

An Invitation
Improvisational Living and Teaching

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Abstract

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When teachers and students teach and learn artistically, live dramatically, play spontaneously, create collectively, and are aware of 'being in the moment', the boundaries of the curriculum as well as the community of the classroom become more in tune with the improvisational and human characteristics of life. A reflective and analytical consideration of related phenomenological scholarship could support an enhanced perception of improvisational ways of being — of life as an ongoing journey of improvisation.

This dissertation will connect the practical and the theoretical by journeying through a series of reflective narrative and poetic glances connecting my daily living and professional practice to improvisational and artistic pedagogical moments which are not only grounded in the current and accepted scholarly discourse, but are further underpinned with a series of important interviews that will resonate within the field.

This dissertation seeks to explore how might we become more in tune with different improvisational forms so as to incorporate and/or evaluate their pedagogical effectiveness in the classroom? And to that effect, how can we tell, share, write, dance, sing, draw, paint, build, sculpt, compose, act, or teach passionately, sensitively, graciously, and mindfully as improvisational beings whilst maintaining predetermined relationships, structures, and affiliations?

To what extent has dramatic improvisation been reformulated as a competitive performance enterprise consisting of stand-up-like-comedy, warm-up games, and winner-take-all tournaments? How credible is the ethereal nature of spontaneous creation that is experienced in the moment? How can we begin to share the improvisational moments of daily life, as a vital part of our own personal narratives, our parenting, our relationships, and our pedagogical practice?

Acknowledgments



Could our children be here to teach us what it means to play, to enter the land of imagination where bears and lambs, sun and snow dwell together? {Celeste Snowber (1989) *In The Womb of God – Creative Nurturing for the Soul*. (p. 20).}

I have seemingly spent an eternity on this wonderful improvisational journey — and any journey worth taking is full of great collaboration, compromise, disappointment, exploration, and one would hope – successes. And not unlike Dorothy’s wonderful jaunt down ‘the yellow brick road’, the journey is never quite complete without the helpful friendship and support of a wonderful variety of characters, either willingly or through co-opted means, participating and following you through the dream-like wonderment of the ‘poppy fields’ on your way to ‘Oz’; or into the darkness of the evil forest, awaiting the inevitable attack from the ‘flying monkeys’ while being held hostage in the castle of the ‘wicked witch’.

I have had many such journeys: as a person growing up in a divorced family (with a whole cast of Disney villains playing the roles of my natural father and his family), countered only by the integrity of my parents Hall and Carol, my brother Mark, and my grandparents Ben and Lil; as a young student I was bored in school, so I’d fight the system for the sheer joy of doing it; as a university student both in my undergraduate and graduate work; and of course now in my professional career – I have lived many different lives, tried many

different things, and most recently found a peacefulness and joy in my existence that I never could have imagined had it not been for the following people who have helped me along the way – to all of them I am eternally grateful...

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... and finally, for my daughter Emma Jordan Leiren Young – **I dedicate this dissertation to you** and to the wondrous gifts that you have given me (and everyone else who knows you) without ever really trying! You are my one true teacher, as my educational journey wouldn't have ever been complete without you – and with you – it keeps moving forward into the infiniteness of your potential.

Because our eyes become old, we need child's eyes to see again — to truly, deeply see the things of eternity. This is what children give to us. They give us back time to see. We often think that as parents, we are the ones who give so much to our children — and to a certain extent this is true. But... by birthing children into our lives, even if they are not our own flesh and blood... We are given new eyes to see through their wonder and virgin sense of discovery. {Celeste Snowber (1989) *In The Womb of God – Creative Nurturing for the Soul*. (pp. 65-66).}

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Mud is to jump in and slide in and
yell doodleedoodleedoo



Doodle doodle doo-oo!



PROLOGUE



Improvisations of a kind are continuously taking place, whether we are creatively testing the text by reading it, or are on our feet opening up an imaginary playground.... We should be guided by the game of make-believe, which we played so well when we were children.

Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 1973. pp. 72-73.

Prologue — Unzipped

• • •

The actor's act — discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up — is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings.... {Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968. p. 212.}

In education, surprise ought to be seen not as a limitation but as the mark of creative work. Surprise breeds freshness and discovery. We ought to be creating conditions in school that enable students to pursue what is distinctive about themselves; we ought to want them to retain their personal signatures, their particular ways of seeing things. (p.581) {Eisner, Elliot. (2002) "The Kind of Schools We Need" in *Phi Delta Kappan*.}

It's 10:00 AM on a cold winter Friday morning in a university lecture hall. Today, I am teaching Education 420 (School Organization in its Social Context). I am standing in front of more than fifty pre-service, second-year, highly judgmental, and soon-to-be certified elementary school teachers opening my morning lecture with some current events issues on the promotion of a new Minister of Education for the Province of British Columbia. As I go over the pros and cons of this new appointment and the problems that this new cabinet minister has inherited – a series of incredibly disturbing 'titters', chatting, and giggling seems to be following what I consider to be some of my more astute political insights. I didn't quite grasp what is going on, until a student mid way back in the tiered lecture hall holds up a sign written on paper with pink highlighter: "Dave, your fly is undone!!!"

Now fully aware of the reason for the commotion, I pause, feel the heat rush to my blushing face, and without missing another beat, zip myself back to respectability and comment that my motto after all is: “Embarrassment is Temporary” and I guess that we’ll now find out just how temporary it really is!

Laughter filled the room; I had survived the moment, and graciously moved forward, and there was a palpable shift within the class as I suddenly felt a deeper and much more human bond form between me and these new teachers.

What if I had responded to this very universal-moment of slight embarrassment in another manner — with anger, or scorn, or sarcasm — as opposed to being in the moment, spontaneously, laughing at the folly of it all? I believe that this very simple experience represented a series of important ideas for me to conceptually reflect on in my own practice — on graciously accepting the serendipity of life; accepting the realization that we can not, nor should we ever, take ourselves too seriously. And, most importantly, that part of any pre-class preparation must include an obligatory zipper check!

The raw basic guitar playing of some of rock ‘n’ roll’s greatest artists have recently been highlighted in honor of the roots of playing the acoustic guitar — and aptly titled “un-plugged”. I believe that in one simple moment in time during the second term of my first year as an Assistant Professor in a university, I was actually at my most basic, and I need to reflectively honor my roots and thus become and understand what it means to be — “unzipped”.

When I think of being unzipped in a literal sense, I think of having it all ‘hang-out there’ for everyone to see. To be unzipped is to be vulnerable or to take a risk. I believe that the same is true for the “unzipped” teacher who is taking the risks to challenge the established barriers; asking the questions that need to be

asked; pushing the limits of the curriculum to challenge both themselves and their students; to raise the level of expectations a little bit higher for everyone they work with.

I believe that I am “unzipped” every time that I walk into the classroom. To that end, I know that I am that much more human, more real, more truthful to the interactivity of the endeavor of ‘being’ human with a class full of other human beings. In his book *Teaching as a Performing Art*, Seymour B. Sarason (1999) takes great pleasure in connecting the artistry of teaching to the craft of acting, and likens the expectations of an audience to that of a class of students. When Sarason writes: “Audiences are silent performers. They are silent but not passive, at least they did not come expecting to be inwardly passive. They come expecting to see themselves and a slice of life differently. They do not expect to be bored, unmoved, and sorry that they came; (p.14) he could easily be describing the thirty-one grade six students that I am now teaching daily.

I pride myself in making even the most rote grade six subjects evocative, interesting, and active. The class is filled with performances, energy, enthusiasm, and most importantly a sense of wondrous tension – because no one knows what might happen next – surprises abound – when the teachers’ improvisational and playful performances are part of the daily routine. And I am “unzipped” as a teacher when I appreciate, understand, and realize the inherent artistry in my craft as ‘teacher’. That the only ‘performance’ standards my students will be consciously aware of at the beginning, middle, and end of each class, will be the performance of their teacher – me. And it is incumbent upon me to understand that “good teaching depends on sensibility and imagination. It courts surprise. It profits from caring. In short, teaching is an artistic affair”(Eisner, 2002. p.577).

And I know that if I can do the kind of work that I believe that I am capable of as a teacher-performer, I can then only hope that my students will find similar ways to model what I have done, and therefore meet or exceed the standards that we mutually agree upon as a learning community.

I believe that I am “unzipped” when I strenuously declare that I am no longer a willing participant in an education system that is based on punitive measures. That continues to penalize students for what they don’t know, as opposed to rewarding them with what they do know. I want to honor the many gifts and offers that my students bring to our class, and to this end, I am even more angry that I was initiated into a Bulimic educational system. A Bulimic process is one which we teach kids solely for the sake of having them regurgitate the information back to us – leaving little or no educational nutrients in their system. A Bulimic education stifles spontaneity, and has little or no time for the improvisational merits of the connectedness of education that takes place in the moment. But is it any wonder that we impose Bulimic practices on our students, when our teacher education programs are creating Anorexic teachers, fundamentally starved for practical methodology from academics who are decades removed from the currency and actuality of the field. At what point do we demand that our new generation of teachers must be well versed and open to the precept that “artistry in teaching represents high levels of pedagogical performance”; as well as a dependency on the “... sensibility, [that] it uses imagination, it employs technique, it takes pride in its craft. Teachers as artists are sensitive to the tempo of the classroom, to matters of timing, and to the quality of their own performance...” (Eisner, 2003, p. 655). And I am “unzipped” when I propose that as teachers we should be more willing to self-analyze and

constructively critique the systemic problems that inhibit our artistry, or the manner in which we can begin to re-nourish and replenish the undernourished nature of students' learning, and the way that we ourselves are taught.

Still Pedagogical Ripples

I awake to cold still silence
 Stillness
 There is a tiny stream running along the property line
 The downward momentum of the sloped earth
 Aiding the ice-cold water run-off
 The sound is luscious
 As it trickles slowly towards the cliff-line...
 and then...
 Feeding the salt water below
 It is so quiet
 When my dogs bark
 Their echoing little voices bounce outward
 and between...
 The rocky bluffs on either side of the bay
 The gray shrouded clouded sky greets me with infinite possibilities
 How slowly the world seems to move from this vantage point
 The stage before me is the glassy still water of the Pacific Ocean
 Accoutrements of the theatre at Hood Point
 The performance begins
 The ferry crossing that I watch takes only a moment
 Gulls flying by
 The wake from the boat rippling towards
 and beyond...
 Momentary stillness shaken
 and then...
 The actor retreats into the wings
 The boat is gone from sight
 The momentum of the wake
 Lapping strongly against the bluffs and rocky shoreline
 Gone from view but still felt
 Our education is like that
 Our students entering the still theatre of our classrooms
 Our lives
 and then...
 Through a series of encounters over time
 Retreat
 Leaving their energy
 Our teaching
 and so many of...
 Our pedagogical interactions
 Ripple through these lived moments

Their momentum and significance
Lapping at the shoreline of our mindful practice
Our sense of purpose
and desire...
We feel the ripples throughout our lives
No matter how small
Enveloping us in distinctive lived memory
Personal narrative
How deeply do I see
How deeply do I allow myself to know
To create knowledge for me
and others...

I am curious about how to connect drama, improvisational living and teaching with other aspects of everyday life. What is the practicality, the tangibility of drama, spontaneous creation, and improvisation for a young person's life, and how will it help them further themselves in the workplace or in an educational environment? Parents, curriculum developers, and politicians need to be aware of the validity and importance of drama. I want to try and explore the drama classroom as a place of authentic being, of expressing ourselves in the moment, spontaneously creative as basic humanity. Maybe there is something to it in a metaphoric sense. Maybe the production of a school play with a bunch of students speaks to us in a metaphoric sense? Maybe the metaphor is not unlike what is gained from participating in a team or a group where your goals are met and achieved similarly and simultaneously together? Maybe I should explore the phenomenology of the classroom, playful creation, improv, to better understand the substance, the outcomes, and the rationale behind them; so as to give each one a perspective that would allow other drama teachers or academics an insight into the life-force that is the drama class? Then again, maybe I should continue to explore the idea of curriculum as delivered by

the individual teacher, a personal narrative on teaching and living improvisationally in the academy as well as in the drama classroom?

I want to reflect and connect my daily living and professional practice to improvisational and artistic pedagogical moments. I want to look at a life lived as a father, partner/husband, teacher, artist, writer, director, researcher, academic, and consider the serendipitous moments that brought me to each juncture, turning point, corner stone, and impediment in my life. I want to look back at this doctoral journey that saw so many life altering changes take place in my world, and honor their significance.

When I began my PhD at Simon Fraser University in the summer of 1998, I had just completed my M.A. from the University of British Columbia, and was working as a secondary school drama teacher. During the more than six years that I have been working on my doctorate I have watched the birth of my daughter, who is now almost five. I have finished a complete renovation of my home. I have experienced the stress of family deaths, illness and the capricious and frightening realities of terminal illness. I have experienced the political machinations and bitter territoriality of the academic community, while simultaneously enjoying the success of journal publications and conference presentations. I have morphed from more than a decade and a half of working with teens and adolescence at secondary school, to my current position working with elementary aged children at a new fine arts school — And I can't help realizing how open I had to be to all the 'offers', 'invitations', and 'choices' that came my way, in order to live life so fully.

It is from this place of realization that I want to better understand and appreciate the system of education that I have become so intrinsically connected

with by way of composing this dissertation. It is within this document that I want to look deeply into how my living informs my practice? I want to re-examine my personal narrative, my stories and experiences while living and teaching dramatically, and consider their effect on my curriculum. Similarly, I need to reflect on the artistry, the graciousness, and joyful community of teaching. I want to recognize, honor, and be open to the invitation of improvisational living, teaching, learning, and being. While at the same time taking a critical gaze at how improvisation is currently being conceived both theoretically and practically with students and actors. I need to question the change from the communal sharing of the collective dramatic experience in exchange for competitive forms of improv and TheatreSports. I need to ask what the educational benefits are when we alter developmental dramatic play to be competitively evaluated. I want to search and re-search the origins and rationale of competitive forms to feel more comfortable with their inclusion in our present and future curriculum development. I am also grappling with the way we teach, the way we are taught, the way we are expected to learn, write, research, and 'be' scholars, pedagogues, academics, teachers, and students.

I believe that this document will encapsulate and reflect on these questions in artistic and academically meaningful ways. I am confident that I will be able to share my stories and thoughts in many different formats, while specifically utilizing an arts-based qualitative research paradigm. Melisa Cahnmann (2003) in her article "The Craft, Practice, and Possibility of Poetry in Educational Research" in the *Educational Researcher*, states that a series of strong leaders in the field are "confident that alternative, arts-based methods are rigorous, relevant, and insightful – have taken risks and explored new methods

for analysis and publication that experiment at the scientific perimeter to push our questions outward and enhance the field” (p. 30). Cahnmann is also a proponent for the inclusion of poetic forms in educational research, as she writes: “Poetry as a method of discovery in educational research that examine some specific techniques of poetic craft that can help increase the value and impact of qualitative data collection, analysis, and representation... [and] offers a means to say what might not otherwise be said” (p. 29). Similarly, LaPierre (1997) explains that, “the art education researcher should utilize that which is specific to the arts domain as an integral part of reporting the thoughts, behaviors, or processes embodied and experienced in the arts” (p.xiii).

In order to be open to the numerous invitations that this document attempts to share – the reader must be willing in keeping with LaPierre, to accept Cahnmann’s challenge for the inclusion of the poetic; as well as arts related personal narratives and interviews. Keith Johnstone is one of the most prominent theorists in the world of theatre and improvisation, and interviews with him are woven throughout this document. Johnstone and his work are described by one of the leaders in drama education research, Richard Courtney (1983), as “brilliantly absurd” (p. 154). Johnstone’s unique character and genius will be seen clearly in my discussions with him, as well as through my analysis of his work.

I will try to expound on the theme that improvisation is not a lesser art form or curricular learning tool than any other forms of drama education or theatre. Del Close (1993), one of the founders of American improv comedy, writes in his co-authored book *Truth in Comedy*, “Improvisation is not some poor relation to “legitimate” theatre,... It is an art form that stands on its own, with its

own discipline and aesthetics" (p. 14). Going beyond the aesthetic to the curricular, improvisational and process-oriented forms can be perceived as complicated to work with as drama theorist Philip Taylor (2000) explains:

The spontaneous and improvisational nature of drama praxis makes it difficult to pinpoint in functional quantitative terms what the attainment targets are. It is perhaps not surprising that some educators have tried to fit the dynamic and evolving drama curriculum into an outcome-oriented programme, with the outcomes essentially being those extrinsic skills and attitudes which can be observed and measured, rather the intrinsic changes which happen inside humans when they experience a work of art (p. 74).

Another concern is the general perception when it comes to improv work that "the 'evanescence' of spontaneous improvisation makes its meaning difficult to control" (O'Toole, 1992, as cited by Hornbrook, 1998, p. 86). If anything this makes improvisation that much more dynamic, and invigorating, especially in terms of living improvisationally and in the eyes of Keith R. Sawyer (2004) whose recent *Educational Researcher* article "Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation" extols his belief that "teaching is an improvisational performance" (p. 12) that can be harnessed successfully by teachers in their daily practice as well as with the instruction of pre-service teachers to live "in the moment" (p. 18).

As I watch the children at my daughter's daycare engrossed in their joyful make-believe play, or the elementary school kids who I am now working with on the playground at recess and lunch, acting not unlike the children in a Maurice Sendak book, I can see with utter delight that they are not only living fully in the moment, but they are living and breathing examples of life in its purist form – unzipped.

If only we could get more teachers to watch these scenes of childhood exuberance, played out daily without guile, maybe we too could reconsider, reconcile, and reflect on our own sense of propriety and apprehension at living and teaching improvisationally and, of course, unzipped.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: An Invitation



Young children live like poets. To explore, discover, prove and then rejoice should be their heritage. The rejoicing arises out of total expression, forms of flinging your whole self against the sky on mountaintops of innocent festivity. You are spiritual and animal all at once. A sound, a smell, a feel has a richness bathed in wonder, that in later years may soon be lost. Only the fortunate retain it.

Peter Slade, *Experience of Spontaneity*, 1968, p. 10.

An Invitation

• • •

The day began with an invitation — an invitation to play, create and be spontaneous, as my 16-month-old daughter looked up at me, arms outstretched and implored “fly daddy, fly!” As I took her little hands into mine, picked her up and begun to spin her around and around, watching the smile on her face, listening to her squeal with delight, her laughter sung into my heart, eyes glittering trust, love, joy... placing her gently on the ground, dizzyingly, she jumps back up, “more daddy, more!”

I walk into my classroom and I begin the day’s lesson with an invitation — an invitation to improvise dramatically, to explore and make meaning of our common world through sharing, through play, through performance. My students connect with my lessons, units of action and ideas sometimes premeditated and developed over years, sometimes spun together while driving to work, occasionally created as I speak to the class. Then in turn, they share themselves with me, gift-like, graciously and without reservation. Each interaction is a communal creation between student and teacher, actors and audience, peers, colleagues and friends. It’s a shared journey, enabling us to mutually become less compartmentalized, less afraid, less formal, less unsure and less unwilling to share ourselves with one another as people, as human beings.

I have become more attentive to living and being in an improvisational world. Every conversation, every interaction, every movement, every well-laid plan, is filled with impulsive energy requiring the adept and yet fumbling nature of improvisational spontaneous creation. My dog walking with my two Shelties on the Fraser River is no longer a thirty-minute routine now that my daughter is a participant in this ritual, as she demands to jump into every puddle, look at every flower, pick up every stick, point out the airplanes, the boats, the moon, the sun, the clouds. She attempts to find berries that were full, ripe and spilling over with syrupy moisture in the summer, long gone now in early March, but none the less she is attending to their remembrance, attending to the pebbles, the sticks, the water and the world around her in ways that I busily have turned my back on, ignoring the numerous and generous invitations to similarly attend to life, living and the world around me. Letting myself be carried away with wonderment in her toddler-like manner would be a grand-retreat from the non-stop stress of my... our... manic '24-7' instant-messaging existence. And although I wish the best for my daughter, I mourn daily the loss of her childhood wonderment, even before it has gone, because I know that as she enters our socialized and often mechanized school system, she will be held to a different account, a different set of standards and her ability to attend to daily living will diminish as mine has diminished and has been closed off, by school, work, relationships, commitments and the travails of our work-a-day world.

As the wind blows the waters of Howe Sound in front of me, waves and whitecaps moving towards the rocky shoreline, a pair of gulls find the up-drafts and glide back and forth, swing-like on the horizon, a BC Ferry crosses languidly between two points of land, the snow-capped mountains, deliciously sprinkled

with icing sugar, stand quietly in the background, the wind howls, the trees sway, branches dancing, swinging, moving to a frenetic rhythmic motion with the cold Squamish wind. My dogs scurry puppy-like about the beach chasing the breaking waves. Everywhere I look, all around me, the world is attending to itself, attending to me, offering up an invitation to participate, react, interact, with no set plan, no agenda. I am invited to co-create and integrate myself into this place, to take deep soul-replenishing breaths, greedily drinking in the fragrant salt-water mist, the rushing sound of water and wind. The cold bites at my skin through layers of clothes making my connection more immediate and painfully beautiful. Although I yearn for the warmth of the cabin fire, which invites me in its own ways to find attentiveness and sustenance in its flames, I am brought closer to my world as teacher, mentor, pedagogue, friend, husband, lover and father in this tempest-like scene; as everything as far as I can see moves freely, independently and yet is fully connected and in concert with one another.

Each invitation is only offered once.

I awoke this morning to a snowstorm buffering the cabin by the sea that I am staying in. The infiniteness of the foggy horizon expands beyond Hood Point on Bowen Island, beyond the lapping sea-water, beyond the physical realm of what nature provides, beyond what I commonly perceive, because as I sit here before this panorama, I am provided with an invitation to be more aware of the sensuous characteristics of the world around me. I am beginning to have a more connected sense of the world and the many ways we live and work in it. My eyes are open, penetrating deeper into my experiences, my relationships and my professional practice, as a teacher, student and academic. Daily I am more painfully aware of the mechanics, machinations and manipulations of our

educational system. I am worried that my daughter will enter this clouded atmosphere only to lose her contagious wonderment to what Elliot Eisner (1993) says is an “environment that does not put much premium on imagination, personal spirit, or creative thinking.... [Emphasizing] a form of rationality that seeks convergence on the known more than the exploration of the unknown” (p. 306). I am worried that my own students will not be able to persevere through the haze of an educational system fraught with political and economic hardships. I am worried that other novice academics entering the academy will encounter and have to endure what I have — mean spirited muting voices whose shadowy existence seems designed to diminish and disregard the essence of what Clandinin and Connelly (1993) place at the heart of curriculum making and research that, “practice becomes part of our personal knowledge. Our purpose is not to silence our own voices but to create a lived text of researcher, teacher and learners in which a new story is lived and told” (p. 386). And as the snow continues to fall, swirling, blowing, fluttering and drifting throughout this shrouded morning, my feet resting warmly underneath one of my sleeping dogs, I begin to question and re-examine the many doubts, truths and directions of my life and my work so that I can now write and explore a new personal narrative, a living text, in the moment and journey onward through the clearing fog.

Our lived stories are experienced as they happen — and in the immediacy of the moment we react improvisationally, spontaneously creating action, reaction, tension, confusion, reconciliation and reflection. The lived experience of the teacher and the student in the classroom has significant value existing moment to moment, never to be reproduced in any sort of exactness ever again. The phenomenon of each encounter is continuously played out, having universal

likeness, similarity and a wide variety of differences in classrooms worldwide. It is this type of connection that Max van Manen (1990) examines when he writes:

Phenomenology appeals to our immediate common experience in order to conduct a structural analysis of what is most common, most familiar, most self-evident to us. The aim is to construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld (p. 19).

van Manen validates and establishes strong connections in human science research with the phenomenology of the lived experience as well as the recounted stories that come from the place of “what is most common, most taken-for-granted and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly” (p. 19). There is a mindful attentiveness inherent in van Manen’s invitation to take the time to look deeper into the fragility of our daily being, living in the moment to experience the sensuousness of what we normally ignore and pass over and ruminatively documenting the uniqueness of these events. For van Manen this is considered to be “good phenomenological description” because it is “collected by lived experience and recollected by lived experience — is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (p. 27).

The drama classroom has a unique pulse and rhythm as a place where life is actually lived out in the various extemporized scenes, interactions and enacted relationships that exist within its physical space. As practitioner/researcher I am committed to help facilitate moments of increased human awareness of our precarious, foible-filled and embarrassing nature. I have come to accept Phil Carspecken’s (1996) belief that “research as praxis means both personal growth and social commitment” (p. 171), to the young people I am fortunate to work with and the community that I am able to serve. Teaching cannot be a mercenary venture as connected with or to a salary, benefits, or a few of months of summer

holidays. Teaching must be about giving something back to the community, about developing human connections, about helping people find new truths, new paths, new mediums for personal development and growth. And while there is always the potential for both teacher and student to become vulnerable and exposed during these transactions, this is where the foundations of my reflective pedagogy and praxis subsist, that place where the electric spark of human connection and sharing exists and continues onward in a multiplicity of directional currents. I agree with much of what Paulo Freire (1968) argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* when he writes that, "action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection" (p. 53); thus extolling the virtues of living, being and reflecting in the moment as a vital part of our human-being-ness.

Late last summer I was walking my dogs on the periphery of the University of British Columbia's Endowment Land trails to collect the bulging ripe blackberries at season end. As I filled my bright orange bucket with the ripen fruit, I couldn't help reflect on the living connection, the metaphor with my own journey and practice in education. I wander around the perimeter of the education system with my dogs picking the fruit, so really all that part of the world, the 'human-being-ness, the fruit picking, the dog walking, exists solely on the periphery and the perimeter of the system. I shared this story with a dear friend, a professor embroiled in academic politics and I wrote this person an email saying:

You my friend, are that fruit! Existing with all the sweetness, beauty and nutrients on the fringe of academia. And only the ones who come looking (with an appetite) for you, will appreciate your excellence and wonder! And the politicos are afraid (and always will be afraid) of you and your vitality, uniqueness, creativity,

spirit and connectedness to the world you exist, write and teach within!

I worry that not enough people both within and outside of the education system (at every level) will understand and appreciate that “teaching is fundamentally a mode of being” (Aoki, 1991, p. 7). I worry that they won’t realize that this course we are all walking, running, or picking fruit from on the periphery (either within or without) as educators, professors, teachers, mentors, pedagogues and students, is inextricably connected and intertwined with the “lived experience,” representing the very heart of Pinar and Grumet’s (1976) theory connecting curriculum, autobiographical reflection and ‘*currere*’. Phenomenologically Grumet (1978) expected curriculum scholarship derived from ‘*currere*’ (translated from the Latin meaning “to run”, as in to run a course) to provide additional penetration and comprehension, so as to further develop and seek the various perspectives and points of view of both the student as well as the teacher. She believed that a greater effort should be made to be consciously aware of what we actually observe or experience in an educational environment, so that we could honor and reflect upon the lived educational and individual experience (pp. vii, 12-21).

For Donald Schön (1987) the nature of the practitioner’s lived experience was the basis for his writing on reflection-in-action, which he describes as “the thinking [of] what they are doing while they are doing it” (p. xi). Schön’s book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) prompted a fair amount of attention as he examined and discussed the need for professional practitioners to reflect and understand the inherent artistry and deftness from which they worked through and within everyday experience; as well as extolling the necessity for novice

practitioners to utilize and hone these skills under the supervision of a veteran practitioner/coach. I thought about Schön when I recently sponsored a beginning teacher, whose dynamic presence opened a treasure trove of new ideas, lesson planning and reflective practice. The opportunity to share my stories and experiences as a mentor and colleague with a beginning teacher, as well as the chance to view someone else's work with my students in the drama classroom, offered me the chance to ruminate and look back on my own choices, while also informing my practice. The many discussions I had with my new colleague provided us both with insight and extensions for our work with young people in drama and enabled us to validate the necessity for continual self-evaluation. This is the same type of self-evaluation that I have all my drama students' experience, which is an evaluation based on mutual-meaning-making and personal development, curricularly rooted in the lived experiences of the students and the teacher in the controlled chaos of the classroom. Carl Leggo (1997) clarifies this when he writes; "...the essential business of the classroom is to provide an environment for reflection and a venue for discussions about experience and life" (p. 11).

This morning I awoke to a clear blue sky, I can see fresh snow on the mountains and a still, silent and wave less expanse of water. How completely different from last night's gale, the winds gusting all around, within and throughout the little cabin by the sea. I want to be mindful of the dichotomy between the extreme storm and the splendid calm. I want to find a place of connection in-between these two places for my practice and my living. For that place in-between is a place of wonderful tension, a place where we create and expand our ideas of life further than we could in that place of dead calm or deep

rage. There is a certain beauty and symmetry in the messiness that spontaneous and improvisational living, teaching and learning affords us with. The human endeavor of education is messy. Students don't come in neat little packages, with a set of simple instructions; neither do our colleagues, nor do our other relationships. We must encounter our world at "life-rate" (Heathcote, 1984), and deal with the surprises, capricious realities and various roadblocks that are placed in our way. And it is how we deal with these impediments both reflectively as well as in the moment that proves our adeptness, our agility and the true artistry of improvisational living. I agree with Peter Grimmett (1988) in his discussion on the nature of reflection in Schön's work when he writes:

Reflection arises from a directly experienced situation, which puzzles or surprises us. It occurs when a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, or mental difficulty engulfs the mind. Grappling with a genuine problem or question stemming from sudden change or uncertainty draws out reflection; for the perplexing nature of the experienced situation presents the mind with an unresolved difficulty (p. 6).

Grimmett further discusses some of the foundations of Schön's work as underpinned by the concept of reflection as experimentation, as a place where practitioners make choices in the "indeterminate and messy zones of practice" (p. 10). These are the places that are most conducive for unpremeditated action, reaction... a place of beautiful tension... of not quite knowing... feeling your way through... finding your way out... creating authenticity by being in the moment... the moment of reflective practice... actualizing the artistry of doing... the phenomenon of exploring new and different modes of being — and finally the epiphany while emerging from this subjective and chaotic tension — this is the 'stuff' of phenomenological reflection, as well as improvisational and

spontaneous creation, learning, teaching and living — this is the place I hope to be daily with my students.

If we embrace the world we live in; if we attend to the invitations and offerings that present themselves to us; if we welcome and accept the dynamism of change in the field of educational research and practice; if we become more attuned to the ordinary and the mundane; if we contextualize, theorize and philosophize the lived-experience; if we honor our curriculum, our teaching and our pedagogy as a multidimensional and continuously evolving and co-created paradigm; if we re-conceive and reflect upon these practices, these ways of being, these places from which we exist as phenomena, as phenomenological inquiry, as reflection-in-action and reflective practice; then we should acknowledge a tradition of academic educational and philosophical scholarship that is situated and connected to improvisational and spontaneous ways of being, living, learning and teaching (Husserl, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Pinar and Grumet, 1976; Jardine, 1987; Kincheloe, 1993; van Manen, 1990; and Aoki, 1991).

Searching and Re-Searching

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The activity of instantaneous creation is as ordinary to us as breathing. Whether we are creating high art or a meal, we improvise when we move with the flow of time and with our own evolving consciousness, rather than with a preordained script or recipe. {Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 1990, p.17}

I am searching. I am re-searching. I am searching and re-searching ways of being in our daily lives, modes of teaching and thinking, gracious moments that enable us to co-create the participatory and connected situations that we work within as educators, academics, students and teachers, so that we do not neglect the many invitations and offerings that present themselves to us in our daily living. I want to talk about improvisation as a life-skill, as opposed to just a drama, acting or theatre skill. We must reflect upon all the times in our daily lives, we, as people, have to improvise, change our plans, work within or around set strategies that somehow changed because of situations that we did not have control over.

Improvisation is a skill that we need to utilize in our everyday lives, as we act and interact with the people and world around us. The permutations and modifications that we undergo daily come from deep within us as people. The choices that we spontaneously create in impulsive moments of unpredictability tend to exemplify our personality and character. In social or work settings we might behave differently, because as we improvisationally deal with daily circumstances we might alter the truth, embellish a story, enhance or detract from others, create an excuse, or generally act out of character in order to meet

specific personal objectives. Many of us are at our best when we are 'put on the spot', when rising to the occasion means having to compose an extemporaneous narrative or dialogue while simultaneously being mindful of our intended audience, our objectives and the potential outcomes of our words and actions (Goldberg, 1991, pp. xvi-xviii). The unpredictable reality of a classroom full of students forces the artful and performative nature of the teacher to be fully engaged, while circumnavigating the day's lessons, the attention and cooperation of the students, the attitudes of the parents, the administrative of the office and the politics of the day. These elements all play an integral role in this well-established, yet somewhat capricious relationship. Paradoxically, if teachers consciously prepare and teach to unpredictability, is it still unpredictable, or does the mere act of preparation, make the experience or encounter predictable?

In the theatre or in drama, improvisation is considered to be a place of mutual acceptance utilizing unpredictability. When an actor acts in a play, most times the play is a practiced piece of art, so that as an audience the performance that we see on stage has been well rehearsed and crafted. Although one of the key elements of live scripted theatre is that each performance has the potential to be different from night to night, show to show. It has the possibility to be different because of technical error, audience reaction and actor response. It has been well documented in interviews with many actors, especially comic actors, that they react and occasionally alter their performances based on audience response (Foreman, K. & Martini, C. 1995). When the audience responds in a specific way that makes them feel good or successful, a lot of actors will work harder during specific moments in the play to get that response. Almost like a drug the actor is addicted to the response of the audience, the applause, the

laughter, the oohs, the aahs. Frequently in live-theatre just when the actor gets used to this type of audience reaction and begins to expect this 'pay-off' moment, usually that's when a new audience responds differently and forces the actor to reconsider (in the moment) what their initial objectives were to begin with. Constantin Stanislavski (1948) considered this as a 'trap' for actors who didn't respect each and every performance as different and unique, thus requiring different energy and emphasis from show to show. Peter Brook further articulates these sentiments in his most recent book *The Open Door – Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (1995)

Let us use the example of audience reaction. If during an improvisation you feel the presence of the people watching you – which you must, otherwise it makes no sense – and those people laugh, you risk being pulled by that laughter in a direction that you wouldn't necessarily have taken without hearing the laughter. You wish to please and the laugh confirms to you that you are succeeding, so you begin to focus more and more on getting laughs, until your links with truth, reality and creativity dissolve invisibly in the merriment. The essential is to be aware of this process and not be trapped blindly. (pp. 28-29)

Each performance (both on stage and in daily living) requires a great deal of improvisational response that takes place above and beyond the scripted and rehearsed work, because improvised performance and improvisation is as much about reaction as it is about interaction, especially in relationship to external influences. Keith Johnstone discusses this concept in great detail in both of his books *Impro* (1979), and *Impro for Storytellers* (1999), as he toys with the idea about playing with opposites in relationship to our normal set of expected reactions. For Johnstone, actors as well as people in everyday life, should deny or ignore their initial 'normal' and 'obvious' intuitive responses to unforeseen situations and experiences, thereby finding alternative reactions in opposites to

explore all the viable possibilities. It is within these opposites that Johnstone believes we will understand and appreciate more fully the complexities and inherent artistry required in navigating the unexpected and the spontaneous. Exploring all the possibilities does not necessarily mean actualizing them in life or on stage. It means exploring them in your head and in your bodily reality and then (and only then) utilizing the moment that is most highly triggered. This means that improvisational acting or life skills are about compelling people to be more keenly aware of engaging their impulsive, 'spur of the moment' experiences and spontaneous reactions in a deeply intuitive and holistic way of being. For example, if we are driving somewhere and we have a set route and there is construction on that road — most often we will figure out ways around the impediment. We perhaps try to take a side street to get to our intended destination. Or we'll get stuck behind the line of cars and become frustrated with our lack of freedom to change directions. We do this in our daily lives whenever we are working and sharing ourselves with people, because the daily interaction with others is unpredictable. Even though there are predictable elements of daily living, routines, goals and commonalities, many times outside and external influences enter into these routines and that's when we have to figure out a different (possibly more creative) way to get from A to B.

What is spontaneous reaction? When we react spontaneously are we really acting from a source of new experience or are we just calling on set patterns that are already within our inherent makeup? Much of how we react or respond to daily situations is about our acting and reacting within the 'real' moment, as it is our acting and reacting within set patterns that we have learned from related stories, television, film and other popular media. This is because

much of our primary knowledge is socially constructed knowledge or scripted. R. Keith Sawyer (2001) theorizes, "our everyday scripts must allow for a range of common possibilities, almost like a flow chart that represents each possible scene as a path leading from the prior scene" (p. 10). Citing psychologist Ellen Langer (1989, 1997), Sawyer explains that "each one of us has a repertoire of thousands of scripts that are cued by certain situations"(p. 11); essentially proving that set patterns have already been programmed and have educationally been processed so that truly spontaneous reactions are always tempered with these potentially predetermined modes of being that we already have encountered vicariously through feeling, wanting, listening, talking and reading.

When I reflect back on watching my daughter's development as an infant, I can't help noticing the evolution and expansion of her own catalogue of experiences. I see a great deal of what must be considered true improvisational and spontaneous living in her early life. As an infant so much of what she was living and experiencing was new and in a lot of ways she was unable to articulate herself other than with sound vocalizations, facial expressions or body language. Her reactions and responses to brand new stimuli, whether it was a new food, sound, toy, or environment suggested that she quickly understood what it was that she was seeing and experiencing and reacted accordingly. Activities or stimuli that she had previous knowledge of didn't necessarily get the same reactions. In fact, the things that had become rote or routine, or that she had a constructed knowledge of like being clothed, bathed, diapered, or fed, had all been figured out previously, while moments that existed outside of these routines required her to react in new and unique ways and obliged her to create a new catalogue of understanding and meaning making. How many of our adult

reactions (especially in teaching) exist outside of the routines we have imposed upon ourselves or that we have had imposed upon ourselves through family, work and other socially constructed relationships?

I wrote about the idea of just driving to a specific or desired location and then having to change your route. The structure exists and I know that I am going from A to B, but my normal route is impeded. I change my route. I still get to B. I still get to my intended destination. How do we react when those impediments slow us up and change our routine or our lives? How much does fate play into our thinking, or that we don't have choice, we don't have true free will, but that our moment to moment living is always mapped out for us so we go about our business automatically in our predetermined world. I get that feeling when I take an airplane as the idea of a pilot or human error controlling my destiny frightens me. Although I know that as a daily commuter, to and from my work, I have more chance of getting into a serious accident than I do in an airplane, I still have the illusion and I stress it is an illusion, that I have more control over my own destiny or fate as the driver of my own vehicle than I do as a passenger in an airplane. Maybe that is a part of living spontaneously — that living improvisationally is a bit of a facade, this idea of choice, this idea of being in control, because how much control do we have? Once we have a career, a job, a mortgage, a family and commitments with constructed expectations placed upon us as members of a community, a society, a faculty how much opportunity do we have to live spontaneously or improvisationally within those structures? How much of those structures predetermine our routine, our actions and our reactions? And why is it that when people react outside of socially constructed norms they are considered to be eccentric or unstable? Why is it that we have

predetermined how people should react to socially constructed events and situations? If we do something out of character, like speak loudly, or we react in a way that is disconnected, we are viewed as odd, strange, troublesome and disturbing. Keith Johnstone (1979) extends these views in his book *Impro – Improvisation for the Theatre*,

At school any spontaneous act was likely to get me into trouble. I learned never to act on impulse and that whatever came into my mind first should be rejected in favour of better ideas. I learned that my imagination wasn't good enough. I learned that the first idea was unsatisfactory because it was (1) psychotic; (2) obscene; (3) unoriginal. The truth is that the *best* ideas are often psychotic, obscene and unoriginal.... [Therefore] we suppress our spontaneous impulses, we censor our imaginations, we learn to present ourselves as ordinary and we destroy our talent. (pp. 82-84).

Potentially this holds us all back, reining us in, the idea of our world being created in a certain way, with certain rules and a certain semblance of being. In many ways this is what universal public education is all about too. It is about creating a productive and connected, socially constructed member of society, someone who will pay their taxes and line-up and not be disruptive and will follow the rules. That's why people who are spontaneous, who may break the rules, are viewed by others in a leery sort of way. We create so many rules that tie us in, structures that tie us down so that we can live peacefully amongst ourselves theoretically within the rule of law. It is obvious that we have developed a sense of right and wrong and a sense of what we are and are not able to do very early on. If this is the case, then how much is spontaneity and improvisation honored in daily living? Or is it only regarded as an important human attribute in the context of set and defined structures?

Within my own practice, with my students, I daily question the defined social order and the standard ways of being and thinking. Like Johnstone (1999) I ask students to explore opposite reactions, I want students to feel free to challenge the set patterns and normative standards of behaviour in the context of our drama work. I want to liberate my students from the rigors of the normal school day, by instilling in them a passion for difference, change and a sense of personal autonomy in re-examining their relationships and contextually set patterns of acting and reacting. I am drawn towards the writing of Philip Taylor (1997) who in championing the place of qualitative and reflective methodology in drama research also explores the "creative possibilities" of "the magic if." Taylor argues that reaction and experiencing of dramatic and artistic work is extremely personal and unpredictable. Taylor writes:

... while we can all share an arts experience, each of us is individually constructing it for ourselves. You cannot tell me how to respond.... In the end, it is going to be who we are as individuals and the kind of experiences we have which shape our construction of that work (pp. 80-81).

Taylor's "magic if" has the potential to strongly underpin the ability of improvisational forms of artistic creation in such a way that both audience and performer have an implicit connection in the construction of the presentation.

I have often expressed this to my drama students, by explaining to them the purposeful relationship that they have with their audience when they share themselves as performers. To this end I believe that it is a priority for my students to construct both universal and personal relevance in their acting work through improvisational rehearsal techniques. I am witness to "the magic if" coming alive when I have my students work through an isolation exercise, where the actor explores in a spontaneous and improvisational manner the depths of

their character. In that exploration we use lighting, sound, darkness, shadows, colours and side-coaching to help the actor find and construct meaning in their character and in their character's world in relationships with others. In many cases what it provides the actors with is a place of meaning from which their character can dimensionally progress through an incredible range of emotional responses by reacting impulsively to the external stimuli I provide them with. It's about playing within the structure to help find meaning and to create a place of mutual understanding from which to build the art of the play.

When I use improvisation as a tool to develop acting skills or an actor's ability to create greater depth and insight into the play or their character, I have a deeper appreciation for Stanislavski's groundbreaking books *An Actor Prepares* (1948), and *Building a Character* (1949). Written like platonic dialogues, in the voice of a youthful actor's quest to develop his craft, Stanislavski uses improvisational techniques to bring his performers thoroughly into the lives and emotional memories of their character. I can also appreciate the work of Viola Spolin (1963), Uta Hagen (1973), and Del Close (1993), all authors, directors and improvisers whose improvisation work still resonates with actors, directors and teachers currently, in part because they were the creators of many of the 'games' improvisers and students presently play. It was through the playing of these 'games' that students and performers would hone their craft, their roles and reaffirmed the foundations of their own acting skills. The dichotomy that I find difficult to reconcile is how improvisational theatre went from a purely developmental and non-performance endeavour, to a legitimized form of performance and competition as TheatreSports.

As the originator, Keith Johnstone (1999) readily admits that the genesis of TheatreSports as popular entertainment draws heavily on the influence of professional wrestling and openly expresses the disposable nature of competitive improv scenes. Johnstone also fostered a tradition of interactive audience participation, which began in 1978 at the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Alberta, Canada (where audience members could throw cream pies at performers). The enthusiasm and energy of this type of audience interactivity was a double-edged sword — while it had the potential to create a long lasting, invigorating and enjoyable theatrical experience, it also had the potential to lead to insincere and self-indulgent improvisation (Young, 2001). I worry that competitive improvisation structures have been accepted blindly into the curriculum without enough understanding for the potential effects on student skill development. Similarly, how does the desire to compete, compare and ‘win’ drive students to potentially surrender the collective and communal exploratory nature of this art form? A further concern that I grapple with is that competitive improvisational drama and theatre (unlike the strictly exploratory version) relies heavily on breaking established conventions — how can student actors be expected to break the rules when they haven’t learned them yet? The result is that many improvisational actors today actually lack acting training, knowing little or nothing of the craft of acting. Whereas only professional actors could play the improvisational forms of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, Viola Spolin (1963) believed that “everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre...” (p. 3). And although I appreciate and actually embrace Spolin’s invitation, I am also worried that distinctionless artists have the

potential to diminish the incredible value that improvisation and spontaneous creation possess in drama and theatre education.

In my own practice I have implemented a taxonomy from which theatrical improvisational forms are derived — relationship; inspiration; transaction; and narrative.

NARRATIVE TRANSACTION INSPIRATION RELATIONSHIP

Relationships define the manner in which we relate to the world around us. Everything and everyone — people, places, objects, interrelate to each other and form the basic foundation for any theatrical improvisational or spontaneous endeavour. Similarly, the inspiration for improvisational and spontaneous creation is derived from the transaction, which is usually an offer or an idea from the audience to the actor, or from the actors on stage with each other. One of the basic tenets of improvisational work is to accept and not block these offers, to allow these transactions to be a fundamental part of the improvisation. And the narrative is the ability of the improvisers to tell and share their stories and universal truths with the audience.

I have been looking at improvisation as a way of living and being, as a place from which to develop artistic theatrical and dramatic creations, as a place of both exploration and competition. I would also like to discuss improvisation in music — in particular jazz. I went to a jazz club the other night and witnessed

a quartet playing an extended set. As an untrained listener and observer I think one of the things that really excited me was, first of all, each jazz number, each song that they played had a format or a structure and within each structure the individual musicians had opportunities to improvise. I listened to them 'book-end' their material so they have a specific type of tune or melody or a refrain that both began and ended a piece of music, which they came back to at the end of the song, which might be twenty or thirty minutes later. In between the songs there are many different through lines that each individual artist will bring into the music and offer the other performer. The percussionist in particular, from my observation, at times followed and accentuated the other musicians and their solos and as there is a real effort for each individual artist to have a solo. Each solo moment, was a personal, unique narrative. The music told a story, taking the audience on a journey — a journey that could only be taken by being a part of a live audience.

