Radical Improvisation Part 1: The Liberation of the Individual

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Improvisation involves a radical dynamic that has the power to liberate the creative imagination of the individual. This is observable in the training systems of the leading improvisation authorities of the Twentieth Century, Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, which coalesce around three key principles: engagement with reality in the moment is key to developing spontaneity, that games are a route into this state of engagement, and that discipline imposed by authority is the greatest impediment to this liberation. Following these principles can lead the individual to overcome internalized censorship and therefore liberate the creative imagination of the individual. The effect of this liberation has ripple effects that might impact the improvisor's community and wider political discourse. Ultimately, the radical potential of improvisation can challenge stable structures of value within societies.

Keywords: improvisation, Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, censorship, radical, spontaneity, games.

Introduction

This article argues that there is a radical dynamic at the heart of improvisation that has the latent power to liberate the creative imagination of the individual. This spark of ignition within a single person is radical because it has the potential to cause extreme change in part, or all, of the social order. As Mahatma Gandhi wrote,

> We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him [sic]. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.
>
> (Gandhi 1999, 241)

I will compare the improvisation training methodologies of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, drawing out three key similarities: that engagement with reality in the moment is key to liberating the spontaneous creative imagination; that games are a route into this state of engagement with the world and with others; and that discipline imposed by authority is the greatest impediment to this liberation. It is in these three principles that the radical potential of improvisation can be fostered. This is the basis of a wider programme of research that will build upon this analysis to show how the internal liberation of the individual can impact their community and wider political discourse. Ultimately, I will suggest that the radical potential of improvisation challenges stable structures of value within societies.

Improvisation

To live is to improvise. Improvisation is not a peculiar subset of activity that is more complicated than other actions, rather it is the natural state of things. Improvisation comes before plans, before structure, before we fix ourselves into a course of approved and predefined action. To improvise is to react, in the moment, to our environment. It is only by discerning patterns in the world that we are able to move away from improvisation into planned action, to become comfortable with the world and turn it into a 'familiar domain' (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 150). By developing habits regarding these familiar things, we can spend less of our awareness and conscious attention dealing with them.

Improvisation in theatre and performance occupies a similar state of ubiquity and foundational precedence. Looking back beyond Zeami's Noh treatises, beyond the Natyashastra, beyond the ancient Athens of Plato and Aristotle, before the written word gained its power to define and confine, knowledge of the world in the form of stories and truths was passed between people and generations through an aural culture.

Walter J. Ong wrote, ‘it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe’ (Ong 1988, 2). In other words it is very difficult for us, who live in a literate world, to understand the outlook of a completely aural culture. What we might assume is that for the spoken word, even in the case of mechanically learned recitations, the absence of an authoritative text against which accuracy and legitimacy could be checked allows space for variation, for creativity, for improvisation.

The written word, that moves language outside the body, from the breath and voice onto stone and the page, gives meaning an existence beyond lived experience. It offers the opportunity to ossify lived knowledge of the world into a permanent structure that can then mediate all future engagement with the world. When aural traditions are translated into written documents, this process is repeated. The space for variation, for creativity, for engagement with the world in the moment, narrows. The sense of the world as dynamic, changeable, and evolving phenomena is lost and replaced by solid, unchangeable and unchallengeable truths.

Aristotle notes that prior to the comedies and tragedies of Ancient Greece there were mimes made up of stories with improvised speech, acrobatics and stage combat. The performers of these mimes were known as *phylakes* – translated as gossips (Leep 2008, 7). This tradition was incorporated into Roman performance culture, where the *phylakes* performed stock characters within comedies. It next surfaced prominently in Rennaisance Italy in the form of *Commedia Dell'arte*, where players would perform as stock characters and would improvise around an agreed comic plot. This form of popular morality play spread throughout Europe, reaching as far as Germany and England.

It should be noted that this incarnation of improvisation was popular entertainment rather than high art. A similar distinction might have existed between the Phylakes of Ancient Greece and the dramatic literature that it gave rise to, as it does between scripted plays and improvisation today. Such a pattern suggests that the written word is taken more seriously, given more status and authority, than the spoken word of improvisation. The reflection and consideration implied by the written word, of the world of structure and abstraction, are seen as more real, more important, than the immediacy and impulsive utterances of improvisation.

Where the written word seeks to represent life as it is lived, it becomes necessary to reverse the process, to find the immediacy and impulsiveness in human behaviour in order to represent the artistically constructed and considered word of written literature. The process of bringing authentic, believable life into the rigid words of a written script has been one of the preoccupations of actor training in the Twentieth Century and into the Twenty-First.

