BALANCING ACTS:

AESTHETICS OF VULNERABILITY IN BRITISH CONTEMPORARY IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Chloé Arros, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated. Signed:

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<u>Acknowledgements</u>

Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of contemporary British improvisational theatre, as it began developing in the 1950s until the present time, using the notion of vulnerability as research question. It discusses the balancing act performed by improvisers, navigating both the vulnerability intrinsic to their art and the image of vulnerability they intentionally convey. Its aim is to show the central place of vulnerability as an emotional state in the creative process of improvisational theatre and the expert strategies that improvisers develop to overcome it. Stemming from Brené Brown's notion of vulnerability as a positive creative force, it also studies the unique ways in which improvisers can perform vulnerability, use it as a strategy in order to achieve virtuosity and make it part of the aesthetics of the form.

In conjunction with theatre studies literature, it relies on the methodologies of neuroaesthetics and aesthetics as defined by Denis Dutton, in order to examine in depth the improvisation creative process and complement qualitative material. Field research in the form of interviews with both improvisers and improvisational theatre spectators was conducted between 2013 and 2018 in order to gather original material to begin a dialogue with, complement and challenge the existing literature on improvisational theatre. This thesis updates our knowledge of the form and provides an original, in depth insight into the creative process in performing arts. The key finding of this work is a new understanding of the expert ways of doing of improvisers which legitimises them as artists in their own rights and shows improvisational theatre to be an artform and not just a tool. As such, it is a manifesto for contemporary British improvisational theatre.

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1. Introduction

a. Question and Purpose

This thesis is an exploration of contemporary British improvisational theatre through the notion of vulnerability, using the methodologies of theatre studies, aesthetics and neuroaesthetics. The Oxford Dictionary defines vulnerability as: 'the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.'[1] This negative definition is counterbalanced by social work researcher Brené Brown. In her book, *Daring Greatly*[2], the culmination of her then 12-year ongoing research on vulnerability, summarised below in an extract from her 2012 TED Talk, 'Listening to Shame', she defined vulnerability in new, positive terms:

> [Vulnerability is] emotional risk, exposure, uncertainty. It fuels our daily lives. […] Vulnerability is our most accurate measurement of courage. […] Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change. To create is to make something that has never existed before. There is nothing more vulnerable than that.[3]

She combines emotional risk and courage; exposure and creativity; uncertainty and change. Out of all those terms, it is creativity which I am particularly interested in, as Brown brands it as the most vulnerable of processes, the act of making 'something that has never existed before'. Her definition offers hope: that it may be possible to turn vulnerability into a strength: to embrace it, rather than fear it, to fuel creativity.

My aim is to transpose the idea of vulnerability to improvisational theatre. As a spectator, student and occasional workshop participant, I have observed that improvisation, in its live spontaneity, brings about high degrees of vulnerability. Yet, as observed earlier, there is always an element of near magical momentum to a successful improvised performance. To create a whole performance on the spot, with little to no guidance, appears daunting. Improvisers experience real, tangible vulnerability. Nevertheless, experienced improvisers are able to not only create coherent narratives, but also draw their audience into the vulnerability of the process, only to make them applaud and cheer like they would a magician or a tightrope

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[1] "Vulnerability", *Oxford Dictionary Online*. (Accessed November 2017)
[2] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, St Yves: Penguin Life, 2015.
[3] Brené Brown, "Listening to shame", *TED*, 2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYYV0 , (accessed 3 November 2016).

walker. Therefore, they seem to exert control over the image of vulnerability they convey.

How, then, do improvisers develop strategies against and of vulnerability in their art? I shall argue that the 'trick' of successful improvisation is a balancing act. On the one hand, improvisers must courageously and skilfully overcome the vulnerability of the highly spontaneous, collaborative and participatory creative process at the heart of improvisational theatre. On the other hand, they project and reinforce an image *of* vulnerability in order to achieve virtuosity. In doing so, they are making vulnerability part of the aesthetics of the form.

b. What is Improvisation? Definition and Literature

Overall, it is easier to define improvisation through establishing what it is not, such as a form of composition requiring preparation or forethought. As for contemporary improvisational theatre, we could say that it is theatre without a script or rehearsals, or as Halpern et al define it: 'getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning'.[4] Performers collaboratively create a scene on the spot and are therefore playwrights, directors and actors at the same time.

It can be difficult to access any kind of database of improvised performances due to lack of recordings. However, improvisation manuals, as well as histories or biographies of major troupes and figures, provide a goldmine of information and material, not only for improvisers, but also for scholars. This includes works such as Keith Johnstone's and Viola Spolin's, two major figures of improvisational theatre whom I will discuss further on.[5] Some other works study the uses of improvisation as a tool within various other forms, such as Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow's[6]. Others study how the experience of improvisational theatre can affect personal development[7].

In 2005, Matthew Fotis wrote his Master's degree thesis: *Improvisational Theatre: In the Vanguard of the Postmodern*, the aim of which was to situate

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[4] Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim 'Howard' Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing Ltd, 1994, p.13.
[5] Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998, p.3.
Keith Johnstone*, Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre,* London: Faber and Faber, 1979, p.75.
[6] Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
[7] Colin Stewart, "Effects of Improv Comedy on College Students", *Theses and Dissertations*, 601, 2016. https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/601, (accessed 15 December 2019).

improvisational theatre within the performing arts by demonstrating that it belongs to the postmodern movement. Few other scholarly studies focused solely on improvisational theatre have been written before or since then. Fotis mentions Amy Seham's *Whose Improv Is It Anyway? Beyond Second City* as 'the only scholarly work about improvisational theatre'[8]. Seham's work, however, focuses on the role and struggles of minorities and women in improvisation, and can be said to be more of a sociological study within the field of theatre. Fotis also omitted the 2003 thesis of David Alfred Charles, which is perhaps the closest to the work I will be presenting in this thesis.[9]

In his work, Charles uses Bakhtin's analyses of the novel to describe the dialogical, polyphonic qualities of improvisational theatre and its 'creative rather than […] recreative drive'.[10] I must note a few important points. First of all, I found Charles's thesis after I had written the core chapters of the present work and discovered then we agreed on many points. I took a different direction, but some of the core beliefs that Charles expresses are also mine. These core beliefs are that improvisational theatre is about an exchange between all parties involved in the performance as well as all the offers of creative material available to them (the dialogical and polyphonic aspects), and that the creative process is the product of improvisational theatre, not the re-enactment of someone else's creation (the creation versus recreation point).

Improvisational theatre, however, has changed since 2003 and my understanding of the form has evolved with it over the last 10 years. As such, I diverge fundamentally on some other aspects of Charles's thesis, which are summarised in the following citation:

> An improvisatory mode of performance acknowledges the latent creative potential in each individual and returns the tools of the theatre to the people. Through selflessly sharing the theatre magician's tricks, improv also poses as a model of collaborative creativity available to all, elevating the inherent dynamics of the here and now, esteeming the prosaic wisdom of its participants through including them earnestly as artistic partners, inviting structural malleability so as to afford a posture of

[8] Matthew N. Fotis, *Improvisational Theatre: In the Vanguard of the Postmodern*, 2005, p.4. Available from: Illinois State University, (accessed 3 November 2013).
[9] David Alfred Charles, *The novelty of improvisation: towards a genre of embodied spontaneity*, 2003. Available from: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/76, (accessed 15 December 2019).
[10] David Charles Alfred, 2003, p.324-325.

inclusivity, openness and relatively unfettered discourse, while pursuing a playfully transgressive breach of controlling boundaries, systems and norms.[11]

I fully agree that improvisational theatre can be compared to a magician's trick. However, I disagree with the overall idea that improvisational theatre is as democratic, inclusive and open as Charles implies it could be – albeit with room for discussion. When he writes about returning 'the tools of the theatre to the people', and the selflessness of improvisers, I cannot but think that this, in part, negates the expertise of improvisers. Indeed, they are the facilitators of a performance which can involve spectators very closely. Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood, for instance, very often ask audience members to come up on stage and take part in improvised games. However, this is a controlled process.[12] Improvisers in the type of improvisational theatre I study – that which is aimed at creating stories for the purpose of entertainment – are not relinquishing expertise, and I do not believe that they ever fully make the audience their artistic partners. While there is indeed a challenge of 'boundaries, systems and norms', that comes with inviting audience members to witness the creative process more closely, there are still boundaries, systems and norms. Performers and their audience are never truly equal, and their experience of the event is not the same. Magicians do invite spectators up on stage to attest that there are no hidden mechanisms or cards up their sleeves, but we also all know that this is just a way to make the trick even more impressive and that magicians do rely on hidden mechanisms and sleights of hand.

While improvisational theatre *is* collaborative and inclusive to a point, my experience of it as a spectator does not fully match Charles's. He is right in saying that the creative skills involved in improvisation – the games, structures and techniques that help guide a scene – are quite available to anyone who has ever come in contact with an improvisation manual. The implication that these techniques can be very transparent during a performance is also correct and is an insight into the workings of theatre. However, I do not believe that this is the actual 'trick' of improvisation. If this trick was selflessly shared, how come improvisers hear, after almost every performance: 'I don't know how you do it.' The improvised

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[11] David Charles Alfred, 2003.
[12] *The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group*, recorded at the Pabst Theatre Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, Mills Presents and Music Link Productions, 2011, DVD.

performances I have attended it in the last 10 years never revealed to the audience what the trick to making them gasp with admiration is. Instead, they reinforced the feeling that there was a secret that improvisers held and that audiences could not comprehend, and this is what made them thrilling to watch. Improvisers, like magicians, gain prestige in pretending to have magic powers. It is how they achieve this illusion that I want to deconstruct, not simply the training and techniques involved in being a successful improviser – though this is also an important part of this work.

c. The Importance of Studying Improvisational Theatre

i. An Artform Still in Need of Legitimisation

With this thesis, I want to create a manifesto for improvisational theatre as an artform, to help show that it has its own style and ways of doings, its own aesthetic. When I began to research improvisational theatre, I wondered about its future. Improvisational theatre is an ever-changing art form. It is constantly evolving, and I asked myself whether it may even eventually fall out of 'fashion', exhaust its potential, and possibly fade away, like other art forms or artistic movements throughout the centuries. In 2014, in my Master of Research's conclusion, I wrote:

> Will performers be willing to carry on exploring the potential of the form? With most established performers in British improvisation today reaching middle-age, will a new generation be willing to carry on their work? Is the new generation a precursor to a new age of improvisation or the beginning of the end for an art form drifting into extinction? Only time can tell.[13]

The need for legitimising improvisational theatre as an art form of its own is still very recent. In January 2014, a petition was issued in the UK to ask casting database Spotlight to add improvisation to their production type list, so that performers could add it to their profiles[14]. The petition was backed up by improvisers and improvisation fans as well, and Spotlight eventually agreed. This shows the lack of recognition of improvisational theatre even within the performing arts. This is not to say that improvisation is completely in the dark or that nothing has been written

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[13] Chloé Arros, *An Art of the Instant*, University of Western Brittany, 2014.
[14] David Shore, "Sign the petition to get Spotlight to recognise Improv!", *The Crunchy Frog Collective*. (Accessed February 2014).

about it, but it is true that improvisers are still fighting to prove themselves as legitimate artists. The limitations of this process lie within the difficulty to bring the form to a wider audience and for performers to be able to make a living as improvisers only. In 2014, the very few who were able to do the latter either took advantage of the popularity of the British and American versions of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or taught workshops on applied improvisation.[15]

Time did tell, however, and the form did not drift into extinction. In the last 10 years since I became acquainted with improvisation as a fan, and the last 6 since I wrote the paragraph above, improvisational theatre did evolve and change. The Hoopla theatre was created in 2006 and is the 'UK's first improv theatre', fully dedicated to improvisational theatre performances and workshops.[16] In 2019, comedy website *The Phoenix Remix* launched the 'Improviser of the Year' award, the latest and first recipient of which is Sally Hodgkiss.[17] One review article in 2019 provided a non-exhaustive list of 57 improvised shows at the Edinburgh Fringe[18]. The Hoopla website lists 25 improvisation festivals in the UK and Ireland only. New generations participate in new formats and do not rely on shows such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway* for popularity.[19] And most importantly, contrary to what I believed, improvisers were already reinventing their own art and writing their own history, separate from the teachings of Johnstone, Spolin and their students. Therefore, while improvisers are indeed still asking for recognition, the scene is expanding and I believe the time is right to write scholarly studies to help accelerate the process.

ii. Challenging the Established

To say that improvisational theatre still lacks some wider recognition is not to say it is deprived of established principles and major figures. The works of Viola

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[15] Neil Mullarkey, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2013.
"About the Applied Improvisation Network", *Applied Improvisation Network.* http://appliedimprovisation.network/about-applied-improvisation/about-the-ain/, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[16] "About us", *Hoopla.* https://www.hooplaimpro.com/about-hoopla.html, (accessed 13 November 2019).
[17] "Winner Announcement", *The Phoenix Remix,* 6 November 2019. https://twitter.com/ThePhoenixRemix/status/1192178933871104001, (accessed 6 November 2019).
[18] Paul Levy, "I want to see… some improvised comedy and theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe", *Fringe Review,* 2019. http://fringereview.co.uk/edinburgh-fringe-2/general/2019/i-want-to-see-some-improvised-comedy-and-theatre-at-the-edinburgh-fringe, (accessed 4 March 2020).
[19] "Improv Festivals", *Hoopla.* https://www.hooplaimpro.com/improv-festivals.html, (accessed 4 March 2020).

