group agreement. According to Spolin, "improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group play that material evolves for scenes and plays."<sup>63</sup> Forsberg's "adjustment and adaptation" are also connected to Stanislavsky's actor training techniques. In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky states, through the voice of the Director, adaptation means "both the inner and outer human means that people use in adjusting themselves to one another in a variety of relationships and also as an aid in effecting an object."<sup>64</sup> In Forsberg's approach, the players learn to make adjustments spontaneously while maintaining the logic of the scene through a focus on environment, character, relationship, and activity. By "doing" agreement and adjustment in a creative way, rather than learning to follow a rule, players have a deeper learning experience. The concepts are embodied, becoming a "way of being" that moves beyond the class or performance space. Acceptance, agreement, adjustment, adaptation become a "way of being" in life. If one accepts and understands these concepts, Forsberg promises, "life will be better."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 242.

<sup>65</sup> Forsberg, interviewed by Meghan Duffy, April 2009.

Toward the end of the first-term, Forsberg introduces the players to performance techniques. One of the performance-based exercises, “Passion,” focuses on helping the novice improvisers play with high energy and to “take stage.” A player’s/actor’s energy is key in keeping a performance vibrant and in keeping an audience engaged. Energy is the word usually used by actors and directors when analyzing the failure or success of a scene or beat within a scripted play. Forsberg chooses to use the word passion instead because it has a sense of the immediate, of the personal; it is, she believes, a trigger word that can reach down into an individual’s core. “Passion,” she states, “has love in it. Energy is adrenaline and can be manufactured. Passion is a way of being.”<sup>66</sup> In the “Passion” exercise, all players walk through space, with each taking a turn calling “me.” Taking focus by calling “me” is reminiscent of the “Character of Space” exercise introduced in the early part of the term.<sup>67</sup> In “Passion,” just as in “Character of Space,” when the other players hear this, they must stop, look, and listen, giving full attention to “me.” “Me,” who has chosen a thought, a thing, a feeling, or a type of person that has excited or agitated her, now has the spotlight and must take stage and perform full out. The player must demonstrate a full commitment to communicating what she has chosen and express, through sound, movement, and language, the way in which the thought, thing, feeling, or person has affected her. As the players take the stage, Forsberg side-coaches: “Get into it and do it with high energy. Passionately.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 20.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 2 of this dissertation for a full description of “Character of Space.”

<sup>68</sup> Forsberg, *Something From Nothing*, 20.

By the end of the first term, players are relating to one another and playing in their scene work on an intense level. At this point, they are a functioning group that understands working collaboratively, that is trusting of one another, and that is continually developing their communication skills. Forsberg now begins to introduce more sophisticated concepts that will be developed further in the second term. In an exercise called “Compassion and Empathy,” players are asked to reach out to one another in a more intimate way. In this exercise, one player initiates by being in need of emotional, physical, intellectual and/or sensual<sup>69</sup> support; the other player must demonstrate “great compassion and empathy” for her partner’s plight. Forsberg notes, “This exercise requires deep penetration into thoughts, feelings and/or actions.”<sup>70</sup> The obvious benefit of this exercise is the interpersonal connections that the players must make in order to do the exercise; however, it also supports the development of social intelligence.

Being socially aware means understanding the needs of others, which may be communicated through non-verbal emotional cues. An individual with heightened social awareness has tapped into her primal empathy ability and has a well-developed empathic accuracy. A second element involved in the development or possession of social intelligence is social facility, which includes concern or compassion for the other, and then acting on it accordingly.<sup>71</sup> Forsberg’s “Compassion and Empathy” exercise supports

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<sup>69</sup> In Forsberg’s work, sensual means an influence from the environment. Someone who needs sensual support needs to be reconnected to her environment.

<sup>70</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 84.

the development of these two components of social intelligence. Once this warm-up exercise has been completed, all players work in groups of two on their agreed set up for a scene, which should include this new element. A heightened engagement between the players and new ways of relating to one another should now be part of the student's experience.

The first term ends with a revue, which is also a review of the concepts to which students have been introduced over the eight weeks of the term. The class is divided up into groups with each group choosing a theme that they will play out. Each group then subdivides into smaller groups that will improvise scenes based on the chosen theme. A list of the proposed scenes that has a logic and dramatic/performance arc is created, which becomes the "running order" of the show. The players will use the exercises from this term in any combination they choose as a summative assessment of their training. Each scene will have a beginning, middle, and end. When all scenes have been performed, the players come together and take a bow. The players then

walk around together and move as they please and make loud wonderful sounds. Stop, exhale, and the first term has reached its completion.<sup>72</sup>

This ritual signifies the end of the novice-stage and celebrates the establishment of a new community of improvisational artists. The players are ready to move on to the second term, which focuses on creative logic in relation to human behavior through character development.

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<sup>72</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 22.

## Second Term

The overarching concept for the second term is “expansions and extensions,” which requires the players to move beyond the parameters of the onstage scene they have created. “Extensions” refer to the environment that is beyond the audience’s view. For example, if the players have agreed that their scene will take place in a living room, they may also bring in elements from the front yard that lies just beyond the walls of the living room. These elements are brought into the scene through the players’ senses. For example, they may introduce what they see, smell, and/or hear from the world outside the living room. Forsberg points out that each extension of the environment is solely the “creation of the player.”<sup>73</sup> Of course, as learned in the first-term, the creativity must have a stage logic. “Expansions,” as described by Forsberg, have “to do with the player creating more with which to work.” In this term, then, the players learn to build on the concepts of acceptance, adjustment, and adapting one another’s initiations. They are now learning to expand initiations, which is accomplished through each player’s sensual center and through her imagination. The players are now moving into the realm of creating fuller experiences for the audience and for themselves by improvising scenes that are multi-dimensional.

The “Telephone,” which is usually introduced as the first exercise of the second term, introduces the players to the idea that there is more to the present moment than meets the eye. In this exercise, three players make individual contributions to the group scene by creating offstage lives that inform and influence the onstage life they are sharing. The players accomplish this task by agreeing on an environment where the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 23.

action of the scene is taking place and by making and/or receiving telephone calls. The onstage environment that they create should be detailed and specific. There is one phone in the room that is created out of “space substance” rather than being an actual prop. The players must use the same phone; therefore, it must have the same weight and shape for all players. In addition, all players must know exactly where the phone has been placed in the environment. If the first player carries it around and places it on a table on the opposite side of the “where” they have all created, the second player must pick it up from that exact spot.

The scene begins with an agreed upon activity, which might be as simple as washing, drying, and putting the dishes away. At some point, player one answers a personal phone call that has a significant impact on his character. Player one may now take this opportunity to make a discovery, or initiate a new action, based on the phone call. The other two players must then adjust to the first player’s creative expression or make a new discovery by using player one’s offer. For example, player one may get a call informing him that his lost dog is now at the pound. She will have a specific response to this news and will bring both the news and her response into the scene. An event that has occurred outside the immediate environment created by the players has now had an impact on the immediate space and the other players. Player one’s response to the telephone call has an impact on the scene as does the response of the other two players to the news and to player one. When it becomes apparent to the players that they have exhausted this beat of the scene, player two makes a phone call.

The motivation for player two’s call must be rooted in stage logic, a concept that was introduced in the first-term. Player two may call another friend to inform her that the

dog has been found and that she is now available to go to the movies. This second call is personal and does not have a significant emotional impact on player two. This call is not necessarily contributing to furthering the action of the scene at this point; instead, it serves the purpose of marking the end of one beat and the beginning of a new beat. For example, player two may state: “Now that Butch is safe, I’m going to call Ellie and let her know that we can go see *Batman* after all.” Eventually, player three answers a call that will have a significant impact on all three players. This third call serves to heighten the connection between the players, as well as the action of the scene. The caller may inform player three that she knows their neighbor was responsible for letting Butch out of the yard. All players once again converge in a shared experience—the impact of losing their dog.

The last beat of the scene is a fourth phone call that all three players make together. It is a long distance call to someone with whom they all share a relationship and to a person with whom they just want to touch base. In continuing the logic of the scene, they may be reporting that Butch is safe and that they are going to pick him up at the pound. This phone call represents the restoration of the group and ends the scene.

The four phone calls are not made in quick succession. In between each call, the characters must interact with one another and do so through the agreed upon action and environment. The interactions taking place between the calls is actually as important, or perhaps even more so, than the primary focus of the exercise—the making of the calls. In addition to introducing the concept of extending what is happening on stage, this exercise requires all players to remain engaged with one another and with their environment while also dividing focus with off stage happenings. Throughout the “Telephone” exercise, the

three players must continually and deftly move between involvement and non-involvement with one another. This exercise sets up a situation that requires spontaneous involvement obligations. In *Interaction Ritual*, Erving Goffman points out “becoming spontaneously involved in something, when it is a duty to oneself or other to do so, is a ticklish thing.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, the responsibility is not easy to fulfill. In this exercise, the three players must solve the problem of making and receiving calls, of responding within the logic of the scene, and of being aware of the focus and action of the scene. The “Telephone” exercise then also allows the players to engage in the work of fulfilling social responsibilities through group process.

After each player makes or receives her particular phone call, she must once again become part of the scene. In other words, all three players must again interact as a group of three. Accomplishing the restoration of the group is not necessarily an easy task to accomplish. The player who momentarily stepped aside to make or receive the call is obligated to re-integrate into the scene. In turn, it is also the obligation of the other two players to re-integrate the individual who had to momentarily leave the action of the scene as required by the exercise. This process of re-integration fits into Goffman’s theory of interaction ritual. Goffman points out that in a social situation where individuals are obligated to interact with one another, all of the interactants are responsible for maintaining involvement. He states,

The individual’s obligation to maintain spontaneous involvement in the conversation and the difficulty of doing so place him in a delicate position. He is rescued by his co-participants, who control their own actions so that he will not be forced from appropriate involvement. But the

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<sup>74</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 115.

moment he is rescued, he will have to rescue someone else and so his job as interactant is only complicated the more.<sup>75</sup>

In this exercise, each player is given the opportunity to rescue a fellow player—the one who is stepping outside the action to make or receive the call—and to experience the difficulties inherent in that social obligation. This exercise, then, serves more than one theatrical and improvisation purpose as described by Forsberg. This exercise also supports social interaction awareness, which works with Goffman’s theories.

As a sociologist, Goffman discusses interaction ritual and the rules of etiquette that individuals follow, or do not follow, in social situations. The interactions will differ based on the environment in which groups of individuals are interacting. If the players in the “Telephone” exercise are interacting in a casual space, such as a friend’s living room, the stepping out to make a call and re-integrating may be less difficult for the players. If they are in a corporate boardroom, there may be a greater level of difficulty because the rules of the environment will be formal. Of course, incongruity between action and social setting can lead to the creation of a humorous scene; however, purposefully focusing on the comedy of the scene is not part of the exercise. The relationships, interactions, and re-integrations of each player is a point of concentration with any humor resulting as a by-product of the actions of the players and their abilities to overcome the obstacles presented in the scene.

Another way of looking at the interaction obligation and re-integration task within the “Telephone” exercise is through the concept of social intelligence. In *Social Intelligence*, contemporary scholar, Daniel Goleman, discusses social interactions in

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 115–16.

relationship to social cognition. He points out that individuals who are “adept at this variety of cognition” have the ability “to find solutions to social dilemmas.”<sup>76</sup> In other words, individuals who have the ability to process social information will demonstrate a greater skill in fulfilling their obligations in ensuring that all players are part of the group. In the “Telephone” exercise, players are given the opportunity to practice reading the individual cues that their scene partners are providing, both verbal and non-verbal, and then acting on them. The players have an opportunity to work on their social skills and to “mobilize” their social cognition.<sup>77</sup>

An exercise that focuses on using the space beyond the audience’s view is “Extension of Environment.” To begin, three players agree on an onstage environment that they will create collaboratively, who their characters are, and what their relationships are to one another. Player one, onstage alone, initiates by introducing what he is seeing through an open window, from a balcony, or perhaps through a telescope or set of binoculars. Once player one has set up the offstage environment, player two enters and describes an event that has just taken place offstage. Both players respond in the moment to what has just been introduced. Player three enters and responds to the other players’ behavior, adjusting and adapting to the moment. Player three then creates the connection between the first two players’ initiation by providing a general history of their shared experiences up to this point in time, a reminiscence of their shared lives. Players one and two begin to add to player three’s story. All three players ultimately become involved and

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<sup>76</sup> Goleman, *Social Intelligence*, 90.

<sup>77</sup> See Goleman for more information on the definition of social intelligence, 82–101.

relate to one another by recounting individual past experiences, either from their immediate or distance pasts.

The “Extension of Environment” exercise uses storytelling to teach players how to extend and expand the onstage life of the characters. In this exercise, storytelling is also used as a form of communication that serves as the basis of creating and maintaining the onstage relationships. The players do not just stand and listen, which is not the art of improvisation at its best. As in the “Build A Story” exercise introduced in the first-term, the players make contributions, providing images of who their characters are and what their characters’ life experiences have been. In *The Life Story Interview*, Robert Atkinson points out that storytelling plays an important role in an individual’s life. Atkinson asserts that a story does more than provide basic information about an event. Stories, he tells us,

Increase our working knowledge of ourselves because we discover deeper meaning in our lives through the process of reflecting and putting the events, experiences, and feelings that we have lived into oral expression.<sup>78</sup>

This exercise does not require the players to reveal personal information about themselves; however, improvisers often do draw on personal stories. Drawing on one’s own life as a means of inspiration and creativity is also found in Stanislavsky’s acting techniques, particularly emotional recall. The “Extension of Environment” exercise, then, is another example of the connection between traditional actor training and the art of American improvisation. Although they are active in the present moment, they are also drawing on shared memories as material for their scene. They are bouncing back and forth from their shared pasts (their memories) to the present moment. One player’s

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 1.

initiation stimulates a memory in a second player who stimulates a memory in the third player.