Konstantin Stanislavski's System, the great edifice overshadowing actor training since the start of the Twentieth Century, sought this authentic behaviour from improvisation among other places (see Stanislavski 1917, 54-57). The effort to dress realistic, naturalist theatre in at least the appearance of spontaneous, improvised behaviour might be seen as an attempt to bring art from the abstract plane of the written word back into the realm of lived experience. The difficulty in making the scripted word live as though it were being really lived (and therefore by my definition, improvised) shows the artifice of such drama.

Some avant-garde forms of performance and Performance Art have sought the realm of the real, the phenomenon of presence, and reified liveness in a challenge to the primacy of the text over the spoken word. Barthes' call for, 'the death of the author',

has been incorporated into the world of performance as a justification for making the text subservient to the performative moment rather than the other way around. Grotowski's esoteric laboratories, and those who have been influenced by his work, might be seen to seek the spiritual in the performative moment, endeavouring to create structures that enable co-presence and co-creation to occur (Lendra 1997, 124-127). These projects transfer the meaning-making centre from the text into the performative moment, turning away from the written word towards improvisation to discover ways to come closer to approaching truths.

Improvisation is therefore not a niche branch of performance that runs alongside other forms, but a mode that directly articulates concerns that have been central to the development of theatre and performance for the past century or more. However, improvisation, as it has appeared and explicitly been labelled as such, claims none of the weight and seriousness that I have just given it. Indeed, such weight is contrary to the nature of improvisation. To weigh something down, to make it serious, to give it significance is to carve it into stone, and to deaden it. Rather, the radical nature of improvisation exists not in its weight or permanence, but in its lightness, its dynamism, its direct interaction with a world that is itself, dynamic, unfolding and alive. The future is not pre-ordained. The future is unwritten. The future will be improvised.

There is a radical potential at the heart of improvisation that affects the fundamental nature of performance and impacts upon every element of that performance. However, it also supports a radical re-evaluation of community, society, political discourse and has the potential to destabilize societies' hierarchies of value. As I note at the outset, this radical change originates in the liberation of the individual's creative imagination. Improvisation emerged as a distinct form of performance in the Twentieth Century most prominently in two places, Chicago and Britain/Canada. These

two strands were growing and developing concurrently, although there was no apparent contact between them in their early stages.

Viola Spolin

In 1940s Chicago, Viola Spolin was a director and teacher working with children in the Young Actors Company. There she cultivated theatre games developed from the work of the sociologist Neva Boyd, under who she studied play and performance games, as a method of actor training. These theatre games were built around improvisation and aimed to develop creativity, spontaneity and moment-to-moment truth in the performers. The improvisations emerging from these games became engaging for audiences in their own right. Spolin's son, Paul Sills, used her games in his own theatrical work, beginning at the university of Chicago before forming The Compass Players, and later evolving this into the Second City (see Spolin 1963, x). These theatres worked primarily in improvisation and used improvisations to develop sketch comedy shows and comedic characters for film and television projects. Del Close, an alumnus of The Second City, in collaboration with Charna Halpern, founded The Improv Olympic (now the iO), also in Chicago. Here they developed The Harold, a format for improvisation that became the bedrock of modern long-form improvisation (see Halpern, Close and Johnson 1993, 3-5).

A key principle underlying Spolin's approach was that we only learn through experiencing which she defined as, 'penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive. Of the three, the intuitive, most vital to the learning situation, is neglected' (Spolin 1963, 3). Spolin goes on to say,

> The intuitive can only respond in immediacy – right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act,

> involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us. … Spontaneity frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly.
>
> (Spolin 1963, 4)

In the first session of the training programme that Spolin sets out in *Improvisation for the Theatre*, she recommends the 'Listening to the Environment' exercise that asks the students to sit in silence for one minute, listening to the sounds in their immediate environment before comparing what they hear with one another (Spolin 1963, 55)[i]. By placing the students' awareness on their actual physical environment through their sensory engagement before any fictional elements are introduced, this makes it clear that spontaneity is not something that emerges purely from the individual's internal life but is a result of their engagement with the world around them.