Spolin, Keith Johnstone and their students, for instance, are hailed as biblical within the world of improvisation and describe at length the philosophy, principles, rules and structures of the genre[20]. However, as is the case with any 'sacred' text, there is very little that challenges those teachings, or attempts to bring them up to date. What Spolin discovered in the 1930s and Johnstone in the 1950s is still what is mainly taught today. In writing about contemporary improvisation, I want to give credit where credit is due: to go beyond the established and into the workings of modern improvisation, that which respects but also breaks away from the teachings of pioneers like Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone.

Indeed, the practice of improvisation as a genre of theatre has evolved, yet its history is not complete in the available literature. I want to fill this gap and challenge its founding principles. Nobody can or does ignore the importance of the existing knowledge, but I believe that knowledge is made to evolve and be completed, in a scientific – here I am talking about humanities and arts, which the French call *sciences humaines* – and contemporary manner. There are, of course, many ways to do this, and I do not claim to have found all of them. However, the two main discoveries I have made while doing field work and interviewing practitioners are:

- that there is an alternative history of British contemporary improvisation that developed in parallel to the work of Keith Johnstone and his alumni;
- that improvisers who do not follow established teachings have created new ways of improvising which are not discussed enough, if at all.

Although the former is not the main purpose of my thesis, I shall endeavour to share those findings in this introduction. As for the latter, it is the main purpose of my thesis: to study, as described earlier, the uses of vulnerability and the strategies linked to it.

iii. An Insight into the Creative Process

Improvisational theatre offers an insight into the creative process. Robin Nelson states that: 'Given performing arts' connection with many other domains (…), new insights might be produced through resonances between the one and the other.'[21] He also describes improvisation as an established mode of artistic

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[20] Neil Mullarkey, 2013.
[21] Robin Nelson, "Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge", *Performance Research*, vol.

investigation.[22] Improvisation is also described by Brian Magerko et al as: 'a relatively understudied aspect of creativity and cognition', two notions which can offer an insight into the cognitive processes at work in creativity.[23] This provides us with a bridge between science and art and the means of analysing the problems performers face when improvising. It justifies a methodology drawn from neuroaesthetics, which I shall return to further on.

The benefits of studying creativity, however, reach far beyond the realm of theatre, starting with education. One of the crucial needs that *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education* – the 1999 report by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education – describes is a need for including creativity in school education, as well as an understanding of creativity as universal, a potential in and for all humans, that can be encouraged and improved:

> We favour a democratic conception of creativity: one which recognises
> the potential for creative achievement in all fields of human activity; and
> the capacity for such achievements in the many and not the few.[24]

According to Spolin, 'everyone can improvise' and 'if the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn. […] "Talent" or "lack of talent" have little to do with it.' [25] Johnstone also believed that 'it is possible to turn unimaginative people into imaginative people at a moment's notice', with the right tools.[26] He implies that the right tools can be found in improvisation and be taught to performers. Both Spolin and Johnstone started out their studies of the benefits of improvisation as educators advocating the need for improved creativity in the learning process, a goal shared by the writers of *All Our Futures*. Therefore, a study of improvisational theatre and its aesthetics and creative process, is relevant within the field of the performing arts as a whole.

It is also important to understand the intuitive processes at work in creativity, and how those processes are not uncontrollable, but can be learnt and improved as well as technique to achieve virtuosity. Susan Melrose explains that the research on

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11, no. 4, 2006, p.111. Available from: Taylor and Francis Online, (accessed 3 September 2017).

[22] Robin Nelson, 2006, p.109.

[23] Brian Magerko, et al., *An Empirical Study of Cognition and Theatrical Improvisation*, 2009. Available from: Gatech, (accessed 7 November 2015).

[24] Ken Robinson, et al., All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education, 1999, p.30.

[25] Viola Spolin, 1998, p.3.

[26] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.75.

this topic is limited:

> There is relatively little published research on intuitive process and the development of expertise, or mastery, or virtuosity in the performing arts. What published research there is with what seems to me to be some implication for the performing arts tends to appear in the fields of Education or Psychology.[27]

Yet, virtuosity and expertise belong within the studies of performing arts, and as I consider vulnerability as part of the aesthetics of improvisational theatre, those notions cannot be omitted and their study applied to improvisational theatre fills a gap in our knowledge, as Melrose writes:

> Few of us would hesitate when it comes to acknowledging the wisdom of theatre-makers, Peter Brook and Robert Wilson, musician Yehudi Menuhin, or choreographer and visual artists, Rosemary Butcher and Shobana Jeyasingh, but while we attribute wisdom to them in everyday life, few of us are actually likely to have seen their expert-intuitive processes at work in the making. […] Few of us, in addition, are able to identify exactly what constitutes that peak of expert knowledge.[28]

Studying expertise and virtuosity in improvisational theatre, framed by the notion of vulnerability as aesthetics, will provide this missing insight, a decomposing of this 'expert-intuitive process' and its 'peak', and will help us understand what makes a masterly, accomplished improviser.

Expertise and strategy are also linked to the notion of control. Improvisational theatre is often studied in terms of what cannot be controlled, yet to be an expert means to be in control of one's art. While I will indeed discuss what improvisers cannot control, e.g., the intrinsic vulnerability of their creative process or the responses from the audience in moments of participation, I also want to study what they can control. This means examining:

- the strategies improvisers implement to overcome uncertainty and the ways in which they control their intuitive responses;
- the ways in which they can manage risk and control the actions they take in the face of fear;
- the control they can exert over the parameters of participation and the

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[27] Susan Melrose, 'Chasing expertise: reappraising the role of intuitive process in creative decision making', *Thinking Dance 2015: Questioning the Contemporary Symposium*, 16-17 October 2015, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom, p.7. Available from: Middlesex University Research Repository, (accessed 31 January 2020).
[28] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.12.

audience's contribution, as well as the control they can intentionally relinquish in order to trust spectators;

- the control they exert in the form of artistry when they compose *with* rather than in response to vulnerability.

iv. A Different Approach to the Notion of Vulnerability in the Theatre

Vulnerability has been studied in various ways in theatre, notably in the field of applied theatre and theatre as therapy. Oftentimes, it deals with vulnerability in terms of vulnerable population such as 'juvenile offenders, disadvantaged youth, or abused women and children'.[29] Augusto Boal's work, for instance, uses a great deal of improvisation, aims at producing political theatre and tackling social issues, and therefore deals with a similar type of vulnerability. The improvisation games which he uses are not only aimed at actors, but also 'non-actors', and particularly in what he calls 'Forum Theatre', he encourages participants to explore real life socio-political conditions. Here, the type of vulnerability at play is a socio-economical vulnerability which is intrinsic to the life, upbringing and background of the participants. His work's appeal goes beyond the theatre and shows that improvisation can have many benefits outside of the arts, in this case, the exploration of social issues and their solutions, and as is the goal of Applied Theatre, 'education, social change and community-building'.[30] The aspects of vulnerability in which I am interested are not socio-economical vulnerabilities, however, but rather, the vulnerability that exists in the moment of improvisation and relates to a universal attitude to creativity, liveness and spontaneity.

As quoted above, outside of the field of theatre studies, Brené Brown's work also focuses on vulnerability, in a more universal way: the vulnerability of everyday life, which she links to feelings of fear and shame.[31] Colleen Clement's work is a combination of Brown's notion of vulnerability and Boal's. She explores drama as a means to 'provide opportunities to teach young people skills to confront shame and vulnerability outside of the bounds of theatre', to allow 'students to practice vulnerability' and believes this practice should be made part of the curriculum of

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[29] Colleen Clement, *Theatre as Curriculum to Practice Vulnerability*, 2014, p.10. Available from: University of Victoria, (accessed 16 October 2017).
[30] Colleen Clement, 2014, p.10.
[31] Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, St Yves: Penguin Life, 2015.

formal education.[32] While this has links to the benefits of studying improvisation I mentioned earlier, notably the insight into creativity, which *All Our Future* described as an essential skill to teach children, it is still not something I shall be discussing at length in this thesis.

I want to engage with vulnerability in a different way, through a study of improvisational theatre. Amongst theatre studies literature, Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems,* is a good starting point. It describes the various elements of the performance which can disrupt it and induce feelings of fear and shame in the minds of performers. It links vulnerability to concerns of aesthetics and creative process rather than social vulnerability.[33] However, it does not tell us how to overcome vulnerability, nor does it discuss staged vulnerability or disturbances specific to improvised performances. As for Brown's work, I want to apply it to how improvisers and their audience feel and understand each other. As her work can be applied to anyone of any trade or walk of life. Finally, the work of Gareth White on participation also touches on disturbances and the various risks that participants in theatre (with some examples from improvisational theatre) face[34]. Importantly, it also discusses protection, which I shall return to. Overall, these works have approached vulnerability more or less explicitly, and they help to understand its causes, as well as support a study of the strategies that improvisers implement to overcome vulnerability through their work. I have discussed those strategies through field research, which I shall discuss as part of my methodology section.

Beyond this, I am interested in the balancing act I described earlier, which is what vulnerability in improvisation is about: a consciously navigated fine line between control and failure. Erin Hurley describes vulnerability in similar terms applied to the performing arts, specifically in the circus:

> The assembled spectators gasp and hold their breath; our hearts race, our pupils dilate, and goose pimples rise around the circus tent. As the jumper holds on for dear life, swaying back and forth, the audience's focus narrows to the point where the aerialist's hand holds the now undulating wire while his partner also struggles to maintain his precarious balance. After what feels like a very long time, the jumper

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[32] Colleen Clement, 2014, p.1.

[33] Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[34] Gareth White, *Audience Participation, Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p.77.

> pulls himself back onto the high wire and consults with the other aerialist; we in the audience exhale and giggle uncomfortably. Then the performers restart the game of leapfrog. This second time they complete the feat successfully and are rewarded with the spontaneous, thunderous standing ovation of a rapt crowd.[35]

There is a lot to unpack in this description, which serves as an introduction to many of the notions I shall study in this thesis. While the word 'vulnerability' is not mentioned as such, it is what is being described: a stretched-out moment during which failure and control walk side by side. First, Hurley writes of physical reactions: hearts racing, pupils dilating, holding our breath… These are biological responses to fear – here, the fear of witnessing the aerialist's death – followed by feelings of discomfort in wanting to rejoice at the aerialist not falling, but also knowing that the performer has not yet been successful. Alternatively, they are also responses to excitement, to the thrill of danger. These feelings are rooted in the uncertainty of not knowing whether they will succeed or not, but also whether the aerialists consulting each other is staged or real. Spectators are aware of the risk, whether it is truly as dangerous as it looks or not. On the aerialist's side, although there is obvious skill and a small possibility of failure, a risk has nonetheless been taken, to play with the 'precarious balance' effect. Instead of 'completing the feat successfully' from the start, they deliberately pretend to be about to fail and in doing so, are physically placing themselves in a position of danger. This could be seen as brave, not relying on the safety of well-practised skills in order to gain momentum, the reward of the 'spontaneous, thunderous standing ovation of a rapt crowd'.

The main difference between Hurley's description of a moment of vulnerability and this thesis is that I do not argue that improvisers are in any real physical danger. The risks they take are more to do with reputation and personal fears as well as the risks inherent to audience participation. She nonetheless provides us with a lexicon of words linked to vulnerability (fear, discomfort, uncertainty, risk), but also strategies to use against it (skill or training, courage and protection). The notion of biological response is also important and points to a need to use, not only the methodology of theatre studies, but also of neuroaesthetics, in conjunction with qualitative research. This is another way in which I wish to study vulnerability and improvisational theatre: through a dialogue between science and art.

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[35] Erin Hurley, *Theatre and Feeling*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p.12.

d. Methodology

i. Aesthetics

To write of a strategy of vulnerability implies that it is not only a state of mind, but also becomes part of the creative material of improvisers and as such, is part and parcel of the aesthetics of and cognitive processes at stake in improvisational theatre, of the experience of the form. To write of aesthetics of vulnerability also helps to emphasise how this study can relate to other artforms, justify the various approaches of vulnerability included in this thesis, but also highlight the bond that forms between improvisers and their audience through vulnerability. Denis Dutton summarises the evolution of the notion, beginning with Tolstoy, who saw art as communal, 'communicative'.[36] The communicative aspect of aesthetics is at stake in the chapter on participation of this thesis, in which I shall study how vulnerability is communicated and empathetically experienced by all participants of an improvised performance.

