

Frank Totino: Keith Johnstone Impro

This course is designed for the following outcomes:

1. Develops a Confidence about being spontaneous in performance
2. Creates a useful and Evolved vocabulary about Behavioural Communication
3. Gives Philosophical and Practical tools for performance.
4. Imparts an Understanding about the nature of Character, Transformation (transition), and Narrative

Many times the term Impro, or improvisation is misunderstood, at least in these days, to mean a collection of games that are performed in front of audiences, often without any substance as to content or meaning with the intention of 'lightly entertaining' the audience with what can only be termed 'stupid comedy'. Personally I don't mind a little bit of that now and then, if it is being done with an eye to making others laugh and feel good for a bit. However, it is also true that often the performances turn into showcases for individuals trying to be 'the best' at being noticed. My threshold and tolerance for that is not very high and I get very bored and frustrated with a troupe that insists on making an entire evening's performance about that. Time wasted.

Audiences go to the theatre to have an experience that they can relate to; that makes them understand about their lives in some way. They hope to see a story told that allows them that kind of experience. They may not say that, but if we analyse the spectator's experience, that they can claim as "good", then we can see that what makes it good is in fact a process of identification with the meaning of the narrative on stage. This narrative is what Aristotle describes as the through-line of the narrative, the dramatic action; that action being the elements that the spectator recognizes and reacts to as being significant in understanding the story. They see that the characters become altered by the interaction between them; they change from one state of mind to another. It is this 'alteration' which is the evidence of something having been done by one character to effect a change in the other character in the scene. If there is no change in the characters, there is no dramatic action and so there is not a narrative to be found.

If the story is not present or is not any good, the audience can at best admire the performers for some kind of skill in voice and movement perhaps, or maybe they produce some good gags, but the performances are deemed 'good' by the audience, if they can experience the phenomenon of projection of themselves into the story (identification with the characters state of mind, and its consequent alteration). These 'moments' are exhibited by the actors through physical behaviours that seem 'real' to the viewer. There is a truth to be found in them, and when that happens, the performance is "good". This can happen within any framework for a narrative that is imaginable. It can be a fantasy, a ghost story, a hero's journey of any kind, whether or not it is based on 'true' events, historically or is made up from the imagination of the writer. That is why we can have 'good' performances from animated characters, as long as the fundamental idea that "something is happening" is there. The audience reads the behaviour, and we, the audience as a whole, are expert in reading human behaviour. It is only when an individual is being 'looked at' that this ability to be an expert seems to disappear. This is fear. The

fear of being judged by 'the others', as not being interesting enough, or of not behaving in a proper or appropriate way, or of not being a good actor, or of revealing too much of our personal lives to strangers (or even friends). This is the actor's dilemma: to be 'real' as if they are not being watched while they are being watched by a room full of people. This is why we both need and have actor training. For if the performer can overcome self-consciousness, can put aside the ego, that little voice in the head that seems to be concerned with what others think of it, then the actor is capable of behaving in ways that they normally would not, but that the character that they are playing will. The actor somehow gives himself the permission to allow other versions of the self to exist and 'behave' in the context of the narrative being explored.

Keith Johnstone's Impro System, (which is not what he himself calls it, but that has been described by his biographer as such), is an exploration of how the mind works, especially where spontaneity is involved. In studying or trying to understand what human behaviour is, and why it is so, which is what the study of acting is anyway, it becomes necessary to break down or deconstruct the totality of behaviour in such a way that it can be studied or examined. A concept about what might be happening within an interaction between people is formulated, a question about what is going on in that interaction is asked and then an exercise (or game) is invented so that actors can experience the concept by doing the exercise. The learning becomes experiential and understood by the doing of it. This seems fundamental. The term 'Dram' which is the root of drama, in ancient Greek simply means "to do", or "to act". Experiential learning allows the actor to incorporate the concept. Then that concept can be used in any application that has to do with human interaction. These exercises have been recognized as valuable tools to many disciplines besides the world of actors or theatre. Psychologists, Therapists, Business development consultants, writers, Management and Human Resource training companies and consultants, Governmental think tanks, large corporate enterprises...such as Pixar Animation have found invaluable these ideas when applied to the idea that 'creative' people and groups are more productive than those who are not. And it also becomes evident that all people are creative when they can be relaxed enough to not worry about being judged on their behaviours.

These exercises are meant to explore ideas. They are not meant to be a methodology for actor training, but in fact operate well in that field of study because they supplement, or compliment most of the "universal" methods. Those methods invariably are derived from the Stanislavsky System.

A few years ago I took part in a research project in Italy called Metodifestival. The idea was to bring teachers of as many of the modern Acting training methods together with students to take a look at them side by side. We had representatives from the leading Studios of New York for Meisner, Adler, Strasberg and the ideas of Viola Spolin. There were teachers from Moscow Arts Theatre who were Stanislavski experts, Grotowski specialists, Michael Chehov, Clive Barnes teachers, all of them leading in their respective fields of Acting Training. I was there with Keith Johnstone Impro System. The students were exposed to workshops in the various systems and the teachers were able to engage with each other about the processes and pedagogies.

In the end we teachers were agreed that all methodologies seem to want to get the actors to the same place. That is, to be spontaneous in their performances and so be working towards authentic

performance and hopefully some kind of truth. My discovery was that improvisation was pertinent to all the other methods and was in fact a key element in the relative success of the students who were experimenting with the different models. Impro did not challenge the validity of the experiences or the pedagogy of any of the teachers and their methods. In fact it was a compliment to nearly all of them. Impro explores the core of spontaneity and is relative to the needs and intentions of those who would use it to better understand the context of its application. It proved a good model of how the mind works in human interaction.

Paolo Asso of Italy, who created the Metodifestival and organized it, writes in his article for Pace University on the outcomes of the project:

“An intense stage practice doesn’t need an experimental training, the invention of a pedagogy protected against the market’s urgencies. But contemporary actor training was born through the need and the study of *real human interaction*, the enchantment of a spontaneous action arousing from immediate relations between human beings...This has been the epoch-making thrust that drove Stanislavsky and all those who later elaborated pedagogies, often within human communities that were in themselves experiments in human and social aggregation...Improvisation is not just developed to produce formats for presentation, It is the source of pedagogical principles and practices that often clarify the most genuine nature of training in general”