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Improvisation for actor training and performance in 20th century America (with special emphasis on the Spolin and Sills tradition)

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City University of New York, 1990

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IMPROVISATION FOR ACTOR TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICA (WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE SPOLIN AND SILLS TRADITION)

by JEFF BRONE

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.

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Date

Chair of Examining Committee

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Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Thanks to my family for their encouragement.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of improvisation as a tool for training actors in America has changed and grown during this century. Acting teachers have expanded their methods of using improvisation, engaging an actor's creative imagination when he or she works on existing texts or creates new material. The creating of new material, of course, is one of the traditional uses of improvisation. This dissertation will explore and explain the various uses of improvisation for actor training in this country. It will show the usefulness of this training and provide a historical overview of this use of improvisation. Comparisons between important teachers of improvisation will be emphasized as well as analyses of certain trends and popular theories in improv training.

In the academic field, the topic of improvisation training has been scarcely touched, although the subject was dealt with in a dissertation by Lee Gallup Feldman (A Critical Analysis of Improvisational Theatre in the United States from 1955-1968. Denver: U of Denver, 1969.) She presented a critical study of improv from 1955, when The Compass Players began, to 1968. Feldman used a lively approach as she described the active process of developing scenes through improvisation, interviewing many (over twenty) people in the field, though concentrating primarily on people connected directly with The Second City improv company of Chicago. Her work focuses on the practicalities

of developing improvisational scenes in the Second City style and provides good historical information on the beginnings of The Second City and the groups that grew out of that particular Chicago movement (ex. The Premise, The Compass Players). While covering the development of improvisation groups during that particular period from 1955-1968, Feldman chose not to focus on improvisation specifically for actor training.

In the first two chapters of this dissertation, an overview of the literature written about improvisation will give some historical sense about the progress of the use of improvisation for actor training. During the late 1800s, for example, there is evidence that improvisation was used for the creation and performance of minstrel skits, burlesque material and even productions of scripted plays. Later, the major works by Stanislavski and Spolin, as well as various other writers, less known but quite important, add to the history of the development of improv as part of actor training in America. For example, Keith Johnstone and Sanford Meisner have contributed to the field through their books (Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre and Sanford Meisner on Acting, respectively) as well as their teaching. All books, both the more popular and lesser known, which offer theoretical bases for the teaching of improvisation as a part of training actors, will be discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, where theoretical views about improvisation will be compared and contrasted.

Familiarity with these books is critical to understanding improvisation for actor training. The analysis of these books and their theoretical views will also provide an historical overview of the changing ideas about the use of improvisation by acting teachers.

These books are the major, and often the only channel through which today's improvisers and improv teachers gain access to past ideas and teaching methods, and the value of each book varies with each reader. For example, Gloria Maddox, a successful actress and acting teacher in New York, said that Spolin's Improvisation for the Theatre[1] has a brilliant first 50 pages but much of the rest of the book "reads so much like a cookbook" that it is difficult to use.[2] This comment indicates a personal preference which sheds light on the presentation of the ideas in Spolin's book as compared to, for example, Johnstone's book, which Maddox said that she used extensively in her acting classes. These books contain theories of varying degrees of usefulness, and Maddox's comment indicates that these theories influence teaching methods. Theoretical analysis of the works will illustrate the varieties of methods for teaching improv which are available to acting teachers.

After a discussion of the literature available on improvisation, this dissertation will cover various individuals as well as groups of people involved in improv training. Those who were strongly influenced by the teachings of Spolin and Sills will be emphasized because

these two teachers were (and still are) very influential in improv training. The groups of people or the individuals who will be discussed either used Spolin's or Sills' theories and methods directly or as a starting point to develop new ways of teaching. In addition, those people or groups to be analyzed are particularly enlightening on the subject of the uses of improv for actor training. These analyses will show the beginnings of trends in improv. A group may pioneer a way of teaching improvisation, or of using it in performance, which is a kind of actor training itself. This new method may add much to the field and will be given attention. In addition, the methods of one group (or person) may relate to earlier theories or uses of improvisation, and this relationship will show the progression in the field. This study will use critical books and reviews to assess the value of the work done, and personal interviews with those involved with each group will help clarify the methods of improvisation training used.

This study will concentrate on topics directly affecting acting training in America in the 20th century. Certain groups (for example, the Italian commedia dell'arte), though important in their own right, will not be discussed because they have limited influence on the practicalities of teaching improv in 20th century America.

The eighth chapter will be devoted to studying the views of selected actors and actresses, exploring what they

think about their improvisational training. This chapter will include analysis of their training-- if it has helped them and what should be done to enhance the use of improv to train actors.

When dealing with a subject as broad as improvisation for actor training, there are some choices to consider. Included in this dissertation is an analysis of books, people and movements which support this thesis, provide valuable information on the uses of improvisation and, in the case of the groups, have a strong connection to the teachings of Spolin or Sills. The topics-- books, improv companies and people-- covered in this work were, and still are, influential. They are also interesting and accessible sources for critical reviews, interviews, and information in general.

The term "improvisation" in this dissertation can mean two things. The first is the use of impromptu dialogue for training actors for stage work, or for creating new material to be performed on a regular basis. The second is the use of acting exercises that have a strong quality of being improvised, a basic structure that allows the actor much latitude to create words, actions or movements that express his own creative impulses.

In this study, the term "actor" can also mean "actress" when appropriate. The terms "improvisation" and "improv" are interchangeable.

CHAPTER ONE

IMPROVISATION IN AMERICA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19th CENTURY

There is solid evidence that actors during the second half of the 19th century improvised in a variety of circumstances. Improvisations took place in minstrel shows and burlesques, which employed a looser structure than straight plays or even comedies. There is also evidence, through stage directions, that scripted dramas written by Ned Harrigan and Charles Hoyt (for example) called for improvised pieces of business and even lines spoken ad-lib, or improvisationally. While it seems that improvising was done, it was not, as far as is evident, an important part of formal actor training. Improv was, however, a skill which an actor could learn through rehearsing and performing.

The books by eminent actors of the period (Minnie Maddern Fiske and Joseph Jefferson, for example) as well as directors such as Augustin Daly and David Belasco make no substantial mention of improvisation as an important part of actor training.[3] Improv, though, was a part of an actor's practical, or on-the-job training. Evidence discussed in this chapter indicates that improvisation was used often as a source of spontaneous comedy in sketches or as a way of developing stage business. The type of improvisation done by actors in the second half of the 19th century took a few forms which are most easily organized by

types because any chronological or historical progression is unclear.

The first type of improvisation was the kind done in minstrel, vaudeville and burlesque shows. It was characterized by impromptu, humorous lines or action done either as a comic device or in response to unforseen changes in the performance or unexpected lapses in an actor's memory. Sketches, for example, often had a quality that would be difficult to contain in a script, such as one performed by the San Francisco Minstrels as discussed by Robert C. Toll, in Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America:

> Since the San Francisco Minstrels were considered unrivaled masters of the free wheeling, spontaneous ad lib, it is especially difficult to recapture their performances. . . .In 1880, these zany, unpredictable comedians performed one of their greatest farces, "Pleasant Companions." Set in an asylum for sleepwalkers, the skit had a cast that was hilarious in itself.[4]

After a lengthy description of the characters in the sketch (Abigail, Tobias, Reuben, Charley, and Zeb), Toll described the ending of the scene:

> Played by the hulking Charlie Backus, Reuben prowled the stage, barking, snarling, attacking, and even biting the other patients. Into this incredible menagerie crept Zeb Doolittle, a burglar played by Billy Burch. . . . Deluged with Tobias's nationalistic rhetoric and deafened by his firecrackers, Zeb was wooed and kissed by Romeo and had his clothes and valuables stolen by Abigail. Finally, the growling, snarling Backus pounced on him, biting and howling like a giant, rabid dog. The skit closed with all the characters wildly chasing each other around the stage.[5]

The Minstrels were well received, and Francis Wilson, an actor and a chronicler of theatre in this period, said that

"Billy Burch and Charles Backus of the San Francisco Minstrels strayed into byways by alert and refreshing comment and reflection." and in reference to their performance in the above sketch that "they provoked the most spontaneous laughter [in the audience] . . ."[6] Such a sketch as described above, with its wild nature, would certainly have had some element of improvisation in its performance.

In minstrel show scripts the stage directions have, at times, indicated a need for stage business created by the actor. In the sketch "Sublime and Ridiculous" by George H. Coes,[7] a tragic actor type character is to throw the character of Julius across the stage. The tragic actor is to speak pseudo-Shakespearian dialogue while carrying out his action. Coes directed that ". . . all this time Julius can say whatever he likes; it is to be worked up very melodramatic until this last speech is over."[8] This type of direction allowed for improvisation in creation of the dialogue of Junius, and most probably some latitude in the speaking of this dialogue during performance. Another sketch-- "Camille"[9] by G.W.H. Griffin-- calls for a character (also named Julius) to carry out the "business of going up and down stage, as though not used to addressing an audience."[10] Again, there is latitude here for some creativity by the actor. While the term "business" indicates that something must be planned by the actor, it

is also indefinite enough to allow spontaneity by the actor in both the creation and execution of the business.

Another example of improvisation occurs in the minstrel sketch "I Haven't Got the Nerve" in Negro Minstrels: A Complete Guide by Jack Haverly.[11] The actor in this monologue is instructed, in the stage directions, to mention a specific black neighborhood in the town where the minstrel show is being performed.

Some burlesque actors had a skill for improvising, often receiving the admiration of their fellow players. One such actor was John Brougham (1814-1880), whose talent is related in The Stage Reminiscences of Mrs. Gilbert. One night in 1876 at the Second Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York, Brougham was in the burlesque of Pocahontas playing the character of Powhatan, the father of Pocahontas. The woman playing Pocahontas, Henrietta Hodson, failed to appear on her cue and Brougham, according to Gilbert, improvised in this fashion:

> "as my daughter Poky would say;" and so getting through the performance [improvising humorously] until it became absolutely necessary to bestow something upon John Rolfe, for his bride, when he [Brougham] seized a broom from the wings and placed it in the bridegroom's arms with a "take her, dear fellow."[12]

Moody, in Dramas from the American Theatre 1762-1909, clarifies this story by explaining that Brougham, when asked "Where is Pokey?", quipped "Lost among the icebergs on Broadway [Broadway was frozen over]."[13] According to Moody, contemporary accounts said that the audience was delighted with Brougham's improvisations.

He also improvised with the leader of the theatre's orchestra. The newspaper Music and the Drama (14 July 1860) reported:

> . . . We may be allowed to say that we think that his [Brougham's] conversations with Mr. Cooke, the leader of the orchestra, might be curtailed a little, for although they are very amusing to those who are near enough to hear, those who are not are apt to wonder what on earth is the matter . . .[14]

Thus Brougham not only improvised when actors failed to appear on stage, as in Pocahontas, but with the orchestra leader. This suggests that Brougham had a spirit of spontaneity on stage, a desirable trait for an improviser and, when used correctly, a way to maintain the audience's interest.

Two actors from the second half of the 19th century, George L. Fox and Pete Dailey, were both known to improvise. Laurence Senelick related a story about Fox from the New York Mirror (6 July 1887):

> His [Fox] quickness at improvisation was also a valuable resource. On one occasion, as he made an entrance, his hat caught on a gas fixture, and it [the hat] and his wig came off together. Without turning back, Fox cooly took a hat off one of the actor's heads, snatched the wig from another and proceeded to speak his lines as if the denuding had been part of the role's legitimate business.[15]

Such a quick witted and good humored reaction certainly saved the scene an embarrassing pause. As related in Nat Goodwin's Book, an incident involving Dailey happened sometime in the late 1800s, although Goodwin does not mention an exact date. While peforming a burlesque, Dailey unpredictably "threw his lines to the winds and in a few

moments had [his fellow actor] tied into knots." When the other actor took his hat off to mop his brow, Dailey mercilessly quipped "Put your hat on; you're naked!"[18]

Dailey, in this instance, was engaging in a kind of playful (and maybe a bit taunting) game as his fellow actor was challenged to improvise along with Dailey. In this case Dailey did not have a formidable opponent: his fellow actor simply was "tied into knots." Had the other actor been creative enough, he could have adhered to the lines of the scene (or, at least, the basic form) while Dailey improvised, and both could have created an interesting though unusual scene. Dailey was exhibiting the basic playfulness important to a good improviser. So were the San Francisco Minstrels, although Dailey's example is more pointed. This playfulness, and the germ of improvisational spirit, though it was not formally labeled as such, was present in Dailey's behavior and in other actors of the period.

There is evidence that Harrigan and Hart captured that same spirit. Although some of the personal scrapbooks of Ned Harrigan show the work he did in writing and rewriting songs,[17] there was room for improvisation in his performances, both in a spontaneous way and through improvised stage business. In The Merry Partners: The Age and Stage of Harrigan and Hart, E.J. Kahn Jr. relates some informative events.[18] For example, in some of Harrigan and Hart's performances there was a young boy who sold lozenges

to the audience and explained the plot as well. It was common for Harrigan, Hart, and others to quip "bring on the lozenge boy" when a particular piece of a scene did not play well with the audience. The freedom to ask for the lozenge boy indicates the presence of an improvisational quality to the performance. More pointedly, during a 1888 performance Harrigan was presented with a sterling silver water service for his birthday. An actress on stage at the time, Annie Yeamans, then delivered a two minute impromptu speech on the value of cold water as a healthy beverage.[18] Once when Harrigan played a Yankee in The Blue and the Gray (in New Orleans) he asked the audience if they could give a "poor Yank a hand too?" and delighted the crowd.[20] Such lines were not the only examples of improvisation in Harrigan's work.

In the script of The Mulligan Guard Ball there are many instances of stage directions which call for improvised stage business by the actors.[21] This direction for business, created in rehearsal through improvised work by the actors and director, appears several times in this script, giving the actor a chance to be improvisationally creative with his execution of the business. The first example of this direction is in Act I, Scene 1, when a cigar being smoked by the character of "Dan Mulligan" (originally played by Ned Harrigan) explodes. Mrs. Mulligan asks "Are Ye hurt?", Dan's son Tommy asks "What's the matter, Pop?", and the stage directions call for "business"

by Dan followed by his lines "Ha-ha-ha- that's first rate Tommy, you had me that time."[22] Dan obviously feigns injury, since Tommy asks what the matter is. This type of business was developed in rehearsal and was probably done to good effect, making Tommy and Mrs. Mulligan believe that Dan really was injured. The dramatic resolution comes when Dan says to Tommy "Put it there! [Shaking hands] That's an old game with me." Dan has played his own joke, feigning injury, and the business was an important part of this humorous interchange.

Harrigan inserted stage business throughout the script. At the end of Scene 3, two characters engage in business to finish the act. The directions state "Enter Primrose, seizes him [Sneider]. Bus. for finish."[23] As it was needed to end the scene, this business was probably theatrically effective. The first entrance of the Skidmore Guard involves business after the members march in and come to a halt. The business devised and used in this script would seem to play an important part in the humor and dramatic effectiveness of some of the sequences.

The last sequence of the play contains five directions of business and a general "melee." During this "melee" the character of Lochmuller and six butchers enter with cleavers. The ending builds comically as local merchants enter and demand that Dan Mulligan pay past due bills, the merchants taking their turns fighting with Mulligan as stage directions call for "Business and fight"

three times. The business helps build the frenzied atmosphere and follows the comic "rule of threes." This rule is not actually provable, but it is an old axiom that humorous events are more effective when they happen in groups of three. Given the fact that the ending of this play relies on a building of humorous hostilities followed by a melee, the stage business called for was quite important to the effectiveness of the scene. This business, which was improvised and created during rehearsal, and included a sequence where the burly character of Sim Primrose tackles a woman, had to be both humorous and dramatically strong, both allowing for creativity from the actors and adding to the theatrical humor of the piece.

While it is difficult to know how much improvising actually went on during the performances of this play, it seems that some was done. The informal nature of the piece, and previously related incidents of Harrigan and Hart's tendency to improvise with the audience, suggest that the stage business called for in the script allowed the actor some latitude. For example, such an ending melee with so many people on stage-- in excess of thirty-- could never be done exactly the same way every night. Different people would get in any one actor's way, and the confusion of the whole situation would necessitate spontaneity and, just as important, cooperation from the actors. Within the framework of the script, which had to be basically followed

for the piece to be effective, there was surely room for some spontaneous improvisation.

Charles Hoyt's A Temperance Town,[24] which opened in Buffalo, NY in 1892, also employs stage directions of improvised business. The best example of these directions comes in Act IV, Scene 2, where Hoyt mentions that two characters, Sprague and Belcher, who are opposing each other and serving as attorneys in a trial scene, carry out "excited business" when either man becomes angry at the proceedings or what the other man has said about him. For example, when Belcher accuses Sprague's client of lying and trading in liquor illegally, Sprague shouts "I object" and Hoyt's directions say "Same business of running up and down in excited manner. Both Belcher and Sprague shout to each other ad lib and slap hands."[25] The "same business" referred to by Hoyt was mentioned a few lines earlier in a similarly excited situation when Hoyt directed that Sprague engage in "excited business with Belcher." In all, this type of business is called for four times during the scene. At one point, Belcher calls Sprague "No opposition at all" as a counselor and the same business is called for, though Sprague's anger at the insult would have probably affected the way that the business was done.

The use of this last stage direction is especially illuminating because of the direction to shout "ad lib," with lines delivered as the performer wishes, including or omitting them as the actor deems appropriate. The use of

"excited business" in a scene of such high energy would alone necessitate some spontaneity in the actors' performances. The use of the term ad lib makes it clear that Hoyt would have wanted the actors to create in the moment of performance. Like Harrigan and Hart, Hoyt used the direction of "business" to encourage spontaneous excitement in his actors during important parts of the play. It is important to note that the play was successful, opening in New York in 1893 and running for 125 consecutive performances. After 1894 it ran periodically in New York for the next ten years, as well as playing many performances in road companies.

In the case of both Hoyt, and Harrigan and Hart, there was some freedom provided for the actor to improvise. Certainly the rehearsals gave the actors a chance to create "business," and even in performance that business might have changed a small amount each evening.

In the area of acting by performers in straight plays, there is additional evidence that improvisation was used. There is solid evidence of Edwin Forrest engaging in improvising on stage. Probably because he was often caught up in the excitement of the moment, Forrest was known to do the unpredictable, as stated in Garff Wilson's A History of American Acting:

> Scenes of combat in which he [Forrest] participated were always a terror to the other actors. There was no shamming in the battle. Forrest became so excited that he fought and hacked with terrifying gusto. His opponents were always in real danger.[28]

Wilson also relates an incident that happened when Forrest was playing King Lear and became so caught up in the passion of the character that he tore his grey wig off and hurled it twenty feet toward the footlights.[27] Certainly Forrest could be spontaneous and unpredictable, and while his behavior was not completely in character, he captured a certain power that was probably refreshing.

James Rees' The Life of Edwin Forrest provides further evidence of Forrest's improvisational inclinations. During one unspecified production in England, Forrest was playing a Roman warrior. In a scene which called for Forrest to be attacked by six of the tyrant's thugs, Forrest complained to the actors playing the thugs that they were too tame and that their anger was unbelievable. The lead actor of the thugs asked Forrest if he wanted a "bully fight" to which Forrest replied that he did. During the performance the actors set upon Forrest, punching and kicking him with accuracy and injurious intentions. Rees recalled, with some romanticism, the result:

> For a moment Forrest stood astounded . . . then came the few minutes of powerful acting, at the end of which one super [playing a thug] was seen sticking head foremost in the bass drum in the orchestra, four were having their wounds dressed in the green room, and one finding himself in the flies, rushed out upon the roof of the theatre, and shouted "Fire!"[28]

Rees added that the audience was very pleased with Forrest's "acting," though one questions the value (and danger) of such improvisation.

This incident indicates spontaneity gone awry, as the same actor who could thrill an audience with his unpredictable acting could also injure a performer with a temper tantrum. Forrest's explosive quality might have made him a good improviser, if he had been in more control and was able to direct his energies with more creative censorship. It was probably this quality in Forrest, the ability to explode at a moment's provocation, that helped make him an exciting actor. While possessing some basic qualities for improvisation, he would have needed less egotism and more attention to the general welfare of the scene and his fellow actors.

There are other examples of improvisation by actors in straight plays during this period. Dion Boucicault, for example, was known to improvise business during a performance. In a production of The Jilt in Philadelphia, while bargaining with the villain of the play, Boucicault noticed that the villain was wearing a hat. Boucicault immediately picked up his own hat and pointedly put it on, as if that would give him extra leverage in the argument. The move was perfectly in character and fit the motivation of the scene, and the audience reportedly enjoyed the piece of improvised business.[28]

The various uses of improvisation in America during the second half of the 1800s were probably beneficial to an actor's learning of his (or her) craft. There were uses of improv for creative enhancement of the play, such as those

of Harrigan and Hart, or of Hoyt. Actors were called on to improvise business such as fight scenes, physicalization of being panicked or angry, or elaborate pratfalls, to enhance moments in a play. The acting of such business, given the nature of the scripts, probably included some improvised changes with each performance. Actors such as Brougham improvised when actors missed their cues and thus improved the entertainment value of the pieces being performed. Minstrel shows employed, with regularity, scenes with improvised moments.

Evidence suggests that improvisation was not a formal method of training actors, but was used mostly in spontaneous, unplanned situations on stage, or in scenes that had a loose structure where improvising would be appropriate. Still, improv can be seen as practical, or on the job, training for the actors who used it and had a talent for improvising. Being on stage and improvising was probably beneficial to the actors for developing spontaneity, confidence, rapport with the audience, and a better sense of humor. A more formal and extensive use of improvisation for acting training came later, but the creative value (and spirit) of improvisation can be seen in these examples from the later 19th century.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL VIEWS OF IMPROVISATION FOR ACTOR TRAINING

Theoretical perspectives of this topic fall into historical, personal, and method oriented categories. For example, certain people who were prominent at the same time should be compared and contrasted. If one of them has much in common with someone from a different period, then these two people should also be compared. Those who were heavily influenced by one teacher and method of teaching (for example, Lee Strasberg by Constantin Stanislavski) should be seen in light of their teachers and a particular approach to acting. Examining theories of improv and the teachers who supported them will show the various influences of teachers on the use of improvisation, the constants in the theories of improv, and the occasions where teachers have differed in their opinions. Historically, there are basic theories, overall trends and important people which have greatly affected the way improvisation has been used by teachers and performers. Both the historical view of these theories and the practical use of them in improv training are important.

When discussing such a broad category, one has a sense of loosely defined impressions and ideas as well as hard and fast dates and rules of improvisation. This reaction is appropriate; the study of acting in general, and improvisation specifically, can be characterized as

fluid, given to change and open to some varieties of interpretation. The actual moment when an improvisation is successful can only be understood completely when it is experienced, either by the actor or the audience in a class or performance situation. This experience is both an intellectual and emotional one, creating feelings as well as thoughts to provide the actor with a comprehension of improvisational acting which surpasses purely intellectual analysis. Thus, there is a practical side to teaching improv, and there is much to gain from imagining how the actual theories presented might work in a real class situation.

CONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

The ideas behind Stanislavski's theories incorporate improvisation in many moments of an actor's work, including the investment of the actor's true feelings in the performance of a role. This investment, accomplished by the use of imagination or by recall of sensory elements of the actor's past life (either real or imaginary), can create reality in the performance. Still, the actor must always remember that he or she is striving for his objective (also called his spine) when playing the character. Stanislavski's approach to sensory memory demands that the actor recall sensory elements without striving for any predetermined result or anticipated emotion. An actor, when doing a sensory recall exercise, must help his senses remember elements of an important event, object, or

whatever the actor is using to stimulate his or her feelings. The performer is to let the true feelings come, and not worry about whether or not they will. This concept is improvisational because the actor does not really know what is going to happen.

Stanislavski's ideas about imagination support the improvisational qualities of his theories, suggesting that the actor place himself in the position of the character and ask himself what he would do if he really were that person. The emphasis is on giving a good performance because it is an honest one. Like the concept of sensory memory, this imagination work (often called the "magic if") involves the intangibles of feelings and imagination, which are never quite the same two times in a row. Thus, there is an improvisational element in every performance an actor gives. While the super objective supplies the goal for the actor to pursue, the honest feelings supply the improvisational spontaneity.

Stanislavski used improvisation more directly as a tool for rehearsals. As explained in Stanislavski Directs by Nikolai M. Gorchakov, Stanislavski's use of improvisation is fairly clear and detailed. To begin, Gorchakov's work offers two of Stanislavski's definitions concerning improvisation.

> Improvisation: The director creates a situation, the nature of which helps an actor to find the elements in his role that he needs to create a part. In an improvisation the actors do not portray the actual

> characters of the play but try to find the nature of the characters they are portraying.[1]
>
> Étude: An improvisation created by the director on the same theme as the play, with the actors in the characters they are portraying. The situation must be close to the actors' personal experience and of the same nature as the situation in the play.[2]

In the first definition the use of the phrase "nature of the characters they are portraying" suggests an adherence to natural honesty and truth. In the second definition there is no doubt of this same connection as Stanislavski says that the situation must be close to the personal experience of the actors. Thus, there is a connection between improvisation and the inner life of the actor as character. The two cannot be completely separated, as they complement and support each other.

In finding the "nature of the characters" portrayed, Stanislavski indicates that feelings and personality traits can be transferred from an improvisation (or étude) to the performance of a script. Stanislavski believed that this transference would happen and was a worthwhile way of using improvisation. He made this point in one instance, after he had improvised the inner thoughts and outer actions of a character:

> I know that all this is improvisation, but I am absolutely sure that these were M. Bashelet's thoughts. This is the inner monologue that speaks within him, and it is the basis for any role for an actor . . . I want to inspire and convince you with my improvisations and suggestions to take much more daring steps in the creation of M. Bashelet's character.[3]

Here Stanislavski made the connection between improvisation and character work more clear and suggested a way that

improvisational work can be transferred to acting with a script. The thoughts, as improvised, would be the thoughts of the character. The two guideposts to follow are the actual thoughts, which an actor can recall on stage, and, less tangibly but still important, an actor's sense of daring-- the freedom of imagination that will take an actor into new areas, and allow a discovery of more of the character's traits. Stanislavski added:

> If you feel that a certain étude doesn't come off-- that you don't get the point we're working for, do it again and again, changing the given circumstances and stimulating your actor's imagination.[4]

Thus an étude has an ever changing, improvisational quality during its exploration in rehearsal or classwork. This fluid quality can also inspire an actor, while on stage, to create more daringly and effectively.

Stanislavski also provided important goals for the director when improvisation was used for working on the play. When discussing rehearsals, Stanislavski first noted that the scheme of the play is the "skeleton which holds together the inner and outer action of the play." He suggested that the director keep working along this scheme early in rehearsals, avoiding attempts to develop full characterizations and situations. He advised that the cast discuss the play with each other and the playwright. What Stanislavski meant by "scheme" is made more clear in his analysis of the use of improvisation in rehearsal:

> Skip the detailed analysis and study of the text. Select only the leading facts and events. Analyze them

> thoroughly with the author's help. Create a number of études on the theme of these events and have your actors perform them. Let them improvise the text but keep within the author's thoughts and ideas. Then connect the first étude in relation to the development of the play with the second, then add the third, and so on. Thus, you will have a chain of études. If your choice of the main facts is correct, if you use these as the basis for your études, you will then have the living skeleton of the play.[5]

Stanislavski believed that the use of these improvisations would provide a useful skeleton (or scheme) upon which the actors and director could build their concept of what the play was about. As the actors improvise, but still confine themselves to the "author's thoughts and ideas," much latitude is given to the performers and the director to explore the text within the confines of their own imaginations.

Stanislavski's use of improv is important for a number of reasons. His use of improv indicates just how useful it can be in rehearsal, and solidifies the relationship between improvisation and work with the text. The actors, through improvisation, can create a framework upon which the play can be rehearsed. Within this framework are the ideas of the actors and the director, guided by the intention of the author and the feelings, emotions, and character motivations discovered by the actors. Through improvisation the actors can find directions in which to take their imaginations, thoughts their characters might have, and pieces of business which could be brought into work on the play's text. One would hope the actors'

imaginations would be of the daring kind Stanislavski mentioned. One gets a clear idea of Stanislavski's positive feelings about improvisation from an analysis of his ideas in Stanislavski Directs.

Further evidence of the use of improvisation is provided by Stanislavski in Stanislavski On the Art of the Stage[8] where he, in a clear and practical way, showed the use of improvisation in melodrama during a rehearsal of The Sisters Gerard (performed by the Moscow Art Theatre during the 1927-28 season). In the scene being rehearsed, Stanislavski first played an old man whom the villain was trying to drug with sleeping powder. Then Stanislavski played the villain in the same scene. In the first playing of the scene, Stanislavski was acting with an actor who was not good at improvisation; in the second his partner was a good improviser. Stanislavski showed the importance of improvisation to an actor who is trying to achieve an objective.