In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavsky, through the voice of the Director, informs his students that

A visual memory can reconstruct an inner image of some forgotten thing, place or person, your emotion memory can bring back feelings you have already experienced. They may seem to be beyond recall, when suddenly a suggestion, a thought, a familiar object will bring them back in full force.<sup>79</sup>

In the “Extension of Environment” exercise, both visual and auditory cues are used to trigger the memory of a past incident. Player one sets the stage with images he is observing/creating as he looks outside of her immediate environment. Player two brings in more information, recounting an event, through movement, sound, and language, that she has just witnessed. Player three takes on the responsibility of bridging the initiations of his scene partners through a story to which all will contribute. Working through this exercise, students experientially tap into their innate creativity while keeping their eyes on the “ball,” which is relating in the present moment, and responding in the moment to a memory trigger. Stanislavsky believes that “perfectly developed technique cannot be compared with the art of nature.”<sup>80</sup> We must, then, find a means of becoming the rulers

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<sup>79</sup> Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 182. See also Bella Merlin, *Konstantin Stanislavsky* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Merlin points out that Stanislavsky identified two types of memory: sense and emotion. In improvisation, players can draw on both types of memory. For more discussions regarding Stanislavsky and emotion memory, see Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Stanislavsky In Focus: An Acting Master For The Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2009) and Richard Hornby, *Script Into Performance: A Structuralist Approach* (New York: Applause Books, 1999), 46–7.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

“over our complicated creative apparatus.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, the players/actors must exercise control—without being controlling. This exercise contributes to acquiring that skill through its points of concentration: relationships between the players, focus on the environment, and find the moment for a memory. In an alternate version, the players create a scene where they are building “a clear picture of what could happen.”<sup>82</sup> In this version, the players are still in the present moment, relating to each other in the “Now,” while telling their stories; however, the stories that they are telling are not the focus of the scene. Instead, infusing the scene with “life” is the focus. This alternate version requires students to also stand outside of the actual experience as well as relate to one another in a spontaneous way.<sup>83</sup>

When exercises such as “Telephone” and “Extending the Environment” are introduced, many novice players believe that these “games” will be too easy. However, in the doing, they discover that the exercises are far more complicated than they had

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>82</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 26.

<sup>83</sup> See Jonathan Fox, *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (New Paltz: NY: Tusitala Press, 1994). In his discussion about improvisational actors skills, Jonathan Fox notes that in non-scripted theatre actors must also be playwrights. This does not mean that they are standing around simply talking. It means that the skilled improvisational actor has “a sense of form and a linguistic inventiveness, an intelligence, in fact, which comes from the ability to stand apart from experience. Much of the literary actors’ task is to put themselves as fully as possible *in* the fictive moment, whereas the non-scripted theatre actor, while needing to be *in* just as fully, must also understand and comment on the scene by inventing it as it happens.” (p. 104). Although Forsberg, and probably all improvisers, would argue with the idea that they are inventing something rather than allowing it to happen, Fox’s point is significant because actors must be aware of their environments at all times. Moreover, all actors, whether doing improvisational or scripted work, generally work *in* and *out* of the fictive moment. To work with an actor who cannot work on more than one track is dangerous.

imagined. Individual bravado and talent is not enough. Only when a sense of trust is developed between the players, when all know that they will be taken care of by their partners, can each player begin to experience a freeing moment. In working together, the fear of not knowing is abated, resulting in the player being in the moment and being able to focus on what is happening in the “Now.” When players understand that they have built bridges between each other, the door to experiencing flow has been opened, which can result in moments when a player feels that she is in the zone of peak performance. A peak performance denotes a period of transcendence, when the cultural and personal ties that bind have been loosened and the blocks to creativity have been removed. The refinement of involvement skills in an improvisation, in combination with performing in the “flow” zone, can serve as a trigger for a peak experience, a crystallizing moment when the individual “gets it.” As Goffman points out in *Interaction Ritual*, a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement is the spark that “lights up the world.”<sup>84</sup> Recognizing this can be a peak experience for an individual.

When students have become comfortable with extending the environment, Forsberg introduces “Expansion of Characters.” In this exercise, students are introduced to the idea of character emotions by creating an emotional symphony. At this point in their training, working with audience suggestions is also introduced. The workshop players are split into two groups. The onstage group solicits a suggestion from the audience group. The audience group is asked to provide “a feeling or state of being for each player” in the onstage group.<sup>85</sup> One onstage-player is chosen to be the conductor of

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<sup>84</sup> Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, p. 116–17.

<sup>85</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 27.

the emotional symphony, which has three movements. The first movement is the natural sound of the feeling assigned to each player; the second movement is played through language that expresses that feeling. In the first two movements, the players do not “transact”; they do not relate to one another. The players proceed in the same way that a symphony orchestra would perform. There is a group sound composed of all the individual sounds made by the various instruments. In the improvisation, the instruments are the individual “selves.” In the third movement of this improvised emotional symphony, the players do “relate and *transact* the feelings.”<sup>86</sup> Once again, the players are involved in an interaction ritual that supports collaboration and creative community while teaching the players the significance of giving and taking focus. The concept of “Expansion of Character” is reinforced through other exercises, such as “Inner and Outer Action,” which teaches students to differentiate between the inner life of a character and how it is manifested outwardly through behavior. The two do not have to be congruent; however, cues, or foreshadowing, will become apparent as the scene progresses. This exercise is initially done non-verbally. Eventually, once the players begin to understand, experientially, how this works for the stage, language is introduced. The players then begin to focus on word choices, as well as tone and delivery, to express the inner lives of their characters.

In the second term, Forsberg also introduces her students to the significant role that theatre plays in culture. Forsberg calls this: “Why People Go to the Theatre and the Variations of How the Theatre is Used.”<sup>87</sup> This unit of the term is designed to instill in

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 30.

the players an understanding of genres and how audiences are affected by what they see onstage. She uses genre concepts to spark the players' imaginations by asking them to explore types of theatre or films with which they, as audience members, are familiar. For example, in the exercise "Sensationalism," students work with creating high stakes scenarios based on environmental disasters, which can be extended to science fiction elements as well. The disasters range from natural phenomenon, such as earthquakes, to attacks by some sort of creatures. The atmosphere the players create becomes the point of concentration of the scene rather than a preoccupation with trying to produce an emotion such as fear or anxiety in the face of danger.

In "Sensationalism," Forsberg is building on the "Character of Space" concept introduced in the first term. The character of a space is the overarching mood that defines the environment where the action of a scene is taking place. In *Something from Nothing*, Forsberg explains the significance of giving a space character and remarks that improvisers are responsible for filling the playing space with a mood or feeling. The players must use sound and movement to create the atmosphere; describing the atmosphere or mood will not engage the audience in the same way as observing someone living through the experience, albeit in an improvisation. In explaining the importance of giving the space a character or filling it with atmosphere, Forsberg refers to both the Greek Athenaeum and Shakespeare's Globe theatre, pointing out that in both these theatres, actors performed outdoors during daylight hours. She states, "when the scene was to be night, the performer created the character of space through their sensual center

and defined verbalization.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, through a heightened use of one’s senses, in conjunction with clear language, the players sparked the audience’s imaginations, bringing them into the world of the play.

The concept of a space having character is found in Michael Chekhov’s actor training techniques. Chekhov, who was trained by Stanislavsky at the MAT, privileges the concept of “Atmosphere,” considering it the key element in awakening “Feelings within us that are the essence of our art.”<sup>89</sup> In *On the Technique of Acting*, Chekhov points out that some actors view the theatre as a place where things “must be visible and audible.”<sup>90</sup> For these actors, the theatre is only used in one particular manner, as a place where the material world is re-created. For them, there must be set pieces and the sound of voices speaking scripted texts. For other actors, Chekhov states, “the stage is always filled with Atmospheres, the source of ineffable moods and waves of feeling that emanate from one’s surroundings.”<sup>91</sup> Actors who view the playing space in this way envision the limitless possibilities that the theatre and the stage hold for the creative artist, for new visions of the world, and for new ways of being.

In addition to working with character of space, or “Atmosphere,” in the “Sensationalism” exercise, Forsberg’s players are also given the opportunity to experience the different ways in which they might be using sound and movement based on a theatrical or film genre. They also witness the myriad of ways in which individuals

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>89</sup> Chekhov, *On The Technique of Acting*, 31.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 26.

respond to disasters. During a catastrophe, one person may be too petrified to move; another may heroically jump into action; a third may be despondent.<sup>92</sup> All responses are authentic and provide the players with insights into human behavior, including their own. As Frost and Yarrow point out in *Improvisation in Drama*, in improvisational work, there is a major focus “on the discovery or disclosure of the full self (or Self, to give it its Jungian emphasis) through group activity.”<sup>93</sup> In placing an exercise such as “Sensationalism” in a “uses of theatre” category, Forsberg is providing her students with an opportunity to play out an idealized version of themselves and perhaps a version that is not so palatable. They also are given the opportunity to observe how heroic and non-heroic behavior affects others and what it is to be a victim. This may be considered a paratheatrical use of theatre and improvisation, which speaks to the ways in which Grotowski and Boal have used theatre and improvisation.<sup>94</sup>

Other exercises in this “Uses of Theatre” category include “Stimulation.” In this exercise, players are asked to create scenes that excite the audience by waking up “old thoughts and [introducing] new thoughts”<sup>95</sup> that warrant consideration. For example, the topic of the scene may be healthcare, unemployment, new technologies, or any current

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<sup>92</sup> For a more complete discussion of Atmospheres, see Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*, 26–36.

<sup>93</sup> Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 90.

<sup>94</sup> See Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002); James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta, *Jerzy Grotowski* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1979); Augusto Boal, *The Aesthetics of the Theatre of the Oppressed*, translated by Adrian Jackson (New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>95</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 31.

cultural event. Although Forsberg does not make this claim, a connection between “Stimulation” and dialectical or Brechtian theatre can be made. To stimulate the audience into thinking and contemplating action, as opposed to using theatre as a form of escapism, is tantamount to Brechtian theatre theory.<sup>96</sup> Forsberg also introduces the players to Realism by asking them to create scenes that draw the audience through identification with the characters and situations created by the players.

### **Third Term**

By the end of the second term, players have worked with genres and creating onstage and offstage lives in order to enhance the onstage action. In the third term, players discover the dimensions of characters from within the self. In doing character work, Forsberg’s approach differs from Spolin. Whereas Spolin defines character as “people; human beings; real people; the physical expression of a person; speaks for himself or herself,”<sup>97</sup> Forsberg specifically discusses character as “the attribution of human feelings to non-human beings, objects, [and] natural phenomena.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, she broadens the way a character can be imagined and opens the door to non-realism approaches. Players can be animals, creatures from another planet, molecules; the possibilities are only limited by the player’s imagination.

Forsberg breaks down the concept of character into three different dimensions, specifically describing each. The first dimension character is expressed as follows:

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<sup>96</sup> Brecht was a model for the original Compass Players. For more information, see Coleman, *The Compass*.

<sup>97</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 379.

<sup>98</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 33.

Very exaggerated beyond true behavior and magnified, overstated, posturing and indicating. It is a shallow demonstration of what the character is feeling and thinking.<sup>99</sup>

This type of character, or person, would be considered superficial and cartoonish. The second dimension character is a cliché. Forsberg describes this character in relation to art:

In a painting, the character would be like a “relief,” which is a projection of a figure from a plane surface.<sup>100</sup>

In other words, this character has a bit more depth than a dimension one character, but it is still not representative of a fully developed being or creature. The third dimension character is the fully realized character that represents a depth of feelings and thoughts. Forsberg describes this character as having “recognizable characteristics of reasonable thinking and significant needs and wants with which the audience can identify with inner and outer components.”<sup>101</sup>

In teaching characterization, Forsberg emphasizes behavior. Players are asked to behave like a certain type of personality based on their conceptions of that “type” of person’s behavior. To fine-tune their physicalizations of personality types, Forsberg asks players to observe the behavior of the people who move in and out of their lives, including their fellow players. In one exercise, players are asked to use fellow workshop attendees as models. The player uses that individual’s gestures, body movements, vocal quality, and language to bring an improvised character to life. This is a powerful exercise that is filled with both fun and anxiety, fun for the players “doing” the person and

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 33.

anxiety-ridden for the individual watching herself being played by someone else. In this exercise, the player being “played” often sees physical habits and speech patterns of which she has been unaware, which can be enlightening as well as painful. At the end of the exercise, those “doing” a fellow player reach out and hug her. In another exercise later in the term, players are asked again to chose “to do” a fellow player, walking and talking like her, within the context of a scene.

“Doing” a fellow player in a scene where relationships must be developed and where players are interacting and engaging with one another supports the players in learning how different personality types interact socially. In addition, players learn how behavior is mutable and flexible based on the power dynamic of the situation. In focusing on relationships, players come to see power as fluid. Power does not necessarily remain in one individual’s domain; instead, it flows from one person to another. In the case of improvisation, it also flows from the onstage players to the audience and back again.

Forsberg understood this dynamic and drew on psychological theories, primarily on her training in transactional analysis (TA), to create exercises that highlight human behavior, both its capriciousness and inflexibility. An exercise that still resonates with students after as much as thirty years is “Persecutor/Rescuer/Victim.” This exercise is closely related to a game individuals play, particularly those in the “helping” professions such as physicians and teachers, called “The Rescue Game.” It is important to note that the word “game” has a different meaning in improvisation than it does in TA. In an improvisation game, players focus on problem-solving and authentic engagements. These games are also often referred to as operational structures. In transactional analysis, as its creator Eric Berne explains, “games are superficially rational, with a concealed

motivation.”<sup>102</sup> In *Games People Play*, Berne explains the distinction between operations, or simple and honest transactions, and the concept of games in transactional analysis:

An *operation* is a simple transaction or set of transactions undertaken for a specific, stated purpose. If someone asks for reassurance, and after it is given turns it in some way to the disadvantage of the giver, that is a game. Superficially, then, a game looks like a set of operations, but after the payoff it becomes apparent that these “operations” were really *maneuvers*; not honest requests but moves in the game.<sup>103</sup>

Games in TA are not “happifying” nor are they based on honest, spontaneous engagement. A TA game always has a “gimmick.”<sup>104</sup>

One “gimmick” is rooted in an individual’s need to acquire a sense of power in a situation in which she does not have any obvious agency. Clinical psychologist and transactional analyst Claude Steiner believes that powerlessness is at the heart of all “Rescue” games such as “Persecutor/Rescuer/Victim.” In *Scripts People Live*, he asserts that powerlessness as a way of being is taught in childhood by authority figures, most likely as part of the family dynamic. Steiner points out that there are three areas of power which are attacked in every family:

The power to love, that is, the power to successfully relate to other human beings; the power to think, that is the capacity to understand the world; and the power to enjoy

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<sup>102</sup> Eric Berne in *Classics in Group Psychotherapy*, edited by K. Roy MacKenzie (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 203.

<sup>103</sup> Berne, *Games People Play*, 48–49.

<sup>104</sup> For a further discussion of TA games, see Eric Berne in *Games People Play*, and *Classics in Group Psychotherapy*, edited by K. Roy MacKenzie (New York: Guilford Press, 1992).

ourselves, that is the capacity to experience and make full use of our bodies and emotions.<sup>105</sup>

Children who are not allowed to enjoy the things they can do, “such as love and understand the world and themselves,” become the victims of their oppressors, the parent or caretaker who denies them their right to express themselves, also known as the Persecutor, and the Rescuer who prohibits them from expressing themselves in the name of love and caring and then does it for them.<sup>106</sup> As a result, individuals get caught up in what Viola Spolin refers to as the “approval/disapproval” syndrome. According to Spolin, a constant need for approval/disapproval results “in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing.”<sup>107</sup> Spolin believed that the focus on problem solving in the games would result in “an awakening sense of self,” and make the need for the “status given by approval/disapproval” to disappear.<sup>108</sup> Forsberg is far more direct with her students when it comes to issues of power and agency. Her words, “write a new script,” are emblazoned on many a Players Workshop alumni’s psyches.