A defining quality of Spolin's approach is her use of games to harness spontaneity and relate to others within an agreed framework of rules:

> The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer --- this is the exact time he [sic] is truly open to receive them. Ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crises the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game's objective in any style he [sic] chooses.
>
> (Spolin 1963, 4-5)

A good illustration of this at work in Spolin's practice is in the 'Where with Help' and 'Where with Obstacles' games (Spolin 1963, 103-105). In the first of these, two players

collaboratively draw the floor plan of an agreed environment and populate it with appropriate furniture and objects. They also agree a simple relationship between themselves and a reason for being in the room. They then enter and play out this scene, with each trying to make contact with every object in their floorplan, helping the other to do the same by giving reasons for this contact to occur. The second variation of this, 'Where with Obstacles' proceeds in the same manner, but with each player attempting to prevent their partner from making contact with the objects in the room. These rely on the players having two 'points of concentration', one related to the fictional scene of two people being in a location for a particular reason, and the other the game between the two players to 'win' by achieving their goal and either helping or preventing their partner from achieving theirs. Placed in this situation, the players are incentivised to use their 'ingenuity and inventiveness' responding to the scene in the moment of its unfolding and shows clearly how Spolin used the game structure to foster the spontaneity of her students. This establishes a tension between the fictional scene and the objective of the players, with the latter adding a creative frisson to the former.

While total organic involvement with the environment was seen as the route to spontaneity and games were a useful tool for activating this form of experiencing, she saw authority as the biggest threat to this process, specifically when it encourages participants to seek approval from, and to fear disapproval of, the teacher:

> Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized "good" or "bad" from birth ... we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others' eyes and smell with others' noses. Having thus to look to others to tell us where we are, who we are, and what is happening results in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing.
>
> (Spolin 1963, 7)

The elimination of the need for approval and the fear of disapproval is a consistent preoccupation of Spolin's approach, but nowhere more apparent than in her treatment of 'evaluation' – debriefing the exercises. Early on she is at pains to distinguish the evaluation from criticism or judgement. This is clear in her instructions for the evaluation of the first exercise of her programme, 'Exposure'. She advises teachers to, 'question the whole group about the experience they have just had. *Be careful not to put words into their mouths*. Let them discover for themselves how they felt' (Spolin 1963, 51-2). She later insists that the trainer be careful not to refer to the principle they are guiding the student towards, but to, 'Let this realization come to each student in his [sic] own way, particularly when working with lay actors and children' (Spolin 1963, 53). The specific mention of these two groups suggests that this approach is necessary to counter power dynamics where a status difference between the trainer and student might be especially pronounced.

The three key principles that I have just drawn from Spolin, the primacy of spontaneity, the agreed rule framework of games and the destructive power of authority to the liberation and learning of the individual are each echoed in the work of Keith Johnstone to who we turn now.

Keith Johnstone

While Spolin was working with the Young Actors company in Chicago, Keith Johnstone was growing up in seaside Devon and reacting strongly against his society. He dismissed his parents as 'small' people with middling ambition and no real imagination. He remembers that they, 'said no to everything and they had a very tedious, terribly boring life' (Johnstone as quoted in Dudeck 2013, 22). In fact he found that the society in which his parents had found their place stagnant, slow, and narrow-minded.

Johnstone found that his schooling set about driving all of the creativity and inquisitiveness out of him. Foucault notes that the purpose of Christian elementary schools established from the 17th Century was to inculcate moral values into children whose parents could not be trusted to do so (Foucault 1979, 210). This moral imperative was subsequently strengthened with further disciplines of fortifying the body of the child, 'for a future in some mechanical work.' If Johnstone's perception of the British education system of his time is accurate, it would seem that the values British society wished to impart to its working-class children in the 1940s were blind, unquestioning obedience, the memorizing of accepted and sanctioned knowledge, and a repression of natural creativity and original thinking, effectively dulling the mind for a future in some mechanical work. Johnstone saw the disjunction between what education claimed to be doing (expanding minds) and what it was in reality doing (closing them down).

In a challenge to this he enrolled in teacher training college. Here he was taught by Anthony Stirling, an advocate of Lao Tzu's eastern philosophy of the 'unseen leader' where the students are guided through tasks in such a way as they feel that they are responsible for any discoveries and achievements they make, but subtly protected from failure (Dudeck 2013, 27). This unseen leader is similar to Spolin's challenge to authority in her pedagogy. Stirling also drew heavily on Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This was a sharp departure from the 'banking' style of education that Johnstone was subjected to in which the teacher enforced discipline and regimentally imparted accepted knowledge to the pupils.