In the first playing of the scene, Stanislavski, in opposition to the script, deliberately stopped the villain from putting sleeping powder in the glass. Stanislavski did not bend over to straighten his shoe buckle and allow the villain to administer the drug, even though the script directed Stanislavski to, as did the prompter. Stanislavski even delivered the lines "Feeling drowsy when it's much too soon to go to bed. Much too soon. Getting old, that's the truth of it. But I shant go to sleep, sir. I shall not go

to sleep!" in such a cheerful and confident tone that it was clear that he did not intend to go to sleep as the play dictated.[7] The actor performing with Stanislavski was frozen and protested that Stanislavski did not let himself be given the drug. Stanislavski forced the actor to admit that he should have found a different way to carry out his actions. In reference to the stage directions, Stanislavski explained:

> That must have been what they did at the first performance. . . . You should never try to carry out the stage directions of a melodrama literally. That is very unoriginal for melodrama, in which, according to tradition, the actors are entirely at liberty to carry out all the physical actions in their own way, though always in accordance with the demands of the plot and the logic of the actions. Let's play this scene again.[8]

Stanislavski was hardly through with his lesson at this point. The second time they played the scene, he pushed the drugged glass of cider off the table at the last minute, without having drunk a drop. Clearly, Stanislavski was suggesting that his students be creative, and improvise different business as the situation dictated, while still being in agreement with "the demands of the plot and the logic of the actions." This quote echoes his descriptions of the use of études, where the basic logic and story of the play must be adhered to while the actors are exploring the play through improvisation. The adherence to logic is a constant throughout Stanislavski's work, as he makes a point of it in An Actor Prepares when the director says that ". . .all action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent, and real."[9]

When the actor working with Stanislavski in this melodrama complained that he could not continue the play, Stanislavski replied:

> I'm afraid that means your imagination is not working properly. All the stage direction says is "Drugs him," but it does not really force us to drug him in a certain way, which means that Uncle Martin need not drink the cider if he doesn't want to. You see, Piccard should have prepared all sorts of alternative ways in which he could get rid of the old fellow.[10]

Stanislavski then played the scene totally in improvisation with an actor who understood exactly what Stanislavski was trying to teach his actors. Stanislavski played the villain, and the other actor (Mikhailov) deliberately thwarted Stanislavski's every attempt to administer the drug. In a final move, Stanislavski sneezed, said he had caught a cold, and produced a remedy. This turned out to be a knockout drug, and he poured some in a handkerchief (presumably to give to himself). While Mikhailov was looking at the bottle, Stanislavski grabbed Mikhailov from behind and pressed the handkerchief to his face. He passed out, and Stanislavski exclaimed to the cast "I hope you now understand the meaning of the logic of physical actions and its importance in melodrama."[11]

It is not only the logic of physical actions which is clear in this example, but the gains from improvising within the confines of this logic. If one stays within the play, and if one adheres to the motivations and goals of his character, one can improvise and see how the pursuit of an objective can take on many forms. All of Stanislavski's

improvised actions were acceptable because they made sense within the play. If an actor allows his or her imagination to be free, he will find that many more actions make sense than might have been first thought of. Also, the goal of the objective will be attained more creatively and imaginatively if improvisation can free the actor from the stage directions (at least in the case of melodrama) and allow him or her to pursue objectives in a way that makes sense. Improvisation can thus make acting more personal as well as more creative.

The actors in this second improvisation (Stanislavski and Mikhailov) played together well-- an important skill for improvisers. Mikhailov knew how to thwart Stanislavski's attempts to administer the drug; yet, Mikhailov was always sensible. At one point he switched glasses with Stanislavski because, as Mikhailov said, the host should always have the fuller glass. Both men's actions were within character, both were aware of the objectives of the scene, and both were challenging each other to achieve their objective and circumvent the other's resistance. A sense of working together is critical in improvisation, and these men had that in spite of their conflicting objectives. When Mikhailov was finally drugged, he realized the game was over and gave in; that was the only thing to do. He exhibited the necessary cooperation.

Much of Stanislavski's work incorporates improvisational elements. The attention to real feelings

and imaginative creativity necessarily includes the spontaneity of improvisation. However, these two specific examples, the use of études and the improvisation within melodrama, give a greater insight into the use of improv by Stanislavski. Improvisation was a directorial tool when Stanislavski worked with his casts, and through this direction he taught his casts about acting. The melodrama improvisation shows the value of direct pursuance of an objective through improv, and the freedom of imagination that this process provides. Stanislavski also used improvisation when he taught class, as there are accounts of improvisations done by students in An Actor Prepares and in Building a Character. In the latter book, the student creates a "critic" character and improvises a conflict with the director. Importance is given to these improvisations as a way of building spontaneity. There is a strong feeling of the importance of improvisation throughout much of Stanislavski's writings and the two examples elaborated in this section are especially vivid.

EVGENY VAKHTANGOV

One of Stanislavski's most influential pupils was also a proponent and explorer of the use of improvisation. Vakhtangov, who began his career in 1911 as an actor in the Moscow Art Theatre company where he played over fifty roles, was put in charge of training the actors at Stanislavski's First Studio. Continuing as acting teacher and director, Vakhtangov used improvisation effectively,

and contributed much in this field. Keith Johnstone, an improvisation teacher of great popularity among today's instructors, adapted some of Vakhtangov's ideas and discusses them in his (Johnstone's) book Impro: Improvisation for the Theatre.[12] Lee Strasberg also stated that "Vakhtangov had certain things in mind that he wanted from his actors and he used improvisational techniques in arriving at what he wanted."[13] James Roose-Evans said of Vakhtangov:

> His last production-- he died in May 1922-- was Carlo Gozzi's Turandot. At the first rehearsal he announced, "Our work is senseless if there is no holiday mood, if there is nothing to carry the spectators away. Let us carry them away with our youth, laughter and improvisation." Sonia Moore records how the actors worked on every word, gesture, and intonation until it seemed absolutely spontaneous, as if improvised. Actors would compete with one another in invention. A scarf would become a beard; a lampshade, an emperor's hat; a towel, a turban; a shawl, a dress, and so on.[14]

This transformation was at the beginning of the 1922 production of Turandot, held especially for Stanislavski and other members of the Moscow Art Theatre. In this production the actors came on stage and, by their imaginative use of the props, converted rags they found lying on stage to pieces of fine clothing. Towels became fine capes, for example, and the way the actors "wore" these rags and old objects suggested this transformation. This type of improvisation was one of many tools used by Vakhtangov to stimulate the imaginations of his actors.

According to Vakhtangov, the key to improvising was in action. Nikolai Gorchakov relates in The Vakhtangov

School of Stage Art that Vakhtangov said to "remember that in an étude the aim is always action, not emotion"[15] and:

> When we started our impromptus the first time, you tried to think them up . . . if you have to improvise on the spot (and that's exactly what we have to do), you must act and not think. It's action we must have--wise, foolish or naive, simple or complicated, but action.[16]

To that end, Vakhtangov would help his students do improvisations through side coaching. When a student was confused about what to do, Vakhtangov would ask the student questions and gently work him or her through the improvised piece, inquiring what the room (in the scene) looked like, or if the fireplace was warm. The student, finding himself doing the improvisation quite imaginatively, could also discover new pieces of business or blocking to use in the scene. As Vakhtangov coaxed out of his students what he wanted, the students often were amazed at their creativity. Vakhtangov, skilled at talking a student through these improvisations, made the creative process seem easy. One student commented:

> There was every reason to feel confused. Vakhtangov was not only reproving us, he was creating a completely new atmosphere and making it lively by taking an active part in it.[17]

This practice of side coaching was a key to the teaching of Vakhtangov, and is very useful in improv training for actors. Side coaching takes the obligation off the student to be creative, as the teacher is helping guide the student through the exercise. The student feels less pressure to create, and paradoxically feels free to be more

imaginative. While probably not new, side coaching was used quite effectively by Vakhtangov and is also used by Viola Spolin, Paul Sills, Keith Johnstone, and many other teachers of improvisation.

As related in Stanislavski's Protege: Eugene Vakhtangov, Vakhtangov perpetrated a "baptism of fire," with a very specific purpose, on the cast of his production of Turandot.[18] He told the cast to entertain some members of the Moscow Art Theatre who were sitting in the audience of the Third Studio Theatre. The theme of the improvisation was left up to the actors. Initially bereft of ideas, they gradually became more inspired, performing a successful improvisation of about twenty minutes in length. The audience enjoyed the work, and at the peak of excitement Vakhtangov called out to stop the rehearsal. He had a plan.

The next day, the same improvisation with the same details failed spectacularly. This is often the way in improvisation, as the inspiration of the first time is absent the next time the improvisation is done. The actors went home and worked on their improvisational characters (which coincided with the characters they played in the play) and brought different pieces of their work back each day. Added character traits, pieces of business, or bits of appropriate dialogue were fit into the improvisation each time it was done, with alternating success and failure. Overall, the result was good. The actors moved closer to their roles and gradually became them. Here the

improvisational work was taught through experience, and the actors gradually came to understand what was necessary to get the most out of this kind of rehearsal. The unnamed actor in Stanislavski's Protege: Eugene Vakhtangov related that:

> Every improvisation demanded a skilled and finished technique. This technique must be called upon to help the artist in the moments of his improvisational state of being. Improvisation is the road to inspration, to priceless creative behavior on stage. As we see, Vakhtangov's demands were based on his knowledge of the fundamental principles of theatrical art, and not on the small, easily changeable adjustments.[18]

Through this experience the actors learned how to make the improvisation work with consistency, and to use the elements of the improv in the actual performance of the text. This incident also indicates the discipline that Vakhtangov knew was necessary for improvisational work in the theatre.

Vakhtangov certainly explored the use of improv in actor training, and his use of side coaching and demands of discipline from his improvising students would be a valuable approach for any improv teacher. While following the guidelines of Stanislavski (études, for example), Vakhtangov encouraged the use of the imagination to a great degree by using specific études for a purpose. It was unique work, neither better nor worse than Stanislavski's, just contributory in its own special way.

The improvisation practiced by Stanislavski and Vakhtangov, done to improve an actor's creativity,

imaginative powers or characterization, was used in service of acting technique in general. Clearly, improvisation techniques were an important part of an actor's training. Both teachers used improv to train actors directly through the études and improvisations that were done by both men, and indirectly through the whole philosophy of acting propagated by the Moscow Art Theatre. This philosophy, which relied much on honesty of feelings and spontaneous reactions to stimuli on stage, carried with it an inherent improvisational quality. While these two men did not create a whole theory of improvisation, they used improv to train and direct actors, and achieved some excellent results.

LEE STRASBERG AND THE GROUP THEATRE

The Group Theatre, as well as Strasberg's acting classes, utilized improvisations to a significant degree. Inspired by Stanislavski's and Vakhtangov's belief that improvisation was useful for training the actors, the Group perpetuated their interest in improvisation. Furthermore, the Group found improv useful for performance as well as in a classroom or rehearsal situation. This fact suggests that the improvisational experience in front of an audience is productive for training actors, and can be an important part of learning improvisation.

Improvisation was important to the Group's rehearsal process. In "Acting Experiments in the Group" by Mel Gordon and Laurie Lassiter there are descriptions of the Group's improvisations during their first summer in 1931:

> Improvisations-- especially complicated and ingenious ones-- during the rehearsal process became Strasberg's trademark in the Group era. . . . During the Group's first summer in 1931, the 15 supernumeraries in Paul Green's The House of Connelly improvised a sequence where they were caught in a burning mine shaft, causing them to crawl down miniature corridors and automatically creating distinct characters and relationships.[20]

The actress Margaret Baker supported the value of the exercises because they created a sense of working together. She is quoted in the above article as saying that the actors had to cooperate to survive in the mine shaft, and this strengthened their on-stage relationships. Eventually, the improvisations more closely paralleled the situation of the play and incorporated more details until the actors would almost be performing the play in their own words, a process similar to Stanislavski's use of improv.

Accounts of the Group's second summer together show its inspiration by the improvisational work of the Moscow Art Theatre.[21] The actors in the Group, excited by translations of accounts of Vakhtangov's use of études, improvised for two hours in the afternoon and two more hours for non-leads in the evening. They created short scenes, incorporating sensory elements and a good dose of humor. For example, Robert Lewis created a scenario as a clerk who is forced to take a cold shower and braces himself by reciting Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric." In the style of Vakhtangov's work in Turandot, the actors created costumes and characters from scraps of paper and cloth. The Group used improvisation to expand an

actor's imagination. In one instance, Lewis used the word "America" to create a sketch of a businessman hurrying to his job only to find nothing to do. This improvisation sprung as much from Lewis' own point of view as from any traditional interpretation of the word "America," indicating that he had to bring his own feelings and creativity to his work, which is an important skill for an actor to use.

Through these exercises the actors became involved in their own creations, often before they were even aware of it. These improvisations were finally presented to adult summer camps and left wing political rallies where they were applauded and enjoyed. Gordon and Lassiter suggest that the Group's improvisations took on a "'mad energy' of their own," indicating the immersion of the actors into the improvisational process.[22] Such immersion, which helps create fuller and more believable characters, is valuable for an actor to achieve.

Continuing their experiments in improv, the Group improvised pieces for a performance in New York and used them as a curtain raiser for a performance of Waiting for Lefty.[23] Critics enjoyed the improvised works, which exhibited a sense of humor and a political consciousness. Sketches included an "Operation on Hitler" which led to the discovery that Hitler had no heart. Also featured were a vaudeville type piece performed by Morris Carnovski and Joe Bromberg as two park bums speaking in Russian-Yiddish

gibberish, and a sketch with Robert Lewis satirizing modern dance. Such improvisations might be a revelation to those who thought of the Group as very serious and somewhat depressing. This notion is easily dispelled by the humor of the group exhibited in these improvisations, and that humor may have been brought out by improvisation.

By following and interpreting Stanislavski's method, the Group utilized improvisation, both in the Moscow Art Theatre style and in ways that possibly went beyond it. This fact is important, both theoretically and historically. Ideas in theatre training crossed from Russia to America, and theoretical changes occurred. The American improvs were possibly more political and might have stood on their own at times rather than being strictly a part of method training. Yet the use of improv by the Moscow Art Theatre gave improvisation legitimacy and prompted its use by other teachers. Thus, improvisation was achieving importance in the history of actor training in this country. When studying improvisation for actor training in America, one must naturally analyze Stanislavski because he greatly influenced actor training here. Now it is clear that he was responsible, in part, for the use of improv as a facet of this actor training.

Strasberg, at The Actors Studio, used many exercises which were improvisational in approach, although they were not improvised scenes with dialogue for the purpose of

performing them for an audience. This difference suggests a distinction in the use of improvisation.

Some improv work is directly designed to create a scene, such as the improvs performed by the Group before they acted in Waiting for Lefty. Such improvisations are important to an actor's education because they teach him or her the value of what he or she has learned in terms of stageworthyness in front of an audience. Another type of improv work is for actor development without benefit of a performance, and is less accessible to an audience. This improv work lacks the form of a performance piece but is useful for actor training. For example, Strasberg decribed the usefulness of a gibberish exercise in the book Strasberg at The Actors Studio, as he says it forces the actors to understand each other and to make themselves understood. One particular incident was a breakthrough for an actress:

> I used gibberish in the Group Theatre for a specialized purpose. I found it most helpful in dealing with actors who had an emotional problem in that they could feel, but expressing the feeling was difficult. In one play I had problems with an actress . . . I wanted her constantly free and improvising in the hope that what we were working for would break through. Fortunately in the last week the breakthrough came, and it came through gibberish.[24]

The gibberish forced the woman to explode emotionally while talking about emotional topics and she began to express, through gibberish, her feelings. Gibberish was unconventional-- it freed the actress from what she had learned in the past: to hide her feelings.

If someone has grown up being emotionally unexpressive, feeling much but letting very little of it out, gibberish is unusual; it opposes the normal level of expression for that person, helping the actor break out of a pattern of verbalizing, intellectualizing, rationalizing and repressing feelings. Gibberish simply connects a sound to a thought (or feeling), and allows expression without intellectualization. The gibberish exercise is very common to acting training and improvisation, being used by Strasberg, Spolin, and others as well.

Robert Hethmon also supported improv:

> A break-through for the inhibited actor cannot be hoped for except in improvisation. If the emotionally bound up actor merely rehearses and performs, almost inevitably he will merely continue his patterns of inexpressiveness.[25]

Hethmon explained that one good exercise to use is the private moment. This exercise is improvised, based on doing something that one does in private, and involves an action that the actor would stop doing if someone entered the room. An example would be singing or dancing to a recording, looking at himself in the mirror while fussing over his appearance, being partially clothed in his room, or anything that reveals a private part of his life. The actor improvises based on his own feelings, thoughts and sense of privacy; the goal being to stimulate the actor's fullness of impulse and freedom of expression. Once done, the actor begins the scene and tries to carry that freedom over into the interpretation of the script. The activity

done in the private moment should be carefully chosen to be exciting to the actor and stimulating in a creative way; the sense of freedom achieved can be very helpful.

By side coaching these actors through these exercises, Strasberg would help them achieve greater freedom. He would allow the feeling created by the private moment to continue while directing the actors to do things to help free the emotions (throw a pillow, kick a chair, etc.). Sometimes the actor would continue into the scripted scene he was preparing with this same feeling. The use of the private moment as an improvisation with carefully chosen stimuli (ie. a strong basic structure) can be emotionally liberating for an actor. Since it is so personal, it can often get to the heart of what the actor is feeling, going past the surface emotions or initial nervousness of being on stage, although it takes a somewhat experienced student to do the exercise well and to gain from it. There was much to be gained. Strasberg said improvisation leads an actor to talk more believably, with real thoughts and logic, rather than rhetorical or pre-planned thoughts.

From a historical perspective, one can assume that Strasberg developed these exercises (private moment, gibberish, etc.) during his teaching career, which went from approximately 1930 to 1982. It is not possible to say exactly when any exercise was done or developed, but there is a continuity in the use of side coaching, for example,

from Vakhtangov to Strasberg. (It is interesting that Spolin, Sills, Johnstone, and other purely improvisational teachers also use side coaching quite often, suggesting that this improvisational technique is very effective.) Strasberg began using improvisation with the Group Theatre in 1931 and developed his technique for teaching throughout his career. Improvisation was probably used at The Actors Studio from its inception. Most of Strasberg's improv techniques used in his teaching were used from the 1930s, or at least by the early 1940s. Margaret Barker, in A Method to Their Madness by Foster Hirsch, made this observation about Strasberg during his years at the Group Theatre:

> He did an enormous amount of improvisation. There were one word exercises where we had to create an object. And we did a lot of work on animals- I remember watching white rats. This way of going about acting was new to me.[28]

As Strasberg continued the techniques used by the Moscow Art Theatre, it is clear that he also brought a new kind of teaching to this country.

Strasberg used improvisation effectively, both for actor training and, to a lesser degree in the case of the Group Theatre, for performance material (and the training that leads to performance of this material). Unfortunately, this aspect of his work is often ignored, the attention being focussed on the debate over the value of sensory work and emotional memory. Strasberg has been perceived as being neurotically obsessed with the feelings of his students; it

is enlightening to see that he was also quite imaginative and creative with improvisation. The feelings of the students were important to their work and their exploration of characters and use of their own emotions in creating a role, but Strasberg's approach to these feelings was varied. Strasberg's use of improvisation offers much to a student of acting, and shows both a connection to Stanislavski's methods and a development and promotion of his work in this country.

MICHAEL CHEKHOV

Sonia Moore praised Chekhov for his understanding of Stanislavski, adding that Chekhov did not receive the attention he deserved from teachers and students of acting.[27] In his book To the Actor, Chekhov provides a clear interpretation of Stanislavski's use of improv.[28]

Chekhov suggested that the highest aim of every artist is to express himself freely and completely. Chekhov embraced improvisation as a continual process within an actor, asserting that every role offers the chance for an actor to improvise. Chekhov explained this point:

> How he speaks the lines and how he fulfils the business are the open gates to a vast field of improvisation. The "hows" of his lines and business are the ways in which he can express himself freely.
>
> More than that, there are innumerable other moments between the lines and business when he can create wonderful psychological transitions and embroider his performance on his own, where he can display true artistic integrity.[28]

Improvisation brings freedom according to Chekhov and is an "inexhaustible well" of creativity.

Chekhov believed that an actor should perform improvisations in rehearsal and use them to enhance his or her performance of a role. The actor should decide which are the starting and ending moments of the improvisation (to provide a structure) and make these moments take the form of an action, such as looking out the window or sitting down and saying "Yes" in a decisive tone. Then he encouraged the actor to follow his instincts and give himself to his intuitive inclinations during the improvised scene:

> Any and every possibility is open to you according to your mood at the particular moment, or according to the accidental things you may encounter during the improvisation. All you have to do is listen to that "inner voice". . . . Your subconscious will suggest things which cannot be foreseen by anyone.[30]

Chekhov provides much freedom to the actor within the structure of the improv. This is good, as Chekhov suggests that the actor build the structure to include more elements. The improvisation can be expanded like a play, with the actor adding more moments of action between the beginning and the end. These new actions are not to be predetermined because they are logical. On the contrary, the actor should leave the task of justifying them to his or her own intuition and allow them to evolve through the act of improvising. Thus, the blending of freedom and structure in improvisation is possible.

By following this method of developing an improv, Chekhov said that an actor can cultivate the "psychology of an improvising actor."

> Later on, when rehearsing and performing on the stage, you will feel that the lines you have to speak, the business you have to do and all the circumstances imposed upon you by the writer and director, and even the plot of the play, will lead and direct you as did the necessities you found for your exercise [improvisation]. . . . Thus you will eventually be confirmed in your belief that dramatic art is nothing more than a constant improvisation, and that there are no moments on the stage when an actor can be deprived of his right to improvise.[31]

Improvisation can and should be a constant process within an actor. Through practice, this end can be achieved.

Such improvisations may be done by groups of two, three and four to develop a feeling of ensemble, but the group should follow certain guidelines. First, a general theme must be decided on (ex. factory workers, a party, etc), dialogue should be used judiciously, and no one should monopolize the conversation. Second, the group must be seen as a collection of individuals, not an "impersonal mass," and must perform an exercise (beginning, middle, and end) together, as a group. Third, this improvisation should be done several times, improvising in a slightly different way each time but always adhering to a definite beginning and end. Performers should get to know others in the group: their intentions (in the scene), their moods and their artistic styles. Finally, a scene should be chosen from a play which no one in the group is very familiar with. The director should distribute the parts (characters) and let one actor "direct" the beginning and the end (as it takes place in the play) with everything else in between being

improvised. From these exercises, the group will learn the "psychology of the improvising ensemble."

Chekhov's ideas about ensemble work, the attitude of the improvising actor and the process of working with improv are clear, and his practical approach to improvisation would be helpful to an actor. His assertion that acting is itself a series of improvisational moments is an echo of Stanislavski, reinforcing the concept even further. The idea of using a definite beginning and end of a scene is used today in improvisational theatre, most directly when the improvisers take the audience's suggestion of a first line and last line of dialogue. This method does allow a definite framework upon which the improvisation can take shape. While not a major development, Chekhov's work definitely provided a further clarification of the use of improvisation for the actor.

VIOLA SPOLIN

Spolin, who began as (and still is) an educator rather than an acting teacher, has contributed a tremendous amount to improvisation training. Her book Improvisation for the Theatre, called "The Bible" by many improv teachers, is widely held as the place where many ideas about improvisation today originated. Her son, Paul Sills, has become one of the foremost teachers of improvisation in this country, is one of the most successful directors of improvisation based theatre, and has been responsible for promoting many of her theories. Spolin's influence in the

professional improv theatre will be explored later in the chapters on The Compass Players, David Shepherd and Paul Sills.

Spolin began her training as a student of Neva Boyd, a recreational director at Hull House in Chicago in the 1920s. It was from Boyd that Spolin received training in the use of games for stimulating creative expression in people from all areas of life. Most of these students were children from the inner city, whom Boyd led in theatre exercises, story telling, and folk dancing to help them adjust to the difficulties of urban life. Spolin took this experience into her years at the WPA Recreational Project in Chicago, in which she began working in 1938. Here she developed many of her games and began to gain real prominence as a teacher of improvisation at the same time as the Group Theatre was doing improvisations of its own. The differences between the two are clear. The Group employed professional actors for the purpose of creating theatre; Spolin worked with inner city youths for the purpose of teaching them how to express themselves creatively. The Group used ideas from the Moscow Art Theatre and built upon them; Spolin used her experience in recreational theatre and expanded upon that. Her classes performed improvisational revues based on current events and with an emphasis on the problems facing the children in the class (poverty, for example). Spolin's theories behind

improvisation were important, and these became prominent in further improvisational ventures in this country.

These theories are based strongly on the idea of games and play. While it would be difficult to explain all of her theories in this dissertation, the basic and most important points will offer much insight into her approach to improvisational actor training. One of her beliefs is that improvising is not a goal or a contest to see who can make the audience laugh or cry, but a creative group experience intended to stimulate the psychological growth of the improviser. In her book Improvisation for the Theatre she states:

> Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and become "stageworthy."

and:

> If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach. "Talent" or "lack of talent" have little to do with it.[32]

Involvement in the evironment is crucial, and intuitive involvement is most important to the learning situation. Involvement in the environment includes an awareness of your fellow performers, developing an ability to relate to each other on stage, and avoiding isolating involvement with oneself. Environmental involvement stimulates spontaneity, which leads to freedom, discovery and creativity. Intuitive involvement requires an ability to react naturally on stage, with little intellectualizing.

Both environmental and intuitive involvement work together to sharpen an actor's skills. Spolin's theories suggest a childlike response to games, and encourage the player to simply be immersed in the situation and to avoid striving for an end result.

There is great value to these skills for work in the professional theatre. The element of intuitive involvement is a great ability to be learned for any actor. While the professional stage demands results in terms of performance and playwriting, being immersed in the work rather than worrying about the end result is a good way for an actor to achieve an objective. This belief was held by Stanislavski in reference to his work in sensory memory.

In her book Spolin offers "Seven Aspects of Spontaneity"-- clear and stimulating concepts to be used when teaching students improvisation and developing their ability to be immersed in the work. These "Seven Aspects" are as follows:

1. The Use of Games. They are group oriented, develop a sense of cooperation, and still allow for personal growth.

2. The Lack of Approval or Disapproval. There is no right way to solve a problem on stage; therefore the teacher and student must work together, as equals, to find a solution. The needs of the theatre are the real criterion. An atmosphere of support must be created, breaking down the performer's inhibitions.

3. The Importance of Group Expression. Each student participates freely, but all students work together for the good of the production. Spolin makes an important point:

> If we are trained only for success, then to gain it we must necessarily use everyone and everything for this end; we may cheat, lie, crawl, betray, or give up all social life to achieve success. How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself.[33]

Group endeavor and group learning must take the place of competitiveness.

4. The Audience's Role is Crucial. It is what the theatre exists for, and the needs of the audience members are important. Always take them into account.

5. Theatre Techniques are Intuitive When Real Communicating Occurs on Stage. No actor should have a "bag of tricks," vocal gymnastics, double-takes, etc., but only an honest desire to communicate and do the improvisational work.

6. Carry Learning into Daily Life. Experience as much of life as possible, and it will enhance your acting.

7. Physicalize as Much as Possible on Stage. Use imagination to create a specific space and objects on stage.

Spolin was concerned with group dynamics, freedom of expression, and a desire to rid the theatre of clichés and engage in creative growth. These concerns were carried into her workshops.

There are three important concepts in Spolin's theories on practical theatre rehearsal: problem solving,

the point of concentration, and side coaching. Problem solving consists of using a certain exercise (which creates a problem on stage) to solve an already existing problem on stage. For example, if actors have a difficulty in giving and taking focus, an exercise can be done which makes the actors alternate (with others on stage) between being and not being the point of focus. When one pair of actors is being watched, the others continue their relationship without sound or large movement, but they do not freeze. Each pair of actors alternates being in focus (of the audience) and continuing their relationship without freezing but still acting silently and with physical restraint. Actors learn how to give and take focus without dropping out of character, and a valuable skill is taught by giving an exercise rather than intellectualizing or simply telling the actor to take focus. Spolin's book contains hundreds of games designed for the purpose of solving specific acting problems.