Dutton also mentions Aristotle's concept of 'mimetic naturalism'. To Aristotle, 'we enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as forms of the vilest animals and of corpses'.[37] This notion is important in understanding how spectators carry their own personal vulnerabilities to improvised performances and can project them onto the performers and entrust them with the task of re-enacting them, either in a comical way in improv comedy or in a more mindful, emotional way in formats that use vulnerable stories for material such as *Lifegame*. There is indeed a pleasure in witnessing subjects that make us feel vulnerable being endorsed by someone else, experiencing vulnerability vicariously, with distance bringing a certain degree of safety.

Dutton also establishes what he believes to be the 'universal features of art', all of which relate to main aspects of the aesthetics of vulnerability in improvisational theatre. He lists them as follows:

- 'Expertise or virtuosity': this is linked to training the mind to react against vulnerability. It is also linked to a display of talent and mastery in creating

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[36] Denis Dutton, "Aesthetic Universals", in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics,* 2002. http://www.denisdutton.com/universals.htm, (accessed 3 June 2018).
[37] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448b, translated by W.H. Fyfe, 1932, cited in Dutton, 2002.

momentum through a performance of vulnerability. Improvisers often risk failure through the spontaneity of their art and perform acts of recovery to avoid it. I shall argue that improvisers have a unique way of displaying mastery through blurring the line between real, intrinsic vulnerability and vulnerability that is performed in order to achieve virtuosity in short bursts.

- 'Non-utilitarian pleasure': this relates to story-telling and the intention to provide an enjoyable experience to the spectators. In this thesis, I will for instance study how improvisers make sure that whatever level of vulnerability the audience is exposed to does not tarnish their enjoyment of the performance. The particular types of improvisation I study are not concerned with therapeutic experiences (when the experience is therapeutic, it is not the aim of the performers), but use vulnerability in order to enhance entertainment. The experience becomes more thrilling and engaging through vulnerability.

- 'Style': I shall argue that improvisers can turn vulnerability into a stylistic device by composing with it. Again, this relates to the achievement of virtuosity. It also relates to the importance of the experience over the content of improvised performances. Vulnerability is weaved through the various processes (creative, cognitive, emotional) at stake in improvisation and thus contributes to a particular style of performance.

- 'Criticism': in this thesis, the criticism is the study itself, a critical analysis of vulnerability in improvisational theatre. My critique of the artform as a scholar also provides a valuable addition to the unconscious work of recognition of the audience, and the often inaccurate work of critics, which I shall also discuss further on.

- 'Imitation': vulnerability in improvisational theatre can be real, tangible and influenced or heightened by the performing environment, but also an imitation of real-life vulnerability, a pretence. Here, it is no different to vulnerability in other forms of theatre.

- 'Special' focus: Dutton defines this as a part of the artwork or performance which is 'bracketed off from ordinary life, made a special and dramatic focus of experience'. He adds that 'these objects or performance occasions are often imbued with intense emotion and sense

of community.' This, again, relates to the communication of vulnerability and the momentum of the performance of vulnerability. It is indeed the focus of my exploration, specifically when I write about cognitive, emotional and psychological processes.

- 'Imaginative experience': Dutton writes that 'the experience of art is an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences'. It is relevant to speak of an aesthetics of vulnerability in improvisational theatre in those terms, as it not only relates again to pretence, but also the spectators' willingness to be taken on a journey of uncertainty, in which they do not know whether risk is real, whether vulnerability is real, but agree, implicitly, to see it as such, like a magician's audience agree to believe, temporarily, that magic is real.[38]

These aspects of aesthetics justify my approach to vulnerability in improvisational theatre. They enable me to speak of it, not as an anecdotal occurrence in improvised performances, or simply a hurdle in an improviser's learning process, but something which is part and parcel of the form and a tool with artistic potential.

ii. Neuroaesthetics

Besides the definition above, it is also relevant to write of aesthetics in terms of feelings, first, because of the etymological roots of the word, which links it to emotions. And indeed, art is about emotional responses to a work. In other words, it is about a mental process:

> Aesthetics studies how artists imagine, create and perform works of art; how people use, enjoy, and criticize art; and what happens in their minds when they look at paintings, listen to music, or read poetry, and understand what they see and hear.[39]

I have already expanded on the elements of this citation linked to artistry, training, criticism and entertainment. However, I am also interested in what was not explicit in Dutton's approach: 'what happens in [the] minds' of the participants of improvisational theatre. As Dutton's study is comprehensive, it appears that it needs to be coupled with another approach. Indeed, vulnerability is a feeling experienced in

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[38] Adapted from Dutton, 2002.
[39] Thomas Munro, "Aesthetics", *The World Book Encyclopedia*, *Vol.1*, A. Richard Harmet, et. al. (eds.), Chicago: Merchandise Mart Plaza, 1986, p.80.

the mind and triggered by the brain. This implies empirical knowledge which could give us an objective insight into the manifestations of vulnerability. Therefore, a neuroaesthetic methodology is also justified.

While dialogues between the arts and neuroscience already exist, few focus on improvisational theatre. Magerko et al's is the only study relevant to this thesis I have found. It focuses on the decision-making patterns at stake in the creative process of improvisation and is useful in understanding how improvisers make creative choices in conditions of spontaneity. [40] However, it is not enough on its own to fully understanding the neuroscience of vulnerability and its applications to improvisational theatre. For instance, it does not mention the neurological and biological responses to vulnerability that improvisers experience in the moment of creativity, such as fear. On this subject, I will need to rely on Joseph Ledoux's work[41]. By understanding how fear works, we can also understand how it affects the minds of improvisers, not simply in terms of a terminology of fears, but also in how the decision-making process is affected in situations of uncertainty. This is where the work of Daniel Kahneman on the heuristics of decision-making comes into play.[42] By understanding that the creative process in improvisation is flawed, vulnerable, we can then better analyse the strategies that improvisers develop in order to overcome this vulnerability. To do so, we also need to understand knowledge, but also concepts of memory, notably as studied by Endel Tulvig.[43] Memory, as described by Tulvig, is

[40] Magerko, et al., 2009.

[41] Joseph LeDoux, "The Emotional Brain, Fear, and the Amygdala", *Cellular and Molecular Neurobiology,* vol. 23, Nos. 4/5, 2003. Available from: Researchgate, (accessed 6 September 2017).
Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, "Using Neuroscience to Help Understand Fear and Anxiety: A Two-System Framework", *American Psychiatry,* vol. 173, no. 11, 2016, pp.1083-1093. Available from: Researchgate, (accessed 18 October 2017).

[42] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Subjective Probability: A Judgement of Representativeness", *Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 3, 1972, pp.430-454. Available from: Datacolada, (accessed 3 September 2017).
Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases", *Science, new series,* vol. 185, no. 4157, 1974, pp.1124-1131. Available from: Science, (accessed 3 September 2017).
Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk", *Econometrica,* vol. 47, no. 2, 1979, pp.263-291. Available from: Caltech, (accessed 3 September 2017).
Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, St Yves: Penguin Books, 2012.

[43] Endel Tulving, "Concepts of Memory", *The Oxford Handbook of Memory,* in Endel Tulving and Fergus I. M. Craik (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.33-43.
Endel Tulving, "Memory", in Michael S. Gazzaniga (ed.), *The New Cognitive Neurosciences*, Cambridge, Massachussetts: MIT Press, 1995, pp.727-732.
Endel Tulving and Martin Lepage, "Where In the Brain Is the Awareness of One's Past?", in Daniel

a relevant notion in that it is through the communication between the memory types that intuition and expertise is built. Intuition and expertise are at the core of improvisers' skills. I must also note that these works do not take into account applications to aesthetic processes and are based on a behavioural and cognitive approach. As such, they are extremely valuable supports to this study but need to be studied in conjunction with field research and in depth studies of improvised performances.

Notions such as kinesthetic empathy also present some parallels to this thesis, as well as movement theories.[44] These notions are based on the theory of mirror neurons, pioneered by Giacomo Rizzolatti.[45] Works on mirror neurons provide a better understanding of the ways in which vulnerability is communicated between participants in a performance. Those neurons are not simply useful in the acquiring of motor skills but can also help assess people's intentions, because they code both for the initiation of a movement and the feeling that the movement will evoke.[46] As such, they are important to study in relation to non-verbal communication, on which improvisers rely often to create collaboratively, and which also happens between improvisers and their audience. This will enable me to show how vulnerability can be experienced as a wave between participants, but also show the flaws in this communication which improvisers use to their advantage, in order to trick the audience's perception of danger.

Melrose's work provides a bridge between neuroscience and theatre studies

L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry (eds.), *Memory, Brain and Belief*, Cambridge, Massachussetts: Harvard University Press, 2000, pp.208-228.
Robin Nelson, 2006.
[44] "What is kinesthetic empathy", *Watching Dance*. http://www.watchingdance.org/research/kinesthetic_empathy/index.php, (accessed 15 September 2019).
Joslin McKinney, 'Empathy and exchange: audience experience of scenography', *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, 2012, pp.221 - 235. Available from: White Rose Research Online, (accessed 15 September 2019).
Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, *The Viewpoints Book*, London: Nick Hern Books, 2014.
[45] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Craighero, Laila, "The Mirror Neuron System", *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, *vol. 27*, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.neuro.27.070203.144230, (accessed 10 October 2019).
Marco Iacoboni et al., "Grasping the Intentions of Others with One's Own Mirror Neuron System", *PLoS Biology*, vol.3, no.3, 2005.
[46] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Craighero, Laila, "The Mirror Neuron System", *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, *vol. 27*, 2004. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.neuro.27.070203.144230, (accessed 10 October 2019).
Marco Iacoboni et al, "Grasping the Intentions of Others with One's Own Mirror Neuron System", *PLoS Biology*, vol.3, no.3, 2005.

which is, as stated previously, an important transition towards notions of virtuosity, through her theory of expert intuition and expert deliberation. Indeed, if neuroscience enables me to deconstruct the improvisation creative process, Melrose's work enables me to narrow down what it is that makes an improviser an expert, a master of their art. Overall, a neuroaesthetics methodology is inseparable from a more traditional approach to aesthetics in this work.

I must note, however, that this thesis still firmly and primarily belongs within the field of theatre studies. I do not imply that science is all that is needed to understand vulnerability in improvisation as the latter is a complex, subjective emotion which transcends empirical evidence. Nonetheless, neuroaesthetics provide complementary knowledge and an original dialogue between science and art, interdisciplinary studies on emotions and the arts are still few.[47] It will help me slow down the improvisation process and study it frame by frame, to complement the spectating experience, which limits us to assuming everything that happens in an improvised performance is fast and automatic.

iii. Field Research

I also needed to rely on qualitative research, to complete what neurological, objective date cannot tell us about personal, subjective experience, as highlighted above. It also enabled me to let my study evolve with the form. I conducted interviews with improvisers between 2013 and 2018, as well as a few short interviews with regular members of the audience at the Comedy Store in London between 2014 and 2016. For a full list of the people I interviewed, interview dates, as well as samples of the interview transcripts, I refer the reader to this thesis's appendix. While the primary material generated from my interviews is essential in adding original knowledge to my study, it does not fully replace the literature on the topics discussed, nor does it replace a study of improvised shows. However, it also provides an insight into performances that cannot be gained solely from a spectator's point of view.

I selected improvisers who were representative of different ways of doing of

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[47] Manuela M. Marin, "Crossing Boundaries: Toward a General Model of Neuroaesthetics", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, vol. 9, no. 443, 2015. Available from: Frontiers In, (accessed 15 September 2019).

improvisational theatre, from people who had worked with Keith Johnstone, such as Roddy Maude-Roxby, to a newer generation borrowing from other artforms, such as Robert Broderick. The aim was to review the field and gain a deeper understanding outside of what is written in improvisation manuals. As for audience members, time and access constraints meant I was only able to conduct some email interviews with regular members of the audience at the London Comedy Store, although the people involved also attend other improvised shows around the country. Nonetheless, they provided answers which either confirmed my own experience as a spectator or offered a slightly different, complementary insight, which was useful in studying the relationship between participation and vulnerability in improvisation.