If music is strictly an audio sensory experience, what is it then that brings an audience to watch it and listen to it live? I think one reason is that we get to see the passion, the physical joy, the effort and craft of the musicians when they perform and put the music together. Especially in jazz, as an audience we are looking for or hoping to find these unique ethereal moments, these moments in time and space that take place only once, these magical moments, these moments that come from playing the music from the depths of their very being, their soul, that they share with an audience, that you can't get from listening to an audio recording.

In his book, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* Derek Bailey (1992) writes, "supporters of improvisation are defined by their attitude towards

the fact that improvisation embraces, even celebrates, music's essentially ephemeral nature" (p. 35). Bailey also discusses the fact that in jazz the musicians have to know all the important rules of music before they can endeavour to break any of those rules. In conversation, musician Steve Lacy recounts to Bailey that the excitement of improvisation has "something to do with the 'edge'. Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go on out there you have your years of preparation and all your sensibilities... prepare [you for the] leap" (p. 57). Dancer Daniel Nagrin (1994) writes about how "improvisation was the weld that joined" (p. 4) his creativity to the rules of choreography and technique. Painter Jackson Pollock trained as a classical representational artist and later became an impressionist artist before he gained notoriety for his splatter abstract paintings. I raise this point, because I believe that in music, dance and in visual art, the artist has learned his or her craft before they explored it by breaking and in fact creating new rules. Greg Atkins (1994) boldly declares that "improvisation is the jazz of theatre" (p. 146), but improv theatre rarely possess the same craft, because it is lacking the foundational sources, the respect (or at least understanding) for the rules and the ability to sustain unlimited time or rifts.

Maybe theatrical and dramatic improvisation isn't supposed to have any rules, possibly it is the ultimate form of deconstructed theatre, not unlike free verse poetry or performance art, improv defines and re-defines itself openly. I connect with Carl Leggo's (1997) book, *Teaching to Wonder: Responding to Poetry in the Secondary Classroom*, when in relationship to playing with poetic text he writes:

There are no right and wrong answers. Deconstruction encourages a plurality of responses. There is no hidden meaning to be revealed. The text is a site where the reader's imagination and experience and understanding and emotions come into play in unique and imaginative performances. The goal of deconstruction is to open up the text, which becomes not a puzzle to be laboriously pieced together, but a stage on which to perform (p. 76).

It makes sense to consider the poetics of our daily living and improvisational mannerisms as freely formed performance, as experimental theatre, as impulsive exhibitionism. I also strongly believe in the set structures that I see in improvisational theatre (relationships, inspiration, transactions and narratives) to have a completely anarchistic image of improv as an art form, but still maintain that this experience is devalued by a woeful lack of artistry and craftsmanship in the preparation and training of the actual performers. Too often improv is presented as short skit form comedy, allowing the actors to manipulate and twist scenes for cheap laughs. With little or no story or relationship to draw from they resort to base bathroom humor and trite characterizations. It is only recently that Keith Johnstone has become a proponent of long form story improvisation, where the actors have to sustain a story, situations and relationships for upwards of forty-five minutes, thus forcing the actors to be more highly trained as actor artists, to rehearse and prepare for their performances and risk taking; therefore creating deeper preconceived notions of structure, content and form. This ultimately moves the actors and their work into the realm of prepared spontaneity, rehearsed improvisation, preparing for the unexpected, as the actors exist before an audience while waiting for their next invitation.

I went to Calgary twice over the past four years and visited with Keith Johnstone (2001, 2004) to discuss his improv theories and methods. He graciously provided me with an informative, entertaining and uninterrupted period of his

time. We spoke about his childhood, his moving to Canada from the U.K., his books, his teaching, his playwrighting and directing. We had lunch and after much discussion said goodbye. During our time together, I found out that Keith didn't fit in as a child or as a teen and that he was constantly in trouble because he couldn't sustain his concentration for extended periods of time. Keith also told me that just now, in his seventies, that he was taking Ritalin to help him focus while writing. It dawned on me that the man who had essentially created the three to four minute TheatreSports format had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Before Keith left I had him autograph my copies of his books. Later that evening, while packing my things in the hotel room, I noticed that one of the books that he signed was an upside down mirror image of his signature. And I realized that the man who had originated TheatreSports and progressed the theories of improvisational theatre throughout the world obviously viewed life in a much different way than most of us.

CHAPTER TWO

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part One}

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A Conversation with Keith Johnstone
Saturday, June 23, 2001 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada
With additional footnotes from our follow-up conversation
Saturday, December 11, 2004 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part One}

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In 1999 I began an email correspondence with Keith Johnstone's Business Manager James Faulkner to discuss the possibility of my coming out to Calgary, Alberta to spend a day or two in conversation with Keith. After more than a year of planning, James confirmed a date and time within Keith's busy schedule. I booked a flight, a hotel room and went to Calgary. Keith and I chatted for more than four hours at the hotel and spent another few hours having lunch at an organic deli. Our discussion at the hotel was tape-recorded; in fact Keith and I both taped our conversation with our own separate recorders set out on the coffee table in front of us. What follows is 'Part One' of an edited and abridged transcript of our conversation from Saturday, June 23, 2001, with additional footnotes from our second conversation a few years later at Keith's home on Saturday, December 11, 2004.

Keith is the founder and originator of TheatreSports and is one of the seminal leaders of improvisation, in the world today.

This interview is a composite and companion to the overall thesis document, as it supports the majority of the theories and ideas espoused throughout my writing, my practice and my research.

Johnstone was a University of Calgary professor in the theatre department for twenty-five years and is part philosopher; part visionary, part theorist and most definitely part eccentric. His stories, ideas and body of work have profoundly affected the world of drama education and theatre worldwide.

At no time during my PhD studies have I been so honored and excited to really experience the educational dialectic that I understood to be 'the Socratic Method' – as a series of stories, dialogues and questions forcing you to think and re-think the way in which you see the world. My two conversations with

Johnstone — in which he allowed me to spend collectively more than twelve hours with him alone, discussing and analyzing his work – resonate much further than just solidifying my doctoral writing and research, but have affectively and insightfully grown within my own practice.

Thanks, Keith, you are a true modern philosopher!

David L. Young: I have read your books and I am impressed with what you have to say. I am someone who has grown up participating as a drama student and now as a teacher and certainly now as someone who is researching TheatreSports, improvisation and spontaneous creation....

Keith Johnstone: Which faculty are you in?

DLY: I am in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and I am working on my PhD in Drama Education.

So I guess for me what I am excited about is really just trying to find out beyond the written word where the genesis comes from. You talk a lot about wrestling and the 'pop culture icons' that you saw in your world.

KJ: Pop culture icons? Wrestling. They weren't 'pop culture icons'.

DLY: I see them as pop culture.

KJ: That was long ago but it wasn't really "pop culture". It was working class culture. It wasn't in the mainstream of pop. It was a working class phenomenon. It wasn't like the stuff you see on TV. It was family entertainment.

DLY: The wrestling was?

KJ: Yes, it was ridiculous. It was, I didn't watch it many times, but the pleasure of the audience was undoubted.

At that time, the only time you ever had a decent audience at the Royal Court was when Arnold Wesker's trilogy¹ went on. Then, suddenly, the theatre was full of nice young people.

Joan Littlewood had that problem, do you know her?

DLY: No.

KJ: You don't because she was a communist. She was the best English director.

DLY: Had she been blacklisted?

KJ: She wasn't given money.

Let's see how bad I have been, like Karl Marx. The idea that 'man' is basically corrupt about the system, instead of being pretty lazy anyhow. They mostly want to spend their time playing or doing things.

She started a school theatre company in 1936²... She was a great director. She produced *A Taste of Honey*³. If you had seen the plays that she put together with Sheila Delaney....

She was an interesting and influential director and had many West End successes. Every time that happened I would come to the West End and they would be getting £100 per week instead of £10. Then she would lose them and she would have to start a new company. She was a success. People like me would go down to see it, all kinds of middle-class people - the same West End audience that goes down to Stratford to see her play. But the local people wouldn't come. The local people did come before she took the theatre over. They were mostly doing sort of vague strip shows as far as the censorship would allow in those days. She did a most wonderful production of *Twelfth Night*, very stupid and they never came back. She should have gone in and done another strip show and improved it and done better strip shows. There was this production of *Oh*

¹ Arnold Wesker produced theatre based on his Jewish socialist family roots.

² Johnstone describes Joan Littlewood's theatre company as "original" and incredibly supportive of new playwrighting when other companies were not.

What a Lovely War - you may have heard of that. Wonderful production and amazing. Changed many people's lives. I hadn't understood about the Great War until then. People would come to see it. They would go to see that and go home without having their usual meal. It would make them reassess everything that had happened. It was real genius.

DLY: You talk a lot about...

KJ: Theatre is based on improvisation.

DLY: Right.

KJ: In process. For me to go from the theatre of taxidermy at the Royal Court to a twenty-five minute ride on the District Line. Then we could see live human beings on the stage, then we would come back to the taxidermy. I was a bit pissed off.

DLY: Is improvisation and spontaneous creation that takes place before a live audience, is this de-constructed theatre? Is it a form of 'taking apart' - is it taking apart the structure of what someone else created and the form of what someone else had said?

This is the staid old form of theatre and this is what we do and this is what theatre should be. The audience is the consensus. The audience sits in the seats and they are sitting as passive receptors of information of someone on the boards of the proscenium arch. They share with us their talent and their wisdom and their words.

In some ways what appeals to me about improvisation is that it opens us up to the human element of joint thinking, of sharing our mutual being.

KJ: Well, I was one of the crucial people.

³ Johnstone admired this production because the "actors were very spontaneous".

I think people like Spike Milligan were very influential because *The Goon Show* was a radio program that came out probably in the early fifties and that broke all the rules⁴.

And I think that is certainly at least something. It certainly suggested you could have other possibilities. I mean people like me, I went to see about three plays in the West End and said, 'screw that'. And they called it the 'nationalistic theatre'. I had never seen anything less nationalistic — it was so ridiculously formalized in my view.

I can't watch soap opera because it is so formal and fake and stupid. There are a few like Kelsey Grammar or somebody, they manage to be human but the kind of soap operas they put on during the day. It is possible to get good work on TV I guess sometimes.

I thought *Seinfeld* was good.

I have a serious attention deficit, you have probably noticed. It made it hard finding this hotel actually. I can't work out streets and avenues. You will probably keep me on track.

The audience was awful, horrible. I grew up going to the circus and the cinema and I loved reading everything. So I became an avant-garde playwright because I had grown up watching the circus and I hated the theatre I saw. I also read everything. All kinds of stuff...

DLY: So when John Osborne's play⁵ comes out and everyone hails him as the great angry playwright and it's natural and it's real.

KJ: Quite wrong. It was savagely attacked.

DLY: I realize that, but I am talking in retrospect.

⁴*The Goon Show* was an incredibly popular BBC radio comedy program that also starred a young Peter Sellers. "It was a revolutionary comedy show for playwrights and nurtured the kind of comedy that would one day spawn *Monty Python*."

⁵John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, premiered in London's West End in 1956.

KJ: I will tell you what happened. The theatre had nothing else to put on. It was going to go dead. Many theatre companies start, go for a little while and they die.

I always found it; to me there was nothing of the slightest interest theatrically in [Osborne's] play except that the tirades were very funny. And they were saying things that are not normally said on the stage and lots of people saw it. I remember seeing it and not liking it, but every now and then they would mention a character and I would say I hope that character doesn't turn up. Then I read the reviews and the idiots were complaining that this was bad technique. I was so pleased!

If you see *Pulp Fiction* there is going to be this boxing match with Bruce Willis and then you see him climbing out the window after the boxing match. You haven't had to see another fake Hollywood boxing match, what pleasure. I think *Pulp Fiction* shook everybody up because they also broke many rules, disgusting and horrible as it is.

DLY: And non-linear. Do you like it in particular because of its non-linear structure? Does that stand out as an important thing to you?

KJ: No, I thought it was something that was clever.

I don't think like that.

I thought it was fresh and you didn't know what was going to happen. And it also pleased you and he understood about storytelling.

The moment the gangster tells them to take his girl friend out, to entertain her, the entire audience expects something to happen. So then you go off and they mix heroin with cocaine and stuff and it kind of gets him happier and then they win the skittle competition at the dance. Then he takes her back to the gate and you hang around. The whole audience doesn't want her to invite him in because that is the worst thing that could happen. She invites him in and then they are together and its not boring but it acts boring.

It is very important to bore the audience, to create expectation and the more you bore them, if you seem relaxed, the more they think there is something really big here. If you look interesting, you sort of look active.

DLY: What, to play with those opposites?

KJ: If you bore the audience and you're calm they think that there is something really big here.

Anyway, then he goes on to the bathroom and he pees. Then he looks in the mirror as long as he likes because he is allowing us to project into him and we know from the plot everything that we should project in there. Then he comes out... She thinks it's coke and it's heroin... I never understood that, but I understood the overdose.

I have to have movies explained to me, so did Niels Bohr, the physicist⁶.

We think he is going to bed her and the catastrophe would come, that the gangster and all that, but we got something infinitely better because instead of bedding her, he has killed her. So having been made to wait all that time, he does this wonderful thing and then when he finally gets to the guy, who is going to do it, the guy won't do it. It is such pleasure. Travolta is wonderful to watch.

J.K Rowling, oh, the lady who wrote *Harry Potter*. I am afraid that she has become a genius, I am really worried. When you become a genius, when you become a genius, nobody will tell you anything then.

[Sir John]Gielguld said, "It is awful when they think you are great and you're famous because nobody will tell you when you are wrong."

I know lots of young actors who don't want to be told when they are wrong.

It's the same with her, the last big fat book - could have been sixty pages shorter. With her quality, nobody has mentioned this that she promises you something that is excellent because people want the mystery solved. And what happens is always best for the boy. Have you read this book?

DLY: I have read one and I didn't really enjoy it much. It really didn't do much for me.

KJ: I thought it was great.

DLY: I didn't see what all the hype was about.

KJ: It is good storytelling.

DLY: I don't know, maybe I was so caught up inI find it very difficult to read when I am teaching. I was about to say, do you read fast?

KJ: Yes, I read very fast and I read for relaxation and it is usually on holiday and I haven't been on holiday for three years, so it has been a while.

I have lost my books.

I have got all four books by her and I want to go through them and analyze them in terms of promising and over-delivery.

You read the first book. Harry Potter is going to be visited by a friend of his from school with a wizard family coming to visit these 'muggles' — whoever they are. The father is crazy and he keeps out all the time to look for them. He knows they are going to come in some ghastly vehicle. They are going to float in and all the neighbours will talk, it will be awful. When they arrive there is a knocking through the fireplace. They emerge through the fireplace because there is an international magical connection between live fires. It is far better than you thought - it is great!

DLY: So going back to when you came into the room, you were talking about what you saw last night at the theatre⁷. So for you to be excited about it, it must have been better than what you expected. Yes?

KJ: No.

⁶ Johnstone admires Niels Bohr (Copenhagen, Denmark) because he came up with a theory of quantum physics and argued with Albert Einstein.

⁷ At the beginning of the Saturday, June 23, 2001 interview Keith entered the room very excited about the TheatreSports performance that he had seen at the Loose Moose Theatre the night before.

DLY: What was so good about last night at improv?

KJ: Usually improv is like watching drowning people dragging themselves along. Jumping up and down with big grins like a circus performance and that's faking. That's faking togetherness.

Anybody with any perception can see it is all shit. Like anybody with any perception knows that wrestling is all crap because they don't kill each other.

So if you were to have a really nice evening where people were happy and high and with good feelings, even if they were not inspired and nothing interesting happened, it is probably worth seeing that, just the pleasure and the good nature of the people.

Most improvisation is by frightened people covering up their fear. They are afraid of failing; there is no good nature. This happens to most improvisation groups - so at the normal level of shit is frightened people, all trying to be good and all trying to be the wittiest.

And very few women. If there are women there, they are men with tits, because they have had to become totally aggressive to stay in the group. Most women go out like squeezing a lemon; they come in and out, because the men won't treat them as women.

DLY: Also, when I have spoken to improvisers, women improvisers, they feel that what they have to do is, they have to be louder, bigger, more aggressive on stage with the males and that's not so much to become a male, just to be louder, bigger, stronger is it?

KJ: They have to be louder, bigger, stronger to the audience, but you don't have to be mean and nasty. You don't have to avoid all emotional commitments.

DLY: Do you see that? When you see women on stage doing improv?

KJ: No, because they are just like the men and they can't help it. It's their situation. The situation creates this.

There are two million people in Alberta, I don't know. I think it is like Denmark like in the twenties, I think it had the same population....

I mean check them out - there is all kinds of shit going on.

Here, I don't know, maybe some good message is going on somewhere.

In Shakespeare's London, there were thousands of literate people. I don't know five thousand literate people, not many. But there were poets and all kinds of literature. So I am saying that this stuff is in the people but the system crushes it and every now and again, when the conditions are right she needs to appear.

DLY: I like the fact that you have brought this issue up, of 'the system crushing you' because you spoke quite a bit about the fact that you felt that the system crushed you as a kid and as a student. And that the system continues, in your eyes, to do that to kids, I think the term you use is that children are "atrophied adults".

KJ: Everybody quotes that.

DLY: I love that. As a teacher, I think it is a wonderful thing and I like to share that with the student teachers that I work with because I think it is very valuable. It is a very valuable and insightful point.

KJ: I don't like it, but teenagers like it.
I think it is the first chapter⁸.

There are all kinds of different children. Some are by nature obedient. I am sorry about that. I used to love the disobedient ones.

DLY: As a teacher?

KJ: Yes, yes. If I wanted to do an interesting project in a school, I did some work on music.

⁸ Johnstone, Keith. (1979). *IMPRO: Improvisation and the Theatre*. Routledge. New York.

I would go round and ask the teachers to spare the worst behaved child in the class. I would collect them and god, they would be wonderful because they are not quelled, they are full of life, ready for anything. You see a lot of times the worst kid and this is my experience as a teacher; a lot of times the worst kids are the bored ones.

I was bored.

DLY: Yes, me too.

KJ: I was so bored in school. I was miserable and I was in the principal's office daily.

If you look at biographies of the lives of anybody. Robert Browning, I'm sure, anybody... Blake never got sent to school, he was too delicate. Stodges like Dr. Johnson liked their school, but that's because he was incredibly brilliant at all stages. He is an exception. I don't know, I haven't done it, but look at Keats I'm sure if you look at any successful poets from the last century, they would, I'm sure, tell you that they hated their school - but I am guessing.

There is a bit of research could be done, probably wasted hypothesis and it could be checked.

There are all kinds of kids and if you got the situation right, the kids would be desperate to go to school regardless of the kind of schooling, that would be like the first level.

Anyway let's get back to the drowning guys jockeying around with big grins, liking being on the stage, no benevolence. They are like the CBC, no benevolence. They just want to tease people to death. They never inform them of anything useful.

Entertainment, I don't see why playing with German flash cards couldn't be entertaining, like snap with somebody. I mean anything can be made into a game or pleasure. It's so eerie.... It's eerie that we live in a culture where entertainment has to be about nothing or it induces some kind of stress in the recipient.

DLY: We don't want to think, right.

KJ: Why don't we want to think? Are we apes? How did we destroy the curiosity?

Of course you have got to think. We did at one point, but our entertainment doesn't allow us to think.

We have been educated.

It must be something to do with stress, hype and burning.

My problem is school and Shaw's problem is that it was an incredible interruption to the education.

You know you are a human being, you want to know everything and these idiots at school, they kind of teach you what they want to teach you. They are not interested in students. It doesn't matter what the kid wants as long as he is desperate to learn.

I would say you should go for the process and not the end result. That if the process is wonderful, the kid would be wonderful.

I got into the wrong course [at school] and in very strange ways, when I got there I became their chief reader. They were astounded. I wasn't surprised. I didn't ask the questions then. I know why I was successful. They had been to university. They were good students. They knew all about the Elizabethan theory. I hadn't read Brecht then. I didn't know Lawrence and Laymer – because I knew the stuff outside of the Canon. None of them knew - *Spring Awakening*⁹ - which is now well known. They hadn't read Japanese plays like *The Love Suicide*¹⁰. I have read all that. They probably hadn't read more Strindberg than *The Father*¹¹. I had read all of Strindberg because I love reading.

I desperately adore Chinese music because there was somebody on the radio playing this 'cat stuff' and he liked it. So I am saying there is something there, I have got to find out about Chinese music.

But the school does the opposite of that.

Really it's to do with discipline. They all come from the army, it is the military. It is trying to make people conform. Some people are fine but I think

⁹ Frank Wedekind's 1891 play *Spring Awakening*.

¹⁰ Zaemon Byers (date unknown) *Love Suicide*.

¹¹ August Strindberg (1887) *The Father*.

that even the people who conform are damaged but they get through school fine because they can, by nature, become conformists.

I never talk about students at all because you can't suck them all up. Every teacher is going to have some students who make it. So, maybe you just failed.

*The Kids in the Hall*¹² got me to come in and review their show. Two of them who were also the writers were in the room, I think they are writers. They did a show and invited me in to talk to them and I saw it and I said I would love to talk to you. I can tell you anything. The theatre was packed with kids hammering at the doors at eleven o'clock at night. They were leaping over the seats to get to the front. I didn't know what to do. I said I would tell you anything.

Now if they stayed at 'The Loose'¹³ I would have said things to them. I would say, it is wonderful, this play is fantastic, but there wasn't one scene I wanted to remember.

But that isn't quite true. I would remember Bruce McCulloch's scene. Bruce would do a scene where he comes in with his pet as a block of ice that he has bought and brought to the theatre. You have got somebody with a mind. Anyway, if you have got good nature and good feeling it is like a good party. That is the beginning.

My chances of going to the TheatreSports has been better than nil.

I went to TheatreSports, two of them in Edmonton about six weeks ago. I didn't see any TheatreSports, I just talked. I told them I wouldn't see them because I think it is a waste of time. If it is a tournament, it is going to be appalling because they want to win.

DLY: Let me touch on that, because one of the things that I deal with in my research and as a teacher/practitioner is the competitive nature of kids.

Part of that competitive nature plays out with TheatreSports, as well as the phenomena across Canada in a lot of high schools which is the Canadian Improv Games - which used to be the Improv Olympics.

¹² *The Kids in the Hall* are a very popular Canadian comedy troupe that had their own television series from 1989-1994. A few of the actors from this group studied under Keith.

¹³ The Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Alberta that Keith founded to do TheatreSports.

KJ: Wasn't it David Shephard?

DLY: Yes, David Shephard. He did the Improv Olympics and then, it transmuted into this national event based out of Ottawa, now run by my friend Alistair Cook.

I guess the thing that always concerns me is that competitive element.

KJ: People have no idea how to play games.

It is a disaster.

I don't watch sport. I have no interest in it.

It reminds me of teaching teachers to play tag. It is like there is a big field somewhere. They have got a bunch of teachers. They can play tag and they all played tag as children. As children they had one technique and as adults many of them have another technique. The adults don't want to be caught; some of them run a far distance and hide behind bushes. Children (which they once were) knew that the game was about risking to getting caught. Now the point of the game is the pleasure of playing the game. You have winners and losers. If you always have the same winners, that's a real drag....

We have words like 'games' and 'playing' or 'acting' and as soon as you have a word because we are not the schools – which should teach the pleasure of competent dissidence. That's what they should teach, because this world is never going to make sense when we put grids on things. The grid is useful but actually the grid excludes all sorts of stuff. The grid is a tool and competent dissidence is a pleasure. I sort of loved it when there were stars that were older than the universe. That's life to me.

I will tell you a thing about bad teaching and the effects of it. Teaching doesn't ruin everything, but you can see traces of it even in very gifted people. It's a science. There is some new discovery and the scientist is interviewed. They say things like 'we don't have to panic yet'. Why don't they say 'we don't have to celebrate yet'? They never say that because they are unconsciously defending their knowledge.

The good student comes to destroy their knowledge. Define the good student. You have come to destroy the knowledge of the professor if you can. That's the good student, but don't do that in my university. But if the professors were good, you want your knowledge destroyed by the students if you can. That's the game. That's a wonderful game. By the time they come out of high school they think that the procedure is that they learn from the professor in drama and in Fine Arts that is insane, especially as the power of human beings comes from the unconscious, it doesn't come from the intellect. Now because of universities and the Fine Arts and critics, if you can prove that you are intellectually clever and original and strange it is art, whatever it is. And the whole system has really collapsed - it's gone - it's hopeless.

DLY: When you were a teacher, how did your colleagues regard you?

KJ: I was a very bad teacher.

DLY: No. No. Were you a bad teacher or were you received badly? Let's go back to that for a second, I am just curious.

KJ: I am a very disorganized person.

My life has greatly improved recently in the last five or six years by taking on a business manager who is not like me.

As a teacher I need somebody else to help me organize, because I am very unorganized, but my idea of teaching was to inspire the kids and they were going to throw me out.

Fortunately the school got inspected and the guy never came near me again. That's all right. The divisional officer saw a kind of chaos [in my classroom] and was right about that.... There was a two-year probation. They took me off probation after the first year.

I failed my teaching college course - nobody ever failed. It was a crash course for teachers. Nobody had ever been known to fail it.

DLY: What was the deficiency? What hoop didn't you jump through for them?

KJ: I was interested in politics and I thought if you were interested in politics you should have some interest in economics. So in the second year, I gave up music, which I was very good at and took up economics. I learnt nothing because I can't learn anyway.

Unfortunately the Economics Department got inspected that year so they apologized to me; and they said we want you to be a teacher, because they had reports for me on teaching practice that were amazing. They wanted me as a teacher but they knew as an academic I was going to be quite useless.

So they said: "Why don't you come and take English?"

And I said: "I can't. I always fail in English."

They said: "nobody fails. If you take it - it will be all right."

So I took English, which I have always failed at because I can't spell.

Yeats would have been a professor of literature at Trinity I think. They wouldn't take me in the end. Like they wouldn't take that guy in Toronto because he said something about Prozac. Told the truth about Prozac. Millions and millions of dollars in funding effects the universities, so there's a lot of creeps over there, not just in psychology. The guys who run the whole University of Toronto are contaminated because they should have come and said 'you come'. You can't suppress this guy for telling the truth... anyway I got side tracked. What were we talking about?

DLY: We were talking about the teacher college and how you had failed.

KJ: Actually the teaching was fine.

Yes, Yeats his letter of application had so many spelling mistakes he spelled professor with about four f's!

DLY: Didn't have spell check.

KJ: Absolutely, I didn't know how bad I was until I got a computer. It's true. Do you spell it like that? Oh, god! Anyway, bad spellers...

DLY: I have a joke with my students that I do as an aside. If they catch spelling mistakes on the board and punctuation mistakes, they get more marks because I am terrible at the board. I am terrible without spell-check.

KJ: It's a game.

DLY: Yes and they have fun with it.

KJ: And it shows that you are willing to lose and stay happy.
You teach them good things. You are not teaching what most of them teach.

DLY: No. I have a motto I teach. My motto is "embarrassment is temporary" and I model for my kids. I like to say to them that we are in a room full of crazy losers and that I am the biggest loser here! And it's about being able to take the risks and allow them to feel comfortable with whom they are as people. And that people are strange, people are odd, crazy mixed up beings that take themselves way too darn serious.

KJ: It is in fact, a playground.

DLY: Yes and we just have a blast! And whether we are doing scripted work or stuff that kids are writing or improvising, it is about them being themselves and how they can explore it all fully. That is how I approach it and always have.

KJ: Then you are pushing rocks uphill in the education system.

DLY: Yes, I know.

KJ: So, was I.

But anyway my kids all learned to read and stuff. How can a child not learn to read? I mean it has to be a pleasant game. It has to be nice. What we do is we put kids into English classes where they are told how to interpret literature.

DLY: I had a student come to me and complain that a teacher had told them that they had interpreted one of Shakespeare's sonnets incorrectly.

I said, "How did you do that?" It is something unique and personal to you and something very different to the professor, or to the teacher. It is something different to everyone.

It was very frustrating and I think that my most difficult challenge, to be quite honest, in academia — what I have been told is that because there is so little academic research in the field of improvisation and TheatreSports and it is not rigorous. There is not enough rigor. I like to use that word rigor as in rigor mortis — deadly.

Unfortunately I had to go to the extent of changing supervisors because of this problem and I had to find someone who would accept my work and my writing and the area that I wanted to play and research in.

KJ: You say improvisation, but you realize that they don't have a clue about comedy.

Let's make it a larger field. They have no idea what comedy is. Their idea of comedy is pathetic¹⁴.

DLY: Why do you think it is so hard? Why to you think it is so hard for people to figure it out?

KJ: They don't understand tragedy either. They can write about it. They get serious and you don't laugh.

Well one thing about it if you really laugh at something it fucks up your short-term memory.

DLY: What? Explain that.

¹⁴ Johnstone believes that today's comedy is too mechanical.

KJ: The brain takes life and it transfers certain things to the long-term memory. The transfer is not so good when you laugh a lot. If you laugh hysterically at a show, it is quite hard to grasp it. Talk to improvisers if they do a wonderful show they can't remember what happened.

DLY: I think that is the same with actors when they feel like they are clicking. They walk off stage and they go 'wow' and they don't know what happened.

KJ: But they weren't there.

DLY: I know they weren't, they were in the moment.

KJ: Their ego wasn't there. Something else drove them. That is what you want in art. Talk about rigorous!

Like Peter Cook¹⁵.

It is ridiculous, idiot people hiding.

The world of universities is full of really intelligent people, who went through the system, but who can't think straight. They can't use common sense.

The universities want the students to be well-rounded individuals maybe that's the phrase, I don't know.

Take Richard Feynman¹⁶ who I really like, he took an option outside of physics or whatever he was doing, mathematics perhaps. I don't know what he was doing in history of art. They suppressed him from it.

There is a book called: *How Children Fail*.... ...they suppressed John Holt from the education students in Calgary. They had never heard of John Holt¹⁷. Have you heard of heard of him? Write down the name John Holt. Write down, *How Children Fail*.

DLY: Is that his book?

¹⁵ Peter Cook was considered by Johnstone to be "the funniest man in England." He was an actor/comedian during the mid-1950's and with his partner Dudley Moore, they wrote review sketches.

¹⁶ Nobel Prize winning physicist.

¹⁷ Holt, John (1964) *How Children Fail*. New York. Pitman.

KJ: Yes, it was his first book. He sat in classrooms and he watched kids and he watched teachers.

Write down Richard Feynman. If you had done quantum physics you would do quantum diagrams. He was a Nobel Prize winner. He was the youngest American professor who helped to build the bomb. He was the person who broke the secrecy about why the space shuttle crashed....

Anyway, You must be joking. Mr. Feynman, is the book. It never went out of print. I tell you, you will love that book. It tells you how to get the showgirls in Las Vegas to sleep with you.

This is quite difficult, very difficult; they won't do it unless you read the chapter explaining how to open the high security safes of the generals at Los Alamos. He is a guy, in the depression in some country town. These little towns in the depression, if your toaster won't work that is the end of it. Here for a charge of 7 or 8 they will take the toaster to bits to see how it works.

DLY: We have wonderful minds. Do you think that people obviously have the inherent desire to play to be spontaneous to be?

KJ: Of course that is what the schools lack. They don't think it's important.

A few scientists in the last month wrote an interesting report on the importance of play.

We are desperate to play in the schools.

There is so much evidence now that play is related to brain growth.

DLY: What is interesting though Locke and Rousseau in both their writings really explore the suppression of play as the most important aspect of educating people. I think that is one of the problems; we want desperately to make kids into suppressed adults.

KJ: It is the military. It is the militarization. The government loves sport, the totalitarian government, all governments, the communists, god they loved it. The

fascists loved it. And Hitler loved it. They thought sports wonderful because the contact is pathetic and is like most improvisation.

On the other hand we have the guys who are drowning and trying to look happy and they all hate everybody. They are arrogant assholes that just want to be on the stage to be admired....

Then you have people who can actually put this story together. That's rare in improvisation. As soon as the story evidence is there, as soon as the story begins to develop, it is killed dead on the stage. They can see it. They can predict it.... People who are afraid of the future, are terrified of the future, most of them do bad improvisation and they are all destroying the possibility of the future. They are also avoiding any possibility of emotional identification or self-revelation.

[During last night's improv performance]... somebody said "I want to show a new mask [in the character of] God doing Micetro¹⁸." So I said, "Fine, what's he like?" He said a few things about what it was like, so I thought the best thing is to put him on a park bench with somebody else... and this other guy came and sat there. He was a really interesting character but I think the mask or something bored him. He treated him wonderfully you see and he gave everything to the mask, as he should. He touched him a few times.... And the mask improviser stood up and I thought he was really pissed off because his wife died a month ago and the whole family comes up and she doesn't even know the answer. She accused everybody including him. She underlined him and the other guys... and said, "What kind of world am I in"? We had to go to a therapist because we can't talk to one another as human beings. It has got so bloody mechanized that if we are in pain and grief you have to go to a specialist for help. Well have you seen a scene like that in improvising?

Wow! So there is a wonderful image. They are working wonderfully well together. Improvisation is effortless. There is emotional identification. You can bring tears to people's eyes. And there's a point. There's a point when the guy

¹⁸ Micetro Impro is a more recent form of improvisation that Keith has created, where a guest judge or facilitator makes suggestions or directions to the actors while the scene is being played out.

thinks he can offer help because he is a therapist and the other guys say I want help from a human being. Amazing.

Another scene last night about... I haven't got a very good memory, two guys... Short-term memory transfer is not good. Minsky¹⁹ said that. The guy from MIT, Marvin Minsky. He has the idea. Because the education fails. He has some interesting ideas. He was the founder of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT.... He has this idea of short-term memory transfer affected by laughter.

One of the things I said to a guy, a sixteen-year-old boy who was kind of, I realize now, it's becoming amazing. He is on a stage with a guy who is forty-five. They are standing side by side. I said tell me something that outrages you. He said, "Censorship". So we put a sofa with its back to the audience. We put him on the sofa so you just see a tuft of hair and his father comes in and finds him reading pornography. It is a scene that is worth remembering because it's about something. It's about a family relationship.

DLY: In the examples you have given from last night's improv work, it's obvious from your descriptions just how ephemeral it is. How the improv exists in it's own moment and time.

KJ: But it was worth watching.

DLY: I know, you walk away and you go, wow and you smile and it creates that connection for you as a member of the audience — and then it's gone somehow. How often does this happen? Give me a percentage. How often?

KJ: On a great night a lot of it can be like that. There were more examples like that and many of them were inspired. If the scene inspires, it's got something deeper than just the surface.

DLY: If this feeling exists and I know it does and you know it does, then how come, improvisation is treated like a cheap cousin to scripted theatre?

¹⁹ Marvin Minsky an MIT computer 'Guru', who specialized in artificial intelligence.

KJ: That's because they don't realize how much crap scripted theatre is. Most of the work is crap, most of it is. I mean it's appalling.

DLY: But you know what I am saying — scripted theatre has been given a value that improvisational theatre has not been given.

KJ: They are not thinking.

I think people are taught to display their intelligence in university. I teach people to be obvious and that's not what the universities understand — being obvious.

Being clever as far as the improviser is concerned isolates you from the spectators and from your own self. Being clever is the intellect. The intellect is not you.

DLY: These are also some of Stanislavski's teachings. In his writing, he talks about getting away from 'the obvious,' get away from 'being clever'. Do you put much stock in Stanislavski's work and what he tried to do improvisationally with actors?

KJ: I think to have any system is ridiculous since we are all different. I think you have many, many systems.

The guy who wrote the forward to the Danish version of improv said that Stanislavski's favorite pupil had lots of tricks; and felt that this sort of system of trickery was not very good, but when he worked with me he realized it was important to have lots of tricks. Which really means lots and lots of methods. As soon as you have a method you so limit everything.

I don't think acting is understood at all. I think you see the kids shut themselves off. Jackie Coogan²⁰ was age three. Well if acting is a cerebral thing where you have to study it for years and years, then that's serious genius.

DLY: I think it is like the little girl in the movie, *The Piano*. Does she deserve an academy award to be a little girl? It's how the director set her up.

KJ: I didn't like it. I was bored stiff by it.

DLY: But you know what I am saying? Did you see the movie, *The Sixth Sense*?

KJ: No.

DLY: OK, the little boy in that movie with Bruce Willis, he was acting. I thought there was a craft to what he was doing and he didn't win any award. Whereas the little girl in *The Piano*, I thought was her just being a little girl.

KJ: That would be good.

DLY: What?

KJ: If she is just being a little girl, maybe we could project into her.

DLY: I don't know. I thought one of the things I was acknowledging in the little boy in *The Sixth Sense* was the fact that he was a little boy but he was dealing with issues and things that were incongruous to being a little boy in such a way that we saw a craft.

KJ: If the story insists that you have to do something, you have to do something. But the kid who is afraid and chattering when he is taken away believes it. It is wonderful.

There are also stories that have come out recently about little kid actors that directors treat quite harshly and did all kinds of nasty things to get the reaction. The kid believes it.

²⁰ Jackie Coogan was three years old when he played opposite Charlie Chaplin in the famous film "The Kid". Johnstone points out that "kids always believe that it is really happening to them."

CHAPTER THREE

A Reflective Glance — Seeing the Unseen



As we reacquaint ourselves with our breathing bodies, then the perceived world itself begins to shift and transform. When we begin to consciously frequent the wordless dimension of our sensory participations, certain phenomena that have habitually commanded our focus begin to lose their distinctive fascination and to slip forward toward the background, while hitherto unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness.

David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 1996, p. 63.

A Reflective Glance — Seeing the Unseen

• • •

It's Friday afternoon
 the final bell has rung to signal the end of the school day
 the end of the week
 the end of my yearly spring performances
 possibly the last of my career at this school
 and as I walk languidly over to the staff room
 I enter the pallid glare of the men's washroom
 sickly bright orange counter tops
 entangled and intermingled with the shiny white porcelain toilets
 and as I ready myself to release the days water waste...
 the kidneys work hard
 to filter the brown liquids which I ingest over the course of the average school
 day... black coffee and diet coke...
 make my heart and body forget that I am asleep on my feet
 make me forget that I circumnavigate two hours of asphalt highway daily
 for the honor to work with the kids at my school
 consuming, consumption, collectively, collaboratively,
 calibrate, calcification, connotative...
 black coffee and diet coke
 rush out of me as I stand before the urinal
 stare at a chipped piece of paint on the wall directly in front of me
 bodily perception provides me with the opportunity to truly feel the wonder of
 release, relief, raining, rushing, rejuvenating my bloated bladder...
 at this precious moment
 a moment in time
 I drink in my first real deep breath of the day
 I savor it
 hold it in
 let it take me to a thousand different places simultaneously
 I find myself wondering about my pregnant wife
 soon to give birth
 practicing Kegel exercises to strengthen her for the impending delivery
 wasted water flowing out of me
 flowing out like my soon to be born daughter
 flowing out
 — disposed of —
 like our first attempt at pregnancy that ended in a miscarriage
 flowing out like my semen
 during the moments of our lovemaking trying to conceive

flowing out like the small spawning streams
 that provides my favorite lake with Rainbow Trout
 sitting in an aluminum boat
 casting... waiting...
 enticing the water dwellers onto my hook
 for my own sporting amusement, the rain is flowing too...
 gray storm clouds pulsate over me
 pissing, spitting, sputtering moisture, drenching me
 awakening me
 filling me like it does the lake
 like I fill the urinal
 and as I expel my breath
 the wind that nourishes my lungs
 oxygenates my blood
 helps to aid me as I press the plunger handle down
 and watch as my yellow water
 mixes with the clear fresh water flowing into the bubbling bowl
 into the drain holes
 through miles of pipes
 sewage and septic systems
 until we meet again recycled and clean
 in a boat on a lake
 fishing for trout
 with my wife and soon to be born child
 showering, bathing, washing
 or reconstituted into my addictive brown liquids

~~~~~

The question at the staff meeting  
 was about student work ethic  
 students accepting mediocrity  
 student attendance, lates, coming unprepared  
 voracious, vocal, volatile, voices  
 filled the room  
 blaming the students  
 verisimilitude  
 it is their fault  
 it is their parent's fault  
 it is the fault of the media, movies, television, video games and rap music  
 no one looked in the mirror though  
 no one looked deep enough to see their own responsibility  
 their own teaching  
 which might be lacking  
 where was the grace  
 graceful, gracious, grace in living  
 graceful teaching  
 where we explored our own ability or inability  
 to teach passionately  
 with enthusiasm  
 with love

with a sense of wholeness and purpose  
 no one except me pointed these things out  
 and within that single moment

I felt  
 alone

solitary amongst my colleagues  
 not only for having these thoughts  
 not only for saying what I said

BUT

for teaching the way I teach  
 for living the way I live  
 for sharing myself  
 passionately, enthusiastically, dramatically  
 with my students

I was alone and singled out in this meeting  
 the room, the teacher's silent gaze, the room...  
 ... I was alone...

although  
 when I teach

I am surrounded by my students  
 communal, collective, community  
 no problem with work ethic here  
 with them

I am never alone

~~~~~

I am attempting to make a change in my life
 my career of nine years at my school
 seems to be closing in on me
 and I feel trapped, indentured, unable to move, to transfer
 a lack of mobility prevails...
 and as I explore the many options I have at this juncture in my professional life
 sitting in the far reaches of my office
 the drama room office
 room number 144a
 the sign above the door tells me that this is my office
 "David L. Young — Theatre/Drama"
 I rest myself this morning
 like I would if I were in my home
 closed off in my own bed
 the warmth of my wife lying next to me
 our dogs close at hand
 my office in this school has become my defacto home
 I sleep in this velveteen golden hued chair that was donated years ago
 as a set piece for the first musical production I ever produced at the school...
 its 1970's design, decor, now dilapidated
 sits in my office corner,
 it once held a place of prestigious honor in a family's living room
 dancing babies on knees
 Christmas presents being opened

waiting up for children
 late coming home from a party
 reading the Sunday newspaper
 or watching the Stanley Cup finals...
 this chair holds this dynamic, static, energy
 and it's place on our musical stage
 was not dissimilar from its place in the home of its previous family
 stared at by hundreds of people show after show
 our cast danced on, in front of and around you
 our stage crew took off your swiveling wheels and pivots
 only to be replaced by a couple of bland 2x4's
 cut to fit
 and look like your once splendid legs
 my students
 as well have enjoyed you
 used you, cried in you
 tests studied for, lunches eaten, advice sought
 your clientele has been varied...
 one of my favorite students now graduated
 told me on numerous occasions
 that if and when I leave
 I MUST give the chair to her
 that it holds special meaning for her
 that the tattered fabric
 and flattened cushions
 somehow represent her five years spent with me as a student in drama
 I sit in this chair many mornings
 having arrived from an early morning commute
 my eyes still tired, dry, and weary
 I find this chair waiting for me in my office
 providing me with respite comforts
 reflective glances around my space
 I see the many masks that I have collected over the years
 plaster masks made with numerous grade eight students
 their expressions tense, worried, eager, frightened, taught with excitement
 as their peers placed wet plaster bandages on to their face
 to be bunched up
 molded and dried
 to create masks for creative stage work
 each mask is the mold of the face
 each face a past student of mine
 the students have left
 but the masks of their faces still remain
 I can remember whom each mask belongs to
 and it amazes me
 that even the mask of a young girl who committed suicide five years ago
 still smiles and laughs as it hangs on my wall
 I have a hundred or so creative projects scattered all over my shelves
 they are dusty

and never cleaned
by either the lazy drama teacher (me), or the custodial staff
who jokingly tell me that they are too afraid, respectful, to clean them
for fear of breaking or disturbing the silent homage I pay them
as they honor me
with the memory of the maker
the students now long gone
but the joy and wonder of the offering still amazingly fresh and poignant
the dust collects on these artifacts
just like the dust has collected on me
in nine years
I have grown up
been witness to and participant to my students growing up...
I've been to weddings, funerals, birthdays, graduations and cast parties
I have arbitrated disputes, given my love and helped to make meaning
and in the process
I too have been married, graduated, gone back to school once again
and am now about to experience the unknown challenge of parenthood
I worry that the dust that has gathered in and around my office
and metaphorically on me
has held me back
held me down
held me close
comforted me
grown with me
stilted me
shouted out too me
and muted me all at the same time
it's only recently that I have really noticed the dust
— a reflective glance —
providing me with the opportunity
to see the unseen
to find meaning in my practice
my teaching
my career
my life...

Time

• • •

In improvisation, there is only one time: This is what computer people call real time. The time of inspiration, the time of technically structuring and realizing the music, the time of playing it and the time of communicating with the audience, as well as ordinary time, are all one... The work of the improviser is, therefore, to stretch out those momentary flashes, extend them until they merge into the activity of daily life. (Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 1990, pp. 18-19.)

The chirping crickets create a stately and largely rhythmic current to my thoughts while sitting on the cedar deck of a cabin, once again by the sea, lazily typing my thoughts on a fine summer August afternoon. My wife, daughter and two Shelties nap after a morning of wandering and exploring through the salty tidal pools on the sandstone beaches of Hornby Island. A fishing skiff motors across the water. I hear its wake lap the shore line as the undercurrent of an old Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young song echoes through the standing pines, spruce and fir trees separating me from another cabin dweller. The bicycle trails are close by and have a constant stream of 'weekenders' riding through them. The smell of sea air mixing with a beach BBQ lunch off in the distance whets my already sated appetite. The freshness of this Hornby breeze takes me places beyond this Island, to places I have visited before. Life moving slowly. Time moving slowly — leaving me to consider the places I have been, the places I want to go and the places I will actually travel yet to come.

I have become maudlin as I watch my growing daughter, seemingly age so quickly, even at two years two months, I can't believe how much she has grown and changed. She is very independent even at two, with inner happiness and outward joy she explores the world. This morning while investigating the tidal pools she wanted to hug and kiss a tiny crab that we found under the seaweed and barnacle encrusted rocks because she was so excited and enthralled by it. Her energy is contagious as she exclaims loudly "good for us" or "I love it!" Our two dog's licking and drinking fresh water from a bottle squeezed onto my wife's hand caught Emma's attention and she also had to lick the fresh water from her hand too. It's not so much the idea of copying, or imitation, as it is the idea of experiencing, being open to experiencing everything in the freshest possible manner without prejudice. It is through my daughter's eyes that I am seeing the world differently now. For I too am more interested and attuned to these moments in time and certainly to her reactions to them as we encounter them together — her for the first time and for me with increased appreciation.