The concept of problem solving, which expands on the earlier uses of improvisation for actor training, uses improv for immediate results. The actor does not do an improv based on a scene; he or she does an improv while doing the scene. This process helps a performer utilize improv to directly improve acting from a script.

The next concept, the point of concentration, demands that the student focus on a certain task while carrying on with the scene. For instance, a student may be handling an

imaginary object, creating it sensorily and imaginatively, while acting in the scene. This concentration point will give the student a stable place to put his or her energies while the scene progresses, as well as diminishing nervousness, providing discipline and freeing the student's creativity. Gradually, a point of concentration, which coincides with Stanislavski's (and Strasberg's) use of an objective to focus an actor's energies, can be widened to include more complex tasks.

Finally, the concept of side coaching involves calling out directions to students while they are playing a game or acting a scene. The coaching may involve direct suggestions such as "Share with the audience!" or suggestions to incorporate a skill used in another game, such as "Two scenes!" (a game which helps actors share focus, described in the above paragraph on problem solving). Sometimes side coaching can also be used to direct an actor to play a game. Calling out "Contact!" (one type of game) would mean the actors should touch each other whenever they talk. Side coaching keeps the energy flowing in rehearsal and avoids intellectualizing too much over acting problems. Spolin cautions that excessive side coaching is confusing, and teachers should see themselves as part of the scene, imaginatively involved to a degree in the scene, coaching only when necessary.

Spolin's theories rely heavily on developing spontaneity. She avoids terms like "blocking" and

"performance" as they force actors into pre-planned ways of behaving that do not allow for enough discovery. Spolin makes her position clear in Improvisation for the Theater:

> Improvising itself is not a system of training. It is one of the results of the training. Natural unrehearsed speech and response to a dramatic situation are only part of the total training. When "improvising" becomes an end in itself, it can kill spontaneity while fostering cleverness. Growth ceases as the performers take over. Everyone ad-libs every waking hour of the day and responds to the world through his senses.[34]

Spolin believes that the integration of daily life responses into the theatre will create the drama and scene improvisation worth watching:

> A moment of grandeur comes to everyone when they act out of their humaness without need for acceptance, exhibitionism, or applause.[35]

It is necessary to have an open mind when learning the Spolin method, because it relies on the relative absence of preconceived ideas and predjudices about acting. Her process is one that blends with life itself, and this wholistic point of view could help an actor become more immersed in his or her training, becoming aware of it in daily life.

Spolin personally reiterated her ideas, in a telephone interview, about exploration being preferable to performing.[36] She said that very few really understand her work and that few practice it because they are "stuck in their heads, trying to be funny." This comment suggests the unfortunate lack of physicalization in acting (involvement inside one's head rather than with the stage space) and the

attempts to entertain and be humorous rather than to explore improvisation with a more open attitude, creating better acting (and actors). She said that the key to her work was the intuitive (a point made in her book). Downplaying the idea of performance improvisation, she believes that her work would be "freeing for anyone, anywhere they are," meaning that her work would help anyone in any walk of life, not only actors. She also added that her theories of improvisation are too broad to be covered by one discussion, and advocated the use of her books. Finally, Spolin emphasized that improvisational work is a "lifetime process," reinforcing the benefits of a blend between acting and life.

There are many ideas in Improvisation for the Theatre, and while the book has a broad approach to dealing with all types of people (not simply actors) and their personal growth, it also has value to improv theatre teachers. The book contains a practical section on rehearsal and peformance, and provides information on how to run a rehearsal for the best results. There are descriptions of over a hundred games, and an improv teacher can easily choose which games he or she wants to use. More accessible to improv teachers is Theatre Games for Rehearsal,[37] another of Spolin's works, which is a series of examples of typical stage problems (such as not listening to fellow actors, being physically uncomfortable, etc.) and the games to play that would help solve the

problems. Both of these books strongly advocate the use of side coaching by directors and problem solving on stage, two concepts crucial to Spolin's work.

Spolin presents a departure, radical in some ways, from improvisation in the Stanislavski tradition. Firstly, Spolir was not concerned with working with scripts, at least not primarily, whereas Stanislavski was training actors to interpret scripts. Moreover, Spolin's point of view is that of an educator who is not primarily concerned with play production, and she has more freedom to explore improvisation without needing to fulfill the demands of a play and its production. Still, Spolin's theories are rigorous in the demands they make on the actors and teacher or director. Spolin believes that her concept of group work could make a totally different kind of theatre.

> Scene improvisation will never grow out of the artificial separation of players by the "star" system. Players with unusual skills will be recognized and applauded without being separated from their fellow players. Group harmony pleases an audience and brings a new dimension to theatre.[38]

While the concept of group harmony would probably please Stanislavski, as he desired his actors to be in communion with each other,[38] the type of theatre Spolin was working with presented very different possibilities from the work of Stanislavski's students. Spolin's students were free to create works based on their own feelings and needs, rather than on something already written. They also saw the process of rehearsal as a growing experience, a perspective

very different from the performance oriented demands of the professional theatre.

The major difference between Spolin's theories and those of Stanislavski is in the area of emotional memory. Spolin is aganst the use of recall in a scene, and this is basically in opposition to Stanislavski and definitely in opposition to Strasberg's theories. To elucidate this disagreement, Spolin offers a definition of the word "recall":

> Subjective memory (dead); deliberately bringing back a personal, private, past life experience to get an emotional or character quality; confused by many with acting . . . in spontaneous selection [which is preferred], the intuitive gives us past experiences organically as part of a total life process.[40]

Spolin calls such emotional recall "clinical" and possibly destructive to theatre reality and artistic detatchment. Spolin believes that emotion, even from a past experience, will come naturally through one's imagination. It is natural to have flashes of past feelings, spontaneously occurring, when an event parallel to the stage situation has taken place in the performer's life. This point could be seen as advocating the use of an actor's imagination; yet, it is more than that, as Spolin adds that recall should not be consciously used at all. She also offers a definition of her preferred alternative, which she calls "spontaneous selection."

> Selecting that which is appropriate to the problem without calculation; a spontaneous choice of alternatives at the moment of crisis; since theatre is

> a series of crises, spontaneous selection should be working all the time.[41]

This choice leads to a balance between the intuitive and the intellect, much like the natural thought processes that take place in life. Since improvisation training can (and should) be carried on into life, her preference of spontaneous selection over sense memory is logical. It is also useful because it provides an alternative to sense memory, and thus another acting tool for the performer.

Following Spolin's theories in improvisational training leads to the achievement of "transformation" on stage. This is a moment of creation when both the audience and the actors experience a new reality. For example, when a bare stage really becomes a forest, and when both the actors and audience can really see the trees-- that is a moment of transformation. This is not planned through emotional recall, but springs naturally from the actor's imagination and possibly from something in his or her past. The audience must experience it as well. The transformation is a key to improvisational work in general, and while it certainly happened in improv work before Spolin, she was the first to use the phrase and point it out as being necessary to true improvisation.

Spolin gained prominence in small circles, in Chicago in particular, as early as the late 1930s, though her work did not become widely used until the late 1950s and early 1960s. Her work with the WPA, for example, was reviewed

favorably by the Chicago Daily News of May 26, 1939, by critic Howard Vincent O'Brien.[42] Still, largely because she concentrated more on educational theatre than on the professional theatre, she did not gain prominence until the 1950s, and it was The Compass Players who first used her theories for actor training in this country's first professional improv theatre. Her work represented the seeds of change, and helped create a real explosion of improv work in later years. Historically, she is one of the most important figures in improvisational training in this country. This popularity is for two reasons: the newness and practical value of her theories and the influence she had on later improvisational actors and directors.

SANFORD MEISNER AND SONIA MOORE

Both of these teachers have promoted important theories on improvisation. Distinguished by their valuable theoretical and practical contributions to the use of improvisation, and their fairly large following as teachers, they have come out of the Stanislavski theoretical tradition and added to his ideas about improvisation.

Meisner has been an influential figure in theatre training since 1935, and the Neighborhood Playhouse where he teaches has explored the field of improvisation for actor training. His theories were developed out of some opposition to the work in the Group Theatre. Uncomfortable with the self-analysis and overly intellectual tendencies

of Strasberg's method approach to acting, Meisner looked for ways to allow the actor to be spontaneous and for exercises that discouraged the need to think too much. He wanted to use improvisation to gain these ends, but shunned the Group's use of creating dialogue to fit a pre-determined situation. While searching for improvisations that followed the shifts in intuitive impulses that take place constantly in an actor, he discovered the repetition method of training as one tool. In this technique, actors need to contact each other, react to their fellow actor as well as to their own feelings, and repeat a meaningless phrase to each other. This phrase can have something to do with the situation of being on stage, and may reflect to some degree the feelings of one or both of the actors, but this phrase is not dialogue by any means. Thus, actors may relate to each other with the phrases "I'm tired of this." "You're tired of this?" "I'm tired of this." "You're tired of this." etc. Each time the phrase is said, it should change somewhat (in intonation and feeling) based on each actor's reaction to his partner. The improvisation comes, in this game, in the freedom to follow one's impulses and allow emotions to emerge, a crucial concept in Meisner's training.

The main benefit of such work is that it takes away the actor's words. There is no need to "playwright" (create a story or plot), or to think of clever things to say, only to follow one's impulses. This game is useful for helping

actors to experience real emotion, and to get them "out of their heads," as the phrase is often used. This phrase means to stop thinking (in one's head) and to start reacting. Meisner explains:

> It eliminated a need for you to think and to write dialogue out of your head in order to keep talking-- as if acting were talking, which it is not. And the illogical nature of the dialogue opened you up to the impulsive shifts in your instinctual behavior. [43]

Like Spolin, Meisner is implying that it is better for an actor to follow impulses and feelings rather than intellectual ideas. This repetition exercise is only improvisation in a removed way, but it does lead to the Meisner work of improvising actual scenes. The repetition exercise enhances these scenes because it helps the actor to follow his intuition and impulses.

This attention to moment to moment relating is carried over into Meisner's improvisational scene work, where the prime requisite is to react honestly within the confines of a predetermined situation. In these scenes one actor enters a general type of situation (for example, two people are living together, not necessarily in a sexual way) while the other actor carries out what Meisner calls an independent activity (reading, sewing, etc.). The actor who enters comes from a situation which requires strong preparation for the existing emotional condition (a fight, an audition, etc.) while the actor doing the activity must be totally involved in the action. The actors must be specific about their relationship and the entering actor

must know the emotional condition with which he or she enters and exactly what has just taken place. The imaginary situation should be stimulating, and then the actors must react truthfully and behave honestly in moment to moment contact while doing the improvisation. The actors speak in real dialogue, not as in the repetition exercise.

This type of improvisation follows some solid guidelines. The use of an activity is a common rule in improv. Vakhtangov called it a point of focus, Spolin a point of concentration, and for Stanislavski it translated into an objective. The activity focuses the actor and gives him something reliable to do; his objective, or task, is to finish his activity. Thus in the "Meisner Technique" there are solid improvisational concepts. The actor who enters must predetermine certain things such as where he came from, what happened, etc. In this way, the improv could help an actor do the kind of preparation necessary for script analysis. What made this work unique was the idea of dealing, moment to moment, with both the other actor and the situation of the scene. This idea, reinforced by the work with the repetition exercise, is a keynote in Meisner's technique, and the improv was the bridge between the repetition exercise and dealing with the situation in a scripted play. The goal of the improv is "To allow what exists to affect you rather than working out of your head-- what you think should exist-- so that you're working from an actual moment."[44]

This improvisational work is reminiscent of Spolin's transformation concept. In a transformation the actor must allow the actual moment to create the drama without using a past memory or emotional recall. Meisner also advises against emotional recall for acting in a scene (improvisational or otherwise), or for preparing to act. For the actual acting in a scene he encourages moment to moment contact between actors and following of one's natural impulses. For perparation he encourages daydreaming and fantasizing about situations, which is a less structured process, to create an emotional condition in an actor.

Meisner's use of improvisation was tailored to serve his system, but could be used by any acting teacher because his exercises have practicality and embrace basic rules of improvisational acting. As a former Group Theatre member, Meisner put into theoretical perspective the improvisations of the Group; the Group not only encouraged continuation of its theories, but some rebellion against them. Meisner, with his repetition exercise, rebelled against the improvisations based on pre-determined situations. Rebellion was not Meisner's goal, but it facilitated a path to intuitive and natural involvement with scene situations on stage, which was Meisner's goal in training actors.

Sonia Moore has developed theories about the work of Stanislavski which involves the use of improvisation.[45]

Moore studied acting at the Third Studio of the Moscow Art Theatre before coming to America in 1940. Since the early sixties she has studied Stanislavski's method in hopes of defining and achieving what he, near the end of his career, intended to teach actors through his system. In 1961 she founded the Sonia Moore Studio of the Theatre, which is dedicated to actor training by helping students achieve spontaneity on stage.

Moore said that her use of Stanislavski's method was based on a derivation of Stanislavski's work:

> I am doing research. I have been doing it for 27 years, of Stanislavski's final result of his work, which is unknown here. . . . Stanislavski's main goal was to find the means which will make an actor's behavior and face spontaneous, which is improvisational. It took him 40 years to find the answer.[48]

Moore explained that Stanislavski, being a fine actor himself, knew that even great actors could give mediocre performances when they were lacking inspiration. He studied human behavior to find out what it was in life that made people spontaneous. This achievement of spontaneity, according to Moore, was Stanslavski's goal for actors (Moore feels that the terms "improvisational" and "spontaneous" mean the same thing). Still, all of Stanislavski's theories on what would create spontaneity (relaxation, concentration, imagination) did not create the desired effect. At the heart of Moore's theories is the belief that mind and body are so closely related that they cannot be separated. They work together to create the

emotion necessary to acting: this is the theory of psychophysical action. According to this theory, each emotion a person has is connected to a muscle in his body. This connection between mind and body, which is often broken on stage, must be achieved to create spontaneous acting.

The connection between mind and body is restored, at least partially, through improvisation, which can be used to create real life behavior on stage. In theory this is logical, though the connection from improv to scripted acting is a difficult one to make. Moore, in her book Training an Actor, advocates extensive use of improvising:

> Perform as many improvisations as possible on the situations in the play, or on some that may not be in the play, but which could have happened. Only after a great many such improvisations may you perform improvisations on every action in your scene, using your own words. Reread the play and the scene you work on, following the actions in your mind. This will enable you to have a better idea of the superobjective of the play and of your character.[47]

Thus, through the process of improvising, an actor can connect his mind and body (as they are connected in life) and achieve a unity of them in the context of the play. An actor will learn to be psychophysically connected when on stage, possibly achieving the "psychology of the improvising actor" mentioned by Michael Chekhov. Personally endorsing the effectiveness of this technique, Moore answered this question in her interview:

> You find that when a student does a successful improvisation, he carries that connection he makes, the psychophysical connection, into what's [happening] on stage?

> Moore: Absolutely. If you see a good performance on stage, you know that that person has achieved this psychophysical behavior.

Moore feels that all the actor's work must ultimately project the play to the audience. In Training an Actor she reminds her class that Stanislavski called the audience the "co-creator" of a performance. The actors depend on audience reaction, and she tells the class that "You must carefully select the behavior that will be most expressive of what you want the audience to understand."[48] She affirmed this in her interview when she said that her students' first obligation is to project the play to the audience, concurring with both Spolin and Stanislavski on this point. To accomplish this projection the actor must achieve lifelike behavior and select the proper actions.

In choosing actions to communicate to an audience, Moore prefers conflicting behavior. When asked if there was an improvisation she found most effective, she said that improvs with conflicting actions are preferred. She offered the example of having to borrow money from someone that the actor (as the character) hates. There is inner conflict between having to act pleasant while disliking the lender and lying about the praise being given to him. Moore added that in life "We don't always say what we think" and the conflict between the words being said and the emotions in the body would present a challenge for the actor to portray and would be interesting to the audience.

Historically, Moore's system is an important development in the use of improvisation, as it takes into account the relationship between the mind and the body in the theory of the psychophysical connection. While her system is an extension of Stanislavski, it uses improvisation for the very specific purpose of achieving this connection, and represents a development in actor training. Moore offers an integrated use of improvisation in acting teaching, and makes improv an important part of overall acting training. The closeness between improvisation and life is evident, and Moore's use of this connection to train actors to perform believably could be very effective. The concept of the psychophysical connection helps explain that the actor's natural absorbtion of improv techniques, through practice, will find their way into his or her scripted scene work.

KEITH JOHNSTONE

Johnstone's games, as described in his popular book Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre, are clearly conceived and useful to acting teachers. Quite a few improv teachers, Gloria Maddox, Carol Schindler and Rick Thomas for example, speak highly of Johnstone's teaching and use his exercises often. There is a large demand for this book, which sells quickly in this country. Johnstone began as a playwright at the Royal Court Theatre in London, England in 1956. Seven years later he was asked to teach acting, probably because he had many theories about the theatre, and the Royal Court

was looking for teachers to work in a new studio that the theatre had started. His initial studio work was influenced by what he thought was a reaction against Stanislavski.

Johnstone felt that Stanislavski's methods implied a naturalistic theatre. Though Johnstone admits that this assumption is not really true, he used it as a springboard for his theories. He explains his resistance to existing method oriented acting theories when he says:

> I thought his [Stanislavski's] insistence on the "given circumstances" was seriously limiting, and I didn't like the "who, what, where" approach which my actors urged on me, and which I suppose was American in origin (it's described, in Viola Spolin's Improvisation for the Theatre . . .) Lacking solutions, I had to find my own.[48]

Through this rejection of existing theories, Johnstone looked for his own methods with which he felt comfortable, and which he eventually found.

Johnstone bases much of his work on a philosophy of the freedom to create without competitiveness, a concept that emerged from his ideas about traditional schooling. He states that, in his own school years, he tried always to be clever and came to be afraid of trying anything new for fear of failure. His teachers had no insight into his problems (he had speech defects) and were only concerned with him being a "winner," as he puts it, which made his problems worse:

> One day, when I was eighteen, I was reading a book and began to weep. I was astounded. I had no idea that literature could affect me in such a way. If I'd have wept over a poem in class the teacher would have been

> appalled. I realised that my school had been teaching me not to respond.[50]

Such an overemphasis on intellect over emotion could certainly stifle the sensitivities of anyone, certainly an actor, and Johnstone was acutely aware of a real problem. Like Spolin, he had educational concerns in mind which he has pursued through his teaching of improvisation. He says that a teacher should be responsible for the progress of his students in his classes, and must blame himself if they are not learning. It is wrong to call the students "dull" or "uninterested" (an all too common mistake). He explained his teaching methods:

> The first thing I do when I meet a group of new students is (probably) to sit on the floor. I play low status, and I'll explain that if the students fail they're to blame me. . . . I have already changed the group profoundly, because failure is suddenly not so frightening anymore.[51]

The teacher, in taking a low status position, becomes less traditional and less threatening. In fact, the concept of status is a key to Johnstone's teaching and to his theories of improvisation.

Johnstone came upon the status concept as a way to create realistic, interesting scenes. Early in his teaching (at the Royal Court Studio) he found that his actors had no success reproducing ordinary conversation while they were improvising. If casual conversations were lacking in any strong motivations, he wondered why they were so hard to recreate. He began thinking about theatrical choices and the fact that actors try to make the strongest choice and

pick the strongest motivation they can. Johnstone wondered what would happen if actors chose the weakest motivation possible (while still having any motivation at all). He told his actors, when they performed improvs based on everyday conversation, to try to attain a status just a little above or below their partner.

> The scenes became "authentic," and actors seemed marvelously observant. Suddenly we understood that every inflection and movement implies a status, and that no action is due to chance, or really "motiveless". It was hysterically funny, but at the same time very alarming. . . . In reality status transactions continue all the time.[52]

Johnstone had accurately hit upon a subconscious motivation that occurs often in life. It was subtle, but enough to be used by improvisational actors to create interesting scenes.

Status, according to Johnstone, is something one does (or plays), rather than something that someone is. Low status people, such as tramps and servants, can play high status, as well as kings and bosses can play low status. Students have to make an effort to play status beyond simply being natural. If a student is asked to lower his or her status, and responds to the mention of the book War and Peace with the comment "It's my favorite!," he is actually raising his status by implying that he is well read. A much better response would be "I've always wanted to read that." or "I wish I could read!" Thus a student must be aware of the status he or she is playing. Playing status gives the actor a task, or as Spolin would call it a "point of

focus." The actor has something to do beyond simply making conversation; he has, in Stanislavski's terms, an objective. In addition, status moves can be made on other actors. If an actor cannot lower his or her own status, he can raise his fellow actor's (and vice-versa) by praising his fellow actor or mentioning an embarrassing moment. Once students are experienced at various status combinations and variations, Johnstone refines the game.

> I insist that they [students] have to get their status just a <u>little</u> above or below their partner's. This ensures that they really "see" their partner, as they have exactly to relate their behaviour to his. The automatic status skills then "lock on to" the other actor, and the students are transformed into observant, and apparently very experienced improvisers.[53]

Johnstone's improvisation group, which performed at colleges in the late 1960s and eventually toured Europe, owes much success to this status game. He says that they could never have toured in Europe without prepared scenes if they had not known how to play status.

There are some specific games which Johnstone uses to explore status playing. For example, one game involves a master and servant relationship. The actors begin the scene and switch status periodically (while still remaining the same characters). The scene has a dual nature of helping students create an improv scene, since it does contain characters and a relationship (master and servant), while still being set in the framework of a game. This situation helps relieve the pressure of having to create, and eases the obligation to be clever, since the game provides a

structure to follow. Such simple games are especially useful for beginning actors, who quite often shock themselves with their newly found stage talents.[54]

Johnstone, like other teachers of acting (Moore, Stanislavski, Spolin) is concerned with achieving spontaneity in his students. He believes that imagining is as effortless as perception, and only when we censor ourselves do we have trouble imagining. Johnstone gave the example of seeing his father walking toward him. The process that Johnstone's brain goes through, and the mental images called up by the sight of his father, are quite complicated, as all kinds of physical characteristics have to be perceived and interpreted in nanoseconds. Yet this all happens spontaneously. Johnstone correlated this process with imagination.

> It's the same with imagination. Imagination is as effortless as perception, unless we think it might be wrong, which is what our education encourages us to believe. Then we experience ourselves as "imagining," as "thinking up an idea," but what we're really doing is faking up the sort of imagination we think we ought to have.[55]

To this end of achieving spontaneity, Johnstone involves his students in several exercises.

Some of the exercises are as simple as Johnstone's perception of his father would seem. In one such game, he asks a student to name objects, simply anything that comes to mind. This proves difficult, as Johnstone said that his students often reject their first idea because it is too unimaginative (they think) or too strange. They are

concerned about failing, and cannot allow themselves to be spontaneous. Johnstone tells them that any answer is fine, and it might be quite original to just say the same thing many times with a slight change each time (ex. "a pebble," "a pebble with a mark," "a big pebble" etc.). A problem arises when an actor prepares to be spontaneous, as strictly trained method actors may do. Such actors will be shocked by being asked just to "be sad," and they often resist the request. Johnstone reasons that if they act sad, they will eventually feel sad and a reason to be sad will come to mind. It is similar to holding your arm up in the air. When a student is asked why he might be doing that, he will answer "to hold a subway strap" or something like that. If such reasons just occur to the actor naturally, why should a reason to be sad be any different?

Anyone who has ever walked away fuming at an annoying situation, talking to him or herself at what should have been said at the time, can understand the natural volatility of the human imagination. Imaginative creation and emotions do occur naturally: the task of the teacher is to stimulate them in a creative situation. Johnstone, in creating a secure and non-judgmental environment for his actors, can lead them into being creative through simple and direct exercises. He then shapes these creative impulses into improvisational scene work.

An important concept of Johnstone's theories on scene creation is shown in his discussion of blocking and

accepting. Blocking occurs when an improviser refuses to participate in an action. For example, a scene that proceeds in this way: "Your leg looks bad, I'll have to amputate." "No, check my arm." is a blocked scene. The second actor refuses to accept the action (amputation) suggested and so the scene ends. The first actor may, and should suggest another action, but will probably also be frustrated by his first attempt being thwarted. A better answer might have been "Yes, do amputate, and I'll sing while you saw." It is important to remember that anything that stops the action is a block. In a two person scene, to respond to a command to leave with "No!" is not really a block, because this response keeps the action going. Conversely, to leave would bring the scene to a stop, or slow it down considerably, and would be worse than the initial refusal. This concept of not blocking and keeping the action going can be seen in other improv teaching methods, most notably in the "Yes, and." rule of The Second City style of improvising.[58] It is also related to the Stanislavski concept of working together to continue the action of the scene.

Blocking, because it cuts off further possibility of creating, is a way to kill spontaneity. Blocking should not be confused with presenting and overcoming obstacles to actions, such as in Stanislavski's exercise with a melodrama scene (described earlier). In that scene the actors had a script to follow and knew their objectives. In

a totally improvised scene the actors are creating the piece on the spot, and need to cooperate to build the scene; they have no script to rely on. Blocking destroys the opportunity for actors to cooperate in their improvising, a process vital to improv and called for in Spolin's theories as well as Johnstone's.

Johnstone's discussion of narrative skill is important because it is a skill that an improviser needs; yet, it is not often analyzed directly. When creating an improv scene, acting teachers have talked about "focus" and "motivation." These tools help shape a scene, but improvisation often demands more, especially when done in a performance situation. The actors have to write the story as they are acting it. This is not done on a completely conscious level, but the obligation is there, as Johnstone pointed out:

> The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must "balance" it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them. . . . he not only generates new material, but remembers and makes use of earlier events that the audience itself may have temporarily forgotten.[57]

To do this the actor has to ignore content. He cannot worry about the theme or the message of his improvisation, but must simply follow the rules of improv, do his best to reincorporate ideas and incidents (this is very important), and trust that his innermost self will be revealed. Any good story uses reincorporation of events and ideas to

provide continuity for the audience. Such a skill is vital to improvisation, as without it a scene usually lacks structure. Johnstone has several exercises which build narrative and reincorporation skills.

It is useful to make the student gradually comfortable with this type of narrative work. If a student is reticent to make up a story, Johnstone asks the student questions about the story, taking part in writing it himself. He will pose questions such as "There is a box. What's in it?" and when he gets an answer (for example, "A fish.") he will continue with a question such as "What is the fish doing?" The questions end when a story is made. Through this exercise Johnstone can guide his students into imaginatively reincorporating elements of the story. The roles can also be reversed, and the student can ask Johnstone questions about the story, to which he answers "yes" or "no". The student creates the story, but Johnstone is there to provide support and to give the student confidence.

Once the student becomes skilled at narrative work, more complicated exercises are introduced. Some of these exercises are performance oriented, and are actually used at improv theatres. One such game is called "expert." In it, one actor is a talk show host, and the other is an expert in a field chosen by the host. This field is chosen immediately, with no prior knowledge of either actor. Once the host tells his expert what field he is in, the host

asks the expert a series of questions about the latest developments in the field. Anything will do, it does not have to be scientifically correct. For example, a zoology expert may be asked "Now, how have you been teaching hippopotamuses to yodel?" The secret of the game is to supply many questions and give immediate answers, without worrying if they are logical (or creative). Johnstone believes that they usually are:

> It's not so much what is said, but the expert's eagerness to supply instant answers. The audience know that they'd hedge, and beat about the bush, and they have a great respect for a performer who doesn't try any evasions.[58]

This game is done at The Second City and Chicago City Limits, although it may be called different names (such as "Speakers Bureau" or "Interview").[59] Johnstone's advice about immediate response illustrates some general rules about improvisation. These include the need to cooperate with your fellow actor, not to deny on stage, to trust your instincts, and to reincorporate ideas wherever feasible. The explanations by the experts often naturally create a coherent story of a scientific method in use, though maybe a bizarre and humorous one, and this creation supports the development of narrative skills.

This skill is important in many improv games. A "Conducted Story," in which a group of three to seven people improvise a story one word, sentence or short paragraph at a time, demands narrative skill to make the story interesting and coherent, yet still creative. This

game is done often in improvisation performances. In fact, most any improvisational scene demands that the actors have narrative ability to make the scene understandable to the audience.

In dealing with narrative work, Johnstone has covered something very important to improv performance. He is directly concerning himself with the problems of being on stage and improvising in front of an audience. This is an important point in improvisation training, as improv actors need to have useful skills that can be relied upon. As a theorist, Johnstone combines a philosophical approach to creativity (his attempts to undo the effects of traditional public schooling) with a practical approach to performing improvisation. His emphasis makes him, in the area of actor training, a proponent of learning by doing. Improv acting, like scripted acting, involves performance in the learning process. What is learned in the classromm is tested on stage, then brought back to the classroom for refinement; actors need both situations to learn their craft. Johnstone proposes a synthesis between theory and practical performing experience for the improv training of an actor, and emphasizes performance techniques a bit more than the other theorists in this chapter. Though British, he has taught workshops in Canada in various cities and primarily at his theatre in Calgary, Alberta (The Loose Moose Theatre Company). Like Spolin, it is his book that is mostly responsible for the use of his exercises, and it is these

exercises' practicality that makes them so popular because they give teachers and actors direct access to the experience of improvising.