Initially, I designed my interviews to act as a review of improvisational theatre, its rules, conventions and the individual experiences of some of its major figures, as well as their opinions on certain aspects of improvisation such as its transposition to different media. I then asked questions about the way improvisers devise their own shows and handle their relationship with their audience, as those themes were described very little, if at all, in the improvisational theatre literature. These questions were key in researching the chapter on audience participation. They also stemmed from an initial approach to this thesis with a more specific focus on audience relationships. Interviews with audience members had a similar benefit. The aim of the interviews was not to constitute the only original material of my thesis. Nonetheless, they were a unique way to frame my thesis and challenge the established teachings of improvisation. They enabled me to write of the alternative ways of doing to the established canon of improvisation, as mentioned previously. Improvisers who followed different trainings to the ones described in manuals, as well as ones coming from countries other than Britain gave me some answers with a different perspective from those of improvisers who still follow Johnstone's teachings. Improvisers who have willingly undertaken a more experimental practice also demonstrated the evolution of the form.

The interview process was reflective of the ever-changing nature of improvisational theatre. It had to constantly be adapted. While there is less on the newest generation of improvisers, the people I have interviewed have prominent places in British improvisational theatre, reflect regularly on their own practice and perform with younger improvisers as well. The interviews I conducted with spectators of improvised shows were not as developed, as it became clear quite early

on in the process that in order to fully review the audience experience, I would have needed a quantitative approach which did not suit my project. Set questionnaires did not seem open enough. Instead, I spoke to selected people who were able to articulate their experience in writing. Their answers were a suitable complement to the interviews I conducted with improvisers, as well as literature on spectating and my own experience.

iv. Primary Material Limitations: Recorded vs. Live Improvisation

The study of improvised performances is of course essential, and I was able to attend many shows in the last few years. However, when it was not possible to attend, and in order to broaden my primary material, I also relied on recordings of improvised performances. The Comedy Store in London was able to share some private recordings with me for the purposes of my thesis. I also sourced recordings of improvised shows such as the *Colin and Brad Two-Man Group*'s show or *The Actor's Nightmare*.[48] Unfortunately, it is difficult to find such recordings, as most improvisers are reluctant to record their performances, believing in the ephemerality of the experience, and therefore, I also needed, at times, to use recordings of improvised television or radio programmes such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or *The Masterson Inheritance*.[49] This poses two problems:

- that using any form of recording distances the viewer from both the theatrical space (even more so, obviously, in television or radio recordings) and the experience of the moment and is therefore not fully representational of the performance;
- that recordings, particularly of television or radio performances, could have been edited, which makes them even less representational of the experience of improvisation.

While these problems do not mean that recordings should not be used, they nonetheless imply a necessary degree of critical thinking in handling them.

First, it is true that the experience of a live performance is anchored in the conventions and rules of the form at stake. Indeed, according to Fix and Despierres,

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[48] The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group, 2011.
The Actor's Nightmare, improvised performance, The Pleasance Theatre, London, 1st December 2013.
[49] Richard Vranch, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2013.

'each audience becomes a collective influenced by the work they observe and spectators do not behave the same from one venue to another', or even one representation to another.[50] Furthermore:

> Spectators who watch an act on DVD or Youtube are subject to a vastly reduced (if not absent) social involvement, and may not have the same commitment to the performer or performance as someone who has purchased tickets. Film and video by definition flatten three-dimensional life, in the process tending to squeeze from it some of the chemical reactions upon which stand-up thrives.[51]

There is physical distance in not attending the venue in which the performance takes place, but also social distance in not sharing the human, aesthetic, communal experience of the work. This means that spectators do not form a bond with other spectators or the performers as strongly as they would in the flesh, if at all. Finally, there is neurological distance, which removes the possibility of using the neuroaesthetics approach necessary to fully understand the concept of vulnerability in improvisational theatre. It makes it difficult to use recordings as empirical evidence of emotional affect.

The second issue, to do with editing, as confirmed by artists who took part in shows such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway.* Laura Hall, for instance, who improvised the music in the American version of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, confesses:

> We would tape over a three day weekend, and did tons of games that would later get cut into the shows. And yes, we were really improvising, but no, they're not that funny all the time. The secret is in the editing. Some of the games would go well, some not so well; that's the nature of improv. (And actually, if something went really badly, they would keep it, because that can be funny too!) And although we were good, the editing made us look more brilliant than we actually are.[52]

Although Hall acknowledges that improvisation, by nature, can very well not work, she also mentions the use of editing in order to make some scenes funnier. While the original material is indeed improvised, editing means that failure, and therefore vulnerability, cannot always be seen. It also limits what we see of the creative process, something which improvisational theatre often easily exposes in a performance. However, there is also an element of editing in live improvisation, in

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[50] Florence Fix and Claire Despierres, *Le Destinataire au théâtre : à qui parle-t-on ?*, Dijon: Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2010, translated by Chloé Arros, p.114.
[51] Eric Weitz, *Theatre and Laughter*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p.75.
[52] Laura Hall. "Back on the set of Whose Line is it Anyway", *Laura Hall*, 2014. https://laurahall.com/blog/back_on_the_set_of_whose_line_is_it_anyway, (accessed 2 April 2014).

choosing material and rejecting some of it. I shall return to this further on. For now, I will note that using recorded material is inevitable in a comprehensive study of improvisational theatre but must be treated carefully so as not to present it as a true reflection of what happens in the live venue, in the moment of creativity. In order to avoid the issues above, I will use recorded material if I have either attended the performance myself or spoken to people who have attended or performed in it. In other cases, I use recordings as examples of strategies of and against vulnerability, rather than as a means to study the experience of vulnerability.

e. Structure of this Thesis

The main body of this thesis consists of four chapters. Each of them will explore a manifestation of vulnerability in improvisational theatre coupled with a strategy to overcome it and/or turn it into a creative device, using not only theatre studies' methodology, but also those of neuroscience, biology, social work and social psychology. First, I will study the psychological effects of the vulnerability of dealing with uncertainty and risk on improvisers' creative process. I will then study how improvisers' training and experience enables them to embrace their instinctive reactions to spontaneity and make expert decisions. The next chapter deals with the real, tangible feelings of fear and shame that improvisers face in performance, two emotions which Brown links strongly to vulnerability. I will also argue that improvisers are able to demonstrate courage in the face of fear. In the third chapter, I shall move on to matters of audience participation and the vulnerability that it brings to the performance. In this chapter, I challenge the ways in which Keith Johnstone advised that the improviser deal with participation and argue that there are other ways of protecting participants that welcome and use vulnerability rather than silence it, with beneficial effects to the performance. Finally, I will analyse the ways in which various forms of improvisational theatre relies on improvisers' expertise in order to achieve virtuosity through conveying an image of vulnerability to their audience. This chapter takes the thinking behind this thesis from studying the tools that protect against the effects vulnerability to studying how vulnerability can be used as a tool.

2. History and Principles of Improvisational Theatre

a. Improvisation in the Arts: an Overview

i. Improvisation in Music

In this thesis, I am concerned with improvisational theatre as a form in itself, which would not be identified until the 20th century. As such, I will not be studying in detail improvisation as a rehearsal or training tool, so as to keep my study focused on the artistry of improvisational theatre specifically. However, improvisation has been used as a tool in theatre, music and the performing arts for centuries. Those uses cannot be denied as important background knowledge to frame any study of improvisation, because improvisational theatre inscribes itself in a specific artistic context and shares a history with other forms of theatre.

The study of improvisation in music often links it to notions of composition and virtuosity and indeed, virtuosity is primarily seen as a musician's achievement. [53] Jazz music, specifically, provides examples of composing melodies based on themes and existing scales, thus showing that there is a grey area between creating something from scratch and creating something based on pre-existing elements which is still considered improvisation.[54] This grey area is important to consider in improvisational theatre, where suggestions can be seen as the work of the audience, which implies that improvisers are not the sole creators of their work. Studying improvisation in music also gives insights into virtuosity and recognition, helping us understand how audiences are able to recognise skill and artistry in performers.[55]

Improvisation in music has also been studied from a neuroscience standpoint:

> Neuroscientist and musician Charles Limb and neurologist Allen Braun conducted a study that put jazz musicians into fMRIs. [… They] discovered that when musicians played memorized scales, their brains looked very different than when they were riffing off the same scale— when they were improvising, in other words. During improvisation, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex decreased in activity and the medial prefrontal cortex increased. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex is like your inner critic; it's that voice in your head that says, "Don't say that" or

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[53] "Virtuoso", *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, website. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtuoso, (accessed 15 October 2018).
[54] V.A. Howard, 2008, pp.6-7.
[55] V.A. Howard, *Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts*, New-York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008, p.16.

> "What will happen if you're wrong?" On the other hand, the medial prefrontal cortex is associated with language and creativity. While musicians improvised, their brains' censors decreased and their creativity centres increased in activity.[56]

In essence, Limb's study shows that when musician's improvise, they favour intuition and spontaneous thinking over conscious, deliberate thought, and are able to silence self-consciousness in order to be creative. The link between creativity and language implies that not only can creativity be as 'normal', as evident and easy and speaking, but also that there is communication, and therefore *connection* in art. And improvisation is indeed about creating a connection between different areas of the brain and mind, between the mind and the body, but also between improvisers and their environment, their colleagues, their audience…

What the study of improvisation in music shows is that there is a way to study improvisation that uses both a neurological and philosophical approach. We can combine science and notions of virtuosity to establish what makes the skill and artistry of an improviser, specifically, in this thesis, theatrical improvisers. It is however worth noting that Drinko states that 'too much emphasis is often placed on the so-called evidence discovered by fMRIs and other brain scans' and that 'cognitive science has yet to catch up with the arts'.[57] This gives even more importance to the inclusion of not only empirical sciences, but also qualitative research and philosophical approaches to a study of improvisation, to more precisely understand what makes the *experience* of the form.

ii. An Art of its Time: Improvisation and Performance Art

Turning to the world of visual arts, in the 1930s, textile artist Anni Albers first expressed the idea of 'art [being] concerned with the HOW and not the WHAT; not with literal content, but with the performance of the factual content'[58]. Albers belonged to a community within the Black Mountain College of North Carolina, which would devise performances, some of them improvised.[59] There is a similarity

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[56] Clay Drinko, "How Improvisation Shapes the Brain", *Psychology Today*, 1 October 2019, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/play-your-way-sane/201910/how-improvisation-changes-the-brain, (accessed 7 June 2021).
[57] Clay Drinko, *Improvisation for the Mind: Theatrical Improvisation, Consciousness, and Cognition*, Tufts University, 2012, p.155.
[58] Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art, From Futurism to the Present*, third edition, New-York: Thames and Hudson World of Art, 1988, p.121.
[59] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.121.

between this politics of process over content and the fact that improvisational theatre finds its wealth in its creative process. However, improvisation is not just a performance *of*, it is a performance that creates its own material on the spot. Nevertheless, it shows that visual and performance artists were concerned with more than the finished product around the time improvisational theatre began to develop in the United States with Viola Spolin's work.[60] A need for putting the emphasis on creativity, on understanding it, was beginning to emerge.

Live art also developed at the time. Mostly centred on visual arts, it involved the artist creating art in front of an audience, giving life to objects that inspired them, etc.[61] This led to the appearance of 'happenings'. Painter Allan Kaprow was amongst the first artists to perform happenings, which included music and painting and in which the spectators were instructed to do particular things such as standing or sitting in a particular spot.[62] For Kaprow, it was a way to 'increase the "responsibility" of the spectator'[63]. The engagement of the audience was crucial. They were not just witnesses, but also part of the artistic process, which would not have been justified without them. This is even closer to the politics of participation in improvisational theatre: audience participation becomes not only a challenge to overcome, but a welcome, necessary part of the performance and live experience of the event.

In the 1960s and 70s, when improvisational theatre began to develop in Britain, performance artists considered that the work of art was 'superfluous'[64]. They would use unusual, unexpected material for their art, such as their own bodies, because they thought their art 'implied the *experience* of time, space and material, rather than their representation in the form of objects'[65]. And indeed, improvisational theatre is more concerned with the time-based, ephemeral experience of the event than the finished product, of which few traces, if any, ever remain. The Comedy Store Players, for instance, retain recordings of their performances, but do not share them with the public as they do not believe that recordings provide a complete replacement of the live event.[66]

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[60] Viola Spolin, 1998, p.3.
[61] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.128.
[62] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.128-130.
[63] Alan Kaprow, quoted in Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.128.
[64] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.152.
[65] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.153.
[66] Richard Vranch, 2013.

Other similarities between performance art and improvisational theatre are described as follow:

> The work may be presented solo or with a group, with lighting, music or visuals made by the performance artist him or herself, or in collaboration, and performed in places ranging from an art gallery or museum to an 'alternative space', a theatre, café, bar or street corner.[67]

And indeed, improvisational theatre shares with performance art a flexibility of form, allowing the introduction of pre-existing visuals or props (such as the Austentatious company who perform in period costumes).[68] Improvisers have also taken their art to 'alternative' spaces such as clubs and cabarets, beginning with performers like Steve Steen and Jim Sweeney in Britain.[69] What this achieved was an ability to appeal to a larger public, which is indeed one of performance art's achievements as well, and in turn, it created an attraction stemming from 'an apparent desire of that public to gain access to the art world, to be a spectator of its ritual and its distinct community.'[70] What improvisational theatre gives its audience is an insight (real or perceived) into the workings of theatre. It brings to the fore the process of acting and reveals aspects of the person behind the actor, behind the character. It gives spectators a feeling of closeness, both physical and emotional, and a sense of community gathered around the performers, who nonetheless do not relinquish expertise. They retain control of the performance, which is also what the audience wants: to be allowed in without being left to run the show.

