TaPRA 2017 – Performer Training Working Group

Stepping off the Cliff: The sharp divide between training and performance in improvised comedy

James McLaughlin

I'm standing backstage at the biggest gig of my life. There are a thousand people in the Athaneum Theatre, Chicago and me and my two friends are about to take the stage as The Improv Bandits, opening for Colin Mockery and his Improv All Stars. We have a well-honed setlist of games and scene setups that we think will go down well with this crowd. We have been training, drilling and rehearsing together for seven years and we know how to come together to make our style of improv come across to an audience.

When the lights fade and the chatter in the audience swells to whoops, applause and stamping that shakes the stage under my feet I feel each of the beams of this prepatory scaffolding bending, buckling, and falling away. The darkness that has swallowed the theatre, making the cacophonic sounds of the crowd even more prominent and consuming in my awareness, has made the ground disappear from beneath my feet. As I run on to stage in the pitch black I have the sense of running into nothingness, falling through the air, leaping from the cliff of self-assured authority into the chaotic uncertainty of the performance.

The lights blaze on in full-intensity and Wade, Jason and myself find each other scattered across the stage in our opening rock-star poses. The audience's roar

resounds in my chest and from that moment, any sense that our preparation has given us some sort of control over this performance flees. For the next 45 minutes we play out of our skin, throwing ourselves into each scene with abandon and scarcely remembering where we are from one moment to the next. We are present, fully alive, and performing.

Without the training we would not have been able to surf the wave of this performance, and yet there is a real sense in which the mode of training for the performance and performing are two fundamentally different things. This paper seeks to lay out a frame of reference for each of these states – training and performing improvised comedy – and to attempt to articulate the connection between them.

The comedian's fundamental aim is to provoke a specific reaction from the audience – laughter. Their virtuosity depends upon how well they instigate and modulate this in the audience; the performance itself resides in this dynamic rather than in the actions of a performer that are observed by an audience. Pre-performance training can therefore not access the key feature of a comedy performance.

This reliance on the audience is amplified in the case of the improvising comedian who not only cannot access performer-audience dynamic in their training, but cannot rehearse the means by which they will do so in performance. Improvisation training therefore focusses on the performer's reactions and how they relate to their fellow performers (Johnstone, 1979). This training must then be set aside, and left as an unconscious background, as the performer engages with the audience in the moment of performance.

This paper will build on Oliver Double's explorations of stand-up comedy and provide a critical robustness to the growing body of work surrounding popular performance training. But I will be focussing on the experience and behaviour of the improvised comedian in training and performance, not on what makes something funny.

To fully grasp my target subject, I will be using the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty. The reason for the use of phenomenology is that this lens seeks to describe the phenomena that subjectively appear to the consciousness of the subject, in this case the performer, rather than the objective facts of the situation. This perspective allows me to slip inside the perspective of the performer and to understand the different modes of training and performance of improvised comedy from the inside.

There are two major traditions of modern improvised comedy to distinguish. Long-Form Improv emerged in America from the games employed by more traditional training, most notably in the work of Viola Spolin. Eventually at the Second City in Chicago, the improvisation became recognised as a legitimate form of performance in its own right, and purely improvised shows were staged.

The second major tradition of modern improvisation is short-form improvisation inspired by Keith Johnstone. His performance system is articulated by his key 1979 text, *Impro*. This system underpinned a series of franchised shows, including Theatresports, that were exported around the world.

The training for both short and long form improv is based on formal classes focussing on key exercises that are repeated as drill. Such repetitive training will be familiar to many performance traditions, where exercises are drilled to shape the performers' relationship with a particular task, environment, or their fellow performers.

Drilling in improvisation often involves short, quick-fire exercises that encourage the performer to ‘speak before thinking’, and to exhaust their conditioned responses to situations so that a spontaneous creativity can emerge, bringing life back into situations that habit has deadened. For example, in AB Lines performers form two queues facing the front of the stage. The first line is called A, the second B. The people at the front of each line take a step forward and the person from line A says one sentence that gives their partner from line B a name and the environment where a scene might occur. The person from line B responds with one sentence that gives their partner a name and a problem that might occur in such an environment. After these two sentences are spoken, the two improvisors join the back of the opposite line so that they will play the other part when they next reach the front.

For example:

Person A: Thank you for inviting me to the beach today, Ted.

Person B: No problem Sharon, but watch out, there’s a tsunami on the horizon and it’s getting closer!

This example is typical in the lack of subtlety and the obviousness of the early repetitions in this exercise. As the exercise continues over ten to twenty minutes the improvisors can find themselves reaching further from predictable interactions into more surprising and less obvious territory. For example:

Person A: Imelda, your spam farm is quite something to behold.

Person B: Why thank you Josh, but I just found this manifesto for the redistribution of wealth to all forms of processed meat.

While this is still a little rough for performance, the elements that the improvisors are introducing might take the audience more by surprise. Such potential curve-balls can force the partners to really listen to each other and to respond instinctively. In doing so the deeper thoughts, obsessions and opinions of the performers are brought into contact with one another.