WARREN ROBERTSON

Through the use of "imaginative personalizations," Warren Robertson uses improvisation as a way of freeing an actor's emotions. In these exercises, the actor improvises a conversation with a person he or she imagines to be standing in front of him or her, confronting the person with feelings of anger, love, need, anything that the actor feels strongly about. The actor then begins to have emotions concerning this relationship with this person, reaccquainting the actor with feelings that have been forgotten or with which he has lost connection. The person that the actor confronts is usually important to his or her life (mother, father, wife, etc.) but can be anyone who causes emotion to be stirred up in the actor. This method is also used by Terry Schreiber, as well as other acting teachers who are involved with this technique.[80]

Robertson's approach is a combination of sense memory and improvisation. He explained the exercise in his book Free to Act as he guided a student through this work:

> Now think of a person who has been particularly important in your life. . . . Imagine that person is sitting in a chair in front of you. The composite parts of the imagination to use are sight, sound and smell. Use your senses to remember as much as you can about that person. . . . Let your imagination be free to "see" that person. This is a sense memory. . . . Now, select an action you were never allowed to take with that person. Speak to that person. Out loud. Allow

> yourself to feel your shyness or embarrassment. Confront this person. Or demand something. Tell them, "I want. . ." Challenge them. [61]

The right words will eventually come to the actor. Before that, if the actor cannot find them, he or she should just speak in numbers. It is most important to have the feeling because acting without feeling is boring, while with emotion an actor is more dynamic and exciting to an audience. Still, emotion must always go with action. An actor uses emotion in support of his actions on stage, and is thus a more interesting actor.

Once this emotion is reached through work with imaginative personalizations, the actor can then begin his or her monologue in class. In a performance, he may begin a monologue, a scene, a song, whatever the play calls for. The emotion reached can be used to support the text, and will create a more free and believable interpretation of the piece. Actors who often use personalizations at intervals throughout the course of the play to help bring out their emotions should choose personalizations based on the demands of the script. If an actor needs to confront another character in the play, and he is having trouble carrying out that objective with believability, he should prepare by doing a personalization of confronting someone from his own life. Feelings aroused from that exercise, and perhaps even sensory elements of it (a smell, part of the imaginary person's face), will resurface during the performance. Ultimately, the emotions aroused by these

personalizations help an actor carry out actions (objectives, motivation) on stage. Emotions are not the end in itself, only a means to help an actor carry out stage actions.

Robertson, like Johnstone, believes that life itself can be detrimental to an actor's development, and social situations extinguish true emotions:

> We are trained not to show emotion in public. For the most part, we equate showing feelings in public with some sort of weakness, something to be embarrassed about.
>
> As a substitute for taking actions based on real needs and desires, instead of showing anger when we "feel" it, most adults offer a habitual social response. To get along with the rest of the world, to fit in, we feign feelings.[82]

Both Robertson and Johnstone are accurate in their assessment of everyday life, though their methods of undoing its damage differ. Robertson, through the use of personalizations, attempts to connect an actor with his feelings about his own life, while Johnstone tries to reintroduce to an actor a sense of creativity stifled in childhood. Robertson takes a confrontational approach, asking the actor to face his feelings, while Johnstone (like Spolin) prefers game playing and exercises with more of a sense of fun. This comparison points up a difference between acting teachers who use improv and improvisation teachers who teach improv exclusively. Acting teachers (Robertson and Strasberg, for example) are more prone to use direct psychological probing of serious emotions, while improv teachers such as Johnstone and Spolin tend to use

games, in an indirect way, to bring out such emotions. Both methods are useful and, ultimately, there is no real reason to choose one over the other-- an actor can use both as he or she sees fit.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of improvisation for actor training has changed and grown in this century in America. With Stanislavski it was an important technique, and Vakhtangov's work expanded its uses and helped inspire the improvisations of the Group Theatre. The spread of Spolin's theories was extremely important because, for the first time, improvisation as a separate form of theatre had a complete theoretical basis. It was no longer only a technique for teaching acting, and for helping actors to deal with scripts; improvisation was a whole branch of acting itself. Moore and Meisner made inroads into the use of improvisation to help actors, and Johnstone's book and teachings contain yet another approach to improvisation. He is concerned with games to expand the improviser's skills, concentrating both on theoretical concerns (creative freedom, working together) and the very real problems of improvising in a professional company before an audience. Some straight acting teachers use improvisation to help an actor feel an emotional affinity with his character and, like Robertson's use of personalizations, the use of improvisation has a more casual structure dictated by the needs of the actor and the text.

The improvisation exercises of Spolin and Johnstone are used widely among improvisation teachers, indicating their overall value. Paul Sills, for example, still uses many of the Spolin exercises, and Johnstone's games are also widely used. Certain exercises, for example, Spolin's object exercises and Johnstone's status games, are reliable ways for teachers to introduce their students to improv, as well as valid techniques for more experienced improvisers. The theoretical bases discussed in this chapter have truly affected improvisation training in this country.

There are two main directions, both important, in the use of improvisation for actor training: for script interpretation and for performance of improv. Teachers such as Meisner or Strasberg, who use improv to develop skills useful to an actor for script interpretation, believe that the talents acquired in improv work (enhanced imaginative powers and emotional freedom, for example) will be helpful to an actor, but that the most tangible benefit is the expanson of choices. An actor can find, by improvising, specific choices, including pieces of business and ways a character might pursue an objective, which can be used when the actor approaches the script. The result of improv work is, in this instance, clearer than in the second case: improv for performance. Teachers of this second method also develop skills in an actor, but the connection of the skills to script work is not as clear. For example, the sense of confidence and trust in his fellow actors fostered

in an improvisational performer are certainly important when he or she works with a script, but they become part of who he is and how he works as an actor rather than providing hard and fast choices for interpreting a text. Learning improvisation for performance is useful for an actor, but analysis of this training demands a wholistic perspective, asking what it does for the actor beyond exploration of a specific character in a script. The answer to this question will vary with the student and teacher.

There are some constants in theories of improv use for actor training. These constants are:

1. Actors must work together and cooperate while they are improvising (From the theories of Spolin and Johnstone particularly).
2. There must be a tangible focus of the improv. The actor must know what he or she is trying to achieve (his point of focus, or motivation) by doing the improv (From Stanislavski, Vakhtangov, but generally all teachers).
3. Intuition and natural responses are necessary for the improvisation to succeed (Meisner, Spolin, for example).
4. This type of work is fairly accurately described as a lifelong process (Spolin, Robertson, most all teachers).

These constants have taken different forms with various teachers, but still are threads that can be seen in each example of a theory of improvisational training for actors.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPROVISATIONAL TRAINING FOR ACTORS IN THE COMPASS PLAYERS

The Compass Players (or "The Compass"), the parent group of The Second City, was a pioneer in training actors for improvisation work. Founded primarily by David Shepherd and Paul Sills, The Compass initiated professional improv theatre in Chicago and was a springboard for The Second City company as we know it today. This company, the largest professional improvisation theatre in the country, is very influential in terms of improv training which provides actors with improvisational classes as a part of their overall education. The Compass Players, acknowledged as the first professional improv company (its actors received a salary) in America by Spolin[1] and Paul Sills as well,[2] used improvisation to train its actors, many of whom went on to theatrical careers in both improv and non-improv theatre. Begun at the University of Chicago, The Compass, through training, peformances, and the people whose careers it began, brought much attention to improvisation as an important part of actor training.

The atmosphere at the University of Chicago in the middle 1950s provided fertile grounds for The Compass group, which was begun out of its founders' desire for theatrical expression. There was, at that time, a meeting of intellectuals at the university and a liberal atmosphere that accepted the new theatre company. It is a strange

paradox that such a strong movement (Chicago improv) began in the atmosphere of a university which had no formal theatre program, but only a group of students wanting to start a theatre in the few available theatre spaces open to them. The flexibility of improv is evident, as it can be done for an audience with few sets or props, and in nearly any suitable space. Improv provides, for the actor, both opportunities-- to perform in a simple setting-- and challenges-- to perform well under such conditions. As a basis for their work, The Compass was the first group to use Spolin games for actor training.

Shepherd said that The Compass actors hoped to achieve a group unity and an ensemble feeling among the players through this training, but he did not see the games as being able to solve specific directorial problems in scenes, which is the use Spolin later advocated in her book.[3] The Compass actors played the games as a group, hoping that the skills of improv would gradually be learned through the process. This goal was achieved, at least partially, since the group was successful. The games were used as exercises by which the group members developed their improvisational skills and created ideas for scenes. This had not been done before by a professional improvisation company in this country. The use of the games was beneficial for training the performers in basic improv skills; they learned how to listen and respond on stage, work together in performance, and have confidence in their

performing. This third skill was important because many of the original Compass Players were not actors at all, but students in other areas of learning (law, philosophy, etc.). Improvisation was a path for these students to learn acting and bring their creativity to the stage. They did innovative improv scenes and achieved something unique for their time using a process based on scenarios.

The group members wrote scenarios, which were outlines of scenes which the group would expand upon through improvisation and then perform for an audience. In this way the group adopted a practical approach to improvisation because they had the obligation of performing regularly for a paying audience, which is a kind of training in itself. Unlike most approaches to more traditional acting, which encourages much rehearsal before a young performer faces an audience, improvisation training is more likely to encourage even the inexperienced actor, after a fairly short time, to be seen by others out of a classroom setting. This situation bolsters confidence and even courage in an actor if he or she sees this acting work as a learning experience and is non-judgmental about his or her performance. The scenarios used by The Compass were often based upon group members' specific interests, reinforcing the concept of bringing oneself to one's acting. For example, one member who was a tax accountant wrote a scenario about catching tax evaders. The Compass, by using improvisation to train its actors, created ready

and enthusiastic scenario players who could improvise, if needed, within the frame of a loose script.

Sills, the first director of the Second City, began his work in improvisation at The Compass. He first directed for the stage and met Shepherd at the University of Chicago in the "University Theatre," a play production group on campus. He worked with them and another group ("Tonight at 8:30") in the early 1950's. During this period he met Shepherd and Eugene Troobnick (later a member of The Second City), and the three founded the "Playwrights Theatre Club" in an old Chinese restaurant at 1560 North La Salle St. in Chicago (on the other side of town from the University). It was a serious group, born out of some desperation: some of the actors slept in the theatre as well as performed there. They did plays by Brecht and Buchner, although problems arose and they were closed out of their second theatre at Dearborn and Division Street. It was at this time that Shepherd got the idea that would lead to The Compass Players.

Shepherd was political in his viewpoint and acted on his beliefs. He was displeased with "bourgeois" theatre and the same kind of audience that attended it. He wanted to start a theatre for the people, one that could play in the stockyards of Chicago, and one that would be about contemporary issues and reflect the problems of the working class. The stockyards idea proved unworkable, so Shepherd set up a cabaret theatre (The Compass), similar in concept

to the post World War II French and German cabarets which also served the working class. Shepherd was strongly influenced by the experience of seeing these cabarets and said that a new style of acting was needed to serve this theatre. The plays needed to be, for the main part, improvised pieces devised by the company itself. Shepherd believed that improv was free of the stuffiness and pretension which he disliked in theatre, and was also immediate; an audience suggestion could lead to a scene in a few minutes. The original Compass Players upheld the idea of a "theatre for the people" by taking suggestions from the audience. In addition, their contact with the audience was important to their training, and the idea that the audience is a vital part of the performance was reinforced.

In the beginning, the point of view of The Compass Players was unique because most of its members were not really actors. Roger Bowen, for example, was a law student at the University of Chicago when he was in the Players, though he later went on to acting in films (MASH) and television. Initially, The Compass actors were not theatre people, but philosophy, law, and literature students, and had a certain perspective different from most actors. They brought their ideas to the stage, as suggested in the previously mentioned scenario written by a tax accountant. This situation indicates a point that Spolin stated: with hard work, anyone can learn to improvise. The success of The Compass lends support to this concept. Furthermore,

improvisation can be an introduction to acting for those who have little or no experience in theatre, and can be extremely useful for training beginning actors.

After some brief exposure at the University of Chicago's Reynolds Club Theatre, The Compass opened their first real show. According to Sills, it was in a bar under improvised conditions:

> . . . we had some friends who were opening up a tavern and we just knocked a hole in the wall, bought the beer from them and went on . . . that was The Compass. It was not a legal place, but it was in Hyde Park, and it was strongly supported by the community, nobody complained and there were no accidents.[4]

On July 5, 1955, the Players debuted with the scenario The Game of Hurt, directed by Sills. The cast featured, among others, Elaine May, Bowen, and Shepherd. Before performing the hour long scenario, the group presented a few short pieces and a "Living Newspaper" in which the cast would read excerpts from a newspaper and then act out the story (with a humorous point of view), using a narrator if needed. At the end of the scenario, the cast would create improvisational scenes based on suggestions from the audience. The Compass provided a full night of improvised and scenario based theatre.

The undertaking was successful and popular. The scenarios, which really began as the skeletons of story lines, were fleshed out improvisationally by the actors, the show being a bit different every night. Thus the actors combined acting from a script with improvisation. A photo

essay in the September, 1955 issue of Chicago gives some idea of The Compass' popularity:

> The entertainment is fast moving and intermittent, but because it is largely impromptu it is never twice the same. People hate to leave, clamor for more, and the actors, who mean to shut down at midnight, often keep it up for a couple of extra hours. . . . Overflow crowd on the sidewalk in front . . ..[5]

Sills offered a reason for this success:

> Well, anything was funny in those days. We were the first people on stage to mention real names, real products, real streets . . . In those days when you did a review, if Eisenhower was the President, you'd call him Visendower, right? I mean some such thing as that. We just called him Eisenhower, so we won, right? Then we discovered free speech . . . we could say whatever we wanted to and get away with it.[6]

The early Compass scenarios really did have a feeling for humanity. The scenes were not only a series of satirical political sketches where a real person's name could get a laugh, but conveyed more thoughtful concerns about society in general.

One scene in particular, written by Elaine May, was called "Georgina's First Date," and concerned an unattractive girl who is dated by a handsome guy who wants to win a bet with his friends. Her parents encourage her to date and have sex with him because having him as her boyfriend would be a status symbol for the parents to brag about. Thus, society pushes this girl into damaging her self-esteem, and in the end she loses her virginity and tells her mother, in a tearful voice, that she had a wonderful time. This kind of seriousness is refreshing in improv, though this sketch also had quite a bit of humor.

Centered on everyday people who are faced with societal pressures, this scene says that society will tell you to do things that are bad for you, and only you should decide what you really want. The scene was basically entertaining but there was a definite point of view which fit Shepherd's desires.

Shepherd was committed to didacticism in theatre, to raising the public's consciousness about the society around them and to encouraging the public's involvement in the performance. In this way, the importance of the audience would given much attention (a concept suggested by Spolin). Shepherd explained:

> The theatre is in trouble because it is based on words. Scripts are keeping the audience from getting into the act. If you're doing a play about St. Joan it should be possible for everyone in the audience-- every man, every woman-- to be St. Joan (or her soldier or executioner). Otherwise they're not getting close to the experience of Joan.[7]

The Compass attempted to establish such involvement of the audience, as Shepherd believed its members should shout out suggestions and even become part of the performance.

In the beginning, The Compass was made up of people who had little formal theatre training, though Spolin had worked with the group for several months before their first performance, and Sills ran workshops after Spolin stopped. The performers obtained further improv training by developing scenes (based on scenarios) onstage for an audience. The Compass actors learned by performing as well as through classes, and this method of study serves actors

well even today. In Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, really any theatrically active city, there are many actors who perform sketch comedy in cabarets and nightclubs. Usually helped by some formal classes in improvisation, these actors learn as much in front of an audience as they do in class. The Second City is the most famous of this type of company, but there have been many. "The Groundlings" began in Los Angeles, "The First Amendment" in Boston and "Chicago City Limits" in New York; there have been others. These groups have started the careers of actors who now perform in scripted as well as improv pieces for theatre, film and television. In addition, many smaller groups are started every year. The experience of taking classes in improvisation, working together with a group of fellow actors, and then performing can be, as shown by The Compass, a fertile training ground for an actor.

In October of 1955, The Compass moved to larger quarters and underwent several other changes. The group began performing in "The Dock," a night club in Hyde Park with a cabaret that seated 140. Sills left the group to study in England, Shepherd brought in other directors to work with the company, and some of the original players dropped out. Replacements, including Shelley Berman, Mike Nichols, Bobbi Gordon and Severn Darden, were brought in from New York. Because the cast found it difficult to change shows every few weeks, the runs of each show were longer. The group also changed from the scenario format

with longer sketches to many more short sketches and even "blackouts" (pieces about a minute long characterized by a quick punchline and blackout of the lights). Improvs that went well were remembered for later performances, rather than being created from scratch each night. These changes in format made the show safer and more reliable as entertainment, but were not as adventurous. The casting of professional actors also made the quality of the show more even, though the whole perspective of the company was altered. The group lost the continuity of Sills' sole direction, and the addition of professional actors was a change from the original Compass group of amateurs.

According to Roger Bowen, the new performers changed the perspective of the group.

> When it became all professional actors, the quality of the acting greatly increased, but the vision became narrower. People will improvise what they know, and if what they know is the world of theatre and commercials and movies, that's what they're going to improvise about. But if they're social workers or lawyers or doctors, they're going to improvise about those things.[8]

This period in The Compass signified a change. The actors' work was beginning to attain real popularity. This was the company where Nichols and May began developing their now famous and classic improv comedy scenes which were often requested by Compass audiences during this period (1955) and were later recorded and performed on Broadway as well as on television shows in the early 1960s. Darden also was well received, and went on to some wider popularity as a

comic actor, both in the later Second City company and in movies and television. Darden, though a professional actor, had been a philosophy student at the University of Chicago and had created a popular character named "Professor Valter von der Voegelweide" at The Compass. This character was based, in part, on the professors Darden had in class and was famous for his spontaneous lectures on anything suggested by the audience. His lecture on metaphysics is still popular with improv fans and is much requested when such sketches are played on radio stations in Chicago. The Compass actors, trained in improv, were creating enjoyable characters and sketches while learning successful stage techniques.

Another sketch of much popularity and insight was one popularized by Nichols and May entitled "Pirandello." This sketch was typical of the intelligence that the two exhibited in their improvisations. It began with the two acting as young children who were making believe that they are their parents. They yelled at each other in mock adult fashion and gradually, almost imperceptably, they became the parents and the argument became more threatening. As the final beat, they slipped into really arguing (as the two improvisers) and the audience was unsure of what was really going on. The end made it clear that it was all an act, but for a while the scene took on exciting dimensions.

The use of professional actors may have been important to The Compass' creation of more popular material

during this period. Certainly May, Darden, and Berman were able to build on their experiences with The Compass to create successful careers for themselves, and material they developed with The Compass served them well as they continued performing. These professional actors, while not possessing the point of view of previous Compass members, might have known how to be more entertaining and possibly more interesting to an audience. Whatever the case, during this period The Compass started the careers of some very creative actors who went on to perform various types of material in different mediums.

The Compass was changing during this period (late 1955), and some of the changes were productive. The work of Nichols and May, as well as Darden, are a few of the most obvious examples of growth. Another change at this time was the inception of the St. Louis Compass, begun by Theodore J. Flicker.

The impetus for this company began when the Chicago Compass moved out of their theatre ("The Dock") into a theatre uptown, near Loyola University, in the spring of 1956. The company was in some financial trouble, eventually closing during the winter of 1956. At this time Flicker thought The Compass show was too undisciplined; it was interesting, but not really professional entertainment. There was a business possibility of finding a backer to open a Compass in both New York and St. Louis. The New York venture, however, did not receive the necessary initial

backing so the enterprise was begun in St. Louis in April of 1957 with Flicker and Shepherd as partners, and Flicker as director.

The St. Louis Compass, whose cast included Flicker, Del Close (later a Second City actor and director), Nancy Ponder and Jo Henderson, was different from the Chicago version. Unlike the Chicago company, Flicker wanted his St. Louis cast to wear some kind of uniform clothing onstage: dark pants and white shirts for the men, and black tights and skirts for the women. They played at the Crystal Palace in St. Louis, a fairly elegant nightclub with crystal chandeliers, and very much unlike the Chicago Compass theatre spaces. Shepherd was discouraged with the atmosphere of the Crystal Palace, as well as the venture as a whole. Although the St. Louis Compass was a financial success, Shepherd thought there were too many pieces done purely for a laugh rather than because they had a message. In short, Shepherd thought that the St. Louis show was too commercial, and the partnership between him and Flicker was dissolved.

There were still a few things of lasting value that came out of the St. Louis Compass. Besides being a successful company, and a forerunner of "The Premise," a group started by Flicker that later played in New York, the style of the St. Louis Compass group contained elements later used by the Second City. The St. Louis Compass' idea that there should be a "show" rather than all experimental

improv is followed by the Second City today, and this concept provides structure for improv work that adds another dimension to its value for actors. The actors have a tighter script, of a kind, to follow, and learn something about scripted performing. In addition, Flicker and May developed some rules for teaching improv to actors.

These basic three rules are still taught at The Second City as well as by other improv teachers. First, an improviser must always say "yes," as in theory it is wrong to deny anything said by your improv partner. Concepts or actions suggested for a scene are always supported, not undercut. Second, one must make active choices onstage, and do rather than be done to. Third, actors should always justify what they do to develop the scene. Rather than say "my character wouldn't do that," the actor must do the action, incorporate it into the character and integrate it into the scene.

These ideas were variations on theories of theater and improvisation since Stanislavski. Still, it is important that the St. Louis Compass, a professional improv theatre, stated these rules because they are, in varying forms, the theoretical foundation of improv classwork even today. That these rules were developed through performing indicates how performance plays an important role in theories of teaching, and how much can be learned about training through working in front of an audience. The St. Louis group's performances represented a real departure

from purely experimental improv, even more of a departure than the later Compass group with Nichols and May did. Ironically, the St. Louis group also codified these three theories behind improv. Until that point, The Compass groups had been performing successfully without knowing why their technique was working. These theories of the St. Louis Compass helped explain how, and why, improvisation could work in the theatre and set down guidelines for teachers of improv for actor training.

The St. Louis Compass was short lived, running only from April of 1957 till the end of the year. Shepherd did, however, continue taking The Compass, in various forms, to work in clubs and theatres around the country. The most successful of these was probably the 1962 Hyannisport, Massachusetts company.

This company at Hyannisport, a Cape Cod resort village, did primarily political satire, largely because many politicians vacationed there. The cast included Alan Alda, Reni Santoni, Diana Sands, Suzanne Shepherd, and Ron Weyand. The company received mixed reviews of its work. Martin Gottfried remarked in the Village Voice that "The Chicago Compass has sired a Cape Cod offspring at the Yachtsman Hotel in Hyannisport, but a chip off the old block it isn't. For one thing, it can barely be termed improvisational."[9] Gottfried was being unfair, as the second half of the Hyannisport Compass' show contained improvised scenes based on audience suggestions. The show

did receive some good reviews, especially from Arthur Gelb in the New York Times, who called it "generally very good" and "impertinently hilarious."[10] Shepherd was trying to combine the trend toward set material with improv, and his venture was moderately successful.

The improvisation trend began by The Compass Players led to The Second City, which was initiated by Sills back in Chicago. Sills saw the success of The Compass and realized that there was a market for this type of theatre. While running workshops with old Compass actors, including Howard Alk, Bowen, Darden, Andrew Duncan and Barbara Harris, Sills looked for a suitable place to open the new improv theatre. Joined by Bernard Sahlins as producer, Sills and Alk pooled their money with Sahlins and opened The Second City Theatre at 1842 North Wells St. in what had been a Chinese laundry. A stage was built by the partners in the venture, and they brought in lights, chairs, tables and a piano. Bill Mathieu, an old friend of Sills, served as piano player for the new group. December 16, 1959, was the first night of performances. The show was a series of sketches and songs that had a good natured political bent, poking fun at conventions of the time (Eisenhower, FM radio, strikes). The city was ready for such a venture, critical response was good, and the company was successful. Much of their audience was drawn from old Compass fans. The group retained the use of a set of improvised sketches based on audience suggestions, which they did after the

preset show was performed. Much of later material for shows was developed through these audience suggested improvs. The group upgraded the size of its quarters until 1967, when they moved into a space at 1616 North Wells, where they reside today. Since their inception in 1959, the group has sponsored New York (Broadway) and Los Angeles engagements, record albums, and television appearances in addition to running extensive classes in improvisation.

The impact of The Compass was strong. It was the first professional improv company in America, began a trend, and was founded on a certain ideology not entirely based on commercial success. Like many theatre movements it was begun by amateurs but, in this case, the amateurs were not even theatre people (though many later became actors and acting teachers). The Compass was a theatre created by law students and secretaries who trained with and followed the tenets set down by Spolin and taught by Sills. Out of the original Compass, the very first company, came Sills, Bowen and May, among others. The amount of talented people who worked with The Compass is further evidence of The Compass' influence and its importance to improvisation for training actors. Like other theatre movements, The Compass eventually found it had to be more commercially acceptable. The logical evolution of The Compass, initiated by Sills, was The Second City.

Sills and Nichols praised The Compass Players. Sills stated:

> I was at The Compass for the first ten weeks. Ten weeks doesn't sound like anything, but we produced ten separate shows of two hours length in those ten weeks. It was an incredibly creative period for everybody and like nothing that I've ever been through because we made up every word and every idea and every everything. There is nothing like the great work that we were doing.[11]

Nichols has said that improvisation has taught him two things: to be confident with an audience and to choose a definite event upon which to build a scene.[12] Nichols feels that he learned something from his acting with The Compass, and currently (1989) continues teaching acting in New York in addition to directing.

The Compass was vital to improvisation history in this country, and was important to the development of improvisation training. It was the first real attempt to use Spolin's concepts as a basis for professional improvisation. The Compass also took into account the importance of working in front of an audience for the development of an actor in improvisation, and was a starting point for Sills, Del Close, Shepherd and other current teachers of improvisational acting. The Compass had energy, a spirit of cooperation, and a point of view. Though these things are less tangible than acting exercises, they are important parts of improvisational theatre training and are needed for the success of any improvisational company. In addition, The Compass' existence allowed the improvisation movement to begin, move in different directions, and gain followers. The Compass

called attention to improvisation, helping move it out of the acting classes and into the world of the professional theatre. Others had done this before, the Group Theatre for example, but The Compass was based completely in improvisation. Consequently, more actors became interested in improvisational training, and through The Second City (and other schools) were able to obtain such instruction.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONTRIBUTIONS TO IMPROVISATION TRAINING FOR ACTORS MADE BY SHEPHERD AND SILLS

The work of both David Shepherd and Paul Sills has contributed to improvisation training for actors in this country. Shepherd first began The Compass Players as well as the "Improv Olympic," an improvisation contest played by teams of performers in competition to exhibit their improv skills. The teams are judged on their ability at a series of games designed to promote both improvisational talents and a spirit of cooperation. Sills was the first director of The Second City improvisation company, and has also directed numerous shows on his own, the most notable being Story Theatre on Broadway and his Sills and Company which has played in New York and Los Angeles. He has taught improvisational acting for over thirty years and is one of the best known teachers of the Spolin method in this country. In addition to these accomplishments, both men have theoretical views on improvisation which are valuable to one's understanding of the field.

These men teach classes in improvisation as a part of acting training. They, unlike teachers such as Strasberg and Moore, do not teach sense memory, emotional recall, scripted scene work, or any other type of acting skills that would complement the training of an actor. Sills and Shepherd train actors in the skills of improvisation, and

it is up to the actor to use these skills, which are valuable to actors in general, as a part of his or her overall education. Improvisation training, as it is taught in most cases, is a part of actor training; most people in improv classes are actors and go on to do (or try to do) various types of acting: from a script, improvisational, partially improvised sketch playing, etc. As in any class dealing only with improvisation, it is up to the actor to use improv skills as a part of his or her acting training. Improvisation does, however, provide many skills of general use to actors wanting to do other kinds of performing besides improvisation, so utilization of these skills is not difficult.

