Abstracts Symposium

Improvisation as Art: History, Theory, Practice

Edgar Landgraf, BGSU

HISTORY. Since the eighteenth century, improvisation has maintained a highly contentious relationship with the arts. Many artists and theoreticians have vacillated between high praise, feelings of ambivalence, and profound skepticism about improvisation's artistic value. The simultaneous suspicion and new appreciation for improvisation extends from the early representatives of the aesthetics of autonomy (e.g. Moritz, Goethe, Fernow), to the Romantics staging improvisation (Tieck) and finding in improvisation a model of universal art (Adam Müller), and well into the twentieth century. It is not until the arts' "performative turn" (Fischer-Lichte) in the second half of the twentieth century that improvisation achieved broader respectability. **THEORY**. The historical ambivalence about improvisation reflects how improvisation simultaneously fulfills and contradicts key expectations for modern art. Jacques Derrida recognizes the problematic status of this binary. He demonstrates how improvisation (and really all notions of singularity, originality, or immediacy) are always already tied to repetition (otherwise, these notions cannot be communicated, understood, or even recognized). Derrida concludes from this that improvisation, in a strict sense, is impossible. **PRACTICE**. To escape Derrida's dead end, I will suggest we draw on second-order cybernetics and examine the iterative mechanisms employed in improvisation that promote inventiveness and the emergence of unique works or performances. In theater, such mechanisms can be examined, for example, with regard to the Stanislavski system of acting (or Method acting), which puts at its core the practice of improvisation.

Playing Games with Frames

Gunter Lösel, ZHdK

The theory of performativity has opened theatre studies to a wide range of performative practices that before were not describable on a theoretical level. Does this approach also help to describe and explain improvisational theatre? In this presentation Gunter Lösel will draw on a heuristic concept within the theory of performativity, that was proposed by Klaus Schwind in 1997, and present a model of the performativity of improvisational theatre applying three basic frames: Reality/Play/Fiction. He will demonstrate the use of this model to describe and analyse improvised theatrical performances. Building on this, he will introduce a three-dimensional, dynamic model, claiming that frames should not be conceived as static but can shift and change both on purpose and arbitrarily, thus creating what Erika Fischer-Lichte called „perceptial multistabilies".
Lösel will examine techniques through which improvisers introduce certain frames of perception thus influencing the performative status of the performance. He will introduce a model of theatre-perception that might help to understand multiple perceptions as well as the emergence of frames within a performance.

Play Frames and Spontaneity as a Social Practice in Improvisational Theatre

Nicolas Zaunbrecher

This session identifies the quality of "spontaneity" as criterial to the identity of improvisational theatre, and asks how improviers "do" spontaneity in this context—i.e., how do improvisational theatre practices make account of spontaneity, and how do they mark performances and experiences as spontaneous within this practice?

Through this ethnomethodological perspective, the audience will explore this question through participating in variations on Victor Turner's "play frames," providing examples of differing social practices of spontaneity. Participant discussion of experiences in these different frames will be connected through lecture to the relevance of differential practices/accounts of spontaneity, and their relevance for both interpreting and constructing improv theory and methodology.

Improvisation as a Prosaic Theatrical Paradigm or a Belated Response to Aristotle's *Poetics*

David Charles

The development and renown of the Western tragic dramatic impetus owes much to Aristotle's *Poetics* of the fourth century BCE. This document sought to dissect and codify the defining features of this emergent form of high art. It is a commonly held belief that Aristotle also crafted a companion treatise that explored the less august comedic genre, although this work was quickly lost in the sands of time. While Aristotle's *Poetics* continued and continues to exert a considerable influence on the face of drama, the comedic impetus lacked a similar level of formal inquiry and esteem.
Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson coined the term "Prosaics" in their critical consideration of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. While many theories exist extolling and elevating the dynamics of elite "poetic" language, Bakhtin was groundbreaking in his efforts as a literary theorist to pursue an understanding and appreciation of the everyday – the language of the proverbial street. For Bakhtin, poetics sought to impose a strict and elite order (much as Aristotle had done) whereas prosaics recognize and value the many-voiced chaos and mess of the mundane, common and popular. The improvisational impetus shares much with Bakhtin's prosaic paradigm and a consideration through this lens elucidates the defining features of this nebulous creative energy that often seems to defy simple categorization. This paper reflects on how improvisational theatre has been shaped and deployed throughout history and explores the untapped potentials of such a prosaic approach to performance as modern practitioners seek to address the contemporary challenges of both high and low art.