Forsberg’s theory of personal or “life-script writing” comes directly from her transactional analysis work. In drawing on the concept of “scripts,” Forsberg is pushing her students/players onto the path of awareness and autonomy. Her “Persecutor/Rescuer/Victim” exercise then does more than introduce her students to characterization; it also moves them along the path to self-actualization by liberating

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<sup>105</sup> Claude Steiner, *Scripts People Live* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 149.

<sup>106</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the Persecutor/Rescuer/Victim roles as defined in Transactional Analysis, see Claude Steiner, *Scripts People Live*, 149.

<sup>107</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 7.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

them from automatic behavior rooted in societal and childhood dictates and oppressions. Forsberg's belief that individual's can rewrite their life scripts is first introduced in "The Pledge." In their initiation/welcoming ritual, the "lay" persons promise to change their thinking about their belief systems ("beliefs about life are not a prison"), and to become aware of their behavior ("automatic behavior is over"). At this point in the third term, when they can call themselves improvisers, they are brought face-to-face with the negative impact playing certain life roles and adhering to old life scripts has on the "self."

In the "Persecutor/Rescuer/Victim" exercise, players work in groups of three, agreeing on a Who/What/Where and choosing which of them will take on the roles of Persecutor, Rescuer, and Victim. The scene begins with a premise that can be as obvious as a car accident or as subtle as a family gathering. The initial beats of the scene are played out as follows:

- Persecutor attacks Victim through accusation
- Victim is terrorized
- Rescuer defends Victim

Once the players have established their characters, they switch roles. The next beats are played out as follows:

- Victim turns on Rescuer becoming Persecutor
- Rescuer becomes Victim
- Persecutor becomes the Rescuer<sup>109</sup>

The players can do one more switch, giving each player an opportunity to "do" each type. Forsberg sees this exercise as not only highlighting certain behavioral patterns, but also demonstrating the interdependency of these personality types. In other versions of this game, players can choose any personality type, such as the "Doer," the "Doubter," and

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<sup>109</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 35.

the “Clown,” and play out a dramatic triangle with each player switching twice in order to experience each position. By “doing” each type, the players experience both the positions of power and the positions of powerlessness, learning that power and powerlessness are not stagnate states of being.

By the end of the third term, players have discovered and explored the dimensions of characters and have had the opportunity to experience that characters, and humans, do not operate in isolation. If the players have truly grasped the concept of the fluidity of life positions, and have gained an understanding of how they may be slipping into automatic behavior, or how they may have been relying on destructive schema, they may have gained a greater sense of self-awareness. Berne informs that self-enlightenment requires “living in the here and now, and not in the elsewhere, the past or the future.”<sup>110</sup> The players may have also gained an understanding that they have options in life, which translates to “the freedom to choose and express one’s feelings from the assortment available” to them.<sup>111</sup> Lastly, by this point in their training, players may have attained a greater degree of autonomy, which is the liberation from the cultural ties that bind and the overthrow of life’s irrelevancies.<sup>112</sup>

#### **Fourth Term**

In the fourth term, the players are introduced to scene structuring, or finding the beginning, middle, and end of a scene. Those who do not understand the art of improvisation often believe that anything goes; players just get up on stage and do

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<sup>110</sup> Berne, “Autonomy,” in *Games People Play*, 178–181.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 178–181.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 178–181.

whatever comes to them. This is not the case. Improvised scenes have a structure that includes a stage logic, the creation of characters with “credentials,” environments, and activities. In *Something from Nothing*, Forsberg points out that in building anything, “one must have a foundation or all comes tumbling down.”<sup>113</sup> She goes on to state, “this same principal relates to the composition of a scene or play that is improvised.”<sup>114</sup>

In improvisation, when there is a strong foundation, a strong structure, the player experiences a great freedom and ability to “deviate from the basics. This is how a new form can be created.”<sup>115</sup> Taking a basic scene structure and expanding and/or transforming it is similar to what a jazz musician does. The jazz musician takes the basic chord structure of a tune and plays within it, around it, and on top of it. The musician, and in the case of theatrical improvisation, the players, eventually come to own and embody the structures so that they become lost in the “flow” of creativity. The approach to the work is deepened and in some cases, has the musician/player’s aesthetic stamp. The musician/player’s work then is no longer identified as a structure; it is now her creative expression. It is art.

When improvisers have embodied the structures and have learned to expand and experiment with them, they often experience what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to as “flow,” which is characterized by a total engagement in the process of an activity. For an improviser, “flow” can occur when the player embraces a state of “not knowing,” has engaged with her fears, has taken a risk, and has discovered she can

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<sup>113</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 41.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

survive ambiguity. This knowledge and sense of accomplishment may trigger what psychologist Abraham Maslow calls a peak experience, a crystallizing moment when the world and the self seem different, or transformed. Forsberg asserts, that it is at this point in the work that “the dimension and dynamics of newly discovered resources in the player”<sup>116</sup> are stimulated.

In the beginning of the fourth term, students are introduced to the myriad of ways that scenes can conclude so that they learn, experientially, how to sense the ending of a scene, or beat, in performance. The exercises that Forsberg uses to teach players how to end scenes requires the players to take full responsibility for choices, which affect the individual player and the group. Learning how to end scenes, organically, supports students in understanding what occurs in interaction rituals, without using the term directly. In other words, students are now asked to be aware of their “intuitive computations,”<sup>117</sup> which alert them that they have fulfilled their obligations to the other players in the scene and to the audience through their individual and collective choices. In becoming responsible for making choices, and in learning that although there may be an element of fear inherent in being responsible for making choices, something wonderful can be created through choice. Without making choices, without taking action, nothing comes to fruition; there is only static, circular, and often argumentative behavior that disrupts a scene and prevents it from moving forward. A fear of making choices and taking responsibility also inhibits personal growth.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>117</sup> Berne, *Games People Play*, 38.

Forsberg's fourth term notes are extremely brief. She does not discuss scene endings in detail; instead, she only enumerates seven ways that a scene can end without the players leaving the stage. They are:

1. Problem/Solution
2. High Energy
3. High Energy Drop
4. Repeated Line
5. Switch
6. Surprise
7. Going Back to the Beginning

The description of the exercises she includes are also extremely brief and do not cover each of the seven methods for concluding a scene. It is apparent that at this point in their training, Forsberg is giving the players full ownership of their creativity. They simply need to use all the techniques they have learned in the first three terms and work towards identifying what is occurring in their scenes and when they, as a group, bring them to a close.

The exercises she includes in this term that are described in a bit of detail helps the players see how they can expand on the structures and the ways in which they have been playing. Forsberg calls this section of the term, "Stretching the Rules." In this section, players create fantasy lives for their characters. In the exercise, "Pretending," one player creates a Who/What/Where. A second player joins her and makes it apparent that she is aware of the first player's initiation but is pretending to be elsewhere. The initial Who/What/Where never changes. This exercise seems to be anathema to the concept of accepting initiations/offers and adjusting to them or adapting them. However, the players have actually agreed that this is the premise of their scenes and, therefore, their agreement keeps the action of the scene moving forward. Neither player is actually

denying the stage logic that each has brought to the scene. They are playing with the acceptance concept, around it, and on top of it. Like jazz musicians, these players are taking a structure, or theme, and making it their own.

In “Parallel Lines,” two players appear to be having a coherent conversation by actively listening and accepting, adjusting, and adapting to each other, using the environment and activity that they have created together. The twist in this exercise is that the two players are actually following two different tracks of conversation. For example, player one may be talking about gardening while player two is talking about cooking. Both of the players can be discussing flour, or flower, depending on their topic. In order for a scene based on “Parallel Lines” to be successful, the players respond to one another’s initiations without commenting on the underlying scene structure. They must play it guilelessly. A scene built on this premise can be quite funny if the audience knows the structure.

Another exercise, “Inane Suggestions,” introduces players to ways in which they can deal with audience suggestions that are ridiculous or in poor taste. To do this exercise, Forsberg asks the players to list bodily and sexual functions that can be used as the basis of a scene. Each group of players chooses three from the list; however, they are not to take the suggestions literally. They must use the suggestions as a metaphor for a scene that can be done tastefully and artfully. For example, a suggestion might be “boobs.” Instead of doing the obvious and improvising a scene about women’s breasts (“boobs”), the players might take that suggestion and create a scene where a couple of clowns or fools (i.e., the “boobs”) are harnessed together in a straight jacket. Although Forsberg uses this exercise to help the players deal with tasteless audience suggestions, it

actually serves other purposes. It is directly related to the “Acceptance and Adjustment” concept to which the players were introduced in the early part of their training and which they should be continuing to use. In addition, it is a stimulus for developing divergent thinking skills.

A complex exercise that also promotes heightened divergent thinking is “Solo.” In this exercise, which is usually done at the end of the fourth term, a player creates multiple characters and works with transitional spaces. The transitional space in this instance is the space used to move from one character to the next. Each character, then, has its own place of creation in the playing space. In the “warm up” for this exercise, all players are moving through the playing area simultaneously; however, each player moves in her own sphere. Forsberg calls freeze and everyone stops. When all the players begin to move through the space again, each says something “relevant to their position.”<sup>118</sup> In other words, the statement, phrase, or question that is said aloud is directly linked to each player’s position within the space and relative to the other player’s in the group. The line does not have to make sense to other players. The players then have an opportunity to work alone. Each player then creates a total of five characters, four of which are major and one supporting. Each character created by the player exists in its own space in the playing area; however, they all interact in some way. “Solo” is a difficult exercise and provides a significant ending for the fourth term.

### **Fifth Term**

In the Fifth Term, students create scenes that cover a range of genres. The players do scenes that are realistic as well as fantastical; they also improvise musicals, including

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<sup>118</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 42.

the songs and dances, operas, and, of course, comedies. Unlike some of the improv schools that emerged in the 1980s, Forsberg's focus has never been solely on comedy. She understands that the comedy in improvisation is actually rooted in the authentic, in-the-moment responses of the players and not because the players are particularly funny or telling jokes. Indeed, in improvisation, trying to be funny never works. Players who go for the joke are considered spoilsports because they are actually destroying the play world that has been created by the group. Yet, in the fifth term, Forsberg does systematically break down various comedic devices and theories of comedy. In teaching comedy, the focus is not on jokes or wit, which Forsberg believes cannot be taught. Instead, it is on behavior and a demonstration of how comedy is part of who we are as humans. The American philosopher Susanne Langer believes the comedic is "the pure sense of life."<sup>119</sup> Forsberg would say that all improvisation is life in the purest sense.

Forsberg first introduces her students to the concepts of sight gags, one upmanship, misunderstandings, and inappropriate behavior, which she refers to as "Simple Comedy." The players can draw on such classic comedians as Abbott and Costello, The Three Stooges, and/or cartoons. The point is not necessarily to imitate, but to understand that the comic comes from the naïveté of the players and not trickery. A specific example she uses in *Something from Nothing* is Abbott and Costello's "Whose on First" routine. In addition, players are also introduced to what she calls the "Complex Comedic." The "Complex Comedic" brings players into the world of parody and satire. The warm-up exercise for parody is physical. Players begin with a small gesture that they

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<sup>119</sup> Susanne K. Langer, "Chapter Eighteen: the Great Dramatic Forms: The Comic Rhythm," from *Feeling and Form*, in *Theories of Comedy*, edited by Paul Lauter (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 498.

continually repeat, each time exaggerating it more and more. They then do the same with a sound. Lastly, they combine the two. The second part of the warm up is a “follow the leader” type game. The first player does a small movement that is exaggerated by the second player, which is exaggerated even more by the third player. This part of the warm up continues until each player has had a chance to play the leader. In the scene work, the players can choose a play, an author, a film, or a performance to parody. They cannot parody a parody or something from television because, Forsberg states, it’s too easy.”<sup>120</sup>

In working with satire, players are asked to choose a social or political topic for their scene. Forsberg directs each group to “include a serious point that can come out of the humor.”<sup>121</sup> Working on the scene then becomes more than trying to be funny or trying to be satirists, which is not an easy task. Instead, the players experience satire by making social and political commentaries within the playing of the scenes. They experience the power of satire in “doing” their scenes and in the responses they receive from the audience-players. In her brief description of satire in *Something from Nothing*, Forsberg includes a quote from Goethe:

All truly wise thoughts have been thought already, thousands of times; but to truly make them ours, we must think them over again, honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.<sup>122</sup>

Forsberg’s satire exercise requires the players to take a deeper look at the social and political events of their time and place in history and embody them.

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<sup>120</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 52.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 53

At the end of the fifth term, Forsberg gives the players an opportunity to demonstrate an understanding, or even mastery, of the skills they acquired in this term. In “Show Time,” which is a summative assessment of the fifth term, the players work in separate groups and choose a genre. As a group, they create a “running order” that they believe will have the most impact on the audience. They also choose a beginning and an ending for this final class project. An example of a running order might be:

- Musical Opening
- Simple Comedy
- Serio-Comedy
- Serious
- Parody Satire
- Musical Closing

The way in which the players structure the running order demonstrates the development of their creative expression and an understanding of pacing a show.

By the end of the fifth term, players have had continuous opportunities to hone the skills they acquired in the first three terms. They understand how to use their sensual centers; they understand the significant role that give-and-take plays in keeping a scene moving; they understand how to work with passion; they understand human behavior; and they have a greater awareness of who they are as individuals and as artists. They are on their way to being well-rounded improvisers, theatre practitioners, and creative artists.

### **Sixth Term**

In the sixth term, the last term of the Players’ Workshop, students create their own show. In a sense, this is a capstone project in that they will work collaboratively and intensely on a final performance that will demonstrate the acquisition of their improvisational and performance skills. More significantly, they will be demonstrating that they are indeed creative artists who can work with other artists while still

maintaining their unique creative voices. Forsberg guides the improvisational artists through each stage of creating the show. She helps them with special techniques for doing the show, how to get the most out of the scenes, and how to balance the show.

In her notes on creating the show, Forsberg cites Mahatma Ghandi: “Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and test of civilization.”<sup>123</sup> In a sense, this is one part of the core of the art of American improvisation. Each player finds her unique voice through the group process to create something beautiful and essential. Forsberg has the players begin the process with brainstorming; each member contributes at least three ideas for scenes. The next step is rehearsing. Forsberg states that this step is “the easiest of the process to explain and the most difficult to do.”<sup>124</sup> Part of the difficulty and complexity of the first phase of the rehearsal process is found in the group coming to a consensus on what should be cut. This phase requires a lot of personal confidence as well as ego taming, bruising, and victory. If the players cannot come to an agreement on cutting a scene, or are blind to a problematic scene, Forsberg may cut it.