I am still avidly picking the ripe fruit, the late-summer blackberries on the periphery of the academy. I now share these moments with Emma, she picks the low ones and I pick the high ones, as we fill brightly colored plastic beach buckets with the bulging sour/sweet fruit. I still love this metaphor. The ripe fruit growing on trailing prickly barbed vines on the outskirts of the university that I one day aspire to be a part of. The fruit is beyond, before, belonging too, brought forth from, the outside of where the knowledge is built, brandished, bullied and beguiled. The prickles and thorns serving to remind us, remind me, of the labour involved in the attainment of this fruit. That even the ripest juiciest

blackberry on the top of the vine, requires a fight to pull it down to be picked. The bush doesn't yield easily and in the process, I get cuts and scratches and scars making that one piece of fruit taste even better than if I had bought it from a store, or had it fallen effortlessly into my tiny blue sand pale. My daughter, ever mindful of the prickles works her way slowly to each berry, pulling them off she sometimes likes to squish them between her tiny fingers to experience the tactile nature of the fruit in her hand. And even though I, ever the worrier, ask her not to eat them before we get home to wash them, she eats more than she drops into her bucket: it is without guile or politics or disguise of any kind that she picks, eats, offers, shares and experiences these moments. As improvisers and teachers should we not have similar senses of the world, as we offer, share and experience the world for and with our students or our audiences?

I recently went through a period of 'what if's?' Big 'what if's?' Thinking to myself dark thoughts about loosing everything I had worked for, feeling a sense of impending doom – looming beyond the horizon, around the corner of what had become (and what is) a very good life with my family. And I wondered about how I could, or would be able to cope should I suddenly loose it all. What would I do? How could I survive? And these dark thoughts and feelings brought me through a period of little or no sleep, little or no food, full of foreboding emotion of deep regret and despair. I kept wondering and asking myself what it was all about, how could I go beyond this place and make it on my own? And maybe this too is one of those elements we start to lose within the routines of daily living. We become so set in our ways and our creature comforts that the

idea of being spontaneous or improvisational to put ourselves into the mode of basic survival seems outrageous and absurd.

Control is an illusion. Time is a trickster. I fell asleep this morning while watching my daughter, my wife and my dogs wander off down the beach. And as I lay back in the carved and creviced sandstone rock, which ever so slowly yields the fine dust-like sand for this beach, I crossed my arms and began to breathe in deeply the scents and sounds of this wonderful place and fell asleep. In that time of sleep I awoke to a different landscape of water and sand. My family is further out towards the horizon as the out-flowing tide beckoned them further out onto the glistening tidal plane. And so it goes. The changing tides, the altered beach, to be walked upon, then washed with waves. Seasons and time come and pass and we become such slaves to them, wondering if we ever make any decisions or difference at all, or if it isn't all pre-ordained and if so what legacies do we leave in our own wake? I am taken by David Abram's (1996) invitation to be "free to look around us, in this vast terrain, for the place of the past and of the future" (p. 209). Abram goes on to cite Martin Heidegger's book *Being and Time* (1967) explaining Heidegger's philosophical structure of time (the past, present and future) in terms of three ecstasies carrying us "towards a particular horizon" (Heidegger, 1967 as cited in Abram, p. 209) He writes:

... Heidegger offers us a helpful clue. In *Being and Time*, he writes of past, present and future as the three "ecstasies" of time, suggesting that the past, the present and the future all draw us outside of ourselves. Time is ecstatic in that it opens outward... we notice an obvious correspondence between the conceptual structure of time, as described by Heidegger and the perceptual structure of the enveloping landscape. The horizon itself! Heidegger uses the term "horizon" as a structural metaphor, a way of expressing the ecstatic nature of time (p. 209).

From moment to moment we create, recreate and perpetuate our daily lives. The ‘ecstasies’ of time require a mindful commitment from each participant to experience and linger in the moment, full of appreciation, wonder and desire. When we reflect on time, time well spent, time wasted and time simply lived we realize the precariousness of these moments. Recently, five students of mine — all graduates from my drama program — were driving to a friend’s house late one evening after renting a movie from a local video store. While driving on a wet darkly lit country road, five minutes from their intended destination, they hit a wet patch in the road ‘fish-tailed’, swerved and flipped the car into a ditch with the car propped up on the side of a power-pole. This tragic accident, which took place in a matter of seconds, left four kids injured and one dead. In this instance the respondent driver was unable to deal with the spontaneous nature of the road conditions affecting his vehicle and within the ensuing seconds (mere heartbeats) could not control the outcome. The survivors will forever play out the “horizon of time” in a multitude of scenarios, as they linger in these moments.

Reflecting Upon Time

• • •
While exploring
Images of my daughter – Emma
I used to believe
That I had infinite time
That each moment
Would merge into the next
And that these spaces
Experiences
And places
In time
Would reproduce themselves
In a way
That would allow me
To be greedy
And take for granted
The fleeting
Ethereal
Nature
Of each moment

Then you came into our lives
So happy
So perfect
And with each day that you grew
And changed
Each milestone
You became
Even more perfect

But
It made me painfully aware
Of time

I watch you at play
You are so cute
So happy
And I wonder...
For how much longer does this last?

How many times will you ask me to play in the sand with you?
Or repeat sounds and words?
Or speak your own special word language?
Or make toe-art on mommy and daddy's feet?

As each moment occurs
I am witness
Participant
Excited and mournful
That it has happened
And will never happen again
Each day is it's own photographic video image
Of something worthy of saving
Worthy of capturing
Worthy of life-long memory
Worthy of a time capsule

I am already maudlin
Because each snapshot as it is taken
Each photographic image
Touches me so deeply
As a testament in time
As a captured moment
That we can look back on

Time moves so fast now

I feel life accelerating
In a way
That I never knew existed
I look forward to so much
But look back also on many moments
And find my self heavily laden with memories
Of time wasted
Or spent foolishly
The conflict is to create an understanding
Of what is important
What has real value?

Time is a trickster
Pretending
And
Promising
Infinite moments
When in fact
So little truly exists

If I were to quantify
How many times you will hold out your hand to me

And
Call
Me
Daddy
(With each time my heart swells with love and pride)
If we count them
Along a linear path
From one year old to three
Or from three years old to eight
Each one that I miss
I must consider
A painful loss
A missed opportunity
Never to be regained

If there were only
(Let's say)
100 times we could play in the sand
Together
And I choose to read a book instead
Would I ever get that opportunity back again?

Or is it gone forever?
And the countdown begins
And drops to 99, 98, 97, ...
Until one day
This reservoir of opportunities
Dries up
And you no longer want to play in the sand
And if you do
Not with your daddy any more
And I am left behind
Wishing
I had never picked up that book

You have made me see
So much more of life
You play
And improvise
And connect with your world
You are learning
In so many ways
While neglecting nothing

Adults view time
Or I view time
Or I used to view time
In such a way
That I thought I had

Plenty of it
But
Then you were born
And then 'he' died
And some planes exploded
And there was a war
And we were building a new house
And money was tight
And our careers weren't what we wanted
And
In and amongst all of that
We still went to work
But not as happy as before
Certainly not as relaxed
Less smug
In fact
Because we realized
I realized
That time
Was no longer infinite
Actually
It was always finite
But it took you to prove this to me
Because your world
Your moments
Were so precious
And valuable
More so than any treasure
Yet
In and amongst
The busy-ness of life
Those moments
Were so very difficult to control
Or be a part of
And they kept getting lost

I don't want to look back on a life
Of exclusively raising other peoples children
I don't want to ignore the fact
That my family is more valuable
Than my student/school family
I will not take time for granted
I will not look back at your photos wishing
That I had been there – because I will be there

We need to reconfigure our lives
Spend time as carefully
As we spend money
Place value on family

Friends
And special moments
That only happens
Once
Or twice
Or three times
So that
We don't look back with regret
Remorse
Or contrition

As I write these words
I am sitting on a beach
The healing sun
Shining hot
Brightly
Overhead
Looking out
At a vast expanse of deep blue ocean
Lapping waves
Along the shoreline
The moist
Humid
Aromatic
Hawaiian air
Fills my lungs
And I am mystified
Stupefied
Into a state of peaceful recompense
With my life
With my time
The horizon seems to go on forever
But it doesn't
The sun wants to shine on me
But there is a long
Low
Cloud
Overhead
Denying me
That opportunity
I can wait for the clouds
To dissipate
But what will that bring?
If I continue to wait
For the sun to burn through
I would have to have patience
And be willing
To persevere
What if I can't wait?

What if I don't have this virtue – patience?
Or if I do
I wait impatiently
Because
I now understand time
Better now
Than I did before
Or do I?
While exploring
Images of my daughter – Emma

Lingering Moments



... Students desire ways of accessing being in a new way and understand how this informs their practice. A hunger is evident. Students are yearning for places to nourish an inner life, which will sustain them in their engagements in daily practice. {Celeste Snowber (1998), *A Poetics of Embodiment – Cultivating an Erotics of the Everyday*, pp. 73-74.}

I have been incredibly fortunate to have had my daily practice and academic writing 'nourished' by Celeste Snowber (1995, 1998), whose own embodied, poetic, pedagogical living has informed my work immeasurably. The depth of her prose and reflections enables me to linger in the many moments of Eros she creates for her reader. Whether she is recounting the lingering moments of an early morning coffee and blueberry scone, or reliving one of many precious moments with her children and parents, Snowber invites her reader to share and revel in these, her life-gestures. As a poet, dancer, teacher, academic and mother, Snowber both knows and honors attending to the erotics of living life improvisationally. She writes:

The word improvisation stems from the Latin *improvisus*, which means "unforeseen." The element of surprise is embedded in the word, both in its integration in the art of performance as well as in its use of improvising living, loving, teaching, or thinking. Improvisation is the act of instantaneously finding fresh forms which can... be so present to the moment, or awake to bare presence, that one is open to the possibilities of thinking with the whole body (p. 141).

In daily living we act and we react, the causality of our attendant actions and reactions is usually based on a set of socially acceptable responses, it is

within this confined construct that expected predictable outcomes are usually born. However, when we are present in the moment of these unexpected happenings, we are open to all the possibilities, better able to linger and be present in the moment, enabling us to respond spontaneously with a deftness and ingenuity deeply embedded in our bodily memory and intuition. Nachmanovitch (1990) explains this type of improvisational living in terms of "intuitive promptings," while using the example of a tourist walking down the streets of a foreign city for the first time, the tourist encounters this new city and all she meets with a conscious and unconscious freedom (p. 19). When Snowber exclaims "every act of life is an improvisation, an act of living into the unforeseen" (p. 142), I am able to reflect on my own living and teaching improvisationally, to question deeper the intuitive moments of my praxis. And I wonder if I am just a tourist journeying through the streets of a new city, with each student, colleague, parent and administrator being a different route traveled, or corner turned.

My students are not listening to me. I am attempting to engage them in an improvisational role-playing activity and they will not sit still. Two or three of the girls keep whispering and giggling to themselves, disturbing everyone else. Three boys can't keep their hands off each other as they wrestle, push and prod one another. And this one girl continues to interrupt the class with imitations of bodily functions. I look around me, spot the clock on wall, only to realize that I have twenty-five minutes remaining in a thirty-minute period and I begin to sweat. I re-look at my lesson plan, the one that wasn't working and begin to improvise. With the help of a sound effects CD, we began to buzz around the room like mosquitoes and bees. We hopped around the floor like frogs. We

rooted about the space like oinking pigs. And, for a while, we all became twenty-three kitty cats — hungry, searching for our lost homes, eating, cleaning, purring, meowing and napping. And still, each time I tried to get their attention, to sit them down, to praise or instruct them, there would be some sort of distraction. One student would giggle, or move their chair, or say something silly and all the others would follow. Each with their own self-looping conversational theme, all speaking simultaneously, I try to get control. But what is control? I look at the clock again and I still have ten minutes left and not knowing what to do, still sweating, lingering desperately in that moment, we improvise a fantasy story where all the students willingly play along. When the bell rings and students file out of the classroom I start to question why, after more than a dozen years of teaching adolescent and teen high school students — I decided to try my hand with elementary school children especially in this case, Grade Ones?

As a reflective practitioner we can linger in these moments to help us pedagogically in our praxis. We can attempt to understand and consider what went wrong in our planning or explore the many ‘would have, should have, could have’ moments as we dissect our lessons. But, for me, in this particular example of my first day of teaching Grade Ones, as much as I was unprepared for the unexpected, I also found myself desperately crawling and hopping around the room like a pig, a cat and a frog. As hard as I was working, I was also deeply in tune with the improvisational mode Stéphane Grappelli (1976) speaks of when she points out, “improvisation is a mystery.... When I improvise and I’m in good form, I’m like somebody half-sleeping. I even forget there are people in front of me” (p.4). To linger in this ephemeral phenomenological moment

helps me make meaning for future interactions with students of all ages and appreciate the necessity for teachers to be intuitive and flexible practitioners.

Tom Griggs (2001) an academic who has a background in acting, mask and Commedia dell'Arte, takes this idea one step further in a paper extolling the virtues of improvisation and acting techniques in teacher training when he writes:

As a teacher educator, it is my goal to explore my own ways of knowing and experiencing the world and the ways they contribute to making me a more effective teacher and researcher. I attribute some of these ways of knowing to what I call the "epistemology of acting," which I define essentially as the visceral, multi-sensory means through which actors come to know and experience life... (p. 29).

Correspondingly we can advance and strengthen our own practice not only by taking the time to understand and linger in these ephemeral moments but to share them with our students and colleagues as education related biographical narratives, phenomenological writing and qualitative research. In a recent edition of the *Educational Researcher*, authors Bullough, Jr. and Pinnegar (2001) state that "part of what makes education-related biographical writing attractive to readers is the promise of recognition and connection. A space is formed for readers' experience that throws light on one's self and one's connections to others" (pp. 16-17). I'd like to draw a connection between the educational biography as storytelling, with the teacher engaged deeply within Griggs' (2001) "epistemology of acting." The teacher as storyteller, telling stories for and with her students, reaps mutual benefits to both. This is well articulated in Rex, Murnen, Hobbs and McEachen's (2002) article where they point out that, "traditionally, students described their good teachers as inspirational storytellers..." who were willing to share real stories that had happened to them

for the benefit of their students (pp. 788-792). Rex, Murnen, Hobbs and McEachen (2002) "view storytelling as a rich site for observing teaching as the joint social construction of 'self' as successful academic performer and social actor..." (p. 765).

CHAPTER FOUR

Teaching as Theatrical and Artistic Performance



Acting is in many ways unique in its difficulties because the artist has to use the treacherous, changeable and mysterious material of himself as his medium, detached without detachment. He must be sincere, he must be insincere: he must practice how to be insincere with sincerity and how to lie truthfully.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, 1968, p. 131.

Teaching as Theatrical and Artistic Performance

I was concerned about the persona of the teacher and argued that when a teacher is "personal", the disclosure, no matter how sincere, is still a role, performed within the context of the classroom and the position and possibilities of teaching within it. {Madeleine Grumet, *Visible Pedagogies*, 1998, p. 9.}

The teacher lives in a world full of performances. A world that is both personal and pedagogical — acting as, acting for, acting in, a curriculum-based system geared towards performance-based results. Both the student and teacher engage in an intertwined narrative, a role-playing and role taking relationship, as audience, spectator, client and patron of the performative act called teaching.

I can stand before a class of students and call it a performance. This performance, my teaching, is as much about my ability to deliver the curriculum (my script); to engage the students with the day's lesson (my lines); to interact with the students (improvising); while always maintaining my status and responsibility as the teacher (my role). The bell rings and my students (the audience) enter my classroom (the theatre), filled with expectations and a willingness to experience, explore and expand while taking a journey into our mutual learning (the production). Where there is a student there is a teacher. The teacher's role can only be expressed through the relationship with a student — the performer and the audience.

I want to talk about performance and how we the teachers deliver curriculum to students. I want to think about performance and the etymology of

the word — *parfournir* (to accomplish entirely) from the Latin *performare* (to form thoroughly). I want to reflect on what it means to perform, to have a performance, to be performing, to be a performer. Teachers perform when they teach. They take on roles as teacher, instructor, pedagogue and purveyor of information and present themselves before a class of students in the appropriate roles. I want to examine the many roles teachers play — *role* (a part or character taken on by an actor); any assumed character or function. The students as an active and dynamic audience — *audience* (an assembly of listeners or spectators), needing to be thoroughly engaged as partners in the educational transaction. The teacher as role taker and performer — the performative nature of education and curriculum as our part, our lines, the places from which we script our lessons.

Personal Teaching

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In elementary school Ms. Callas sat her grade one students in a circle and began to read us a story from a large colorful book. As she read, she played roles, narrated, showed us pictures, asked us questions, engaged us with vocalizations, facial expressions and hand gestures. We participated by listening, by interactively and responsively replying, making sound effects, answering questions and by watching in rapt attention.

Mrs. Kron told our grade two class about the Holocaust — how her family, some of whom ended up in Auschwitz, had barely survived. She rolled up the sleeve of her blouse and displayed the tattooed serial numbers that designated her as a child concentration camp inmate. We the students, her audience, were not only silent in awe, tearful and respectful, but were taken on a personal journey that enabled understanding, empathy and learning.

I recall French classes where the teacher engaged the students as if we were in a restaurant or a supermarket. In role, we learned a practical side of the language.

In P.E. the teacher performed his own version of a Hockey Night in Canada play by play as we played floor hockey. Each student was given a name of a hockey star, placed on our favorite teams and allowed to imagine we were playing for the Stanley Cup.

In social studies and history our teacher facilitated elaborate simulations to gain enhanced understanding of the Treaty of Versailles, the Nuremberg Trials, or the United Nations. He told us stories of his own childhood. The advancing Nazis flying over head with their Stuka Bombers, his family fleeing. Did he have to share his own stories in order to deliver the curriculum? Or was he helping to make meaning of the curriculum by placing it in a personal realm — a place of mutual and human understanding?

My grade nine math teacher told jokes at the beginning of every class, awarded prizes for student success and placed our studies in the context of everyday finance. He was a consummate player of the stock markets, especially penny speculative stocks and always had the stock listings and financial pages folded neatly on his desk at the front of the class. Math nine was as much about fractions and basic algebra as it was about learning how to incorporate, invest and create a stock portfolio. Numbers just seemed to have more meaning IF they had a dollar sign attached to them.

My grade ten English teacher was a typical child of the sixties, her tied-dyed skirts, afro hair and laid-back attitude was coupled with her desire for us to call her by her first name. She served coffee, tea, hot chocolate and cookies each class and invited us to share our writing in a trusting and communal atmosphere. She shared stories of actually going to Woodstock and what it meant to write and be creative in a world of turmoil. We wrote and presented creatively, communally and collectively. Our spelling, grammar, punctuation and other mechanics were given less priority than were the aspects of nurturing creativity, sharing and expressing ourselves with confidence.

I was shocked when my literature twelve teacher entered the classroom wearing a lace veil over his face and other feminine accoutrements, to get into the mood for reading the part of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. He ran his class on many occasions like a stand-up comedian, presenting personal monologues before each lesson, sharing humorous anecdotes about his own life with us and always hamming it up, playing the roles of the great characters of literature with a flair for melodramatic style.

My drama teacher smiled a lot, told jokes, provided insight into his own life — his own stories, gave examples of how to play, act and take on a role, from first hand examples he would perform for us on stage, sometimes using student volunteers to help with his demonstrations. We used to love going on stage with him when he acted out his examples. It was an opportunity to communicate with our teacher, on stage, in role and as equals. His relaxed demeanor made us relaxed. As we the students listened to him speak, we would be sitting on the terraced floor of the drama room, giving each other massages, relaxing ourselves, and preparing to do the assignments and the scene work that he assigned. We all desperately wanted to impress him, because we wanted to give something back to our teacher, because of what he had already given to us — himself. When I review the examples that I have cited, snippets of my own schooling, the caring up-bringing, pedagogical nurturing of a few fondly remembered teachers, I see a lot of teaching styles, a lot of personality and a lot of performing. I also remember teachers who were well versed in their fields. They looked genuinely excited about what they were teaching, because they were excited, or at least they were acting excited. They taught with passion and enthusiasm and subsequently we learned with passion and enthusiasm. Paradoxically, in

reflection every teacher I ever had, passionate or not, personal or distant, superlative or mediocre, played out the daily role of teacher/performer in relatively adept fashion. Teaching is a performance. The role of the teacher albeit personally connected is still a role that we take upon us. We can credit teacher training, we can credit curriculum, or we can give credit where credit is due — to the teacher as artist, actor and performer.

Theatrical Teaching

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There is a healthy tradition of metaphorical rhetoric in the writing of educational theory and research. To equate the classroom with a theatre, to correlate teaching to a performance, curriculum as dramatic event, or to consider the teacher as an actor/role-taker has great resonance for me and has been well contemplated and discussed (Grumet, 1976; Lessinger and Gillis, 1976; Bolton, 1984; Rubin, 1985; Pajak, 1989; O'Neill, 1989; Verriour, 1994). The classroom and the theatre have a great many commonalties, providing a relevant and meaningful vocabulary to facilitate the description of educational experiences. As an artistic medium, theatre has the ability to reach out to an audience in an entertaining as well as a didactic manner, while also providing the full spectrum of human feelings and emotions. As a social instrument, the school or the classroom has the capacity to enfranchise its participants with experiences, knowledge, opportunities and training, while also eliciting invaluable human connections.

In their book *Towards a Poor Curriculum* Madeline R. Grumet and William F. Pinar (1976) emphasize a desire to bring schooling and education at all levels down to its essence and have it "stripped of its distractions" (p. vii). Citing heavily from the theories of Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski's book, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968), Grumet draws important connections between Grotowski's theories of theatre and education. Grotowski's theatre was a theatre

of bare essentials, existing in the politically muted Communist Eastern Bloc, his actors were expected to experiment and explore within the theatrical medium through intense physical discipline, self-sacrifice and most importantly by fighting "to discover, to experience the truth about ourselves; to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily" (p. 212). Grotowski's book was a manifesto, challenging the status quo, demanding that a meaningful change in perception was needed for actors, audiences and directors, altering entirely the way we would view and experience theatre. Limited resources and political censorship made Grotowski's theatre a theatre of necessity, a theatre without the trappings or trickery of make-up, costumes, sets, lighting and further external influences that Grotowski felt severely limited his art. In his written statement of principles to his acting troupe Grotowski wrote:

Theatre — through the actor's technique, his art in which the living organism strives for higher motives — provides an opportunity for what could be called integration, the discarding of masks, the revealing of the real substance: a totality of physical and mental reactions. This opportunity must be treated in a disciplined manner, with full awareness of the responsibilities it involves. Here we can see the theatre's therapeutic function for people in our present day civilization... The actor's act — discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up — is an invitation to the spectator.... This act... we call a total act. [And] in our opinion it epitomizes the actor's deepest calling (pp. 211-212).

The artistic realities inexplicably linked with teaching, educating, learning and meaning making must be honored, respected, understood and practiced. Unfortunately, the political misdirection of educational consumerism has whetted a public appetite for standardized testing, regurgitated knowledge and quantifiable results; placing the artistry of teaching at an unfair disadvantage and at severe risk. The 'stuff' of education that takes place between students and

teachers in the classroom — this transaction of human communication, information, factual, fictional and statistical — doesn't exist on a ministry spreadsheet, it exists in the student's ability to make sense of a confusing and often alienating adult world. Grumet (1978) makes a case to wrestle "meaning from the grip of knowledge and return it to art" (p. 148), to provide students with activities and options to find personal satisfaction and relevancy within their journey of learning. This is why Grumet finds the theatre metaphor so attractive, because "theatre is the enactment of possible worlds" which is "performed in a middle space owned by neither the author nor reader," it is a "space for negotiation" (p. 149). Grumet's beliefs are as compelling today as they were when she first published them. Her desire for educators to explore and express their personal narratives is in keeping with Grotowski's rigorous theatrical methodology where the "act of performance is an act of sacrifice, of sacrificing what most men prefer to hide — this sacrifice is his gift to the spectator" (Brook, 1968, pp. 66-67).

For Grumet (1978) the connection between theatre and curriculum was expressed through autobiographical reflection and a phenomenological strategy called *currere* (translated from the Latin meaning "to run"), as in to run a course; and was "devised to disclose this experience" and provide additional penetration and comprehension (p. vii). On a phenomenological level, Grumet demands that curriculum scholarship and development seek the perspective and point of view of the student as well as the teacher, that a greater effort should be made to be consciously aware of what we actually observe or experience in an educational environment and that we must honor the "lived experience," putting the focus of education directly on the individual (pp. 12-21). Grumet expresses these

intentions in an existentialist realm, seemingly going far beyond Grotowski and certainly asking increasingly penetrating and difficult outcomes from an education system steeped in a much more pragmatic dialectic. She writes:

Whenever we speak of education, we are speaking of man's experience in the world. Despite the unique specificity of each person's perspective, the intentionality of all-conscious acts focuses his gaze on some object, real or imagined; he exists always in context....

Just as art requires the imposition of subjectivity upon the objective stuff of the world and is embodied in that stuff, in its materials, forms and limitations, so education requires a blending of objectivity with the unique subjectivity of the person, its infusion into the structures and shapes of his psyche.

Viewed from this perspective, education emerges as a metaphor for a person's dialogue with the world of experience (pp. 33-34).

To this end, Grumet hoped education could be much more than it already was, wanting to explore every aspect of the lived experience as a natural and expressive part of the course of living.

If we follow Grumet's 'course of living' and her use of the theatre metaphor, then contextually we would find our way unmistakably to the artistry of teaching as expressed by phenomenologist like Ted Aoki (1991) or Max van Manen (1990). Aoki is situated as a staunch supporter for the "legitimation of curriculum-as-lived by both teachers and students" (p. ii). Aoki believes that education is overly centralized, focusing on curriculum-as-plan or on teaching outcomes and results, "thereby displaying a willful ignoring of the lived world of the teacher and the students" (p. 1). In his writing, Aoki described a personal experience he had as a child; days before his family of Japanese Canadian descent were forced to leave coastal British Columbia for a World War Two internment camp in Alberta. He reflectively revisits the moment he walked away from his school, as he felt the watchful gaze of his teacher follow him for the last

time. Through this personal narrative, Aoki reveals "teaching as watchfulness and thoughtfulness" (p. 4); that teaching is "fundamentally a mode of being" (p. 7), and to be educated is to be "ever open to the call of what it is to be deeply human" (p. 21). For van Manen too, the pedagogical gaze of the teacher is paramount in phenomenological research and curriculum that "resonates with our sense of lived life" (p. 27), and is expressed by questioning the way we experience the world and our "intentionality... in which we live as human beings" (p. 5).

What is the correlation of the phenomenological worlds of Aoki and van Manen and the theatre metaphor? The dialogue of the classroom is a creative and reflective interaction — at its best both teacher and student are co-creators of a dynamic teaching and learning narrative, at its worst students become passive receptacles to be filled with static sonorous instruction. Paulo Freire (1968) suggests that when education becomes a process of "hollow, alienating verbosity" that it is suffering from "narration sickness" (p. 57). Teaching that finds its expression through the delivery of figures, rote facts and a variety of trivial data is part of a detached and disaffected educational system far removed from student significance and experience.

Artistic Teaching

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Each experience that I have had has helped to define the person and the teacher that I am today. Both the experiences in my life and my experiences in the theatre have a certain interchangeability... mirroring each other... exploiting the fact that so many of our experiences as people are universal in nature... exposing relationships and the full spectrum of emotions... our experiential memories are the foundational blueprints and signature codes, the psychological DNA for who we are as people. This ability or desire to synthesize and merge the lived experience with pedagogical practice is viewed by Deborah Britzman (1991) as a vital and dynamic mode of being. She writes,

...the foundations and sources of theory lie in teachers' practice. Educational theorizing... is situated within the lived lives of the teachers, in the values, beliefs and deep convictions enacted in practice, in the social context that encloses such practice and in the social relationships that enliven the teaching and the learning encounter (p. 50).

What am I doing when I am teaching? I operate with the conviction that in my teaching, I am myself. Not unlike Pinar and Grumet (1976), I share my lived experiences as an important and valuable appendage to 'the curriculum' (p. vii).

There is an interesting juxtapositioning of the scripted world of curriculum and the improvisational world of teaching. The theatre metaphor of teaching appeals to me because I view my teaching and much of the teaching that my colleagues do as artistic in nature. Artistic teaching exists in a place

where teachers and students interact in a collective state of learning tension. I use the word tension in the most positive connotation — as in stretching our capabilities to learn or perceive new ideas; or in having our fixed notions of the world we live in stretched to allow increased awareness or renewed perception; as in mentally straining to examine and understand our lived lives; or the excitement of appreciating the world as a place of fascinating and expanding knowledge; as in the perpetual motion that can be education exacting unlimited, unparalleled forces towards an educational equilibrium.

The theatre is a place of tension whereby the audience is engaged with characters, situations, stories, problems and scenarios awaiting solutions or resolutions. The classroom is a place of equal or greater potential, requiring both student and teacher to play simple, well-defined roles, journeying into the familiar and the foreign in a communal state of togetherness.

I attended a recent meeting at my secondary school where teachers were asked how to improve student work ethic; the staff sought suggestions, as if this were a simple equation requiring no more than a few linear definitions. More than twenty suggestions were placed on the white board to mull over; each one put the blame squarely on the shoulder of the student, while only one questioned the ability of the teachers. What is sorely missing is a sense of communal ownership for both the collective accomplishments and systemic deficiencies in education. In the theatre, actors are consciously aware of the symbiotic relationship that must exist between them and their audience — why aren't teacher's similarly aware of this? When the play goes poorly, gets terrible reviews, bad attendance and loses money, everyone from the actor, director, to the playwright is blamed for this failure. In professional sports, coaches and

managers of underachieving teams are continuously blamed, ridiculed and eventually fired from their jobs, because their million dollar athletes neglected to buy into the team's philosophy. In education when the students do poorly, the teachers and administrators tend to blame the students or the parents and even go as far as blaming popular culture and the media. Occasionally teachers will blame the Ministry of Education or the curriculum, but rarely will look in the mirror and question their own practice. Students and parents will blame teachers for their lack of success and will rarely own up to their own complicity.

Artistic teachers will teach with enthusiasm, passion, creativity, spontaneity and embrace their audience/students in a world of wondrous tension, suspense and originality. In this environment both the students and the teachers will want to be in daily attendance for each other, working simultaneously to create mutual understanding and embrace the transmission of newfound knowledge as if they were prospecting for gold, each nugget of information to be treasured, memories made and enhanced by a growing understanding about the world we live in.

When I discussed these ideas at this meeting, there was a cold reception for this type of analytical self-evaluation. I was even ridiculed by a colleague when he leaned back during a moment when the principal was summarizing the meeting's outcomes and mocked my comments about passionate and enthusiastic teaching.

What is wrong with wanting to give yourself over so fully to your teaching that your energy becomes contagious, so that students revel in their classroom opportunities? But in our education system there is a prevalent reluctance to 'raise the bar' of our own practice and teachers that make these

efforts are often ostracized or regarded as suspect. The role of the teacher is so much more than what we make of it, it has been crudely shaped by the continuously evolving frenetic embodiment of the classroom. Teachers should not just *act* like professionals, but *be* professionals.

In his book *Free Play*, Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990) writes about the manner in which "we split ourselves into controller and controlled" (p. 143), and I can't help being frustrated with the implicit implications of this with our current education system. If we use a private sector model for education and view our students as clients or customers, as teachers we might make more of an effort to give the customer what they want instead of what is deemed necessary. Using the theatre metaphor, with teachers as actors and students as audience, Peter Brook's (1968) advice resonates as he writes: "The actor's work is never for an audience, yet always is for one. The onlooker is a partner who must be forgotten and still constantly kept in mind (p. 57). The fact that most teachers can not get their students out of their minds during the school year, yet still manufacture, deliver and evaluate the curriculum without consultation with or consensus by their students, stands as an obvious paradox that needs rethinking.

How often do we as teachers allow student input into the decisions and directions of the individual and class learning plans? Expectations and evaluation are negotiated by the class as a collective — communally — with a shared determination, mutually negotiating the curriculum Nachmanovitch (1990) writes, "the teacher's art is to connect, in real time, the living bodies of the students with the living body of the knowledge" (p. 20). The artistry of teaching lies in the ability of the teacher to find the methods, explore the means and

facilitate the numerous felicitous, spontaneous moments that can and should exist in our classrooms.

An exceptional book that I have read on the subject is Louis J. Rubin's *Artistry in Teaching* (1989). Rubin's reflections extol the virtues and attributes of the artistic teacher and in the process validate and honor daily practitioners. I also agree with his assertion that "artistic teachers excel at improvisation" (p. 16). Some of the best teaching occurs in the place between the planned and the unplanned — a moment in the lesson when something happens, someone says something, or a feeling is shared; or perhaps the moment is that flash of fear when the lesson seems to fail, students seem lost and through the endorphin rush that is panic... a new direction is inspirationally discovered that helps make meaning. Rubin writes:

A major dimension of artistry, in fact, involves the ability to take advantage of unanticipated opportunities — to capitalize on the ripeness of the moment. While expert teachers are, of course, organized in one fashion or another, they are nonetheless able to temper a plan, precipitate serendipity, or exploit chance situations when they occur (p. 17).

For Rubin, the artistic teacher is someone who is not only improvisationally adept, but also someone who is well versed in the dramatic endeavor that is teaching.

The dramatic artistry of teaching lies within the potential for dialogic encounter that passes between student and teacher during every meeting. If teachers can be the "tellers of our myths", with the curriculum doubling as our cultural imperative or tribal stories, which can be shared with the "young of the tribe" as suggested metaphorically by Kieran Egan (1986, p. 113); then artistic teachers certainly must play an active and integral role in the delivery of an

"affective" and "cognitively" understood story (p.29). Dramatic teaching and learning is when the teacher takes on the role of information provider and the students take the role of information gatherer and they work together to sustain one another's belief in the teaching and the learning. Patrick Verriour (1994) explores the manner in which students and teachers co-construct meaning within the dramatic moments of creating classroom role drama, he writes, "teaching in role is probably the most effective way to engage the students' interest, maintain a clear focus for their work and help them to approach material in new and interesting ways" (p. 80). Rubin (1985) concurs with these thoughts, explicating that "acting is not pretense. It is used not to deceive, but rather to vivify. Teachers act in order to gain attention, to clarify and to stimulate" (p. 117). If this is true then teachers who role-play, story tell and share themselves personally with their students have the potential for greater success in the daily transaction that is teaching.

Edward Pajak (1989) suggests that the role of the teacher and the student in the transaction of the classroom is not dissimilar to actors communicating their scripted performance before an audience. Pajak delineates teaching between "script-driven theatre and character-driven social interaction" (p. 204); thus explaining how the variety of constraints placed upon teachers inherently determines our script or role. It is the social interaction with students both in and out of the classroom which acts as the key variable for Pajak, who points out that teachers adjust their character or performance to suit the "reaction (or lack of reaction) of the student" (p. 205).

The Teacher as Performer

• • •

When I go into my classroom in the morning and see my students greet me with affection, respect and a sense of familiarity, I know I am preparing for an interactive performance — sometimes making it up improvisationally and sometimes doing it as well rehearsed and pragmatically as a clinical scientist. Some classes begin with a monologue-like introduction as if I were David Letterman or Jay Leno... rolling out one-liners and droll witticisms... and the students laugh and follow me through the lesson. And some days I come in with a tired frown, take attendance, list off a short description and expectations for the class and tell them to get started. On those occasions, the students look seriously at one another and whisper, "he's in one of his moods," but they still follow me through the lesson.

For me, so much of being an academic, or even a drama teacher, working every day in front of hundreds of young people, parents and colleagues, means taking on specific roles for specific moments. Every mode or encounter I have throughout the day demands a different role. Each role has its basis in how I wish to be perceived by my audience. The roles I play daily at my school are: teacher, mentor, friend, colleague, professional, department head, administrator, academic, researcher, fund-raiser, director, instructor, disciplinarian, baby-sitter, counselor, etc... I can bounce from role to role, shifting into each with ease — only to hope that at any given moment my audience will listen, react, or interact

with me as I intended. Drama education theorists such as Dorothy Heathcote (1984) contextualize the dramatic role playing of situations of explored expertise as the 'mantle of the expert'. Heathcote's theory illustrates how, when the role taker becomes endowed with unfamiliar characteristics, he will explore these characteristics with a certain detachment, allowing the role taker to use all of his real and perceived knowledge of the role to function normally as an 'expert'. If, to become an expert, we must first 'role-play' at being an expert, then this begs the question — how do teachers become teachers? How do we know how to conduct ourselves as experts?

The expert, or authentic teacher, is someone whose intent and inclusiveness can reinforce, examine, or dispute the viewpoints held by their students. The artistry of the teacher/performer is to realize the potential for human connections and inquiry. Joe Winston's (1998) inquiry of researching drama in the classroom explores a moral imperative within student dramatic and narrative play. Winston's focus helps illustrate the potential for drama education to provide the means for young people to explore "significant moral processes of thought [and] feeling" (p. 90). Teachers have an opportunity to go much deeper within the roots that underpin social educational practice, to facilitate what Winston calls "an understanding of moral life" through reflective and artistic practice (p. 90). Citing Schön's (1987) views that the daily performance of teaching can be fraught with "messy, confusing problems,... [which are] characterized by uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict," Winston examines the description of 'good practice' as being at the "core of artistry" (p. 90).

The authentic and artistic teacher exists within the living classroom, sharing and teaching both the personal and pedagogical. The curricular

objectives are routinely scripted, produced, designed, directed and performed in an ever-changing paradox of fluidity and fluctuation in the classroom/theatre. The teacher as performer who operates in an artistic and performative manner with students is viewed by Elliot Eisner (1985) as providing "a climate that welcomes exploration and risk-taking" (p, 118); while Peter McLaren (1986) expresses a real concern that this type of teacher can potentially transcend into the "teacher-as-entertainer." Cecily O'Neill (1989) suspects that the teacher-as-entertainer has the potential to captivate their students, but she describes them as being a "passive audience of isolated and unreflective spectators" (p. 153). All three make a great deal of sense, especially when I consider how many times during a class I can sense some of my students using their imaginary remote control 'clickers' to change the channel.

The teacher as performer will not last long if their student/audience feels isolated from the action of the class. The classroom cannot be a place of static, passive learning, nor can it be a place where the teacher is afraid or unwilling to share the stage. The classroom that is open to the improvisational free-play and the give and take of student learning, will be a classroom that becomes a place of ensemble learning, not an assembly line of rote knowledge. The theatrical and artistic teacher is not a primadonna, a passive purveyor of information, but a team-player, ready to actively involve students in the shared interactive experience of learning. Grumet (1978) points out that the inherent artistry in the educational transaction "requires that we acknowledge that curriculum is the world of meanings that we have devised and that as teachers and students we assume responsibility for it" (p. 286). The responsibility of the theatrical and artistic teacher is that at the end of each class they must be prepared to share the

stage with their students, to go beyond standard curricular evaluation and reporting — realizing that the educational endeavor is truly a theatrical performance with many opportunities for joyful interactions and the potential for an unrivaled curtain call — with the silent applause of the students lasting a lifetime.

In the Middle of...

• • •

In the middle of...

The telephone call came...
 And I was in the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 In the middle of...
 Rebuilding my house
 And I found out that our...
 Building plans weren't approved
 Or that we couldn't get our permits
 Or the concrete had been poured incorrectly
 Or there were no forty-five degree angles in the addition
 And the roof couldn't be placed on straight
 Or the windows would be off centered
 And the chimney was structurally unsound
 Or the inspector needed new drawings
 Or the sewer must run up the hill and be pumped
 But the city couldn't decide
 So they determined to go downhill instead
 And the drainage people couldn't figure it out for over a month
 And someone stole the Shop-Vac
 And the framer didn't show up
 And the window wasn't ready
 And the architect didn't know how it would all come together
 So we ripped out a chunk of the house
 And put it back together again
 And the electricity had to be inspected
 But the inspector didn't like it
 So hydro was at the site within hours
 And cut off the power
 Powerless

And then...

The alarm on my watch went off...
 And I was in the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 In the middle of...

Sleeping, dreaming, rousing, waking, washing, drying, dressing Eating, leaving,
 commuting, driving, arriving, planning...

A lesson for my drama ten students

A song to warm-up my acting class

A schedule for rehearsals for my yearly production

Treating myself

I went to the hot drink vending machine

Put my coins in the slot

Pressed the buttons to choose my selection

Suddenly the message reader by the coin slot

Boldly declared me A WINNER

And kindly dropped my 95¢ down into the change slot

I proudly went back into the drama room

Hot chocolate in hand

And began my class

By announcing to my weary students

That I was a WINNER

With that

I pushed play on the CD player

And in groups of four

Had them create a mimed scene on stage

To the Beatles' song "Help!"

And it was in the middle of that song

In the middle of...

Thinking, connecting, listening, placing, realizing, analyzing...

Why I had chosen that song

What motivated me?

To seek out that song

To seek out...

"Help!"

And then...

The school bell sounded...

And I was in the middle of...

The busiest day of the year

In the middle of...

A labor dispute

Between teachers and the government

The daily media sticky with rhetoric

Like the sea birds and waterfowl

Who get helplessly trapped

In the gooey oily mess

Of tanker crude

Tar blackened

And polluted

Grinding contract negotiations

Grinding parents

Grinding students

Until there is nothing left to reconstitute
 And as I waded through this wasteland
 I was
 Worrying, guessing, wanting, questioning, arguing...
 But there was nothing left
 But powder
 And dust
 Nothing left

And then...

 The principal spoke...
 And I was in the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 in the middle of...
 The staff meeting
 The memo
 The student bulletin
 The monthly newsletter
 The P.A. announcement
 The assembly
 The PAC Committee
 The department head meeting
 And we spoke about putting a new out-take fan in the art room
 Because the ceramic students make too much
 Dust
 And the photo students
 Are unable to produce
 Clean negatives
 But it cost too much money
 Or it took up too much space
 Or it will happen during the next expansion
 Or the budget is too low
 And there wasn't enough money
 So he blamed the last principal
 And anyone who had ever spent money
 And took away our department budgets
 Money saved to buy computers and equipment for the kids
 And people were upset
 And moral was low
 Because we feel let down
 Ambushed
 With new foreign agendum
 And people were
 Disbelieving, questioning, disagreeing, complaining, grumbling, protesting,
 bitching, moaning, whining...
 And when the meeting ended
 We left the library conference room
 Coalesced in our fight

Connected in our frustrations
 Administrative breakdown
 Down through the hallways
 We went our separate ways

Separate

Ways

Separate

Ways

S e p a r a t e

And then...

A student comes to me
 And I was in the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 In the middle of...
 Rehearsing a play
 Teaching the class
 Building a set
 Hanging the lights
 Printing the tickets
 Faxing the press release
 Preparing the poster
 Copying the programs
 Calling the parents
 Counting the money
 Buying the costumes
 Painting the backdrop
 Designing the tech
 And this student wants to talk to me
 To ask me about his grade
 Her project
 To find out about the field trip
 To get the keys to the green room
 To borrow some paper, a pen, a pencil, the telephone
 To ask my advice
 To share a secret
 To confide her intentions
 To explain his mistake
 To transfer in
 Or to transfer out
 To get some help
 To connect with a friend
 Who listens

Who cares
 Who wants to help
 Wants to make it better
 For the student
 So that she might find success
 So that he can feel supported
 I don't believe this to be idealistic
 Because
 This is
 Who I am
 As a teacher
 Who lives
 In-between the classroom and the university
 In-between practice and theory
 In-between the philosophical and the practical
 In-between the written and the enacted
 In-between the staid, static and stoic
 But existing within
 The lively, dynamic and the passionate
 With passion he wrote the essay
 With passion he taught the class
 With passion engaged the system
 And with passion he experienced rejection
 As the vindictive professor
 Made it her business to reject his overtures
 Making it difficult to get a chance
 To share himself with others
 Made him feel worthless
 Made him look up at her
 In her ivory tower
 Comfortable and self-assured
 She judges him
 And makes him question his worth
 Until he gets published
 Until he gets invited to present his work
 Until he goes back into the drama classroom
 And the students embrace him
 His teaching
 His empathy
 His friendship
 His mentoring
 And they journey together
 The students
 And the teacher
 Journeying, exploring, creating, expanding, enhancing Exchanging and sharing
 Students
 Children
 Kids
 Babies

Families

And then...

My wife called...
 And I was in the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 in the middle of...
 Building a house
 Being a teacher
 Dealing with politics
 Worrying about my career
 Completing my degree
 Attempting to write
 Trying to make ends meet
 Finding time to sleep
 Imagining if I still had friends
 Taking a journey
 A pedagogical trip
 Walking with my students
 Trying to provide for them
 The care and attention that they have come to expect
 Not knowing
 If
 I could provide for them in the same way any more
 And I was in that place
 In-between
 In the middle of...
 The busiest day of the year
 In the middle of...

And then...

I saw my family looking up at me
 Wondering where I had been

In-between

CHAPTER FIVE

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part Two}

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A Conversation with Keith Johnstone
Saturday, June 23, 2001 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada
With additional footnotes from our follow-up conversation
Saturday, December 11, 2004 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part Two}

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DLY: I am going to change the conversation just a little bit. Did you ever imagine forty plus years ago when you were just getting this all together that your words, your ideas, your concepts were going to be as influential as they are today?

KJ: They were influential instantly. The stuff appeared on TV quickly.

DLY: Did that catch you off guard? Or did you think: "I am going to be great, this is wonderful, this is so exciting?"

KJ: We were told there was no way to protect this material and we knew that somebody was going to make so much money off of this.

Sometimes that entirely comes from a single thing because my stuff is best naturally because it is theoretical. It is not just trying to be stupid in most cases. I thought it was great fun. I like solving problems.

It was really nice and then you see the American guys really had the image of cabaret and had the stupidity of asking for suggestions [from the audience], which has infected the entire world by some terrible fungus. If you ask for suggestions the work is almost guaranteed to be worthless. And if you have seen improvisation since you probably noticed the suggestion in relation to the work.

Well, you are worse, if you get a crowd with a few beers in them, because all they want is bathroom humour or sexist humour or whatever.