In a similar vein, visual arts movements such as Italian Futurism also used live 'performance as artistic mode' and encouraged 'a more dynamic, active spectatorship'. Interestingly, it also shifted performances from traditional theatres to 'variety theatre' venues, where performances take place closer to or even amongst the audience. Dadaism also, 'under the influence of André Breton, […] shifted its relationship to audiences […] towards more participatory events in the public sphere'.[71] Part of the experience of viewing artworks also becomes about the time-based experience of the audience, not just as spectators but as actors – to a degree. However, in improvisational theatre, participation is more strongly woven into the

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[67] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.8.
[68] *Austentatious*, 2021, https://www.austentatiousimpro.com, (accessed 17 May 2021).
[69] Steve Steen, 2013.
[70] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.8.
[71] Claire Bishop, 2012, p.41.

creative process and is also about proving authenticity, providing unrehearsed material and the perception of challenge by the audience, as opposed to how the performers experience it.

In the 1980s, performance art turned towards the media and theatre, and 'came to fill the gap between entertainment and theatre and in certain instances actually revitalized theatre and opera'.[72] It is also around that time that *Whose Line Is It Anyway*, the television programme which brought improvisational comedy to the masses, was created. The show based itself on existing improvisation games and featured established improvisers as well as actors and comedians, who benefitted from an exposure which sent TV audiences back to comedy clubs like the Comedy Store.[73]

One of the main differences between performance art and improvisational theatre is that performance art 'might be performed only once or repeated several times, with or without a prepared script , spontaneously improvised, or rehearsed over many months.[74] Improvisational theatre is not rehearsed as a rule, although there is an amount of preparation around choosing games or the underlying structure of the show. The created content, however, is fully spontaneous, and the aim remains to create stories, albeit ephemeral ones. Nevertheless, improvisational theatre fully inscribes itself in the artistic culture of its time, when other media began to put the emphasis on showing the process, drawing the audience in and exporting art to various media and 'alternative spaces'.

iii. Bringing Life and Awareness to Acting

Returning to the world of theatre, improvisation has been an important part of an actor's work and training for centuries. The earliest recognised use of improvisation in theatre dates back to the Commedia dell'Arte, during the Italian Renaissance.[75] The Commedia troupes based their plays on stock characters such as Harlequin, the archetypal comedy servant. These plays were based on a predefined plot outline, and each actor was assigned a particular character to play. They would then improvise the dialogues in front of the audience in accordance with the

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[72] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.153.
[73] Steve Steen, 2013.
[74] Roselee Goldberg, 1988, p.8.
[75] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p. 16.

personality of their character.[76] This brought more spontaneity, a life-like character to the plays. Jacques Lecoq describe the Commedia dell'arte as 'an art of childhood [which] moves swiftly from one situation to another and from one state to the next. Harlequin is capable of passing in an instant from tears at the death of Pantalone to delight that his soup is ready. This means that the commedia is a cruel territory, but also one which offers fabulous opportunities for play'.[77] It is a form of theatre which highlights and amplifies real life human emotions, made more relatable by the spontaneity of the performance. We can see similarities between this way of improvising and embodying a character within a set plot and modern times improvisational theatre, in which characters often drive the emergence of the plot[78]. This places more importance on the creative, rather than re-enactive, work of the performers, who bring their own experience to their craft.

Closer to our times, Constantin Stanislavski used improvisation as a 'rehearsal and training device'.[79] He notably devised 'proto-improvisation', a 'projection of oneself into a role' which extends beyond the rehearsal space and into life and allows performers to 'pick their own "pre-expressive" shifts'.[80] He wrote that 'nature is a better guide to a living organism than the conscious mind and well-known famous "acting techniques"'.[81] To him, 'the key to unlocking this organismic nature lay, not in the deliberate calculation of an external manifestation of a character's behaviour but, rather, in an analysis of, and commitment to, the character's inner goals'.[82] What this reveals is the ability of an actor to devote his attention to his inner experience and feelings as one motor of his performance. Most importantly, it is about a connection with the goals of the character. The actor put themselves into the situation of the character. This is Active Analysis, in which:

> Instead of first memorizing lines, actors explore the interactive dynamics
> of a story by means of improvisations […]. Active Analysis
> paradoxically steps away from a text in order to learn it. It is *analysis*

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[76] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p. 28.
[77] Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body (Le Corps Poétique), Teaching Creative Theatre*, trans: David Brady, 3rd edition, London: Bloomsbury, 2020, p.118.
[78] Steve Steen, 2013.
[79] Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, 2007, p. 20.
[80] Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, 2007, p. 20.
[81] Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares,* London: Bloomsbury, 2008, p. 128.
[82] Tom Scholte, "Proto-cybernetics in the Stanislavski System of acting", *Kybernetes, vol. 44*, 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283520291_Proto-cybernetics_in_the_Stanislavski_System_of_acting , (accessed 20 May 2021).

> because actors analyse the play by exploring its interactive options through their [improvisation]. It is *active* because, from the first rehearsal to the last performance, actors are on their feet, actively engaging with each other and with the text. Active Analysis is also *holistic* because the [improvisations] help actors activate all aspects of themselves simultaneously—mind, body, and spirit. Thus, Active Analysis produces dynamic performances and actors who are flexible, spontaneous, and imaginative.[83]

This veers away from typical table-based script analysis. What is key in this description in the idea of activating mind, body and spirit in the pursuit of spontaneity. In the context of this thesis, it shows the importance of considering all the mental, neurological, creative processes at play in improvisational theatre. Indeed, if there is an activation of various levels of awareness in actors and improvisers, analysing those levels in details will give us insight into what makes an improviser's skills and ability to embrace spontaneity to the extent of not needing to rely on text at all.

Stanislavski's approach to acting can be described as 'psychophysical'[84]. […] 'Psychophysical acting' and the 'psychophysiology of creativity', were designed 'to enable the actor to be in 'the creative state', to achieve the 'creative sense of the self' in each and every performance, fully experiencing and embodying the role'.[85] On that subject, Stanislavsky writes:

> Being creative is above all the total concentration of the whole mind and body. It includes not only the eye and the ear but all our five senses. Besides the body and thoughts, it includes intelligence, will, feeling, memory, and imagination. During creative work our entire spiritual and physical nature must be focused on what is happening in the character's soul.[86]

This implies knowledge that resides not only in the brain, but also in the body and environment of the actor, a full, both inward and outward focus. This is very important in improvisational theatre as well, where awareness, both internal and external, is essential to creating material spontaneously.

Michael Chekhov, one of Stanislavski's pupils, also used improvisation in his

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[83] "Active Analysis", *Sharon Marie Carnicke*, https://sharoncarnicke.com/active-analysis/, (accessed 28 May 2021).
[84] Rose Whyman, "Explanations and Implications of 'Psychophysical' Acting", *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol.32, no.2, May 2016, p.158.
[85] Rose Whyman, 2016, p.158.
[86] Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. and ed. Jean Benedetti, London: Routledge, 2008, p. 258.

work as a tool to develop personal, spatial and imaginative awareness.[87] Improvisation was also guided by pre-performance decisions and Chekhov encouraged his actors to engage in a process of imaginary, 'real-time' interaction with their character, to meet them, to have a dialogue with them.[88]

> This event and the ability to create it belong to what Michael Chekhov calls the Creative Individuality of the actor, and is not directly tied to his personality. This Creative Individuality allows the artist actor to use parts of themselves that are not just the smaller, meaner, more banal elements that make up their daily life, but rather parts of their unconscious, where dwell more universal and archetypal images.

There are similarities between Creative Individuality and Creative Analysis, notably, in their focus on subconscious processes. Knowledge, in those approaches, resides in the entire body. Creative individuality, in particular, retrieves knowledge from long-term memory, where 'archetypal' images constructed over a lifetime reside, and this knowledge helps set the scene for the inner encounter with the character. To then externalise this encounter and bring it to life in a way that is spontaneous, Chekhov uses 'psychological gestures':

> 'Psychological gestures' is a concept designed by Chekhov to help the actor find his/her particular role. This involves the actor externalising an inner want or trait from the character in a gesture which will then affect the performance on a subconscious level later via the physical memory. If you're playing the hero, maybe externalising "brave" or "kind" in one fluid motion before your performance will snap your mind-frame into the character.[89]

The actor's knowledge goes from long-term memory to conscious deliberation, to automatic embodiment: it travels from the mind to the body. This centres skill on the performer, which is another crucial aspect of improvisational theatre, because it means that actors/performers *can* have full creative control. Making a deliberate, expert choice to externalise a character trait is one way to start a form of improvisation, in the form of a pre-performance decision.

The idea of life and acting being linked (whether an actor tries to use their life as material or tries to assign their character a life of their own) is reminiscent of Augusto Boal's thoughts of *metaxis*, the ability to exist in two different worlds at

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[87] Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, 2007, p. 22.
[88] "Michael Chekhov Technique", *Michael Chekhov Acting Studio,*
[89] "Michael Chekhov's Technique", *Cours Florent*, 2019, https://www.coursflorent.education/news/chekhov-technique , (accessed 20 May 2021).

once, in this case, the real world and the performance world. Boal's 'theatre is conceived as a form of reflexivity', 'doubling or splitting of the self into observer and observed'.[90] Performers, thus, observe real life, incorporate it into their art and are the subject of the audience's gaze in doing so. Importantly, Boal explores this duality further, believing that, 'all human relations, especially those across difference, should be dialogues.'[91] This bridges the gap between the observer and the observed. They are not opposite sides, they interact. They are aware of each other. And this interaction 'requires listening, and respect for difference'.[92] This *metaxis* which enables life and performance to interact, as well as audience and performers, applies to improvisational theatre, in which improvisers not only have to allow part of themselves to be exposed, but also entertain a strong connection with their audience, a true dialogue indeed, which is part and parcel of the *experience* of the improvised event. Spectators also have more involvement, as they do in improvisational theatre, through this experience and invitation to make contributions.

Improvisation inscribes itself in the theatrical context of its time, not only via its similarities to other artistic movements, but also because it follows a natural progression from uses of improvisation as training and rehearsal techniques. Improvisation can be guided by pre-performance decisions made to become automatic, subconscious choices. It is also guided by knowledge which can be subconscious, automatic, as well as deliberate choices, and expert decisions. Therefore, actors can move away from scripts and rehearsals and trust in their spontaneous, creative ability, and give themselves the right to pick a character, their attitude and intentions, and allow this character to exist, evolve, react to their environment and generate a story. This is what the form of improvisational theatre is built upon.

iv. Lecoq and Clowning

Lecoq's work on improvisation also bears similarities with British contemporary improvisational theatre. Lecoq states that the teacher's role when

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[90] Andy McLaverty-Robinson, "Augusto Boal: Aesthetics and Human Becoming", *Ceasefire* Magazine, 2016, https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/augusto-boal-aesthetics-human/, (accessed 20 May 2021).
[91] Andy McLaverty-Robinson, 2016.
[92] Andy McLaverty-Robinson, 2016.

actors improvise is to make sure that 'the driving force is not *what* should be played, but *how* it should be played'.[93] The focus is on the process over the content. This idea of teacher/director ensuring the quality of the performance while allowing the performers to create the material is similar to Keith Johnstone's description of his role as director during the performances of Theatre Machine, an improvisational theatre troupe he created. Johnstone would guide the performance at regular intervals before taking a step back and allowing performers to continue with the improvisation.[94]

Lecoq's work on clowning is specifically relevant to a study of the performance of failure in improvisational theatre. Concerned with *how* clowns make us laugh, he explored the impact of failure in performance and encouraged his students to experiment with ways to fail *correctly*.[95] One of the first principles of clowning that is in essence the same as accepting offers in improvisational theatre is the idea that 'the clown, who is ultrasensitive to others, reacts to everything that happens to him.[96] In improvisational theatre, accepting offers happens via an awareness of every single element of the improviser's environment: verbal cues, physical cues, spatial awareness, audience reactions… The notion of 'ultrasensitivity' is a perfect fit for both clowning and improvisation. Performers in both media bounce off everything – sometimes quite literally in the case of clowning, although many improvisers have been known to get very physical – and must accept the possibility of creating material out of any cue or offer they receive. One of the most interesting parts of this awareness is the awareness of the audience, which is also relevant to improvisational theatre. In clowning, 'you play *with* your audience'.[97] 'Their reactions influence [the clown's] playing'.[98] Lecoq asks his students 'to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can, and to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience.[99] Crucially, there is a call and response relationship between performers and their audience, a feedback loop which guides the performance and measures its quality.