Comparison of Cognitive Process between Improvised and Scripted Acting

Yuri Kinugawa (Yumi Hughes)

This study compares the acting process between an improvised and a scripted theatre performance through field observation, a field experiment, interviews, and an audience questionnaire. We observed and recorded an improvised performance with experienced improvisers. We interviewed them individually afterwards about their thought processes, recording them on video. Then we created a script from the dialogue of the improvised scenes. And other professional actors rehearsed this script before performing it at the same theatre with an audience. Again we followed the interview procedure with the actors. Analyzing the video interviews, we discovered: (a) the actors' point of view during performance fell into 6 main categories and 11 sub categories; (b) improvised actors are conscious not just of acting but also of their roles as writers and directors; (c) scripted actors are more conscious of their acting technique and their acting plan; and (d) improvised actors change their focus towards their fellow performers more often and more quickly than scripted actors. Furthermore, we analyzed audience impressions of the two performances - improvised and scripted. Employing the GELOS scale we questioned 64 drama students. The improvised performance was assessed as more unique and original in contrast to the scripted performance. We concluded that improvised acting demands a more complex cognitive process than scripted acting, creating a more vital impression for the audience.

Abstracts Podium

The improvisatory: an ecology and a politics: some suggestions and stimuli

Tony Frost and Ralph Yarrow

First: what do we mean by 'the improvisatory' and how has this concept developed through the three editions of our book (latest version: *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre and Performance: History, Practice, Theory*, Palgrave 2016: see especially pp. xi-xvi)? The book overall identifies a number of ways in which, across time and space and place and practice, the readiness and capacity to be in a state of improvisation has resonances for political, existential, psychological and social performativity, agency and responsibility.

For us the improvisatory is a way of being, or perhaps you could say a way of being as much as possible. It's openness, it's listening to the other and to others, whether in terms of words or language or gestures or expressions or actions, it's spontaneity of response and not blocking the flow of that response, it's picking up and giving back, it's what you do when you play word games and non-verbal games or learn new languages, it's opening yourself to as much and as many of the sensations and events and energies that are around as possible and starting the process of shaping a response to them. It's experiencing as much as possible of who and where you are and what is and letting responses to that start to articulate themselves. It's being prepared to be and/or wanting to be more and other, and also being able to accommodate, to accept, to negotiate an impermanence at and as the core of that shape-changing. It is living with risk.

For us, right now, this is all that Brexit is not. In a symposium in a country which has voted for restrictions on immigration and which has always had a somewhat troubled relationship with *Gastarbeiter*, and speaking as somewhat unwilling citizens of another country which has just articulated an equally viscerally protectionist position, how might the improvisatory be a model or more directly a way, a praxis to confront this fascistic reaction in oneself and in the structures of the societies we live in, and to reposition the vectors of our relationship with 'the environment'?

Can we do this, here, now, between each one of us? We would like to test how far this thesis works. Can the improvisatory be one mechanism which stands against the crass and crushing defensiveness of Brexit and neo-Nazism and hate and othering in the places and spaces which we comfortably-off academics and liberal thinkers and arts practitioners inhabit (of course these things and worse are not absent from other spaces and places in which arts work also goes on under much greater threats too).

We want to signal the kinds of extension which our book has negotiated over its several editions, towards other cultures, other forms, towards the inclusivity of audiences as well as performers. We will also signal or perhaps play with a few examples of practice, drawing on work from Chen Alon's Combatants for Peace, Al Wunder's 'theatre of the ordinary' and forms of improvisatory poetry and music.

Research with Applied Improvisation and Applied Theatre

Christian Freisleben-Teutscher

A good definition of 'Arts based research' is "the systematic use of the artistic process, the actual making of artistic expressions in all of the different forms of the arts, as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people they involve in their studies." 'Art based research' is used in all phases of a research process, „including data

generation and collection, analysis, interpretation and representation.“ (Mc Niff cited in Balfour, O’Connor, & Anderson, 2015, p 22). There are already many projects, were methods and approaches of Applied Theatre and Applied Improvisation are used in multitude ways.
In my dialogue orientated input I will present some of these examples and building on this some games from the area of Applied Improvisation, that can be used in different phases of research. One important aspect of my input is, that these approaches are enriching ways of ‚Participatory Action Research‘ (see Balfour, O’Connor, & Anderson, 2015), where the boundaries between the roles of researcher and researched are repealed.