I am trying to get people to say the suggestion that inspires us. That little extra addition takes you out of a trap. But they still won't do it. Oh, God. Anyway, I thought that, as this stuff went, there were two things that happened.

We used to do some competitive things in the 1960's, like if you divide the class into two teams and you play against each other. They get much more excited. Not as much as they did in Canada. But there was a problem of it being illegal in England. As soon as TheatreSports started and the idea was that you could play with other teams, suddenly improvisation spread immensely everywhere. It was all, in my view, almost all garbage but people had a lot of fun doing it and they laughed a lot.

I thought then, I thought two things, I thought: "all over the world, are wonderful people, who are going to make wonderful additions to all this and I hope wonderful stuff will come back." Like you have one scientist, then suddenly you have thousands of them. And that didn't happen. Very little new stuff turned up and it is very depressing and it's because of the system of thinking, especially thinking funny. I mean, never walk on the stage to be funny. It's a disaster. Because if they don't laugh, you reduce yourself to the state of a stand-up comedian, where you have got to get your laughs. If you walk on the stage to make a relationship, they can decide if it's funny.

DLY: I wrote a review on your book *Improv for Storytellers*²¹. One of the things I preface...

KJ: I didn't read that.

DLY: I am going to give it to you. I've got a copy for you. One of the things I preface in my remarks is that your words, your intent have been bastardized. Over the years especially and I know from talking to you and other improvisers, you have got a specific hate on for people who use your material and don't give you your due credit.

²¹ Young, D. (2001) Book Reviews — "Improv for Storytellers, Keith Johnstone, 1999" *Research in Drama Education "RIDE"*, Volume 6. Number 1. 2001, (pp. 121-124).

KJ: No, not really. I think there is a 'big hate', but not that one.

DLY: Okay, but I think that where your ideas, your formulas, are really being misused, are in the school system.

KJ: I believe so.

DLY: It is like to borrow a phrase from Peter Brook's 'deadly terms' — Deadly TheatreSports.

Deadly improv with the suggestions, the competition and the bathroom humour, because this is what kids are being taught in schools.

So between the ages of say ten and sixteen, young people are being taught drama in many ways by unschooled and untrained drama teachers and the bastardized version of TheatreSports and improvisation are coming to the classroom and it's easy to deliver. It's pabulum-like to deliver.

KJ: They could read the newspaper.

DLY: Right and they sit and goof around. You can do ten months of that.

KJ: It can teach good things or bad things. I would rather have a good teacher with a bad method than a bad teacher with a good method. But that's not about TheatreSports so best leave it.

Its spread like wild fire but again, the systems that the culture has clamps down and destroys it.

Now before TheatreSports it was closed up, because improvisational theatre had you audition like a normal theatre, like Second City will audition people. My idea was to have no edge. There was no edge, there was no edge but it is still working in kind of the same way. If you want something smooth you say, there is always the class at six o'clock on Friday then one comes to that. So if you come to the class, or get to be an usher, [at some point you will get your opportunity to go on stage and try it out.]

With Micetro²² you are probably going to get picked one week to do it. Micetro is good because you have got stage time – you are on the stage. In TheatreSports you have to be one of the team. I wrote that [created Micetro] mainly to try to correct TheatreSports, but it is useless.

A lot of that stuff is in the newsletter, if you send out a newsletter. One of the things I was able to pick up was trying to do damage control.

DLY: And that's what I wrote about in the review I spoke about. That your new work and theories are about attempting to reel it all it back in.

KJ: I want people to do it badly in such a way that they will eventually do it better.

I send out newsletters to all the groups. I haven't sent them out for about three years now. Nobody ever saw them.

I, in my naivety, thought they would Xerox them and give them out to people.

No, the guys running the [improv theatre] groups, to them the newsletter is power. They control it.

People like Alexander Metious²³ 'the movement guy', wrote books in order not to tell people how to do it. He doesn't want to tell you because he is afraid if he gives it away you will have it.

DLY: They use the information like currency and they don't want to lose it.

KJ: The more you give away, the more you have.

²² In Micetro Impro the improv actors are all given a poker chip with a number on it. Up to 16 actors can play during a performance evening, with the guest facilitator pulling their number at any time to play in any variety of improv activities. The audience and the facilitator then judge the actor's work with cheers and/or boos, which are then interpreted by a scorekeeper. The actor who has the most points at the end of the evening is deemed to be the next evening's Micetro.

²³ Inventor of "the Alexander Movement Technique" is considered to be a revolutionary physical and breathing platform for performers.

DLY: But by the same token, the Beta video format died as a format because they didn't share it openly. VHS shared and VHS is the standard format; and the same with IBM, computers and the Windows platform.

You know, I think the more you share, I think in some ways you do yourself the greatest service by just disseminating the idea.

KJ: Another thing about TheatreSports is that I wanted to be able to do it — so I copyrighted it.

I didn't want to make any money out of it, but then we had to take about 3% off just to organize it. I wanted it in the public domain. The groups, they loved the plays. They don't want competition.

When I am seventy, which is next year or the year after I can't remember.

DLY: You don't look seventy.

KJ: I feel it. I thought I would give the copyright to the TheatreSports organization. They can have it and do what they like with it.

DLY: Just say you made it like the Shaw Trust. You could create a Trust, Keith. you know where basically the royalty generates in the Trust to benefit the foundation and the continuation and currency of the ideals.

KJ: That's not going to happen because it is going to the TheatreSports groups and they can screw up as they like. The problem is it mustn't be a filter to catch the sludge. It is going to a TheatreSports group. First of all anyone can go in and out, if it is done right. But, no, none of the groups recognize it on traditional lines and you have to go to classes for two years before you get on the stage. Well, only the coaches get on the stage. Like people take it as theirs because they feel like they own it. Therefore, they have to protect themselves.

Canadian theatre feels like this. It is full of people who are amazed that it has got into that position or something and it is because they are trying to do it right. They have been taught it. They have learned it. They believe that 'doing it right' lies outside them.

The system teaches them not to be obvious. If you give everything away you have more. There are fairy stories like that where you turn the purse upside down and it empties forever if you try to take the money out. I don't know, maybe I just invented it, but it would be a good fairy story.

I'm amazed at my stupidity actually. It takes me so long to do anything at the moment in writing I will type anything that comes into my head. School has still got me – it still makes me want to question it. If some other force gives it to me I should respect it and write it down. Still, I have to force myself to do it. It's those years of schooling where 'rightness' lay outside you. If it were effortless, that's not right. If it's hard work, that's good. If it's hard work that means it is away from your center, because the center is effortless. So if there is something that is really clear to you, which are distorted as soon as it hits other systems. And it is the other system that improvisation is based on.

It is based on suggestions, which is a form of cabaret and also the CBC. Everything is pushed towards light entertainment because they think the audience is corrupted and the audience is corrupted and they are corrupting it more.

When I was young there was a guy called Reefe²⁴ ran the BBC. This was before this modern thing happened this is what really dates me. He had the idea that you should always be trying to edge people up towards what he thought was right. Because at that time he was very clear. He was an educated person and his idea was essentially benevolent. It would make you ask. A boy like me was thrilled hearing Chinese music even although it did sound like a tortured cat. The idea that there are a billion people listening to this stuff and to them it's music and our music isn't. It's thrilling. I mean, really, what a thing. So to do this type of program was worthwhile because it's information, it's telling me about another culture and no one is wasting my time.

I think it can be done in an amusing way. It can be friendly and it shouldn't be done with contempt for the Chinese music. And it shows me people who are interested. That's worthwhile.

²⁴ He had a significant influence on BBC programming.

Getting me to phone in to show how I can yodel. It's an incredible degeneration from the idea of benevolence and TV or anything. If you see *The Wrong Trousers* you probably will, they keep showing it. It's about "Wallace and Grommet."

Well, it's Claymation. Nick Park made a wonderful Claymation thing that I much admired where he did bits of conversation and then animated zoo animals.... Oh, it was really great. *The Wrong Trousers*. I think he got an Oscar. It's brilliant, it's astounding. Wallace is an inventor. He has got this dog, Grommet and they have a relationship together and one day a lodger arrives who is this penguin, animated not by Nick Park but somebody else. I'm in love with that penguin. The penguin takes over a room in the house and life gets more and more difficult for the dog. Finally the dog can't stand it. So you have a relationship between Wallace and his dog and this penguin that screws everything up. And that's human! It's life! Then the penguin is actually a jewel thief. He wants to steal a large diamond and you are back in the world of commercial shit. It's worthless. But it is still wonderful. The animation is astounding. But if you look at the two halves of the film, the first half has something of humanity in it and the second half is this ghastly thing they feed people where they watch TV and the next day they don't know what they saw because it is all garbage.

So I think from that I certainly feel degraded listening to the CBC and the fact that sometimes at 9 o'clock at night there is an interesting program for specialists in English literature or something. There is a science program on CBC every Saturday. They desperately try to make that amusing and lighthearted. Do they think that nowhere there's entertainment available? If they have got fifty minutes of science program, why doesn't it claim to be clear and lucid? Why do they have to entertain?

Oh, God!! So I feel I am living in this totally crazy world full of highly intelligent people who are all seriously fucked up and they are busy fucking everybody else up and there is no hope.

There was a letter in the *National Post* or the *Globe and Mail* the other day saying about how we could clone people for benevolence and stuff. I almost wrote them a letter. If we cloned everybody to be benevolent, all the assholes would beat him or her to death, which is what happened in the past. It's how we

got here. If you want to find benevolent people look in some remote desert where nobody wants to go to and you find nice, soft, kindhearted people. Everything else has been taken away from them.

DLY: In the school system, occasionally, again we have this prevalence of TheatreSports and improvisation as a learning and teaching technique.

KJ: And in professional theatre.

DLY: Yes, in drama education, but I am going to hold this specifically in drama education.

KJ: Also, drama education for actors.

DLY: What upsets me as a Canadian and as someone who has read your work and I guess, in a sense, feels a certain affinity to the Canadian content within your work, because here you are you have lived in Canada for a number of years and you have worked out of Canada. I think you represent a vital part of the Canadian fabric in this field, yet no one knows KJ, TheatreSports, it is not synonymous. In Europe maybe, but not in the United States?

KJ: I don't quite understand this.

DLY: It pisses me off, because in drama education we talk about Gavin Bolton still.

KJ: Oh, God!! It's so limited.

DLY: I'm tired of talking about Gavin Bolton and I am tired of talking about Dorothy Heathcote.

KJ: He is sort of a fascist dictator and was awful. His students were totally closed-minded. You couldn't tell them anything.

She was great as a teacher but she had it on. There were nice films of her interacting with people, but can she couldn't hand it on to other people.

DLY: What are your thoughts on Peter Slade or Brian Wade?

KJ: Peter Slade, did you read that book²⁵?

DLY: Yes.

KJ: Brian Wade, I think I saw his theatre company once. It was great. I was a schoolteacher and the company came in and they did something wonderful. It must have been Brian Wade I think. It was a Dr. Dolittle thing. They got kids to take part and become the "Pushme-Pullme" and I thought it was great. I was so pleased, but I was outside the theatre at the time and had no interest in it.

I was dragged into theatre by being given money. There was also a stupid theory like if you are part of a group you feel safer. Not necessarily, I have seen those groups in education, those poor unfortunate wretches in the middle of the system. It depends. I did a lot of teaching²⁶ in England maybe connected going back to the 1980's. We did hundreds of schools and gave out written information about it. We appeared in books like *Teacher*.

Theatre people don't do that, teachers do. People in the theatre have got more self-respect. Some of the teachers try to keep it down. When a teacher says to me I think it doesn't sing.

They threw me out because I wouldn't keep to the schedule. I mean, I wanted the kids to like what they were doing. You can't have a teacher like that.

The authorities don't trust the teachers. They think they are cogs in this machine run from the top.

Years and years of organized boredom.

I am getting sidetracked. Where were we?

²⁵ Johnstone is referring to what is considered by mainstream drama education theorists Slade's seminal 1954 book *Child Drama*. London: University of London Press.

²⁶ Of improv with Keith's British improv troupe "Theatre Machine".

DLY: We were talking about Slade, Wade, Heathcote and Bolton.

KJ: I will tell a story. A couple of inspectors came to inspect the Royal Court Theatre and were astounded by it. I kept insulting these guys until they cracked up and became human. And they followed up my work and they propagated it as what to do after Brian Wade and the kids wouldn't be so obedient anymore, because kids loved this work. To me, I wonder why they are teaching drama? It's a waste of time. Why aren't they teaching social skills?...

The system makes the guy who is this totally fucked up law guy take a drama course or a dance course because that is what he needs and the professors understand that. The system is so arranged that they can't do it because if they do it they go to seed. They have got to take something, the great guys, the good guys so they won't give up their "A" average.

A guy with an intellect like that could go and take three or four art books and know everything. What a waste of time. And that's how the universities work. They have got this great idea that they won't do a 'pass'/'fail' therefore it won't work. This will scrap the options. It's a waste of time. I don't understand it.

Help me to understand something. You know, I have been to university. I have read a few books. I think what happens is that... and you can tell me if this is right... in a science book you are dealing with facts and you quote experiments and research. I have come to believe in talking to a graduate friend of mine, he is a graduate student. I think that they do an imitation of science books. Could that be possibly true? I think they are faking it all up as if it was a science.

DLY: Oh, yeah, in the Arts for sure. That's the way the Arts are played.

KJ: Well, that's a total waste of time.

DLY: Of course it is. What happens is, it is ludicrous. This is why my work — if I write about my experiences as a drama teacher and I don't quote sixteen other people to tell exactly this...

KJ: They are imitating the sciences.

DLY: Right. And so the idea is they are trying to find what we call in academia, we call it a pseudo-science.

KJ: Yes, that's right.

DLY: And as a pseudo-science....

KJ: But why is it?

DLY: Because they allow this shit. The people in the Arts and Education feel marginalized and periferal and they want to try and gain respect from the rest of the university community.

KJ: In education as well?

DLY: Oh, yeah. In education it's the worst. This is in drama. The engineers all call it, 'Mickey Mouse'. They don't understand what we are doing. They have no clue. So they are under the same impression that the education people obviously are.

KJ: It could be science. It's ridiculous. Oh God, I was amazed to find no science in the Fine Arts. In which case, why be in the university. No knowledge. I'm appalled. I'm right. That is what it is, yes, but that is totally worthless.

DLY: Except, well you see, I think it is very worthless because there is nothing new.

KJ: That's right. Opinions don't mean anything. Just because I have an opinion that means nothing. We are back to the good student destroys the knowledge of the professor.

DLY: Right and that's the problem.

KJ: You have a good opinion as if that meant something.

DLY: Right, because you have to back it up six times with someone whose name means something.

KJ: If it's opinion, the name is nothing.

DLY: But being quoted enough and been published enough means something in academia.

KJ: No, not in the sciences.

DLY: Well, in science it has to be replicated. You have to be able to replicate it.

KJ: But you could do that in education. You could do it. You could do it.

DLY: It would be nice.

KJ: If the universities refused to accept this shit, then they would have to actually do some research and I can say things like, what type of students are best fitted to method training? I could ask that. There is some research. They do it on drama students as if they were actors. Drama students are actors?

DLY: I have seen drama research that has been written up and where basically they have had researchers quantifying the activities of students in a classroom.

KJ: Quantifying. What is quantifying?

DLY: Putting numbers to it. So if the kid reacts this way that's a number five and if a kid reacts that way it's a number six and then they graph it.

KJ: For what purpose?

DLY: For the purpose of creating statistical framework.

KJ: No, no, for the purpose of adapting the methods for the particular kids.

DLY: Well, to make it scientific.

KJ: There is no point in analyzing that unless you are going to adapt the education to the needs of every kid, even the ones who are twitching all the time.

There was something in the paper last week here about a local teacher, not fired, who had duct-taped a Grade One student to the seats. Did you see that?

DLY: Yes.

KJ: That kid should not be in the school if he can't sit still, not in that school.

DLY: We want to squish the square peg in the round hole.

KJ: Yes! That's right, that's right.

Of course, if the government wants to I'm fine with it but it takes so much money to do it. They could squish much more efficiently.

Well, I will tell you how they will squish that kid. They will squish him with drugs. They will medicate the kid until he sits still.

I'm really uptight about Ritalin because it seems to me that kids are wrongly diagnosed. There's no doubt Ritalin is the most amazing substance, but the kids who need the Ritalin should be having another education. Not that education. Nobody is saying that.

DLY: We aren't looking at trying to change the system – we will change the kid, thank you very much.

KJ: Maybe the system we have works for some kids, but it won't work for me.

DLY: But our system works for the lowest common denominator. But that goes back to what you were saying about entertainment. In our culture we cater to the lowest.

KJ: That's fascism.

Between the brightest, the best and the dumb and the stupid there's that middle ground and a lot of times the middle ground is pushed lower.

It is true that dumb and stuff, the best of the stupid, makes some sense in some cases where there is severe brain damage. But the ability to get out of bed, to sit at the breakfast table, to look out the window and see a tree is an incredible cognitive feat. What I mean is the ability of any of those people to exist in the street without being killed. It takes prodigious computational effort because all this electro magnetic stuff is computer driven automatically. Well, so in a way, as the normal person is doing something absolutely prodigious is their peer to be somehow not brilliant.

It's a mistake, it's a misperception, it's because they are wrapped up in some terrible box or they are stuck in concrete....

DLY: Let me ask you a question about a couple of names. Tell me your opinion or feelings about Del Close and Viola Spolin, not together, but individually.

KJ: There was a lot of bitterness about Viola Spolin at Second City when I was there but I could never get down to it. I think they were really pissed off about wanting credit for the games. She did a collection of games. And for me to be competitive, there had to be about six games that I found I could use.

DLY: What didn't you like about the competitiveness of Spolin's games?

KJ: I want the competition for pleasure.

DLY: Okay, that's fair.

KJ: I don't want to have people on each side of the stage trying to get the stage. When I started I was, I think I have said it now, the actors I first met knew about free games which filled me with horror because I know what I wanted to teach. Most people just want to give people games that they will play so they shut up. That's what schooling is. I think free games are hideous because they are teaching people to kill stories and I don't want that. So it does tell me something about myself at a young age because I reacted with utter horror.

Now I didn't get to Spolin until somebody saw us in 1966 doing a show and said, 'you must be basing it on Spolin or something'. So I got her book and I found most of it, for me, useless. I am not saying it's wrong but, for me, I hate that concept of improv... I don't like basic concepts. I don't like who, what, where and all that because that's from somebody who is trying to model normal theatre by their concept of something normal.

My feeling always was that that's going to take me to a dead end – and I hated that. This is from the very beginning. So refusing whatever little gleams of light there were, I found my own stuff. I am very stubborn. We would work on problems. I knew the acting I was seeing was a fake. I knew that. So do other people.

DLY: Is that because the nature of Second City's work has always been sketched based? I think when you say cabaret it is a bit more continental European, don't you think? Sketch is more American, wouldn't you say?

KJ: Yeah, it's the same thing. I think improvisation is very suited to short themes. I don't think improvising structure is a good idea. I think that improvising on structures is fine. I have heard of somebody who I taught doing really nice stuff. David Shepherd and Del Close have each shown me things called - Long Improvisation Based on a Theme. "Harolds". I could never understand the point of it. They tried to get it into my head and I think it is because basically I think it is not worth doing.

Harold is different. Harold is when you get a name - something from the audience like the word of a profession or something and then you create, you try

and tie them together. Actually that's fine but oh, I'm so sorry. It is a point though. It seems so much less interesting....

I think partly the desire for long form is the desire to do normal theatre. Someone like me who hated who, what, where, when. I am a playwright. It is a non-playwright who is interested in that.

I have seen some long form, too long. I admire it. I wouldn't pay to see it. I admire the skills. I wouldn't see it on TV if I were watching TV. I wouldn't watch it in the theatre. I don't go to see plays. I don't like improvisation for its own sake. I wouldn't go to see opera to see a great singer. The music department of the university, they advertise, on the poster they don't put the works played. They think you should come to see the artists. Well, screw that. I mean, it's like I am designed to be a total misfit and there's nothing I can do about it.

When I wanted to have steady money to bring up my family. I wanted to spend time writing. I didn't want to form a theatre company. Oh, God! One of my friends who knew about academia laughed at the idea of me in the academy. I soon realized that you could do nothing there and that you just worked with your students and it's pointless because you just don't rock the boat. You can't do anything. I never saw improvisation up there for 25 years or something.

DLY: So you were in university for 25 years at the University of Calgary teaching acting.

KJ: Yeah, that is what it was. They hate improvisation.

DLY: Did you direct shows?

KJ: Yes.

DLY: Did you like that?

KJ: In the end I simply refused because other people had more power than the director. Well, screw that.

DLY: Did you enjoy it? Was there joy in it?

KJ: I liked directing the shows. I liked directing the students, but my interests are not really to teach. I want to teach how to think.

DLY: As a director, I direct actors as well as young people. For me, the best part, I cut my directing process into three parts. Explorations and then kind of the stuff in the middle, which I just despise, which is getting the play structure in; and then the final clean up of all the bits. But the best part for me is exploring the play and the actor's reactions. I love exploring a play, the text, the subject and the characters, the relationships, the story, if you will, of a play with actors. For me, that was where my joy was. Beyond that, opening night, I couldn't care less. I am just curious, what was your process as a director?

KJ: If you have a play with two actors, do you block it?

DLY: No, what I do is something I call "natural inclination." I let the actors find their pace, their rhythm. To me if the actor is an artist, I am not a puppeteer. When I went to university, the theatre, I was taught as a director that I am a puppeteer and they are my puppets. They were trying to teach me as a director to control everything.

KJ: Could they direct themselves or were they stage managers?

DLY: Which, the directors?

KJ: The directors.

DLY: Frustrated professors taught me; who were frustrated directors; and were reliving their own pathetic stories through their students. But basically what I learned was – if the actor is an artist, you have to trust them and help guide them, to let them create the art and then sit back and watch.

KJ: No, no, they think the actor colours you. That is wrong.

DLY: To me, as the director, I am a glorified audience member. I am there to sit and to watch, to enjoy and to hopefully throw a few ideas in every now and then, to help facilitate exploring the art.

KJ: They want you to have the concept and they want the end product to fulfill the concept. That is so uncreative.

DLY: Of course. They wanted to create me as a director in their own image and that's why....

KJ: If you have a concept, the rehearsal period should be to destroy the concept.

DLY: Exactly, I hate when actors say, "I have a vision."

KJ: I was teaching these guys up in Edmonton and somebody said: "well, in our group, our philosophy is...."

And I said: "You have ONLY one philosophy!!!! You should have fifty-five!"

The philosophy was to accept every idea that comes from me. Although I spent half an hour kidding with them, which they much enjoyed.

DLY: Obviously your process with actors is very exploratory. Let them find out and to see, let them find the truth.

KJ: But sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes it's wonderful and sometimes it's shit. That doesn't really work in the professional theatre terribly well.

DLY: Do you have a favorite play that you directed?

KJ: I liked *Live Snakes and Ladders* at the university. I keep thinking I should rewrite it and put it together. Snakes and Ladders games, oh Christ, it was a nightmare. None of the professors could understand it or the students on the periphery.

Well, it was about a thrilling insane society governed by the roll of the dice. There's a rich young couple on square 42 getting drunker and drunker and pawing each other. There were blindfolded contestants crawling into snakes by execution with boxing gloves on. Oh, God, the bishop is blessing the snakes, the prisoners in the bottom. Oh, it is great. I had more fun with that than anything. Oh, lovely!

DLY: Your colleagues didn't understand it?

KJ: Not at all, no. Oh, one was in it, he loved it, he was having a great time but he's a bit crazy anyhow. He thought it was very avant-garde. It was snakes and ladders. I really wanted not to have descriptive. I had descriptive to keep him happy.

DLY: Did you like doing classical or any other pieces?

KJ: I had a great time doing *Life is a Dream*²⁷, which, of course, nobody ever heard of, but I had because I read everything. It was the greatest Spanish play. Some of the people I did it with, did it at Stratford-Upon-Avon in England and I think it had never been done in England. Because the English look at all these pages, you know, ten pages of verse. It's a wonderful play about the illusory measure of reality...

I had a lot of luck as a young boy of about thirteen, I remember I was drifting off, sitting in the front seat with the teacher over there so that I could be ignored. Because people like me, of course, are called dreamers in school and dreaming is bad. It is like being an aardvark in the school for penguins. Anyway he started insulting some religious group. You know, you are not allowed to do

²⁷ A Post-Shakespearean play by Spanish playwright Pedro Calderon de la Barca.

that in school so I turned up. It was some group called theosophists²⁸. I thought oh, fuck him. And because I was a strange and peculiar child, I just decided to find out where this group he was against were. He had mentioned Torquay, where 'Faulty Towers'²⁹ is. It was across the bay from the fishing town I was in.

DLY: Where did you grow up?

KJ: Devon. Opposite 'Faulty Towers'.

I didn't understand things like looking in the phone book. It's ridiculous. I'm not very practical. So I made a few trips. I went to the wrong place once and got myself in a religious service. It was some Christian cult and I couldn't get out once I got in there for about three hours. I had to sit and study the bible. Anyway, I finally found them and they were close to the hills of Torquay harbour. It was closed, but it said there were meetings from two o'clock to five o'clock on Sundays.

So I went back again. This is an hour-long bus ride. And I arrived and I would go in a bit shyly and they totally freaked because why has this young boy coming from the other side of the bay and how did I hear about them. I wouldn't say anything. I could have said my teacher said they were a lot of assholes. They talked mostly. They didn't sing hymns or anything, thank God. They were mostly old ladies or old to me, probably middle aged, with all the husbands who towed along. They had free food and coffee and stuff. They would have a short meeting with coffee and stuff and then they would talk about Atlantis or something. They had a wonderful library of Oriental books. So every week I went to the Theosophist Society and took my library book, took four library books back and took four more out and I read all that Oriental stuff at the age

²⁸ The Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, is a worldwide body whose primary object is Universal Brotherhood based on the realization that life and all its diverse forms, human and non-human, is indivisibly One. The Society imposes no belief on its members, who are united by a common search for Truth and desire to learn the meaning and purpose of existence by engaging themselves in study, reflection, purity of life and loving service. Theosophy is the wisdom underlying all religions when they are stripped of accretions and superstitions. It offers a philosophy, which renders life intelligible and demonstrates that justice and love guide the cosmos. Its teachings aid the unfoldment of the latent spiritual nature in the human being, without dependence or fear.

when your culture takes you and indoctrinates you, covers you with poison ants and stuff so you learn the morals of the culture. That was a bit of wonderful luck because I was in touch with something I had not the tiniest contact with such as Zen Buddhism or Hinduism, all that stuff soaking in and I am thirteen. I think that has been a great help because it's another culture.

DLY: And it opened your eyes to the world.

KJ: To something. To another way of receiving.

DLY: Peter Brook talks about doing a lot of improv and a lot of exploration in his directing.

KJ: I think he is probably so serious.

DLY: I am curious what are your —

KJ: I only met him once. I have never seen him at work. Looks all right. I try not to go to the theatre you know. I am so sorry that I didn't see Vanessa Redgrave in *Marat/Sade*. I saw that and thought that was pretty boring. Any twenty minutes would have been interesting.

DLY: I guess the reason I am raising Brooks is that I have read a lot of Brooks work is there is a very controversial thing that he did with the kids in the movie for the William Golding book, *Lord of the Flies*.

KJ: Not very good.

DLY: It was a terrible movie, but he took a lot of kids, British kids whose parents agreed to have their children as part of their summer vacation and he ended up putting them through the 'improv wringer' so to speak in a very

²⁹ The name of a famous BBC television comedy series from the 1970's starring John Cleese, which

realistic role drama and made them essentially live the life of the characters of the book to get the movie.

KJ: It worked, didn't it?

DLY: Well, it worked in that he got the movie and he wandered on his merry way but a number of these kids were pretty screwed up afterwards.

KJ: Just this stupid idea that the actor has to become the character.

DLY: Ah, yes.

KJ: Where does that come from?

DLY: Touch on that.

KJ: The actors don't become the character. George Devine³⁰ said that if we become the character then we fall off the edge of the stage. We do what the character does.

DLY: This comes from the bastardization of Stanislavski's work. What happened was, that Stanislavski wrote five books, but only two made their way to the United States at the time.

KJ: And one ten years after the other.

DLY: Yes and they were translated by Elizabeth Hapgood-Reynolds. The two that made it to the States ended up in the hands of Lee Strasberg³¹. And Strasberg bastardized it to make "The Method." And it's "The Method" where we see the actors try to become the character. It's not about acting, it's not about technique.

was fictionally located in Torquay.

³⁰ George Devine was a prominent British television and film director.

KJ: There is something else. Actors do talk about becoming the character and what that means is that something else took them over. An automatic process is locked in so that their ego didn't have to do it. So the experience is best described as becoming the character and they hope it happens. Sometimes when they get the costume on. It's a way of detaching the ego from what they are doing and to describe it as becoming the character is fine, it is a way of talking, but to take it literally, no, they don't know what is going on. They are doing the stuff the character has to do. It's ridiculous to say they become the character. Maybe some people do. You can get possessed by gods and things, but that's probably not the best procedure for acting and that's not going to be any good for script.

The thing is, it doesn't matter what the actor is feeling. I have yelled at people who have felt something. I want to get something into the body but it doesn't matter.

Laurence Olivier has a story, he talked about hating Merle Oberon [the lead actress playing opposite Olivier³²]. He hates her and day-by-day it got worse on the set and then when they really couldn't stand each other, William Wyler [the director] said, "Now we do the love scene." And fifty years after, Olivier is still baffled by the fact that Wyler was tormenting Olivier by doing take after take until Olivier gave up acting. Olivier thanks him for it at the end of his life. He taught him how to act in film. He would film Olivier. He would do fifty takes. And Olivier would plead with him and Wyler would say, 'Get it right', or 'Do it better'.... Anyway, of course the love scene went well and he did it on one take, it was fine. Wyler said to print it so Olivier learned that if you hate and loathe and detest and want to kill her it is sexy, it looks like you adore each other. So, of course, Wyler was right, but Olivier still didn't understand it. He still found it a mystery.

DLY: Do you have a love of music?

³¹ Lee Strasberg began a theatre training group called "The Actors Studio" where he taught "Method Acting" to numerous Hollywood and Broadway actors.

³² In the 1939 Academy Award winning film *Wuthering Heights*.

KJ: I am very unmusical, but I do love music.

DLY: Let me ask you a question about jazz.

KJ: I don't understand jazz.

DLY: Does it do anything for you?

KJ: Nothing, nothing. Well, I listen to it, but it doesn't take me anywhere.

DLY: The web I am trying to connect it to is improv.

KJ: I don't admire the musician. I don't admire the actor really. I don't admire the writer. I admire something else. I am totally sucked into classical music.

DLY: Do you like modern art?

KJ: Ugh!! It's shit. No, I like Max Beckman and no one likes him. What they call modern art is decorative, nice, sometimes, like an Eastern carpet. I think I would rather have a really wonderful Persian carpet to tell you the truth. Everything taught among rich idiots who like speculating on the stocks and by asshole intellectual critics who want to be ahead of the game. It was a disaster with the impressionists, who were wonderful. But that ghastly, stinking academic dead art and suddenly there's a burst of light by the canvass being torn to pieces and you see it is wonderful and then they totally fucked up people like Van Gogh who never sold anything....

Where were we?

DLY: You were talking about art.

KJ: I love art. I love a great genius who is not fashionable, he is a master of Medieval wood carving of the 1300 or 1400's.

I think a lot of art is showing the artist can do it, or if it is showing that the artist is clever or is a good artist. It is like speaking to somebody who is trying to tell you what a great person he is. A lot of art is like that now. It's because our education system is driven by the intellect — which should be driven by unconscious forces.

Freud wanted to replace it by the ego....

The Christian idea of the devil and the angel and the angel is the intellect and the devil is all these terrible animal forces because in the old days we were desperately trying to deny that we were apes.

There is school. They are still trying to do that to me. No, no, apes are quite different. We are not apes. Well, I think the angel intellect is terrifying and utterly destructive and I mean they are both capable of enormous destruction.

Heinrich Himmler going to see the death pit and almost fainting, having to be helped away, was right. His intellect told him you have to get rid of the Jews so his intellect worked out other processes. But somewhere in Himmler, he saw something unbelievably horrible happening and he made the mistake of going there.

I have got a play of mine coming on in Munich in October [2001]. They were going to do it in Berlin two years ago. They chickened out, so they did other plays.

DLY: What's the play?

KJ: *St. Peter's in Heaven.* A sweet little girl arrives, after she has been burned alive. She is really shattered. And if you don't know much about Christianity she tries to fake it through. She is Jewish. He says you have to get the elevator and press the button marked H. She desperately doesn't want to go. As she presses the button the door opens and out steps an SS Officer — the same guy who burned her alive....

While writing this show I began taking Ritalin while trying to learn German. If I take Ritalin I can learn German. I can actually remember phrases. I can't remember anything. I take a Ritalin pill and I actually learn 25 German phrases and I have been trying to learn German for 26 years. I am in such a state

about Ritalin. If I want to take it, I take it to do work. Amazing, absolutely astounding. This has happened in the last couple of weeks and now there's a large supply. The idea is that I should take it all the time but I love going into it and out of it because I am interested in culture and as you go in and come out, it is two different worlds.

Wow, it's so interesting. Like the tiny movements that are hidden I make. There are things like that and my relations with people are much more efficient and, oh God, I can't imagine going through the damn universe like a spy whose government has disappeared in another country, whose customs he doesn't understand and there are millions of us.

I taught a course up in the mountains last week. One was a PhD student who had come to take this course in the "Life Game"³³. Middle-aged, totally academic failure, but when she discovered Ritalin she had now gone back to university. She had gone to university and become a PhD or something....

DLY: You travel quite a bit. And you have been able to share your ideas, teach and run workshops. What are some of the highlights of those travels? And also, what do you think are some of the differences culturally, that you might do with young actors or people in Canada versus, say, in Germany or Europe?

KJ: There's very little difference. It is very hard to get the Germans to make fun of the Nazis. If you can't laugh at them, they have still got you by the balls really.

I have worked in the European culture and the European culture is the same.

In Hong Kong it is still the European culture.

In Japan, I'd say no. Something is different but I wouldn't know what it is. I didn't want to go to Japan for a long time. I like to know when I am insulting people. You don't know in Japan. It's a lovely culture but it's the same. If you lay the stuff out to people clearly they don't argue with it because they know it. You

³³ The "Life Game" is another recent Johnstone improvisational performance game that has improvisational actors acting out the story of someone's real life while they recount it to the audience.

can give people insight but whether they are going to keep it or not is another matter. We grew a neck³⁴ on some poor girl at the university, she had no neck and she had this wonderful neck. I saw it four months afterwards, in the autumn and no neck. She didn't want a neck. You can give people insight and they can see it then they'll use it if they want to...

DLY: But what is your favorite place to go when you get a chance?

KJ: No, no, I like being here. I like being with my computer. I don't like traveling and I don't like other places. It pisses me off. It's no fun. I have arranged my life how I like it, otherwise I would arrange it some other way. I am very interested in writing at the moment.

DLY: One of the things that you write about in your first book is a reverence for mask work.

KJ: Oh, they are wonderful.

DLY: Let's talk about masks for a bit.

KJ: ... Masks are really wonderful because you can make a really arty mask and it won't do a damn thing. I am always into objectives. It is all these placebo reactions, that people will believe anything.

They will believe it is a good play if everybody says it's a good play. If they go to Shakespeare they can follow the play. They think that's an aesthetic experience because they can understand the language. It is like people will believe anything and there's no good feedback in theatre. A lot of my work has been on feedback.

In mask work you damn well know if the mask works, you know. And the mask is about being human....

³⁴ A physical theatre exercise to make the actor straighter, with more confidence, or have higher status.

I had a guy who, in a play of mine, totally dressed as a lobster. He was a professor in some little science fiction play, a really nice man, he kept saying: "Keith, I don't have any stage fright." And I said: "Well, you might as well be off stage, because there isn't a single physical bit of you visible. How can you have stage fright if you are totally hidden?"

If you remove the face, you can remove most of the persona. Then novel things can operate because of the 'good angel, bad angel'. I don't mean the angel of intellect, if you use the idea of a good angel. I don't read my books so I can't remember what's in them. In times of intense physical crisis you can experience the ego disappearing completely. If you have some total life or death, falling off a cliff, I did that, but car crashes, anything, the ego is a nuisance then because it is mostly for interacting with other people. It is a social thing mostly, I think. And then the other thing is there. It tries to protect you. Well, I think there is a good angel is what is supposed to operate anyway. I don't think the ego is supposed to do it. And that's tough because our education goes the other way.

They hate anything spontaneous because they may not fit the mold. Our whole culture is based on this...

DLY: Maybe at some point in time, if you are interested and you have the time, if you want to grab a bite, I would like to buy you lunch.

KJ: No, I will come and have lunch with you but you don't have to buy my lunch. I don't go to a normal place. I don't eat meat and stuff.

There was a ghastly place around the corner here but not far from here there is a health store that I go to buy food at and I would probably eat there. You might find it disgusting. It is disgusting.

Have you ever read *Zen and The Art of Archery*³⁵? This is a famous book in Zen. I have tried to persuade people to make films of it. They don't understand it. They read it too seriously. In the book a deadly serious German called Jürgen goes to Japan, I am sure he was a Nazi. He went to Japan in about 1930's and wanted to investigate Zen Buddhism. They said, 'Well, you can't spend 20 years

looking at the wall doing nothing. Why don't you take one of the Zen arts?" They said, "What about getting a Zen teacher to teach you flower arranging." What about the Japanese tea ceremonies? Three and a half hours and you have a cup of tea. It is very relaxing. They said, "How about archery?" He said, "Yes, that's very good. I am a crack shot with a rifle, I will be half way there already." So they got him a Zen teacher and oh, how he suffers. It is a great comedy in my opinion, but I wish I had the copyright; I would adapt it as a play. He arrives at this wonderful Japanese building, traditional Japanese architecture, it is so beautiful. There are no targets. There is a wall of straw. They don't care where you fire the arrow. They are interested in how you draw the bow and how you release it, which is kind of what we were talking about. They are not interested in the exam mark. They are not interested in the story that the kid wrote. They are interested in the fact that it was a thrilling experience for him to write it. If you are teaching kids to write stories, it must be a thrilling experience.

DLY: Have you read Stephen Nachmanovich's book, *Free Play*? He writes an interesting through-line story in the book. It's about living spontaneous. And living life with an improvisational tendency as a basis for living. He talks about, at the very beginning, I guess he has adapted a Chinese proverb and it's about a family who wants their child to grow up to be a great flute player and they hire the best teacher to teach the child. Everyone says that the child is very good and the teacher keeps working the child, working the child, but the child never feels that he is as good as the teacher, that the teacher is so much better than he. One day he gets so frustrated and is so discontented with this, that he can never be as good or better than the teacher. He gives it up and goes on his merry way. Years pass and he comes back to his village and someone recognizes him and says, "You are the prodigy, you were great. Here's a flute, play it." Of course he learns and realizes that he always was as good as the teacher and it was his own ego and own inability to see beyond and live beyond, to appreciate the moments that he was experiencing at the time. Of course, because he is old, it is all too late.

³⁵ Originally published in 1953, *Zen In The Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel, it is considered to be a classic work in Eastern philosophy.

I think that one of the things that I see happening to students in the education system is, again, very similar to that. I really appreciate some of the words you have brought up, some of the ideas – this idea of having students bashing the ideas of the professor or the teacher. That is what it should be.

KJ: Isn't that what it is for?

DLY: But unfortunately what universities tend to want and a lot of these structured professors, they want disciples and they don't want to be challenged.

KJ: But the good people are the ones who challenge.

DLY: It must have been very hard for you working in an academic community?

KJ: No, no not at all. Money comes in every week. You make tenure very quickly. I got the best publisher. It is very difficult for me in meetings because I have to do the stuff. I can't pay attention. I was amazed to get them, they thought I didn't know anything and yet they knew I did. It was an interesting place to be in. Every drama professor tries to start a theatre group but they don't work. I do everything wrong and mine works fine. The penny doesn't drop. They can't let go. I have had a system that made it clear immediately.

They said would you like to direct a play? Well, what about *Love Suicide*? What's that!? Well it's this most famous Japanese play. Japanese!? We don't study that. Then you know you are thinking that they are idiots and don't want to learn anything. The problem is that once you hope you can escape this, for most people, they have been so humiliated and spiritually abused on the way to getting their PhD that they can't let all that stuff go because it costs so much.

I could write a fairy story about that, about this person who finds this wonderful weight. It's so wonderful that he has to drag it behind him everywhere in case he loses it. I mean the normal Oriental figures in an adaptation of the story of having to study bamboos for seven years – and then study 'forgetting' everything they learnt for another seven years, like Samurai sword fighting instructions. And at the end of it he says, "Never think about

these instructions," because, of course, in sword fighting, you would be dead. One moment you think and next moment your head is going down the steps of the temple and that's the end of that.

So the world is spontaneous and these guys are trying to deny that and they are trying to impose the grid on it. One grid that they think is right and actually you impose grids as and when you need them.

That's why people were burnt at the stake.

There's a wonderful film in the video store up here; I take it out occasionally, it's as dry as Joan of Arc. I was a film buff. I was crazy about films. I have seen films 20 or 30 times.

I would see plays many times as well if I liked them, but mostly I didn't.

I saw [Samuel Beckett's] *Waiting for Godot* – it was the first play that made sense to me, so I went to see it. At least eight times I paid for my ticket.

DLY: I saw a production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Stratford Festival, in Stratford, Ontario and it was very interesting. During intermission, I overheard two couples speaking and the fellow says, he thinks he is being very witty and clever and knowledgeable and turns to his friends and says, "What do you think?" And his companion says: "I can't understand this play, but I know I am in the presence of greatness." I thought – a) very astute and b) how pretentious.

KJ: He is in the presence of truth.

Beckett cut bits of it in the Schiller Theatre production. He said that it was boring and he cut it. I've done it five times at least.

DLY: I did it with a female cast.

KJ: Which would have changed it. Beckett would have hated that.

DLY: Oh, yeah. That's one of those – 'because you are in high school you can play around it little bit' things.

KJ: Life is tragic in a way, all that ability and then disappearing up his own asshole is not a good idea. I used to know him. He was so angry about the reception that *Godot* received. And he was determined never to be misunderstood again.

Your fate as a playwright is to be misunderstood.

DLY: It's the nature of the art. You paint a picture, it goes on the wall and your audience looks at it. But you write a play and you need twenty other people to see that vision come to light.

KJ: There were critics about the theatre of boredom. There were clergymen who talked about the religious messages in *Waiting for Godot*. All of which is there, inherent.

There is only one way to do anything to Beckett. There is no choice. There is a famous story that is true. I was there. Beckett couldn't get the noise of the slippers shuffling on the stage right [in the production of *Krapp's Last Tape*]. One day he came in with his slippers and made Patrick McGee wear his slippers. Beckett said, "Yes, that's the sound." The only person in the world who cares about that is Beckett. It was a pity that he was so compulsive and was so determined not to be misunderstood.

DLY: By being at the Royal Court you would have dealt with a number of what would be considered now, important playwrights. Did you deal with any of the other great British playwrights?

KJ: What great British playwrights?

It didn't work. Bond was really disappointing, not to the Germans, but the English.

I just did it as a young man, I really thought it might change. I was so pissed off by theatre. My life was a waste of time....

I liked Pinter's. I stopped watching Pinter's plays. We [the Royal Court Theatre] supported him really strongly with his production of *The Birthday Party*. It's a simple play and it is so odd. Why can't they understand that this guy is in a

state of freedom. These bastards arrive and they turn him into a kind of helpless zombie in a bowler hat. They tell him about all the things they have given him, the golf course and the yacht. Who can misunderstand that? Unless you don't want to understand. Well, people found it meaningless, but to us, to the young people, the playwrights, the young guys it was perfectly obvious. And the dialogue baffled them. We just got tape recorders. As soon as you listen to a conversation on a tape recorder, you think, what, that's not true. So we wouldn't find Pinter weird because we know from tape recorders how people speak...

I thought all the critics would die by having a new thing but they just breed more of the same, because the system reproduces itself.

DLY: Well, from the very nature of the word 'critic' they are there to criticize. What do you think of Canadian theatre? Let's talk about Canadian theatre.

KJ: I haven't seen any.

DLY: You have participated. You created a theatre company.

KJ: Yeah, but I haven't seen anybody else's plays.

DLY: You have obviously had to deal with funding and the craziness.

KJ: Oh, it's impossible. The Canada Council never funded us. They did send two people to us.

DLY: Okay, so what did Canada Council say to you?

KJ: It was fun. Two of their guys came to see us and to ask Dennis Cahill about our work. After an hour because we were famous and there was so much publicity, much more than now, after an hour it dawned on them that the Canada Council did not support us. They had come to us because we were so famous they thought we must be. But, after an hour the penny dropped. Then

they explained to us that of course they would fund us. We had got a theatre and we were a big success, as long as we changed what we were doing.

DLY: What!!! What did they want you to change?

KJ: We had a professional company. They did not want to open it. My feeling was that you should not know where the theatre ends and the community begins. And it's true you don't know. There's no line. I refuse to draw a line around it...

DLY: Let me ask you a question because I know that you had a falling out with Vancouver TheatreSports League.

KJ: Yes, Vancouver TheatreSports thought they invented it all. I gave a weekend course at Vancouver.

On Sunday night I told them to phone up a theatre and say we would do a late night show. Then I talked to Ray Michaels who had a theatre³⁶ and I said, "If you do TheatreSports at your theatre it will be a big success." I saw an interview with him where he quoted me and he said, "I thought Keith was full of bullshit." But, actually, it was perfectly true and TheatreSports did take over the theatre in the end.

But the people who I taught, many of them I knew in Vancouver immediately got jobs because it got massive publicity. And then a whole lot of comedians came in and they had no interest in any of this shit. I don't know why most improvisers don't like me. Maybe it's because I tell them that their work is shit and it's not worth doing.

The Germans are furious with me now because some interview I gave got massive publicity. Honestly, the first question was, you are famous, Keith for leaving German TheatreSports after three minutes. I should know this is a lie because it was after half an hour. Why would I sit and watch that stuff? I can't imagine why the Germans are watching it. There is nothing of the slightest value.