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[93] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, pp.118-119.
[94] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.74.
[95] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.152.
[96] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.155.
[97] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.157.
[98] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.157.
[99] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.159.

Stemming from this idea of guidance, there are rules that regulate *how* to react to offers. In clowning, Lecoq believes that 'the actor mustn't react before he has any motive to do so'.[100] This implies a conscious awareness and deliberate, expert deliberation. Being aware of everything does not mean that everything can be included in the creative process, nor should it be used without reflection. Interestingly, this is also the case in improvisational theatre, where spontaneity, although omnipresent, nevertheless coexists with expertise and conscious choice. In clowning, the choice *to* fail does not mean there is no choice as to *how* to fail.

Failure of course is also intimately linked to vulnerability. Clowning performances that play on failure also embrace vulnerability. Lecoq describes how audiences laugh at the clown's 'weaknesses', 'at the person underneath, stripped bare for all to see'.[101] Clowning and failure exposes the performer and in that moment of seeing and being seen, comedy arises. And indeed, much like improvisers bring elements of who they are to the stage, 'the clown doesn't exist aside from the actor performing it'.[102] Lecoq's philosophy of clowning is very similar to improvisational theatre in that respect: it is based on a performance that feels personal, that draws audiences in through vulnerability and exposure.

Finally, let us return to the idea of *how* to fail, which introduces one of the pillars of this study and one of improvisational theatre's biggest strength. There are many ways to fail in a way that makes audiences laugh. One example is the 'pretentious flop': 'when the clown performs a pathetic turn while believing it to be brilliant: the greatest turn of the century is announced and, when he comes on, all he can do is to juggle with three balls'.[103] This is not so much true failure to perform as failure to meet expectations that were careful set by the performers. The key here is that the performer never does truly fail, but plays on contrast and performed innocence, in the same way it would be comedic to announce to our friends that we purchased a Rembrandt painting and that upon unveiling, a child's drawing is revealed, yet we are still convinced it is a masterpiece.

Lecoq describes another aspect of failure in clowning:

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[100] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.155.
[101] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.154.
[102] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.154.
[103] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.160.

> [the clown] has to mess up something he knows how to do, that is to say an exploit. I ask each student to choose something which only he, out of the whole class, can manage. […] The virtuosity of the action is unimportant; it is only an exploit if no one else is able to do it. Clown work consists in establishing a relationship between the exploit and the flop. Ask a clown to do a somersault: he fails. Give him a kick in the backside and he does it without realising. In both cases he makes us laugh. If he never succeeds, we are tipping over into the tragic.[104]

What is particularly important at the core of this statement is the link between virtuosity and failure. The level of virtuosity of the action is granted by how close to true failure it has come: in essence, recovery makes the exploit (which, in French, means a remarkable, exceptional feat). The idea is to flirt with failure, but to show mastery in the end. What this achieves is a magnifying effect. The audience's perception of the action is warped, intensified: the act *feels* more virtuosic than it truly is, because it looked much harder to achieve than it really was. What I will argue in this thesis is that this is the exact process improvisers follow to achieve virtuosity and artistry.

Lecoq's approach to clowning frames my study of improvisational theatre by introducing some important concepts in this thesis: having creative control over plots, incorporating the self into the performance, using failure – real or performed – as the backbone of a successful performance. It shows the relevance of studying improvisational theatre as a medium that elevates failure to an artistic choice.

b. A Brief History of British Improvisational Theatre

i. The Emergence of Improvisational Theatre

Improvisational theatre derives from and furthers the history of established uses of improvisation. In this thesis, I place a specific focus on improvisational theatre, partly to show how it encompasses and magnifies past uses of improvisation. However, I mostly want to show that it has taken all those uses further than before and now deserves to be studied as a singular artform that has turned means into an end. While this thesis focuses on British improvisational theatre, I will start by mentioning the development of improvisational theatre in the US, as its development influenced a great deal of British improvisational theatre. From the late 1930s, Viola Spolin started using theatre games in order to help young immigrants integrate into

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[104] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.156.

the community.[105] These games were designed to be easy to understand for children who did not speak English as their first language and introduced an element of playfulness to theatre so that these children would act without feeling self-conscious.[106] Spolin's book, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, is deemed the bible of American improvisation.[107] In this work, she establishes from the first chapter that 'we learn through experience and experiencing', that learning is an active process, and that using theatre to teach is a way to get the children involved physically, intuitively and intellectually. She states that intuition is a neglected element of learning and she based her teaching around this assumption.[108] In 1939, under Spolin's direction, the 'first recorded incident of audience inspired improvisation in American theatre' occurred, when she asked the audience for suggestions in order to guide theatre games.[109]

It is worth noting that vaudevillian Dudley Riggs also used audience suggestions in his act with the Brave New Workshop troupe in the 1950s.[110] He did so to deal with 'hostile audiences' in order to deflect their anger and give them some responsibility, something which improvisers nowadays still do as a means to not only provide original material, but also prove that the show is indeed improvised. Riggs described what he did as 'instant theatre', but it is nonetheless a form of improvisation.[111]

Meanwhile, Spolin's work would be taken up by her son, Paul Sills, and his friend David Shepherd, who started The Compass Players, 'the first fully improvisational theatre in the world' in 1955, in Chicago.[112] The Compass was founded upon 'a symbiotic actor-audience relationship and ensemble-based satire created through improvisation'.[113] In short, they would create scenes and sketches, often political, using suggestions from the audience. Together with Del Close, Paul

[105] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p.33.
[106] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p.33
[107] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p.34.
[108] Viola Spolin, 1998, p.3.
[109] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p.34.
[110] Mary Anne Grossman, "Clowning around with Brave New Workshop's Dudley Riggs in New Memoir", *Twin Cities*, 2017. https://www.twincities.com/2017/04/13/clowning-around-with-brave-new-workshops-dudley-riggs-in-new-memoir/, (accessed 6 December 2019).
[111] "A Potted History of Improvisation", *National Theatre*. https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/potted-history-improvisation, (accessed 10 October 2019).
[112] Matthew N. Fotis, 2005, p. 35.
[113] Mike Thomas, The Second City Unscripted: Revolution and Revelation at the World-Famous Comedy Theatre, New-York: Villard Books, 2009, p.4.

Sills would then create Second City in 1959.[114] Their original aim was to produce satirical and political comedy.[115] They used the same principle as The Compass did. However, only 'the post-intermission portion was improvised using audience suggestions'.[116] The material thus gathered would then be re-worked as the basis of future shows. Second City's improvisation workshops launched the career of many a comedian, such as Mike Myers, who would later contribute to the development of improvisation in Britain.[117]

What emerges from those first improvisational theatre explorations is a strong relationship with audiences in improvisational theatre, as well as elements of vulnerability (having to deal with hostile audiences). It shows the importance of including audience participation in a study of vulnerability in improvisational theatre. I must also note that Spolin's work, although essential in framing a study of improvisation, mainly focuses on teaching and does not offer much material to apply to a study of vulnerability. As such, I will not be relying on it a great deal in the main body of this thesis.

ii. Keith Johnstone

In parallel to Spolin's and Sills's work, though unaware of them, Keith Johnstone made his own discovery of the power of improvisation in education, then in theatre, when he started working at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956.[118] He made observations about the benefits of improvisation in the creative process. For Johnstone, what prevents people from being creative and using their full potential is that they anticipate problems in order to avoid them and are therefore never spontaneous.[119] In his book, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Johnstone writes about his discoveries, gives his own terminology of theatre and improvisation and describes his improvisation exercises. His findings fashioned the way in which improvisers work in Britain, and many British improvisers nowadays consider *Impro*

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[114] Mike Thomas, 2009, p.5.
[115] Mike Thomas, 2009, p.6.
[116] Mike Thomas, 2009, p.56.
[117] "Players History", *Comedy Store Players*. http://www.comedystoreplayers.com/history.html, (accessed 26 May 2013).
[118] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.76.
[119] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.31.

as a 'Bible', just like Spolin's work in America.[120] While his and Spolin's work are similar in the way they discovered the benefits of improvisation with a teaching context, Spolin's approach had more of a design, initially, to free students socially. Johnstone, on the other hand, wanted to help them be freer creatively.

In the 1960s, Johnstone also created the first improvisational theatre group in England: Theatre Machine. The four members were Ben Benison, Roddy Maude-Roxby, Richard Morgan, and Anthony 'Tony' Trent.[121] Johnstone acted as director, guiding the improvisation at regular intervals, and they toured in 1966 and 1967, in 'hundreds of schools and colleges including Oxford, Cambridge, and over 120 schools in Wales doing public classes/demonstrations'.[122] They would carry on touring various in various venues until Johnstone moved to Canada where he created the Loose Moose company, which performed at the Pumphouse with a similar format to Theatre Machine, with Johnstone again as a director.[123] He also created *Theatresports*, a competitive comedy improvisation format in which two teams of improvisers compete to perform the funniest scene. The format was copied by *ComedySportz* in America.[124]

In 1985, Johnstone came back to England where he created *Lifegame*, originally called *How It was.*[125] The format bases each performance on an interviewee's life story.[126] It was performed by the theatre company Improbable – founded in 1996 – from 1998, with a few differences, including removing the part of the director.[127] Improbable 'cofounded in 1996 by Phelim McDermott, Lee Simpson, and Julian Crouch', 'has become known for their innovative, visually stunning projects that often combine impro and storytelling with music, masks, and puppetry'.[128] Their work, influenced by Johnstone's but having taken more creative liberties, is different from the more well-known branch of improvisational theatre,

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[120] Neil Mullarkey, 2013.

[121] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, *Keith Johnstone: A Critical Biography*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p.74.

[122] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.74.

[123] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.124.

[124] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.152.

[125] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.152.

[126] "Formats", *Keith Johnstone*. https://www.keithjohnstone.com/formats, (accessed 2 August 2018).

[127] "Phelim talks about Lifegame", Improbable, 2013. http://www.improbable.co.uk/downloads/phelim-talks-about-lifegame-2013/download/PHELIM_TALKS_ABOUT_LIFEGAME.pdf, (accessed 6 April 2014).

[128] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.181.

comedy improvisation or impro(v). It offers a different insight into the genre and a nuance in the uses of vulnerability which I shall be studying.

Although it tends to be studied as part of theatre as therapy or applied theatre, Playback Theatre, created by Jo Salas and Jonathan Fox in the 1970s, is very close to the concept of *Lifegame*, with perhaps a gentler form of re-enactment, aimed at exploring problems and stories from the audience.[129] Again, this is a slightly different exploration of vulnerability from the one I am interested in. Nonetheless, it shows that spectators can be involved very personally in improvisational theatre.

iii. Britain's Improv Scene: An Alternative History

While Johnstone is credited with the development of improvisational theatre in England, other performers and acts also emerged in between the 1960s and the late 1980s. The work of Steve Steen and Jim Sweeney, who discovered improvisational theatre in the 70s, doing workshops, was for instance pivotal in bringing the form back to the cabaret circuit, following Dudley Rigg's circus inspired 'instant theatre'.[130] They started performing in 1972, devising their first Edinburgh Fringe show through improvisation, and in 1974, they started Omelette Broadcasting with Justin Case and Peter Wear.[131] The troupe relied on asking the audience to write suggestions for scenes, which they would put in a fish bowl. They would draw one at random and act it out in front of the audience.[132] As mentioned previously, Sweeney and Steen were the first to adapt improvisation to the cabaret circuit, which meant the games became shorter and faster-paced, performed as variety numbers.[133]

Meanwhile, Canadian comedian Mike Myers arrived in the United Kingdom. Myers, as we saw, came from Second City. He met with British comedian Neil Mullarkey, and Kit Hollerbach, a San Francisco comedian living in Britain. Myers and Hollerbach taught Mullarkey, as well as Dave Cohen, the improvisation games they had learnt in America. They were joined by comedian Paul Merton and in 1985, they performed their first show at the Comedy Store in London, as the Comedy Store

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[129] Anthony Frost and Yarrow, Ralph, 2007, p.114-115.
[130] Jim Sweeney, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2014.
[131] Steve Steen, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2013.
[132] Jim Sweeney, interviewed by Lee Simpson, in *The Sweeney, The Life and Work of Jim Sweeney*, Seeta Indrani (dir.), 2010.
[133] Jim Sweeney, 2014.