In the next step, or the second phase of rehearsal, the running order is set and any final revisions or cuts are made. Forsberg cautions that this phase can become quite competitive. She points out how “the weakness of [the player’s] confidence becomes most apparent.” She suggests that the teacher-director rise above it or let it pass.<sup>125</sup> Her role, as the director, is not to be drawn into the drama of the player’s clashes; her role is to model ways in which the group can come to agreement in “life.” When all stagecraft

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<sup>123</sup> Mahatma Ghandi quoted in Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 61.

<sup>124</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 62.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

elements are in place, meaning the players know their scenes and know their responsibilities, props and set pieces are where they are supposed to be, light and sound cues have been set, and the dress rehearsal has occurred, the players perform their graduation show. This show consists of scenes that emerged in classes, new scenes that were developed through improvising in rehearsal, and “spot” improvisations performed during the show based on audience suggestions. The improvisers now bring their creative expression to the public. Forsberg’s final word to them: “Enjoy!”<sup>126</sup>

Forsberg’s unpublished notes on her curriculum do not include Spolin’s games; however, she did incorporate them in her workshops. A particular game of Spolin’s that Forsberg used is the “Mirror” game. Forsberg believes that the “Mirror” game is the central exercise/game in all improvisation. Spolin’s “Mirror” game requires two players to face each other. Player one initiates an action while player two reflects. Player two must follow player one’s movements exactly. Forsberg took this concept and used it in different ways. For example, she begins her training program with the students reflecting one another’s movements and creative expression as a group in the “Reflection” exercise. When the students are comfortable doing this as a group, she then brings them to the intimacy of Spolin’s one-on-one “Mirror” game. Throughout the first three terms, Forsberg uses some form of mirroring/reflecting. Neuroscientists can now explain why mirroring is crucial in interpersonal communication and in developing emotional and social intelligence. Brain images have revealed that humans share experiences through the mirror neuron system. This discovery has led researchers to consider the idea of a

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 63.

social brain, which is the part of the brain that “allows us to interact with other people.”<sup>127</sup> In “The Social Brain?,” Chris Frith points out:

there is much to be learned by observing the moment-to-moment changes in expression and behaviour in the person we are interacting with. This is the role for the brain’s mirror system.<sup>128</sup>

Mirror and reflection improvisation games support the development of the social part of the brain because the individual has the opportunity to continually engage her mirror system, or neural Wi-Fi. Improvisation in general, because of its emphasis on relationships and authentic communication in the present moment, also supports the development of one’s social brain.

Although Forsberg did not use her workshops as therapy sessions, they proved to be therapeutic for many of her students. Because of her work as a Transactional Analysis leader and her studies in other psychological theories, she understood her students’ resistance to and struggles with some of the work. She could recognize their fear of letting go of control; their fear of speaking out; their fear of looking inside themselves. She could read their personal histories through their movements and sounds and create exercises that could address issues of which many of her students were not cognizant. She knew the life scripts that they were playing out and taught them to rewrite them. She used improvisation to help them discover their creative blocks, to speak with their own unique voices, to help them liberate themselves from the cultural and societal constraints

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<sup>127</sup> Chris Frith, “The Social Brain?,” *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 362 (April 29, 2007): 671–678, accessed March 4, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20209877>.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 672.

that did not serve them, and to teach them about theatre and performance. Many of those who studied with her say that she saved their lives. This may seem over dramatic to some; however, for her students, this is true. Dee Sobeleski Chapman, who participated in the earliest of Forsberg's workshops, states:

My whole life changed when Jo entered it. I began as a shy girl apologetic girl, but discovered my voice, my inner beauty, my humor, my courage and faith through her teachings and philosophy of life. Improv has been my foundation all through my years of acting, whether it be thru [sic] theater, dramatic, musical, or commercials... or for my own entertainment. Her teaching method is based on truth, love of the art, and understanding of the human nature....with no bullshit! She will always be my surrogate Mother, and I so appreciate and value that she shared her heart and family with me. She has always supported me and my family with love and understanding. . .and I love her, more than I can say.<sup>129</sup>

Another student, Sally Edwards, writes:

Jo was my first acting and improv teacher. I'd just graduated from college where I majored in Psychology because I was too embarrassed to admit that I wanted to major in "Carol Burnett." I stumbled upon Jo's classes on a blind date to Second City. I signed up immediately and it was a life changing experience. I was... finally allowed to be who I really am and to study what I really wanted to study. My whole world opened up. Thank you Jo for changing my life and giving me a career in comedy! I'm forever grateful.<sup>130</sup>

Like Sally Edwards, students credit Forsberg for changing their lives; however, Forsberg, like Spolin and Boyd, credits the games themselves as the catalyst for life changing

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<sup>129</sup> Dee Sobeleski Chapman commented on "The Jo Forsberg Karass," accessed March 3, 2011  
[http://www.facebook.com/index.php?lh=a3f0fb178fa536fd3eb435aa90772a47&eu=YvEhvjc9ZkuYju20\\_HNu6w#!/group.php?gid=50758556738](http://www.facebook.com/index.php?lh=a3f0fb178fa536fd3eb435aa90772a47&eu=YvEhvjc9ZkuYju20_HNu6w#!/group.php?gid=50758556738).

<sup>130</sup> Sally Edwards commented on "The Jo Forsberg Karass," accessed March 3, 2011.

experiences. Boyd in particular noted that play changed the individual socially, physiologically, and psychologically. Forsberg understands that the work, with the will and desire of the individual, holds the power to liberate one from the cultural, societal, and psychological ties that bind. Neuroscientists might also credit the work because it provides the individual with opportunities to create a knowledge base of moment-to-moment experiences based on spontaneous and authentic interactions and engagements with other individuals. In describing Forsberg and her approach, then, her students are not over dramatic. They are just aware of who they were before they began improvisational work and who they became.

At the end of their training, Forsberg's players are ready to move into another stage of development where they become not only aware of the self and the self in interaction with others within the safety of the workshop, but also develop a heightened awareness of the self and the self in interaction with others in public performance. The interactions in public performance include both the onstage players and the interactions and feedback received from the audience members. Engaging in the public performance of improvisation without the direct support of the side-coach involves a further perfecting of skills that Forsberg does not address because her approach focuses on an individual's understanding that his/her behavior is directly linked to life scripts and social conditioning. Considering improvisation through the lenses of cognitive psychology and creativity theory, we see that improvisation also supports players in developing a tolerance of ambiguity and divergent and convergent thinking skills.

The next chapter connects the work and theories of Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg with cognitive processes and attributes of creativity that are essential to improvisation. In

pursuing this connection, we move beyond the bodies of knowledge available to these three women when they were developing their concepts. However, the context of cognitive and creative processes deepens our understanding of their work. The next chapter also provides a perspective from “inside” an improviser’s experience, which paints a more distinct picture of the transformative nature of the art of American improvisation as developed by Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg.

## Chapter 4

### **Creativity and Improvisation: The Cognition Connection**

In practicing the art of American improvisation, whether in a workshop or in performance, becoming conscious of the power of one's creative voice occurs on at least two levels. First, a player becomes aware of her own creative expression from the immediate feedback she receives from fellow players, and, if in public performance, from the audience members. Second, and perhaps most significantly, becoming cognizant of one's own creative expression involves the ability to differentiate between the voice of one's "inner censor" and that of one's "inner core." The "inner censor" can be defined as an individual's defense against her own emotions and instinctual urges, which blocks creativity. In *The Farthest Reaches of Human Nature*, Abraham Maslow points out that creative blocks are often the result of an individual's need to protect him/herself against the "dangerous portions of his unconscious, or against his unconscious self, or his real self, which he has been taught to regard as dangerous."<sup>1</sup> The "inner censor" is an authoritarian voice that, in Maslow's words, "kills off and walls off everything unconscious in order to be sure that the dangerous portions of it don't get out."<sup>2</sup> In other words, the "inner censor" is a destructive and inhibiting force—and yet perhaps felt as protective—that prohibits an individual from responding to stimuli spontaneously and with an openness to new experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 84

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Individuals ruled by their “inner censor” are rigid and controlling in their approach to life and in their way of practicing the art of improvisation. They are also often hyper self-conscious. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the self-conscious person is an individual who is “constantly worried about how others will perceive her, who is afraid of creating the wrong impression, or of doing something inappropriate.”<sup>3</sup> In a sense, these individuals become paralyzed when confronted with new experiences and when responding to stimuli that do not fit into their schemas. These individuals cannot engage in the present moment because, as Forsberg would say, they are in their heads. The voice of their “inner censor” is in control of their cognitive and emotional processes rather than their own voice, which limits the way they perceive and manage stimuli.

The “inner core” of an individual, or what Maslow calls the “real Being of the person,”<sup>4</sup> is that part of the “self” that is autonomous, independent, and empowered. When an individual’s “inner core” is at play, she is spontaneous, open, and creative; this individual does not hide behind a protective veil or don a mask. For Viola Spolin, the “inner core” is the “genius” that is within all individuals. Through the explosion created by spontaneity, which for Spolin is the moment of “personal freedom,” individuals are re-formed into themselves.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the individual’s authentic, playful “self” emerges. For Josephine Raciti Forsberg, an individual’s “inner core” and her creative voice is unveiled when she learns to once again “play like a child.”<sup>6</sup> When individuals

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<sup>3</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Spolin *Improvisation for the Theater*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 4.

learn to play again, they are open to the experience of entering into uncensored relationships and exploring unknown personal and performance terrain. Through the practice of the art of improvisation, either in performance or in workshops, players can learn to silence their inhibiting “inner censors” and rediscover and liberate their “inner creative cores.”

Some consider this transformative nature of improvisation as belonging to the realm of the mystical or as an outgrowth of 1960s “fad” psychology; however, viewed through the lens of creativity research, a more grounded concept of the transformative powers of improvisation emerges. Individuals who practice this art form not only develop the necessary knowledge base and acquire the necessary performance skills to be successful and creative players; they also develop other competencies that are critical to the creative process. The other skills that improvisers develop have to do with creativity and cognition. The cognitive processes, as well as the kinesthetic and sensory abilities, that the improviser develops demonstrate that there is a mind/body connection involved in this art form. In the practice of the art of improvisation, the whole organism is involved.

The focus of this chapter is the exploration of the link between creativity and improvisation from a cognitive process perspective. We will look at the intolerance of ambiguity, which is characterized by a lack of openness and spontaneity and by the need to categorize the world in order to make it less threatening. Individuals who are intolerant of ambiguity are married to strict rules and structures that they believe provide them with a sense of security and power. They view the world in terms of black and white, good and bad, “us and them.” They are ruled by the inner authoritarian voice that “kills off and

walls off.” The opposite of intolerance of ambiguity is an acceptance, and perhaps even a delight, in the possibilities that ambiguity holds. Creativity scholar, Mark A. Runco, states that individuals who are tolerant of ambiguity possess the ability “to deal with the ill-defined nature of problems that have creative potential and “to tolerate a range of options that should be considered.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, individuals who can tolerate ambiguity are open to possibilities and can easily adjust to change. In the art of American improvisation, where “not knowing” is a persistent state of being, tolerance of ambiguity is critical.

In addition, we will look at the role that divergent and convergent thinking abilities play in the improviser’s creative process. In discussing divergent and convergent thinking, Runco, points out,

divergent thinking is cognition that leads in various directions. . . because some of the ideas are original, divergent thinking represents the potential for creative thinking and problem-solving.<sup>8</sup>

Divergent thinking is fluid thinking and results in a generation of a myriad of ideas and solutions to solving problems. Convergent thinking involves seeking out one correct answer. We will consider the role that both abilities play in the creative process and in practicing the art of American improvisation. Although divergent thinking is generally privileged when discussing creativity, Runco asserts that divergent and convergent thinking are on a continuum.<sup>9</sup> In other words, with regard to these two approaches to

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<sup>7</sup> Mark A. Runco, *Creativity*, 297.

<sup>8</sup> Mark A. Runco and Steven R. Pritzker, *Encyclopedia of Creativity* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1999), 577.

<sup>9</sup> Runco, *Creativity*, 10.

problem solving, individuals probably operate from one end to another at any given time, although some may have a penchant for one of these approaches to problem solving. In discussing creativity and cognition, Dean Keith Simonton concludes, “The optimal functioning embodied by creativity entails ordinary cognitive processes, and hence creative thought is accessible to almost anyone.”<sup>10</sup> Creativity, then, does not belong to a select few with extraordinary talents. Forsberg knew this and each new participant in her workshops began their journey with her by stating that “everyone is creative” in “The Pledge,” their initiation into the improvisation community.

An aspect of intolerance of ambiguity is authoritarianism, which is an unquestioning obedience to an authority figure. At some point in personal development, the authority figure can become a powerful, prohibitive, internalized voice. Psychologists refer to this voice as the “super ego,” that abstract entity that works hard to ensure that individuals conform to rules and regulations. In *Free Play*, the improvisation theorist Stephen Nachmanovitch labels this voice the “Judging Spectre,” describing it as “our automatic internalization of the parental and other judging voices that throw doubt” on us and those “wishful voices that indicate who we should be and what we should like to have.”<sup>11</sup> When an individual falls prey to these voices, she feels threatened and becomes hyper-vigilant about protecting the “self.” She then looks to identify external impediments, unaware that the threat is coming from within. In improvisation, the

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<sup>10</sup> Dean Keith Simonton, “Creativity: Cognitive, Personal, Developmental, and Social Aspects” *American Psychologist* 55 (January 2000): 152.

<sup>11</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 138.

identified impediment may be a fellow player, the audience, or any number of environmental issues that seem to be barriers to a peak performance.

In her discussion of authoritarianism and her concept of the individual's need for "approval/disapproval,"<sup>12</sup> Spolin states, "the expectancy of judgment prevents free relationships within the acting workshops."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a player who constantly experiences the environment as one filled with the threat of judgment is unable to engage in uncensored relationships with the other players. Moreover, in her quest to quell the voice of judgment, she must maintain the status quo and operate within a rigid structure, or "inside the box." Therefore, an environment characterized by ambiguity will prove to be threatening and difficult for her to navigate.

For Forsberg, the "Judging Spectre" is most definitely the voice of the "inner censor" that is working to keep the individual tied to a destructive and inhibiting life script. Forsberg refers to the "inner censor" as those "old tapes" that tell the individual that she is worthless, untalented, and should not venture beyond her prescribed role. In her approach to teaching the art of American improvisation, Forsberg coaxes the individual's "judging voices" out of hiding so that the healthy, autonomous voice is

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<sup>12</sup> In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin states, "in a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated" (7). She goes on to point out that "approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism," which she describes as having the face of the parent, teacher, and the "ultimately the whole social structure (mate employee, family, neighbors, etc.)" (8). In other words, it is almost impossible to escape.