³⁶ The Back Alley Theatre on Thurlow Street in Vancouver, B.C.

They are all trying to be funny. They are all scared. Is that German theatre? God, can't you Germans invent something worth going to watch that has some values in, some morality, something interesting... You guys are political. You like politics in Germany. Why is there nothing of the tiniest bit about politics?... There is nothing of any political meaning whatsoever in anything I have seen in TheatreSports in Germany. What in the hell is going on?

DLY: What do they say to that?

KJ: I don't know. It is just an interview. But my publisher said they are really pissed off. I said that I hoped it would sell some books.

DLY: Hopefully, it will. There are a couple of young Canadian ladies I understand doing a documentary on you.

KJ: Yeah, God, they are strange.

DLY: Actually, my brother went to university with the main one, Cassandra Freeman. He went to the University of Victoria with her.

KJ: They want to do art. I told you this yesterday. They said we would like them to act out bits of your life. Why would they want to do a documentary with Keith, with people acting out bits of his life? With people who don't know me?!

DLY: By the same token, if you were acting out your life it seems pretty strange. I don't know about that.

KJ: They are trying to get original ideas. Oh, God, no.

DLY: Aren't they just telling your story? It is a great story, isn't it? I think it is a really evocative and interesting story and one that should be documented and noted.

KJ: No, they are trying to sell it and they want to sell it on the basis of show business.

DLY: You are a show biz guy.

KJ: As I said, I have this show biz phobia. They want to sell it to people. They got \$200,000.00 [CDN], which is not much and they have got to get some more. They can still work at it though.

I am just afraid of them, that, the film stuff.

The 'master shot' theory is a waste of time for everybody and they told me on the film that they agree with that. The theory that you get a master shot and you take small bits and you keep cutting to the master shot. Improvisation isn't anywhere. A master shot of the theatre is pointless. You never use it, or if you do use it you make a shot of the whole scene. Anyway, so they might listen to someone else.

They took me to a Chinese garden, I mean walking about and looking poetic. I will never have that happen again.

DLY: That's very artsy.

KJ: They are artists.

DLY: I think they have stumbled on a good subject matter. I really do. I think that you are an interesting person whose story needs be told and people should hear what is going on.

KJ: They need entertainment and we are up to our necks with dying.

DLY: Do you ever do any reading of people like Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire. They talk about improvisation being used in terms of political theatre and social change.

KJ: I think it is a good idea. Theatre makes things real. Now I have sold *The Life Game*³⁷ I have got a bit more money at last. I've sold it.

DLY: Sold it. How do you do that?

KJ: Ah, *The Life Game*. I have been hiding it for thirty years really because I knew they would fuck it up and now they will. I taught one guy when he was eighteen years old a long time ago. He became a director of the Probable Theatre Company. He founded it. They are really good...

He phoned me up and said they wanted to do the Life Game. So I went over there and taught them, gave them five days and made the mistake of doing a complete Life Game. So they took that and they took the model I showed them and they played it with great success around England. They toured about fifty cities with wonderful reviews and then they did it on Broadway for about three months, which was ridiculous of them. \$80.00 a ticket. Would you pay \$80.00 to see a bunch of improvisers? No, it's so stupid. And it can be wonderful.

I understand somebody from the TV, some branch of a MuchMusic or something, somebody said you guys have got to get hold of this and you have got to do it. So they contacted me. It was pitch black and I was outside by this rushing river because I couldn't get reception on the sound and I was in the middle of Germany talking on the cell phone to James³⁸ and these guys. I almost fell in the river. And they wanted me to do it on TV. I had to say yes because they could just alter it and modify it a bit and do it anyway. I had to say yes.

DLY: And get the credit for it?

KJ: Somebody said there is money to be made off it. I never made any money from improvisation until then because I had never taken any money out, I had always given it back. I had never taken any money from the copyright of anything in TheatreSports. The first money I got is from *The Life Games*.

³⁷ Keith sold the television rights for *The Life Game* to a big U.S. television outfit for possible production on Pay TV.

³⁸ James Faulkner, KJ's Manager.

Now I am old, it is quite nice to have a bit of money. I get a research assistant or a TV camera and I can have fun.

Anyway, they are going to do it. I think they are shooting the last three pilots. They own the channel so they can show them. They know nothing about *The Life Game*. None of them had seen it. They don't know what it is. They don't want any input from anybody. They don't want me to have anything to do with it.

DLY: Don't they want to pay in, pay out a few dollars and create...

KJ: They don't want to pay any of the guys who did it. They took three guys from the original company and they pick their brains on how to do it. Once or twice the producers phoned me up about problems that we met long ago, we knew all about. I had to explain to him things to him. I dread to think what it will be like.

DLY: You are not going to watch it, are you? Are you going to watch it?

KJ: I have got to see what it is like. I don't watch improvisation on TV. I have never seen any improvisation worth watching on TV.

DLY: Have you ever watched the Drew Carey thing? *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* What do you think?

KJ: Yeah. I don't like live entertainment. I don't want my time wasted. I'm alive. I want to learn things. I want to touch things. I want to feel something. I do not want Valium.

DLY: Didn't you say in your new book that if improv was about serious things it would be like watching a car crash?

KJ: If it was tragic, which it can be and then you have to send the people home. I'm not saying tragic, I am saying serious.

Last night there was this thing about the plot, another father/son thing. There were two last night. We try not to do two of the same thing in an evening. Then there is this poetic son and the father's bought him a gun for his fifteenth birthday.

I have got all the scenes mixed up. That was wonderful.

I have got another scene that was in two parts. Two guys end up in the forest. I told them to play a scene where they scream if they touch each other. I gave them instruction there because the moment you need an idea you just touch the other person. A guy who just kind of... you had to be there. It was a really serious moving scene about this sexual energy between two men. The two guys were not homosexual though and it was not supposed to be funny. I read the notes afterwards because I waved the lights down on the guy.

DLY: Were you involved in doing the side coaching last night?

KJ: I was doing Micetro. Micetro is good. Micetro is the nicest form and the quickest form to train people.

Afterwards we waved the lights down and knelt in front of him because what was really nice was that you didn't point that out to the audience. It is so nice if the audience sees it and you don't display it. And he said, "what?" And then you knelt down. He said, "ahhhh." Then it dawned on him what the audience was thinking, which is good. Let the audience see it and you just do the stuff which is back to acting, of course. Do the stuff and let them project into you. Don't show anything. Which is why they kept filming videos many times over.

DLY: What do we do about drama teachers using your ideas and your forms and they are screwing them up?

KJ: Well, the system is fucked. You teachers are in a corrupt system and they can't operate.

DLY: Let's assume, that when I complete my PhD and I am out there in the university system because I would like to explore university as a career for a bit.

I am not saying that's where I want to spend the rest of my life. I have enjoyed a dozen years being a drama teacher, Keith, but I would like to explore working with new drama teachers. My question is, what can I do? I want to go out there and I want to do things differently. I want to help, I want to change things and I want to have them do work with kids that is more meaningful in improv and other aspects of drama education. What am I going to do?

KJ: A good improviser is a humble and true agent.

DLY: So humble and courageous. I would throw one more word in there. I use it with my kids all the time: 'grace'. I love that word and I love trying to get them to be gracious as well as graceful.

KJ: If you are humble and courageous, you have grace. It is like being a saint — a saint is graceful.

Now these kids are probably desperately clinging to what they have been told because they have suffered in education. So just to have them understand that Socrates said he was wiser. He knew he was wise. He knew what he didn't know. Everybody else around him was always convinced that he knew everything. If you can encourage that and realize the removal of their fear, then I think you could possibly take them to real situations. But to do this would be unreal in the university.

Go make history. Anything real. It's all fake, everything is fake, it's fashion, it's hype, it's all poisonous...

DLY: What would that do?

KJ: These kids, it's amazing what they haven't seen and they haven't seen it in groups. If you are watching Laurel and Hardy by yourself as a kid, it is not the same. You have got to get them to respect those guys in the final group. So much came from that. We had it on record, it's there. So I saw the whole movie. So if you are showing bits of Buster Keaton or Chaplin or...

You see, I saw Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* at the University of Calgary and the guy talked for about twenty minutes before it came up. He wanted to live to see how the character of Chaplin had developed. Not a laugh for an hour. Two hundred people in a film course — they didn't see *The Gold Rush*, because they were anaesthetized. They began to chuckle a bit towards the end. I think you have to qualify that you criticize the system.

The reason many people respond to improv is that my publisher said, he is a nice guy called Frank Pike, he said, you know who you are, you went away ten years ago and you haven't done any work in the theatre really for fifteen years. Why don't you write something about how you did the first chapter? So I wrote it. So many people responded to it because the same thing happened to them. If they are committed to the system, it is the people who are not committed to the system who have screwed over improv. If the brain washing worked and they become part of the system and they are just there to be full of terror. They are terrified of the forces inside. They are at the mercy of those forces, of course...

This is the heart of all this. I mean I got into trouble in the beginning. It was interesting. They said it is not fair people always accept Keith's ideas and it's not right. So I had to explain to them that they were deluded because they had been taught that when they had an idea they fly to it. When I have an idea I suggest it to them and if it doesn't turn them on I slide on to another one. They don't even notice it has been rejected. And it is not until we finally get to idea number thirty-five that they all go "Yes". So they have the illusions that my ideas are always accepted and theirs weren't because they had been trained to have an idea and fight for the idea³⁹.

DLY: Do you ever have any of these actors turn on you and get all upset?

KJ: You don't analyze. If you analyze and if you project reasons onto people and stuff, nahh!! So, no, I have never had the slightest problem but it looks as if I should but I am not... I think the thing psychologist's do is a power trip. It causes a lot of trouble because they have to be loved or hated. That's not right.

DLY: Do you think that we live in a Büchnerian system, where the average man is constantly being humbled, manipulated and experimented on by the system? Would you say that is pretty much where it is?

KJ: I think there are some very good people in the system. I think the average person out there is a kind of genius but can't operate. I think people in education don't understand this. And there are people who go through and benefit from the system and there are other people who go through and are not smashed by the system. But it is not that people don't have interesting goals. People don't go down to fundamentals because they are trying to be clever and if you are trying to be obvious you go down to fundamentals and you question everything.

I think the other thing besides the luck of that teacher early on insulting me was... realizing all the grownups were lying when I was probably nine or ten. They were I thought they were lying.

DLY: How did your parents deal with you and the way you interacted within your world?

KJ: Well, it was difficult to survive. But because of that I used to reverse anything said to me to see if the opposite is true. That's such a good thing to do...

Space is an interstellar vacuum with nothing in it. Let's reverse it. Space is an interstellar vacuum with lots of stuff in it. You know what I mean...

If you believe in evolution, we are the guys who got to the top and this vicious, horrible system that trashes most people is part of it, we better hang on to it. But as far as individuals are concerned, it is not in their benefit to be crushed down into obeying other people and other people's ideas. It's not to the individual benefit.

So I was happy in the university. I just tried to communicate to my students. Some of whom didn't like it, they didn't want to think. Horrible.

³⁹ Johnstone points out that for some reason people believe his ideas are sacrosanct and therefore become overly attached to them.

CHAPTER SIX

Playing and Learning



... Don't use force in training the children in the studies, but rather play. In that way you can also better discern what each is naturally directed towards.

Plato, *The Republic*, 537a.

Playing, Learning and the Mimetic Nature of Education

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One of man's distinguishing marks is that he is the most mimetic of all animals and it is through his mimetic activity that he first begins to learn. {Aristotle, as cited in B. Halm, *Theatre and Ideology*, 1995, p. 62.}

Children play to familiarize themselves with the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the world that they live in. In fact, the irrevocable world of reality is a much safer place to inhabit once it has been explored previously through play. The human species, not unlike any other animal, incorporates the natural inclination or instinct to play — to learn how to survive, how to interact within their environment and how to interact with others. So much of children's play is mimetic in nature, as it imitates a variety of real-life conditions that it is hard to imagine how a child would develop properly without play. When children play, they examine and experience the roles they will eventually adopt as they mature into adult life; so much so, that parents and educators have made a goal out of manipulating children's play towards specific social and cultural imperatives, career objectives, or gender roles.

Children's play is as much an expectation as it is an inherent process of growing. Parents are the primary providers of stimuli for their developing child as they present their children with toys and a variety of other diversions with the expectation that the child will play with them, enjoy them and inevitably learn or

be educated from them. Toy manufacturers bank on this fact as so many of their products are geared towards parental expectations of an educative result.

My parents bought my brother and me all sorts of toys and games. I played "Stock Ticker" and learned about the stock market. I played "Stratego," "Chess," "Risk" and "Battle-Ship" and experienced the strategies of commanding the armed forces into battle. I had an "Easy Bake Oven" and learned how to bake little chocolate cupcakes under the heat of a 60-watt light bulb. I played with dolls, hockey sticks, paints and Hot Wheels cars. In my play I was obsessed with and actively emulated being either a hockey player or a politician. I also sucked my thumb, held a blanket and adored a stuffed "Piglet" doll from "Winnie the Pooh." In reflection, I can't really gauge how these specific experiences made me who I am today. I certainly didn't 'play' at being an educator or a drama teacher. And I never became a hockey player or a politician. Perhaps all the games and play that I enjoyed growing up enriched me — helping to make me a more complete and secure person. Or maybe it's simply because I still have my blanket and "Piglet!"

In the drama classroom I am always honored and amazed at the manner in which my students play. My students seem to explore both fictional and realistic situations with ease, flipping between personal narratives, disclosures and satirical parodies as if they were using a television remote control. The freedom that drama offers students to play freely as well as to tell, make, learn and reconcile their own stories liberates them to the point where they are better able to encounter their inevitable maturation into an increasingly busy and unimaginative adult world where play and storytelling are no longer honored. It is the job of the drama educator to make sure that our students learn by doing.

No matter what the issues of the day are, we can be assured that our students gain a depth and breadth of knowledge and experience through the collective experience. In the drama classroom, the student can creatively solve any problem. There is no 'right' or 'wrong', just a multitude of choices, which enable a student to journey into a metaphysical world of learning and exploration. The drama student can live a thousand different lives and be exposed to an inordinate number of possibilities, while simultaneously that same student can be revealing the most precious and personal moments of inner truth (Young, 1998).

I find myself agreeing with Richard Courtney's (1995) assessment of dramatic play as a "living metaphor," in which "we play with double meanings" continuously switching "between the actual and fictional — where each resembles the other" (pp. 86-87). A child's play exists in both the fictional world as well as the real world — simultaneously the child can test each one out, constantly comparing them to one another to help make meaning. Courtney goes on to explain how children make an effort to push their fictional worlds "as far as possible," helping them to better understand themselves and their relationship to others. This ability to thoroughly develop personal play, furthers a child's development by instilling in them a desire to take most tasks to conclusion, "an invaluable generic skill in adult life" (p. 87).

Reaching maturity and adulthood seems to be the pinnacle from which childhood is geared. The human infant and child takes an incredibly long time to reach both physical and psychological maturity, so long in fact, that both parents and educators get frustrated sometimes when children act their age, as opposed to attempting to grow up more quickly. The rationalist perspective of John Locke

(1693) believed that "the sooner you treat him as a man, the sooner he will become one" (§ 95). But what is gained from an over-accelerated and unnatural maturation or coming of age? For Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) there was a very defined natural progression from which children developed, characterized by specific theories based in the new emerging science of nature and a desire to embrace man's original condition. Children therefore would mature at a natural pace and would not rush the growing process for the sake of Locke's "reason." More to the point, Rousseau counters Locke's desire to age children prematurely by pointing out that "if children understood reason, they would not need to be raised" (p. 89). Progressivist, John Dewey (1916), believed a child's learning and development was based on a child's mind experiencing, exploring and experimenting with significant activities that held some importance for practical daily living and, therefore, the whole child would mature in stages within the duality of this existence (p. 315).

Children are expected to play, but are also expected to grow out of play. In many cases the school system is utilized as the institution charged with the task of distancing children from their playful spirit and instilling in them a deep-seated fearful reverence for the impending adult world of work, responsibility and monotony. As adults we don't seem to have time to play. And even if we did have the time, what kinds of games would we play, how much energy and imagination are we prepared to invest in adult play and do these games ever really enable us to re-experience our childish imagination and child-like freedoms?

Children's creativity and imagination must be fostered, but as they grow up, that same creativity and imagination becomes a potential hindrance to the

socialization and educative processes that they inevitably will submit to. The child will want to play games, but will only be allowed to play at recess and the games will have rules and the rules will be enforced and there will be a time limit. And when the child writes, they will have to write like everyone else, their penmanship will be judged, their thoughts will be marked for spelling and grammar and their words will be censored. When they move through the school, they will walk not run, they will walk in straight lines with their peers, with no pushing or talking. They will be told the specific parts of the day when they can sing, when they can draw or paint, when and how they must learn a variety of subject matter, they will even be told when they can go to the toilet or eat. They will learn to follow the teacher — who in turn is also playing out their role by pursuing the mandate and guidelines of provincially required curriculum. The curriculum, which is developed through a political process, places significance on social values and mores, on sustainable economic growth and projected employment statistics. Ironically, the people who make the decisions were once creative and imaginative children too, but somewhere in the cyclical realm of the education system, the creativity and imagination that should have been the cornerstone and foundation of the education of children went missing.

If play is such a compelling and interesting accessory of education, why does it seem to be relegated to the periphery of our current system? Could it be that we do not have enough capable, skilled, creative, or knowledgeable teachers, who are prepared to act as both facilitator and as ‘player’ participant to support increased student learning? Or is it because we perceive play in the pejorative, as lacking rigor, effort, struggle and difficulty? Perhaps we just outgrow play altogether and because our education system is so advanced, play simply gets

lost deep within our system, only to rear itself on lazy days when we need a break from the routine of hard study, standardized tests and rote memorization. If we want to revitalize play as a valid and significant educational strategy, as something more valuable than just frivolity, it might be wise to explore some of the historical implications of the role of play in education and child development.

For John Locke, children's play and similar "diversions... should be directed towards good useful habits, or else they will introduce ill ones" (§ 130). One of the fundamental features of Locke's thinking was to consider children as "rational creatures" (§ 54) who acted childishly only as a result of their age. Locke, who seems to be a proponent of corporal punishment when modifying the behaviors of children, goes on to argue that children should have the freedom to be children and that adult discipline should be curtailed in order to let children develop themselves over time. He writes:

If these faults of their age, rather than of the children themselves, were as they should be, left only to time and imitation and riper years to cure, children would escape a great deal of misapplied and useless correction.... But this gamesome humour, which is wisely adapted by nature to their age and temper, should rather be encouraged... (§ 63).

Locke wanted children to be brought up in such a manner that they would learn from their play. Toys for instance should be geared to the age and experience of the child, should be respected, treated with care, used with moderation and on many occasions, children should actually make or help to make their own toys. Locke believed that games, toys and monitored play would ultimately facilitate a child's learning by teaching them "moderation in their desires, application, industry, thought, contrivance and good husbandry; qualities that will be useful

to them when they are men; and therefore cannot be learned too soon, nor fixed too deep" (§ 130).

Locke's philosophy included play in a variety of forms and applications, one of his more notable strategies was to use play as a strategy to teach children to read. Locke believed that children were averse to learning in traditional ways, where they would be chastised, chided or corrected in their lessons; therefore he suggested that learning become a "sort of play or recreation" which children would enjoy, seek out and indulge in (§ 148). Using words like "cozened" and "contrivances," Locke proposed that teachers, tutors and adults, should manipulate learning into a game or sport, with rewards and pleasurable competition, that would excite children to want to learn. Toys and games could be devised to help teach the alphabet and reading skills in such a way that the children "might desire to be taught" (§ 148).

Rousseau's philosophy on education is reminiscent of a pivotal point of great clarity in Shakespeare's *King Lear* — virtually naked, stripped of all his regal trappings, his filial expectations fractured and exposed to the natural elements on the heath he says "Thou art the thing itself: unaccommodated man..." (*King Lear*, III.iv.108). Rousseau's "unaccommodated man" was situated within the world of nature and play, somewhere between an admission that "childhood has it's own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling" (p. 171), and an ideal formed in part by Daniel Defoe's famous story of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), who lived a semi-self-sufficient ship-wrecked life on a desert island. Rousseau acknowledged that childhood had a natural progression and stages of developmental increments in learning, but also expected self-reliance and self-initiative to be an inherent part of a child's nature.

In *Emile* (1762), Rousseau's young charge was to learn by doing and no sooner was his student doing any number of tasks than Rousseau advanced them by making them relevant, meaningful and playful. Whether he was studying geography, astronomy, gardening, or the other labors of life, Rousseau's child learned first hand to have a keen sense of inquiry and passion in all his tasks. Rousseau relied heavily on a natural playful spirit so that when the children competed in races for Rousseau's 'cakes', they continued to race not just for the reward, but because Rousseau had made a game of the activity that they enjoyed participating in. Rousseau's child was raised with a wide variety of activities to continuously employ play, competition and games as a means to achieve cognitive growth and educational development. Rousseau took great delight in describing his games and how the children would play them, benefit from them and eventually, through the natural consequences of playing his games, would grow up to have an advantage over men who were not raised similarly.

John Dewey's writings have provided the field of education with an extensive array of dualism's based on his deeply held theories of education, child development, emotion and psychology. Dewey's ideas on emotional responses were based on the premise that perception was a dynamic force, where actual encounters would always be coupled with an emotional response (Dewey, 1895, p.19). These ideas are particularly compelling when I reflect on my own practice in drama and see so many of my students reaping therapeutic as well as educationally sound benefits from dramatic play. Dewey's theories support cognitive education and growth based on an affective model. Dramatic playing has numerous educative benefits because it engages a child's imagination in a manner that provides them with emotional and visceral knowledge, responses

and relationships uniting them within a dynamic world. This type of “affective-cognitive synthesis” provides the means for children to gain both emotional feeling and knowledge from either viewing or participating in dramatic play (Courtney, 1995, p. 118).

For Dewey, play was not only an important function of learning and the instructive process, but also an opportunity to enliven the experience of work and industry. Play was to be incorporated into education not only to break the tedium, not only to engage the whole child, but to reduce the gap between life and school, or in the case of work, the factory and the office (p. 195). Dewey suggested that play and work were interconnected: that from early childhood we developed an ability to become engrossed in both play and work, in make-believe and reality; and as long as a child continued to be stimulated by an activity of this nature his attitude would be one of “serious absorption” (p. 204). If the school could incorporate this innate play attitude into all learning, courses from mathematics to horticulture could benefit from the pupils' enthusiasm for learning. Dewey writes:

Where schools are equipped with laboratories, shops and gardens, where dramatizations, plays and games are freely used, opportunities exist for reproducing situations of life and for acquiring and applying information and ideas in the carrying forward of progressive experiences (pp. 161-162).

If students were taught a variety of skills including manual and menial labor techniques, then the child would develop a habitualized affinity for their future lives in the industrial labor force, as Dewey emphasized — “work which remains permeated with the play attitude is art” (p. 206).

As I reflect and write about play and mimesis as fundamental characteristics of education and learning, I can't help but spend a few moments

reflecting on my own upbringing and development. How much of the knowledge that I have today was learnt through imitation? As a boy, I learned how to shave by watching my dad — with too much shaving cream and a razor with no blade — I mimicked his every action as I watched him in the bathroom mirror. As a child, I played games with all kinds of toys, making-believe that I was a race car driver, a soldier or a fireman. I played street hockey with my neighborhood friends, weaving in and out on the pavement with a tennis ball as a puck, replaying a variety of Hockey Night in Canada play-by-play highlights, while pretending I was Bobby Orr, Phil Esposito, Jean Belliveau, or Guy Lafleur.

One time, after sneaking a pack of cigarettes from his mother's purse, my friend Sam and I snuck off behind a near-by church to have our first smoke. Through our inevitable coughing fits, we attempted to imitate a variety of television or movie stars we wished to be like, look like and emulate. As a youth, I dressed, acted and attempted to relate to the world around me in the exact same way that many of my friends did. We experienced and explored the world by copying whatever trends were set out for us by the mass media and through attempting to rebel against our parents, family and authority. I know that the mimetic nature of my life adds up to much more than learning how to shave, or dreaming of playing hockey like Bobby Orr. I also know that as a drama educator I view mimesis, artistic imitation and education much differently than Plato did. Or do I?

The mimetic nature of human development is well investigated in Platonic theories of art and education. In *The Republic*, Plato (427-347 B.C.) used Socratic Methods of dialectic irony and a maieutic approach (from the Greek maieutikos, meaning, "giving birth") in his attempts to discover truth by asking

questions and exploring answers at length. The dialogues that Plato created drew heavily on the Socratic concept of 'logos', which was based on a geometrical conceptualization of nature and moral values (Boal, 1979, p. 6). Using this logic, Plato was able to triangulate his dialogues in such a fashion as to pose, counterpose, expound upon, debate and negate a wide variety of ideas and concepts, thus facilitating the expansion and acquisition of knowledge.

Plato's theory of artistic imitation continues to be one of the most contentious of his many philosophies. Artists, art critics, academics and aestheticians have and will, continue to debate Platonic dialogues, based on his rationalist attitude towards the limitations of art (Verdenius, 1962, p. 2). Plato was concerned with an ideal form regardless of the medium. There was a general contempt for the artist within Platonic arguments, which insist that art is intrinsically mimetic because the artist knew "nothing worth mentioning about the subjects he represented," and that art was a "form of play not to be taken seriously" (Plato, trans. Cornford, 1941, in Werhane, 1984, p. 20). Plato argued that the artist could only grasp a fraction of any object or subject matter that they intend to represent or create and, therefore, was a distant imitator of reality, removed from its creation to the point of "knowing nothing of the reality, but only the appearance" (p. 19).

In *The Republic*, Plato was guided solely by the quest to establish a well-ordered and just society. In this society, Plato was concerned that the arts and in particular poetry, could corrupt or trick a person into believing something that was representational might in fact be real. Because the Greeks were prone to consider their poets as "reliable sources and infallible authorities for all kinds of practical wisdom," (Verdenius, 1962, p. 6) poets represented a very real threat to

the indoctrination of the people. Was it possible that Plato feared the power that the artists of his time might wield? After all, it was through the artist that the polytheistic embodiment of the Greek religion was delivered to the people, expressing the many gods, deities and elements of the oracles. The artist represented a free, uninhibited, creative spirit, that was thought to be divinely provided by ancient muses — their writing, poetry, music and dance had the potential to induce innumerable possibilities for instruction and indoctrination.

Isn't art, not unlike education, a series of persistent questions? With the artist/educator presenting his/her work within the structure of a variety of media, through representation, interpretation, both realistic and fictional — questions are being asked and answers are being sought. Plato didn't view the artist in this light. Plato saw the artist living in a restrictive and absolute world and was relentless at "emphasizing the limitations of art" (Verdenius, 1962, p. 27). Similarly, education can be considered to be just as limited, if we consider Plato's allegory, education takes place in a cave, in bondage, a dream-like state, where everyone is educated in a unified and controlled manner. The cave dweller (as student) is reliant upon the teacher to expose him/her to 'the light' — with the progressive nature of education displayed as a journey from the shadowy dark realms into a world of intense clarity, color and complexity. Education and the arts should have been valuable allies in Plato's world, instead they were antithetical to each other.

Considering that Plato's dialogical style was the basis of his pedagogy, it is incumbent on the reader to willingly accept the invitation to engage these ideas by placing each argument in context and by considering both the conventional and mimetic irony that is interwoven throughout (Boutros, 1998).

For Plato, conventional irony was based on a “separation on what is said and what is meant,” thus putting the onus on the reader to establish the truth in the argument. Mimetic irony involved the teacher as authority figure taking on the role of the misguided student, so as to confront the student’s errors by actually mimicking them for the benefit of the student’s own reflection (Miller, 1986, p. 4-5). However, Platonic irony in both its forms as described by Boutros and Miller require the audience or reader to identify with the characters and their dialogue, providing personal insight, internal examination and self-revelation when juxtaposed with the written text.

In some ways, I can see Plato’s *Republic* (in all its dialogical glory) come to life daily in my drama classroom. Students engage in a variety of dramatic and improvisational activities, developing themselves, their self-esteem and their sense of societal connection through mimetic play and imitative situations. By exploring the world mimetically, students are better able to adapt and reconcile the realities of living and maturing into an adult world that is often foreign and unforgiving. Pedagogically, the realm of drama is a natural environment fully exploring, utilizing and fostering Plato’s ironic devices.

As a drama educator, I am unable to distance myself from the mimetic and derivative realities of artistic creation. For me, there is something more to drama, something intangible and something that we are unable to evaluate with standardized provincial examinations. I feel that drama is a key curricular component in our education system because it provides young people with a safe environment to reflect on the world they live in. The fact that the delineation between art and life is so blurry today makes it that much more important to provide a sound contextual framework from which our young people can

reconcile and assimilate the world around them (Young, 1999). Maybe this was Plato's concern — that people in his era would be unable or even unwilling to attempt to distinguish truth from fiction?

Regardless of the philosophical rationale for the inclusion of play in education, the fact remains that mimetic playing and learning are thoroughly connected. Whether the incorporation of play into the curriculum equates to any or all of the attributes discussed by the foundational theorists I have mentioned makes very little difference, because the use of play as a strategy, in and of itself, has the potential to provide students with greatly enhanced learning opportunities. It is within our nature to play and to learn from play. Joseph Campbell (1976) argues that this type of learning is open ended, as “man's capacity for play animates his urge to fashion images and organize forms in such a way as to create a new stimuli for himself...” (p. 38-40). If this is the case, ‘*play-learning*’ should be considered to be one of the fundamental forms of learning, as opposed to a fringe element used only by the so-called, non-academic subjects. There is no reason why play could not be incorporated into all areas of the curriculum, especially if it has the ability to provide a multitude of extensions and conduits towards future educational experiences and opportunities for students. The French essayist Montaigne (1580) noted that “children at play are not playing about; as their games should be seen as their most serious minded activity” (p. xxiii). Unfortunately some educators within our current system are unwilling to concede this point, because for them there is nothing serious about playing — and as far as they are concerned playing is definitely NOT learning. I can't help but wonder if these people have been in a drama classroom recently?

CHAPTER SEVEN

**Interview with Dennis Cahill
Artistic Director of Loose Moose Theatre
Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

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Saturday, June 23, 2001 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Interview with Dennis Cahill

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David L. Young: Dennis, the first thing I would like to ask you is, how long have you been involved in improvisation as a theatrical form and what got you started?

Dennis Cahill: I started with Keith in 1974, 1975 something like that. I took an acting course from Keith at the University in Calgary, second year acting. Keith, of course, introduced a lot of improvisation in that class and I really enjoyed it.

I think the following year Keith started a 'secret improv group', which is a group that performed improvisation demonstrations during the noon hours in the drama department. Friends would show up.

Then, I guess in 1977, Keith started doing skits and asked a number of his former students to join up and I was one of those. That's basically my life in crime.

DLY: You were an actor and you have obviously directed and now you are also administrating.

DC: Yeah, I'm just basically one of the performers. When we moved into the other theatre that we have, they needed a janitor, so I became the janitor. Then they got a grant, a federal work grant for an Associate Director so I applied. I thought um, janitor, I could move up. So I applied for that and then, over the years, became Associate Artistic Director. And then when Keith decided to retire a couple of years ago I became Artistic Director. I started directing, performing and teaching.

DLY: What keeps you excited and passionate about improv for more than twenty-five years?

DC: Well, I had to get it right.

DLY: That's the short answer.

DC: There is no way I personally can guarantee that I am going to have a good night. I would still like to know why that is. On that basis it is still a challenge. It has always been a challenge for me. Also, there is always new things to know about, always new things to learn. It is exciting being around here because there are so many young people that become involved in it. I haven't worked with sane people for twenty-five years...

There are still a lot of unknowns about improvisation and the applications of improvisation. We do children's theatre as well. We use improvisation in the development of children's theatre... We have used improvisation to develop scripts, to develop productions. So that's my interest.

Teaching is an interest as well, different applications for teaching. We did a corporate workshop for the City of Calgary. It was great fun because you have a totally different group of people. You learn new things while working with different types of people. So, yeah, it is still a vast mystery.

DLY: Do you find that when you are out and about in the theatre community in Calgary that improv isn't respected the way you would like it to be?

DC: I am not out and about in the community...

I have a lot of trouble with theatre, because I find most theatre really boring. I find it difficult to go to the theatre. I quite often leave during intermission. I try not to leave during the performance because it is a bit rude. I don't go to theatre actually to tell you the truth, so I am not out and about in 'the theatre community'. And there is a very limited amount of time that I spend with people that are from the 'other side' of the theatre community.

I think they are suspicious of improvisation. I think they are suspicious of us. "How dare you put that 16 year old on stage without training." Yeah, I think generally there is a negative attitude in most of the theatre community, not all of them but most of them. So be it....

For the most part, we don't compete. Our audience usually goes to movies or they go to clubs or they hang out with their friends. They don't go to other forms of theatre. So there is no competition.

DLY: Let's touch on competition on a different level. One of the things that I see working with teenagers in high schools is competition with improv in terms of tournaments and the like. What are your feelings about the competitive level or the competitive edge that some improv tournaments and some improv formats have?

DC: It's a difficult question. I have heard some people say, "oh you can't have competition. You shouldn't have competition in the theatre it's cooperative." Obviously, they have never been to an audition for a film, so competition exists in theatre anyway. The competition that is in something like TheatreSports is their way of involving the audience at a different level than most theatre. If the players take it too seriously and they want to win, then it becomes really difficult.

Anytime I have been to a big tournament, a big TheatreSports tournament, it is a pain in the ass because all of the performers want to do well. As soon as they want to do well they screw up. Which is the great irony of performing. As soon as you really try hard it doesn't work. It turns to shit. That's good. It is a good lesson to learn. So the competition exists as a way of providing a format that invigorates the audience. It gets them cheering, thumping and hollering, which is unlike other audiences.

I wish they did that at other theatres. I wish they booed and hissed but they don't – so it is boring. So I think if you approach the competition in a positive sense then it is less problematic. I think of the competition becoming the end-result — winning. Then it becomes a huge problem. I know for teenagers it sometimes is difficult for them. They become more competitive. I have had high

school teachers say that too, but I think again that if it is put in the right environment.

We have high school students here. If they hang around long enough, they sort of learn the difference between the competition aspect of it and what the actual performance is, what you are trying to do. Really, in TheatreSports, the competition is between the teams. It is a way of galvanizing the teams with the audience against the judges who are really the bad guys. They are the ones who squelch all the fun or get you off stage when you need it but that's the good stuff. I don't really know much about competition. I have limited experience with things like leagues and fresh competition with comedy sports...

I have very little experience with those to say there is a philosophical basis for what they are doing in terms of how the competition plays into it. The problem in TheatreSports is that as soon as people get hold of the format, they immediately want to change it, to make it less risky. So they will do things like take out the lines that are boring, which is a huge mistake because again you want to cut down on humiliation. That's a mistake because humiliation is standing on stage when it is all going wrong and having no way off.

DLY: It's a different attitude towards competition. Do you think that improv is deconstructed theatre?

DC: I am not sure I understand the question.

DLY: I guess we look at the theatre as we know it. It is a human construct that people created to tell our stories. It is a scripted, structured format with audiences having a very specific type of expectation. It is an expectation of what an audience gets and receives and does at a theatre, sitting, clapping and watching quietly. The whole passivity of audiences at a normal theatrical event: the script and the way the actors are supposed to approach it, the protocol, the whole manner of what we have learned theatre is supposed to be.

Then we look at improv and we look at what is pretty commonplace in an improv theatre here in Calgary or in Vancouver and we see something totally different. Really you are rebuilding theatre in a different image.

So when I say 'deconstructed', it is taking apart the pieces that we have learned the normal way about and making it into something else.

DC: I think maybe, to some degree, that may be true. I think that depends on where it is. I am trying to think of other examples like how some improvisation groups have a tendency to be more traditional theatre. Their expectations are different of their audience in their performance. I think it is not a conscious deconstruction of theatre. I think it is something different. I think it offers something different. I think it appeals to young people because there is a certain risk aspect to it, a certain dangerous aspect that is not really in traditional theatre.

DLY: You think that maybe one of the reasons it might also appeal to a young person is because the quick scenic content of TheatreSports, or improvisation as we know it, is very much like a remote control, like a clicker, as we get bored from one scene to the next, so we can flip channels.

DC: Theatre for me has a short attention span.

DLY: Yeah.

DC: ... My son, who is nine, came and saw *Waiting for Godot*, which is two and a half hours, he wasn't clicking the remote. I think that kind of cheapens the whole thing to say that it is a short attention span.

I think the type of improvisation that we do, lends it to shorter scenes. For instance comedy, straight comedy, lends itself to shorter scenes. I felt that ultimately the most difficult thing is to do narrative.

DLY: Do you do long form?

DC: No, we try to avoid it like the plague. But a couple of years ago we did long form. My problem with long form is that, it is such crap after ten minutes, who wants to watch?

So we do something called 'more or less', which is our sort of answer to long form. One of the players will start up to direct a full length play then after a scene or two we ask the audience if they want to see more of it, or if they want to see something else.

DLY: From your experience usually the audience responds they want more or?

DC: It depends, if they are interested, if there's mysteries involved, if they are involved in it, they want to see more of it, of course. If it is guys just goofing about they want to see less. I think if you can do long form, great, but the tendency is to lock yourself in.

DLY: That's my problem.

DC: Long form to me is a way to further legitimize the material. Like saying short form is not good enough. We have got to do something legitimate which is long form. Then if you can do it, great.

DLY: If you were trying to connect improv theatre to, say, another art form, would you look at jazz? Do you see connections between improv and jazz?

DC: Yeah, I do enjoy jazz. I suppose to some degree – I am not a jazz musician so I think jazz, to some degree. There are rules that are played to and in improvisation, I wouldn't want to say rules, but there are guidelines. So I think in that sense there are similarities. A good jazz musician doesn't know any more about what they are going to play than I know what I am going to do when I get on stage, so in that sense there are similarities.

I think it stands on its own. I never felt a great need to legitimize it by comparing it to other things or making it more than it really is.

Keith thought of it as disposable theatre, which I really like. Although sometimes you remember scenes and you remember great moments and it stays for years.

Last night there was this scene with a suitcase and two people on stage. We were directing together and we said it is better to get him to go into the suitcase, which is a perfectly ludicrous idea, only Keith would come up with, but the image will stick with me for a long, long time. There is something totally bizarre and wonderful about this moment telling her husband to get in the suitcase and he being unable to. And a great final image one of the other guys did when he said, "I can get into the suitcase." And he goes in behind it where we have a trap door and he crawls into the trap door. You remember shit like that.

DLY: I just want to call out some names and some ideas and get you to tell me what comes to mind. Del Close.

DC: I don't know much about Del Close other than a few anecdotes I have heard from other people who worked with him.

DLY: What about Viola Spolin?

DC: Oh, I know a bit about Viola Spolin. I know that she developed a number of improvisation games. Some of the games are used in TheatreSports. Her son is Paul Sills. I think he was instrumental in starting the Compass Players that eventually became Second City. Other than that I don't really know a lot about Viola Spolin.

DLY: What about Keith and his influence on you and this theatre?

DC: Well, tons and tons of influence. If it weren't for Keith there wouldn't be Loose Moose that's for sure. And how Loose Moose operates, I think Keith has to be responsible for it. I think it is kind of a neat place because of Keith's influence. We told him to make mistakes... And he let people try things here. Train them to fail gracefully. That is Keith.

So, because of that, Loose Moose has sort of become a magnet for people who want to do this kind of improvisation. I have worked with Keith now for

almost twenty-five years, so obviously there is a great deal of... Well you would never get that from Keith... I know Keith too well. I know people treat him like a guru and that makes him hugely uncomfortable at times. You don't usually treat him like a guru. No, no, no, there's respect. You spent time with Keith. Keith is Keith, a unique individual. I have been known to do imitations of him from time to time. It is that kind of relationship. He got me the other day at lunch. We were doing a play and he was trying to get me to find a character for a particular role I was doing. He said, "Do me." I did him for about 10 seconds.

DLY: Are the actors who work here kind of amateur, learning their craft and working their way up, or do you have a number of professionals?

DC: No, Equity is pretty rare. When people become Equity they are usually busy with other things. Yeah, there is a real mix. Particularly on Friday nights — people who are brand new and then right down the line there are people who have been doing it for years and years.

DLY: Is it predominately young, white, male?

DC: The overall majority seems to be male. It is a problem to keep a balance. There are a number of theories as to why that is. Generally speaking that's pretty true. I don't know the reasons for that, other than Calgary is still predominately white.

DLY: There are two criticisms that I have heard in my research. One, is that improv theatre is predominately, dominated by young, white, males. And, two, that improvisers are usually actors who can't make it in scripted theatre and therefore don't know the rules.

DC: You know, it is interesting because one of the women in class who was here just recently had quite a bit of experience with legit theatre. When she was in university she did a paper on improvisation and went around to a number of

directors in town and talked to them about improvisers. Would they hire improvisers? She got some of that same kind of feedback....

I live around the theatre community right now and I know that in five professional theatres in Calgary they are using people who are improvisers who have been trained into scripts. None of those people ever heard anything said against them.

Really, to me, some people come here right out of high school. So, no, they haven't taken training to act, but they can become very good improvisers. That does not mean that they can't do scripted work. It is different. Some people can do both, some people will do both, some people will do both and some people train to do both. That's fine but they don't have to. I know a really good mime artist. He can act. Why shouldn't he be able to do the same? I know a great ballet dancer who can't do improvisation.

I think that to some people improvisation really scares the traditional theatre community because it cuts out a lot of the traditional crap. To me, a lot of the traditional theatres are like private clubs. To be a member, you have to follow certain rules, but they are not necessarily legitimate rules...

I think it is a way of putting improvisation down by comparing it to something else. Let it stand on its own. It is a legit form on its own. I have two hundred people in here on a Friday or Saturday night. Two hundred people who enjoy the entertainment and if somebody will say, "well that's not theatre." Well, okay, fine, it's not theatre. It is semantics – who cares what you call it? If it's entertaining an audience then it is a legit form.

DLY: I think what scares the shit out of people is the nature that it exists in and of itself in the moment. And if you blink, you miss something that is potentially really cool. And it is not written down. It is not taped. It is a 'one off' every night and you have got to be there to experience it.

DC: To some degree that's right.

We have done full-length legit plays. We did a full-length production of *Macbeth*. It was a full production with a couple of the guys here, but it was with only six performances. Five out of six were improv actors and one was an Equity

actor, who we had some difficulty with. Again, it may not be in terms of how he approached the stage, but improvisers just do it.

You ask an improviser to do something and they don't ask a lot of questions, they don't make a lot of excuses and they usually just do it, at least around here.

We did a very well received production of *Waiting for Godot*. We have actually done it a couple of times, it is a favorite. It was very well received, critically and by the audience. So, I don't know. I don't want to knock anything in terms of discipline.

Actually *Waiting for Godot*, the last one we did, to be perfectly honest with you, yeah there was some lacking in the discipline. I think it had to do with the individuals though. If you ask Keith about it they didn't learn their lines. They didn't learn the text. So maybe there is a legit excuse there.

I don't see a lot of actors who are able to make it and further going a notch down and doing improvisation. We don't get a lot of stand-up comedians in Calgary doing improvisation. You get truck drivers and taxi drivers, guys who install cable and teachers and people who have no intention of ever going into acting. Fortunately they have some success around here and they get this idea that it would be a great thing to go into theatrical work or the entertainment world. Then the problems starts. But I think the world needs some more actors.

DLY: I want to ask one more question. If a high school teacher comes in and says, "Dennis, I want to do improv with my kids. What can I do?" What kind of stuff are you going to share with a high school teacher who is working with a bunch of thirteen or fourteen year old grade eight students?

DC: I would say do improvisation because of the love and opportunity for those individuals to try it.

What would Keith say, to adjust their behaviour in different ways and to test the host's behaviour in a kind of semi-controlled situation? They can find a direct interest in how to interact. It might help them build confidence and personal skills, communication skills. Again, depending on how it is approached,

it can teach you about failure, the nature of creativity and risk-taking, all in a fairly harmless way.

I don't really see improvisation as being harmful, done with a harmful intent. I think that's probably what I would say. If they ask me why I do it. You don't do it to train more actors. You don't do it to train more performers.

Some people golf, some people do improvisation. That's great. I have seen people here, they just sort of come out of shells and adjust to themselves and become rounder human beings. It gives them a lot of confidence. We take everybody in. To be really honest about this, is it like young males? It is, but the door is open. Anybody can come through it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In Defense of the Arts



Unlike many subjects offered in schools, the arts in general and drama in particular, must continually justify their place in the curriculum.

Sharon Bailin, (1993), "Drama as Experience: A critical View". *Canadian Journal of Education*. 18:2:93.

In Defense of the Arts

• • •

I walk into my secondary school's conference room, preparing myself for a meeting where the 'academic' teachers of the school are pitted against the 'non-academic' teachers. A new principal chairs this gathering, prepared to enfranchise each staff member with a voice, an opinion, an agenda, to seek some sort of consensus regarding the manner in which we as a staff utilize and manage the time of our students. Teachers of math, social studies and science, are upset that students are allowed to miss classes to go on field trips to see works of art; they are frustrated when students in the music program are absent for recitals and presentations; and they are even more hostile to the notion of students in the drama and theatre program missing classes to perform plays.

The tenor of their arguments are based on an inherently perceived hierarchy, which places a greater value on a student's success or failure in a biology, algebra, or social studies class, than a student's success or failure in an art, music, or drama class. The arts are viewed as peripheral to an academic education. They are considered frivolous by some and certainly do not merit any special consideration within a curricularly sound school environment.

As the Visual and Performing Arts Department Head and the drama and theatre teacher, I am expected to take the many attacks directed at my department and my program and I am supposed to fight back. I am expected to somehow explain and justify to my colleagues in this meeting the validity and

importance of a well-rounded arts education, the value that it possesses for each individual student, the significance that it makes in their lives and the lives of their friends, families and the community at large. I realize that as I speak out about 'teaching the whole child' and the value of a comprehensive education with the arts as a core curricular component — while citing Dewey, Piaget and other educational theorists attempting to find an academic framework that might impress my colleagues — that there is a vital basis for the inclusion of an arts curriculum in the development of a socially aware and critically thinking young person — I realize that my words are falling on deaf ears, unbudging, entrenched ideologues, with political agendas far broader than simply limiting a student's time out of a particular class. I recognize that I have entered into a well-established debate about the very nature and philosophy of the arts in society.