Shepherd's work in improvisation began with The Compass Players and continued with the "Improv Olympic," which served to introduce improv to many performers. Begun in 1979 in Toronto, by 1981 it was active in Chicago, New York, Ottawa, Toronto and San Francisco. Besides his important role in establishing The Compass Players, and the hundreds of workshops he has taught, the Improv Olympic is one of Shepherd's main contribtions to improv training. The Olympic involved groups of players, or teams, which came from all areas of society. Playing the Olympic games might have been a team of senior citizens, a team of accountants, or a group of aspiring professional actors wanting to hone their skills in improvisation. The Improv Olympics

introduced actors to improvisation, some of whom went on to professional acting careers. The teams competed in a series of predetermined games which helped the actors both exhibit and expand their improv talents. The games also allow anyone to try improvisation, as they are simple enough to be played by anyone after a small amount of rehearsal.

The more frequently used games were (and still are) the most useful for encouraging the basic improvisational acting skills. One such game is the "work-put," in which the actors begin an activity, such as laying bricks or making a cake, while discussing a subject that has no connection with the activity. For example, while baking a cake the actors might talk about politics. The objects used in the activity are mimed, although they are endowed with as much detail as possible. This game, which is useful for teaching concentration and object work (the imaginative creating of objects on stage), encourages the creation of a space on stage (ex. a bakery). Creating a believable space on stage is important to any actor, and one who can create a space on a bare improv stage will probably find it easier to believe in the reality of a set in a scripted play. The focus of the work-put is on both the activity and the conversation, and eventually the conversation may influence how the activity is done (or vice-versa). This game, though simple, has a strong focus and can encourage the actors to integrate an emotional condition with how they carry out

the action of a scene. The direct focus of the tasks of this game gives an actor something simple to do while still learning to do object and spatial work which encourages good scene creation in a simple context.

The character relay game develops concentration in an actor. In this game, two actors each wear some small indications of character, such as a hat or small piece of clothing (scarf, vest). At intervals during the game, they switch hats (or whatever they are using) and also switch characters; actor one plays the character of actor two, and two plays one. An actor must duplicate his partner's characterization in vocal quality, mannerisms, attitude, and any other distinguishing trait. Like the work-put, there are two points of focus in this game: the actor must concentrate on the action of the scene, and he must focus on his partner's character so the duplication process can be done. Shepherd has said that this is a very good game to teach improvisers to observe each other, and to concentrate on stage.[1] Concentration is a needed skill for any actor, so the game has a useful purpose.

Another popular game is called "emotional hurdles," in which two actors must react in a scene with very strong emotions chosen by the audience. The emotions are usually conflicting, such as love and hate, and both actors must portray these emotions at various times during the scene. The emotions can change, and the two actors need not have

the same emotion at the same time, but the emotions must remain an important part of the scene. This game encourages the actors to throw themselves into the scene with an emotional commitment, and encourages them to act without intellectualizing. The suggestion of a feeling often stimulates an emotional connection in the actor, as well as encouraging appropriate dialogue in the improvisers. This game stimulates emotion not by sense memory, but by simple suggestion, and while it may seem a cardinal sin to a method actor to simply "be angry," it can often trigger feelings both believable and theatrically creative in the actor.

Shepherd's work with the Improv Olympic has involved hundreds of people in improvisation, and the games are still used in classes in improvisation for actors. The competitions were organized by him and his students in the previously mentioned cities, the teams of players usually rehearsing on their own or with one of Shepherd's students if the group was unsure of how to play the games. The competitions were open to the public, and held in acting studios, nightclubs, street fairs, virtually anywhere people could be assembled in a lively atmosphere. The audience was usually made up of others interested in improv, though this was hardly the rule. For example, in an Olympic competition at a city festival the audience members could be anyone in the area. The teams were made up of

people from all areas of life, with varying theatrical experience, and some have gone on to professional acting careers. Shepherd is now no longer directly involved in the Olympics, though some cities (New York and Chicago, for example) still have limited competitions run by those familiar with the Olympic and interested in learning the skills of improv.

In a personal interview Shepherd offered his ideas on improvisational training for actors and the nature of this training.[2] He suggested that improv was based on intuition or learned responses and said, in reference to the improv training done at The Compass Players:

> It was like learning how to do the broad jump, or the hurdles, or whatever. You just got into it, that's all. It had nothing to do with acting. It had to do with certain responses which were difficult at first, which you mastered so you'd get to be very good at it, so that you'd do it subconsciously. A fully trained improvisational actor doesn't have to be told to do "contact" [an improv game], he does it automatically.

Shepherd added that improv training was not about emotional memory or character study, but more about game playing, indicating that improv skills are based on intuitional responses, and echoing the theories of Spolin and, to a degree, Meisner. Shepherd added that recently he had been working with non-professional improvisers and had to train them very carefully. They needed to be told to play the contact game, for example, before they realized that it was an important part of the scene. Thus, although perhaps anyone can improvise, it is a skill that must (and can) be

worked at if one wants to do it well.

According to Shepherd, sometimes the games cause the actors to become more aware of certain things in their own lives. One game, called "sound swim," forces the actors to play a scene against a sound that drowns out their words. A waitress Shepherd had trained said this game made her more aware of her customers in a noisy restaurant: she could tell, through non-verbal clues, what was happening at the tables more easily than she could before. Shepherd said:

> For me the Improv Olympics is simply a way of opening up sensibilities, skills, awareness that most people don't have.

The use of improvisation, more than most actor training skills, is suggested as being beneficial to an actor's life as well as to his performing. While one might say that everyday life includes some acting, it most certainly includes improvisation. Most of our social exchanges are improvised, and the connection between real life and improvisation is very close, as suggested earlier by Sonia Moore, and supported by Shepherd. Furthermore, improv training is invasive into an actor's life and can be an involving type of actor training, as it would be easy for an actor to develop some of his or her improv skills through using them in life and thus become a more proficient actor.

Shepherd's contributions to improv training offer both practical exercises for beginning improvisers and a

wholistic approach to improv theory (improv as a part of life). Josephine Forsberg, the director of the Player's Workshop of The Second City, mentioned that Shepherd has not gotten the attention he deserves, as he really "started it all [improvisation]."[3] Historically, his work is integral to the development of improvisation training through his work with The Compass Players in the 1950s and his establishment of the Improv Olympics in the late 1970s.

Sills' improvisational work in this country has consistently explored advancements in improv training. Having begun his career with The Compass Players and later as the first director of The Second City, he has expanded his work to include successful Broadway productions, numerous workshops in Chicago, Los Angeles and New York, and a real broadening of the uses of improvisation for actor training in both class and while working on a production. According to Sills, his career has had three major periods of growth, both in terms of commercial success and artistic development.[4] The first period was his work with The Second City in the early 1960s because the company offered a new kind of theatre skill for actors to learn. The second period was marked by his work with Story Theatre (in the early 1970s). The integration of Grimm's fairy tales with improvisational concepts helped Sills explore the uses of improvisation in performance, and expand on the improv skills useful for an actor to know.

The third period was indicated by his work with Sills and Company (in the 1980s), a return to improvisational games and exercises. In each instance, Sills was doing innovative work with improvisation.

After his work with The Compass Players, Sills began the first major artistic period of his life as director of The Second City in 1959 and continued there for several years, doing work that was critically praised and creatively innovative. He was in charge of directing the actors in scenes and improvisations that became part of The Second City show, usually a series of scenes and blackouts in the form of a comic revue. The early years at The Second City were successful, as the group grew steadily in popularity. By July of 1961 the group played in Los Angeles at the Ivar Theatre and in September of that year opened their Broadway show, entitled From The Second City, at the Royale Theatre. The reviews were mixed, possibly because all the scenes that were performed were preset pieces; no improvisation was done. After the Broadway run the group opened a show at the Greenwich Village club (The Square East) and appeared there on a virtually continual basis until May of 1966. In Something Wonderful Right Away, Andrew Duncan offered some insight into Sills' approach:

> What was evident at The Second City was the completeness of the presentation. . . . Sills planned every second from the minute the light dimmed to the applause and bows. . . . Sills wanted a variety of cast and a balance of cast. He would rarely have two scenes in a row with the same people. He insisted that if you

> saw Barbara [Harris] and me in a scene, if it came back to us again, the audience would be carrying the previous scene with them. He would want a break in between. That's what we used blackouts for.[5]

Sills contributed to the success of The Second City as a director and by determining the "running order" (the order in which scenes are played). The running order of an improv show is vital to involving the actors in the flow of a performance and establishing their relationship with the audience. These scenes performed in these revues included ones developed from scenarios, which required a kind of traditional script acting (and actor's discipline), and certain games which were successfully played as scenes.

One such game was called the "interpreter." In this game, two actors discussed important issues through interpreters. When The Second City performed at the Square East, this game was played with Eugene Troobnick as Nikita Kruschev, and Severn Darden as his interpreter. On the American side, Andrew Duncan played President John F. Kennedy, and Howard Alk was Pierre Salinger. The actor playing the foreigner spoke in a pseudo-foreign gibberish, and the interpreter restated the message (in English) for the opposite side of negotiators to hear. The actor playing the American politician said what he wanted to say, and his interpreter restated the message, in the pseudo-foreign gibberish, in what sounded like a diplomatically acceptable way.

This game clearly helps actors learn to listen to the

person being interpreted. An actor must try to create the diplomatic message based on what he or she seems to hear, not just on trying to create a humorous line. Listening is the acting skill taught by this scene, and the use of gibberish only makes the task more difficult. Arthur Gelb said in the New York Times that this game was The Second City's "most wildly amusing piece" when they performed at Square East:

> When they [the company] really get down to business, they are everything they should be-- touching, absurd, penetrating and uproariously funny.[6]

Thus, here was an instance where an improvisational game could be satisfying to an audience and could be used to create a scene by itself. Such scenes, if successfully done, can give an actor confidence in performing in front of an audience and thus can be important to the training and growth of an actor, as well as enhancing his or her abilities in certain areas of acting, such as listening and responding.[7]

The whole company was quite successful in New York, as noted by their long run at the Square East and the generally favorable reviews. These actors were performing set pieces as well as improvisations, and this combination seemed to be right. Improvisational actors can be very good at acting in scripted sketches, and their interpretations of texts can be especially spontaneous and effective. While this result indicates that improvisational training, such

as that done by The Second City, is effective for actors who interpret texts, it also seems that actors trained in improvisation need, and like, to improvise. They can exhibit their acting skills through improvisation as well as work with scripts and can show another side of their talents.

In the late 1960s (approximately 1965-68) Sills ran workshops in a community setting in Chicago. The class was called "The Game Theatre," and the improvisations were done by people from the community, not professional actors. Sills considered this a good experience as it reinforced the ideas of Spolin, bringing improvisation to people who are not in the theatre.[8] This concept suggests that improvisation is a good way of introducing people to theatre, and can be a good first step in acting training. This workshop came before Sills' production of Story Theatre.

This production, which Sills directed on Broadway in 1970, was successful from a critical and artistic standpoint. The show originally began at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Sills was hired to direct it when the first choice for a production, Sam Shepherd's Operation Sidewinder, was not produced because groups on campus complained that this play was racially biased. Story Theatre is a series of stories, derived from the Grimm fairy tales, and performed by a group of actors skilled in improvisation. Actors have

to be versatile and imaginative as they play roles including talking fish and cats as well as humans. Also, the scenes shift often from place to place; forests, castles, and seasides are used as settings. Locations change so quickly that the actor is obligated to create spaces, such as forests and palaces, with skill and believability. Sills stated in the above noted personal interview that Story Theatre utilized the space work in improvisation very well. Story Theatre was not newly improvised with each performance. Rather, the improv trained actors played from a script and acting ability was necessary to create stage space and humorous but non-realistic characters such as animals. The production at Yale (in 1968) was praised in the New Haven Register (1 January 1969) which carried an article about Sills by Marshall Hahn entitled "Yale Theater's Unlikely Hero."[9] The New York Times, in an article by Guy Flatley humorously entitled "From The Second City, Paul Who?" said that the production "astonished a cynical audience at the Yale Repertory Theater."[10] All in all, this show that called for a combination of improvisational and more traditional acting skills was successful in its pre-Broadway opening.

Story Theatre was equally successful when it was produced on Broadway, opening October 26, 1970 at the Ambassador Theatre and running for approximately a year before going on tour. The production received excellent

reviews offering insight into the acting work. Mel Gussow of the New York Times stated it was "a very simple, popular theater, something for the entire audience, including children-- not an esoteric or coterie thing" and added that "For Broadway-- as for each previous production-- Mr. Sills began fresh improvisations."[11] Gussow praised the originality and seeming freshness of the production, as did the critic from the Christian Science Monitor who cited the production's "coordinated spontaneity" and added that the work of the group was cohesive and that "The present dramatizations . . . call for-- and get-- a total subordination of self on the actor's part."[12] The phrase "subordination of self" indicated a desirable immersion of the actors into their characters, and the mention of "coordinated spontaneity" indicates the teamwork necessary (and achieved) for the actors to perform such material. It is not a coincidence that the cast included actors trained in improvisation. Richard Schaal, Valerie Harper, Hamilton Camp, Richard Libertini and Paul Sand had all appeared on the main stage of The Second City company. Peter Bonerz had worked with the Committee, the San Francisco based improvisation company popular in the 1960s and early 1970s. The cast was familiar with improvisation, and this skill certainly added to the quality of the performances. Each of these actors went on to further success in stage, film and television work.

Richard Coe of the Washington Post suggested the type of transformation which was at the heart of this production when he wrote "With the simplest of stories and settings, the performers take us into the instant of a happening. . . . we become part of an adventure."[13] In Story Theatre this transformation, the moment when the stage is transformed into a different reality, was essential to the performance because the actors created the setting in almost all instances. Instead of scenery a cyclorama was used, sometimes lit with solid colors or designs to suggest a mood or place. In addition, with actors playing animals as well as humans, the imagination of both the actor and the audience had to be active and involved. Such a transformation of stage space is vital to any kind of acting, improvisational or otherwise, and an actor who can achieve such a transformation can be an especially involving performer.

The Grimm stories are written for children and yet their apparent theatricality, as evidenced through this production, attests to the theatricality of a child's imagination. It would be common for a child, while playing, to make believe he is an animal and accept such large imaginative leaps with ease. The actors (and audience) of Story Theatre had to accept such leaps as well, and the performers' acting skills, encouraged by their improv training, made the acceptance of these leaps much easier.

In some ways, it is the child's imagination that improvisation teachers (Johnstone, Spolin) suggest an actor should try to recapture, and it seems this elusive quality was captured by the actors in this production.

The actors in Story Theatre, by using improv talents, created interesting and effective characterizations. This suggests that improvisational skills are directly useful for the theatre and for acting of scripted pieces, which is what Story Theatre is. The performers' improv training also added a special quality to the production.

Sills' work in 1985 and 1986 with Sills and Company, a show made up entirely of improvisation which played in both Los Angeles and New York, was a unique experience in improvisation for its actors. In Los Angeles the show played most notably at the Heliotrope Theatre, opening on January 11, 1985, and playing for almost a year. The cast varied, though it was made up of experienced improvisers, most of whom had appeared at one time with The Second City company. The group changed from time to time so there was not one consistent cast. The Los Angeles company included Avery Schreiber, Mina Kolb, and Severn Darden, all of whom appeared with The Second City Company in the 1960s. Also featured was Gary Goodrow, one of the original members of The Committee. The New York cast featured Bruce Jarchow, a more recent member of The Second City (1980) and Paul Dooley, an actor known for his various theatre, film

(Sixteen Candles, Breaking Away) and television appearances. The New York company played at the Lambs Theatre through the spring and summer of 1986.

This production showed that actors trained in improvisation have the talents to interest an audience within the context of game playing. Actors playing the Spolin and Second City styled improv games (like the interpreter game mentioned earlier) could be entertaining performers without the benefit of a script. This type of training could thus create a unique kind of actor, interesting and creative, spontaneous, and courageous enough to act without a text.

The reviews were very positive and indicated that the group was working well together and exhibiting the traits of good acting. Robert Koehler of the Los Angeles Times said that Sills' "mastery of the form goes right to the source of modern improvisational technique: his mother, Viola Spolin" and added that the production was not about invention, playwriting, dialogue or even behavior, but about relationships between people.[14] The importance of relationships in improvisation was one of Spolin's major concerns, and it is important to most acting situations, improv or otherwise. This review is evidence of the production's quality. Critic Michael Dare made the point that the actors were successful because they were not trying to be humorous, but were truly concerned with

exploring the improvisational games being played.[15] This is a major point of Spolin's, as she stated that "trying to be funny" was a mistake for improvisers.[16] Likewise, actors in scripted work should not play for the laughs, but pursue their character's objective; Spolin's point is applicable here as well.

The show was also well received in New York, opening with a standard Spolin game called "Who Am I?" In this exercise one actor leaves the room while suggestions are taken from the audience as to who that actor should be (usually someone famous). The actor is then brought into the theatre and enters a scene with another actor already on stage. Through clues given by other actors who may enter the scene, and by the one actor who is onstage when the scene begins, the first actor must guess who he is supposed to be. This game can be successful for opening a show because it uses the whole cast and involves the audience as they watch the actor try to guess his identity. It is a good game for teaching actors to be involved in the action of the scene, paying close attention to the clues being given and cooperating with each other to achieve the objective (discovering, or revealing, the identity). Dan Isaac of the Chelsea Clinton News praised this game for its wit and skillful execution and said that it was a good first scene for the production[17].

The success of Sills and Company indicates several

things. An actor who has been trained in improvisation can be a successful performer of those very games he or she has learned in class. Improvisational training can give actors the ability to perform for and satisfy an audience with nothing to work with but their creative imaginations and some games. This experience builds confidence in an actor, and gives him a greater sense of stage presence because it supports his belief in himself and in what he has to offer as an actor. While the success of improvisation can lie simply in the fact that the actors are taking a risk and performing with no pre-existing script, this situation was obviously not true with Sills and Company where the improvisation was of high quality. The production exhibited actors whose skills, learned through improv, could be beneficial in many forms of acting, and the audience was appreciative of the show.

Sills, who currently teaches in New York, offered his ideas on improvisation training. He outlined a plan for beginning improvisational work with actors and explained that Spolin's work is called "games" to keep the idea that the actors are playing, rather than acting. He suggests that the actor open him or herself up to his childlike nature and to the freedom to play and be imaginative that all children feel. With this idea in mind, the work would begin:

> You'd start working with an orientation session, and then you'd go into where they are. You focus on where.

> Then you'd add maybe gibberish. "Where" meaning focusing on the objects of the world around you and showing them in space . . . meanwhile trying to maintain some kind of relation[ship]. Where, who and what.[18]

Sills added that the gibberish brings out "more of the actor" (personally and emotionally), a concept also used by Strasberg. The "where" is the place being created, the "who" is the relationship, and the "what" is what the actors are doing in the scene. These three points have to be kept in mind by the actors, are the initial building blocks of improvisational training, and are applicable to most any acting scene.

By doing these exercises Sills would see if the improviser could create stage space. Many improvisers are always "in their heads" and are unable to create stage space because the space on the stage is not transformed by their actions and their imaginations. Sills believes that these actors continue thinking about what they are going to say, rather than inhabiting where they are.

> A real actor automatically does this [create stage space]. This is true of an actor. . . . He doesn't need a bowl to wash his hands in, he'll just go as if a bowl were there. <u>As if</u> it were there. And he'll do everything like that. . . . You have to keep training people toward this [ability].

Sills said that an actor does not need to do sensory recall consciously for creating space, as it will be present naturally if he or she is trained in this kind of object work. An actor does not have to think about an object when creating it sensorily; if he or she reaches out, it will

naturally be there. In further explanation of this, Sills pointed out that Spolin is not completely against recall, but it does interfere with the actor's involvement in the present moment. Recall also isolates the actor into his or her own head, making it difficult to hear other actors, respond to the situation on stage, and create stage space. Thus improvisation training encourages an actor to be natural and instinctual in his or her involvement in the stage situation. Sills added that there is no time in real improvisation to do recall. The actor has to trust his or her instincts and natural tendency to recall objects.

In addition, the actor has to give the audience members credit for being involved in the play with their own imaginations. The audience does not need everything on stage to be literal. In fact, too much literalism ruins the audience's involvement in the production. Improvisation demands a high degree of imaginative powers from the actor, and encourages the audience to be imaginative as well.

Sills recommended other games and concepts for further improv training. "Contact" is a good game for building a scene and teaches actors needed skills. In this game an actor cannot talk to another actor unless he touches the second actor. This game helps the performers relate better on stage, gives the scene a realistic look, and encourages the performers to focus on each other and on what is being said. Sills also mentioned the "Who Am I?"

game as one that could help actors establish the "who" of a scene and provide training in more skills (listening, for example). In this game, and in improvisation in general, the emphasis should be on "showing" rather than "telling." "Showing" is the incorporation of information, including relationship, place, and activity, into the framework of a scene. "Telling" does not require the intuition of good scene work: it is simply oratory. If a character is a baseball player, it is better to enter swinging a bat (to show) than to enter and ask "Who are we playing today?" (to tell). An actor can get who-oriented information from seeing someone swing a bat, and it is more physical and active than simply talking. The "Who Am I?" game necessitates that the actors show, through their actions rather than by giving verbal clues, who the unnamed character is. Thus this game also teaches the actor to physically portray the action in a scene and not simply speak from an intellectual point of view

Sills explained that the objective of the games is to "bring out the actor in the players" because the games help people do what an actor should do (relate on stage, physicalize his place, etc.) while still concentrating on playing a game rather than on trying to act. These games incorporate the learning of acting skills in the context of simple acting tasks. Sills' approach, as described in this interview, could help an actor through active involvement

in scene work rather than intellectual analysis of what acting should entail. This quality is reflected by improv training in general; it tends toward activity rather than analysis. Sills added that Spolin's work is not intended to go for the joke, although it does produce humor. The work is really geared toward developing character relationships.

On this subject of relationships on stage, Sills believes that they are intuitive. The relationships have to "hit an 'x' area," as he puts it, where between the characters something is understood on a non-verbal level. An actor, as a character, has to know subconsciously certain things about the other characters in the play and allow this knowledge to affect the way his character behaves (much like the way people in real life behave). To be dramatic, all scenes must have this quality which cannot be reached by the intellect, but by working together on the exercises which help the actors learn about each other. The games help the company work together, and learn about each other as performers, adding to the intuitive knowledge that the actors as characters will then have about each other. Sills feels that in most productions the actors are "stiff" in their stage relationships, and he would try to get the performers to play [the Spolin games] together and be more comfortable with each other.

In his teaching, Sills maintains that he has tried to explore Spolin's games. He says that Spolin's concepts are

expansive, and it is difficult to understand everything she is trying to achieve because there is so much to grasp. This comment is not a criticism, but it underscores the hard work necessary to learn the Spolin method properly.

The work of both Sills and Shepherd uses games to a large degree, and this is a fruitful approach. Simplicity can be refreshing for an actor, and a simple, game oriented style of improv training can teach acting skills effectively and enjoyably. This fact is supported by Sills' success in mounting performances which utilize improv. Finally, the simplicity of games is not necessarily limiting because the performer is free to explore much within their form.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPROVISATION FOR ACTOR TRAINING AT THE SECOND CITY

The Second City Theatre in Chicago has been a center of improvisation for actor training in this country since the early 1960s. The critical response to improvisational work done by The Second City, the many companies of actors who work in its employ, and the long list of people who have acted with the group are three factors which give evidence to the group's success. The Second City has been responsible for generally well received work in the cabaret style revue form of theatre for the past 30 years: reviews of the companies have been good, and material created by resident companies has been passed on to touring companies of The Second City. The generally favorable critical response to the material, developed through improvisation by actors trained in this skill, suggests that the material's quality is high, as has been the performance of it.

A Second City show itself is not completely improvisation, but playing of sketches which have been done before and are, in a way, scripted. There is latitude to improvise within the scene, but certain moments and many lines are set and need to be done the same way each night. Thus Second City actors gain experience in both pure improvisation and acting from a set script, usually one of a comic nature. After a preset section of the show,

audience suggestions are taken and some improvisation is done. Interspersed with these improvisations are some scenes which have been done before and are being developed to make them more ready to be part of the next review. A Second City show is, therefore, both improv and acting from a script.

The Second City sponsors many companies. The resident company is a group of actors who perform on the main stage of The Second City company at 1616 N. Wells St. in Chicago. The touring company travels, usually transported by van, sometimes by air if the distance is very far, and performs at various colleges and smaller clubs across the country. There are three touring companies in addition to a company called The Second City ETC, which performs in a theatre behind the main stage company. The Second City has recently opened a company in Los Angeles (at the end of March, 1989). Thus at this time The Second City employs six distinct companies of actors. It is a fairly large business and its size adds to its visibility, making it a popular place to go for improv training.

There is a long list of famous people who have acted with The Second City, and gone on to act in many non-improvisational settings. Alan Arkin, as an example, spoke very highly of improvisational training, as he said it makes actors really listen and react, causing them to be "available" emotionally and creatively.[1] Valerie Harper

also praised improvisational training for actors.[2] The Second City has been the major improvisation based theatre in this country for thirty years and has been vital to improvisation training for actors. It has given them opportunities to take classes, perform, and create sketches through improvisation. The Second City has been instrumental in making improvisation a useful part of actor training; this fact can be seen through The Second City's critical success, the number of actors it employs who regularly work in other kinds of acting and its teachers.

Since its inception in 1959 the critical response to Second City shows has been generally good, indicating that the scenes developed through improvisation were of high quality, and that the performers were skilled. The process of improvisational training is thorough at The Second City and most of its actors have taken classes in improvisation with one of The Second City improv teachers. These include Del Close and Josephine Forsberg. Close has been involved with the company as a director, actor or teacher through the past 25 years. Forsberg runs the Players Workshop of The Second City, and is responsible for training many actors who later went on to work with The Second City. When a performer is hired to work with The Second City, he or she usually begins working in one of the touring companies. After a few years (the exact time varies with the performer), he may be asked to join the ETC Company, and

eventually the main stage group. Of course, many performers work with a touring company and progress no further than that, learning what they can from the experience and moving to other employment in theatre. Through the method used by The Second City to cast its actors, even a performer in a touring company is fairly experienced.

Although The Second City does not perform purely improvisation in its shows, the actors are trained in improv and their performance of preset material usually has some of the spontaneous feeling of improvisation. In addition, the actors are free to improvise somewhat within the general parameters of the scene. Actors, when they have an idea for a scene, can rehearse it, improvisationally, on their own time as well as when they are in rehearsal for a revue. The scene can also be worked on during the "sets," which is what the performers call the period after the actual revue material is performed, when audience suggestions are taken and the actors create scenes from those suggested ideas. Considering that pure improvisation is seldom enough to sustain an audience for a full evening of theatre (although Sills' production of Sills and Company was a notable exception), The Second City does well to include improvisation and elements of improv in its revues. Consequently, they still maintain a high level of success and popular appeal. The playing of set sketches probably serves the actors well, since more jobs are available for

actors in scripted pieces rather than in improv revues, and thus the actors get appropriate experience.

Since The Second City began in 1959, the newspaper reviews of its main stage shows have been mostly positive and indicate the generally high quality of actor developed, and work done, by the company. In the 1960s, while the company was still fairly new, experiments were done with performing full length scenarios instead of revue sketches. One such scenario was "My Friend Art is Dead" which played in 1962. Although the Chicago Sun Times and the Chicago Tribune gave the show good reviews, the form was abandoned for the revue sketch format. This is probably because revue sketches offer better opportunities for comedy without becoming heavily political or too didactic. In 1963 the company performed the revue entitled Thirteen Minotaurs, or Slouching Towards Bethlehem in which Close appeared as an actor. He had earlier directed the company in a revue called Big Deal. Reviews from this period were positive, but often conentrated on superlatives rather than on any insightful analysis of what the company was doing. One notable exception was Richard Christiansen, who wrote in the Chicago Daily News about Return of the Viper:

> achieving at times a brilliance that sets it above and apart from any other kind of theatrical experience and stamps it as a work of genius.[3]

This was the first review that singled out Second City improvisational theatre as especially different from other

forms of theatre. It is very possible that The Second City performers were developing a distict personality and point of view, as suggested by the next period of the company's development.

It was during this period of the Viet-Nam war that politics in general were the subject of satire at The Second City. Over Where opened in late 1967 to excellent reviews. The show lampooned President Lyndon Johnson among others. Another satirical target during this time was the administration of Mayor Daley and the riots during the Democratic convention of 1968. Actor J.J. Barry gained much popularity for his impression of Daley during the shows done in the late 1960s, and the revues of the company adopted a political stand against the war.