<sup>13</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 8.

liberated. One of the ways Forsberg does this is by asking her students to leave self-criticism outside the workshop door.<sup>14</sup>

This concept of leaving self-criticism outside the door, which we can relate to the internalized authoritarian voice, reflects Forsberg's training in Transactional Analysis (TA). In TA, the judging, or authoritarian, voice is based in the Parent ego state.<sup>15</sup> In "A Working Synthesis Of Transactional Analysis And Gestalt Therapy," Ken Wilber states, the nucleus of the Parent ego state, "is composed of the internalized demands and judgements [sic] of parents and other authority figures."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to discuss the Adult ego state, which he describes as the "authentic self, capable of seeing present reality and capable of basing its decisions on objective facts and not on the threats of the Parent/Topdog nor the archaic fears of the Child/Underdog."<sup>17</sup> The goal of TA is to free the Adult voice, or ego state, and to silence or at least recognize the voice of the authoritarian Parent. Wilber believes that the "old tapes" of the Parent and Child are recorded permanently in the brain; therefore they cannot be erased. However, through TA, an individual can learn to spot and clearly recognize in herself the Parent tapes, as

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<sup>14</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> In Transactional Analysis, as in Freudian theory and Gestalt therapy, personalities are dividing into three parts. In Freudian theory, the divisions are labeled the super ego, the ego, and the id. In Gestalt therapy, they are referred to as the Topdog, the centered self, and the Underdog. In TA, they are the Parent ego state, the Adult ego state, and the Child ego state. See Ken Wilber, "A Working Synthesis of Transactional Analysis and Gestalt Therapy," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research And Practice* 15 (Spring 1978) for a more in-depth discussion.

<sup>16</sup> Ken Wilber, "A Working Synthesis of Transactional Analysis and Gestalt Therapy," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research And Practice* 15 (Spring 1978): 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 68

well as those of the Child, and “can choose to turn them off!”<sup>18</sup> If the individual is successful in controlling the “inner censor” and in silencing the “old tapes,” she can explore new behaviors and creative terrain. She recognizes and acknowledges that the impediments to her creativity are not necessarily outside of herself. When the individual realizes that she can manage this voice, she is empowered.

Individuals who have internalized their outside authoritarian voices are also more than likely to be authoritarian-type personalities who need to impose their views on others in order to feel secure. Just as the authoritarian mother, father, teacher, or social structure imposed ways of being on the child, the adult child in turn has a tendency to do this to others. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin cautions the teacher-director to be vigilant about authoritarianism both on the part of the student and her part. Spolin points out, “most of us were brought up by the approval/disapproval method,” which ultimately paralyzes us creatively because “we function with only parts of our total selves.”<sup>19</sup> The authoritarian personality sees the world in terms of binaries rather than as a fluid environment where there may be many approaches to solving a problem and many answers to a single question. She cannot deal with open-endings, vagueness, or ambiguity. According to Else Frenkel-Brunswik, the social psychologist and co-author of *The Authoritarian Personality*, an individual who cannot tolerate ambiguity has a “rigid cognitive superstructure in which everything opaque and complex is avoided as much as

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>19</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 7–8

possible.”<sup>20</sup> If an individual is exerting most of her energy in the pursuit of avoidance, she cannot possibly fully engage in an authentic interaction with individuals who do not operate under the same belief system. With regard to improvising, this individual inhibits the process by negating initiations and offers and by her need to control every element in her improvisations and her life, including the other players.

The same individuals who find themselves in a situation defined by ambiguity may also exhibit behavior that is in direct opposition to a strong adherence to conventions and rules. In “Social Tensions and the Inhibition of Thought,” Frenkel-Brunswik points out that the individual who is intolerant of ambiguity may also display impulsive, chaotic, and confused behavior. Frenkel-Brunswik sees both the rigid and impulsive approaches to thinking as two sides of the same coin. She states, “both of these ways of responding represent efforts to avoid uncertainty, one by fixation to, the other by breaking away from, the given realities.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, individuals who cannot tolerate ambiguity look to avoid or to escape from an environment characterized by free play. They must operate in a sphere where known rules and conventions reign, resulting in inhibited creativity or thought processes. They remain inside “the box,” protecting themselves against ill-defined situations and unable to embrace ambiguity as a source of limitless possibilities. As a result, they cannot experience the heightened consciousness that humanistic

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<sup>20</sup> Else Frenkel-Brunswik, “Social Tensions and the Inhibition of Thought,” *Social Problems* 2 (October 1954): 76.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

psychologist Rollo May believes “accompanies the experience of actualizing [their] own potentialities.”<sup>22</sup> Their beliefs become, as Forsberg cautions, prisons.

A psychologist whose research focuses on the connection between creativity and the tolerance of ambiguity, Katya Stoycheva, also informs us that individuals intolerant of ambiguity find ambiguous situations to be confusing and “a source of psychological discomfort or a threat” that must be avoided.<sup>23</sup> She points out that intolerant individuals “reduce their view of the situation to certain, simple, and familiar cues, and defend themselves through rigid, stereotyped behaviors, which lead them to less than optimal solutions.” Ambiguity-intolerant individuals not only behave in stereotypical ways; they also believe that others need to conform to specific ideals of behavior that are also conventional and stereotypical. Amy Seham’s discussion of gender in *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?* provides an interesting example of ambiguity intolerance in improv comedy. Reporting on her experience as a member of an improv comedy team and on her research focusing on other teams in Chicago, Seham concludes that some male improvisers project the blame for unsuccessful performances and scene work on female improvisers. She points out,

Quite a few male improvisers also believe that women interfere with the unfettered fun of improv play. If a female player appears overly timid or concerned with “the rules,” or desires to protect herself psychologically, she may

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<sup>22</sup> Rollo May, *The Courage to Create* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Katya Stoycheva, “Talent, Science, and Education: How Do We Cope with Uncertainty and Ambiguities?,” in *Science Education: Talent Recruitment and Public Understanding* (Nato: Science and technology Policy, 38), edited by Peter Csermely and Leon M. Lederman (2003), 32.

indeed seem to be a “spoilsport [who] threatens the fragile play-world.”<sup>24</sup>

Although the women are being labeled as needing to cling to the rules in order to protect themselves, which might lead us to believe that they are the ones who are intolerant of ambiguity, women as a group are not necessarily to a greater or lesser degree “threatened” by ambiguity than men. Indeed, perhaps the female players are looking to the rules as a way of pointing out the impulsive, chaotic, or out of control behavior displayed by male improvisers who have difficulties with ambiguity, particularly when it comes to views about women’s behavior. Seham is also alluding to behavior that is authoritarian, which is not gender specific.

Seham goes on to state that male improvisers view many female improvisers as “trouble-making feminists who want to make new rules for the game.”<sup>25</sup> In “Gender, Sexuality, and the Authoritarian Personality,” psychologists Bill E. Peterson and Eileen L. Zurbiggen state, “research has shown that authoritarianism is correlated negatively with feminism and positively with sexist attitudes.”<sup>26</sup> In looking at the research data measuring correlations between authoritarianism and variables concerning feminism, the women’s movement, and gender roles, these psychologists conclude,

attempts by feminists to highlight inequalities run afoul of authoritarian desire to maintain what have become

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<sup>24</sup> Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, xxiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

<sup>26</sup> Bill E. Peterson and Eileen L. Zurbiggen, “Gender, Sexuality, and the Authoritarian Personality,” *Journal of Personality* 78 (December 2010): 1803.

conventional spheres of feminine and masculine gender roles.<sup>27</sup>

Although there are many successful female comedians and improvisers who have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, comedy has traditionally been considered the realm of the male. Perhaps in the situations described by Seham, some of the male improvisers had difficulties accepting women as players because the women's behavior did not fit into their schema of the role of women in society, and more particularly, in comedy. As Peterson and Zurbiggen point out, individuals who score high in authoritarianism

live in a rigidly gendered world, one in which gender roles are narrowly defined and firmly enforced . . . and traditional life paths (e.g., concerning education and career) are embraced.<sup>28</sup>

The authoritarian personality remains “in the box” and listens to the “inner censor” that “kills off and walls off” any hint of straying from an established schema.

Although the Seham example describes a men-versus-women scenario with regard to improv comedy, a black and white, non-nuanced perspective of the world with regard to the roles men and women play and the spheres in which they should be playing is not gender specific. In their study, Peterson and Zurbiggen found that both “men and women high in authoritarianism [are] less likely to endorse nontraditional roles for women.” Indeed, they discovered that “authoritarianism seems to unite both women and men when it comes to gender roles.<sup>29</sup> Both men and women, then, can have authoritarian

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1807.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1820.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1807.

personalities and can be intolerant of ambiguity. However, those who understand that the world is a nuanced place also understand that being intolerant or tolerant of ambiguity is not an either/or way of being. Intolerance and tolerance of ambiguity are on a continuum; individuals can move within a spectrum of narrow-mindedness and openness. All individuals, at times, stereotype and rely on schema to make sense of chaotic, vague, or ambiguous situations. Most individuals are not cognizant of the fact that they rely on schema to process stimuli; yet, a schema is an important element of the cognitive process.

A schema is a way of categorizing and of organizing and processing one's collected information about the world and those with whom she interacts. A schema, according to Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "functions as an anticipatory structure, a readiness to search for and to assimilate incoming information into schema-relevant terms."<sup>30</sup> In other words, when confronted with stimuli, an individual begins making associations that are based on information that was previously processed, encoded, and stored in a certain way. From a positive perspective, schemas can help an individual process and structure information quickly. On the other hand, schemas can often lead to stereotyping because the individual's preprogrammed perception of a person, place, or thing may be based on inadequate, antiquated, and/or biased information.

Improvisers do not eschew schemas altogether. In "An Empirical Study of Cognition and Theatrical Improvisation," the authors report that improvisers generate "a schema of features of a character's activities and behaviors to be acted on over the course

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<sup>30</sup> Sandra Lipsitz Bem, "Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing," *Psychological Review* 88 (1981): 355.

of a scene.”<sup>31</sup> However, a total reliance on personal schemas in improvisation marks a resistance to full, authentic engagement with other players and with the content that emerges through the creative process. An improviser’s reliance on a schema might be demonstrated in her compulsion for storytelling. Storytelling in this instance is not analogous to the exercise “Build a Story” or to games that have storytelling as their foci. Storytelling based on a schema is about being in one’s “head,” rather than relating and responding to the immediate stimuli within the improvisation. The individual who takes on the protective role, or dons the mask, of the storyteller enters a scene with an agenda from which she cannot be deterred regardless of attempts by other players and by the discoveries and offers presented as the scene plays out. She lays out her path for a scene and often cannot stray from that path regardless of whether or not her fellow players can find a space to collaborate with her or in any way relate to the story. This type of player inhibits free play and frustrates the other players.

Interestingly, a version of Forsberg’s “Build a Story” exercise, an exercise where players create a story collaboratively, serves as a diagnostic for uncovering which players are relying on schemas and therefore quite possibly uncomfortable with ambiguity. In “Build a Story,” the initiating player begins by saying only a few lines. She then stops, turns to another player who must continue the thread by saying a few lines, stopping, and then passing the responsibility onto the next player. In a more difficult version of this exercise, players are only allowed to contribute one word to the story. When a group of Ph.D. students in Fordham University’s Education Psychology Department participated

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<sup>31</sup> Brian Magerko, Waleed Manzoul, Mar Riedl, Allan Baumer, Daniel Fuller, Kurt Luther, and Celia Pearce, “An Empirical Study of Cognition and Theatrical Improvisation,” *C&C* (October 2009): no page number.

in this exercise in a seminar focusing on alternative ways of teaching, they found it to be incredibly difficult. One participant explained that she had to keep switching gears because the person just preceding her would always contribute a word that she did not expect and that made no sense in relation to the story in her head.<sup>32</sup> For the most part, it was difficult for all involved in this session to get out of “the box” and let go of their schemas. Because, as psychologists, they were all well-versed in the concept of tolerance of ambiguity and other cognitive processes, they were able to articulate what was occurring in these terms whereas improvisation students do not necessarily have this vernacular nor do they necessarily understand the role that cognitive processes play in creativity and spontaneity.

Stanley Budner, an innovator in the field of intolerance of ambiguity and creator of one of the most popular scales used in testing the intolerance of ambiguity, identifies three possible situations in which an individual intolerant of ambiguity may find himself/herself at any given moment:

a completely new situation in which there are no familiar cues, a complex situation in which there are a great number of cues to be taken into account, and a contradictory situation in which different elements or cues suggest

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<sup>32</sup> On February 9, 2011, I was invited by Dr. Fran Blumberg to be the guest lecturer in her graduate seminar at Fordham University. The “lecture” was designed as an interactive session entitled “Play, Process, and Pedagogy.” In this session, I used two exercises: “Build a Story,” and one that I had created. In the second exercise, the participants were asked to briefly write about an formal educational experience that worked well for them. They then had to communicate that story to the other participants in gibberish. Dr. Blumberg’s comments about the session can be found on the class blog at <http://cognition2.edublogs.org/2011/02/13/process-play-and-pedagogy/>.

different structures—in short, situations characterized by novelty, complexity, and insolubility.<sup>33</sup>

At any time, improvisers may find themselves in any of these three situations while playing out one scene. At times, a player can be charting unfamiliar territories and may not be receiving adequate cues from fellow players. Although all players should be fully engaged at all times and watching out for one another, there are times when this just simply does not occur. In moments such as these, the level of ambiguity is high and an individual's tolerance level must be commensurate in order for the scenes to move forward.

Jeff Michalski, a seasoned improviser, improvisation teacher, and former Forsberg student, thinks of these moments as knowing that he is going but not knowing where.<sup>34</sup> This is particularly evident when the players have solicited an audience suggestion for an improvisation but the scene has not yet begun. Michalski considers this to be a “little transition point,”<sup>35</sup> the moment when preconceived notions and preplanned ideas (schemas and stories) must be wiped clean. At this point, the player is thrust into liminality and must play out the interaction ritual, as prescribed by the audience, with the expectancy that it will be performed using familiar cultural cues yet in a unique and innovative way. It is in this moment that the door to “flow” can be thrust open by players willing to seek out the possibilities found when operating in a state of “not knowing.”

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<sup>33</sup> Stanley Budner, “Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable,” *Journal of Personality* 30 (March, n.d.): 30

<sup>34</sup> Jeff Michalski, interview with Meghan Duffy, March 18, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Michalski, interview with Meghan Duffy.