Players.[134] They based their shows on improvisation games, with one long-form part. That same year, Steve Steen and Jim Sweeney started another improvisational theatre act called the Rupert Pupkin Collective. The Rupert Pupkin Collective included such guests as Josie Lawrence or Richard Vranch, later to become part of the Comedy Store Players.[135]

The Comedy Store Players also played an important part in the development of improvisational theatre in Britain. Having been performing since 1985, their shows regularly include guests from the improvisation and stand-up circuit, deputising an absent Player. Today, the members of the troupe are Josie Lawrence, Paul Merton, Richard Vranch, Neil Mullarkey, Lee Simpson, Andy Smart, and Jim Sweeney as an honorary member.[136] They are a well-established landmark in the improvisation circuit, although they have stayed very much in line with the teachings of Johnstone and Spolin, making up an almost 'traditional' type of improvisation.

Nowadays, several troupes experiment with different formats and themes, collaborate with other companies and participate in festivals. 2012 saw the first edition of the *ImproFest* in London, which gathered 18 different improvisation shows from all over the country.[137] In Bristol, improvisation troupes have created the Bristol Improv Network, as a way to collaborate and promote each other, which seems to demonstrate a sense of community within those troupes.[138] On the internet, in parallel to the aforementioned Hoopla theatre's website, the Crunchy Frog website is dedicated to improvisational theatre news all around Britain (shows, workshops, troupes…) and also includes a forum on which performers or fans can interact. Steve Steen and Stephen Frost created *The Actor's Nightmare, An Improvised Play* in 2012: a fully improvised play which does not rely on any suggestion or preparation. The Austentatious company improvises plays in the style of a Jane Austen story, complete with costumes, and *Shaken, Not Stirred*, is an improvised James Bond show currently holding residency at the Hoopla theatre.[139] The formats that have

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[134] William Cook, "The Comedy Store Players", *The Comedy Store, the Club that Changed British Comedy*, London: Little, Brown, 2001, p.138.
[135] Jim Sweeney, 2010.
[136] "Players History".
[137] *Improfestuk*. http://improfestuk.co.uk/index.html, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[138] *The Improv Network*. https://www.theimprovnetwork.org/theatre-profile/?theatrekey=156, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[139] "We wish all our friends and fans a happy new year" , 30 December 2019. https://twitter.com/JamesBondImprov/status/1211735013139648514, (accessed 20 January 2020).

developed throughout the years, although always anchored in traditional ways of doing to a degree, have become freer, less concerned with rules and more concerned with entertainment and reaching out to wider audiences.

Other comedians such as Robert Broderick enabled improvisational theatre to include other artforms such as hip-hop. This changes the structure of the form slightly, bringing in a different improvisation tradition related to the world of music and not just theatre, but at its core, his work still relies on comedy and story-telling and takes place in the same venues. I study Broderick's work in this thesis over the work of companies such as *Showstoppers*, because his experience as a performer and his ability to reflect on his practice highlights many of the processes I write about such as fear, courage or virtuosity. That is not to say that improvised musicals are irrelevant to this study, but rather, that Broderick's work generated more material that could be used in this work. It also made it relevant to bring in studies related to the field of music, which I do more specifically in the final chapter on virtuosity.

iv. Beyond the Stage

There also seems to be a will to pass on and discuss the principles of improvisation. From the time of Keith Johnstone, who used his improvisation exercises to teach drama students, different workshops have appeared to teach performers the skills and techniques of improvisation.[140] Several troupes run their own workshops, which skilled performers or amateurs can access. The Comedy Store Players, for example, ran their own workshops in their early days and created the Improvisation Academy in 2013.[141] They also announced a 6-week improv comedy course in December 2019, to take place in early 2020.[142] I have also written of the Hoopla theatre's workshop earlier. Improbable regularly organise 'Devoted and Disgruntled' debates, some of which are about improvisational theatre.[143] In 2013, a live discussion on the theme 'What's radical about improvisational theatre' was also

Austentatious, 2021.
[140] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.27.
[141] "The Comedy Store Players", *BBC Radio 4*, Neil Mullarkey (writer and presenter), 1995. CD recording.
[142] "The Comedy Store Players Improv Masterclass", *The Comedy Store*. https://thecomedystore.co.uk/london/show/the-comedy-store-players-improv-masterclass/, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[143] Nathan Keates, et al., Monthly D&D Satellite - What are we going to do about improvisation – Reports, 2012, PDF.

broadcast online, with speakers Phelim McDermott, Jonathan Kay, Katy Schutte, Dylan Emery and Chris Johnston, all improvisers and creators having experimented with improvisation and used it in their work.[144] These initiatives attempt to broaden the discussion around improvisational theatre, although, sadly, it still seems to garner an audience made of practitioners and fans.

What introduced improvisational theatre to the masses is its transposition to the media. Improvisation made its debut on radio and television in Britain from the late 1980s, and this, in no small respect, may also have contributed to its growing popularity. These shows constitute a database of scenes that can be useful in my demonstration, as onstage improvisation is rarely recorded or documented. Television series *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* was created by Dan Patterson and Mark Leveson in 1989. Originally devised for radio (only one series was broadcast in 1988), the show soon got its own television pilot in 1989, running for ten series in the UK and another nine in the US, and was to be a major breakthrough for improvisation comedy.[145] The show, inspired by the work of Sweeney and Steen as well as the Comedy Store Players, was improvised in principle but also heavily edited. Indeed, only the best games were kept, and performers were often asked to play the same game several times so that it would be funnier[146]. Steen, who appeared as a contestant in six episodes, stated that it felt 'clinical' and 'sanitised'.[147] As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, these statements are important to bear in mind when using recordings of the show as material for a study of improvisational theatre.

Improvised radio shows such as *The Masterson Inheritance* (1993-1995) wrested control from producers back in the hands of performers, but there is also still a doubt as to the true spontaneous nature of the show, as well as its ability to replace a live spectating experience.[148] For Steve Steen, 'the problem with radio is, it is a bit like performing magic or doing ventriloquism on radio: you can never be guaranteed that it is real.'[149] Again, this means some caution must be had in using such material.

Panel shows today, be it on television or on the radio, can be said to be partly

[144] *What's Radical About Improvisation.* https://vimeo.com/110489076, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[145] Jim Sweeney, 2010.
[146] Steve Steen, 2013.
[147] Jim Sweeney, 2010.
[148] "The Masterson Inheritance", *BBC Radio 4*, Phil Clark (producer), 1993.
[149] Steve Steen, 2013.

improvised, as the panellists are not issued with a script or a definite way to answer the questions. They may be issued the questions in advance, but not the answers and it is their responsibility to decide whether or not they want to prepare their answers word for word. [150] Some panel shows such as *Just A Minute*, in which the contestants have one minute to talk about a randomly selected subject without hesitating or repeating the same word twice, can clearly be seen as a form of improvisation. The panellists are unprepared, and the format does not allow for much thought.

Another recent attempt at using the media was *140 Characters TV*. The show was live-streamed on the internet in 2012 and the viewers could provide suggestions to the comedians via Twitter.[151] This concept seems to be closer to improvisational theatre. Indeed, as it was broadcast live, there was no doubt as to its truly spontaneous nature. The innovation was in the use of a broader scope of suggestions, although, having personally taken part in the experiment, I have noticed that most of the suggestions were provided by people I knew to already be improvisation aficionados. Therefore, the show attracted no new audience. Participants less familiar with improvisation could also have wondered about potential plants. (This, however, could be the case during a stage show as well.) Ultimately, any material drawn from a recorded improvised performance, *a fortiori* a televised or radio one, is to be used carefully and its inability to fully mirror first-hand experience acknowledged. Nonetheless, the examples above show the evolution and widening of the appeal of improvisational theatre. What the uses of improvisation described so far show is that improvisation is omnipresent, and that a specific study of improvisational theatre could be applied to improvisation as a creative device in other forms of theatre at least.

c. The Formats and Rules of Improvisational Theatre

i. Improvisation Formats

Improvisational theatre may not be rehearsed, but it is not deprived of rules and frames. There are rules and formats that were developed over the years by Viola Spolin or Keith Johnstone which aim at making it easier for improvisers to create a

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[150] Paul Merton, interviewed by Melvyn Bragg, in *The Southbank Show, season 23, episode 1*, Mischa Scorer (dir.), 26 September 1999.
[151] *140 Characters TV*. https://twitter.com/140CharactersTV, (accessed 20 January 2020).

scene. There are too many of these rules and formats to discuss in the main body of this thesis, therefore, I shall describe them in this introduction, so the reader is familiar with them. I will introduce some of these rules and formats in this section and will return to them in more depth in the following chapters.

Before I go any further, it is important to establish what we understand by a scene. According to Halpern, Del Close and Johnson in *Truth in Comedy, The manual of improvisation*, a scene contains 'a few key elements' such as characters and setting, but the most important element is a 'relationship', that has to be established between these elements, such as a doctor and a patient (relationship between characters), or a student entering the wrong room (relationship between a character and the environment). Without these relationships, the scene cannot move on, it needs a disruption, a twist, to do so (the second example is a twist in itself: the space/character relationship is disrupted by the realisation the student has entered the wrong room).[152] Scenes are the base of improvisational theatre; they distinguish it from the non-theatrical uses of improvisation I described earlier.

I will start by making a distinction between non-competitive improvisation and competitive improvisation. In both formats, the aim is to provide entertainment, usually with a comedic intent. In the latter, two teams of performers compete to create the best and funniest scenes. The main difference between these formats is the displacement of vulnerability. In non-competitive improvisation, the failure of a scene lays on the performers' shoulders. Competitive formats, however, were designed to take the pressure off the improvisers. This is the principle on which the shows of *TheatreSports* – created by Johnstone – were based: '*Theatresports* was developed as a training tool for improvisers, allowing them to fail onstage while the audience take it out on the judges who give low scores rather than the performers'.[153] Competitive improvisation uses 'short-form', which I will now define.

Short-form and long-form are two other forms of improvisation. Short-form improvisation relies on short games – providing guiding lines for the improvisation – and are driven by suggestions from the audience. An example which would be easy to picture for the reader would be the game called "one word at a time". In this game,

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[152] Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim 'Howard' Johnson, 1994, p.81-82.
[153] Lee Simpson, "Format Theft", in Monthly D&D Satellite - What are we going to do about improvisation – Reports, 2012.

performers will act out a scene one word at a time, one after the other. The difficulty (and interest) of this game is that the improvisers need to say the first word that comes to mind, whilst listening to the others so the sentence makes sense. They need to work as a team, or the scene will not make any sense.[154]

Long-form improvisation, on the other hand, aims at creating an entire story. The suggestions from the audience are more minimal (a title, a few plot elements, a location…). There are however some predetermined structures that exist in order to guide the performers, the general principle being based on a series of improvised scenes with a story arc.[155] One of the most famous of these structures was devised by Del Close and is called the Harold. Halpern et al describe the Harold as follows: 'Harolds are composed of three basic elements: scenes (involving two or four players), games (usually involving the full company) and one-person monologs. Teams begin by asking for a suggestion from the audience. They then personalize the suggestion [and include it] in the opening game (which can take many different forms). After the opening, the players begin the first round by improvising scenes (three seems to be the standard number). These are followed by a game, and then the scenes return for further development. Another game follows, and the scenes are brought back for a third time, though not all scenes will return. The Harold can end with any of the scenes, or with another game[156].' Those scenes will be linked together by a story arc. Although the structure is set, there is definite creative freedom within it for a narrative to emerge.

Some shows, such as *The Actor's Nightmare,* do not even rely on suggestions or set structures, although they are not common. This provides the performers a huge deal of freedom to explore various themes. However, this does not mean that there is no freedom within other long-form structures to experiment with themes, subjects, or to incorporate a particular form of theatre, film or literature as a secondary structure. Sometimes, these themes and genres can come from the audience (the Comedy Store Players ask the audience to suggest a genre in which to improvise a musical in the second half of their show). Sometimes, the genre is set in advance by the performers. Long-form improvisation, for instance, can be coupled to opera (as do the Impropera

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[154] Richard Vranch, 2013.
[155] Richard Vranch, 2013.
[156] Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson, 1994, p.133.

company), pantomime (the Suggestibles organise an improvised pantomime every Christmas season) or literature (Austentatious).[157] *Lifegame*, which I mentioned earlier, is also part of the long-form category. In essence, game-based improvisation follows less varied a set of structures, while long-form improvisation allows for more creativity around concepts. Game-based is usually designed to provide fast-paced comedy, whereas long-form can be as comedic or as serious as the improvisers allow (or as circumstances dictate).