Beginning in 1968, the reviews of The Second City shows trace the successes and failures of the company more closely than the reviews which appeared from 1960-67. The revue Showdown at the Credibility Gap, directed by Sheldon Patinkin in 1968, received generally good reviews, although Variety suggested that the group's material was not strong enough for a revue.[4] These reviews were better than those received by the show directed by Bernard Sahlins in 1970, Cooler Near the Lake, which received a distinctly cool response. Marilynn Preston said "They've got to make this revue sharper and funnier, with a little less ego and a lot more effort."[5] Reviews of The Second City here, and in most

cases, reflect on the creativity of the actors as well as the production values because the actors are so instrumental in developing material for the revue.

It is probably more than coincidence that by this time Close had returned from work with The Committee in San Francisco to begin co-directing shows with Sahlins. Sahlins had been, and until 1988 still was, the producer of The Second City and at various times also served as artistic director. In 1971 the company staged the revue entitled Picasso's Moustache which received good reviews and featured a scene staged by Close called "There's Something Rotten." The scene dealt with Hamlet, who was being urged on by the ghosts of Laertes, Ophelia and others who were on stage directly above Hamlet. Glenna Syse singled this scene out as well staged, well acted, and one of the best in the show.[6] Close's return to the company, and his assumption of some directorial duties, signaled a rise in quality of the productions. Close is also a teacher of improv for actors, and his skill in both training actors and directing was supported by reviews.

The response to shows directed by Close during the 1970s indicated a rise in quality. The 1972 production of 43rd Parallel received excellent reviews, and ones that mentioned the high quality Second City shows of the earlier years. Marilynn Preston wrote that the "revue. . . comes very close to capturing the humor, the intelligence, and

the disarming vitality of those early coups."[7] and an unidentified review said that "The impudence is back, and this time there's a touch of vinegar and a streak of madness."[8] The revues Phase 46 (1973) and North by North Wells (1976), also directed by Close, received similar notices. Close's involvement in the productions was much stronger in the 1970s than in the 1960s, and reviews singled him out as a positive influence. Critic Larry Kart of the Chicago Tribune had some insightful comments about the 1979 revue I Remember Dada:

> The more Second City goes for that type of humor-- in which skit comedy shades over into straight theater-- the better off the company is.

Kart, indicating a high level of competency in the actors, suggested that the actors could (and should) play more complex scenes than simply comedy skits. In reference to a scene titled "Amtrak," which dealt with a man who loved riding trains and which was developed through improvisation by Close and the actors, Kart said:

> [Dan] Breen and [Nancy] McCabe-Kelly taking the last train from Chicago to Cleveland are treated to a lovingly gentle reprise of all our romantic railroad fantasies- from the old west to Eric Ambler to Alfred Hitchcock.[9]

In addition, criticism of The Second City company's work was becoming more pointed as the years progressed. This indicated a growing familiarity on the part of the critics, and perhaps a development in the company of more subtle performances and forms of improvisation; as the work grew

in complexity, so did the criticism.

The favorable criticisms of The Second City give evidence to some points. The company's program for training actors, which includes stage experience in touring groups as well as classroom study, has developed competent performers. It is unfortunate that newspaper critics pay more attention to material than to actors, but without competent acting the productions would not have been as generally successful as has been indicated. The role of a Second City actor includes him or her as a co-creator, along with the director, of material. Actors trained in this fashion have their creativity stimulated in a unique way because they develop material which often comes from their own feelings, desires and imaginations. They also learn something about writing as well as acting. Favorable reviews of material are, indirectly, favorable reviews of the creativity of the actors. This type of training can help an actor bring more of himself into his work, and within the format of revue sketches the company can create some insightful scenes. This was explored in an article by the critic Kart in the Chicago Tribune in 1981.

Kart analyzed the development of the scene "Walnut Room" from the revue Miro, Miro, on the Mall, directed by Close, which opened in June of 1981. The scene dealt with a mean mother (played by Mary Gross) who treats her son with subtle cruelty while dining in a restaurant. A patron

(played by Jim Belushi) sits with the mother, discreetly gives the boy 50 dollars to run away from home, flatters her in a condescending way, and finally leaves her alone to pay the check. Kart stated:

> . . . every so often (far more often than those who wax sentimental about the company's good old days are willing to admit) Second City comes up with a secular illumination, a scene in which aspects of our selves that we normally don't contemplate are presented with startlingly humorous power.[10]

Kart also added that this scene was an example of "improvisation based comedy at its very best." Kart, as a critic of The Second City's work, has exhibited both care and insight in analyzing improvisation throughout his reviews. In this article he traced the evolution of the scene which began from an idea Gross had after seeing a mother, in a restaurant, similar to the one she played in the sketch.

Gross said the actual incident in the restaurant "really bothered" her. Still, when asked about the character she played in the scene, she said:

> I can't blame those lines on anybody else. They're in my subconscious. But that's the fun of being in a show like this- with all the characters you play, you can run through the gamut of emotions you've felt.[11]

Gross' comment suggests that improvisation, even humorous scenes, can be created from serious or painful feelings, and that her own creative investment in the scene was large. In addition, her comment about her subconscious reinforced the idea of the intuition playing an important

part in improvisation, a concept taught by Sills and Spolin. In support of Kart praising this scene as being an illumination of life, Gross suggested that the scene had a basis in a serious area of emotions. Both Gross and Kart indicated that there was real substance to this improvisationally derived scene, and it was not only superficial humor.

The practical training of Second City actors has been successful for revue productions, and also is beneficial to the actors because it inspires creativity and humor, creates effective performers of sketch comedy (and improvisation), and generally introduces the performers to skills in improvisation which would benefit their overall training as actors. The use of improvisation for actor training and scene development at The Second City can be understood better by discussing some theoretical approaches of the teachers involved with the theatre. These approaches reflect and sometimes call into question other ideas about improvisation and theatre, and offer insight into how improvisation could better be used to train actors.

Close is a very active teacher of improvisation and has taught the skill since the early 1960s in Chicago and San Francisco. He served as either a resident director or co-director of The Second City in 1960, 1963, 1971 and from 1973 to 1982. He has directed there at times since 1982, most recently for the company's 71st show in early 1989,

and also runs workshops on a regular basis. Many improvisers in Chicago have studied with Close, and improvisers in other cities have also been influenced by him, usually because they once studied in Chicago or performed in a production directed by Close. Since Chicago is a center of improvisation in this country, a considerable number of improvisationally trained actors have been influenced by Close.

Having been a professional actor before he became involved in improvisation, Close credits his technical training to his being cast at the Barter Theatre before he began improvising. Having worked with stock companies and the Barter Theatre in Virginia from 1950-55, he decided to audition for The Compass Players in Chicago in 1955. The Compass offered him a job, but he could not accept it because of his contractual obligations to the Barter Theatre at the time. He believes that in the 1950s there was a surplus of method actors, and his technical style of acting made him unique and more castable. Later he was cast in The Compass Players company of St. Louis when Flicker, the director of the St. Louis Compass, saw Close in a off-off Broadway New York production. Thus Close came to The Compass Players with solid experience in theatre.

Close has many theories about improvisation which constitute a fairly consistent approach, incorporating some differences from other teachers' ideas. In a personal

interview he conveyed his approach to the skills of improv as a part of actor training, and was very eager to make these ideas known to others in theatre.[12] Close basically rejects the Stanislavskian utilization of sense memory because it puts the actor in the past and, according to Close, an actor needs to be in the present when he performs. This emphasis coincides with the approach of Sills who said that sense memory isolates an actor from the other performers and puts the actor inside his own head. Close does not like method acting because it makes the men in the play seem "inner directed, self-obsessed and pitiful." Close did not mention the effect of this training on women. Asserting that what The Actors Studio wanted was "enormous emotions," and basing this statement on his experiences with method trained actors he knew, he contended that The Actors Studio set up large conflicts between the actors on stage, and thus created poor scenes. These conflicts generate emotion but do not serve the script, which is an actor's job. Conflict, said Close, creates "stasis, hysteria and death" but agreeing and working together on stage creates interesting theatre. The energies and the emotions of the individual must be calmed and sublimated to serve the needs of the script and the collective energy of the actors on stage. Close describes this situation as a kind of gestalt consciousness where the actors are working collectively rather than individually,

and he suggests that actors, during scene development, look for interesting ways to agree rather than easy ways to disagree.

This approach could serve actors well as long as they keep in mind their character's objectives. The script, rather than each actor's personal feelings, would have a better chance of being explored fully, and each character's objective would support the play as a whole rather than an actor's momentary emotions.

Close disagrees with Spolin's approach to improv training through the use of games. Asserting that she wants to "take theatre and break it down into playable elements for the masses," Close finds this approach "contemptible, because it is very condescending." He thinks that Spolin has impeded the growth of improvisation by reducing the teaching of it to a group of games. One should not assume that the populace cannot do theatre, he feels, and that it has to be translated into such a low denominator. His work with the St. Louis Compass was done for the performance of theatre, not for classwork, and was fashioned to "minimize losses" on stage. Close used this phrase as a methaphor for The Compass' approach to performing.

> What would be playing to maximize your gains? Well it would be going for the laughs primarily, result performance, making yourself look good, striving to "win" as a performer. What would be the approach of minimizing your losses? . . . You tend to lose less if you do not go for the obvious jokes, if you sacrifice your own desire to stand out and instead take care of your fellow performers.

Close also asserts, through this theory, the importance of performance and cooperation in the improvisational training of an actor. Close tends to elevate improvisation into an experience of group creation, suggesting that this point of view goes beyond the use of games.

In 1960 Spolin worked with The Second City company in Chicago, and Close asserted that Spolin's work is "very limiting," or "reductionist":

> There's no ambition in Viola's work. There's no sense of the performer as a serious artist. You are given these simplified things to do, and if you learn to do them the way that she thinks you should, then you're doing it right. But it doesn't lead to anything. She had never mounted a professional show.

Close does believe that Sills has been able to use improvisational games as an ancillary device to develop character, but overall the use of games is limited and does not include artistry as one of its goals. Close also thought that the use of the games was crippling for actors who did have experience in improvisation and were skilled at stage work, though not theoretically aware of the concepts behind improvisational performing. In this case he felt the games were condescending to actors who were quite accomplished. Scenes are much more beneficial material for training an improv actor.

Close believes that improvisations of situations similar to ones in the scripted play being performed are not useful for actors or directors.

> You can get out there and improvise a similar

> situation, but then you've got a script to do. A similar situation does you no good. When you move into the precise, scripted words, suddenly you're not doing something similar, you're doing a very precise [piece].

When a scene is not working well, Close makes sure that the actors understand the words being said. An actor must say the words as the character, and as they are written, not as the actor would improvise them. The fullness of the characters and of the scene is contained in the script, and he does not believe that an actor can transfer elements of what he or she did in an improvisation onto the scripted scene. This is a large break from the opinions of many other acting teachers (Moore, Meisner, Stanislavski, etc.)

Close does believe in utilization of objectives in acting, improvisational or otherwise, and states there are three main objectives: the immediate objective a character has in a scene or moment in the scene, his overall objective in the play and the objective of the production itself. This third one is the artistic concept that the actors, director, and technical crew are trying to put forth to the audience and is not often mentioned in acting training, though it certainly seems valid. In this way Close supports his theory that Spolin's games are reductionist, and that the actor or improviser has to see himself as a serious artist.

According to Close, the problem with the way some theatre artists look at improv is that they ask "what is its use?" Close maintains that the question of improv's use

obscures its real purpose and that improv has no "use," but is a form of theatre in itself. It is not a useful ancillary device to make a scene better because it is an art form on its own. It is, Close says, "as much its own kind of theatre as mime or ballet" and has its own discipline and aesthetic. True improvisation, says Close, happens when actors improvise from the beginning of the production to the end. This is improvisation as an art form according to Close, and this work has the results of being a brilliant training device for actors.

This type of improvisation is teachable to students and follows certain guidelines. Actors should agree and say not only "Yes" but "Yes and" to a suggested action in a scene. If one actor asks another "Do you want to see a movie?" a good response would be "Yes, let's go." An even better answer would be "Yes, and let's get something to eat first. I know a great Chinese restaurant." This type of response not only continues the action of the scene, it also gives more information for the actors to improvise upon and corresponds to Johnstone's theory of accepting offers. An actor should be concerned with making the other actor look good on stage (ie. "I am your supporting player"). Actors should not be trying to be funny, but should support the other actor's ideas and suggestions for action in the scene. This goal is very important to Close, and should be used in any type of production. The common

feeling of cooperation should be carried into work with scripts, as all actors should work with the director for the ultimate artistic goals of the production, not simply to express their own emotions, as Close believed many method actors are taught to do. Close has also developed an exercise which helps teach group cooperaton with several people on stage.

This exercise, called the "Harold," consists of actors taking a suggestion of a theme (an old saying, a news story, even an object) and moving about on stage while verbally free associating about this theme. Eventually a pattern emerges in the free associations, as often an idea is mentioned three times or seems so strong that other actors are also inspired by it. At this point two or three actors emerge from the group and begin a scene. Other actors may join the scene, and it will continue for a while. When it ends another scene may begin, or the free association process may continue until another scene develops. Through this game actors can learn to work together and even achieve a collective feeling on stage. Each actor will have a sense of both what he and what the other actors are doing. An actor will have a sense of the choices available to him or her in the scene. The other actors will also have this sense and, in a subconscious way, all the actors on stage will understand the possibilities for the scene's direction. Close believes

that this type of wholistic feeling is difficult to achieve, but a very exhilarating state for an actor to reach. The Harold exercise is one tool to help learn these skills.

Close's ideas create a fairly consistent theory of training that would provide actors with valuable skills and perspectives on their craft. His success as a director gives evidence to the usefulness of his methods; some of his ideas are strikingly powerful. For example, the idea of cooperation on stage taking the form of supporting the other player and putting him ahead of yourself is not new, but Close gives it special emphasis so that it seems fresh. He underscores this concept with the idea that such cooperation will ultimately maximize your gains on stage. Close's quarrel with method training has value and supports the often made assertion that such training can create self-centered actors. He offers improv as a way to avoid this trap. The concept of the improviser as a serious artist certainly would help one study improvisation, though it could be limiting if that was all that the actor studied. Close offers helpful and interesting theories which, like all theories, can be used discriminatingly as the actor sees fit.

Another teacher whose students often go on to work with The Second City is Josephine Raciti Forsberg. She is head of the Players Workshop of The Second City, which

began in 1975, following Forsberg's 16 years of experience teaching improvisation classes at The Second City. The Players Workshop is not really affiliated with The Second City, although actors from Forsberg's workshop classes often go into Second City touring and resident companies. The Players Workshop also performs in The Second City Children's Theatre, of which Forsberg is the director, producer and writer. This group of adults performs plays for children at various times throughout the year.

Forsberg's approach to improvisation includes serious drama as well as comedy, and development of improvisational skill as a help to one's life. In this way she supports Spolin's approach to improv. Forsberg believes that people know how to improvise because they do it every day of their lives; her workshops put improv into the art form it deserves. In a personal interview[13] Forsberg said that while The Second City Companies use improv for comedy, and this is not a bad use, the Players Workshop actors use the "whole canvas rather than one part of the painting." They use improv as a training device for acting in all drama (serious and comic) instead of just for comedy scenes. Thus an actor who studies with Forsberg can gain skills for serious as well as comic acting. The graduates of the Players Workshop include many members of The Second City Companies as well as successful stage, film and television actors. Bill Murray, Brian Doyle Murray, Harold Ramis and

George Wendt are among the performers who have studied with her. Robert Townsend, recent star and writer of the film Hollywood Shuffle, studied with Forsberg for two years.

The students of the Players Workshop follow a progression of study that teaches improvisation skills. Beginning students are taught to respond in the moment and concentrate on stage, utilizing the basic Spolin games. Through increasingly difficult games and exercises, Forsberg's students learn to better their improv technique and to develop characters for scenes. Gradually they begin to incorporate an emotional condition into their characters, or begin to play a character as a pure type (a complainer, for example). Another type that is useful to a scene is what Forsberg calls a "congruent person." This type is objective, analytical and can help a scene progress logically. When playing simple types of characters is mastered, the characters become more complex.

In scene work the Players Workshop uses serious content for improvised scenes and explores the mixing of different styles of theatre when appropriate to the training of the student. The students gain experience in playing different styles of theatre (farce, parody, drama, etc.) and incorporate more complex elements into both their characters and scenes. The training of the workshop incorporates both humorous improvisation and serious dramatic playing ability in scenes developed through

improvisation by the students. Advanced students also work on scripted scenes, using the skills learned in their training to interpret a text. The year is divided into six terms, and a student can study at the workshop for all six or as few as one. The students' training, after a year, culminates in a graduation show. This show is written (based on improvisations), performed by the students, and includes music as well as acted scenes.

Forsberg believes that improvisers need to be playful, but this does not mean an improviser cannot play within a serious context. This reinforces the emphasis on serious as well as comic improvisation, both of which are included in the graduation production. Forsberg also said that actors need to be both subjective and objective about performing. They need to be involved in the work on stage and to make objective decisions about their acting choices and their careers. This idea is in support of the students writing their own final production. The training of an actor at the Workshop includes many different elements.

The Players Workshop is a training ground for professional actors: both those who want to act with The Second City and those who do not. The workshop is also a place where anyone can study improvisation simply because he wants to enhance his abilities to communicate. Included in this concept is the practice of improvising by actors in their own lives, a process that makes it easier for them to

be immersed in their training and gives them a more wholistic view of their education. Forsberg's point of view is supported by her background, as she studied psychology in college and worked with Spolin. Still, the approach taken by the Players Workshop is theatrical, and the culmination of study with a student-written and performed production makes the workshop seem to be more a school for actors than for anyone else. The acting component and the development of scenes for performance as well as the actual performing in the graduation show (if the student decides to progress that far) is as important as improvising in a classroom. In structuring her program Forsberg is serving both those with aspirations toward professional acting, and people who simply want to learn about improvisation. This analysis suggests that Forsberg both follows Spolin's theories and expands on them. Forsberg uses improv as a tool for anyone to learn, but also puts the skill into a theatrical setting for those who have goals in professional theatre.

The approaches of Forsberg and Close are decidedly different, yet both are successful and valuable. While Forsberg is more traditional and closer to Spolin's work, Close is somewhat radical in his theories and says that Spolin reduces improvisation to overly simplistic game playing. Game playing clearly has a purpose and, when directed toward competent stage work, the games have value

to Forsberg (and Sills, Shepherd, and others as well). Close is involved with improv as an art form in itself, including its own rigorous aesthetic concerns. There is a tremendous amount to be learned from this approach although, like any theory, one cannot learn everything from it. Acting training can incorporate many ideas, excluding very few from the possible realm of what might work for an actor. The good actor, it seems, exposes himself to all the tools available and uses each with skill and good judgment. Forsberg and Close offer useful and varied tools that have been used with good results by many actors trained in The Second City style of improvisation.

CHAPTER SIX

THE USE OF IMPROVISATION, AS RELATED TO ACTOR TRAINING, BY DIRECTORS OF SCRIPTED MATERIAL

Improvisation is a useful tool for directors (and actors) when staging scripted plays. Improv can be used to help a performer find the more elusive elements of a character, to assist the director in creating the overall mood or action of certain scenes and to correct specific acting problems that a performer is having. The insight an actor gains through improvisation in rehearsal can be used later in his career and can enhance his overall training as an actor. Many directors employ improvisation with good results and find that work done in improvisations carries over into the playing of scripted scenes. This process is also used in scene study class, directly affecting the training of actors.

A director is under the real pressure of production: he or she has to stage the play and make it ready for audience viewing. A director's methods of using improv usually has direct effects on the performances because he does not have the luxury of extensive experimentation and the extended use of exercises that might be available to a teacher of a class. However, if the director is also a teacher, he might use his class experience to help his use of improv for directing a play. An exercise that is successful in class can also, with some modification, be

used in rehearsal for more immediate changes in the performance. The directors whose views are represented in this chapter are all successful practitioners of their art, some very notably so (Kazan, Clurman and Lewis). Most are also experienced teachers of acting and have knowledge of both the business of theatre production and the laboratory of the classroom. Schreiber and Patinkin were strongly influenced by the teaching of Spolin.

Harold Clurman explained his preferences for the use of improvisation in Harold Clurman on Directing.[1] He emphasized that any improvisation should be planned, and that the director must have a clear goal or objective that he wants to achieve and a scenario of the improv that he wants peformed. This process will give the actors a path to follow. One type of improvisation which Clurman used involved the acting of an imaginary situation which paralleled the mood or actions of a scene from the play. He gave the example of the actors in a family drama who might improvise a typical dinner together. However, there is an important dramatic twist that Clurman advocated. One actor should know about (and eventually divulge) an important occurrence which the others are unaware of but which will affect them. Through this improvisation the actors learn about their characters' behavior and way of relating in both commonplace and more dramatic situations. This twist allows for something unexpected yet important to the

characters to be introduced into their lives. When the improvisation is completed, the director should comment on the extent to which the actors understand their characters as evidenced by their reactions to the unexpected situation. This type of improv directly enlightens the actors with solid information about their characters and provides playable and useful facts for their performances.

Another example of improvisation suggested by Clurman involves only one actor. The actor improvises a speech to another character while performing a simple task (with a real object) such as sewing a sock. The speech should be on a subject hitherto not covered in the stage relationship, and should have a clear objective such as to warn the other character of a possible mistake he may make. Clurman said that these improvisations can often teach an actor more about a character than a director could through a long explanation. In addition, the simple task performed in the improv can also be used as a piece of business in the performance.

Clurman liked rehearsing the play, scene by scene, through improvisation. In this method the play is acted, following its plot and with its characters, but it is done in improvisation and with the words of the actors (as improvisers). This exercise forces the actors to listen to each other and not to take each other's behavior for granted because an actor cannot be truly sure what will

happen next. Clurman believed that this improv creates spontaneity in the actors:

> To avoid the possibility of staleness through repetition the director adds ever new adjustments and circumstances designed to arouse new perceptions and responses within each situation.[2]

Clurman encouraged the use of improvisation:

> . . . there is and should always be a degree of improvisation in the making of a production no matter how traditional the rehearsal methods. If such a margin of freedom were not allowed, the theatre would be reduced to the mere recitation of lines in conjunction with the most primitive sort of illustration. And that, no matter how elegant, precise and intelligent the reading or illustration, would hardly constitute theatre.[3]

Clurman believed that improvisation was not only useful but necessary to both the rehearsal and the performance of theatre, adding dimensions to an actor's performance and to the director's interpretation of a play.

Elia Kazan also used improvisation when directing, and supported this use in the Tulane Drama Review:

> I think improvisation is a technique whereby, freeing yourself of the lines temporarily, you can find behavior that is truer and more original and more meaningful and expressive of what's happening. But improvisation without objectives is useless. Improvisation hinges on the word want. Once you set that, you can move.[4]

Kazan explained that an improvisation must relate to the character's needs. Through the improvisation the character has to find what he or she needs, or that it cannot be obtained. Kazan suggested a situation, explored by improvisation, where a character wants very deeply for his son to go into the family business, only to find out that

his wife has deliberately arranged for the boy to go away to college. The character of the father must feel deeply betrayed, and the denial of what he wants allows this feeling to occur. Kazan would plot an improvisation very carefully, and when it was performed a number of times he would add surprises in the plot so that the actor, as the character, experienced something slightly different each time the improv was done. This encouraged spontaneity.

In the actual script (After the Fall) explored through this improv, the actor playing the father had only a few lines to convey this feeling of betrayal, but Kazan said that these lines were spoken with the correct feeling that arose out of the improvisation. Kazan believed that an actor can take a certain feeling, as well as elements of behavior, directly from an improvisation and bring them into a scene. Thus, actors having trouble with finding the right feeling in a scene could use improvisation as a tool for rehearsal, making the director's job easier and learning something about working well at their craft.

In another example Kazan dealt with a certain scene, played in a swing, from the film Baby Doll.[5] He used an improvisation which had nothing to do with the scripted scene except that the improv took place in a swing. Kazan said that when the actress performed the scripted scene after the improv the swing took on a meaning: it represented comfort to her, and she had a motivation for

sitting there. When an actor has trouble with motivation in a scene, improvisation can provide this necessary element, revealing the correct emotion and connecting the actor to his feelings with more continuity within the scene. Like Clurman, Kazan felt strongly that emotions found in improvisations will carry over into the acting of the script if the improvisation is carefully chosen by the director (or, by extension, scene study teacher). This is a constant in theories of improvisation, and the choices made by the director or teacher are crucial to the benefits received through improvising.

Robert Lewis, in the Tulane Drama Review, described an improvisation he used to create the actor's consciousness of outer form as well as inner motivation.[6] An actor can study a painting, for example, of a certain period to capture the external pose of the person in the painting. In capturing this pose, the actor must also try to decide why the figure is posing in this way. The actor must seek the inner motivation of the figure as well as the outer physical shape, looking for the reason, or the situation, which led to the pose and trying to understand what that figure may be feeling and how it may move in other situations (standing, sitting, etc). After this is done, the actor actually begins to move as he thinks the figure would. Finally the actor begins to speak some words, a poem or speech, written during that period and seemingly

appropriate for the figure to say. In this way an actor can create an external form (physical movement or pose) of a character as well as an inner feeling. This exercise involves improvisation when the actor begins to move and speak as the figure in the painting. Such improvisations are especially useful for acting in period works such as Molière's or Shakespeare's plays. In this improvisation the actor's sense of artistic awareness is stimulated and he or she is conscious of types of theatre speech (poetry, for example) and movement as well as his or her own feelings. Lewis, in this use of improvisation, added attention to the outer form of the character while still giving much importance to the inner life.

The director and acting teacher Terry Schreiber believes strongly in the use of improvisation for both acting training and directing. Schreiber has been teaching acting in New York since 1968, and since 1977 at his "T. Schreiber Studio" which has inhabited different locations at various times. He has also been a director since the middle 1970s and his first Broadway production was The Trip Back Down by John Bishop which opened in 1977 at the Longacre Theatre. His other Broadway credits include Devour the Snow by Abe Polsky in 1979 and K2 by Patrick Meyers in 1983. For his staging of K2 Schreiber was nominated for a Tony award for best director. He has directed extensively at the Syracuse Stage and at various theatres in New York,

as well as being a highly respected teacher. He uses improvisation both when he teaches and when he directs.

In a personal interview Schreiber said that he began teaching the Spolin games when he traveled with "The Portable Phoenix," an extension of the APA Phoenix Theatre, in the middle 1960s.[7] Schreiber was a young actor at that time, and the group was comprised of actors who would tour the public schools in New York and provide acting classes and demonstrations of theatre for the students. Schreiber said that he "first got into in teaching because of those [Spolin's] theatre games." He added that he thought the games were excellent for basic theatre training for young people, and that the best and most responsive students were not necessarily the brightest and highest achievers. His best improvisers were the "trouble makers," as he says, because they often had the best imaginations and were not bound up by their desire to do things correctly. This observation echoes the ideas of Johnstone. This "good boy complex" can be harmful to improvisation because the improv actor lacks the intuitive element when the judgmental side, which tells him or her to do the improv right and be a good boy, is working too hard. He also might allow his feelings to be overwhelmed by his intellectual side, instead of having the two work together equally. The problem students were probably less worried about getting the improvs "right" or correct, an impossible task that will only

stifle creativity.

Schreiber feels that the Spolin games are very good for promoting class (or acting company) unity. When done with sensory work and exercises where actors can touch one another and relate sensorily, Spolin's games can help actors become much more aware of each other and relate more openly. The Spolin mirror game, where two actors alternately mirror each other, can be very useful with sensory work and touching exercises for building unity and compatibility in a group of actors.

Schreiber agrees with Clurman on the subject of structuring improvisations. Schreiber said emphatically:

> I think when improvs are misused is when the teacher or director does not structure them. When they're just aimless or wandering all over the place.

He said that the improvs are most useful for teaching when the actor is very specific about what action he is playing and, in addition, the "who, what, where, why around that has to be very clear." This refers to the characters, action, place and situation of the scene. Schreiber sees much more value in a structured improv, even if it lacks some spontaneity, than an improv that wanders too much.

Schreiber enjoys working improvisationally with actors when he directs a play, and says that "you can find some wonderful things with that [improvisation], and begin that immersion process into a character and into what's really going on." For example, in his production of K2 he

did some sensory improvisations on the situation (high altitude, cold, blizzard conditions) of the play and how the characters would survive and deal with these conditions. This work was done for a whole week in rehearsal when the work on the script was put aside. When Schreiber directed Devour the Snow, which is about cannibalism in a stranded group of travelers, he worked with an improvisation in which the cast had to engage in cannibalism (imaginary, of course). Some actors refused to do the exercise, but Schreiber felt that the ones who did got a great deal out of the improv. They achieved a sense of desperation and a need to survive that broke down their more noble human qualities that might have made cannibalism too distasteful to them. This result was appropriate for the situation of the play. When Schreiber directed Feedlot (by Patrick Meyers) at the Circle Rep Theatre in New York, he spent a whole day improvising one situation (which happens between the first and second acts but does not appear in the script) in which one actor has the other tied up. The actors found a piece of business (which involved lighting a cigarette) that they used in the production. Schreiber added:

> I think getting into that "as if" that improv gets into, throwing yourself into playing an action, really completing an action, is the essence of what acting a scene is about.