Historically, humans have strived to gain a greater profundity and insight into the nature and meaning of our daily life experiences. Artistic endeavors have been (and continue to be) an important catalyst for humans to examine the capricious disposition of both our internal and external realities. The origin of art is viewed by Ellen Dissanayake (1995) as a behavioral human identifier of "making special" objects, ideas, words, images, movement, sound, music, light, color and a multitude of other elements that become richly textured within the significance of daily ritual (pp. 42-54). This "specialness in the aesthetic sense" that Dissanayake writes about, imbues human artistic endeavors with a mixture of utilitarian, tactile and sensual elements that go far beyond any type of simple behavioral explanation, allowing people to find joy and meaning within the uncomplicated innocence of daily existence (pp. 55-57).

I view so much of my world through the eyes of the drama teacher — where I am afforded the amazing opportunity to be witness to and reflect on, the artistic, aesthetic journey that my student's share with me daily (Young, 1998). The young people that I work with are constantly seeking to "make special" specific aspects of their lives, their adolescent worlds, to consider, contemplate and contend with "the human world as we find it in all its variegated aspects." (van Manen, 1990, p. 18).

My students regularly engage in improvisational, dramatic and theatrical assignments that allow them to explore their lived experiences, as well as attempt to reconcile and understand the uncertain nature of an adult world that is so quickly encroaching upon them. Their presentations are artistically conceived to represent, imitate and explicate their personal, emotional, visceral responses to their peers in the drama classroom. The drama classroom is a place of communal communication, understanding and support, where students feel safe and can easily share themselves with one another.

The Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, *Fine Arts 11: Integrated Resource Package* (1995) proposes a curriculum stressing that the "fine arts reflect a human need to understand our world;" that communicating through the arts is "a powerful means of expressing ideas and emotions to satisfy a range of personal and social needs;" and that when young people respond to, or reflect on, the fine arts they "develop sensory awareness and aesthetic appreciation." With these goals at its core, it is no wonder that students are required to have a specific number of senior "Fine Arts" course credits to graduate.

Published mandates called 'Graduate Profiles' from individual school districts and schools, stress the need for our education system to deliver the political platforms dictated by the Ministry of Education.

During the late 1950's and early 1960's, 'Cold War' politics produced a politically charged curricular platform focusing on science, math and English literature. Although art, music and drama were described as extending the "intellectual development" and "aesthetic appreciation" of students, it was recommended in the 1960 *Royal Commission on Education in British Columbia* that there should be a reduction in "the amount of school time devoted to these subjects" and that they should only be retained as "options in secondary schools."

Thirty years later, came a different educational outlook as published in the *Sullivan Report* or *The Year 2000 Document* (1991), which aspired to provide students with a more universal and socially abstract education, thus making the arts a core foundation of the curricular framework.

How did these particular changes evolve?

Simply put, the political and economical climate of British Columbia changed. In tough times the arts are considered frivolous and in healthy times the arts are considered to be important and valuable.

Unfortunately, it is during the toughest times, when arts education might have the most positive and profound effect on the young people it serves.

Recent national education survey results in the United States exhibit this 'boom' or 'bust' mentality: sixty-three percent of respondents during the peak economic climate of 1997 answered that artistic extracurricular activities were "very important" to a child's education, whereas only thirty-one percent

responded in a similar vein during the recessionary downturn of 1984. The same survey also showed that less than ten percent of respondents thought that the arts should be considered a “curriculum basic” (L.C. Rose, A.M. Gallup, S.M. Elam, 1997).

Perhaps the arts are dismissed as a frill and considered to be ‘extra’ curricular, because they are based on our personal experiences and emotional responses to the world around us, which we take for granted. Possibly the arts are validated during times of political and economic stability because they are less threatening, less able to indoctrinate or incite — and more able to placate and pacify.

If arts education, and most importantly, an aesthetic appreciation of the arts are to be significantly fostered and delivered in the education system, educators have to be wary of the arbitrary and political nature of curriculum development. Teachers in the arts must be resolute NOT to compromise their course offerings in favor of generalizing the curriculum to appease collegial aspirations to include the arts as a frivolous afterthought when linked to core subjects. The arts are too often trivialized as creative, easy and fun, giving students a break from the rote teaching methods commonly used by information based subjects. Teachers in the arts must NOT compromise their professional autonomy by accepting substandard classroom facilities, by being physically ghettoized in the areas of the school that are the least appealing. Teachers in the arts must NOT allow their classes to be a dumping grounds for the school’s least desirable students. Teachers in the arts must demand recognition for each specialty area that is offered in the school and NOT allow themselves to be lumped into a generic perception — drama, music, visual art and dance must all

have equal opportunity to be part of the core curriculum offered by the school. David Best (1992) expounds on these issues by pointing out that the education system suffers from a political and philosophically narrow, "dismissive" and "limiting conception" of the arts and that arts educators must continue to "fight and argue for a significant space in the curriculum for all the arts" (p. 9).

Through years of social and economic stratification the arts as delivered to the masses have been perceived as exclusive, snobby, high class and out of reach. People who 'understand' art are considered cultured, civilized and well educated; while people who supposedly don't 'understand' or even 'appreciate' art are considered to be uncultured, uncivilized and uneducated. How did art become synonymous with a hierarchical social class system and how has that affected arts education?

Perhaps part of the problem lies in our rather futile societal attempt at labeling or categorizing the arts, trying desperately to distance daily acts of human living from prepared, rehearsed, ritualized, commodified, or prized endeavors which have been bestowed the status of ART. Possibly it is the fault of the art establishment for being so mercenary, or the fault of the political system for undervaluing the arts, forcing artists and artistic organizations into becoming fiscal and social pariahs?

The issues that underpin this defense are embedded in the assertion that properly taught and pedagogically sound — arts education must be an essential component within our current and future education system. The fact that the delineation between art and life is so blurry today makes it that much more important to provide a sound contextual framework from which our young

people can reconcile and assimilate the world around them with artistic and aesthetic understanding and appreciation as a foundation.

In Defense of the Arts — An Epilogue

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At a recent PAC (Parent Advisory Committee) meeting in the secondary school library, I was afforded the opportunity to make a short presentation of about fifteen minutes to explain the educational goals and objectives of the Visual and Performing Arts Department at our school. Instead of just making a short speech, I decided to take them on a tour of our facilities. All ten parents on the committee, as well as the principal and one of the vice-principals, went on a tour of the art and ceramics room, the photography studio, the music and choral rooms, as well as the drama room. In each room was a small surprise for my tour guests. I had asked each of my department colleagues to prepare a presentation of their students' work.

In the art, ceramics and photo areas parents and administrators were treated to a wild display of recent art works in a room bathed in color, form and objects displaying student creativity. In the music and choral rooms, the tour was greeted by the senior and junior jazz bands, who were practicing a few musical numbers. In the drama room the group received a preview from an upcoming Shakespearean production of *Twelfth Night*, as well as some excellent examples of our improvisational TheatreSports team.

After the tour, we went back into the library and I made my presentation. I spoke about the arts as 'a core subject'; about how the arts don't only take place

within the structured time constraints of a school's bell schedule; about how students who excel in the arts have better opportunities to stay in school, graduate and find success in a variety of career related opportunities; and about how important it is for the arts to find equality, respect and appreciation from all levels of our school community (including the academic subjects). All the parents listened attentively, occasionally nodding their heads in agreement.

At the end of my tour and presentation ninety minutes had passed.

The chairwoman smiled.

She then turned to the principal and congratulated him, saying "You're lucky to have such a dedicated and passionate group of arts teachers in this school."

The other parents agreed.

The principal thanked them and concurred with a quick smile and a nod.

I was given an opportunity to have a voice with words that focus on my school, my community and my students, to speak about the very nature and philosophy of the arts in society.

I was able to add my opinion — in defense of the arts.

And today, I defended it well.

CHAPTER NINE

An E-Mail Dialogue with Dr. Neil Béchervaise

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An E-Mail Dialogue with Dr. Neil Béchervaise

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From: David L. Young
To: "Neil Bechervaise"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Sun, May 28, 2000, 1:24 AM

Greetings Neil...

I wanted to send you a note to say hi and see how you were doing? Actually I just came back from seeing the new Tom Cruise "Mission Impossible" movie where Sydney Australia is about to be ground zero for a deadly virus... so I guess I was worried about you!

I wanted to keep you up to date on a couple of cool things... I have just recently been publish in Drama Australia Journal "nj" (Volume 24. Number 1. 2000) It is one of my articles that I gave you a few years back. I am VERY proud and excited! I hope you pick up a copy and let me know what you think. My wife Cindy and I are expecting our first child in a little less than two months... so that is very exciting and scary! I have completed all my course work for my PhD and am slowly working away at the next few steps to get on with my research and continue to work as a drama teacher, but also keeping my eyes open for other options that might allow me to do some research in the field.

I hope this e-mail finds you healthy and happy and doing lots of interesting things.

I'm not sure if you know, but I bought a couple copies of your book (co-authored with Joe and Bill), and my school's English Department has been enjoying it immensely! It's a good book.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Cheers! David.

David L. Young - PhD Student
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada
"Embarrassment is Temporary"

From: Neil Bechervaise
To: "David L. Young"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Fri, Jun 2, 2000, 3:00 AM

Dear David,

I am really pleased to hear from you again. And super pleased that the article - one at least is better than the silence they left us in - has been published. And about time too, I think.

Good to hear that you are progressing with the study still. Tell me more. Do you have a description of the research in a few hundred words, not more. If so, I'll look to put it up on a business website that is getting wide interests at www.globalresearchbusiness.com. This is another little venture of mine just starting up. Feel free to publicize it across the Faculty and beyond.

Are you in touch with any of the others from our little band? If so, give them my warmest regards. I think of them whenever I'm working on the Shakespeare on Film stuff. Which is the book you are referring to I presume.

Good luck Cindy - and look after her David. And have a wonderful time with your new addition. Don't expect to get a lot of work done this summer in the study line - or for the next year realistically.

Keep having fun

Dr Neil Béchervaise
NB Consulting (Australasia) Pty Ltd
613 9592 2674

From: David L. Young
To: "Neil Bechervaise"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Sat, Jun 3, 2000, 2:36 PM

Neil,

My research seems to be focused on improvisation and competition in drama education. It is something that has NOT been looked into at any length and appeals to me on a number of elements... especially the connection between TheatreSports and competitive improvisation as a curricular objective. I have a number of offshoot topics, but I feel this one has the potential caché to get me going in an academic career! What are your thoughts on the topic?

... Regarding work and babies... I thought babies and research go hand in hand (he said ignorantly)!!!

Cheers! David.

David L. Young - PhD Student
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada
"Embarrassment is Temporary"

From: Neil Bechervaise
To: "David L. Young"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Sun, Jun 4, 2000, 5:17 PM

Sweet dreams, baby.

The impro/competition nexus seems interesting. I don't know of anything in the area either. It is rather a matter of philosophical difference I suspect - turned into religious dogma in practice. As I'm anti-competition in developmental work, this would include dramatic impro but I certainly haven't seen the two as excusive in production so I suppose it depends on whether we define theatre sports as impro or as unscripted theatre performance. Like a creative essay under exam conditions!! Not many of which are ever published for some reason.

And good luck.

Keep having fun

Dr Neil Béchervaise
NB Consulting (Australasia) Pty Ltd
613 9592 2674

From: David L. Young
To: "Neil Bechervaise"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Sun, Jun 11, 2000, 11:18 PM

I like what you say Neil. I argue that improv is to drama education what the television remote control or clicker is to television... in a piece that you gave to our class (1997) you pointed out that "... we are as real as the image we generate so that the image itself must be real. The resolution of this form of ambiguity allows us to be both real and not real simultaneously. We kill as copycat killers because we saw it on television. We buy what is available and we know it is available because we saw it on television. We tell our stories with strict adherence to the rules and values of the narratives we saw on television — whether they are morally and intellectually tenable in a wider social context or not" (p. 8). In so many ways improvisation for young people becomes a strange

amalgamation of their real life and the lives that they experience from the popular media. Competition in improvisation has become a HUGE part of the drama curriculum in Canada and the U.S. It has gone way beyond simple exploration or rehearsal games. I have attached a document that I have recently submitted to "NJ" for possible publication. It focuses on this world that we speak of. I'd love to hear your feedback.

Who knows maybe you'd like to co-author a paper with some of your perspectives from 'down-under'???

Cheers! David.

David L. Young - PhD Student
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada
"Embarrassment is Temporary"

From: Neil Bechervaise
To: "David L. Young"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Tue, Jun 13, 2000, 4:29 PM

David,

I don't think I have replied to your last email in which you submit that impro is to Drama teaching as the clicker is to TV. You also cite my suggestion that we are as real as the image we generate so that the image must be real. I haven't time to take this a long way but let me suggest that in both the impro and the image cases we have conscious control and a self-defined intention. Each of these assumes integrity in the effort to communicate with a third party, an audience. The extent to which we succeed or fail in projecting our intended image may be a function of practice. It will also be a function of the audience's skill in reading and there is probably a third variable in there too related to the set of rules for communication agreed between audience and performer. Now this is a long way from a TV clicker. In fact, the TV clicker is a teenaged girl trying to persuade her parents that she should be allowed to prowl the downtown mall at 10 at night - because everyone else will be there. i.e. it is a preset performance and everyone has a set role. The script is determined and there are no degrees of freedom in the performance. Somewhat similar to theatre sports really. Whereas the impro is an unrehearsed performance where actor and audience have no pre-agreed or pre-specified roles and the performance is as likely to be surprising for the actor/s as it is for the audience. No TV clickers here.

As you shift to copycat killers etc, you move into the realm of theatre sports. Preset moves, stereotypical role generation [and it doesn't have to be evident that this is so, it may be a masquerade for spontaneity]. But the major difference is that it is a replay without the original motivation - maybe closer to the TV clicker.

Unintended consequences are not part of the move. If we click to channel 9 and get live ballet when we expect a quiz show, we get annoyed because the move has not created our intention based on previous experience. In impro, however, an attempt to create one image might very well result in another being generated for the audience, in which case the next move in the performance may be determined by the audience itself [often in good impro I would suggest.]

Is this worth pursuing?

Maybe even as a dialogue between Canada and Australia leading towards a shared understanding of the role of impro in theatre sports and the role of each/either in Drama Education. In which case we should be saving the responses for further work.

Keep having fun

Dr Neil Béchervaise
NB Consulting (Australasia) Pty Ltd
613 9592 2674

From: David L. Young
To: "Neil Bechervaise"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Tue, Jun 20, 2000, 12:27 AM

Neil, this is certainly worth pursuing! I think you and I both have some important ideas in this area (which is sadly un-researched, under-published and lacking mainstream respect).

Regarding ALL our recent e-mail correspondence I have saved them since our opening dialogue and will continue to do so.

Did you read my attached article? Your thoughts?

I agree on to what you have presented in your most recent comments below. I do however want to clarify my definition between "improv" and the competitive forms of TheatreSports and the Canadian Improv Games [CIG] (Improv Olympics). Plain 'improv' as based in the drama classroom as exploration, character development, or script/text analysis, ALL have moments of personal and human truth in the actual presentation. Considering that in drama classrooms throughout North America 'improv' of this sort is used as developmental and warm-up games.

TheatreSports and CIG are organized, adjudicated, scored and evaluated in the moment.

In Stephen Nachmanovitch's book "Free Play" he describes 'free-play' as uninhibited and exploratory with limitless boundaries... while competitive play has rules, structure and very defined boundaries from which participants are included.

My concern is that we have blindly accepted competitive forms as part of our classroom curriculum without really questioning it fully.

My tie-in of improv with your work was that in "real" exploration and free play - -- improv mirrors the world and experiential realities of the child. The child also gets an opportunity to explore ideas and issues that might have been previously inaccessible or foreign to them save and except popular media, which unless they live on a desert island sans TV, sans computer, CD player, video games, etc... etc... is usually a reproduction of their popular cultural identity as seen, played, or heard via the medium de jour!

Your thoughts???

I hope this e-mail finds you well Neil and you too continue to 'have fun' in your many endeavors! Cheers! David.

David L. Young - PhD Student
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. Canada
"Embarrassment is Temporary"

From: Neil Bechervaise
To: "David L. Young"
Subject: Re: Greetings
Date: Thu, Jul 13, 2000, 2:31 PM

David,

Sorry I haven't responded to this - events sometimes overtake me and bits fall off. Your latest rally must stir me.

... I agree with you on the definitions of improv but I suspect that this demeans the use of it as a powerful exploratory tool - as you note, it is used in warm-ups - and warm-ups are too often seen as the throw-away section of the lesson rather than providing the prelim tools for later greater development. On the other hand, the competition is seen to be more important than the development required to make it happen. The winner becomes the focus rather than the learner and the spread of the techniques into every area of life development and experiment. We create lifelong losers rather than lifelong learners - and this cannot be the reason for any educational activity.

Education must be about everyone being advantaged and therefore upgraded rather than everyone being assessed in competition and therefore [except maybe

for one - and that in a state of relative insecurity] being downgraded - assessed as not meeting the highest standard. So the concept of improvisation as developmental, as learning, as protected risk-taking, as structured exploration of unstructured experience - or potential experience - remains unexamined. The result is a poorer education in drama [which has the potential to be a significant social and personal exploration] against a miserly payback of faint recognition by the 'locker-room brigade' who accept winners and losers but not people involved in the game of life right through until death [which is a more particular final siren methinks].

So where does that leave us as we explore what Drama Education is about? We have multiple and conflicting objectives for the course as educators but what outcomes do we actually expect the students to walk away with that they can't get from any other subject they take?

Keep having fun

Dr Neil Béchervaise
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CHAPTER TEN

Making Connections



Improvisation will probably remain a key tool in the making of dramas. It is a simple and accessible form of dramatic expression requiring few resources. Dramatic art, however, does not regard improvisation as a precious manifestation of the creative spirit requiring protection from the polluting interference of the teachers direct critical access to the production process. Drawing from media education, by treating students' improvisations rather like rough-cuts of films, the teacher can ask for a drama to be run again, can suggest alterations, can examine 'freeze-frames', can send the group away to 're-cut' their work. Others in the class may participate in this editing process, becoming collaborators in the conversations....

David Hornbrook (1998), *Education and Dramatic Art*. p. 135.

Making Connections — Classroom Culture versus Hallway Culture

• • •

You taught me language and my profit on't is I know how to curse.
— Caliban. {William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1611, I.ii.363-364.}

When angry, count four; when very angry, swear. {Mark Twain,
Pudd'nhead Wilson, 1869, ch. 10 heading.}

A couple of distraught students run breathlessly into my office at break to tell me about a shocking display of censorship that they had just witnessed. Our Vice-Principal had just taken our promotional material for our upcoming Shakespearean production of *Much Ado About Nothing* from the school's display case and confiscated it because it circumvented the standards of a public school. Ironically enough I had chosen a new format for promoting our production to generate more attention. One particular group of senior theatre students took some cardboard cut out advertisements from video stores that advertise professional Hollywood movies (called 'Standees') and they transformed one of them to say in large cut out letters: "Come see *Much Ado About Nothing*, it is more fun than a roll in the hay." When I discussed the matter with the Vice-Principal, he was adamant that the phraseology of this particular project was inappropriate for display because the context of "roll in the hay" was blatantly sexual. I explained to him in vain that hayrides can be a lot of fun and that it was his issue if he viewed the slogan in such an off-colored manner. His unsmiling face told

me that I had lost this battle and that this particularly offensive bit of cardboard was headed for the recycle bin.

I am always interested in the obvious contradictions that take place in our school with regard to morals, ethics and standards. On any given day we have upwards of a hundred students under the age of nineteen illegally smoking cigarettes around the perimeter of the school. We have young girls in our school who are part of a prenatal program, who have children and/or are pregnant. Students throughout the day swear up and down the hallway. We have students wearing t-shirts and baseball hats that blatantly display and glorify drug use. But this somewhat tame and innocuous euphemism of sexual innuendo was a spring-board for immediate censorship and was actually brought up as an example of our decaying school system at a school board meeting.

Real people swear. Whether you are slowed down in rush hour traffic by a person making an illegal left hand turn, or you smashed your thumb with a hammer — a quiet, quick and medicinal curse word has the potential to pronounce prosaically, precisely and potently, your immediate state of mind.

Young people in our schools are no different. And the level of their daily discourse, albeit heavily influenced by the prevalence of violent misogynous rap music, movies, video games, WWF wrestling and South Park cartoons featuring language even Howard Stern would be afraid to use in public — is the language of our streets and our school hallways.

School is not only a place of learning, it is a social place where young people test themselves and others, to gauge where they fit, with whom they belong and within this extremely precarious laboratory they become chemists, mixing the components of their own self-esteem and self-worth. The school is

also a place of political and societal control where teachers are expected to take on the responsibilities of ten months of parenting while also establishing and instilling a conducive mode of delivery for the prescribed curriculum.

The paradox between the culture of the classroom and culture of the hallway is actually a pretty reasonable life lesson in self-censorship, language usage and control. A number of colleagues who spoke to me all agreed that many students who swear in and around the hallways of the school do so in a relaxed and non-violent manner, they are essentially on *their* time and are dealing with friends and peers in the manner in which they feel comfortable. However, when the bell rings and they go to class, the level of student language changes to meet with the expectations and learning outcomes that teachers usually expect. If this is the case, what seems to be the problem?

The problem seems to become apparent more often than not, in classes where students are provided creative freedom to write, speak, draw, paint, video, or perform their words or work in front of others for public consumption. The 1990's were a watershed decade for censorship and reaction in a number of school districts in and around the Lower Mainland. In 1993, the Abbotsford School District's ban on eighteen-year old Kathryn Lanteigne's play *If Men Had Periods*. The following year the Surrey School District led by then-Trustee Ken Hoffmann led a heated debate over whether school drama productions should be censored for profanity. Similarly, public scrutiny of our school system was beginning to peak with the Fraser Institute's implementation of publishing school provincial exam results and British Columbian taxpayers having a more consumeristic perception of the schools in their communities. But the issue of swearing in our schools is much more pervasive and much more prevalent than

can be solved by any politician, parent group, administrator, or large group of teachers.

My drama classes exist as a free and open environment. Students are allowed to move and wander and talk to each other and to listen. Because of this 'unstructured structure', students have a greater opportunity to try to 'push the buttons' and test the boundaries. When they talk about issues that upset them on stage, they are often attempting to reconcile themselves to their personal or family problems, relationships, or emotional issues. Sometimes, in the context of their dramatic work, they swear on stage to give themselves a sense of power, a sense of control and a verbal means to vent their inner-rage. When students write things, or say things and 'push the buttons' of the adult authority figures in the school, what they are attempting to do is to test the teacher to figure out how far they can go. Young people should be provided the safety and nurturing professionalism of educators to properly express, explore and understand language without fear of censorship.

I have always allowed students to speak their mind on stage. If a student chooses to swear on stage and it is in context, I will let them do it; because, what is a swear word? We use words to shock and when a young person gets on stage and swears, in a lot of cases what students are really trying to do is shock the teacher or shock their peers. If you refuse to be shocked the swearing becomes less of a thrill and the swear words cease to be an important part of their language. If these words continue to shock and titillate then these words have a certain caché and young people will continue to use them. But if you take away the forbiddenness of these words and you get them to explore how to use language to their advantage and the power of words, of being articulate and

being able to speak in an intelligent and learned manner, they will actually choose the latter.

We have a society that has deemed certain words abhorrent and they are just words and each word has an origin from somewhere that makes sense. Geoffrey Hughes' book, *Swearing — A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (1991), points out that language has evolved through three stages from being "originally sacred, then poetic and finally conventional" (p. 6). Hughes' book also explores the etymological origins of almost every swear word and euphemism ever written. What is of particular interest is the fact that over time many curses, swear words and euphemisms evolve through time from being socially unacceptable to becoming normal everyday language. If Charlie Brown had said "Good Grief!" in 1900, he would have been euphemistically cursing God. Similar terms used from the 1600's to the 1900's such as — Gosh, Golly, By George, Drat, Doggone, Great Scott, Gee Wiz, Jeez, Jimminy Crickets, Shucks and Shoot, have ALL been used as curseful language euphemizing God, Jesus, or shit. Hughes also explains the historical background to a wide variety of more commonly used swear words, the first time they were used in literature and the societal implications of the word usage. One point is strikingly made, that as our modern society became less spiritual so did our bad language. That is why so much of our swearing focuses on human bodily functions — from the bathroom to the bedroom we curse each other because the inherent violence in these descriptive words powerfully punctuates our emotional needs.

A good friend and colleague, who is a district administrator in the Fraser Valley explained to me that "there is a huge difference between invoking and/or loosely using the name of God and loosely talking about the many bodily

functions people traditionally call swearing." She pointed out with great clarity and eloquence the need to differentiate the distinction between invoking the name of God frivolously in swearing oaths or cursing and the socially, culturally constructed words we use violently and disrespectfully. That spiritually it is much more upsetting to hear young people take the Lord's name in vain, because it "implies that God does not exist." Socially, this administrator worries that the implicit violent anger that exists, especially in swearing of a sexual nature, has the potential to develop worrisome "power (gender) relationships that I as an educator cannot support."

I asked a few of my students what they thought about the issue — many of them were surprised that it was an issue. Obviously they felt that in many of their classes there was a need and an expectation for respect and civility, that they had to act and speak a certain way out of respect for the teacher, but in the hallways, at their lockers during break, or outside the school they believed that it was their right to speak the way they felt and if that meant swearing, so be it. One of my grade twelve acting students told me that he felt that, "most teenagers get frustrated while growing up because they have to abide by rules that they don't understand or respect and that a lot of teenagers have trouble expressing what they want to say — so some swear because they don't know how else to get their point across." This student went on to point out that there is a double standard where parents, adults and the media, all seem to swear, but young people aren't supposed to. Another one of my students pointed out that students should be allowed to use swearing in their creative writing, non-structured essays, or acting work only IF it was in context and wasn't used in a disrespectful manner towards other students or the teachers.

Unfortunately, policy makers, politicians and parents seem to exist in an idealistic fantasy universe where they perceive children as pure, unsullied, little people dutifully respecting authority, marching politely through our schools while attempting to successfully regurgitate the day's lessons for gentle pats on the head and little gold stars. Realistically, our children live in the real world — and the real world is a messy place where young people are attempting to cope with the variegated nature of daily existence as best they can. In the real world, school is just one more thing they have to cope with, along with peer pressure, parental expectation (or lack thereof), and a school system that continues to tell them to be well-educated for a diminishing job market.

It is the responsibility of the school system to teach our young people the many uses of language. We should be confident in our ability to help young people find and make meaning in the political hierarchies, power relationships, gender relationships, sociological, spiritual and cultural implications of the language that we as educators expose them to and the language that they themselves bring with them into the classroom. Timothy Jay, Ph.D., professor of psychology, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is quoted in a 1998 article in *Prevention Magazine* by Julia VanTine, as saying that "the standards in our culture have relaxed — and the language we use reflects that" (p. 78). If this is the case, then we have an even greater challenge to teach students to understand, analyze and think critically about this category of language as opposed to censoring it.

A perfect example of this came up early in my teaching career, when one of my drama ten students was working on a scene from a George F. Walker play called *Criminals in Love*, which was the recipient of half a dozen of the highest Canadian awards for playwriting. I have a policy that when contemporary plays

are used in the classroom, if they have any 'off-colour' language, part of the assignment of producing the scene is for the students, under my direction, to come up with potential alternatives for these words, or the student explains why they make sense to them in the context of the scene. On many occasions the students learn that when we find alternative words, or phrases, that the play or the scene is just as powerful and has just as much integrity without the swearing. It is a revelation for a lot of young people to work on scenes that might have four or five incidents where they get to understand and change the words, or explain and justify to me why they should keep these words as a part of the scene.

Regardless, when this student brought home the script, her parents were very upset, had a much different opinion of the project than I did and organized a parent-teacher conference with the Vice-Principal. In the meeting, I attempted to explain to them that during the same school year they had signed permission slips allowing their daughter to attend, on two separate occasions, two Shakespeare plays, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Romeo and Juliet*. I pointed out to these parents that there was more profanity, sexuality and expletives in these two Shakespearean plays than in all of Walker's writing put together. Their response to me was that was fine — because it was written in Elizabethan English and their daughter didn't understand it!

Making Connections — Connecting to Shakespeare

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Images are the raw material for thought.... Theatre and cinema provide very rich raw material for thinking about educational phenomena and issues. {Robert Donmoyer, 1991, p. 99.}

There is a problem with studying plays. It has the air of an occupation that is missing a vital link... you shouldn't *study* plays to get the best out of them, you should watch them, surely, to understand them. {Sally Mackey, 2000, p. 122.}

My acting eleven and twelve students are filing out of the cinema, many of them (both boys and girls) are still visually shaken, sniffing, wiping tears from their eyes, excited, aroused, enthused, reflectively engaged in discussion, thinking critically and making meaning — their imaginations completely captured by Baz Luhrmann's 1997 treatment of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, starring teen heart-throbs Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Pedagogically, Luhrmann's screen adaptation not only comes alive but speaks to my students in their own language — the language of hope, tragedy, despair and love; the language of Shakespeare. It's the same language Franco Zeffirelli used to speak to the youth of the late 1960's with his critically acclaimed 1968 film. Shakespeare's words have the most meaning for our students when they come alive, become personalized, in the immediate moment, transcending the written word in our stuffy, staid school texts to find an important and esteemed place of relevance and reverence that goes well beyond the prescribed curriculum. Unfortunately, every time we as drama teachers decide to teach, produce, or

explore Shakespeare we aren't always able to load up a bus of our students and head off to our local theatre or cinema for an afternoon or evening of educationally sound theatre or film viewing.

Teachers require sufficient resources to cover the required curriculum and in the case of Shakespearean text, the necessity to incorporate cinematic versions on video has become a paramount and preferred delivery method. With this in mind, I can't help but highly recommend *Shakespeare on Celluloid* as one of the best books of its kind. Can you imagine a textbook or teaching reference that students find enjoyable to read? Educators will not only find a vast array of invaluable and highly referenceable material, but they will also be able to connect teaching moments from the text with actual moments from different film versions of Shakespeare's work. The book is structured in such a way that it highlights an insightful and connected understanding of various Shakespearean texts and productions, but also an in-depth knowledge of the director's vision, editing and the language of film as understood by image, sound and editing. We are invited by the authors of this book to "read film as text" through the connection of Shakespeare's words with celluloid images.

I believe that a book of this nature has a great deal of potential for use by researchers in drama education, especially those whose primary focus explores and expands upon how young people relate to modern media created images. Drama research that attempts to define how the cinematic representation of Shakespeare's work communicates differently to youth than staged or read versions could certainly benefit from such a comprehensive book. Similarly, the implications for further investigation are endless if one questions the language of

modern media and how it is used in the 'reading/viewing' of Shakespearean film/video.

Peter Brook (1987) uses an interesting and very evocative metaphor in justifying the modernization of Shakespeare to make him relevant and meaningful to a twenty-first century audience — as he equates Shakespeare's work to a piece of coal. We can understand or study the inert and basic state of a piece of coal, we can even trace its geological history and origins, but it only has its real value when it is used as a combustible source of fuel — providing heat, warmth and illumination (pp. 95-96). Brook's metaphoric elements are the educational catalysts that make this book a success, in that it begins an incredible dialogue about the cinematic techniques and dramaturgical skills needed to transform Shakespearean prose into well-staged, well-filmed text. Béchervaise et al. do a wonderful job of prompting us to consider that the Bard was a man of his time and, as a popular commercial playwright he wrote plays that spoke to the people of the Elizabethan era. His plays were political, poetic, popular, secular, satirical and most importantly — immediately connected with his audience.

Every day I revel at being connected in the concert that is the drama classroom. The honor of being a participant in the rhythm of student spontaneity — improvised moments of meaning-making — each student bringing with them their own range of experiences and conceptualizations. It is these attributes that *Shakespeare of Celluloid* honour and connects with students, as they investigate the sheer abundance of translations and interpretations of Shakespeare's work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part Three}

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A Conversation with Keith Johnstone
Saturday, June 23, 2001 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada
With additional footnotes from our follow-up conversation
Saturday, December 11, 2004 — Calgary, Alberta, Canada

A Conversation with Keith Johnstone {Part Three}

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DLY: Isn't it interesting though that the wealth of knowledge that you have is vast and varied but you are known for the improv and for the TheatreSports, but you are teaching university, as you say, you didn't do any of that you did acting, strictly acting.

KJ: There is not much difference. A great actor and there may be a phase of improvisation that comes over that experience, but the great actor in sense recreates it in every performance. Bad actors are repeating what they learnt at rehearsal. Let me clear that up. They may do exactly the same thing every night but if the situation altered in some way they would be responsive to it because they can see, hear and taste it right now. The other actors are blind and deaf.

DLY: There are two things and then we will call it a day. You were talking about your play *Snakes and Ladders* and you said that it was a shame that you had to script it. Why?

KJ: I would have scripted the first part and then set it going with a set of rules, because the procedures and the rules were sufficient to carry the game through. But they were afraid to do that. To do something on the stage that wasn't scripted.

DLY: Fearful? Why?

KJ: Because it is the university and they do takes.

DLY: Text is superior to...

KJ: Of course.

I did the opposite once. I was employed and taken to Copenhagen to the state school there, to do improvisations with their reading class. After three weeks, it was obvious that we were never going to get the high quality work. So then I refused to do it and they said we had to write a text. Which was good because it was a very good play. I am not saying that improvisation is the thing, I am saying whatever the situation is you go to it...

So you don't block it, but it looks wonderfully directed because every moment is alive. But this is, to me, this is...

DLY: This is the vitality of theatre that I enjoy participating in as audience and that is theatre that is alive, every show, exists in the moment and where the odd line is dropped and people are extemporizing and are coming up with something and then they have to figure it out.

KJ: Popular theatre was always like that and the Crazy Gang⁴⁰ were like that.

DLY: Well, I like to watch actors work.

KJ: Groucho and those guys were like that.

DLY: What do you mean?

KJ: On their stage shows.

DLY: It was always different?

KJ: How do I explain that? They are not trying to get it right.

DLY: No. It's when the actor is trying to get it right and it goes wrong and they have to try and fix it. And that's exciting. And that's what I think sometimes makes live theatre so impressive to me, as an audience because it doesn't have an editor cutting out that unique bit. Do you know what I mean?

KJ: I think perfection is okay as long as it's spontaneous perfection. I saw Vanessa Redgrave do a wonderful *Seagull*⁴¹ once. I saw the dress rehearsal and the critics were....

DLY: What was so special about it though?

KJ: It was so alive. She played it a bit like a seagull. She was this strange demented creature and she was wonderful when she came back. But then every critic slammed her. I saw the second performance and I didn't see the first one. She changed everything. She did a 'normal' performance of *The Seagull*.

The actor ought not to read the reviews. A lesson learned. Well she was wonderful. It was the greatest performance I ever saw, was Vanessa at the dress rehearsal, before they told her she was shit....

Well it is like Brando. It is contempt. Nothing has to be like that. I am sure Garrick wasn't like that. Garrick was obviously wonderful. But part of Brando's thing was 'fuck you'....

Great actors are scary because anything might be possible....

DLY: Did you like acting?

KJ: I never acted.

DLY: You never acted?

KJ: I was called into the theatre as a playwright.

⁴⁰ An English comedy troupe much like the Marx Brothers, but they were more 'music hall' based comedy – just guys fooling around.

⁴¹ Anton Chechov's classic play, *The Seagull*.

DLY: So you never got a chance to get on stage.

KJ: No, I never wanted to. Ah!! Horrible.

DLY: But you teach a lot of people. You are up in front of people. You do workshops.

KJ: There is a theory that I make them do all these awful things because I never had to do it myself.

DLY: Do you think that is true?

KJ: No. I think as a writer I do all kinds of awful, daring things.

DLY: Have you ever had any desire to get up there and do it?

KJ: No. I would have to have my voice fixed and I would have had to have my eye fixed. I mean – I hate being looked at. I have had to spend a lot of time on stages directing improvisers but I do not like it.

Part of the genesis of TheatreSports was my wanting to get off the stage, which is good. I don't mind sitting in the audience, directing stuff. I don't want to get up on the stage and do it. The early days of Micetro I used to get up on the stage and tell them what to do. Micetro is so nice if you do it right.

I haven't seen theatre for two or three years. God knows what you are going to see tonight.

DLY: I am looking forward to it.

KJ: I wouldn't.

DLY: I think it will be fun. I saw *Micetro* in Vancouver, directed by Alistair Cook⁴².

KJ: How is it going?

DLY: It is going pretty good. They have got a nice little following...

KJ: Last night was a place where you would see miracles happen. I am glad I was there. Sometimes I go into *Micetro* and I am so pissed off and think, I can't go on with this shit. But I went.

DLY: You see, that's one of the things that I really enjoy about improvisation on stage is that there's that unknown, because I know how *Hamlet* will end if I go to see *Hamlet*. All I can do is go there and compare it to a hundred other *Hamlets* I have seen and my own images of it. Whereas a lot of times improvisation surprises me. The only time I find that it dies for me is when and a lot of times, when the actors are inexperienced. And this is what I find difficult with kids, as a teacher is, I am able to think twenty times faster and ahead of the improviser and I am bored. I am so bored by watching Grade nine kids who have such limited life experience do the same bloody thing over and over and over again.

KJ: They should play 'master/servant.'⁴³

DLY: No, because they are still on that tentative edge of exploring status the way that you have talked about.

KJ: Forget that, 'master/servant' is different. How old are these kids?

DLY: Thirteen and fourteen.

⁴² Alistair Cook runs a number of professional improv troupes in Vancouver, B.C. and also the President of the Canadian Improv Games.

KJ: In 'master/servant' you can deal with all kinds of parental things without it looking parental.

DLY: I do it with older kids and it works quite nicely.

KJ: Teach 'master/servant' this way. Have a 'master' and a 'servant'. The 'master' is not allowed to tell the 'servant' to do anything. The 'servant' is not allowed to do anything for the 'master'. Leave them there. Teach it that way. The only interest in the 'master/servant' scene is relationship. If they can't do the shit of "give me my cup of tea, where's the sugar"? Which is horrible. Who wants to watch that? If they can't do that, they have to make it positive, ban all negative things....

I can't handle any more.

Let's eat.

⁴³ "Master/Servant" is an improvisation activity where the actors play off of the status of being either the 'master' or the 'servant'.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Theatrical Channel Surfing



Life is a drama.

Always we act roles. Our clothes are our costumes and our setting is the space in which we act.

Yet in life there is no script written for us. We have to improvise. Like the clown in the circus, or the acrobat on the high-wire, we balance our existence precariously between life and death. While we succeed it is still a comedy, but when we fail it is a tragedy. And all the time we are trying to respond with all our agility to "what happens next."

Richard Courtney, *The Dramatic Curriculum*, 1980, p.1.

Theatrical Channel Surfing

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If we are to advance the pedagogical principles and philosophy underlying the current teaching of improvisation in the drama classroom, we must examine the context in which students receive and teachers deliver the curriculum and the rationale supporting it.

Although there are numerous teaching strategies in drama education which will encourage a student to play, be creative, explore situations, take on different roles and accept risks, the strategy that has the greatest potential and is used most frequently is improvisation — and its competitive counterpart, TheatreSports. This kind of drama is a potent and integral part of a modern and progressive curriculum, which is an exciting format for young people because it accurately represents the quick shifting, spontaneous momentum of their youth. TheatreSports (and specifically in Canada, the Canadian Improv Games) captures the essence of today's fast-paced, modern technology and media. Its quick scenic mode of delivery, using audience suggestions with scenes lasting little longer than a few minutes, is a more readily accessible theatrical medium for young people than straight, scripted theatre.

Competitive improvisation and TheatreSports are to the drama classroom and theatre what television remote controls are to 'channel surfing' because, for young people, the need to be constantly stimulated is paramount. TheatreSports provides them with stimulation both as actor/participants within the

improvisation and as viewer/audience members reacting to and giving suggestions to the scene work on stage. We call straight scripted theatre 'a play', but are students actually playing when rehearsals are structured opportunities to choreograph or block scenes and to display a rote knowledge of someone else's words? Improvisation can be a much more liberating form of artistic expression for young people, as they get to use their own words and characters (mostly themselves) bouncing in and out of actual 'games' (Stanislavski, 1948, 1949; Spolin, 1963; Hagen, 1973; Johnstone, 1979).

Drama, Theatre and Improvisation

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... 'theatre' is largely concerned with communication between the actors and the audience; 'drama' is largely concerned with experience by the participants, irrespective of any function of communication to an audience.

{Brian Way, *Development Through Drama*, 1967, pp. 2-3.}

When it comes to the symbiotic relationship between drama and theatre, I have always worked on the premise that whatever we explore and experience in the classroom is 'drama' and whatever we objectify, classify, qualify, feel pride in and deem worthy for an external audience is considered 'theatre'. I accept that both have an integral and equal place in the drama classroom and should be delivered by competent, motivated and well-trained teachers. I believe that both drama and theatre can provide students with a valuable educational and aesthetically rich experience steeped in the traditions of the creative arts. I know that both drama and theatre have many governing factors that are reference specific to each other and that there is an abundance of criteria which are interwoven within the very fabric of each that brings them into convergence.

Improvisation is a commonality. One of the most complex and diverse dramatic and theatrical practices is the use of improvisation in the drama classroom. Suffice to say, without reintroducing the theoretical, philosophical, or curricular dichotomy and decades old debate between drama and theatre in education — I posit that BOTH these artistically sound media hold an esteemed position in the educational growth of young people.

Drama is essentially a communal and collective meaning-making venture enabling young people to explore and reconcile the complexities of our world. Most, if not all drama, finds its structure through improvisational play: role taking, scenario construction, social interaction and self-expression. Young people draw on their own personal understanding of the 'world of reality' and attempt to create a 'world of fiction', discerningly and adeptly they filter these two disparate worlds in the creation of drama.

Theatre (and I define 'theatre in education' as the making of a theatrical production or event for public performance) is fundamentally a communal and collective mimetic undertaking, empowering young participants with a platform to express themselves within the framework of a structured, spectator-oriented project. For theatre in education, the rehearsal process integrates a variety of improvisational methodologies, which underpin the final product. Considering the nature of live theatre, it is virtually impossible to replicate a 'final product' from show to show, performance to performance, night to night. Consistency might be attained, but never exact replication. Accordingly, it should be recognized that theatre is essentially a structured, scripted, rehearsed and well-developed improvisation, even when it is applied to public performance (Frost & Yarrow, 1990).

Theatre and drama are intrinsically connected — each to the other — and both to improvisation.

Dramatic improvisation has been an indispensable part of the curricular objectives in drama programs throughout the North American school system since the early 1960s. The opportunity for drama students to play and create improvisationally has been widely documented by drama theorists and

practitioners as a vital opportunity for students to harmonize and understand the world around them. Young people accomplish this by taking on different roles to explore unknown situations, to expand their intellectual capacity for creative and critical thought, insight, rumination, playing, being, viewing, empathizing and encountering an abundance of improvised roles and situations. Improvisation opens an effective and powerful medium for young people to create an independent and personal narrative and exposition (Young, 1998). Improvisation is an interactive, communal, creative process that forces young people to live 'in the moment', to take risks, make choices and to exercise their creative sensibilities of both 'self' and 'other'.

Improvisation — Then and Now — Part I (History)

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In a normal education everything is designed to suppress spontaneity, but I wanted to develop it.

{Keith Johnstone, *IMPRO: Improvisation and the Theatre*, 1979, p.15.}

The history of improvisation as a form of artistic expression and communication is crystalline with the richness of the ritualistic displays of primitive humans to the sacrament contained in thousands of years of religious tradition and writing. Similarly, improvisation is extremely pervasive throughout the history of theatre and literature. Scholars believe that even the early Greek narrative epics like *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* had their genesis as improvised story telling (Hodgson & Richards, 1966). Commedia dell'Arte (comedy of the [actor's] guild) was fundamentally improvised comedy, which was structured to follow simple plot lines and scenarios (lazzis), consisting of a handful of stock characters (zannis) who expressed their character traits through the use of masks, absurd physicalizations and obscene gestures (Salerno, 1992). Even Shakespeare's plays are believed to have been influenced by the extemporaneous additions of his actors, whose impromptu lines would have been adapted into his written scripts (Hartnoll, 1968). Whether as an adjunct to the actual creation, or through the performance itself, improvisation has always had an impact on the creators and purveyors of theatrical art.

Improvisation became a ubiquitous staple of modern classroom drama due in part to the progressive education movement initiated by John Dewey

(1916), whose views focused on the premise that children learn through the spontaneity of 'playing and doing'. Half a century later, Dewey's theories were advanced by such luminaries in the field as Peter Slade (1954), and Brian Way (1967). Slade and Way, (although both offering their own divergent theories), helped move drama education away from being a mere component of English speech-training, elocution and posture (Henry Caldwell Cook, 1917) towards curricular objectives based on child development, free-expression, as social and psychological growth. Gavin Bolton (1986) viewed dramatic improvisation as a means of natural discovery through 'trial and error', where students had an opportunity to gain insight into human situations by placing themselves into "other people's shoes" (p. 46). Dorothy Heathcote (1984) took this one step further by espousing a dramatic curriculum that not only personally engaged students within a world of improvisational make-believe, but also sought a type of 'hyper-awareness' from the students, where they could feel, learn and reflect upon the drama as it happened. Richard Courtney (1980) saw improvised drama as part of a student's "inner thought" that explored the "spontaneous dramatic action" which occurs as they engage in their own personal "living" and "human" drama (p. 2). The impetus of Keith Johnstone's TheatreSports (1978) was not only motivated by his work at London's Royal Court Theatre, where he created an improvisational company called The Theatre Machine, but was also inspired by the antics of professional wrestling which he viewed as "working-class theatre." Johnstone came up with the idea of replacing the wrestlers with improvisers and TheatreSports was born (Foreman & Martini, 1995).

The foundations and practical applications of the aforementioned curricular philosophies are just as relevant today as they were when they were

first introduced. However, many of them have been integrated and transmuted into a form of improvised drama that was never envisioned or intended for — competitive improvisation.