At other times, players may be inundated with an overabundance of information on which to draw because several scene participants, as well as the audience, are making contributions to the moment. In these situations, a player must be able to take in and quickly process the initiations and offers, make choices that will lead to new discoveries, and support other players in “landing” on a beat that can be explored. In addition, a player can be inundated with information coming from persons or things that are outside of the onstage scene. Furthermore, there are also environmental cues of which the player needs to be aware for no other reason than ensuring she, and her fellow players, are physically safe. Lastly, contradictory information and cues, that may be the result of other players not fully engaging or actively listening, can suggest different paths for the scene. In these instances, the group must come to agreement in order to proceed with the creative process of discovery and exploration. On the other hand, an individual who has a high tolerance for ambiguity may momentarily be in control of the scene. Through the process of “give-and-take,” she may have to “take” the responsibility of the scene, providing offers and cues to the other players in order to integrate all of the players into the improvisation. This individual strives to get the others to play.

Forsberg’s “Acceptance” exercises definitely prepare players for this last situation. In “Acceptance,” players are given the opportunity to do short improvisations where they create an instant environment and action. Player one provides the initial stimulus while the other players must accept the offer and adjust “to the creativity and [add] to the stimulation.”<sup>36</sup> In a second version of the exercise, player one initiates, but the other players do not accept or adjust. Instead, they add something new to the

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<sup>36</sup> Forsberg, *Something from Nothing*, 16.

environment created by the first player, something that seems logical given the circumstances emerging in the improvised scene. This exercise can be used as a drill throughout workshops so that the process of recognizing, accepting, and adjusting are “in one’s body” and “mind.” In other words, the player has ample opportunity to develop a “whole organism” response to stimuli. The player has learned that it is not necessary to know where she is going at the beginning of a scene; she has learned that when this occurs, there is a process in which she, and the other players, will engage. Through this process of creating something from nothing, the player takes an ambiguous situation and ultimately gives it meaning.

If players can fully engage with the other players and with the playing space when they find themselves in any of these situations where ambiguity is present, they can be transported to a “flow” or peak performance experience. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the “flow” experience as follows:

[it is a moment] in which attention can be freely invested to achieve a person’s goals, because there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against.”<sup>37</sup>

This statement may seem to be in conflict with the idea of the presence of ambiguity—“there is no disorder to straighten out”; however, it actually speaks to the way in which good improvisers view the state of “not knowing.” Seasoned improvisers do not perceive ambiguity as a negative or a threat; rather, they look at the situation as one of limitless possibilities. They enter into the improvisational performance with the notion that all offers represent opportunities for creativity to emerge. Furthermore, each “flow”

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<sup>37</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 40.

experience offers the individual an opportunity for growth, both personally and professionally.

Sometimes, nothing will emerge through the process of playing, leaving players with a sense of dismay and failure because the scene just will not work. Michalski sees these unsuccessful attempts at instant creativity as opportunities for growth as well. He tells his students and fellow players, “you have to learn to love the bomb.”<sup>38</sup> However, those intolerant of ambiguity will want to avoid these moments, and the bomb, at all costs. Their need to relieve a threat, which may push them into an old destructive schema or script, hinders the possibility of experiencing “flow.”

In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham notes that achieving “flow” in an improvisation is actually rare; yet, improvisers can become addicted to the experience. The need and desire to find “flow” can be both wonderful and problematic. The experience can be wonderful for the individual who gains a sense of empowerment. Unfortunately, an individual’s desire to achieve “flow,” or her striving to reach a certain goal or outcome for the scene for herself, often disrupts the creative process for the other players. Seham points out,

the never-satiated desire to achieve the zone, combined with the pressure to produce successful performance products, often results in the naturalization of mainstream values, forced conformity, and strained relations among players—especially along the lines of gender and race.<sup>39</sup>

Although Seham does not refer to an intolerance of ambiguity, her statement provides some evidence of its presence. In an attempt to feel empowered in a situation where an

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<sup>38</sup> Jeff Michalski, interview with Meghan Duffy.

<sup>39</sup> Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 64.

end goal must be achieved, the players who find themselves in the circumstances that Seham is describing resort to behavior that is not conducive to collaboration and community. Their behavior, which is manifest in a lack of awareness and an inability to authentically engage and respond, demonstrates a need to adhere to the cultural constraints from which improvisation is supposed to liberate them. The environment in which these improvisers are playing requires them to rely on old habits and old schemas. They are, as Stoycheva found in her research on ambiguity and creativity, defending “themselves through rigid, stereotyped behaviors.”<sup>40</sup>

Stanley Budner also discusses the ways in which individuals who are intolerant of ambiguity respond to stimuli in situations where ambiguity is present. One way to respond is on a phenomenological level, which relates to the individual’s perceptions and feelings, or the way in which an individual experiences something. A second way of responding, which can also be in conjunction with a phenomenological response, is on an operative level. The operative level involves the ways in which individuals respond to objects outside of themselves. In a sense, these responses speak to the “inner” and “outer” worlds of the “self.” Budner further dichotomizes these responses into submission or denial. By submission, he means “the recognition of the situation as an ineluctable fact of existence[,] which the individual cannot alter.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, individuals who submit to the status quo do not consider the possibility of transformation. In terms of improvisation and creativity, submission closes the door to new discoveries or to a consideration of alternative meanings or ways to problem solve or play the scene. Denial,

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<sup>40</sup> Stoycheva, “Talent, Science, and Education,” 32.

<sup>41</sup> Budner, “Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable,” 42.

for Budner, means altering the reality or occurrence to fit into the “desires of the perceiver.”<sup>42</sup> In the language of improvisation, individuals who are shaping initiations and offers to fit what they want are unable to give up control and are working “in their heads.” Due to the denial response to the threat that ambiguity holds for them, they are unable to engage and interact in the present moment.

Intolerance of ambiguity and relating to the world and others from the perspective of an authoritarian personality is not necessarily a life sentence. Improvisation can serve as a vehicle where ambiguity can be faced and its hold on the individual diffused, if not completely exorcised. The improvisation workshop is a “free space” where players can be desensitized to the threat that ambiguity holds for them. Through the process of playing the improvisational games, workshop participants have ample opportunities to find ways of dealing with the threat of “not knowing.” According to Budner, “confidence in one’s ability to judge among alternatives is partly a function of successful experiences in such choosing.”<sup>43</sup> When the players then move into the performance space, they have many positive experiences to draw on and are supported by the skills and techniques they developed in the workshops. Through further improvisational experiences, both in the workshop and in performance, they can find that ambiguity is not a permanent condition and that they can often experience peak performances because they have demonstrated to themselves that they are up to the task and are in harmony with fellow players and with the environment. They may also experience the elusive “flow.”

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 42.

In engaging with ambiguity and seeking out the possibilities of making new associations, or perhaps defamiliarizing what has become the familiar, improvisers are tapping into another cognitive facet of creativity: divergent thinking. Divergent thinking, simply stated, is a way of finding multiple solutions to a problem, or making a myriad of associations when introduced to a stimulus. Zenasni, Bensaçon, and Lubert confirmed their hypothesis regarding a connection between creativity and the tolerance of ambiguity by assessing their study participants' divergent thinking abilities. Participants were given a standard ten-minute divergent thinking task requiring them to create as many titles as possible for an ambiguous text. The study participants were evaluated for (1) fluency (raw number of relevant responses), (2) originality, and (3) unicity (number of unique ideas generated).<sup>44</sup> The evaluation of the originality score was based on the frequency of the occurrence of ideas in the whole sample. In addition, participants were asked to do a story-writing task based on ambiguous stimuli, as well as an Adjective Check List, the Measurement of Ambiguity Tolerance, and the Behavior Scale of Tolerance/Intolerance for Ambiguity. Zenasni, Bensaçon, and Lubert concluded that “the more individuals are tolerant of ambiguity, the more they tend to be creative (generated original and unique ideas, produce creative stories, report creative characteristics).<sup>45</sup> In other words, there is a direct correlation between tolerance of ambiguity, divergent thinking, and creativity.

An examination of divergent thinking is significant in a discussion of improvisation because improvisers must—in ambiguous, and often fast-paced,

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<sup>44</sup> Franck Zenasni, Maud Bensaçon and Todd Lubert, “Creativity and Tolerance of Ambiguity: An Empirical Study,” *Journal of Creative Behavior* 42 (2008): 61–73, accessed June 4 2010.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

situations—quickly process the information being provided in the scene—tacit, verbal, and physical cues—react to the stimuli, and respond with new discoveries. In the ten minutes that it took Zenasni, Bensaçon, and Lubert to conduct their divergent thinking test, a group of experienced improvisers could actually improvise at least ten short scenes. This is due in part to improvisation training that focuses on sensory awareness, active listening, and honest collaboration. Whether or not improvisation students begin as a divergent thinkers, they have ample opportunity to develop and rehearse deep and active listening, as well as to find relationships between objects and language that are not immediately apparent, which supports approaching experiences with openness. In playing with the concept of “busting open a scene,” improvisers practice the art of defamiliarizing the familiar.

In “Creativity and Cognition: Producing Effective Novelty,” Arthur Cropley discusses the cognitive approach to creativity and the “the processes involved in producing effective novelty.”<sup>46</sup> Necessary, and perhaps indispensable, to producing effective novelty is divergent thinking. The divergent thinker quickly makes associations between seemingly disparate stimuli or objects, associations that are not immediately obvious. Improvisers are not necessarily aware of this ability because improvisation never focuses on the cognitive process. Indeed, any discussions of thinking may send players into a state of denial that their creativity is the result of a cognitive process. Moreover, those observing her, such as the audience or fellow players, are not concerned with the cognitive processes. They may simply observe that a particular individual is

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<sup>46</sup> Arthur Cropley, “Creativity and Cognition: Producing Effective Novelty,” *Roeper Review* 21 (May 1999): 253–260, accessed April 12, 2010.

quick. For example, an audience member may suggest “pedophilia” as a topic for a scene. A player may turn that around in less than a second, making a connection with the “ped” root of the word and create a scene about an inordinate love of the foot. The player’s ability to “come up” with this idea seems to spring forth from divine inspiration or, to use Spolin’s term, the “X area.” However, it is simply an example of divergent thinking.

The example of the suggestion of “pedophilia” becoming a scene about the love of a foot relates to what Cropley calls “effective” novelty. When improvisers are creating moments of novelty that are effective, moments that are “meaningful and practicable,”<sup>47</sup> they are demonstrating that they are playing at the top of their intelligence, which is a pathway to experiencing a peak performance or playing “in the zone.” Being “in the zone,” or experiencing “flow,” lies in the discovery of new, deeper, and nonconventional ways of perceiving the stimuli provided by the audience suggestion and the offers of the other players. Without effectiveness, Cropley points out, “novelty is more likely to be a matter of the pseudocreativity that characterizes simply being outrageous or nonconformist.”<sup>48</sup> Improvisers who are dedicated to the art of improvisation and committed to the exploration of the possibilities that each beat of a scene provides want to be recognized as true, not pseudo, creative artists. Therefore, mere novelty is not enough for improvisers striving to create a “flow” experience for themselves, for fellow players, and for the audience. Novelty is not enough for a creative artist. Indeed, individuals dedicate themselves and their creative expression to making a difference in the world. In her approach to teaching the art of American improvisation, Forsberg

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<sup>47</sup> Cropley, “Creativity and Cognition,” no page number.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 253–260.

wanted to make a difference in the lives of her students. As the woman who established the first school dedicated to teaching the art of improvisation, Forsberg was already positioned as someone who had created something novel. She wanted to do more, and she wanted her students to do more.

Creativity researchers Oshin Vartanian, Colin Martindale, and Jessica Matthews examined the connection between divergent thinking ability and an individual's response time in relating concepts. They found "that people with higher divergent thinking ability are faster in judging whether two concepts are related or unrelated."<sup>49</sup> They concluded,

Over time, this ability would lead to a substantial advantage in the number of potentially useful conceptual relationships that could be assessed per unit of time. This speed advantage in creative people may contribute to the selection of concepts that are either rejected or subsequently subjected to the combinatorial process resulting in creative ideas: The faster they judge relatedness, the more potential relationships can be considered per unit of time.<sup>50</sup>

Most improvisers would deny that they reject or judge while fully engaged in the improvisation process; however, whether or not they are consciously aware of this ability, finding relationships between concepts that are at times seemingly disparate can give a player a crucial advantage. Within a scene, improvisers are constantly and quickly processing information and making choices as to what they believe, or intuit, will work in the moment based on the offers that the other players have put forward and the patterns that they see emerging.

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<sup>49</sup> Oshin Vartanian, Colin Martindale, and Jessica Matthews, "Divergent Thinking Ability Is Related to Faster Relatedness Judgments," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Art* 3 (2009): 99.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Through rehearsing in workshops, and perhaps even more importantly, performing live, an improviser's thinking can become more fluent and flexible and the processing of information so rapid that it happens unconsciously. At times, however, choices are quite consciously made, albeit instinct may be given the credit. For example, improv comedy innovators Halpern, Close, and Johnson discuss the improviser taking on the role of editor. When improvisers become editors, they make a conscious choice to cut a scene:

To edit a scene, a player walks onto the center of the stage and initiates the next scene or game. He simply waits for the right moment, then crosses in front of the existing scene, thus beginning the next one. The scene being cut slowly fades back upstage, where the remaining Harold players are waiting and watching for their roles to become apparent.<sup>51</sup>

Halpern, Close, and Johnson also point out that a player may, at times, take on the role of a director as well. This does not mean that the player attempts to control the behavior of the other players or influence the scene in a self-serving way. According to Halpern, Close, and Johnson, when players take on the role of directors, they initiate an idea “that enriches or illuminates the scene currently being performed.”<sup>52</sup> Whether the players believe they are moved by instinct, the intuitive, or the creative impulse, the choices made are connected to the behavioral and verbal cues being observed and processed by

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<sup>51</sup> Halpern, Close, Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 120. “Created by Del Close and Charna Halpern, The Harold begins with an audience suggestion. A team of improvisers fully explore the suggestion through scenes and games, creating disparate stories, characters and themes that eventually weave together seamlessly, like the instruments of a jazz band” IO website, accessed May 16, 2011, <http://chicago.ioimprov.com/io/shows/9>.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

the players. In speaking of taking in cues and processing, we are speaking of the cognitive connection in expressing one's creativity.