Keith Johnstone's books, as well as subsequent publications are filled with such drills. The execution of these drills does not result in an ideal improv performance, but this is not the point. AB Lines encourages the improvisors to trust their subconscious impulses and not try to get the exercise 'right'.

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* recognises the complex and multi-layered nature of embodied experience and the way information from multiple senses is combined in the perception of the individual to produce even apparently simple experiences. To cope with the bewildering complexity of experience, he argues that 'habit' is used to simplify our experience of the world. If we are presented with an experience that is similar to one that we are familiar with, our perception does not bring the minutiae of that experience to the foreground of our minds, but allows that aspect of perception to fade into the background.

In Merleau-Ponty, the process of habit simplifying experience, is done through an intentional arc. He writes that,

> ...the life of consciousness–cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life–is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects.

> It is this intentional arc which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility.
>
> (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 157)

Merleau-Ponty endows the intentional arc with the power to situate the subject in terms of their physical, ideological and moral perspectives. Drilling an exercise like AB Lines therefore allows the improvisor to involve their wider world-view in their interaction with their partner, not consciously and deliberately, but by allowing personal aspects of their intentional arc to rise to the surface. This allows the improvisor to move beyond a conventionally expected, habituated social interaction to one that includes more of their individual experience, beliefs and preoccupations. The habit of conventional interpersonal interactions is progressively set aside as the exercise continues. As this occurs, there are more surprises, more curve-balls, because what might be obvious and natural for one person when a fuller expression of their intentional arc is allowed to surface may come from left field for another. Such mental jolts force each improvisor to become more attentive to their partner.

However, this is not enough for a satisfactory performance in front of an audience. In fact, Wade Jackson, founder of my troupe, The Improv Bandits, has come to reject this exercise in training, believing that it teaches the improvisors to be too formulaic, to look for problems before the scene is established, and to break Johnstone's fundamental rule of not trying to be funny.

I would argue that AB Lines does not *educate* the performer about what makes a good performance but instead *trains* them to perceive the world and interact with it differently.

But this phase of training must end when a performance begins. The crucial addition in a performance is the audience. Where the focus in the training room is the individual and their performing partner, the focus in performance is the audience.

Of stand-up comedy, Double says, 'Working the audience means being able to manage the unpredictable exchange of energy between performer and audience' (Double, 2005: 138). This 'unpredictable exchange of energy' is at the heart of the improvised comedy performance. The improvisor needs to 'read the room' and satisfy the audience by 'giving them what they want'.

Double says that, in stand-up comedy, 'The actual moment of being onstage is all that really counts... The process which leads up to it may be important, but only if it makes that moment right' (Double, 2005: 249). In stand-up comedy this is very true because most of the 'lead up' to being on stage focuses on the generation of material. In improvisation, the material is generated in that on-stage moment and so the lead up focuses more explicitly on training, on drilling, on honing their performer's reflexes and disinhibiting their instincts.

However, in that moment of performance the distinguishable traditions of stand-up comedy and improvisation come closer together. In both cases, the mode of performance requires the performer, 'to manage the unpredictable exchange of energy between performer and audience'. Such a quasi-mystical expression, not uncommon in the field of performer training, illustrates that intellectual understanding is not sufficient for a performer to perform well. There must be an orientation to the demands of performance that is more instinctive and impulsive than conscious reasoning can clearly articulate.

When a comedic improvisor encounters an audience, something new is introduced into their intentional arc. Double alludes to the phenomenon of an audience – the way a diverse group of individuals temporarily binds together as a somewhat unified organism. It is complicated and is often discussed again in terms of the circulation and transmission of energy. To be confronted with this 'thing' for the first time is a very unusual experience, something that few other kinds of activity might prepare one for.

Most people have an abstract understanding of what an audience is, and an idea of what it would be like to face one. But because of the embodied nature of the experience, because you have not actually had that experience until you have, you cannot be prepared for the experience.

The improvisor will also probably have strong intentions towards the audience, a strong desire of how they would like this encounter to play out in order that they can achieve the thing that has motivated them to perform in the first place. But the audience is not an object, it is not a tool to be employed to achieve the ends of the performer. It is very definitely alive, clearly expresses its own judgement and demands a certain kind of treatment from the performers.

The performer must be slowly grasp this new element in their perception intuitively. 'Working the audience' is therefore the fundamental mode of performance. Just like the drilling exercises, the reactions and sensitivities required to do this cannot be gained through education, but must be trained for through the experience of actually performing. Performance is therefore both the end of training (in the pre-performative sense) and the beginning of a new phase of training.

Bibliography

Johnstone, K. (1979*). Impro: improvisation and the theatre.* New York, Theatre Arts Book. Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception*. London, Routledge.

Double, O. (2005). *Getting the joke: the inner workings of stand-up comedy*. London, Methuen.