Schreiber believes that emotions and motivations found in improvisations can definitely be carried into

scripted scene work. He said he has seen real growth in his students who work improvisationally in beginning acting classes, and improv is very good for teaching actors to "jump in" and play an action, as long as the action is not harmful or dangerous to anyone on stage. Through this work an actor can learn to be spontaneous on stage and avoid the sometimes detrimental restraints of his or her self-critical side. Schreiber's students gain much from improvisation, using what they learn in scripted scene classes.

Schreiber, in addition to being a director who works extensively in regional theatre, has received good reviews of his direction of New York productions. Since he uses improvisation quite often in rehearsal of his productions, his positive notices support the value of his improv work although, since only the results of the improvisations are visible, the critics do not mention improv specifically. In reference to Schreiber's production of The Trip Back Down, Martin Gottfried of the New York Post wrote that ". . .all the team acting is to the credit of Terry Schreiber, who originated The Trip Back Down at his T. Schreiber Studio."[8] Schreiber's production of Devour the Snow was well received critically. Don Nelsen of the Daily News underscored the cast's performance and the direction:

> But it is the fine ensemble playing that renders Devour the Snow gripping in its totality. Schreiber deserves a salute as orchestrator of this grim symphony, which suggests that human beings do share a harmony of

understanding that even ugliness cannot shatter.[9] Walter Kerr of the New York Times indirectly referred to the cannibalism explored in Schreiber's improvisation with the cast when Kerr said that the play was bold, and exposed raw emotions of people "going for broke." Kerr added the thoughtful question "Who are the people to do this [actually be cannibals]?"[10] The disturbing content of the play was appreciated by the critics and generally they lauded the production and Schreiber's direction.

The production of Feedlot received praise for its direction and the relationship, explored through improvisation, and developed by the two characters in the play. Linda Stein of the East Side Express said of the characters that "The time they spend alone together is a revelation to the two men, and an insight into human nature for all of us."[11] Mel Gussow also praised the production.[12] Overall the play received good reviews. Schreiber's productions have been appreciated by critics in New York, who rarely have found fault with his directorial work.

As both a director and an acting teacher, Schreiber is in a good position to use improvisation exercises in rehearsal because he knows the effectiveness of such exercises from their use in class. An actor performing under Schreiber's direction learns skills, through improvisation, which can be used in later productions. The actor can also gain insight into improvisational approaches

to interpreting a script. This type of process is also practiced by Sheldon Patinkin.

Patinkin has worked in improvisation for virtually his whole career. He began with the University Theatre (of Chicago), working with Sills who was teaching a class in Spolin games. Patinkin continued his affiliation with improv at Playwrights Theatre Club in Chicago in 1953, where Shepherd and Sills first worked together before the Compass Players, and where Sills and Spolin ran improv workshops. After teaching and continuing his education, Patinkin worked as a director of The Second City from 1963-68 and free lanced as a director and writer in television, theatre and film, living in New York from 1968-1974. He directed the Toronto Second City Company from 1974-75 and worked as a writer and associate producer of the SCTV television series from 1976-78. A veteran director of hundreds of straight plays in Chicago, Toronto and New York, and the head of the Theatre Department at Columbia College in Chicago, he continues work as an artistic consultant at The Second City in Chicago, a position he has served in at the Toronto Second City company as well. His association with The Second City has existed for most all of his career.

Patinkin believes that Spolin's improvisation games are very useful for a director (or teacher), but there is a need for accuracy in the execution of the games:

> They're very useful for all sorts of problems. For instance, if I feel that what's going on between the actors is too cut off from how the characters are feeling about each other, I'll have them play a scene in contact.[13]

The game of contact can help the actors become more emotionally connected to each other, but they must justify the contact that they are making. Patinkin added that the actors "do not touch in order to talk, you touch which makes it ok for you to talk." The touch must be justified and a part of the action on stage, not simply errant contact accompanying the actor's line. Patinkin insists on the proper use of the game for the desired results. He has his actors use gibberish in a scene, or perform the scene while singing or dancing to help free them from the words of the text and understand the emotions and relationships of the scene. Like Schreiber, he has specific reasons for the use of any one exercise.

When he is directing a play, Patinkin believes that both Spolin and Stanislavski exercises can be used.

> I use many games and exercises as part of my directing technique without actually playing the games themselves. Like dealing with inner wants and hidden objectives, and dealing with objectives, etc. At this point my system as a director, and my system as a teacher, I hesitate to use the word system, are intimately bound up with both the [Spolin] games and Stanislavski.

Patinkin uses both Spolin games and Stanislavski exercises to work on scenes in rehearsal and in class as well, but the two do not compare because he uses them for different reasons. The Stanislavski games are primarily for getting

the actor in tune with his character, and Spolin games are most useful for getting the actors in tune with the other actors, and the characters in tune with the other characters. He feels that Spolin games are more useful than Stanislavski exercises for building ensemble, and that the Stanislavski method as practiced by Strasberg actually works against ensemble by isolating the actors. However, Patinkin believes that both Spolin and Stanislavski are important to actor training, and exclusion of either does a great disservice to actor training and limits the tools available to the director. Patinkin's approach is practical, allowing the actor to use whatever might work for the role, but offering a clear understanding of what might work best.

The sense of ensemble, of being part of the whole, is difficult for acting students to understand and Patinkin uses Spolin games to help build an ensemble feeling in class. The sense of ensemble, he says, has to do with how the characters relate to each other and how a character perceives his inner life in relation to his external dialogue. The inner life has to be shown, but not to an extent beyond what the author intends or what the other characters would logically respond to, or would want to see.

> The real problem for an actor is understanding what the other characters need from them. That is different from their understanding of what they need. Games are very helpful with that. I think much more helpful than

Stanislavski exercises.

For example, having an actor play the other character in a scene will help the first actor understand the needs of another character. In life, a person who deals effectively with another person automatically and subconsciously knows what the other person wants from him, and how to satisfy that want and get what he needs as well. This game can help an actor learn how he or she, as the character, should deal with the other characters by learning what they want (if the scene requires this relationship). This in turn will help create an ensemble feeling in the production, as an actor will be fulfilling the demands of the script by knowing more clearly how to get what his or her character wants.

This game is useful for rehearsal with student or professional actors and can be used in conjunction with other games to explore different elements of a scene and correct certain problems that the actors are having. It can also help avoid self-centered acting when a performer only pursues what his character wants with no honest cooperation with the other characters to obtain that goal.

Patinkin said that his most successful use of improvisation, other than his work at The Second City, was its use in a production of Waiting for Lefty:

> [The script] contains the beginning, middle and end of the union meeting, and six flashbacks. We created the whole meeting, and the flashbacks weren't flashbacks, they were done as presentations to the meeting, of why

> this person at that moment in time understood it was necessary to strike. . . . The meeting went on through the scene, [evoking] comments [and] responses.

About a quarter of the text was improvised by Patinkin and his cast. This production played at the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York in 1973 and was well received by Jerry Tallmer of the New York Post[14] as well as by Arthur Sainer, who praised the production and its improvisations:

> Waiting for Lefty is a hammer and the current hammering, in Sheldon Patinkin's production, with its final call of "Strike! Strike!" some nearly 40 years after the call produces a number of surprizing shock waves. . . . The explosive nature of the event is underscored by improvisatory work from the company which runs the gamut from casual banter to strident outcries. It is a forceful if not always fully realized performance.[15]

Patinkin employs a combination of Spolin games and Stanislavski exercises in his work as a director and teacher. His successful work as a director and teacher support the validity of his approach to theatre and the value of his use of improvisation.

A director who uses improvisation, either while staging a play or teaching a scene study class, can offer his or her actors varying and useful methods of playing a script. The overall effect of improv is to further the immersion process of the actor, make her or him closer to the character being played, and help him or her learn about this character. Certain personal feelings which surface during improvisations can be incorporated into a role. All the directors discussed in this chapter believe that

elements of character and pieces of business found by actors in improvisations will transfer into the performing of the scripted scene. This work is useful to an actor. Since the working actor's job is ultimately to interpret a scene with a minimum of help from the director, the tools provided by improv work, either in class or while rehearsing a production, will serve an actor well in his career. The variety of methods used by directors (Spolin games, etudes, etc.) add to the options available to an actor, thus making him more versatile and effective. Improvisation has been, and should continue to be, an effective approach for a stage director to use and a fruitful tool for the education of an actor in scene study work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE IMPROVISATIONAL TRAINING OF ACTORS AT THE OPEN THEATRE

The improvisational work of the Open Theatre both drew from and expanded upon the basic ideas about improv put forth by Spolin, Stanislavski, Vakhtangov and others that came before Joseph Chaikin. His exercises, however, enlighten the study of improvisation because they developed the use of it for actor training and heightened the literary sense of a performer, as the Open Theatre created full length plays through improv. His work is also a good example of group cooperation for the creation of theatre, a process involving not only actors and a director, but writers as well who collaborated with the performers to create scripts. This was an area where the Open Theatre differed from some other forms of improv theatre.

During the time of the Open Theatre (1963-1973) other groups such as The Second City and The Committee practiced a different kind of improvisation theatre: the work of both was limited to sketch comedy, not full-length works that would sustain an evening of theatre. Thus, the actor who was trained with either group received experience in sketch comedy. While this work was valuable, an actor with the Open Theatre was probably trained in a more complete way, receiving more intensive and complex work in movement, voice and creative imagination. The analysis of exercises

done by Chaikin and the theoretical basis of these exercises indicate that they go beyond their predecessors--an appropriate fact, since the energy and imagination necessary to sustain a single piece of theatre over an evening is different than the talents needed for playing of sketch comedy. In addition, the Open Theatre pieces explored subjects such as death and creation, and demanded actor training, often through improvisation, that would encourage a deep emotional and creative involvement by the actor.

The improv exercises done by the company expanded upon existing forms. Eileen Blumenthal in Directors in Perspective: Joseph Chaikin wrote:

> . . . Chaikin has constantly sought ways to make actors more alert and responsive to one another on stage. Some of his early ensemble exercises were adaptations of Viola Spolin's theatre "games": attempts to shift the focus back and forth among continuous scenes, work on passing, receiving and molding imaginary objects; . . . Chaikin himself found them "initially freeing" but ultimately facile; he abandoned them after a few seasons.[1]

Chaikin had attended some of Spolin's theatre classes in the 1950s, and although he found her concepts useful he took them beyond their previous boundaries. This is both a tribute to Spolin and to Chaikin, who used good ideas to develop better ones. Chaikin did do early work with the Open Theatre in the areas of object work and spatial relationships. For example, he used the games of Spolin that taught the creation of imaginary objects, such as

passing an imaginary ball around, or circulating an imaginary object which changes with each receiver. Chaikin ultimately moved beyond these games and incorporated some sensitivity training concepts into his work. These concepts, which help an actor bring more of his emotions into his acting, included becoming in touch with one's feelings and the emotions of others, and establishing a close feeling to others in the group. Through the 1960s, the exercise called the "chord" was widely used.

This exercise is useful for sublimating the impulses of a single performer into the shared group response. The game helps the actor to feel what others are feeling and be in contact as much with their emotions and experience as he is with his own. The actors stand in a circle, one actor puts his arms around the shoulders of the two next to him, the next actor puts his arms around the waists of the two next to him, and so the actors alternate this pattern of interlocking connection. The actors hear each other breathe, hum and finally allow the hum to rise and fall. An actor can forget himself and his or her feelings and become attuned with the experience of being in the group. The actor also may approach a state of existing totally in the present moment, forgetting the past and future as he is immersed in the sounds and feelings of the group that surrounds him. While this exercise is not an improvisation, it helped create a closeness in the group which facilitated

its improvisational work.

Another exercise which was widely used by the Open Theatre was "sound and movement." Involving two actors, it began when one improvised a simple focused action with the voice and body. The action was not to consciously express feeling, nor to be commonplace; it was to be purely impulsive. The second actor recreated the statement of the first actor, taking into account both the energy and the form of the action with the intention being for both actors to relate with body and voice on a less intellectual and more physical way, to be attuned to one another's impulses, and to share them or pass them on. The concept behind sound and movement is the representation of inner life through powerful outer expression. Chaikin explored emotional life and deep impulses through theatrical exercises and forms, going beyond Spolin's basic concept of theatre being "playing" through the use of games.

Chaikin eventually used sound and movement for scene study. In one workshop three actors performed a short naturalistic scene written by Jean-Claude van Itallie. They then improvised the scene, through sound and movement, portraying what they imagined was going on behind the naturalistic external form of the characters. The scene was then performed a second time, allowing the previous improvisation to affect (and deepen) the performance. Through this process the actors used sound and movement to

express and better understand the inner life of a character in a script. The simple, short improv provided valuable insight to the actors about the subtext of the scene.

Chaikin's concept of inner experience was expanded in an exercise called "worlds." In this game one actor expressed, through sound and movement, an inner emotional state-- euphoria, for example. The other actors had to join in and participate in the exercise, creating an improvised scene while becoming part of the first actor's world, and expressing and assimilating his emotional state. In this way the group improvised scenes based on a stimulus from an initiating actor. However, unlike the traditional impetus for an improvisational scene, such as a suggestion from the audience, the "worlds" exercise demanded that one actor look into his own feelings, express them through the common theatrical conventions of the group, and then invite the rest of the actors to join the creative process. The other actors in turn were not simply becoming part of a scene, but part of an emotional experience to which they had to commit themselves.

The demands of an actor in the Open Theatre were formidable. Its improvisations were of an emotional and psychologically probing nature, and grew out of exercises, such as "worlds" or "sound and movement," which also demanded that the actors search their inner feelings.

Chaikin used the sound and movement exercise to

create the expression of the inner life through outer means. Robert Pasolli explored this idea in A Book on the Open Theatre:

> Physicalization, through sound and movement, of a character's inner life is analogical; it represents inner experience where naturalism can only indicate it. . . . Sound and movement, which is not tied to external behavior, can represent the form, rhythms, and dynamics of the inner life with something like the power which they possess as experience.[2]

Furthermore, since the exercise itself was improvisational, it utilized the actor's intuition and allowed the actor to explore what he felt through non-rational means. The sound and movement exercise, especially when used as part of the "worlds" exercise, both assisted the actor in discovering the inner life of a character and helped him relate to his fellow performers as he shared his emotions with them. The exercise, and Chaikin's concerns, attempted to take into account the traditional Stanislavski goals (bringing an actor close to the character) with Spolin's goals (bringing the actors closer to each other).

Another important concept of Chaikin's was the use of transformations, a direct echo of Spolin, which Chaikin took further in both concept and execution. Spolin dealt with transforming the theatre space into a reality that could be accepted by the audience and actors. Any basic area of improvisation (objects, relationships, etc.) will, through transformation, take on a reality that is both believable and interesting to the audience. Spolin's use of

transformations does not prohibit the changing of spaces or characters from one form to another, but she does not make it a primary consideration. Chaikin's transformations called for changing characters, time and place of action, styles of theatre and whole worlds which the actors inhabited. For example, an actor in a naturalistic scene would suddenly break into song, performing the scene in an operatic fashion. Another example would be when an actor suddenly became an animal, acting as if he or she were a dog, lion, etc. The other actors in the scene would then have had to follow the lead of the first actor, accept his or her reality, place and time included, and build upon that. Like any good improviser, the actors in this type of transformation had to "agree," supporting the creation of the transforming actor and joining into his or her concept.

The values of this type of exercise were (and still are) excellent. Actors were forced to play in very different styles of theatre, adopting sometimes wild modes of behavior and challenging their own imaginations to create in a radical fashion. Since the situations in this type of transformation changed quickly and were sometimes illogical, the actor had to follow his instincts and had no time to intellectualize his actions. This was good, especially for method actors. Since there was no time to decide upon motivation and psychological justification, actors trained in the method who were skilled at this type

of character development acquired a whole new approach to performing. Pasolli explained this idea:

> In terms of acting training, transformation develops the actor's ability to handle a wide range of situations, acting styles, and emotions. It also heightens the actor's sensitivity to partners. Since transformation takes the actor out of himself, it is a very good way to break the grip of the method and the dependence on psychological motivation.[3]

This type of improvisation is still done as a game called "controlled actor" in which actors have to give each other directions on how to play the scene which they are performing. The emphasis is on challenging the other actor, and so commands such as "He began singing the scene in Wagnerian style" are often used. This game is still performed by various improv groups, including The Second City. Although one actor commands the other to incorporate a new transformation, instead of the second actor starting it himself, the emphasis of the exercise should still be on changes and the challenge of following them.

The exercises practiced by Chaikin were formulated to achieve goals he set for his theatre. He had desired his productions to, as Blumenthal says, "express things on stage that people cannot generally express in their lives."[4] Chaikin also wanted to explore the use of both the actor's body and psyche to experience and express unfamiliar emotions, and heighten the sense of the experience of the present moment on stage. These goals have much to do with important actor skills as well as with

objectives for the Open Theatre. Through his exercises, Chaikin hoped to train his actors to probe the world and their feelings for areas that were untouched.

> When questions are alive to a company of actors, there is in any of them a dangerous point when discussion must stop and the questions must be brought to the stage in terms of improvising actions.[5]

These questions took the form of social or philosophical inquiries about our world. Chaikin's exercises expanded beyond traditional acting training. Through exercises such as sound and movement, or worlds, the actors learned about themselves, how to work together in an ensemble situation, and finally, through the produced and performed works, how to make a statement about the world they interpreted. These statements most often took the form of productions of plays developed by the group.

James Barbosa discussed the improvisational process of developing plays, and the training of the actors in them, in a personal interview.[6] An actor with the Open Theatre since 1964, Barbosa appeared in several different productions, including The Serpent and Terminal. In reference to the production of The Serpent, he said that the group allowed the work to develop slowly:

> It took months, of course. A lot of time was spent on the idea of an ideal society, the Garden of Eden, what the Garden of Eden was, what animals were, what it might have been like. And a great deal of time was spent on the Cain and Abel section. . . .The Cain and Abel section was based on the presumption that Cain did not know how to kill.

In response to the specific question of how the work

was done, Barbosa said that members of the theatre came in with ideas about how to improvise based on the question "what if?" This meant the use of the Stanislavski "if"-- what if this world was perfect as far as we know it, or what if you really did not know how to kill. This question was an example of the philosophical inquiries that Chaikin believed acting should lead to. Barbosa elaborated on the exploration of these questions beyond the traditional "what if" idea:

> We did exercises on pre-knowledge: you know nothing, your mind is blank, you have no history-- which is very difficult to do. You go out there in all innocence and see everything fresh for the very first time, which was our interpretation of the garden of Eden, everything was new, and pristine.

The company utilized ideas about the experience of being in the Garden of Eden and explored them with exercises. The "pre-knowledge" exercise is similar to the worlds exercise in that each participant has to inhabit the same emotional and psychological world; in this case, a world of pure innocence. This type of exercise is very difficult and demands a great imaginative leap for the actor while providing a new perspective on his own viewpoint.

The work of the company was often nonverbal and very physical. Barbosa explained that the actors did a long physical workout before they began rehearsing, and the work made the actor very aware of his body. Thus the training of the company involved both the imagination and creativity as well as the body and voice of the actor. In a personal

interview Shami Chaikin, an original member of the company, supported some points made by Barbosa.[7] She said that the members of the group were trained physically and were highly skilled in body work. She herself holds a black belt in Akido (an oriental martial art).

The process of developing the plays utilized repetition and refinement of improvisations, and involved freedom for the actors to explore their ideas. Chaikin would often, though not always, bring in suggestions of ideas to improvise upon. For example, in the work on The Serpent, "Who is your predator?" was one suggestion. An improvisation was done on that idea involving animals being both predator and prey. Chaikin would then take notes and refine the ideas and behavior of the improv. The actors would repeat the improvisation again and again with different ideas taking focus at various times. Barbosa stated that improvs were done in freedom, and that the actors had liberty to do most anything they wanted within the confines of the improv and general theme of the scene. He said that the danger in this kind of work is always to be self-indulgent, but the nature of the improv had to include such freedom or the development of the scene would be stifled. By extension, the actors had to feel free to develop their own creativity through the improvisations, or their training would be limited. Chakin did discourage too much self-indulgence, and the actors themselves developed a

sense of censorship in this area.

After the actors had spent a significant amount of time working together on improvisational scenes and exercises, they recognized a danger of familiarity and of avoiding a full exploration of an improvisation. Barbosa stated that while working together helped the actors get to the heart of scenes more quickly, and learn to work together to be more theatrically effective, there was a danger of not being exploratory enough because actors felt they had done an improv enough times to have gained all they could from it. This type of attitude can stifle the creativity and development of an actor, as he or she should always challenge herself to explore her talents further. Joe Chaikin would encourage the group, at these times, to "take it all the way and play out the cliché" rather than censor oneself because certain feelings had already been explored. Barbosa explained that if an actor had a certain area of emotions he had utilized before, he was not to avoid that area, but to explore it and find other areas of emotions through that exploration. For example, an actor who cried easily should cry as much as possible until a new emotion surfaced. It would then be hoped that new creative inspiration would follow.

The results of this work were, in The Serpent for example, a good piece of theatre. The plays were created from intense ensemble work from the actors and the

objective eye of a writer who was sensitive to and utilized the work created by the improvising performers. Though Jean-Claude van Itallie shaped the work of the improvising actors and added his own material, Shami Chaikin stated emphatically that "Everytime we worked on anything the actors contributed immensely." Thus, the improvisations were artistically productive. This fact supports their value for training actors because their creativity must have been stimulated by the improvisations.

Barbosa felt that the perspective of the Open Theatre was unique and did much to affect his work as an actor. He had worked quite extensively as an actor in the traditional method of learning his lines and following his blocking. He described his first encounter with the Open Theatre:

> I sat there stunned for a month watching this kind of free work where an actor was taken seriously as a creator, which they're [usually] not. . . . Then Joe [Chaikin] finally said "Don't you want to get up and work?" and I said "Yes!" and I was terrified because I had never worked in that loose, open feeling.

The Open Theatre valued the artistry of the improvising actor in a way similar to Del Close's point of view. Also, an actor's role as a creator of a script, while not directly connected to his or her general training, probably enhances his or her creative powers. Having a sense of what makes a good piece of theatre, and having played an important part in developing it, gives an actor a different perspective on script interpretation. Barbosa said that when he approaches a script now he looks at it differently

in terms of "the basic world of it."

> It's just a different mindset . . . you don't come up with the clever gimmicks that you know will work. Even on [my current project] we do improvisations on them to get a more visceral connection to the people you're working with, to find out their specific dynamic. It takes time . . . to bring something beyond the written word, another kind of reality.

He emphasized that the approach of the Open Theatre gave him a new way of looking at a play, and now he might play a scene in an unusual theatrical style, or in a different setting, and would see a new way of approaching a line, piece of business, motivation, etc. Barbosa's mention of taking time to get to know "who you're working with" indicated that ensemble playing is important to his work, and his mention of an actor's specific dynamics (emotional makeup, creative interests) might even be explored through a "worlds" exercise.

Barbosa's connection to the Open Theatre's ideals are echoed in his comments about his work today.[6] He uses improvisation to discover what is beyond the lines of the play. He does not believe that improvising based on the lines of the script is useful, but improvising to find the subtext is beneficial. The feelings and emotions which are not mentioned in the lines can be found by improvising, using exercises such as sound and movement. Such work is personal, and each actor will find feelings and needs unique to his or her own psychological makeup. Furthermore, improv is not only a tool to study the script, but a whole

area of exploration of theatre from which elements of one's performance can be found. The improvisational exercise is not only a way to explore the script, but a form of theatre training in itself. Having this attitude allows the actor to probe more deeply into learning improvisational skills and to use them for his acting training in general. Such an attitude also accompanies the improv training at places such as The Second City.

Shami Chaikin also praised the work of the Open Theatre for her own development. Having begun her career as a singer, the Open Theatre created a "cohesive whole" in her performing techniques-- meaning that the imaginative improv work was helpful to her and expanded her creativity. Clearly the training of the Open Theatre provided acting skills which complemented her earlier experience.

Barbosa and Shami Chaikin suggested two strong traits of the Open Theatre: freedom and patience. The group had the freedom to improvise for months, creating a strong unit of actors who worked together well and could bring many elements of their emotions and imaginations to their performances. The actors were free to find out what they could and could not do as performers, and to develop the areas where they were weak. They also learned to work and create together, an edifying experience that gave them a valuable ability as performers.

The overall quality of the Open Theatre's productions

of The Serpent and Terminal (another group work created by the Open Theatre) is attested to by the reviews of the shows. The Serpent opened in New York in February of 1969 at the Washington Square Methodist Church. Terminal opened in New York in May of 1970. Both productions received a very positive response from the critics.

Pasolli's review of The Serpent in the Village Voice was similar to the praise of other critics. Pasolli stated:

> It is an extraordinary play, imposing, yet informal, continually surprising and, to me, profoundly disruptive emotionally.

and that "Their presentation has great power for us who look on it; it is emotional power."[8] Pasolli continued to say that the play depicted the defeat of the brain in favor of the body and spirit of man, a process which revealed the inner truth of the characters to the audience. This type of revelation of inner feelings was sought in the rehearsals and through the improvisations done there. Pasolli also suggested a metaphysical quality to the production through his mention of the spirit taking precedence over the brain, and this was reinforced by Walter Kerr. In the New York Times he observed that logic was bypassed in favor of the soul and of the non-rational side of men:

> we are, of course, once more in that undefined territory where playwright, director, actor and audience interchange roles, abandon strictly logical texts, and go for soul broke with improvised sound and unexplained silences.[10]

Added to this testimony to the spiritual quality of the

production was a more concrete analysis: Kerr said that of all the improvisation work being done at the time, the Open Theatre's was "plainly the best and for quite plain reasons." His reasons were that group had humor, much respect for the "words" and literary value of the script, and a basis of the work placed solidly upon these words. Kerr felt that the attention to the insightful written dialogue was strong within the company, and suggested that the company achieved a synthesis between improvised words and those scripted by the playwright, and that each source was successfully utilized.

In reference to acting training, Kerr's comment indicates that improv did not hinder, but enhanced the interpretation of the scripted words. This was probably because improv was a part of the creation of those words and allowed (and taught) the actors to bring more of their own deep feelings to the production, and to "go for soul broke." Improv also, as Barbosa mentioned, helps an actor find new elements of his psychological and emotional side and bring them to his role, a benefit which can also vitalize the interpretation of a script, allowing an actor to express him or herself more fully through the words.

Kerr also praised Terminal and made a point shared by other critics in reference to the work of the Open Theatre. This point concerned the message to the audience which was communicated by the actors. In an article entitled "The

Finest Company of its Kind" Kerr said that the production reflected a powerful message in the lives of the audience: "Their [the actors'] physical presences somehow reflect our physical presences."[11] Struck by the interchangeability between performer and viewer, Kerr stated that the audience would be "provoked by overtones into reflecting" on their own lives. Mel Gussow of the New York Times concurred, saying "It [Terminal] will offer different things to different people, but should leave no one untouched."[12] Ross Wetzsteon of the Village Voice had a similar response to the earlier production of The Serpent, as he said that the production would surely involve the audience, and that the "work speaks from us rather than to us."[13] In reference to the same production, Gussow said that although it was complex, it was accessible. In these two productions, which were the most prominent improvised pieces of the New York engagements of the company, the message conveyed to the audience added to the overall quality of the theatre experience.

The points of view expressed by the actors had enough universal emotions and thoughts to move the audience members to reflect on their own lives. Certainly the improv training of the actors played a part in their successful relating to the audience, as the training helped the actors to reveal parts of themselves that the audience could relate to. The much desired ability to move an audience is

not limited to improv trained actors, but in the case of the Open Theatre the improv work probably helped them toward this goal.