Although divergent thinking is an important and critical skill for an improviser, it is not the only way of thinking involved in producing effective novelty, nor is it sufficient for an improviser to be solely a generator of idea after idea in order to be wholly involved in the creative process. In his article "In Praise of Convergent Thinking," Cropley points out that creativity "requires both generation (via divergent thinking) and also exploration (via convergent thinking)."<sup>53</sup> His assertion contradicts early creativity research that discussed

divergent thinking (production of variability) and  
convergent thinking (production of singularity) [as]  
separate, more or less competing, or even mutually  
exclusive aspects of giftedness.<sup>54</sup>

In considering creativity as a cognitive process that involves both divergent and convergent thinking, we then come to understand that the creative process is not effortless, even if at times it appears to be so; nor, does the creative process belong exclusively to the domain of painful effort. Indeed, according to Neva Boyd, whose early twentieth century work with children is foundational to the art of American improvisation, creativity aroused through the playing of games is "happifying." Even the intuitive, which both Spolin and Forsberg claim is at the heart of the creative process, is called into question when we explore the improviser's cognitive process.

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<sup>53</sup> Cropley, "In Praise of Convergent Thinking," 393.

<sup>54</sup> Cropley, "Creativity and Cognition, 253–260.

In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin points out that intuition is often thought to be a gift bestowed on special individuals by some mystical force. Yet, she clarifies,

all of us have known moments when the right answer “just came” or we did “exactly the right thing without thinking.” Sometimes at such moments, usually precipitated by crises, danger, or shock, the “average” person has been known to transcend the limitation of the familiar, courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius within.<sup>55</sup>

By using Cropley’s theories of creativity to explore the improviser’s cognitive processes, we can demystify Spolin’s theory of the intuitive. Those moments of genius when the individual knows what to do without thinking, those moments of following one’s intuition, are more than likely a result of a cognitive process that draws on both divergent and convergent thinking. According to Cropley,

far from being an example of production of effective novelty without convergent thinking, intuition may well derive from convergent thinking at least as much as from divergent thinking.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, the individual’s genius, if fully explored and deconstructed, may be an example of drawing on stored knowledge unconsciously acquired through everyday experiences. In explaining a plausible connection between intuition and implicit learning, Cropley states:

Even people who have not consciously acquired knowledge and experience in an area sometimes already have in their head a rough outline of the solution they are seeking, despite not necessarily being aware of this.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Cropley, “In Praise of Convergent Thinking,” 393.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

The improviser, through reading, rehearsing, improvisation workshops, formal education, and being involved in day-to-day interaction rituals, becomes an encyclopedia of experiences that are the basis for her moments of “genius” in performance.

In further explaining what he terms the generation of novelty with regard to convergent thinking ability, Cropley explains that the generation of novelty is

followed by (or accompanied by) exploration of the novelty from the point of view of workability, acceptability, or similar criteria to determine if it is effective. Only then would we speak of creativity.<sup>58</sup>

In improvisation performance, the novelty would be:

1. what occurs with the initial offer based on the audience suggestion—also referred to as a discovery;
2. the moment in between the offer and the acceptance;
3. the acceptance, and then the beat or beats that follow.

This process happens almost seamlessly. Improvisers accept the offer/discovery, explore it by heightening or perhaps transforming it, and determine whether or not it is a beat that has had an effective impact on the onstage life and on the audience. There is no overt acknowledgement of the improviser’s cognitive processes, such as Cropley describes in his divergent-convergent thinking theory of creativity, because the rapidity with which ideas are generated and explored makes what the audience and players experience seem magical, as if they were all transported to the place where genius resides.

Improvisers, who often unwittingly embrace the mind-body split, attribute their choices, and moments of insight or clarity, to a feeling rather than to their cognitive

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 398.

processes. Indeed, when asked about their process, they would probably respond that they have no actual process; it all just comes to them. In *Free Play*, Nachmanovitch states that he considers his experience of playing, not the “I” doing but rather more like “following, or taking dictation.”<sup>59</sup> However, in deconstructing the experience of improvising a scene, the cognitive processes involved in creativity—the tolerance of ambiguity, and divergent and convergent thinking—are made visible. Making these processes visible provides a means of empowering artists and giving them permission to take agency in their creativity.

In *Truth in Comedy*, Halpern, Close, and Johnson do not discuss the cognitive process involved in doing scene work; yet, an example of tolerance of ambiguity/divergent-convergent thinking in improvisation is apparent. The authors describe the Harold, also known as long-form improv, as “the best road to comedic improvisation” and “the ultimate in improvisation.”<sup>60</sup> They explain the Harold in the following way:

The Harold is like the space shuttle, incorporating all of the developments and discoveries that have gone before it into one new, superior design.

All of the discoveries made about creating scenes, all of the games that have been developed, all of the principles regarding truth in comedy, can become part of the cohesive, unified whole that is the Harold.

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<sup>59</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 17.

Skilled Harold players take all of these disparate ingredients and build something much greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>61</sup>

The Harold itself is the product of the creative process and the description above speaks directly to that process. Furthermore, this description highlights the practice of drawing on a body of prior knowledge in order to create something that can evoke “a-ha” moments in both players and audience. Indeed, according to Del Close, Jim Belushi found the Harold experience “better than sex!”<sup>62</sup> In addition, this passage demonstrates that improvisers are using divergent thinking (“take disparate ingredients”) and convergent thinking (“build something much greater than the sum of its parts”). In a further description of the experience of performing the Harold, elements of engaging with ambiguity are evident.

In this same book, Tim Kazurinski recounts his perception of the early days of performing the Harold at Second City in the 1970s:

When we did the Harold back then, we’d take an audience suggestion and line up against the back wall. Alternately, we would begin coming forward in groups of two, starting scenes that weren’t going anywhere yet.<sup>63</sup>

Although, at the beginning of the performance, there was no specific path to follow or perhaps any evidence that there would be a viable scene or experience, the initial players would continue to make associations and provide a foundation until “these little vignettes

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 19.

began to tie up or interweave.”<sup>64</sup> All players, through active listening, take in the initiations, the offers, and the discoveries made in each vignette, synthesizing everything in order to conclude with a final scene that ties it all together.

Another example of engaging with ambiguity and divergent and convergent thinking in improvisation is Jeff Michalski’s technique of busting open a scene. In this approach, players begin by moving with each other kinesthetically, which simply means working off one another’s physical movements and reacting and responding to outside, random stimuli. All stimuli, including that presented by the onstage players, the audience players, the space itself—which is both visual and aural—constitutes the environment. In other words, the players in this technique must tap into their sensory awareness and take in all elements of the playing space in order to begin the scene. In a sense, this initial phase of busting open a scene might be considered a sort of dancing with ambiguity because there is absolutely no rehearsed specificity. Because the initial movements do not necessarily connote any sense of place, character, or direction of the scene, the players can find themselves in one of the three situations outlined by Budner:

- a completely new situation in which there are no familiar cues
- a complex situation in which there are a great number of cues to be taken into account
- a contradictory situation in which different elements or cues suggest different structures

The opening kinesthetic interplay, then, requires the players to “dance” with ambiguity.

The players’ collaborative dance with ambiguity leads to a verbal initiation by one of the players who then provides her perception of the other player’s demeanor. In the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 19.

language of this technique, one player reads the other. All that is required from the initiator at this opening to a scene is a simple statement that begins with “you look.” The initiator then fills in the blank based on what she is seeing and sensing in the other player. For example, “You look intrigued.” The player who has been read may or may not agree with the initiator’s perception; however, the offer made by the actor, not necessarily the character, is accepted. The engagement with ambiguity does not end here. The response of the player who has been read is now busted open, which means the players begin making associations with what has been read—in our example, the word “intrigued.”

These associations are examples of the players’ divergent thinking skills. The players often begin with the literal meaning of the word, or a dictionary meaning, which then leads to associations with abstract concepts. For example, a player may list various meanings of the word “intrigued,” such as highly interested, fascinated, or conspiratorial. These associations, products of divergent thinking, are verbal offers made for the benefit of the players and for the audience. From these associations, a “where” is created, or “manifested” to use Michalski’s word. One of the players may pick up on the word “conspiratorial” and then create an environment where the main activity is conspiring, such as a monastery or a spy headquarters. The scene progresses as new discoveries, branching out from the original initiation, are made. When the two players seem to be letting go of the relationship they have created or are not engaging in a meaningful way with one another, one of the players states: “It’s like you and me.” This brings them together in a concerted effort to redefine their relationship or perhaps transform it. As the scene is coming to a close, the players take the concept out globally, meaning, they relate it to the world beyond that created in the scene. A player might say, “It’s as if the whole

world, like our relationship, is intriguing.” Or, “It’s as if the whole world is a big conspiracy.”

In Michalski’s approach, the players begin by surrendering to one another’s physical behavior, as well as to any other stimuli present in the environment, such as audience chatter or laughter, or even the sound of an air conditioner or the clinking of glasses. Initiating a scene through kinesthetic movement, without any language, forces players to spend time in a situation where anything can happen. The players read one another’s physical cues and then begin the divergent thinking cycle by making associations between their movements, their partners’ movements, and the images that are creeping into the players’ consciousness. The players attempt to anticipate one another’s movements, but anticipation is playing “in one’s head,” and results in a suspension of or resistance to active engagement. Some individuals are quite comfortable with being in the moment and working kinesthetically with others, embracing the possibilities of ambiguity, while others can be overtaken by the fear of “not knowing,” of not being in control of the outcome.

However, with deliberate practice, players can eventually surrender to the possibilities that “not knowing” holds and can even begin to take delight in the ambiguity, which ultimately promotes deeper engagements in the interaction rituals being performed. As Tegano reports in “Relationship of Tolerance of Ambiguity and Playfulness to Creativity,”

Individuals who view ambiguity as desirable and challenging might be likely to engage in problem finding,

problem solving and evaluation, avoiding premature decisions throughout the process.<sup>65</sup>

The player who enjoys dancing with ambiguity comes to understand and to appreciate the significance of the process; this player learns that “flow,” then, is not found in the end product. The optimal experience, or “flow,” occurs along the path or paths taken.

During “flow,” an individual gains a sense of “self” as a strong, empowered, and powerful being. Although the individuals that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi interviewed for his study on the psychology of optimal experience reported feeling as if they were floating or being carried by the flow,<sup>66</sup> the recognition of the benefits of the experiences occur after the actual event:

Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies.<sup>67</sup>

Individuals come to perceive themselves differently in the “after flow.” They grow as people by reflecting on the experience. Through self-reflectiveness, through self-examination and self-awareness, individuals move toward agency and self-actualization. Those individuals who believe in their self-efficacy, the psychologist Albert Bandura

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<sup>65</sup> Deborah W. Tegano, “Relationship of Tolerance of Ambiguity and Playfulness to Creativity,” *Psychological Reports* 66 (1990): 1049.

<sup>66</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 40.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

writes, “can generate a wider array of options that expand their freedom of action, and are more successful in realizing desired futures, than those with less developed agentic resources.”<sup>68</sup> This is a path to optimal experience.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that individuals have the capacity to make optimal experiences happen because each one of us is faced with “thousands of opportunities, challenges, to expand ourselves” throughout the day and throughout life.<sup>69</sup> Although partnered with these positive experiences are moments of doubt, fear, and often chaos, all these emotions and states of being, Csikszentmihalyi writes,

add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of *participation* in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, there is often a battle that appears to be with the “self,” questions of whether one can really push through the difficulties; however, as Csikszentmihalyi clarifies:

The “battle” is not really *against* the self, but against the entropy that brings disorder to consciousness. It is really a battle *for* the self; it is a struggle for establishing control over attention.<sup>71</sup>

Achieving “flow” is the personal experience from which the self progresses toward its fullest potential, toward actualization.

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<sup>68</sup> Albert Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 1 (June 2006): 165.

<sup>69</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

Because practicing the art of American improvisation creates a myriad of opportunities for individuals—whether or not they are experienced improvisers, novice performers, or dilettantes—to rehearse expanding their ways of being in the world, it is empowering, liberating, and transformational. Knowing that improvisation involves the entire organism, the physical and the cognitive, is enlightening and empowering, thus giving the creative improvisers a sense of agency. Of course, the will of the individual to confront and let go of old schemas and to dance with ambiguity is necessary, not only in improvisation but in life as well. As improvisers, we must also embrace our brains, our cognitive processes, because this is also where our creativity resides. Albert Bandura states, “The human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, we are generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive. Understanding that the creative process is not a matter of happenstance and that it does not belong only to the elite few empowers us and gives us agency. In order to experience this power, to tap into it, we just need to be cognizant.

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<sup>72</sup> Bandura, “Toward a Psychology of Human Agency,” 165.

## Conclusion

The art of American improvisation has a rich history dating back to the early twentieth century and the work of Neva Boyd. Boyd focused on the intrinsic value of play as a tool that supported the development of the individual through social group work regardless of physical, emotional, or mental challenges. She devised programs, both for children and for teachers, that emphasized a democratic approach to play and that promoted movement toward what the humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow, labeled “self-actualization,” a state-of-being at the apex of his “Hierarchy of Needs.” Boyd particularly focused on the significant role that structured games play in the social adjustment of all children. She believed that the process of playing a game transforms the individual physically, socially, and psychologically. According to Paul Simon, she “stressed the development of individual potential through group life,” which she applied to social and recreational groups, as well as “the handicapped, retarded, and delinquent children and the mentally ill in hospitals and institutions.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Boyd believed that the difference in play programming for the challenged differs only slightly from “normal” children’s play.<sup>2</sup> The contributions that Boyd made to the development of the art of American improvisation have been largely overlooked. This dissertation has corrected this oversight.

Viola Spolin, Boyd’s student, used Boyd’s theories to develop games for teaching acting/performing and theatre arts. Building on Boyd’s work, Spolin continued to

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<sup>1</sup> Simon, introduction to Neva Boyd, *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Boyd, *Play and Game Theory in Group Work*, 65.

emphasize the importance of game structures as a pedagogical tool, as well as their transformative nature. Unlike Boyd who relied solely on traditional games because of their stable patterns and structures, Spolin developed her own games. Each game addressed a skill that an actor/performer needed to acquire in order to become stage worthy. Spolin's games approach, simply understood, is "giving problems to solve problems."<sup>3</sup> Spolin also continued Boyd's concept of the role of the group leader. She further developed this role into that of the side coach, providing phrases and cues for the teacher-director to use in each game. Her own contributions to the art of American improvisation, an art form which she truly defined, are its stress on spontaneity and intuitiveness and its direct involvement of the audience in the improvisation games by using their suggestions as material for improvised scenes. Although some contemporary improvisers are unaware of Spolin's work, her place in theatre history and the history of improvisation is nonetheless recognized. This is due in part to the publication in 1963 of her book *Improvisation for the Theater*, which has become a foundational text in actor training. She is also directly connected to Second City, the mecca of improv comedy, because of her son Paul Sills and others who participated in her workshops as members of The Compass and Second City.