Improvisation — Then and Now — Part II (Competition)



Everyone embraces the arts rhetorically, but the time, money and attention given to them are paltry when compared with most other school subjects, or even such aspects of school as competitive sports. {Frank Fuller, Jr. "*The Arts for Whose Children? A Challenge to Educators*," 1984, p. 3.}

At what point did a process-oriented activity, with the sole intent of personal growth and experience become competitive? What are the benefits and the drawbacks, from taking dramatic improvisation, which was essentially developed as personal and collective exploration in the drama classroom and turning it into a competition? At what point did we end up with teams of students competing against each other in organized intramural and inter-school competitions, with judges who reward students with points, trophies and other accolades for being more creative, more clever, or more fearless than the others?

Competitive improvisation has become a major part of the drama curriculum in many programs across Canada and the United States. This has happened, in part, as a mechanism for public recognition on the part of drama teachers and their programs to impress colleagues, administrators and school trustees. Because drama, both as a curricular objective and as an art form, have been marginalized as 'extra'-curricular for decades, the opportunity for teachers to compete and gain external and internal recognition is extremely compelling. What delineates an excellent drama program from a mediocre one is not easily definable and can certainly use the boost that competition brings with it. I have

experienced this first-hand in my own career. The athletics department publicly displays their trophies and awards in the front hallway of the school, they announce with pride the results of their most recent basketball or rugby games. The academic programs are publicly praised for the number of successful scholarship candidates that they produce, or for the provincial exam result standings that they earn. But what are the bragging rights for the drama program or, for that matter, any of the courses in the Visual and Performing Arts? If we want recognition on this level we must compete for it. I have produced full-length Shakespearean plays with little or no public recognition, but IF my Canadian Improv Games team competes successfully and we bring home a plaque to display in the school office, numerous staff members offer up congratulations. Similarly, I have had plays entered in our school district's one-act play festival, only to have the creative and artistic endeavor of producing a play brought down to the level of a sporting event with adjudicators choosing winners and losers and student participants competing for recognition, not for the simple joy of sharing their art.

Wasn't that the original theory behind improvisation — the communal sharing of a spontaneous art form? The founders of the improvised forms for both drama and theatre ALL began with the desire to facilitate student or actor learning, to help stimulate a collective creative energy which would be incorporated into the classroom or onto the stage. Even Keith Johnstone's writing suggests a slight contradiction between the competitiveness of TheatreSports and his early teaching. He writes: "I'm teaching spontaneity and therefore I tell them [the students] that they mustn't try to control the future, or to win" (Johnstone, 1979). Improvisation was meant to be played like all games are played, to

develop ingenuity, inventiveness, self-awareness, expressiveness, empathy and inter-personal communication (Spolin, 1963, pp.5-8). Games, regardless of how improvised or spontaneous they might seem, are inherently restricted by certain rules or criteria constrained by group decision and, in many cases, the most important decision is how to keep score.

I believe that there are both positive and negative aspects to competition. Competition provides an energy to the arts that has often seemed to be only reserved for sports and, therefore, can help build up a drama program's status in the eyes of the student population. The caché of being on a successful improv team can mean a great deal to some students who are desperately seeking social acceptance and recognition. I have seen drama programs almost double in size with the inclusion of competitive teaching strategies.

On the positive side, I believe that healthy and equitable competitive aspects of improvised games, student evaluation and casting placements for productions and specialty teams, provide students with a taste of the competitive nature of daily life. Dr. Charles A. Grover (1984) concurs with these assumptions.

... participation in theatre may help young people come to an understanding of competition. Although many directors [teachers] attempt to do as much as they can to emphasize the noncompetitive aspects of theatre participation in order to obtain an ensemble spirit, theatre does have clearly defined competitive elements [which] can help prepare young people to live a successful life in a competitive society (p. 29).

On the potentially negative side, I believe that competition occasionally hampers artistic creativity and sharing. The arts are subjective in nature, with no 'rights' or 'wrongs', but consist of a multitude of choices (Young, 1998). Competition has the potential to hamper these choices, by motivating students to ignore the

artistic intent of a dramatic scene or production and focus solely on finding faults. I have witnessed this kind of behavior first-hand at district drama festivals. When students from other schools make mistakes on stage, a buzz will go up in the audience amongst the competing students from the other schools, as they consider the detrimental effects this will have on the adjudication. I have seen students fight, cry and throw temper tantrums while playing improvisational games and TheatreSports competitively, to the point where friendships are placed in jeopardy and learning suffers. When asked his views on competitive festivals, Peter Slade (1954) wrote:

... They are based on a misguided premise and cause jealousy. The internal and individual strife, as well as the group strife, eventually destroys the elements of good theatre, which festivals are there to stimulate. One never sees good group sensitivity in the acting at a competitive festival.

... We are there to experience, learn and to act as well as we can, not to win a pot or try to prove we are better than some other team.

... No child should be allowed near such a festival. ... and one can only hope that competitive festivals will one day cease (p. 352).

Improvisation — TheatreSports

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Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre....{Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, 1963, p. 3.}

Although Keith Johnstone had been experimenting with improvised ensemble theatre in Great Britain back in the 1960s with the Theatre Machine, it wasn't until he began the Loose Moose Theatre Company that TheatreSports had its inaugural public performance. It was in 1978 at the Pumphouse Theatre in Calgary, Alberta. Using both students and alumni from the University of Calgary as his actors, Johnstone used a game called "No Blocking" and had the actors literally compete for time on stage. The actors were not the only raucous participants in the early days of TheatreSports. The audience was incorporated into the games to provide suggestions, and to throw pies filled with whipped cream at the losing actors and their team. This type of off-the-wall entertainment was an immediate success and with success, came the evolution of increased organization, newly developed games and a more formalized format utilizing more recognizable theatre structures like props, costumes, sound and lighting effects and a master of ceremonies. From 1978 to present day, there are professional TheatreSports and improvisational theatre companies performing and competing within this structure of spontaneous theatre to audiences all over the world (Foreman & Martini, 1995).

I teach TheatreSports to my students because I personally like the majority of the educational learning outcomes that I see resulting in our time immersed in this curriculum. For many students who are unable or unwilling to explore process or role drama, or who become terrified at the prospect of memorizing scripted scenes, competitive improvisation is a way to introduce students to some semblance of theatre tradition. The structure of many of the games makes sense and offers basic technical strategies that can be mastered and implemented in future theatrical projects.

My students from Drama Nine to Acting Twelve all get an opportunity to hone their improvisation, TheatreSports and Canadian Improv Games skills. Each class is split into three or four teams of seven to ten players (depending on class size). Once the teams have been organized, the students tend to take a good deal of time and derive a great deal of joy, from creating the most absurd team names. Once named, the teams are placed into a competitive league format where they compete for overall points and playoff births. Throughout this time, the students not only learn the basic game structures and rules for more than twenty different forms of improvisation, they also practice and strategize in preparation for league play, their own personal evaluations (for grades) and for Improv Day.

On Improv Day (usually the last Friday before spring break), all the drama students involved in the league get to miss their regularly scheduled classes so that they can compete in the 'Dramnasium' to a packed house of more than 500 staff and students. A dozen improv teams all dress up in crazy outfits, put on make up, make signs and spend the entire school day playing and competing for the honor of being one of three teams chosen to perform on

'Golden Horn Night'. Two weeks later, more than 200 audience members cheer on the finalists in our school's championship evening for the 'Golden Horn,' the trophy symbolizing TheatreSports and Improv supremacy at our school. The 'Golden Horn' is an old, broken down bicycle horn, glued to a beveled piece of plywood spray painted gold and engraved annually with the name of the winning team. It is a small, funny looking award — but it is greatly revered — not unlike the Stanley Cup or the Super Bowl.

Improvisation — The Canadian Improv Games

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We have come together
 In the spirit of loving competition
 To celebrate the Canadian Improv Games
 We promise to uphold the ideals of improvisation -
 To co-operate with one another -
 To learn from each other -
 To commit ourselves to the moment -
 And above all ... TO HAVE FUN!
{The Canadian Improv Games Oath.}

The Canadian Improv Games are described as “loving competition between teams of students trained to perform spontaneous, improvised scenes” (Denny, 1996). Not unlike Johnstone’s epiphany while watching wrestling, the architect of the Canadian Improv Games became convinced while he was viewing a televised football game that too many people had become ‘watchers’ and not ‘players’. David Shepherd originated competitive team-based improvised theatre in New York City in 1972, six years earlier than Johnstone’s 1978 TheatreSports debut in Calgary. Shepherd was also one of the founders of the Compass Theatre (the precursor to Second City) in Chicago in the 1950s, working with such celebrities as Alan Alda, Edward Asner, Mike Nichols and Elaine May. In 1974, Shepherd created the prototype competitive format called the Improv Olympics, which incorporated a mixture of professional actors and high school students to produce a high-energy improvisational festival. A couple of graduating high school students who had been participants took this format to the Ottawa-

Carlton School District and began an Improv Olympics solely for the schools within their district (Denny, 1996).

The Ottawa-Carlton High School Improv Olympics lasted for a few years with almost every high school participating, until some of the teachers began to become disenchanted with the concept of competition and the inevitable public adjudication that would follow the students' scene work. A few die-hard proponents of the educational value of the tournament (Willie Wyllie, Howard Jerome and Johnson Moretti) not only worked tirelessly to restart it, but also to advocate for a national platform from which to explore and promote improvised theatre. From 1982 to 1989 the Improv Olympics remained a regional festival, but by 1990 Wyllie, Jerome and Moretti had been successful in making in-roads throughout Canada and the national tournament known as the Canadian Improv Games were born (Denny, 1996).

The Canadian Improv Games has found its greatest curricular success by incorporating the structured nature of the original Improv Olympics and the unstructured nature of TheatreSports, merging them to create a simple set of five improvisational 'events' for students to learn and compete with.

- "The Story Event" (each team must demonstrate its ability to show, tell, or recreate a story in an improvised setting).
- "The Character Event" (each team must portray a character or characters in an improvised setting).
- "The Style Event" (each team must recreate a style or genre of media, film, or television in an improvised setting).
- "The Theme Event" (each team must explore a specific theme which is provided for by the 'Referee/Facilitator' in an improvised setting).
- "The Life Event" (each team must improvise a scene using a life related scenario that is approved by the 'Referee/Facilitator' in a sincere and honest manner (Cook & Young, 1998).

In British Columbia, these five events are incorporated into league play, where each league game is adjudicated by the 'Referee/Facilitator' and is scored on a specific list of criteria, including: entertainment, narrative, technical stage usage and risk taking. A league game consists of three rounds, where each team will play one event per round. Each event or scene can last up to four minutes. The scores from league play are cumulatively tabulated and are up-dated at every event. The top scoring school team (after four or five league games have been played) will win the honor of hosting the quarterfinals at their school. The top two school teams, as determined after playing in the quarterfinals, advance to the regional provincial tournament. The provincial champions move on to the Canadian Improv Games national tournament held every spring at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

The Canadian Improv Games are valuable for teachers and students, as this type of structured improvisation has many far reaching benefits that can not only aid and facilitate student learning in drama, but can also help them become more relaxed and confident actors in scripted theatrical presentations. Students enjoy the Improv Games so much that they always seem to put in the extra time needed to rehearse and prepare for their biweekly league games, while still working on their lines or character development for our school's larger more mainstream productions. Teachers involved in the games usually have incredibly positive accounts of how competitive improv at this level has helped their students "come ahead dramatically" or "developed a students talent and confidence" that has helped many students become "connected and focused at school" (Denny, 1996).

Questions, Answers and A Continuous Dichotomy

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Unfortunately, this very factor of scriptlessness, which makes improvisation of such value as an activity for all children, is often the major reason why many teachers dislike it. The reasons for this are understandable, because at its worst improvisation is much akin to charades and the natural corollary would appear to be that it is better to have a badly read and learned scripted play, particularly if the script itself has merit, than to waste time on 'trivial games'. {Brian Way, *Development Through Drama*, 1967, p. 183.}

In the process of composing my dissertation I took the time to speak to a number of colleagues — drama practitioners, professional improvisers, directors of mainstream (scripted) theatre and students about their feelings specifically towards competitive improvisation, TheatreSports and the Canadian Improv Games. I was surprised at their responses, mostly due to the passionate and opinionated nature of their arguments both for and against competitive improvisation as a curricular objective. I was also surprised by their comments that even questioned the value of improvisation as a theatrical and artistic endeavor. I wanted to understand and gauge why something as pervasive as improvisation had such a poor reputation.

For instance, even though improvisation is a well-utilized and recognized structure in drama education, there are many teachers who balk at its inclusion in the curriculum as a legitimized presentational form. A colleague of mine from another school, a drama practitioner for more than twenty years, refuses to teach TheatreSports or the Canadian Improv Games. She considered the competitive

nature of this type of improvisation abhorrent; and believed that it promoted sloppy skills, kids who show off and use bathroom humor. She felt it was usually only taught by unskilled teachers. A different teacher at a school in my own district told me that he enters his students into the improv league begrudgingly, because his students pestered him until he finally relented. He dislikes improv, is indifferent towards the competitions and would rather focus on scripted work for the whole year. Another colleague couldn't say enough positive things about improv, TheatreSports and the league format of the Canadian Improv Games. She told me she stays away from scripted work like the plague, that her students only sign up for her drama class to do improv and why should she do anything else if that is what they wanted to do.

In the theatre community there is also a recognized and conscious hierarchy distinguishing 'actors' from 'improvisers'. A friend of mine who is a professional director told me that he disliked improvisation because of the repetitive nature of the stock characters and situations that are both employed by the improvisers and suggested by a typically rowdy audience. Another friend who is a professional improviser explained his distaste for scripted theatre because of its verbose and redundant adherence to stock theatrical conventions and the passivity and distant nature that it expects from its audience.

Why is there more significance placed on scripted, mainstream theatrical productions than on improvisational work? Is it because the script represents something tangible and concrete? Are we to believe that the actor who is immersed in the memorization of someone else's words, who is being directed, being costumed, being lit, acting on a designed and built stage and playing within the confines of structured theatrical conventions to a passive audience is

creating a more valuable or important form of art than the spontaneous creations of the improviser? Don't both forms exist in an evanescent moment in time? Even Johnstone's touring company, The Theatre Machine, considered their work in this manner:

THEATRE MACHINE has throwaway form, it is disposable theatre, ideas and memories get re-cycled and the best is really best because it comes out of the moment (Frost & Yarrow, 1990, p. 58).

Does Johnstone's description of his art as "disposable" diminish its value or make it less worthwhile, or is he just reconciled to the ephemeral nature of improvisation and its relationship between the improvisers and the audience (Frost & Yarrow, 1990)? Don't both forms have a legitimate argument to be given equal value and importance?

The question of what value we place on the creation of different forms of artistic expression is an interesting and well-debated one. There must be an understanding that well defined artistic traditions and conventions need to be broken or challenged through an acceptance of innovation in order to breathe new life into what might be considered to be hereditary forms (Bailin, 1994, p. 59). Music has experienced this with jazz, or more recently computer generated or synthesized composition. The visual arts have experienced this type of evolution with all the "ism's" that have come, gone and continue to be studied and have lasting impact. Theatre is no different.

I believe there is a great deal of philosophical and theoretical curricular evidence that supports and justifies the delivery and teaching of improvisational forms of drama education as it is currently taught in today's secondary school system. However, competitive improvisation, TheatreSports and the Canadian Improv Games have yet to be explored or studied sufficiently to provide a

definitive argument either for or against its inclusion as a curricular staple. There is still a very real need to study and research the advent of competitive forms and address some serious issues in the field such as:

1. How does competition affect the atmosphere of communal trust and mutual respect in the drama classroom?
2. What positive or negative influences does the teaching of competitive improvisation, TheatreSports and the Canadian Improv Games have on a student's creative ability and desire to learn and explore straight, scripted, or mainstream theatre?
3. Why is competition considered to be necessary in both drama festivals and improvisation tournaments for program recognition?
4. How much time should be allotted to the teaching of competitive improvisation in the drama curriculum?

I am a proponent of the teaching of competitive improvisation. I am also a vocal advocate for the production of plays for public performance. Not unlike David Hornbrook (1992), I believe strongly in a drama curriculum that is true to the integrity and conventions of the theatre, which include performance as a process oriented product. I don't accept that performance is the exclusive realm of scripted theatre, nor do I feel that performance is only legitimized by inviting the outside public in as an external viewer. However, performance does take place daily in the drama classroom, throughout the class, regardless of an audience being present. I accept that my students live in a modern, technologically advanced world, where they view and experience aspects of their lives differently than I did at their age. I agree with Richard Courtney (1995) when he classifies these students as "young people of the electric generation"

whom he argues view their lives and the world they live in as "liminal"; therefore requiring unique and innovative ways in which to view it (p. 194). Competitive improvisation, TheatreSports and the Canadian Improv Games can therefore be qualified as the popular entertainment for the young and their initiation into a larger theatre tradition.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**An Interview with
Lori Dungey and Jim McLarty
Former Vancouver TheatreSports Actors
and the Founders/Directors of
New Zealand Improv**



An Interview with
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July 31, 2000 — West Vancouver, B.C.

An Interview with Lori Dungey and Jim McLarty

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Early in my doctoral work I had already formulated the basic foundation for my dissertation and around the same time, I was contacted by my good friend Alistair Cook, who told me that Lori Dungey and Jim McLarty were up in West Vancouver visiting Lori's mother. I contacted the two of them that afternoon and met them for breakfast in a small coffee shop on Marine Drive in West Vancouver. At the back of this busy café, I pulled out the tape recorder and we began to chat. This is our edited conversation, which connects in so many lovely ways to my own research and findings throughout my doctoral studies.

David L. Young: How did you both get started?

Jim McLarty: TheatreSports was the real vehicle for me to discover improvisation. You know, I had heard of it before. I used to be theatre reviewer for a film and theatre magazine in Toronto and I was aware of a group performing improvised theatre for audiences. I, like most people, thought, "oh that's not real theatre." So, actually, I never went along to any of their shows.

When I moved to Vancouver a lot of actors were actually doing TheatreSports and I heard about it quite a bit. It was a late night show at the City Stage Theatre and I went along one night. It was amazing. It was the first really suspenseful theatre I had ever seen. I saw it on a really good night. I just never really knew what was going to happen next, just the way the scene happened. It wasn't very good. They took it off and something else happened. So it was way more suspenseful than a lot of scripted plays, where you go in the door and very soon you get a feeling of you know what's going to happen and there's no surprises, so pretty soon you are fidgeting in your seat and you want to get out.

That's the worst of live theatre. From there I just decided to get involved. You know, it scared me like skydiving scares me and it took a lot of training and a lot of determination to succeed there. There were two things that were required really to succeed doing improv in Vancouver: talent and this incredible determination to make it in spite of whatever failures cropped up.

Lori Dungey: I had always done theatre. Summer camps, school productions and all that sort of pretty typical sort of getting into theatre and then went to Simon Fraser University for four years and was going to do child psychology and drama. And then I realized that it wasn't quite what I wanted, so I switched to theatre and had to end up at UBC to get my Bachelor of Fine Arts.

While I was there, some of the fellows in our class were actually doing TheatreSports. At that time there weren't enough women and it had always been a bit difficult for women to break into the sort of improv thing. So some of the guys said, "Well we are going to train you. We will do a few workshops and then we are going to throw you in."

I had been working with Arnie Zazlov, who was classically trained in movement at Jacques le Coq in France. So it was a lot of physical movement. A lot of the French classics, where all the parts are all very staged. We did a lot of that work and a lot of that was improvised. A lot of mask work which was also improvised.

So the boys trained me down in the basement at UBC and I think I had seen it once and then I played. I found it quite exhilarating and I loved being able to work with the other actors. That's what was really quite fantastic, that sense of back and forth and back and forth. You have that on the stage in the theatre of course in a scripted piece, but I think you really take it to its full potential when you are actually improvising with another actor, then you are really dependent upon each other.

I really took to it – like a fish to water and then, basically I just remained with the company. And our company grew until they took over the City Stage and we were doing seven or eight shows a week. And these were our own productions. And we were creating our own improv structures, creating our own plays that were highly formatted but always had improv elements in them and

we were making a living. We were a very successful, co-operative theatre because I don't know, in a way, I don't know if it's the TheatreSports or the improv that makes it that much more participatory. So we in fact were actually writing our own theatre.

Vancouver TheatreSports was almost a perfect improv model. Of course there were only a small group of people doing all the work, but still it was actors actually creating their own company.

I think improv empowers you as well as it empowers the kids in a sense. So then we just remained as freelance actors who do crossover, we do both.

DLY: How did you end up getting into working with young people in improvisation? That wasn't a big part of the Vancouver experience, was it?

JM: No, that was New Zealand. We both ended up going to New Zealand and working for what was called United TheatreSports, which was sponsored by the United Bank [in New Zealand], which no longer exists. At the time it was one of the biggest art sponsorships I have ever heard of, more than \$1 million NZ over three years, which was a substantial sum and part of that dedicated for theatre and education. We had funding to go into the schools and teach the teachers and suddenly we had to develop a program that would work for younger people.

LD: We wanted to have a program where we, as tutors, went in and facilitated the process. So there was quite a bit of emphasis put on teaching the teachers how to teach the kids. If we wanted to have a program that was ongoing, the teachers needed to be on board.

We also acknowledged the fact that improv is so empowering but then the whole thing of student leaders was developed. Where student leaders could then assist the teacher and also even take on the job of running after school or lunchtime clubs with the younger students. So then we had training sessions for student leaders as well...

That was a program that stretched over basically six months really at the time. We used to be far more competitive but we actually sort of started to tone it down.

DLY: So you first started out working with the teachers who got this grant and then you go a step further once these kids start really enjoying it. This is just teaching them how to improvise. So these are not games in the sense of competition, winning, losing. It's just teaching them how to improvise?

JM: Teaching them how to improvise and teaching some of those games. You know, all of the basic games are really good examples of how to work together.

The emphasis for us was teaching them how to tell a story. That's how you get them away from all the cheap laughs and playing to the lowest common denominator. Teaching them about story-telling and that is the real art of improv. That the majority of every improv scene tells a miniature story with a beginning, middle and end. So that you are always looking for those elements. Those elements are there, they free you to bring in all kinds of other things to just lift it to a higher level. I feel very strongly about this as an actor.

A lot of the best stuff I have ever done has been improv. The tragedy of that is that it only happens once and it is only seen by a small number of people. Whereas if you are in a very successful play, well, that will reach more people and in successful film even more.

I worked with one actor that we brought into a team with Lori and I. We worked so hard because we wanted to have another woman on the team, trained her up, brought her in, we had a great night and then she said she would never play it again. Why? Why? You have had a great experience. That's it, I don't think I will ever be able to top this. She went right back to traditional theatre and never did improv again.

LD: So with kids we found that with the competitive aspect of it is actually a part of what they know in school in New Zealand, where it is very sports oriented. A lot of time is given to rugby, netball for girls. So, in fact, the competitive element was something that they really craved and liked.

We really tried to push the fact that what you are doing is producing a show. Bottom line is, it has got to be a good show. So you can go into the other team to see if you can help them in some way, make their scene better, which

will ultimately result obviously in more points. That's a good thing. That was something we really worked hard at and the kids really took that onboard and often when we got into most trouble was when we actually had some of the teachers pushing the competitive element. For them, if the team won then that was kudos for the school to go back with a trophy.

JM: I liked that it was great to have TheatreSports being put up there on the same platform as rugby, you know. It is walking this fine line, this aspect of sports enthusiasts – so basically it is a matter of improv equals TheatreSports and it is a competitive program.

Often a TheatreSports company will do other formats that are non-competitive. What brought improv to New Zealand and captured the national imagination is TheatreSports and it is used synonymously with improv there. Most people in the country would have heard of TheatreSports and have some idea of what it is.

Part of that money was earmarked for theatre and education for schools but it was also earmarked for community usage and so people in the community formed groups too and we went around and talked to the parents of kids too. That was quite good.

What we did when we had the money was we had national tournaments but sometimes we were faking it. The teams wouldn't necessarily be the teams that won. Sometimes they would be a corporation team. In Auckland they might put a team together of four kids, one from each school, so that the kids all had experience to bring back. Then we would have the kids do a workshop in the day. There was always a big effort on the workshop during the day and they would do the show at night and there would be two or three of them, to ease the pressure of one great big monster finale.

DLY: So really then, the competitive aspect is synonymous with the New Zealand improv experience?

JM: It is, but we found with the schools it is better to play it down, water it down a bit, because we don't want it to be all about winning and losing. It is

about the experience. It's about what happens. The creative process, what happens between two or three people on the stage.

So with the kids we would always say, "forget the judging." The judging is only there for the audience, to get a response out of the audience, so don't get sucked in by that, don't be too concerned about winning or losing. What's important is, at the end of the show, did you have a good time? Did you feel that you really did some good stuff? If that occurred it doesn't matter where your team is placed at the end of the night. Those kinds of statistics are not kept and it's not what will determine which school is represented at any national or regional event. It is more how the school has worked. What kind of team it is and whether they won three and lost two is immaterial.

LD: Then they feel good about what they have done. I think that is the power of TheatreSports in a way.

In New Zealand it actually offers a lot of the kids who aren't so sports mad or sports bent or good at it an alternative at something that they can actually do for their peers that they really enjoy. We found that even a lot of teams might have kids who are very sports minded but there are kids who are totally not. So for us it was also the opportunity to bring kids together that would never work together because it would be too uncool...

There was this great evening thing that made all the kids be able to contribute equally in a way, which was really fantastic.

JM: Some of those kids will never play, they are never going to play to an audience even by participating at a class level, you see the shy kids in the corner suddenly taking a step forward and developing a little bit more self-confidence. Even though their classmates are suddenly looking at them in a slightly new way. In a way, that's the most satisfying thing.

The other thing we have to deal with is kind of a racial thing, as Auckland is the biggest Polynesian city in the world. There are huge Polynesian and Maori communities and this is a European [or North American, language based] theatre form. And it doesn't really lend itself to Polynesian culture. So when I have got to teach a class full of Polynesian students, it can be a daunting experience, because

their whole background is so entirely different, they often don't know what you are talking.

Like the word 'status', which is a very basic part of TheatreSports, you know. Playing status games and working out where your character is in the status, the hierarchy. To them status means a cultural thing, it has nothing to do with eye contact or body language, it's all about giving status to the more important people in the village. It is that kind of interaction, it is not your own way of approaching life, your own attitude. So when you show them that they can actually use status to appear, give an impression of how they want to appear. You get them up and you say, okay make me as high a status as possible. It is amazing to them. They are shocked by the fact that they can take one classmate and make them very low or make them the king of the world. So it has those kinds of social implications as well.

I remember one young Maori girl that I worked with. She came from a total Maori school and we picked her for a regional and then a national festival. By the end of that national festival she was driving scenes, she was up there commanding the audience attention. Wow, for a Maori woman, that's actually not what's encouraged in their society. She just blossomed before our eyes. She will never be the same. I don't know what she is doing now, but it was an incredible experience watching that!

LD: We had lots of teachers and parents even, one mother came up and she said that over the course of her kid being involved, she had so altered, she was such a little shy wallflower and now she was just a little energy chatterbox. That was immensely satisfying. That was just fantastic. Because it is true a lot of these kids will never actually get onto the stage to actually do those competitions but they come and they watch their friends play. That is the lovely thing. Because you have spent all the work in the classroom, working together. They have a lovely feeling of participation and they own a bit of it, which is great, which you would rarely have in a [true] sporting situation.

DLY: I would like to just touch on something that Jim brought up, regarding the cultural implications because I think, particularly in Canada, we have a lot of

ESL first generation New Canadians. We also have our own percentage of indigenous Canadians of First Nation ancestry. And, of course, for teachers in the United States, there is still very much a real and prevalent cultural divide.

So I am wondering based on your experiences in New Zealand, what are you seeing with regard to cultural implications vis a vis TheatreSports being embraced and welcomed into the cultural traditions of these different folks?

JM: Well, in New Zealand there are a lot more Polynesian and Maori theatre companies now than before. A lot of them are doing comedy and stuff, which was kind of unheard of ten years ago. [The advent of] TheatreSports was partly responsible for that. Some of them trained or would have experienced it at other schools, but that means they are no longer actually involved in improv, that they are doing their own scripted entertainment. I don't think that makes a difference. They were still heavily influenced by the whole time and effect that TheatreSports has had.

Our national finals used to be televised and there was a real impact that it made. We had lots of exposure throughout New Zealand.

There are Maori schools, where there might be all Maori boys or all Maori girls and we had a lot of teens from a lot of these schools and they were all bussed for the finals and stuff and they would just be so proud and be so behind their schools.

One of the schools, in fact, had little bars that they wear on their school uniform for whatever they participate in and they created a TheatreSports bar. They still have that and these kids have it as part of their school uniform. So I know for some of those kids it would have, almost all those kids who are adults now, either participating in the different sorts of theatre Maori, Fijian or what have it in high school, they have taken actually some TheatreSports at some point.

ESL is also a big thing as there are also a lot of schools where a lot of Asian students have joined the clubs and that's been really good because a lot of those kids kind of feel very isolated. You just sort of allow them to be a little bit more physical so those kids have been able to really participate. And I know of drama teachers who have said it improved their English. It improved their self-

confidence. It has helped them integrate themselves into the school population so its been really good in some schools for some of the Asian kids as well.

DLY: Can you tell me a little bit about what you see with regard to drama curriculum in New Zealand? For instance, do they have all club based extra curricula for their drama work, or is it something that's within the timetable? Is there a strong tradition of it? Are the schools producing plays and mainstream theatre as well as doing the TheatreSports?

JM: Part of the problem is that the teachers who tend to do the theatre, they tend to put on the classic musicals throughout the year. They are really overworked, so kids really have to work to make sure that they just work at a place in the curriculum.

There is so much for them to do that is part of the curriculum in most schools, not all. No, not all schools. It is not a part of all schools' curriculum. And some schools are very heavily into drama as part of the school culture and some are not. Some are so rugby oriented it is really a constant battle against things like rugby or academic achievement, to have not just improv but any kind of theatre that is endorsed and supported.

LD: Yes, because I would say in Auckland probably three-quarters it would be club based, which would be noontime, after school. And then there is about maybe a quarter where we actually go into the school during class time and the teacher has actually pulled kids out of other classes and gathered the kids who are keen to do it and are teaching it. Then they would also see them probably after school and noontime. So it's about a third that you actually go in school time, I would say, but all the day-long workshops you do with the teachers and the students. The teachers actually have to get out of school for the day and the students also have to get out of school as well for the day and we have it at different times. So they do have to make an investment and they have to get relief teachers to fill in for them. So they do have to make an effort to get there.

DLY: You have been running programs for a number of years in New Zealand, in and around Auckland. Could you give me a description? I guess first of all, what is it that you do? How are you funded? What is your season? And what is your year working with teachers and kids?

LD: It used to be that the school had to pay a very small amount and then we subsidized the rest of it from the grant money, but now it is basically all user pays.

DLY: How much are we talking about?

LD: It's about \$500 NZ that the school has to pay and that gets them into the course. They get a TheatreSports manual that Jim and I wrote and we have since updated it a couple of times. That's a nice bound book, which explains the whole concept, matches, games and the rules behind improv.

Then there is also an advanced TheatreSports manual that we have developed in the last two years because as the program builds and kids want more challenges, the teachers want more challenges. So we are introducing more and more, sort of Improv concepts and games for them in the second manual.

They basically have three all-day sessions with teachers, so the year starts and they would come to see us for a whole day. Those would be the teachers who are experienced. Then we have another day for the teachers who have never done TheatreSports before. It's like a refresher course all day. And then we also have another day for novice teachers. We would start in about April, then we would see the student leaders and we have a full day with them for the beginner student leaders. And then we have full days for the advanced student leaders who have all done it before as we are finding the student leaders are actually sticking with this for three years or so.

In some of the schools in fact, the teachers have very little time or no time and it is the kids who have actually initiated it. They are running the program. That's in a very small number of the schools and we always make sure, we always need a teacher contact and we actually keep an ongoing contact with them. We have a schools co-coordinator who does all the faxing and the letter

writing and the contact thing with everything so they know that's the person to contact.

Then we have a pool of tutors who are also players in the company. They are assigned a school and each school has four hours time for that tutor to come and teach directly with their pupils. That can be taken in a one-hour block, a two-hour block or sometimes they take the kids out of class for half a day. If they want more then they have to pay extra, some of them do that.

Then we give them a couple of months to get that together and then we have a new players night where it is just brand new players and we have a series. Each school has to host a match and so we have four teams playing, four schools playing at a time. And we have those over a series of a couple of weeks and they are now on a school night, they are like on a Thursday or a Wednesday.

Then we have an experienced players night where pretty much the same thing happens. And then, in the middle of the year we have another all-day workshop for teachers and we have another all-day workshop for student leaders, the new ones and then the adult's one, because we are getting their class plan then, correcting them and handing them back — all that sort of business because the student leaders are expected during that time to teach two classes.

Then we have a final series of festivals, we call them now, where schools play again and I think last year if we had a final, I cannot remember. Yes, we had a final which we don't do every year. We did this year because we are finding that we actually had about three satellite areas where we sent two of them down to work with them for like a whole weekend and then they stayed for a week and visited the schools or taught at the schools. So the third team up they wanted to represent. So we actually had it — was like someone coming from, if you were in Vancouver, it was like a team from Nanaimo — and we billeted them if they needed to be. That's how it basically worked. You just had a series of those festivals. And so you have one over-all winner, but we don't even do that every year. We don't feel that it is suitable. That's how it pretty much works. We have also had, when we had a little bit of money left over, a new players, junior players night.

DLY: Get them while they are young.

LD: Yes, so we have tacked that on at the very end, where we are hoping this sort of curriculum, those three years, will be invaluable to the players, those at a very young age. It is really involved that way. It was really hard. I think the greatest challenge was trying to find a way for the program to work that would suit teachers and students in the majority of schools, because the schools are all run so differently. You have got the private schools and your public schools and your all boys schools, your all girl schools, the Polynesian schools, the Maori schools, the Catholic schools and that's just in Auckland. You have the same thing in Wellington, Christchurch, etc. There are four major regions in New Zealand with a program that is operating. It became tremendously difficult to find one way. So basically each of those centre's is sort of operating their program in a way that suits their students.

DLY: You both have given me some fantastic insights into the world from which both of you live and work. Tell me how improvisation affects your daily life? I am wondering how do you think your skills, your background, your joy and spirit that allows you to improvise so successfully and work with so many kids – how does that translate into your daily living?

LD: I think it makes you feel like you are actually doing something very rewarding. Because every now and again I just sort of go "Oh god, here's the schools program again." And you have got to get in there and you have to work with some of those kids that, you know, sometimes its like pulling teeth.

How has being an improviser changed me and the way I deal with the world?

Well, I think it makes you go with the flow a bit more. You see things from a funnier point of view. I think you adapt better.

I am basically a shy person and I don't know how to improvise this but I know that I have the compassion to become outgoing and deal with any situation because I have those skills.

JM: One of the types of shows we do a lot in New Zealand is called a 'mingle', where you will go into a room of fifty, two hundred people or whatever as a character and you will entertain them one on one. You will go up to their tables and chat with them and you have got to keep that ball alive. You have got to make the first offer, see how they react and play off their responses. Then all night long, you are going to have to come back to that table and having to remember, now who are these people and what did we have going here, oh right and fit right back into that little story that you were creating around this character. It's a fantastic skill. When I first started doing it, it scared the hell out of me and now I actually quite look forward to it. I prefer it to actually standing up and doing just entertainment, a bunch of improvised scenes or something. I still enjoy that but I actually much prefer this one on one style of performing.

Sometimes when I go to a big party, where I am going as myself and I think, you know I really don't want to be here, I would rather be home reading a book, watching TV, I just slip into that "mingle mode". I also know that I am often going into meetings with fairly high-powered, corporate types. That does not intimidate me, I am quite happy. I know I can go in there and make a positive impression.

You have lessened your fear because you become so used to placing yourself in that position that so many people feel public speaking is the biggest fear in the world or something. Once you sort of do that a lot you just become a bit fearless. I think that that also goes into theatre when you are doing conventional theatre and actually producing a performance. I think that's just alive, that every night it is so much for alive. It is like so many people think that, oh yeah, you just do the same thing blah, blah. Well, it is not.

A lot of actors do that and you think, oh I am going to get the same thing from that person every night, so now it's my job to just try to put them off a bit so that they have to be alive as well.

But it is just such a sense of disappointment because that's the joy of every night, and, I mean, just how blessed can you be to able to have a job where you can do that and you actually, even if you do fail, especially in improv, it is okay, you know. No one is hurt.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Why We Improvise?



Drama offers a rich range of activities that can be applied in the service of developing spontaneity and a broader role of repertoire. While scripted, rehearsed forms of theatre may be useful to a limited degree in this respect, improvisational, creative Drama approaches are far more appropriate.

Brian Way, *Development Through Drama*. 1967, p. 2.

Why We Improvise?

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Dramatic improvisation has been an integral part of the curricular objectives in Drama programs throughout the Western Canadian secondary school system since the early 1960s. The opportunity for Drama students (and for that matter young people in general) to 'play' and create improvisationally has been widely documented by Drama theorists and practitioners as a vital opportunity for students to reconcile the realities of the world around them by portraying a multitude of improvised roles.

Improvisation cultivates and provides students with opportunities to analyze, reflect upon and reconcile daily life experiences. Improvisation opens up an effective and powerful medium for young people to create a narrative and exposition, to voice their concerns within an adult world where they feel disenfranchised and powerless. Improvisation is an interactive, communal, creative process that forces young people to intermesh their perceptions of the individual within the environment and its inhabitants. Improvisation mirrors the social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts from which it is derived. Improvisational instruction helps students to acquire the much-needed capacity to take on different roles, to explore unknown situations, to expand their intellectual capacity for creative and critical thought, insight empathy and rumination. The essence of dramatic improvisation is the whole person, the personal, the inner-moment, confusion, chaos and a world of possibilities

requiring a dramatic journey, an improvised journey. Improvisation is tangible and intangible simultaneously. Its importance can't be disregarded — because young people need to learn to communicate and improvisation provides a safe medium for their communicative needs.

To engage in improvisation is a habitual human act. Throughout our daily routines and rituals we are constantly processing information, engaging in discourse, navigating our lives improvisationally in a precariously fragile and causal orbit with the many people, places, things and situations that we encounter. People are incredibly astute and consummate improvisers. In many ways we create deliberate, consistent and well-defined *modus operandi* and, without fail, we stick to these ways, until we encounter a variety of obstacles ranging in significance, value and importance. It is how we deal with these impediments that determines just how adept we really are as improvisers. It is from the perspective of going beyond the presentation, application and teaching of improvised forms in the drama classroom, the rehearsal studio, or the theatre that we can appreciate improvisation as something more valuable — something possibly akin to 'improvisation as life skill'.

Unfortunately, competitive improvisation and especially TheatreSports have gained a bad reputation for lacking rigor, structure, or serious content. For some reason improvisational theatre seems to be considered the cheap cousin of straight, scripted and rehearsed theatre. This is a completely unfair perception, as both have their rightful place as important, engaging, creative and artistic mediums. The problem is that there are a great many drama teachers in the field who spend an entire year doing TheatreSports with their students, for no other reason than the ease with which it can be delivered. Many drama curriculum

guides and 'how to' books offer improvisation and acting games in a pabulum-like manner, making planning and organizing seem like a worry free lesson. But what is wrong with that? The problem is that it makes it easy to water down the curriculum, which makes it easier for school districts and administrators to justify employing unqualified and untrained drama teachers, continually relegating drama as an extra frill, requiring only an adult supervisor to watch over the kids while they play at their silly little drama games. Somehow the delivery of this type of drama curriculum has been bastardized through lax, lazy teaching, which in turn has fostered and developed sloppy student improvisers. It's not hard to imagine class after class of *Whose Line is it Anyway* television take-offs, with student success being evaluated solely on the volume of laughs they receive and the clever, clichéd and pithy endings that they produce.

The reason this important form of drama education curriculum has transmuted into the rather caustic description I provide above is because the original words and intent of Keith Johnstone's TheatreSports have been either forgotten or misinterpreted. I argue that Johnstone's work is at least if not more important a contribution to the theatre, actors and drama education as Viola Spolin's, Uta Hagen's, Gavin Bolton's, or Dorothy Heathcote's. The problem lies in the dissemination of his ideas — limited publications and research and an overabundance of drama books that provide teachers with recipes for teaching "TheatreSports-like-games" with little or no rationale or methodological framework — which is the antithesis of Johnstone's original theories.

With this in mind, I honor the seminal writing of Keith Johnstone in the field of improvisation and the great care that he has taken to share, teach and explore his TheatreSports theories with drama and acting students, practitioners,

researchers and audiences world-wide. His most recent offering, *Impro for Storytellers*, comes some twenty years after authoring the highly influential and significant book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. Both books display the brilliance of Johnstone's writing and his highly accessible style, formatted in a variety of manners ranging from personal narratives; teacher/student dialogues; directorial rants; reflective musings; to strategic lesson planning; rationale; and uncomplicated illustrations of numerous actor or student activities.

Impro for Storytellers builds on and extends his earlier work by conceptualizing improvisation as an everyday human transaction, with activities focusing on students, student success and the on-stage exploration of risk-taking and option making. Teachers, instructors, or directors can find methodology and practice in this book that will aid students ranging from grades eight to twelve in secondary school, from college or university, or even the rehearsing actor needing to reinvigorate their sense of improvisational focus. Johnstone's book is not a 'how to', it is a book written in a dialogical manner reminiscent in style to Constantin Stanislavski, with the reader playing the role of on-looker to the side-coaching dialogues between the actor and director. The book is not written entirely in this fashion, with some sections expressing more personal and philosophical reflections, which can seem a tad self-indulgent. Occasionally, Johnstone explains the formula and motives for the delivery of his many self-invented improv games and formats. However, the writing tends to be overly prosaic and in places is actually written in point form, in need of either further expansion or sound editing.

Impro for Storytellers provides the necessary theoretical underpinning to conceptualize and put into practice improvised forms in a manner that will

enhance student learning and facilitates sound drama pedagogy. With sixteen chapters, four appendices and a detailed index, Johnstone makes sure that he covers all levels of both current and experimental forms of improvisational work, but pays specific attention to the concept that good improvisers must be good storytellers. This theme permeates the whole book, with Johnstone presenting numerous examples of how to break free from the routine of tired improvisation by having actors go in opposite and obvious directions in their scenes, with teachers side-coaching and teaching towards (and rewarding) evocative and insightful storytelling, as opposed to simplistic, mindless entertainment. The book has the potential to be an invaluable resource for teachers, instructors, or directors who have a desire to expand their own understanding of improvised forms, as well as being a superb primer to help augment the repertoire of the student, actor, or performer.

Johnstone's desire to explore opposites can be viewed as theoretically contradictory when viewed by researchers who have a depth of knowledge in his work. While Johnstone readily admits that the genesis of TheatreSports as popular entertainment draws heavily on the influence of professional wrestling and openly expresses the disposable nature of improv scenes — in this book he also seems to be yearning for something that might be taken more seriously and in that vein he has evolved his thinking from the short challenge games of original TheatreSports towards new detailed narrative forms of improvisation which rely heavily on thorough storytelling techniques which he calls Micetro Impro and Guerilla Theatre. The contradiction becomes glaringly apparent when the reader understands that the tradition of interactive audience participation which began in 1978, at the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary, Alberta, Canada

(where audience members could throw cream pies at performers) still exists; albeit in a less messy form, with the audience being incited and coaxed by a referee, a Master of Ceremonies, or an actor in a guerilla suit, to cheer, jeer and offer suggestions to the performers on stage. The enthusiasm and energy of this type of audience interactivity is a double-edged sword. While it has the potential to create a long lasting and invigorating theatrical experience, it also has the potential to lead to insincere and self-indulgent improvisation, while at the same time validating the criticism of TheatreSports as "gutless light entertainment" (p. 73).

Whether information for TheatreSports scenes are being yelled out as suggestions by audience members, or teachers are playing in role with their students to find moments of 'Heathcotean' authenticity, the interactive nature of improvisation can not be negated. Spontaneity has the potential to exist in every movement and moment in the drama classroom or the rehearsal studio and Johnstone makes sure that his readers are aware of the exciting opportunities that improvisational techniques and teaching provide those willing to play, perform and risk within the form. I teach TheatreSports and a number of other improvisational techniques to my own grades eight to twelve students because I personally like the majority of the educational learning outcomes that I see resulting from this work. I am also cognizant that when taught in conjunction with scripted scenes, publicly performed plays, dramaturgical studies, technical theatre and theatre history, that my students are better placed to not only understand but explore different genres of theatre, as well as adapting to and believing in an ethos of mutual respect and human and personal understanding.

Lynda Belt (1990) agrees with the value that improvisational theatre techniques and TheatreSports have for young people. She writes:

Beyond basic acting skills, improvisation also teaches skills necessary to quality living: those of problem solving, increased communication skills, creativity, self-growth, self-discipline, teamwork and support... Students involved with improvisation learn life skills of trust and support, acceptance of others as well as themselves as they work together to solve the game problem or situation (p. 17).

Improvisation and drama education have a way of helping young people deal with and reconcile the variegated realities of their adolescent worlds. For many students who are unable or unwilling to explore process or role drama, or for that matter who become terrified at the prospect of memorizing scripted scenes, competitive improvisation is usually a way to include and introduce students to some semblance of theatre tradition. This is supported by Johnstone, who points out that "teens who would despise any conventional 'cultural' performance will go through considerable hardship to take part in our shows because impro is 'daring'." (p. 6) And it is within these 'daring' moments that some of the most interesting stories are told.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Interview with Randy Dixon Founder and Artistic Director of Unexpected Productions



Interview with Randy Dixon
Founder and Artistic Director of Unexpected Productions
Seattle, Washington — April 12, 2001

Interview with Randy Dixon

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Randy Dixon is one of the preeminent new leaders and theorists in American improvisation. He is the Founder and Artistic Director of Unexpected Productions in Seattle, Washington; as well as being a noted lecturer, workshop leader and published author in the world of improv theatre. I met Randy through my friend Alistair Cook, when Randy was up in Vancouver for a TheatreSports tournament. I arranged to visit with him at his theatre in Seattle's famous Pike Place Market for lunch in April 2001 when I was in Seattle presenting a paper at the American Education Research Association (AERA) Annual Conference.