Fragile Devices: Improvising Across Artistic Disciplines to Engage with Difference

Rebecca Caines

This presentation will have two parts. Part one will draw on the presenter’s recent research exploring commonalities and differences in improvisation as it manifests across disciplines including theatre, performance art, music, dance, creative technologies and film. Using current literature in Critical Studies in Improvisation, she will argue for improvisation’s unique capability for artistic innovation, community building, social engagement and engaging with difference. The second part of the presentation will include a short participatory demonstration where participants will be invited to explore improvisation that blurs the boundaries between disciplines, using a range of tools to augment their theatrical improvisation, including iPad apps for sonic exploration, live wiki edited poetry, and pico projectors for visual explorations. The presenter will share exercises she has used in her work in Australia, Northern Ireland, Canada and China, where improvisation has proved to be a vibrant “fragile device” for engaging professional artists and communities in innovative artistic exploration and social engagement.

Contributors short CV's

Rebecca Caines
Is Associate Professor (Creative Technologies) and Director of the Regina Improvisation Studies Centre at the University of Regina. Her research areas are critical studies in improvisation; socially-engaged art; emerging technologies and locational art. She is one of the editors of *The Improvisation Studies Reader,* New York: Routledge, 2014.

David Charles
is working as Chair and Managing Director of Annie Russell (2012-Present) at Rollins College, Florida, Department of Theatre. He has been acting and directing improvised and devised theatre for more than 20 years and published his PhD thesis *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity* in 2003.

Anthony Frost
is currently Director of Drama at the University of East Anglia and Course Director of its Scriptwriting and Performance degree programme. His publications include *Improvisation in Drama*, *Theatre and Performance* (with Ralph Yarrow, Palgrave Macmillan, revised, enlarged 3rd ed. 2015), and *Theatre Theories* (ed. and contrib., Norwich, Pen & Inc., 2000).

Christian F. Freisleben-Teutscher
is working as a researcher at St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, Austria. His interests are improvisation in higher education and improvisation in research. He is currently working on a PdD-thesis titled *Teaching and learning with Applied Improvisation. Fostering participation and cooperation offline and online*" (due at the end of 2018).

Yuri Kinugawa (Yumi Hughes)
Is an Actor, Improvisor, Director, Writer and Resarcher at the University of Tokyo. She has been the head of Japanese National Theatresports at the world championship in 2006. Currently she is working on a PhD on improvisation and cognition, applying methods of cognitive pschology to improvised acting.

Edgar Landgraf
works as Associate Professor at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. He has published numerous articles on the history of improvisation and is author of the acclaimed book *Improvisation as Art. Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*. New York / London: Continuum, 2011.

Gunter Lösel
Is heading the research focus Performative Practice Zurich University of the Arts. He has published several books on improvisational theatre and a PhD thesis on the performativity of improvisation: *Das Spiel mit dem Chaos – Performativität und Systemcharakter des Improvisationstheaters* (2013), Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag.

Duncan Marwick
leads both the Dance and Performance Practice degrees at Leeds City College, using his professional experience to explore multi-disciplinary work. He is a skilled theatre and film practitioner, improviser, puppeteer, director, performance teacher and has worked professionally as an actor since 1996. He is currently working on a PHD-thesis on Sanford Meisner and Improvisation.

Ralph Yarrow
Is Professor em. in Drama and Comparative Literature at the University of East Angelia,GB. He has done intercultural research an improvisation in Indian and Asian theatre and has published the influential book *Improvisation in drama:* Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama,* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).

Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher
works as Adjunct Professor at South Louisiana Community College, Department of Arts and Humanities. He is an improvising actor and has published several articles on improvisation. 2016 he has delivered a fascinating PhD thesis on spontaneity: *Doing Spontaneity*. Diss. Southern Illinois University—Carbondale, 2016.