Johnstone had great success in applying these techniques in a Battersea Comprehensive with classes of children who had been categorized as 'average' and 'uneducatable'. Johnstone remembers that the school, 'referred to [these students] as

"poor stock", and they disliked precisely those children [he] found most inventive' (Johnstone 1977, 20). He would often involve his students in games that made them react spontaneously to the world around them rather than trying to absorb abstract information. In these games, such misspelling words and allowing his class to correct him, he gave the status and authority over to the students. In doing so he was unknowingly adhering to Spolin's principles of spontaneity, game playing, and the rejection of authority.

Similarly to Spolin, Johnstone saw that enlivening his students' perception of the world around them was the first step towards greater spontaneity. However, in Johnstone, there is often an extra step built in – of escaping the brain's habitual dulling of the quality of the perception that is possible. In one exercise, he says,

> I get them to pace around the room shouting out the wrong name for everything that their eyes light on. ... Then I ask whether other people look larger or smaller ... 'Do outlines look sharper or more blurred?' I ask, and everyone agrees that the outlines are many times sharper. 'What about the colours?' Everyone agrees there's far more colour, and that the colours are more intense.'
>
> (Johnstone 1981, 1)

It appears that Johnstone is acknowledging that students aren't coming to him in a state of innocent openness to the world, but that they must find a way around the restraint that they have internalised before they can engage with the world fully and spontaneously.

To an even greater degree than Spolin, Johnstone makes games central to his training. The second major book about his impro system, *Impro for Storytellers*, focuses to a large extent around his largest performance franchise, *Theatresports*, which consists of improvised performance games. Johnstone writes that, 'games are an expression of theory' (Johnstone 1999, 130). This is a brilliantly concise explanation

for how games can be useful in the training studio. Through games the player can explore theoretical principles practically. This is similar to how Spolin introduced games as 'performance problems' with distinct 'points of focus'. Three of the ideas behind Johnstone's games further illuminate how he uses games to foster spontaneity:

> 'That splitting the attention' allows some more creative part of the personality to operate. …
> That improvisers need 'permission' to explore extreme states.
> That when we think ahead, we miss most of what's happening (on the stage as in life).'
>
> (ibid)

This shows how Johnstone is explicitly using game dynamics to escape the internalized restraint of the student (just as we saw Spolin introducing the levels of the fictional reality and the game objectives to create greater creative tension), give them permission to take risks they would normally shy away from, and to focus on the present moment, rather than planning ahead.

Also echoing Spolin, Johnstone describes a playful way of avoiding the students seeking approval or avoiding disapproval. This involves lowering his status and therefore encouraging the students to claim more responsibility and independence. This then initiates a play of status in which the traditional power dynamics of the classroom are destabilized:

> 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. Then they laugh, and relax, and I explain that really it's obvious that they should blame me, since I'm supposed to be the expert; and if I give them the wrong material, they'll fail; and if I give them the right material, then they'll succeed. I play low status physically but my actual status is going up, since only a very confident and experienced person would put the blame for failure on himself. At this point they almost certainly start sliding off their chairs, because they don't

> want to be higher than me. I have already changed the group profoundly, because failure is suddenly not so frightening any more. … The normal teacher–student relationship is dissolved.
>
> (Johnstone 1981, 14)

Later, while running the Royal Court Studio he formed a small company called Theatre Machine with who he would give clowning 'lectures' both at The Royal Court and in schools around England. They received warm responses from audiences and critics throughout Europe, but as there was no script to submit to the Lord Chamberlain, these performances were illegal in Britain under the theatre censorship laws.

Censorship

Perhaps it was Johnstone's part in the battle with the Lord Chamberlain's Office that allowed him to identify the process of censorship at work within students and performers. This censor within the individual is the self-imposed regulation that people learn as they develop a sense of themselves in society. Which impulses are acceptable? Which are not and will invite disapproval and ostracism?

To be specific about the kind of censorship under discussion here, I will define three distinct forms of it. Firstly, the most common usage of 'censorship' refers to externally imposed control on what an individual can express. In its pure condition, externally imposed censorship is enforced by a repressive state on an individual who is then punished for expressing the contrary views that they hold.

Externally imposed censorship might then bring about a change within the individual, leading to the second form of censorship I wish to distinguish – self-censorship. Self-censorship is when the individual prevents themselves from expressing certain views that they hold. This could be a rational response to externally imposed censorship, so that the individual does not suffer the penalties threatened by the state. It

might also be a response to cultural forces, such as what are described as 'the culture wars' in Britain in the Twenty-First Century where one may self-censor in order to avoid being 'cancelled' by the majority opinion for expressing unpopular or controversial views. Such a scenario would demonstrate the normative pressure that society can exert upon itself and that such power is not the exclusive preserve of autocratic regimes.