David L. Young: What are your feelings towards competition in improvisational theatre and TheatreSports, both working with professional actors and working with kids?

Randy Dixon: Something like a TheatreSports format or competitive improv format where there are two teams and there's scores and there is a winner. Then they go, "I get that" because they have seen it any number of times live. So as far as a framework for providing something for an audience to get its arms around so that they understand improvisation, or at least are willing to come in and sit down and watch it — I think competition can be a positive effect.

On the negative side which in a way, maybe outweighs the positive and I think the ongoing problem with competition and competitive improv format are, to me the competition only benefits the work and not the improviser's gift. The improvisers themselves are not competitive and that is the hard part. In that sense, I am sort of torn as to whether you should have or emphasize the competition or not in improvisation. Because you are in a collaborated art form

and the best thing in a collaborated art form that makes it different than anything else is that you are creating art with each other and working together and so the idea is that everything I need to create scenes is in my scene partner and everything they need is in me and we are working together.

To have that relationship work well together you sort of have to have no attachment to the outcome. You have to just kind of be interested in the process. The only way to really achieve that is by not being competitive, not competing with my scene partner for whatever, attention, laughs, most dramatic moment, the story to go my way. You are really creating that together and if you have got people who are competitive spirits or in nature it becomes really difficult.

I think Keith Johnstone defines whatever you like as a collection of solo performers trying to look like a group and I think that is often what happens. I see it all the time. I have yet to see a competitive improv format where all the improvisers were not competitive.

Why on earth would you want to take something like that seriously? Because it doesn't really matter in the end. I think with young people it is emphasized even more because people who are older are a little further removed from that experience. We are competitive but we are competitive in life ways, career goals, what we achieve in life, that kind of stuff. When you are growing up and you are in high school, things are coming at you directly and being involved in sports or following your sport teams through your school. And so I think that pressure — that competition puts on the performers is heightened a lot more with young people than with older people because that is the experience that you are coming from.

DLY: You have done a lot of travel throughout North America and Europe and I would like you to maybe articulate some of the experiences or some of the things you have seen, some of the differences or similarities about this art form in Europe, Canada and other parts of the United States that you have experienced and seen.

RD: Well let's see. There are differences. The thing I found in particular in working with the Europeans, is that the Europeans are much more disciplined

about rules and somewhat about structure, but primarily about rules. What are the things we can do, what are the things we can't do in this particular format? So when you are working with games or heavily structured improvisation, the Europeans are really quick to pick up on that and to really be able to do it within the structure. When you get into sort of looser forms like the Harold or things like that, at least unstructured Harold, it is a lot harder to get them to cut loose, to sort of be free form. It is very difficult sometimes. But there is a desire on the Europeans' part, particularly the Germans, who tend to sort of be stringent about rules, to really adopt that. I think that is one of the things that really appeals to them about improvisation and long program improvisation in particular, is the desire to be free, free of these rules and still be able to tell a story; whereas in America, or in the United States in particular it is the opposite.

I wish that U.S. improvisers were a little more disciplined, I guess. It is sort of a jazz form so you can't say get up there and do it all you want and sort of frame it loosely in this Harold structure or whatever structure you are using. We get that, the U.S. improviser seems to really understand a certain jazz of improv. But it gets in the way because they are so loose that so many forms just kind of become the same kind of thing.

I keep talking about Harold, there are lots of other forms other than Harold but groups are exposed to Harold and all their forms are kind of like Harold. Just because they are not disciplined enough to either understand that a different long form might have a different goal in mind. Or to really understand that the structure of a scene or a style that seems to be very different to what you would normally get in Harold. So it tends to blend all into one kind of free form jazz thing. So the distinctions are kind of strong. Canadians are similar to that.

The thing I find interesting about Canadian improvisers is a real focus on a certain community aspect to the work in terms of focusing on the structure of comedy — what makes something funny, what works, that kind of thing. You see a lot of sort of comic tendencies it seems to me in different cities, certain amounts in the U.S. as well, so I am lumping the US in here a little bit as well.

If you go in and see a show in Vancouver all the time, the ten games that you see in Edmonton all the time, the ten games you see in Toronto or whatever — those cycles seem to be much longer than anywhere else, I mean here, in

Seattle, we certainly, in TheatreSports, we go through cycles again. But every couple of months you are really seeing a change over in a number of games. For whatever reason people get tired of it, it doesn't work. So maybe we drop the games for something else. My experience in Canada is that the cycles are much longer. You can go back after a year and there are still a lot of the same games, being done well, but cycling those things out. I don't know whether it is a performer's need in terms of the performer needing to understand or feel comfortable doing the games so they want to rely on that or whether it's the fact that it works for an audience and so we will just keep doing it and doing it for the audience. I think it is more performer related.

DLY: Is there really anything exciting or unique that you have seen in Europe that you have come back home with and have to try – something that you would like to see translated onto a Seattle stage?

RD: Well, for the most part it seems, no. A lot of what is going on in Europe actually is that they are adopting a lot of American and Canadian forms over there. There is a longer history of it here. So when I go and teach new forms they will do those forms...

So a lot of the stuff I am seeing is actually sort of my stuff redone that the Europeans tend to do. Sometimes that can be interesting because you go, "oh that's an angle that I didn't really think of when I was creating the long form or creating the piece." So they have found their own way of doing it. So I want to bring some of that back.

To me, what I am finding interesting about working with Europeans, and what we try to do here at the festival, we are going to do it again this year as an experiment, is this idea of format that I am calling translations which is trying to find forms that really transcend language altogether. In translations you have got basically two halves. In the first half everyone speaks their native language in every scene, whether they are in a scene with a native speaker or not. So you might have someone speaking German and someone speaking English. With the English people, since a lot of Europeans understand English, I will have them speak fast or with an accent so that they are harder to understand in their

English. So you have a German speaker and an English speaker who may not understand each other, know what the words mean, but they play the scene as though they do. So they are finding different levels of communication. Then, in the second part, everyone speaks in a second or third language that they don't speak well. So you will get Italian in, we had Chinese last year and things like that where they only know a handful of words. And the idea is that if I can only talk about the cooking in Chinese, the idea is not to steer the scene towards cooking. The idea is if I am in a love scene how do I express love because I don't have the language for it. You have to find different forms of expression. The thing I like about working with Europeans in that art or any foreign language is that it really forces you into that situation. You are not pretending you can't communicate but you need to find another way to communicate, you really have to find another way to communicate or it's just sort of a lost cause.

Now, unfortunately in this recent trip to Europe I saw a lot of people trying this kind of idea but basically making gags at it, speaking their third language out of context, making fun of language — which, to me, defeats the purpose. At that point it is just a gag and you might as well stew the scene. That has got some possibilities in terms of really lifting the work because you take away the language and it came out of something that, out of my lack of understanding German, which was that I would go work with Germans or Austrians or Dutch or the Danish and they would say, "Oh, we have got all these problems, our scenes are over complicated, we are adding too many problems", that kind of stuff. Then, because I didn't speak the language I would say, "Great, let's work on that, let's do a scene". And they would do a scene in English and be really great. Then let's do another scene and they would do another scene and they would be really great in English and it would be, "Well we are not encountering all the problems that we had". It took me a long time to finally realize that by having them work in English it took away their creative vocabulary. So they no longer had the language to be creative, they had to be simple. And that's my hope for this translation format; is that even English speakers can be reduced to the lowest common denominator language wise and basically eliminate language and really focus on collaborating together.

I am excited about that and that's come out of the collaboration of both North American and European improvisers. Like I said, in terms of the forms coming from Europe, a lot of them are variations on forms from here. So my hope is that they will start to do more and more of it as they get more and more comfortable with improvising and serving freeform.

The one scale that I see Europeans have which is really amazing is musical ability, in terms of not only improvising music but also the musicians that they have there. For the most part, they're so much better than musicians in North America and I think it comes out of that tradition of musicians really being a part of their theatre tradition. Whereas here, we will get a really good musician for a couple of years but their goal is to go and be in a jazz trio or go and do music elsewhere. Whereas there it is really an established tradition and people work really hard at becoming good musicians for theatre and it shows. It is really good music. Not just playing for songs but underscoring, much more complex and interesting than I see here. That is something that I hope we can bring back is sort of an incorporation of things other than just creation of dialogue or a creation of theatre improvisation but really getting the whole package.

DLY: One of the criticisms that a number of drama teachers and academics in drama education and theatre have leveled against improvised drama education is that young people don't have the life experience and the cultural background to draw on, so when young people improvise their focus tends to be a mimicry of television and pop culture. I was wondering if you can speak to that problem, both for young people and also what you tend to see with your audiences and with your adult professional performers?

RD: Well, the thing about experience I think is an interesting one. I could answer on a bunch of different levels. My initial response is, yeah, a seventeen or eighteen year old doesn't have the life experience that someone older does. But I know people in their forties that don't have a lot of life experience either. It doesn't make them any worse off.

To me, as far as experience goes, any kid who is sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen in some cases has a lot more life experience than I have had. He has

gone through a lot of different things. To me, it is not just about experience in the past sense, it is about the anticipation of experience. To me, I am fascinated with young people in terms of where they are at now and where they see themselves going — where they see the world in their lives-taking place. For me, in improv you need a variety of different voices.

We used to have this ongoing discussion here in Seattle where we have, you know, forty something improvisers saying they are tired of performing for kids and they want to perform for people with kids instead. I appreciate that, but for me it is also like preaching to the choir. To me, someone who is in their forties has a lot more to say than someone who is seventeen about what it is like to be forty. And vice versa, I think someone who is sixteen, seventeen, eighteen has a lot to say to those of us who are older about what it is like to be sixteen, seventeen and eighteen today. What they have to look forward to and what their lives are like and what they are going through. So when I think of experiences and that sort of criticism of youth, I don't buy it, I see it sometimes, sure, there are times when you kind of wish someone would go a little bit deeper or they are not really going as deep as someone maybe with more life experience. So it is there, but I just think it is given way too much weight than it needs to be because I think there is so much that kids have to offer and have to say.

I think it is important for everyone in the culture to know that what comes down the pipe, that is the experience snowballing towards us all and will influence us when we are in our fifties and sixties. Out of that attitude is going to come the prevailing winds of society. I think that excuse comes from a place of people not wanting to listen to someone other than them-self...

As far as the pop culture stuff, it is popular with kids and I don't know, to me the pessimist, I guess, would say that if that's what kids are saying in this experience, which it might very well be, then there is a sad future headed our way. Because then everything is sort of referential and based on what's cool and what people want, want you to like rather than your own taste. I would hate to think that kids own taste would never develop. The optimist in me thinks that kids are hiding behind the pop culture references because it is something that appeals to a wide range of audience so they say something and a lot of people

get it. Also because it has been ingrained and socially acceptable for adults. As a kid I can talk about this in this way and it is acceptable as a kid to do that.

I was amazed at what some of the stuff kids were saying about the parents, you know dealing with mother/daughter relationships. So if they had a tiff with the parents and about each other, about how the kids felt towards other attitudes that are on edge and very adult, I thought attitude and also adult problems in terms of how do these two messages find each other, how do they get along? Had we not been doing that kind of work, had we not been taking the time, with the director really giving the kids space to feel safe or to take the time to say those things, I never would have thought about it. If I just had to write it out of my head a lot of those things I never would have even considered going through a kid's head. So I am really grateful for the opportunity to be able to take that time and to get those messages. And they weren't pop culture references; they were very serious references to confusion, to choices that are made to dilemmas that face youth. And to me, all of those things are so incredibly valuable to all of us that there needs to be room for it.

So many problems that we have, well not just with young people, I think with society in general, is that people are not encouraged to sort of express their opinions in a conducive way, in a way that allows them to feel heard and to answer or to express whatever they want to say in a form where they feel that they have been heard. They have spent so much time suppressing things and that's just not unusual. We are adults, we say what we want and we do our thing. I sometimes think the adult students that I encounter are far more reclusive about their own emotions than some of the kids who I work with.

DLY: You have started in the last little while to explore long forms of improv and spending more time to focus on telling a story. This is what Johnstone has been talking about in his most recent writings, so there is this move away from the short blips. The short blips I have likened to channel surfing and I am wondering, is there a place still in your heart and mind for the short pieces? And if so, when and where do you feel you want to use short form, games, versus long form, stories?

RD: There are a couple of things. One thing is the short form. I think it is viable and it took me a while to get there. I went through a phase that I think all improvisers sort of go through which is where they hate games and they hate the whole structure. Why are we doing this? Then another level that is written about is that you needed to find a way to either like a game or to just stop improvising because they are not going to go away. They have been around forever and will continue to be around forever...

One of the things that I found in this German book I got is the things that got me about games again were two things, one was to always ask myself, why do we play this game? When I go back to the roots of why we play the game it was far different than why most improvisers play the game now. So we try and reconstruct that by going back to the original intent of the game and see if that happens.

That happened you know with gibberish, [everyone] lost interest in gibberish altogether and then a couple of things happened. One of the most influential things was working with Paul Soles in gibberish and all of a sudden you say 'oh, yeah' I had completely forgotten, of course. That's what gibberish is, that's what it is for. And all of a sudden I began to really enjoy it again.

The other thing that really got me back into games was the notion that people liked long forms and really open long forms because they think oh, I can take time to tell a story, or it's very open, there's no rules, I can tell the story I want to tell and that kind of thing. Part of the challenge of games is, I think, trying to tell a story within the framework of a very tight structure. You take a game like a scene with only questions. I think this example I wrote about in the book. If I am supposedly a good storyteller, then it becomes a challenge to all of the sudden tell a story with only stating questions? Is there a way to do that? If I can just tell you a story, then great, I will just tell you a story. Now it becomes a little more challenging to tell it, but now if I can only ask questions? It kind of raises the bar again. It makes games a little more challenging in terms of, 'oh, the questions only get in the way, letting the questions serve you.

The flip side of that is people play the game with only questions as a way of making gags but not moving scenes forward because we tend to get caught up in the verbal-ness of it. The scene is only questions, but we are not asking

questions and nothing is happening. But to me reconstructing the original intent of the games was forcing you to react and to act because the actual story takes place in the silence between the questions. So somebody states a question and by not being able to react to it is going to have a great impact on the story. So play with that intent also, the game becomes really, to me, interesting again. It is teaching me a real basic skill about improv that I need to know.

With every game I teach to students I think that the impression now is to talk about truth, you know, why do we play this game? If we can't come up with a good reason for playing it then we shouldn't play it. And I have come across a few of those, you know, I think that's not a good game. It is not very conducive to storytelling or to the improv skills.

The whole short form, long form debate, it has got kind of an interesting history, at least here in Seattle, in my experience because many of us, while exposed to the games, here in Seattle, were really doing a long form before we did TheatreSports. The part just kind of came out of the wave that improv developed here in Seattle. Harold was here before TheatreSports, so we were actually doing longer forms. And then TheatreSports came and it's a way for groups to work together. Whereas in most cities it seems to be the opposite, they start with short form TheatreSports and eventually move towards long form. So we have got a good twenty-year history of long form in Seattle.

But my approach is that it is all improv and it should all be treated the same. Whether you are telling a story in three minutes or in forty-five minutes, the goal is to tell a story. The challenges are different but I think each game should be approached and each long form should be approached from that standpoint, that the goal is to tell a story and variety, variety, variety. I think the problem with short form in games is that it tends, to lean towards faster, funnier work and so most improv groups rely too much on the games to carry the humour, so the structure is what is getting the laughs.

The improviser in panic basically versus improviser trying to tell a story – those aren't improvisers to me, they are game players.

In long form you need to break up the length of it with some lighter stuff, shorter stuff that will give the audience a little change of pace in the middle of your long form. Otherwise your long forms tend to get into a similar pacing, it

can be long and drawn out and boring. We complain about long form and it certainly seems, you know both of those, it seems really excruciatingly boring long form and really light cotton candy, never remember any of it in the morning, short form. So try to break some of that long form sensibility to short form, some of the short form sensibility to long form. Because in the end long forms are just giant games and Harold is a giant game, it has rules and things that you are trying to accomplish; whereas half and half is a long forms that has distinct rules that make it different and I do think that you need both...

We did this show in Berlin as an example where it was really different than just about everything else that we saw there. We are in this big 300-seat place filled with people drinking and you think, oh, short form, lots of laughs and lots of things like that. We just kind of said, you know, let's just do what we do and forget where we are. So we did it and then afterwards we went, oh, my God, that's amazing, that's incredible, the audience really loved it. And then I was talking to people afterwards and they were like, "boy, I wish we could do that kind of work in our TheatreSports show."

And I am like, "well, why not?"

"Well, the audience."

"Well, we just did it for your TheatreSports audience and they enjoyed it so what's holding you back?"

So I found a place for myself where games are okay. I tend to work in long form because it is interesting and there is a lot of space to grow. I find most new games to be variations on old games so in terms of creating new short form games, I think it is incredibly difficult to do when it comes to something truly new. In the long form stuff there is a lot more room to explore, to make mistakes and learn, but I found an appreciation for short form. Otherwise, I am serious, I would not be able to continue improvising because you just encounter it in every single place you go and you have to know about it.

DLY: You mention your book, Randy and I would like to hear a little bit about your book. You published this book in German and at some point in time; hopefully, it will come out in English. Could you tell me a little bit about your

book and what motivated you to write it and what some of the more salient content areas are?

RD: Yes, the English title is *Being Present* and I wanted to write as I felt. Again this kind of onslaught of work that was entertaining, that audiences enjoy, that has value.

I think the stuff like short format even the stuff on television has value. It can be entertaining. But there is so much of it and to me that is the overwhelming identity that improvisation has. I look at improv as an art form unto itself and something I write about in the book, so it is kind of what the book is about. It is trying to give an appreciation to an art form that is process-based in a product-oriented society.

One of the main things the book was trying to show is the value in the process of improvising. Not in the sketches, whatever you get at the end is fine but it is a by-product of the process and the process is what deserves the focus.

So a lot of the book is about the process of being present, being on stage with our stage partner and just by being there generating art out of each other. So that was sort of the main reason.

The other reason was to theoretically look at the development of an improviser, kind of going through this whole short form thing that we have been talking about, into an approach for long form. So how does one approach long form in a way that is going to allow them to touch an audience to get an audience to play with you. This is what I think is important about the process of the process, learning long form.

So the book really, I like to think starts with people just learning how to improvise, where they go into that and this approach to long form. And then the book ends with my thoughts on where I think improv can go if this was the functioning reality of improvisation, what would be the lofty goal that I would have for it. That's primarily just this idea of working. As I say in the book, working with your audience and not at your audience. The idea that the work, the process, in the end, you get to enjoy being in the moment, being in the flow on stage with someone. But in the end the process is completely for the audience, for the observers.

What we can touch upon through those stories is really what I always think about the lofty quote from Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, who said, "What is the meaning of life?" Why do we perceive that clash? He said that he didn't think that people would presume the question, "What is the meaning of life?" What they were doing, is they were trying to experience. They were not looking for meaning to life, they were looking for the experience of being alive.

Really feeling this aliveness. To me, that is the goal of improvisation. In particular, I am going back to what we were talking about at lunch. I think that is the goal that theatre should be, people sitting in a space, watching people on stage acting out their life. It is my life. They might be king, they might be president, they might be fictitious characters, they might have magical abilities, and they might be the neighbours next door. You know the set, the apartment next door but at some level all those different people are really giving me a glimpse of my life. So that when I leave the theatre, the colours are brighter. You get the pretty lofty goal but I don't think that is difficult.

I think a lot of theatres lost it and improvisation has lost it in the sense that when the performers are worried about themselves they do the exposure judgment which is there, that they are getting from an audience who are more concerned for themselves than they are. The idea that I want people to really like me in the improvisation, rather than just improvise. If people are going to like you they are going to like you.

It is like if you paint. You paint to paint and if people like your paintings, great. But it doesn't matter what you get out of the process. Just painting is just as valid and important as somebody validating that.

What I tried to do in the book was to provide a practical approach in terms of user exercises and user games that I found useful and user long forms. A few examples of long forms because ideally I would want people to read the book, then go out and create their own long forms, their own stuff, to just add to the body of the stuff that is available for everyone.

I would try to take a few basic examples like, Harold that a lot of people are familiar with and kind of use that as an example. How to look at long form. It was a theoretical book but I also tried to make it practical from that standpoint, that there were exercises and examples that people could look at and go, "Oh

yeah, I have seen that scene." Or, "I have played that game." Or, simply saying "he is wrong, I would see that game completely different." That is fine too. It is fun.

To me the best part about writing a book as I am sure you have discovered in your work, is you reach a point at certain junctures where you really have to decide, where you really have to think, how do I feel about this? What do I really think about it? That was great in terms of my teaching and just my thinking about improvisation, it was so nice just to go through that process, to really have to wrestle with myself and go, no, this is what I think. This is where I come down on this question and that is what I am going to try to express. So that part of it was just really great.

DLY: What brought you, as an artist, theatre person, an artistic director, theatre administrator, etcetera, what brought you to the point where you are doing the work you are doing today?

RD: I think part of it has been being in the moment as much as possible.

There is something that happened to me a few years ago. I started improvising when I was really young. I took a class, my first class when I was about fifteen, maybe a little bit younger. I took it just on a lark, actually not even a lark. A friend of mine who was about three years older, he was eighteen or something like that wanted to take this class and didn't want to take it alone. So I took it with him and that's kind of how it all started.

Anyway, I started really on edge and a few years ago I was sitting in a class in Chicago watching Del Close teaching. We did these exchanges and I was just sitting in the seat. At some point he said something like, "So how does it feel to have been improvising more than half your life?" I kind of gave some stupid answer, but the question, the thought keeps coming over and over and over again in my head and it has become so ingrained because I got exposed to it so early.

People will say, "Well, how did you get to where you are?" Or "how did you create this?" Or, "how do you make a living doing it?" My answer always is, "I really had no plan to do it. It really came down to, in a way, improv coaxing

me along." When I first started I was a kid, I was going to school and things like that. That gave way to being an actor. I thought well am I going to be an actor. How do I know if I should be an actor or not? Then things just started happening. I needed a job, often a job would show up or literally magical things that I have no explanation or nothing to do with. I remember thinking once, "I need \$200.00 for tomorrow to pay my rent, what in the hell am I going to do?"

Then a job just came up. I just thought that just means I am on the right path, I should just keep doing this. They set me up with improv. There was a guy involved with improvisation. It was just being in the moment or accepting the offer as it came. All the basics of improvisation that we all know and love. I was acting for a while and began to lose an interest in that and as I was losing an interest in that, I became very interested in improvisation. Again, it was like improvisation just kind of flamed up and said, "well come here." And by going there, all of the sudden, again more opportunities came up where I never imagined. I never thought these things would happen.

That is kind of how it has been all along. I keep thinking well one day it will be some other offer that will just come along and boom, I'll be doing something else. I don't know if that will happen or not. I am not trying to make it happen but I am not trying not to make it happen. So I think just the ability to kind of be in that moment to be able to accept the offers that came to me, one thing leading to another lead to it. There were so many examples of things that just happened, no idea, no plan, nothing and all of a sudden the phone rang or I met the right person, just happened to be there, that kind of thing.

If I had planned it, it never would have worked. I am convinced that if I had decided I would have made my living as an improviser, an arts administrator and have this successful theatre, all that stuff — it never would have happened. I don't think I would have been too conscious, trying too hard, pushing maybe where I shouldn't push and not pushing where I didn't know not to push. So it just kind of opened up.

I am a firm believer in that, I tell people that all the time now. It sounds like not very good advice, sort of mystical or whatever but I do I think if you are meant to do it, it just sort of happens, if you just trust yourself and trust the process. One thing from my early age that I remember and I still feel it now and I

don't know where it came from because I didn't learn it in school, was taking the risk but realizing that the answer might be 'no', that failure was there.

I wanted to work in theatre but the answer might be that I might not be able to get work. If I don't get work then I need to just accept that and going into it just knowing that, yet hoping for the best but trusting that it might now work out. That happened all along.

When I became artistic director here I was twenty-three, I knew nothing about being an artistic director. I was being paid fifty bucks a month. We were just starting out as a company really and, you know, it was just kind of, well, I will just keep going and this decision I will make and if it ends up working out badly then the company folds or I don't continue doing the job. That's the risk that I take in doing it. But I am just going to go with what the moment tells me to do. I think, for the most part, I have been able to do that.

The other thing, which took me a long time to get over is realizing that my goal was not to be on television or to be like a big movie star. I just never really thought, well sure, if it happened, great, but it wasn't like I set out to go I am going to be in acting because I want to be this huge star. I really loved the work. Then going back to the process, I really just loved the process. I loved the process of acting, working a piece I really believed in.

Then I lost interest in all the pieces that were out there, but improv gave me that same thing. I just love the process of working, working something out both in front of an audience but also in developing new forms. That, to me, is great, whether I am doing it here in this hole in the wall theatre in Seattle or somewhere on TV, it doesn't really matter but that process is what was more important than anything else.

DLY: Do you consider the art form of improvisation, improvisational performance, and improvisational theatre to be a form of de-constructed theatre? Kind of like modern art, in the sense that not so much on the cutting edge, but that it hasn't yet, over the course of it's history, gotten any of the kind of credit or respect it deserves. I guess as an addendum to that question, when you go out in and around the very extensive theatre community here in Seattle, which you

have, and you connect with your friends and colleagues in the field who are theatre people, what is their response and attitude towards you and your art?

RD: The de-construction question, I've got to think about that one. I am not convinced that it de-constructs theatre. I do think it plays an important role and it hasn't been given the credit that it is due. And again, to me, it goes back to this process versus product question.

Both from the aspect of, say, other forms of theatre where you have got a script or you have got this product that people can clearly see and then judge. Whereas in improvisation, most people in the theatre will judge the product again like, what comes out at the end rather than watching how well did they work together, or how did the whole thing come together, how was the piece played? They will just look at a whole composition, including in the art form, I think part of the reason why improvisation has not gotten its due is because the people doing improvisation don't trust it as an art.

The example I use again and I think I wrote about in the book, is you have got a group like 'The Second City', which is sort of a pre-eminent improvisational group in the country, in the US. In Canada as well it has got a long established history. You say, such and such a pro group and people shake their heads and so you say 'The Second City', they go 'oh yeah' because they get it. They do very little improvisation. They do improvisation after the set, but the goal in 'Second City' seems to me the product of sketches. So they get sketches that can be created night after night, after night for people who are paying money to see the sketches. Then they use the improvisation as a way to get to those products. But the focus is not on the process of improvisation. The focus is on getting to the end product of the sketch. So I look at that and I go, you have got improvisers who are good, talented improvisers, wonderful performers, but I look at it and I think there is not a lot of respect for the actual process. There is no real credit given to just the process of improvising. So I think improvisers hurt their own cause in terms of gaining respect in theatre because of that.

I do think it is important, as I was saying before, I think improvisation has, right as its fingertips, the ability to return us to what I think all theatre should be or what theatre was originally about. I love the immediacy of it, the idea, again,

as I often say, it's the one theatre form I know of where something can happen in the world today and you can be doing something about it on stage that night. It is that immediate.

To me, those are the things that come out of that process and the process being so important that improvisers, as well as the theatre community, tend to neglect. It is the exploration of spontaneity that is vital.

Again, as I said before, it just amuses me to no end that people who work in theatre are afraid of spontaneity, especially when they try to create, in many cases, something that appears spontaneous. So theatre is about driving any potential spontaneity out of the piece. We rehearse it to death and we block it, lights and everything, everything is secure so that nothing spontaneous can happen, but we want it to appear spontaneous.

To me, it is just a fear and I don't know why that happened or what developed but improvisation has avoided it so far. It is one of those things, by being ignored by both theatre and some of the people in improvisation that have been its saving grace. That is what has kept it pure is the fact that people think, "oh yeah, it is improv. So we will just put it in the background." Because of that it has kind of stayed pure. It has not lost its potency because people have ignored it.

Now I think people are finally beginning to take it a little more seriously but it has to focus on process. In terms of the reaction that I get from theatre people is "oh, it's too bad it's a rehearsal type thing." Or "It's too bad you are wasting your time doing that kind of thing", is one sort of response. The other response is actually a great deal of respect. People think, 'oh I could never do what you do'. Which to me again coming from someone in the theatre is kind of ridiculous. You should be striving to do what improvisers do I think all the time. Improvisers should also learn a lot from actors, directors and other theatre traditions.

... The negative side is oftentimes, 'oh it is just an improv company' and that kind of thing. Some of our more lofty projects where we produced specific shows we would get written off because, 'oh, it's improvisers'. A lot of people, especially in the media, don't really understand improv. We have had lots of debates with the critics and things like that about, 'well I can't come and review

it because it is different'. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So often times they go, "oh, it's an improv group so it is just going to be more of that TheatreSports stuff." Or 'more of whatever it is that we are known for doing.'

When I look at our shows I see just a variety of different things from straight plays to script development, to long form, to extended long form, to short form, to TheatreSports. I think there is also an unknown quality that I get from people when I talk to them about what we do. In fact, sometimes people think that it is two different groups if I talk about Unexpected Productions. They get one association and they think TheatreSports and they think, "Oh is that the same thing?" Many times the gut reaction in people is that they think we just share the space. Which, again, I take as a compliment. It means that we are not the same all the time.

I don't know if that answers your question, those kinds of reactions I get a lot.

DLY: I guess what I do to kind of finish up, I am going to throw a couple of names or terms at you and just have you give me your quick opinion or observation on it. So I guess I will just start with Keith Johnstone.

RD: Okay, a big mentor of mine.

I think he is the best observer of scenes that I have ever seen. I am amazed. He can just watch a scene and then, in just a few words either tells what is wrong with it, or through some side coaching correct it.

I don't necessarily think a lot of people that work with him appreciate that. That he is so skilled at that. Because I have seen many people attempt to do the kind things like Keith does. But they kind of fail in comparison because they are not really observing what is going on. They are just basically trying to recreate what Johnstone has said about it in the past.

He has done so much for improvisation and so much for improvisers. He helped me incredibly in terms of understanding what it is about by really asking interesting questions in his own work that I think it has been an inspiration for a lot of people.

But I also feel like, on some level, he has also not necessarily lost interest but is not as interested as he once was in pushing the work forward. I think what he is interested in is kind of getting his message out.

Maybe that is what he needs to do.

Maybe it was just my exposure to it as a young improviser, before he was much more interested in pushing things more forward. Let's see where this thing can go, rather than kind of saying this is what I think it is and that's all it is.

So with Keith, when you are working with Keith's stuff, it is great and amazing, but when you get outside of his area of interest like doing Harolds and things like that, he is just not interested in it. So it becomes a little more difficult but maybe that's the way it has to be or should be.

DLY: Viola Spolin?

RD: I wish I had worked with her.

I have worked with Paul Soles, her son-in-law and she is one of those early influences through her book.

I feel like her book — and this I got after working with Paul, like I felt like Paul is doing a lot of her work through his own lens and it was just an eye-opening experience. He was literally doing exercises out of the book, which was, come on, I can read the book, why do I need to come here and work in this?

But after a while I realized the insights and the way he was approaching it really opened up the work and you don't get that just reading the description and so, because of that, it made me want to work with her on a personal basis just so that I would have the opportunity to learn from her.

I think she did so much to bring together the games but also to bring together improvisers, not so much with a common language, because the game names, some are the same, but a lot have changed.

But the idea that you could collect in one collection a number of different approaches and everyone should kind of speak the same language — that is my first association with Viola Spolin.

Many times the first encounter I have with groups is they have just read Johnston and they haven't really read Del Close's stuff but you say, "Viola

Spolin" and they say, "oh yeah, Spolin, we have been doing Spolin for years." She was a true grandmother of the form.

DLY: Del Close.

RD: Del was a great.

He, again, another big, big mentor of mine and really was so responsible for me in terms of growing up as an improviser. He was a really great guy. We had conversations about stuff.

One of the things he told me was that one of the things he liked about me was that I thought improv was an art. Because of that, we were able to really take improv seriously with each other.

So when I think of Del, I think of somebody who really pulled it all together.

I think Johnstone is really focused on structure, narrative structure or status, things like that, tools.

Viola Spolin and Paul Soles were geared towards games and bringing them into the moment.

Del just kind of pulls it all together and says, "What do we do with it?" What we do with it is we explore our own experience, our own psyches, whatever you want to call it, our own lives. He just really found a way to really corral it all together and to find a use for it.

He could be hard. I have seen him be hard. He was always really great with me, I don't know why, I guess he liked me but I never had a fight with him. He could be difficult, but I never saw him do it without reason.

In my mind, he was really a brilliant teacher because he would go on and on about things and he could be hard on people, but in the end there was a lesson. In some cases, with Del, he is still teaching me. There are still things that, you know, things that I have not sorted out that I have seen him do and we have talked about where, two years later I will think "oh, this is what he meant." He really, from that standpoint, was one of the best teachers.

I think his mind was amazing; his ability to trust improv and to trust improvisers to do a lot was great. If you just get people on stage and just let them

do what they want to do and then, if there's a problem, you fix it. If not then you have created art.

He trusted them. And the people on stage knew what they were going to do.

So I think about him all the time. That's it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Different Faces in Different Places & Epilogue The Improvisational Journey Continues...

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The actor's act — discarding half measures, revealing, opening up, emerging from himself as opposed to closing up — is an invitation to the spectator. This act could be compared to an act of the most deeply rooted, genuine love between two human beings — this is just a comparison since we can only refer to this "emergence from oneself" through analogy. This act, paradoxically and borderline, we call a total act. In our opinion it epitomizes the actor's deepest calling.

Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 1968. p. 212.

Different Places with Different Faces

I am alive with the cold soon to be winter air

as it blows through me

I think about the yoyo-like existence of being in many places at many times

- flying - driving - sleeping in different beds - different homes - different places -
different faces - I await the flow of words - ideas

and teachable elements that stand up as the fodder from which I create my
groove

- I speak - I profess - I teach - I learn - I am a part of education - and education is
a part of me - parting me off in pieces - piecemeal - my work - is taking me to
colder places - colder faces - awaiting the flow of words - ideas - the flow only
begins with the coming of the thaw

and I eagerly await the moment when a hand reaches into this deep freeze

gently takes me out of the storage compartment

and places me carefully in the microwave for a quick ten-minute defrost

- as the ice melts away - I sense an awakening into different places - with
different faces - watching and judging - they determine with a jaundiced eye if I
am defrosted or not - worthwhile or not - worth the time or not - the investment
or not - do I make up the main course or just the appetizer - sections - sessions -

sessional - momentary lapses into buildings strewn with the detritus - am I part of this waste? Or am I more connected - tuned in - part of the loop -

- I drive the roads and highways from here to there - snow tires with aggressive treads hold fast to the icy roadways - gripping to these different places - these different faces - staring at me - waiting for me to deliver some incredibly meaningful noteworthy something - the performance has begun - and I am cheerfully awaiting my turn - I see silver linings

I have options

- I challenge the status quo - only to find that I still need ten more minutes in the microwave defrost cycle - before I can be considered a main course - an entree - a feast - a festival - a place of celebration

- shouldn't education be a celebration? Full of different places - for different faces - making their way into a sun-filled world - open to ideas - ideals - ideologies - idiosyncratic moments - my words echo here and there - and in between the cold frozen hillsides on both the North and South shores - overshadowing the endeavor

- we meet - me meet - we meet - we continue to have meetings

- we email - we email - we email - we email each other with information that we 'cc' others

- we voice message and we voice message - and we send inter-departmental memos

- and then we meet again - and again - and add another item to the agenda - which gets placed on yet another meeting

- and at some point the buzzer goes off to say that the defrost is completed - but
no one answers the...

ding-ding-ding-buzz-buzz-buzz
of the frozen one
the frozen one blessed be he
blessed be the one who patiently awaits defrosting

- to become the feast - a feast of friends - of different places - and different faces

- I await the warmth - I await - I await - yet I am cold

- and in the cold I am frozen still

ding-ding-ding-buzz-buzz-buzz---
ding-ding-ding-buzz-buzz-buzz---
ding-ding-ding-buzz buzz-buzz---

Epilogue — The Improvisational Journey Continues...

• • •

Improvisations of a kind are continuously taking place, whether we are creatively testing the text by reading it, or are on our feet opening up an imaginative playground. Everything and anything can be improvised,... We should be guided by the game of make-believe, which we played so well when we were children {Uta Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 1973. pp. 72-73.}

Something has brought me back here to this cabin by the sea at Hood Point on Bowen Island. I find myself wandering the rocky shoreline taking in the rhythm of the waves, the running of my dogs, the Northern winter airflows, the white peaks of the mountains that dominate the horizon and create a tunnel focus to watch the Pacific Ocean ebb and flow towards and away from me simultaneously. I rub my finger over the exposed barnacles and mussels exposed by the retreating water. I am drawn to places that enable me to experience the sensuousness of time, pace and rhythm. On my way up here it took more than an hour to converge with the other cars on to the Lions Gate Bridge. Driving north through Stanley Park I was able to reflect on my emotional state as I sat in traffic, full of anger, frustration and a sense of helplessness because I am unable to magically create a new lane for my own immediate and selfish purposes.

I sit watching out the window as the cold winter sunshine reflects the majesty of the glacier mountain tops, windless and still. The environment that was so viciously hammered by wind and snow on my last visit is now serene. The saltwater moves in slow, pulsating currents, as my dog Eddie gently licks my left foot, working his little tongue in between my toes, making me wince as he tickles me.

I am in the presence of infiniteness here — infinite space, infinite time, and the freshness of spirit, ideas, an expanse of quiet powerful images. I look beyond

the horizon, not just at water, trees, mountains, but upon living metaphors, breathing metaphors, metaphors in-waiting and philosophical wonderment.

And therefore as a stranger give it welcome
 There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
 Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.
 {William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.v.165-167}

I want to roll around and play within the richness and texture of this natural fabric. I want to hold these moments inside me, inside my head, letting them loose playfully onto this page. I want to stop the time, freeze the image of the fishing boats returning to the bay, the gulls hovering overhead or dipping one wing closely, just barely, brushing the waters edge. How can I accurately project myself to that island I see across the water? I imagine myself climbing, swaths of new trails through the syrupy moisture of cedar, spruce, pine, rocks and earth blanketed with years of deadfall and forest remnants rebuilding on top of my every footstep.

My trail, my journey, my wonderment, my work, taking me, forcing me, through this expanse — and then comes the sound of the oncoming train whistle — breaking the silence of my breath in and amongst the trees and I move aside to watch the diesel and the many connected railcars pass by with incredible momentum, clanging one by one, their colours and words a blur, each full of cargo, and covered with the CNR logo and graffiti. The blurry lines of rail cars, diesel engine, rumbles through this forest — or is it the horn calling out from the BC Ferry – The Queen of Naniamo passing over the glassy waters, carrying cars and passengers across my path towards Vancouver Island?

Each interruption breaks the stillness, of solitude, their intrusions are expressed in whistles or horns, rumblings or waves, enters into these places as

both uninvited intruder and honoured guests. What does this tell me? I learn that from within each moment there exists an anti-moment and it is incumbent upon our living, to be improvisational in these moments, to be aware and to examine and juxtapose these places and experiences within our personal catalogue of time, sensual awareness and poetic living. It is up to us to spontaneously accept these invitations, to project ourselves into the moment, to imagine, to play, to contemplate and reflect – to accept the challenge to look at the world and exist within our time, to see the connections clearly and to make metaphors within the living breathing world around us as human beings and as teachers.

What would it be like to climb that glacier? Would it be akin to teaching my grade one elementary school students? Each time I reach for what seemingly is a realistic handgrip to pull myself closer to the top. I slip backwards on the snow sprinkled ice, ever closer to the edge, sensing the illusive nature of control or what we educators term 'classroom management'. If I were to be at the top of that summit, the sun shining brightly off the whiteness, glaring into my smiling eyes, would it not be like the feeling I had yesterday when a number of my senior acting students understood and succeeded in producing some deeply involved character work from the rolled-up texts in their hands? The cold, fresh, ocean water pushing relentlessly against the outcrop of rocks to the left of my vision, exemplifies the constant political pressure from administrators, petty bureaucrats and unionized colleagues to create educational reform based on teacher needs or financial constraints, with little or no thought for student success or student learning. The sailboat passing before me, sails all rolled up in the breezeless morning sun, outboard motor whirring, propelling itself through a tranquil expanse of water, searching for drafts, attempting to reconcile the

stillness and sunshine with something more impulsive, pulsating and animated, something to propel its next journey into an awaiting place of calm.

Ebbing and flowing. Ebbing and flowing.

My own journey somehow connected to these thoughts, I understand my life, my practice, and my improvisational momentum pulsates from deep within me, ebbing and flowing. Ebbing and flowing. Like the water I am gazing out and beyond. The gull lands in and amongst the beached wood and drifts from place to place. And I envisage the many classroom moments as both teacher and student, drifting from place to place. At one point I have my own hand raised, sitting in a small desk, reciting my notes for my teacher's approval – and in a moment in time – I am the teacher and I have a student in front of me looking for a nod, a smile, a joyful glance and my approval, which I try to share and give often in ways that allow my students to feel accepted and nurtured in their learning, in ways that I often had hoped I would have received myself, but all too often didn't. I can only hope to give back to my students in ways that I had wanted when I was in their place. I can only hope to be the type of teacher, mentor, pedagogue that I have experienced in my own time, the kind I always wanted to be, the kind I always dreamed of becoming, and, as much as I try, as much as I hope, I am even more pleased that the journey continues.

Post-Script

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Yesterday the Principal at my new elementary school asked if he could put my name forward to the school district as a possible candidate to be an elementary school Vice-Principal. Honoured by his high regard, of my abilities and the potential to take on a new career challenge, I didn't know what to say. It's funny, I thought... I never imagined myself as an administrator, but that being said, I never imagined myself as a youth soccer coach, a playwright, a director, a drama teacher, a university professor, or even now as an elementary school teacher!

I remember telling Cindy when we were a month away from having our daughter, Emma – that from this point on in our lives and my career, I would be in a constant state of transition – I said we would have to be open to all the possibilities and permutations this entailed.

I applied for, and was short-listed seemingly and unbeknownst to me as 'interview fodder' for two separate tenure-track assistant professor positions a few years ago. I went to interviews, answered questions, and attempted to position myself correctly, to seem like I belonged. In many cases I subjugated my teaching and my artistry, to attempt to prove that I was a rigorous researcher with all kinds of potential. As hard as I tried to impress, the political imperatives of each of these universities took hold and neither wanted 'my kind' in and among them.

During this time I kept going back to my drama room, my office and the greenrooms, in the secondary school that had been my career home base, the place where I literally came of age in so many profound and meaningful pedagogical ways – and it pulsed with memories.

I went to another interview up in the interior of British Columbia and was offered the opportunity to join the club – to become an assistant professor – with all the joys and frustrations that come with the title as a faculty member in a School of Education. The excitement and possibilities abound with this new job and even though it was hard to start packing up my belongings, handing in my keys, saying 'goodbye' to my life as a secondary school drama teacher, I knew that I was not meant to be there for the rest of my life. And even though I felt the emotion swelling inside of me, as I left the school, I did so with pride, as if I had graduated to something better, something more prestigious, more real – as if being a schoolteacher were tantamount to being the poor cousin to the university professor. After all, I can now sign my mother-in-law's passport as a university professor!

It took less than two months to realize that I was in the wrong place. I had more autonomy as a drama teacher than I ever did as a professor. I was never given the opportunity to 'profess' or espouse my own ideas, because the overriding paradigm was that the institutional programming was paramount, sacrosanct. There was no room for artistry, spontaneity, improvisation, differing opinions, new ideas, or risk taking. And as someone who seemingly goes through life "unzipped," I quickly found myself on the periphery of my own faculty, an outsider still auditioning for the right to belong. Suddenly, I was alone, in a rented house, with that cold winter wind rushing across the river

valley – wishing that it might take me home – not unlike Dorothy. Please take me back to the ‘black and white’ reality of my drama class... there’s no place like home... there’s no place like home...

Reflecting back to this amazing time, this period when I was made to feel so inadequate by a number of malicious and mean-spirited colleagues, who were so caught up in their own place of fear, territoriality and narrow-mindedness – that I became the target for a series of daily attacks on my credentials, my ability, my commitment, my professionalism, my research and my teaching – I received daily emails, voice messages, memos, not to mention the marathon meetings – meetings that went on and on with no end in sight.

During this time I would travel back and forth between the British Columbia interior and Vancouver weekly on the Coquihalla Highway, driving more than nine hours round trip every time – risking my life on the icy winter highway. For what? For the pleasure of having my work ethic questioned? Or for the joy of dealing with a petulant cohort of first and second year student teachers, who had little or no interest in the course content so long as the instructor gave them the right grade for their transcript and possibly gave them a few teachable ‘recipes’ for future consideration during their practicum work?!

At the pinnacle of this place of ‘dis-ease’, even though I tried to maintain my “unzippedness”, that place of risk taking, being open to all the possibilities, I felt thoroughly cheated. I began to look backwards instead of forwards. Would I be able to go back to my old job? What would people think? How can I extricate myself from this place without damaging my future opportunities?

Then I received an email from a friend who was starting up a new fine arts elementary school, and he asked if I would like to teach there? I replied that I

would love to, but that I had limited elementary experience. He responded that he believed fully in my abilities, unconditionally and that I should give it a try... Try I did...

And even though some of these stories that I have recounted and reflected upon are still being played out and are still being written at life-speed, in the meantime I get to focus on going to work daily and being greeted by the smiles of 300 elementary aged children. And I realize how lucky I am to have been open to the invitation to play and to teach and live improvisationally.

It was early in the writing of this dissertation that I wrote about my daughter Emma and I, little buckets in hand, out on the periphery of the university picking fresh blackberries. I once said that those blackberries represented the fruitfulness of the ideas that exist solely outside on the periphery of the academy. Now that I have had some first hand experience on the inside of the academic world and have seen and experienced first hand just how 'fruitless' it can be, I now appreciate much more why those blackberries exist on the perimeter – it is because they are messy – and occasionally fight back – thorns and all – and, eventually, ever so slowly, the long branch-like trailers creep towards the inside – towards the centre. And the last time I looked... the whole campus was surrounded.

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