Spolin's student, Josephine Raciti Forsberg, does not have a secure place in improvisation history; yet, she made significant contributions. As the only professional theatre practitioner among these three women, Forsberg directly linked improvisation with actor training. She built on the Spolin foundation, which was informed by Boydean theory, and drew on her other areas of interest in order to create a vibrant curriculum that

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<sup>3</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 20.

taught theatre/performance and life skills. By designing exercises that asked students to use their own perceptions, observations, and experiences from everyday life to create their improvised scenarios, she supported them in working through issues that were not only blocks to their own creativity, but also blocks that prohibited personal growth. Forsberg never used her workshops as therapy sessions; however, with her focus on liberating students from their own negative life scripts, from the ties binding them to old habits that were not serving them well, and from their fear of “not knowing,” her workshops did have a therapeutic component to them. Forsberg designed improvisation exercises that emphasized “give and take,” acceptance,” and “self knowledge.” These concepts are as essential to improvisation as they are to a life well lived. They underpin collaborative work and community building.

In discussing the experience of discovering one’s “being,” Rollo May describes these moments of cognition as tantamount to

going into my very own Garden of Eden where I am beyond good and evil and all other human concepts. It is like the experience of the poets of the intuitive world, the mystics, except that instead of the pure feeling of and union with God it is the finding of and the union with my own being. It is like owning Cinderella’s shoe and looking all over the world for the foot it will fit and realizing all of a sudden that one’s own foot is the only one it will fit.<sup>4</sup>

In Spolin theory, these experiences are the explosions that free us from cultural constrictions and constraints when we are engaged in moments of true spontaneity, when

we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves

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<sup>4</sup> Rollo May, *The Discovery of Being* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), 99.

function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression.<sup>5</sup>

Forsberg calls these “A-ha” moments; they occur when the individual has faced a creative block and has overcome it by finding new behavior, by letting go of an old life script, and by silencing her “inner censor.” By the time students complete Forsberg’s training, they have had several opportunities to confront old habits, as well as develop an awareness of how certain automatic behavior has inhibited or completely stopped personal and creative growth.

These three women, all first-generation Americans, believed in the power of play and the importance of focusing on the processes involved in learning and creativity, and devised a pedagogy that demonstrated the power of a focus on process rather than end-result. They all drew on the important theories of their time and place in history. Boyd’s contributions grew out of social and educational reform; Spolin’s work grew out of a necessity to communicate with non-literate individuals; Forsberg’s approach was rooted in the Human Potential Movement, a movement that asked Americans to strive to reach their fullest potential. If these three women were developing their theories and approaches today, they would more than likely focus on the advances in neuroscience and cognitive psychology that provide scientific explanations for what they observed and that give us deeper insight into the processes involved in improvisation.

Like Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg, I witnessed the transformative power of directed play, the ways in which games build community through collaboration, and the ways in which games support the development of the “self.” In 2006, I began teaching

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<sup>5</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 4.

improvisation at The City College of the City University of New York. I knew what improvisation had done for me in terms of actor/performance training and “self” development. I knew what improvisation was from inside of “me.” I was quite unprepared for the transformations I would observe in my students. As I watched them “play” in each class, sometimes doing very well and sometimes struggling, I came to understand why Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg dedicated much of their lives to promoting the benefits of play and improvisation, and to creating a pedagogy focused on process. It works for the students and the teacher/leader alike.

Initially, I used the “Spolin Games” filtered through my experiences as a student in Forsberg’s Players Workshop and as an improv comedy performer. In each class, I noted particular behavioral patterns, resistances, and successes demonstrated by my students and searched *Improvisation for Theater* for games that addressed the issues and achievements that I was witnessing. Most of the students’ reliance on old patterns of behavior and schemas was based in their fear of “not knowing” what I, as the teacher, wanted, or if they were doing it right. Many of them were looking to me as the authority figure who would tell them how to play the game. In keeping with the Boyd/Spolin/Forsberg pedagogical approach, I did not oblige. “There is no right way,” I would tell them. “In improvisation, there is only the process of solving the problem of the game.” For some of the students, this response was inadequate. For others, it was liberating.

Regarding the significance of problem-solving in her pedagogical approach to teaching improvisation and acting/performance, Spolin states,

Problem-solving performs the same function in creating organic unity and freedom of action as does the game and

generates great excitement by constantly provoking the question of procedures at the moment of crisis, thus keeping all participating members open for experiencing.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the problem presented in the game is paramount in supporting the development of new behaviors and attitudes because it keeps the players focused on something outside of themselves (the procedures) and engaged in the process. Spolin also points out, “Mutual involvement with the problem instead of each other frees the air of personalities, judgment values, recrimination . . . and is replaced by trust.”<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, I use the following side coaching phrase: “It’s not about you.” I also use Forsberg’s advice: “If you take care of the other player, you will be taken care of.” This simple idea often takes several classes to grasp and to believe. As Forsberg’s student, I had learned how to respond to side coaching as a player and how and when side coaching was used. As a teacher, I learned its value.

Like Forsberg, as I continued developing my pedagogy, I began infusing my approach to teaching improvisation with other concepts about which I was learning from my research on this dissertation, as well as from other improvisation technique classes I was taking and other actor training programs in which I had participated, such as Anne Bogart’s Viewpoints, David Mamet and Bill Macy’s Practical Aesthetic,<sup>8</sup> and Michael Chekhov training. In addition, I began looking at improvisation and the exercises I was

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<sup>6</sup> Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> The Practical Aesthetic is taught at The Atlantic Acting School. It is a Stanislavskian-based training that uses Sanford Meisner’s repetition techniques and Stanislavsky’s “As If” as a basis for scene study. “As If” is an improvisational technique that those trained in The Practical Aesthetic use to give life and purpose to a scene.

using through the lenses of psychological, cognitive, and creativity theories. Perhaps one of the most enlightening concepts for me, and one that now greatly informs my pedagogy, is the intolerance/tolerance of ambiguity. Ambiguity is ever-present in improvisation, as it is in life. Improvisation can serve as a tool to help individuals learn to endure situations that are characterized by uncertainty and to feel confident that they can solve ill-defined problems. When an individual can tolerate ambiguity, she can experience the present moment and respond in the “Now,” as opposed to running from the threat that “not knowing” can pose.

When I began working on this dissertation, Forsberg gave me a copy of *Something from Nothing*, her informal notes on the exercises she was using as part of her curriculum. I began experimenting with some of the exercises that she had either not used when I had been her student or that I had simply forgotten over the past two and half decades. I also began putting more focus on “mirroring,” which she believes is the key to improvisation. Her “Character of Space,” “Passion,” and “Acceptance” exercises are now staples in my repertoire of exercises. Furthermore, in researching the theories that influenced Forsberg’s work—both those she acknowledged and those she did not—my perspective on human behavior was transformed. I was already familiar, to a degree, with the “old tapes” and “inner censor” from Forsberg’s side coaching and her evaluations of our scene work in class. I knew that she had been a Transactional Analysis (TA) group therapy leader, had been studying psychology, and had participated in Erhard Seminar Training (EST).<sup>9</sup> I learned, first hand, that Forsberg wanted all her students to move

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<sup>9</sup> See Steven M. Tipton, *Getting Saved From The Sixties: Moral Meaning In Conversion And Cultural Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

toward emotional health and to learn to take care of their “selves.” In digging deeper into TA, EST, and the Human Potential Movement, I discovered Humanistic Psychology with its emphasis on the health rather than the pathology of the individual. When I read the work of Abraham Maslow and Rollo May, I understood exactly how improvisation leads to personal transformation.

One of the exercises that I use in all my first day improvisation classes is Spolin’s “Exposure” game. In this game, half the participants stand in the playing area and are side coached to “do nothing” while the other half become the audience-observers. Each group has the opportunity to play both parts in this game. Although solving the problem of standing there “doing nothing” while everyone looks at you seems quite simple, it is deceptively difficult. No one can “do nothing.” When the exercise is completed, I ask all participants to write down their observations, from both the perspective of the “doer” and of the observer. One of the students observed that she never found a level of comfort while “doing nothing” and being “exposed” to the rest of the group. However, she reported that while observing the other group, she had an “A-ha” moment. She recognized that what she was witnessing were just humans being human.

This student’s recognition of humans being human, or individuals simply behaving in an authentic way, epitomizes the art of American improvisation. At the core of improvisation as it developed in the United States is a belief that we can learn to interact with one another as collaborators. Foundational to improvisation is the belief that “play” serves as a catalyst for collaboration and community. In addition, “play” can also serve as the royal road, or at least provide a path, to self-actualization. Neva Boyd, Viola Spolin, and Josephine Raciti Forsberg believe that through the process of playing, we

learn who we are. One way of describing the art of American improvisation is to say that it is the art of using the “self” to know the “self,” to liberate the “self,” and to transform the “self,” all through the process of learning to play with others.

This dissertation has taken an important first step in writing the historical narrative of the development of an art form that Frost and Yarrow have argued is “distinctively American.”<sup>10</sup> I have not only traced the roots of American improvisation to the educational and social reforms that were changing the cultural landscape of the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. I have also demonstrated that women were the key players in the development of an art form that has the power to influence and change the lives of those who practice it. By dedicating a large segment of this dissertation to the work of Josephine Raciti Forsberg, I have written her back into the history. In other words, I have given her back her voice.

The discovery of and the use of one’s voice are evident in Forsberg’s work, as well as in the focus on process and experiential learning that are at the core of improvisation. In addition, the concept of “voice” is an important theme in feminist theory. Overt communication with others in the public sphere is only part of the concept of the voice. “Voice” also includes internal communication, the notion of listening to one’s inner self, the self that knows, the self that does not censor. Finding this voice is crucial in personal development. For Spolin, this was the intuitive. For Forsberg, this means “getting out of your head.” In *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule call it the infallible gut. In their discussion of “Subjective

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<sup>10</sup> Anthony Frost & Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (New York: Palgrave, 1990), 45.

Knowledge: The Inner Voice,” they relate the story of Inez, a woman who was “no longer subject to the dictates and whims of external authorities.”<sup>11</sup> This woman, like many other women in their study, moved from a position of “passivity to action, from self as static to self as becoming, from silence to a protesting inner voice and infallible gut.”<sup>12</sup> This occurs, they argue, when

a woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the ‘still small voice’ within her, [finding] an inner source of strength.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this stage in their self-actualization that “women become their own authorities.”<sup>14</sup>

This dissertation does not solely focus on the experience of women as improvisers. The main goal of this project was gaining a deeper understanding of the transformative powers of improvisation rather than the creation of a narrative that separates players into gendered categories. In her book, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham focuses on the gender issues that have plagued improv comedy.<sup>15</sup> While improvisation and improv comedy are usually conflated, they are different genres that do not necessarily share the same skill sets. Moreover, with the development of Theatresports and Improvisation Olympics in the late 1970s, improvisation began moving

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker, Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, Jill Mattauck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1986), p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>15</sup> Amy Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).

towards a competitive model rather than an art form. I chose to focus on American improvisation as a theatrical art form and on telling the story of its development as women's theatre history and history in general. This narrative is one that focuses on the positive contributions that women have made rather than on finding the cultural and social pathologies that have relegated women to the role of victim. Like the art of American improvisation, this dissertation is meant to empower.

Further research on this topic might include the change that occurred in improvisation training when Forsberg's The Players Workshop was forced to close when Andrew Alexander made the decision to establish a training center at Second City. Forsberg, Boyd, and Spolin all argued that the communication skills and sense of community that were the result of adhering to play and improvisation structures created self-actualized, responsible, ethical members of society. The question to ask then is: Have the post-Forsberg schools turned their backs on the significance of interaction ritual, the development of imagination, and the acquisition of performance skills simply because it is considered "old school"? As an insider who has participated in some of these workshops, and who has taught players who have only been trained post-Forsberg, I believe that the answer to this question is "yes." As one of my students recently remarked, something seems to have been lost when Charna Halpern established her theatre and improv school in 1981 called the IO. What has been lost is the psycho-social aspects of improvisation. This is not to say that there have not been wonderful new developments in improvisation. It is only to say that an important aspect of a player's training is no longer necessarily included and that revisiting concepts taught by Spolin

and Forsberg may benefit both the players and improvisation itself—perhaps a return to improvisation as art.

Another area of research on this topic is the neuroscience and “social brain” connection. With the development of new technologies that can visually record changes that occur in the brain, a collaboration between neuroscientists and improvisers would provide a great deal of information on the creative process, cognitive process, and what happens when individuals authentically engage with one another. This dissertation has provided insight into what happens in the brain with regard to mirror neurons and how improvisation can support the development of a neural wifi system. A question to ask is: How does improvisation change the brain?

As a scholar and practitioner, I will continue to build upon the work and theories of Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg and to infuse my own concepts into a pedagogical approach that supports the transformation of the individual. I will continue to ask my students to find the space where fear and courage collide because this is where art is found. I will continue to find ways to empower my students, as Boyd, Spolin, and Forsberg did. I will continue to teach my students to be cognizant of who they are and where they are, and that they have a unique voice and the right to use that voice. And I will continue to model the concept: passion is a way of being.

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## Autobiographical Statement

Margaret M. Duffy (aka Meghan Duffy) is a professional actor, theatre scholar, and educator, who has performed in every venue from Broadway to boats. She played Frenchy in the original Broadway production of *Grease* and her National Tour credits include Trixie in *The Rocky Horror Show*, Gooch in *Mame*, starring Juliet Prowse, and *Grease*. She has appeared Off- and Off-Off-Broadway as Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, Knowledge in a musical adaptation of *Everyman*, Linnie in *The Wonder Years*, Helen in *Swirl*, Sissy in *Something Blue*, and Georgy in *Georgy*, a musical based on the film *Georgy Girl*. Regional Theatre productions include *Brigadoon*, *A Christmas Survival Guide*, *Over Here*, *She Loves Me*, *Return to Forbidden Planet*, *Christmas Carol*, *Pump Boys & Dinettes*, *Beehive*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *Jacques Brel*, *Godspell*, and *Dames at Sea*, for which she received a Sarah Siddons best actress nomination. Original works includes *What a Wonderful World!*, *The Meghan Duffy Show*, and *Girls Don't*, which she has performed in Toronto and New York, and several cabaret pieces. She has recorded film soundtracks in London and the United States and can be heard on *The Care Bear* recordings, the CD *Seize the Day*, and is featured in one of the *Mister Men* children's videos. As a theatre scholar, she has presented at major conferences across the country. Her publications include *Comedy*, "Janusz Glowacki's *The Fourth Sister* at the Vineyard Theatre," "Holly Hughes Gives Us a Peek at the Next Generation," and biographical entries for Tina Howe, Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, and Terrence McNally for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* and Grolier's *Encyclopedia of American Drama*. Meghan has developed a unique approach to the theory and practice of improvisation and actor training. As an educator, she guest lectures on improvisation as a pedagogical and

performance tool at universities in the U.S. Currently, she is the Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, where she also teaches. She is the founder of The Edge Effect Improv Lab.