Persistent operation of self-censorship might then lead to the third form of censorship I wish to discuss, and the most salient one for this article – internal censorship. Whereas in self-censorship the individual *chooses* not to express views that are problematic in their context, internal censorship occurs when the mechanism of censorship has been internalized and takes hold at a pre-conscious or subconscious level.

As Steve Nicholson writes in his comprehensive study, *The Censorship of British Drama*, 'censorship, I suggest, is at its most effective when it is invisible' (Nicholson 2003, 1). He expands on this idea in the context of British theatre as he writes,

> Banning a play was a last resort, avoided by the Lord Chamberlain whenever possible. Before that came the process of removing certain elements and of persuading the manager … to alter the script. Next time round, perhaps the manager would anticipate the difficulties and either refuse to touch the script or save time by insisting it must be altered before submitting it for licence; the time after that, perhaps, the playwright would censor the play before sending it to the manager, or censor his or her own thoughts while writing. Preventing the unacceptable from being written or even imagined is probably the ultimate goal of censorship.
>
> (Nicholson 2003, 2)

'Preventing the unacceptable from being … even imagined' is the possibly the most

insidious form of censorship conceivable, and it is this internalized censor that Johnstone and Spolin target through their work with improvisation. As I suggest elsewhere in an examination of the struggle between improvised performance and the Lord Chamberlain's office, the process of internalizing the censor is illustrated by Foucault's analysis of Bentham's *Panopticon* (McLaughlin 2018, 105).

Although Sigmond Freud has been subject to substantial revision over the past hundred years (see Crews 2017), he proposes a useful model for understanding what Johnstone and Spolin are getting at. Freud himself was operating in a heavily censored environment where publications and private communications were subject to state censorship. Freud argued that the human brain functioned in a similar way to this externally-imposed censorship. Thoughts, memories, or impulses would make it from the unconscious to the pre-conscious, and then on to the conscious, only if the internal censor judged them not too disturbing (Galison 2012, 235).

Many of Johnstone's exercises are designed to bypass the internal censor, either by distracting it or by overloading it. Once the performer is able to express themselves without censorship, they are able to access and express their creative imagination which, when working with the creative imagination of others, is able to generate surprising, entertaining and satisfying performances.

Spolin noted the relationship between authoritarianism in society and in the studio, and the responsibility of the teacher to counter this in their relationship with their students:

> Approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of the parent to the teacher and ultimately the whole social structure … The language and attitudes of authoritarianism must be constantly scourged if the total personality is to emerge as a working unit. All words which shut doors, have emotional content or implication, attack the student-actor's

> personality, or keep a student slavishly dependent on a teacher's judgment are to be avoided.
>
> (Spolin 1963, 7-8)

Conclusion

There is a great resonance between Spolin and Johnstone: both were educators working first with young people before their methodology was applied to adults; both saw that engagement with reality in the moment was key to liberating the creative imagination; both saw game playing as key to entering into this state of engagement with the world and with others; and both saw that discipline imposed by authority is the greatest impediment to this liberation.

This is where I will take up this exploration in the next part of the Radical Improvisation Project, 'Improvisation and the Community'. In that phase I will bring Augusto Boal's improvisation into the story and how he applied Paulo Friere's radical pedagogy to his more politically directed improvisation practice. I will also look more closely at the issue of audience inception that troubled the censors of Keith Johnstone's time so much – what is the radical potential of reducing the mediation between the impulse and its expression? I will also address some of the danger inherent in the radical. Is this liberation of the individual psychologically healthy? Is it tied to particular ideologies that might reinforce exploitative power relations? Could such individual-centric freedom of expression be divisive and offensive? How does this play into the 'culture wars' of modern Britain? Might it be co-opted by commercial interests to oil the wheels of the global capitalist machine? How does this relate to the current, very necessary efforts to create safer training environments? However, I assert here that Johnstone and Spolin, working independently found the same route to the liberation of

the individual – spontaneity through sensory engagement with the world, game playing and the rejection of authority.

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[i] This is strongly reminiscent of Sanford Meisner’s opening session where the focus is on ‘the reality of doing’ through a direct sensory engagement with the environment (Meisner 1987, 17).