The skills of the Open Theatre actors was often mentioned by reviewers. Pasolli, in the above mentioned article about The Serpent, praised "the uncommon conviction and control which the company brings to the so-called improvisational theatre."[14] Daphne Kraft of the Newark Evening News agreed when she said that "The Serpent puts to bed once and for all any misconceptions that to be off-off Broadway means you are not technically proficient."[15] Edith Oliver of The New Yorker called the performers "expert technicians" with music, movement, words and pantomime, and explained that:

> The company displays a kind of theatrical discipline that is very rare, and the facial expressions (and facial blankness) are even more eloquent than the words and movements. In short, there is real acting.[16]

Words like "control" and "discipline" were proof of the high degree of training of the company. Though the actors were skilled in improvisation, they also chose carefully what freedoms they would have during performance, and limited their actions when necessary to serve the scripted words and message of the play. Joe Chaikin called acting "a dialectic between the experiences of restraint and of abandon in peformance; between the impulse and the form which expresses it."[17] He also credited this restraint to an actor's sublimating his ego for the good of the whole

company, and believed that the Open Theatre knew how to work together.

Through tailoring their improvised scenes to make them intellectually pithy and theatrically effective, the actors learned discipline. They developed both a sense of freedom through improvising, and a helpful critical sense of what they were creating. Their physical training also helped their performances, and was compatible with their improv work.

The Open Theatre used improvisation to train a company of actors, help create scripts for performance, and perform a successful and powerful type of theatre. The improv exercises used were based in traditional methods (Spolin, Stanislavski) but contained elements which were new and aided the group members in achieving their desired results. The group worked slowly and with great freedom and respect for the actor's creative contributions to theatre. The artists involved worked together to a highly productive degree, and the efforts of the group to become close and know each other as performers proved valuable to the productions. Through improvisation the Open Theatre attained results which were admirable, and trained actors in important skills. The improv work of the group could be useful to a large number of acting students. The exercises, if done with the high artistic standards held by Joseph Chaikin, could help student actors experience the kinds of

discoveries made by the actors of the Open Theatre.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ACTORS' VIEWS ON IMPROVISATION TRAINING

Actors in the theatre today who have been trained in improvisation have a practical perspective, and generally a positive opinion, of the value of this training. This value, both theoretical and practical, can be seen throughout the previous chapters. The comments of the actors in this chapter support and help clarify specific points about improvisational training. Its benefits include learning how to support fellow actors, enhancement of imaginative powers and creativity, and strengthening of basic acting skills such as listening and spontaneity. The actors interviewed in this chapter also support the comments of other actors (Barbosa, for example) in previous chapters.

The actors whose opinions are expressed in this chapter were chosen for a variety of reasons. First, they have all had solid experience in improvisation training and performing. They have not simply taken a few classes in improv, but know it well and are in a good position to assess its value for them and for actors in general. Second, these actors represent those trained at The Second City, those not, and those with some Second City related experience. Since The Second City is the major place for improv training in this country, these actors' experiences relative to The Second City was a factor in choosing them

to interview. Third, they are working and successful. Included are a very successful commercial actor (Paul Dooley), working regional theatre actresses (Gloria Maddox, Barbara Vann), and others of various levels of strong achievement and experience. Fourth, these actors have interesting ideas about improvisation, and provide helpful theoretical and practical perspectives. Although they were chosen with no prior knowledge of what they thought about improvisation, they were eventually included because their ideas proved to be insightful.

Paul Dooley has been an active and working actor for over thirty years. His successes include film appearances in Sixteen Candles (playing the Father), A Wedding, Breaking Away, and Popeye, as well as regional stage and television work. Most recently he has starred on television in the series Coming of Age. He spoke highly of his experience in improvisation.[1] After having been an actor for several years in regional theatre and summer companies, doing straight scripted acting rather than improvisation, he was hired to work with The Second City during its run in New York in 1962 at the Square East Theatre in Greenwich Village. Having had no training in improvisation, he joined them in "a very unusual way"-- as a replacement actor for all of the men in the company, playing the role of each one of them for a week while the original actor went on vacation. When he served in this capacity, he was hired to

act in the "frozen" or non-improv portion of the show and did not take part in the improvised portion when suggestions from the audience were taken. His learning of this basically scripted portion of the show would seem commonplace except for this fact, as Dooley explained:

> The odd thing is the scripted material had no script. It was all in their heads. I asked them for a script and they said "We don't have a script, just watch them and learn it."

He replaced each actor for one week after having learned each role by simply watching the show. He was, however, improvising:

> You had to be flexible enough because they're [the actors in the show] improvisers. In their set pieces if they want to go off on a beat, or off on a riff, you had to be able to go with them.

To make the situation even more uncertain, Dooley had auditioned by improvising with the company, in a performance, for one evening. They had no scripts; the only way to be appraised was to jump on stage and improvise.

Dooley learned much from this on-the-job method of training.

> That's the way I learned it, and it's funny, of course that's the way anybody learns it. Sometimes it's a workshop, this was just a workshop where I was paid.

Inherent in Dooley's experience is the fact that improv skills can be learned through practical experience. Soon after his first performance with The Second City, Dooley began working in the improvisation portion of the show and took his place as a full member of the company, acting in

all parts of the performance. His observation that someone can learn about improv by doing it suggests that this element is crucial to training. An actor has to take an active part in improvising, whether it is in a workshop or a production, to learn the skills. An actor can take such an active role quickly because he or she may already know something about improvisation. Dooley pointed out that day to day social interactions are usually improvised, and everyone, to a degree, knows how to improvise, although improvisation for training actors involves a higher degree of creativity than most everyday situations.

During his work with The Second City in New York, Dooley realized that his skills could be sharper, and he began taking improv workshops during the day while he was acting with the company at night. These workshops, made up primarily of actors in the company, involved improvising scenes based on situations and incorporating "who, what and where" information to begin the improvisation. Dooley ran workshops in 1980 and based the classes on Spolin games. He gained more experience in the games in 1986 when he appeared with Sills and Company in New York, and said that he found these games very helpful. The object work used for creating a space on stage helped him believe more in the stage situation (thus making him more believable as an actor). Also, since the nature of improv requires that actors work together to build the scene (or it fails in

front of an audience), Dooley learned how to better support his fellow actors on stage. This ability transfers well to scripted work, where actors need to sublimate their desires to be noticed by the audience, and instead must work together for the benefit of the scene.

Dooley believes that his experience with improvisation has helped him become a much better actor, improving his performing in the areas of "subtlety and naturalism."

> If you're an actor, it's very possible to give some bad readings from time to time. When you're improvising and it's coming from your subconscious it's impossible to read a line wrong that you're just now thinking up and saying from somewhere deep inside you. How are you going to read that wrong? It has to come out real. . . . Your performance of it will almost always be perfect for what it is. Everything I've done since then has been influenced by those experiences [in improv].

Honesty is certainly valuable for an actor. While it is not all that is needed, it is a good quality to have and, many believe, a crucial starting point for a performer. Warren Robertson's theories are based on the assumption that an actor must start with himself: how he feels, what he fears, what he needs, etc. If an actor does not start with this, how can he ever create a believable character? Of course one might ask, "What about actors who play characters unlike themselves?" There must be some part of every actor that is like the character he wishes to play, or his performance will not be believable. It may be theatrically effective, but will not have the true feeling that can make

a performance especially involving. An actor who can be honestly himself on stage can find the elements of himself to play characters believably. This theory may not work for all actors, but those who find it helpful could use improv as a training method.

Dooley believes that every actor should have some improv training, as it encourages more creativity. He uses improvisation for creating material.

> Stuff comes from a source, I don't know where it is, but it's tremendously rich with invention. Someone says something you didn't expect them to say, it's not something you would ever have written. Your answer to them, your response comes from a place where you're pushed to the wall or the edge of a cliff. And you come up with something you didn't know you would have come up with. . . . It isn't something you would have invented by writing . . . it's really very magical.

He thinks that actors can challenge each other in this way, as one actor builds on the ideas presented by another, and create increasingly inventive material. The result from improv, he says, is greater than the sum of its parts. It is "You and your partner, plus it's a thing that neither one of you were in charge of." Dooley suggested that improv actors tap into a subconscious creative area of their minds. This process, though not completely explicable, can be facilitated through improvisation and will help an actor create more interesting characters.

Dooley's success as an actor in scripted material, and his consistent employment in films and television, give support to the use of improvisation for actor training. It

has affected much of his work positively.

Carol Schindler was one of the founders of the Chicago City Limits improv company of New York and has much regard for the value of improvisation training. She studied in Chicago for two years (1975-77) with Del Close before joining Chicago City Limits, which was begun in Chicago in 1977 by a group of improvisers including Schindler, George Tedesco and Paul Zuckerman (a current member of the company). The group moved to New York in 1978 and after performing in various nightclubs (including the "Duplex") in the New York area Chicago City Limits established its own theatre in 1980, currently housed at 351 E. 74th St. The group has performed various comedy revues, developed by the company through improvisation, during the time of its existence and is New York's oldest improv comedy theatre. At the time of the writing of this dissertation, Schindler was teaching improvisation in New York, on her own in a privately rented studio, and was pursuing acting as well. She only recently (1988) left the Chicago City Limits company. Her opinion is valuable because of her extensive and active experience with improvisation (both performing and teaching), as well as with starting a professional, successful, and long standing improv company.

Schindler believes that improv training complements the skills often taught in non-improv acting classes.[2] Because improv training is less inclined toward

introspection (than, for example, method training is), improvisation can teach an actor to be aware of himself without being too self-absorbed. Improv makes an actor aware of his fellow actors and his obligation to provide them with support to reinforce the action of the scene. Paradoxically, improv also helps an actor learn about himself and what he has to give as a peformer by forcing him to trust his instincts about what should be included in a scene. Because the work encourages spontaneity, an actor must trust his immediate reaction, sometimes discovering for the first time just what that reaction is. Everyone has instincts. Finding out what they are and following them on stage, in a creative way, can assist an actor in becoming more exciting and interesting, and connect him to some of his deeper feelings.

Schindler also feels that the transformational quality of improvisation has helped her learn to play different characters. Improv scenes can change quickly as characters or situations are altered, and she said that she has learned to "change her mind" and her character's emotions, ideas and point of view to accomodate such shifts in the middle of scenes. She has become adept at playing different kinds of characters by having to incorporate many different elements into a role. Thus, according to Schindler, the transformations that are such an important part of improvisation not only make the scene more

enjoyable for the audience but add to the skills learned by the actors. This point is supported by Pasolli's analysis of the transformations done by the Open Theatre.[3]

When teaching classes in New York, Schindler utilizes games and exercises from both Spolin's and Johnstone's work. Basic theories of Spolin are taught to her beginning students through observation exercises as students work on observing objects and recall as much about them as possible. Johnstone's concepts are useful for providing a framework with which beginning improvisers can feel secure. Schindler uses status games for this purpose, asking students to improvise and create slight changes in the status relationship of the characters in the scene. Improvisers having this kind of "status task" have a focus and a goal to achieve, thus diminishing the on-stage anxiety of not knowing what to say. Schindler's classes provide evidence that Johnstone's games give students practical tools of improvisation, and beginners a chance to enjoy performing on stage with almost no previous training.[4]

Gloria Maddox discovered improv after many years as a serious actress. Unlike Schindler, whose training was primarily improvisational, Maddox had studied serious acting with teachers who followed the Warren Robertson style of instruction,[5] and she always thought improv was somehow frivolous and insubstantial as a teaching aid.[6]

Maddox had performed serious roles in the Broadway production of Devour the Snow in 1979 and various other regional and Off-Broadway productions (including work at the Syracuse Stage and The Studio Theatre in Buffalo). She was working and successful as both an actress and teacher of acting since the late 1970s, and certainly could have felt that she did not need any other type of training. She said that she considered herself "a serious actress," emphasizing with some humor her adherence to the gravity of her approach to acting, and added that improv was a revelation to her because she realized that it incorporated a lighter tone than traditional method training while still instructing students in important acting skills.

Maddox has found that improv games are a productive tool for teaching. While providing an atmosphere of freedom and some fun, the games "trick" students into listening to each other on stage and paying attention to the scene. Students learn listening skills without consciously trying to because the skills are built into the form of the game. Johnstone's status exercise is a good example of this type of game, as the actors have to pay attention to the subtle status changes taking place between the characters. Maddox also feels that the games help actors gain a humorous perspective on stage, and this can be carried into their work on scripted material. Such a perspective is learned and becomes part of the actor's temperment, making it more

natural for him to use his sense of humor in character development. Maddox, like many others, mentioned the cooperation that is necessary for improv actors to be successful, and added that improv actors should try to open up the imaginations of their fellow actors by being creative themselves.

An improv actor, by being imaginative, can challenge other actors in the scene to exhibit more of their own creativity. Because the scene is being created in the moment, there is almost no limit to the creative possibilities there, and actors who support each other's ideas will generally build better scenes. Such an experience can give an actor confidence in his or her own creative abilities and fellow actors. An actor must be primarily concerned with his or her fellow actors for this process to occur, and must include them into the action of the scene and support their input. If their ideas are not included, the actor will seem to be "showing-off" and will ultimately be detrimental to the growth of the scene.

Of the many actors who have studied (and performed) improvisation with The Second City, the opinions of some are enlightening. Bruce Jarchow and Nancy McCabe-Kelly performed on stage with the touring company in the late 1970s and in the resident company from 1979-1981. Jarchow also appeared with the New York (1986) production of Sills and Company as well as on numerous television programs

("Family Ties," "Kate and Allie") and commercials. Jarchow and Kelly support some points made by other performers in this chapter.

Jarchow said that, initially, it was "instant fun" to improvise because the structure appeared to be loose.[7] This attractive quality of improv training makes it ideal as a introduction to acting, especially for those who are intimidated by performing. He added that the structure of improv is actually quite tight, and that the games have strong focus, but an actor works with a sense of freedom because the feeling of playing the games is fairly relaxed. Kelly agreed about the relaxed atmosphere of improv, and said that improv was less intimidating than traditional acting because there was no need to play a script and become another character. It was easy for her to begin acting by simply playing herself. While one cannot always play oneself, this can be the basis for creating a believable character. She learned to react naturally on stage from studying improv, and said that when other actors act with her now they appreciate this talent she has acquired. Jarchow and Kelly support Maddox's point that improvisation teaches acting skills while encouraging relaxation and the enjoyment of being on stage.

Jarchow and Kelly spoke highly of Close as a teacher and related one of his helpful ideas about creativity in improv.

> [Close] would say "If you're in trouble open a window." Let something else in your brain at the moment, start as far away from the focus of the activity as you possibly can. If you were given a secretary and a typewriter [as a suggestion of a scene idea], start your scene in a jungle or jumping on a plane. You'll eventually get to the secretary and the typewriter, but the voyage toward the focus, that's the fun.

Jarchow supports Close's beliefs in his way to approach improv, and expands on the point that improv is, and should be, a creatively exciting method of acting training. Improvisation offers the actor a chance to imagine almost anything, no matter how extreme or removed from reality. The nature of improv allows this type of freedom and culminates, when done correctly, in the transformation when the imagined actually seems to become reality. Improv encourages creative extremes and risk taking in imagination work (as advocated by Stanislavski); therefore, when the transformation happens, it is especially enlightening to an actor's sense of possibilities available in a scene.

Following this idea, Jarchow said that improvisation training expands the creative possibilities of a script for him and allows him to see different possiblilties for his playing of a character. A character may seem to be a certain personality type when the script is first read, but improvising may show an actor other ways to play the character. This choice may not ultimately be what the director wants, but will spur the actor to think creatively and find new ideas to make the script more interesting to interpret and the performance more spontaneous.

Kelly added that the concept of support of your fellow actors is useful in straight acting as well as improv. In improv, she said, you support the other actors' ideas in a scene and then build on them. She said that she feels more comfortable in scripted scenes when she has this in her mind, and support of your fellow actors should be an underlying feeling in script work as well as improv. With this support also comes the listening and responding skills that she believes improv is so useful for teaching. It follows that an actor would have to pay attention to the other actors on stage if he was to support them and work with them for the benefit of the scene.

Though other forms of training are necessary to develop skills not often taught in improvisation, such as acting in serious drama, both Kelly and Jarchow believe that improv is a good training tool for actors. Improv was also a good introduction to acting for them, as neither had much acting experience before their work with The Second City.

Dan Breen, another Second City trained actor, performed with the company in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After working in the touring company, he acted with the resident company from 1979-1982. He was a very popular and successful performer with the company, and the critic Larry Kart, whose reviews of the company were quite insightful, said that Breen had never "had a bad moment on

The Second City stage."[8] Breen's training, throughout his career, has been mostly in improvisation. After his work with The Second City he became a regular performer on the comedy television series "Not Necessarily the News," which he continues performing in at the present time (1989), and has also appeared in various improv shows, including a Los Angeles production of Sills and Company in 1986. His work is well known among improvisers as well as the many viewers who are familiar with his television appearances. In a personal interview[8] he talked about his training in improv.

He worked with Spolin when he was in Sills and Company in 1986. At first he thought that such training was unnecessary, since he had been an improvisational actor for eight years, but the experience was very educational and he said that it helped change his approach to teaching improv and to acting in general.

> I think I have a much different approach to it [teaching], and I would be more basic than I was several years ago teaching. I used to say "Let's skip the mirror game because I don't like to watch it." . . . I still work on stage out here periodically with different groups, to keep my chops up, and I found that I was really using stuff that she [Spolin] taught me. She's really big, as is her son [Sills], on using the space.

This work on space helped Breen to imagine himself more believably in the situation (place and location) of the scene when he was acting, making him feel more comfortable when he improvised and making the audience believe his characterization more easily.

This work carries over into the interpretation of scripted scenes. Breen said that when he first began acting in "Not Necessarily the News" his improv training might have hindered him somewhat because the script was not as open to change as an improvisation might be. The lines in the script were set, and not as fluid as an improvisational scene. Gradually, he found that his improv training helped his creative approach to interpreting a script in terms of the choices available to him when he played a character. For example, drawing on his work with Spolin and her use of the space in a scene, Breen explored scripts by imagining himself to be in different environments (outside, indoors, etc.) when he rehearsed and consequently saw how the change in environment affected his character. He could then incorporate some of those changes into his performance of the scripted material. He also used some of Johnstone's status games when studying his interpretation of a script, and reversed the obvious status relationships as written to explore other ideas in the text.

These comments suggest, as do others in this chapter, that the freedom of improv expands an actor's imagination. Learning to think about a scene in a non-conventional way helps an actor create an interesting and sometimes unusual way of playing a character. Breen would like to see improv become even more accepted and used as a form of acting training.

Rick Thomas was an actor with The Second City resident company from 1981-1985. He has also directed one of the touring companies and acted in films (Heartburn, Radio Days) in addition to performing in his own one man show (The Rick Show) in New York and Chicago. He offered some ideas on what constitutes good improv teaching.[10] One necessity is the freedom from approval and disapproval. Teachers should adopt a non-judgmental attitude that encourages exploration of the art and eschews evaluation based on "right" and "wrong" evaluations (a concept which is supported by other teachers, Warren Robertson for example). Such evaluations limit the freedom necessary for productive exploration in improv acting training. An improv teacher should avoid cultivating a following based on his personality. The art of improvisation should always be the focus of the teacher's efforts, and the teacher's personality should play a part in his instruction only to the extent that his personality affects his ability to teach improv skills. By following these guidelines a teacher can achieve a productive and somewhat personal relationship with his students based on serving their needs rather than his own desires to be liked. While the teacher should avoid being judgmental, he must demand discipline from his students in their execution of an improv exercise or a performance. Artistic standards should be upheld in either situation.

While improv is a type of actor training, it is important to demand high artistic standards from improv students, as then they will thoroughly learn the skills of improv and become better actors in general. Improv can be fun. There is nothing wrong with having fun as long as an actor learns his craft while enjoying him or herself and does not let his artistic standards fall because improv is enjoyable. The point of view that improv is an art form in itself has great value to the use of improv for general actor training because it forces the actor to be diligent in his studies, learning skills useful in scripted acting as well as improv. Thomas added strongly that improv is not the only way of training. It is extremely useful, but other methods of acting training can help an actor who is skilled in improv.

Judith Searcy, who has acted with the Chicago City Limits improv company since 1984 and currently (1989) teaches improv, has studied both improvisation and method acting. She believes that improv teaches skills useful for actors no matter how they have been trained. Improvisation initially frightened her because she was afraid of not being able to "think of anything to say." She explained why this fear was not appropriate:

> When you're in the moment, thinking of things to say is really the least of your problems. What really is most important, which I think is also important with [any type of] acting, is being in the moment with the other person and responding to what the other person is giving you.[11]

Following that idea, Searcy said that improv removes the actor's tendency to intellectualize too much, and allows a performer to respond to the situations on stage. Improv helps actors allow themselves to respond, rather than thinking about how they should respond, which can stifle creativity and imagination. Certainly people will always think, and to stop thinking would be impossible. However, the term "acting" is appropriate because it involves taking an action toward an objective and following it through to the end: an important part of good acting. In improv, an actor needs to take action to keep the scene going, and has little time to think about what should come next. In addition, intellectualized acting, sometimes called "head acting," where the actor thinks about and plans each moment, is often boring because it ignores spontaneous emotional responses. Improv discourages this problem.

Searcy added that improv training can give an actor confidence. Since performing with no script seems risky to many performers, success at improv can make an actor feel that he or she can do much more than he thought possible. Searcy's abilities to be imaginative, to listen and respond, and to work creatively with her fellow actors on stage were enhanced through improv work. There is also an exciting element about the spontaneous creation of improv that bolsters an actor's feelings about his or her own creative powers. This idea follows the thought that improv

is a good introduction to acting, but expands on the idea by suggesting that improv actually instills extra confidence in a beginning actor. Of course improv, like any acting, can fail, and then the actor must try to learn something from the experience or the actor may be afraid to try it again. A class and its teacher should supply the non-judgmental atmosphere that encourages exploration.

Barbara Vann offered some insights on improvisation and how it is currently (1989) taught.[12] Vann was an original member of the Open Theatre and worked with the company from 1963-1973 until joining the Medicine Show improvisational theatre. She has worked in improvisation, or improvisational acting based on a script, for over 30 years. Vann thinks that verbal skills are not the only requisite for improvisation. She believes that improv is useful for exploring a character, and in her work with the Open Theatre she explored non-verbal means of expression through exercises such as sound and movement which led to a meaningful interpretation of dialogue through exploration of non-rational and emotional expression. She thinks that improvisation should be much more than just "verbal expertise," which encourages glibness but may lead to overlooking deeper interpretations of a scene. Teachers of improv should avoid an overemphasis on verbal skill in improvisation because cleverness rests on the surface of an actor's feelings, often disguising deeper emotions. Vann

also believes that her improv training with the Open Theatre made her much more aware of these emotions, and in learning what they were she was able to use them in her acting. She learned how to approach a character in a non-rational way through improvisations, and this ability revealed emotions that she incorporated into the role by imaginatively restimulating these feelings.

These actors represent a wide variety of experience with improvisation and their ideas support and add to the view of improvisation as a method of actor training. Their comments are a continuation and amplification, from a personal and practical standpoint, of the ideas in the previous chapters. While improvisation has been useful to these performers, why it has been useful is more important. The skills of improv (listening, support of other actors, etc.) have practical value to these performers, and are accessible enough so that others could learn these skills as well. For the actor who chooses to study improv, much can be gained.

CHAPTER NINE

CONCLUSIONS

The use of improvisation for actor training in America has expanded steadily since 1900. This expansion has taken both practical and theoretical forms, causing an increase in both the use of improvisation as a method of training and in the theoretical views on improv. While vaudevillians, minstrels and performers such as Harrigan and Brougham during the last half of the 19th century employed improvisational skills in their performances, usually through spontaneous ad-lib comments, the field of improvisation was not viewed then in the same way as in the early 1900s. As a method of actor training in the later 1800s, improvisation occupied a place in the on-stage element of an actor's training; some actors were reported to be good at improvising when things went wrong in a performance, or for comic effect. There is, however, little evidence that improv was considered a formal element of an actor's education.

The use of improvisation began formally through the influence of Stanislavski and Vakhtangov. Later teachers such as Strasberg, Moore and Chekhov developed the use of improv primarily along the lines of Stanislavski's theories, and expanded upon these theories as well. Gradually, as teachers interpreted and employed valuable information contained in Stanislavski's methods of actor

training, improvisation played an important part in this work. The theories of Spolin signalled a change because, for the first time in the 1900s, improvisation was looked at as a separate form of actor training. Her ideas also represented a break from the traditional method school of acting.

Improvisation has also grown in the theoretical views held by its teachers. While these views are involved with the practical teaching of improv, they are interesting in their own right because they have reflected concerns about other areas of life which may influence theatre. Spolin believed that improvisation was useful to anyone who dealt with others because most everyday situations involve improvising socially with other people. Johnstone, a successful practitioner of improv training and performance, uses some of his improv theories to counteract what he considers to be a stifling public education system. Through these points of view, actor training can be seen as overlapping with one's life, and this view indicates a progression towards a more complete way of training an actor.

The various professional improvisation theatres indicate that improv has become an increasingly active form of theatre and has helped develop the talents of many actors. The Compass Players was the first professional improv theatre in this country and, as an outgrowth of

Spolin's theories, helped begin many other improv groups, most importantly The Second City. Other examples of practitioners of improv are as important, indicating the diversity possible within improv's form. The Open Theatre explored unique areas of theatre through improvisation, and successfully used developments of improv experimentation to train actors and create theatre.

Actors have been trained in performing different forms of improv, and this diversity has helped further develop the uses of improvisation. The Second City style of training employs improv to develop sketches which are primarily set (or "frozen") for performance. Still, improvisation is possible within this frame, as the actors are free to improvise within the action of the scene. Other endeavors (Improv Olympic, Sills and Company) have included nothing but improvisational games. Pure improvisation can be immediate, or "instant" theatre, and offers actors an opportunity to perform virtually anywhere and in any situation. This experience can help develop an actor's confidence. On the other hand, sketch playing helps ease an actor into the approach necessary for interpreting a script. Improvisational actors usually approach a script with an expanded imagination and a more open approach to acting choices than they had before improv training.

The role of performance is vital to the training of an actor. Vakhtangov and Sonia Moore (as well as Spolin)

required that actors involve the audience in the experience of theatre. Improvisation as a part of actor training emphasizes the importance of performing for an audience, for developing the relationship between actor and viewer, as well as for the actor to develop his or her skills. The response of the audience can provide an indication of the performance's success or failure, informing an actor about his or her weaknesses.

Improv helps foster a feeling of cooperation among actors. For example, the "Yes, and" rule of improv dictates that actors not only say "yes" to the ideas of their partners but build upon these ideas as well. The work of the Open Theatre resulted in cooperation between the actors for the creation of group theatre pieces as well as for the feeling of emotional closeness achieved by the actors. This element was important to the group creations through improvisation. Because improv actors depend on each other during the creation of a scene, they learn, almost out of necessity, how to work together.

Those interviewed in this dissertation, as well as reviews and written information discussed, have mentioned words such as "magic," "excitement," and other adjectives, just as vivid, when describing the performing or viewing of successful improvisation. This quality of vitality, akin to the vitality conveyed by any well done form of theatre, is a necessary part of improvisation training. This trait is

not always tangible. It may be best described as the transformation that happens when the stage takes on, for the audience as well as the actors, a totally different reality that is both full and involving. This situation is highly desirable. It attracts actors to study improv and makes learning the skill much more enjoyable.

While improvisation training can offer much to actors, they may need more than improv work to develop fully as performers. Improv training tends toward the development of comic talents in an actor. This fact is especially true of the Second City style of improv work, and an actor trained in this method might want to take other classes to develop his more dramatic acting talents.[1] Improv companies often perform many short sketches, and an actor in such a company may not learn how to sustain a character throughout an entire play. Quick sketches often contain humorous characters lacking in depth. This problem rests more with the use of improvisation than the actual training, but it should be mentioned. One group that avoided these problems was the Open Theatre, which combined improvisation with deeply felt emotional performances and full length scripts. The benefits of improv for actor training are many, but actors can and should want to explore other methods of training to complement the skills taught by improv.

Improv has become, and will continue to be, a

productive part of actor training. Ideally, acting teachers should become familiar with improv techniques and use them in conjunction with other forms of training (method, Neighborhood Playhouse technique, etc.) to best serve their students' needs. While improv training alone can help an actor, improv in addition to other forms of acting training will add even more to an actor's abilities. The skills of improv do not inherently exclude what can be learned through other acting teaching methods; the actor must simply choose what method is right for a particular role, moment in a play, or scene. As more actors and teachers become familiar with the uses of improv, it will grow in its use and variety of approaches. Acting teachers would be wise to become familiar with improvisation and attempt to utilize it to all its possible advantages.

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Various improvisational performances (over 50) attended by author. These involved various performing groups including (to only name a few) the Second City Touring Company, On the Edge, The Mary Wongs, and the Improv Olympic teams. Places of performance included Second City ETC Theatre, Chicago Comedy Showcase, Crosscurrents Theatre, and the Chicagofest Summer Festival, Chicago, IL, January 1982- March 1983.