There are very few improvisation formats which do not rely on active participation of the audience. And even in the case of formats which do not ask for suggestions, a study of a live, spontaneous performance cannot be separated from the people who witness it in the same space and moment. By including audience participation, some freedom is given to the audience: to engage – or not – more closely with the performance and performers without necessarily having to be a creative force. Improvisers also use participation as a means to prove that a show is indeed improvised, by asking for suggestions or occasionally making audience members take part in scenes.[158] Overall, participation and its various degrees are part and parcel of the formats of improvisational theatre and can also serve to define them. As such, it is essential to include participation in a study of improvisational theatre.

ii. The Creative Rules of Improvisation

If there is one rule of improvisational theatre that all improvisers agree on it is, aptly, "agree and add", or "yes and". This is what Johnstone calls 'accepting offers'. He defines offers as follows:

> I call anything that an actor does an 'offer'. Each offer can either be accepted, or blocked. If you yawn, your partner can yawn too, and therefore *accept* your offer. A block is anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner's premise. If it develops the action it isn't a block[159].

An offer can be anything, from a wink to a light flickering. It is then up to performers to either build up on it, let it go in exchange for another offer or willingly and openly

[157] *Impropera*. https://www.impropera.co.uk/, (accessed 20 January 2020).
The Suggestibles. https://www.thesuggestibles.co.uk/, (accessed 20 January 2020).
[158] Neil Mullarkey, 2013.
[159] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.97.

reject it. The latter two are what Johnstone calls 'blocking'. He sees it as a negative action which is not conducive to the development of a scene. To him, accepting offers has more benefits as it presents performers with an infinite source of material and the impossibility of failure, as even 'accidents' or disruptions become part of the scene.[160]

One incidence which occurred during a Comedy Store Players representation illustrates this idea.[161] The game being played was 'Foreign Expert.' In this game, one improviser (then Steve Steen) played an expert who can only speak a foreign language, while another improviser (Andy Smart) translates for them. Steen had to be giving a lecture in Montenegrin about hunting and taxi drivers. Smart translated Steen's gibberish to: 'It gives me great pleasure to stand here on this stage tonight to talk to you about two of my favourite subjects: hunting – that could be any animal at all…' At that moment, a member of the audience laughed very audibly in a high-pitched voice. Steen immediately mimed pointing a rifle at her before walking into the audience to find the origin of the animal-like noise. The audience laughed and cheered, appreciating that the scene had remained organic thanks to Steen's ability to accept the laugh as an offer.

This links to another one of Johnstone's ideas, which is that in order to notice all of the offers surrounding them, improvisers have to listen, to be constantly aware of their surroundings.[162] Improvisers must always assume that offers have been made and are already there to seize, rather than think of offers to make. If they start thinking ahead, they are not listening but rather, anticipating what could be instead of what is. Overall, all the ways of doing of improvisation gravitate around the idea of accepting offers and working collaboratively with other improvisers, trying not to be dominant over one another. Again, this suggests that improvisational theatre is not unique because it is devoid of rules and fully spontaneous, but rather, that the rules it relies on facilitate fast thinking and intuitive, yet expert creativity. The latter notion is particularly important, because it highlights where the improvisers' skills lie, and I will return to it in depth in the next chapter.

As I mentioned above, not accepting an offer is a block. Blocking can make

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[160] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p, p.100.
[161] *The Comedy Store Player*s, London, Comedy Store, 21 August 2016.
[162] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.99.

the improviser feel safe that they do not have to take a risk and it prevents any action from developing. It stretches out a moment of in-between, where a scene has started but is not going anywhere and this can be laborious to watch. There are other ways to subvert the rules. Improvisers mention 'pimping' – announcing another improviser's character before they walk in and making it something particularly difficult to play[163] – but also 'dimping' – which implies commenting or criticising what a performer is doing[164] – as well as 'upstaging' – pulling faces behind another performer, unbeknownst to them[165]. Eventually, they all have the same effect of blocking an action from developing and letting the audience see the actor behind the character. Indeed, they imply breaking the pace of the scene and making it so that focus is shifted from the theatricality of the improvisation to the internal politics of the troupe.

The artistry of improvisation resides in the composition, in collectively making up a story on the spot, with a time limit and incorporating whichever offers are available at the time, using the skills that are specific to improvisational theatre. While the rules above can seem quite rigid, there is room for transgression, and I shall return to this further on. For now, I shall note that to subvert rules intentionally yet in a way that is entertaining is an alternative skill, which is not taught in manuals and workshops, yet is common practice, particularly in improvisational comedy. I shall discuss the ways to break the rules, and the reasons for doing so, throughout the thesis.

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[163] Andy Smart, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2013.
[164] Neil Mullarkey, 2013.
[165] Steve Steen, 2013.

3. The Vulnerability of Spontaneous Creation

a. Introduction

This chapter examines the relationship between vulnerability and the creative process in theatrical improvisation. It also discusses how improvisers are able to learn and train to make expert decisions in order to overcome their feelings of vulnerability in the face of spontaneity. My aim is to provide a better understanding of the skills improvisers use to face and make sense of the apparent chaos of creative situations. I am offering a new dialogue between cognitive science and social psychology theories of uncertainty, theories of memory and the techniques of improvisational theatre.

Johnstone writes: "Good improvisers seem telepathic; everything looks prearranged. This is because they accept all offers made - which is something no 'normal' would do"[166]; he implies that the mastery of improvisation, what places improvisers above their audience, is in presenting a story which is polished and feels pre-written, but also that the improvisation creative process is fast, immediate, faster even than 'normal' and that improvisers operate somehow outside of human capabilities, communicating in ways the audience cannot understand. While this is true from the point of view of someone witnessing successful improvisation for the first time, it is possible to slow down this creative process and analyse it frame by frame, which is what Kahneman's work will allow me to do. I will argue that improvisers are subject to the same cognitive processes as every other human being but differ in the way they handle them. I will also argue that improvisers are not 'telepathic' but are able to communicate their intentions to others in complex non-verbal ways.

There appear to be three main elements that contribute to the vulnerability of the creative process in improvisational theatre: the chaos of offers; the complexity and flaws of the mental operations at stake; the inability to pause the story-telling to communicate creative intentions to others. The chaos of offers, to begin with, refers to the multitude of elements that improvisers have to sort through in the moment. Ken Robinson defines creativity as an 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to

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[166] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.99.

produce outcomes that are both original and of value.'[167] In the case of improvisation, the performers have to create something original on the spur of the moment, based on elements they can see, hear, or feel and bind together to produce a story. However, not all elements presented to improvisers make it into the developing story. This means that improvisers must make creative choices in the moment, a task which is highly vulnerable as they have very little time to make those decisions. Liane Gabora goes further and explains that uncertainty and chaos are essential elements of all creative tasks, and that each person uses their individual worldview to make sense of the chaos.[168] What is particularly important about this definition is the idea of 'making sense'. It implies that creativity is about problem solving, which is how Magerko et al described improvisation: 'real-time dynamic problem solving.'[169] The premise of a problem also implies vulnerability in not (yet) knowing its solution. Approaching the creative process as a problem is appropriate since solving a problem requires a logical thought process which can be demonstrated and, therefore, studied in detail.

The second notion that adds to the vulnerability of the creative process is that of the complexity and flaws of the mental operations that improvisers have to perform in order to solve the aforementioned problem of making creative decisions in the moment. This is where a neuroaesthetic approach becomes essential. On the one hand, there does exist a process similar to what Johnstone describes: a process that is complex, yet also intuitive, involving subconscious, automatic mental operations. This process could be said to be unpredictable, uncertain and, potentially, flawed. On the other hand, there must also be a process that requires the performer to pause and consider all creative options in answer to the offers presented to them in the moment. I will study how these processes coexist and affect each other. To make matters even more complex, Kahneman states that the human mind is intrinsically flawed in the way it deals with uncertainty, and rather than relying on absolute logic, it creates heuristics, subconscious shortcuts, to compensate for a lack of

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[167] Ken Robinson, et al., 1999, p.31.
[168] Liane Gabora, "Honing theory: A complex systems framework for creativity", *Nonlinear Dynamics, Psychology, and Life Sciences*, vol.21, no.1, 2016. Available from: Researchgate, (accessed 25 September 2017).
[169] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.

information.[170] This relates to a form of vulnerability which is also mentioned in Johnstone's work, in which he argues that we feel vulnerable in the face of creativity because we are aware of our potential for making 'wrong' decisions, and this affects our natural potential.[171] In this respect, I will argue that improvisers do not have to find the 'right' way, but rather *a* way, amongst several options, to be in the right mindset as well as ways to embrace imperfection in order to be creative, and this is achieved through training, learning, gaining expertise and collating a mental database of strategies and tools.

Finally, adding to this problem is also the issue of improvising collaboratively. Indeed, an improviser's individual worldview, as described by Gabora, seems limited when it comes to building on other performers' ideas in the moment, without pausing to communicate, individually and collectively. This implies a more implicit, empathetic form of communication, which becomes necessary in order to accept the offers made by other performers, in a way that contributes to the development of the scene. This relates to Johnstone's notion of 'telepathy', of non-verbal communication. Indeed, improvisers must be aware of the choices and offers of other performers, they must empathise with them, while combining their decisions with what their character would do. I will argue that we can also slow down this seemingly telepathic process in order to study how improvisers are able to communicate their creative decisions to others.

As well as contemporary improvisational theatre literature, notably the work of Keith Johnstone, this chapter relies on literature from several different fields: cognitive psychology, neuroscience, practice-based research theories and theatre studies. Amongst other works, I shall draw on Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Kahneman pioneered research in the heuristics of decision making under uncertainty and risk, two terms which are inherent to the notion of vulnerability.[172] He defines heuristics as shortcuts in assessing reality which distort our understanding of new information or prevent us from seeing beyond the obvious. I shall argue that in improvisation, this distortion can become an advantage when used as material to

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[170] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 1979, pp.263-291.
[171] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.17.
[172] Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 1972.
Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, 1974.
Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 1979.
Daniel Kahneman, 2012.

include in the performance, and shortens the communication process between improvisers. I will also refer to Magerko et al's study of the cognitive processes in improvisation.[173] Those works must be studied in relation to theories of memory and knowledge, so as to understand the complexity of the cognitive processes at work in improvisation. By doing so, we will be able to find out at which point in their cognitive, creative process, improvisers are able to make fast, yet intentional and expert decisions that build up a scene. I shall also refer to the work of Endel Tulving, which details different types of memories, as well as the work of Robin Nelson, who highlights types of knowledge, which are derived from use of memory.[174] The work of Bruce McConachie brings concepts of cognitive studies as well as theories of memory and creativity together with theatre studies in *Theatre and Mind.*[175] It helps us transpose the scientific concepts mentioned above to the context of improvisational theatre. Finally, the work of Susan Melrose on knowledge and expertise in the performing arts will inform our understanding of how improvisers are able to make expert choices in spite of, or through a state of feeling vulnerable.[176]

The first section of this chapter discusses the state of being vulnerable through the uncertainty of a spontaneous creative process and the cognitive processes at stake in spontaneous creativity. I will analyse the ways in which these processes can cause people to make mistakes, as well as approach notions of cognitive ease, learning, training and expertise, which are essential in overcoming or avoiding those mistakes. In the second half, I shall study how improvisers apply these notions to their art, the strategies they develop through training and learning in order to overcome the chaos of creativity and make expert decisions, individually and collaboratively.

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[173] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[174] Endel Tulving, 2000.
Endel Tulving, 1995.
Endel Tulving and Martin Lepage, 2000.
Robin Nelson, 2006.
[175] Bruce McConachie, *Theatre and Mind*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
[176] Susan Melrose, 2015.

b. Cognitive Processes and Uncertainty

i. Memory Types, Knowledge and Intuition.

A spontaneous creative process relies on intuition, which Melrose links to memory.[177] Nelson also states that 'memory is a pre-requisite for knowledge'. I shall therefore begin with discussing the memory types at stake in retrieving knowledge in situations of uncertainty.[178] This will provide a better understanding of the mental processes at work in improvisational theatre and a terminology to rely on in the following sections. First of all, we must make the distinction between short-term memory and long-term memory. Short-term, or working, memory, is used in situations where new information is being processed: someone's phone number, for instance. This information will not be retained long. Short-term memory works in conjunction with the 'executive function' of our brain. Probably located in the temporal lobes of the neo-cortex, it enables us to '[scan] memory for a possible fit between a past solution and present circumstances.' It also 'synthesizes cues from the environment, from relevant memories, and from other networked activations to make split-second decisions about possible courses of action.'[179] Based on this, one could argue that short-term memory is the process at work when improvisers are presented with offers.

Short-term memory enables immediate processing of new information and, through repetition, transfers information to long-term memory. Implicit long-term memory types can be affected by priming: they can be shaped by previous experience which guides information retrieval. In this case, the retrieval will be unconscious, as the response to the original stimulus is intuitive. Explicit long-term memory types, on the other hand, rely on conscious retrieval of information and are not primed by previous experience.[180] To make those concepts clearer, I have summarised all main sub-types of long-term memories in the following diagram, based on Kahneman's, Tulving's, Nelson's and McConachie's works:

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[177] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.8.
[178] Robin Nelson, 2006, p.108.
[179] Bruce McConachie, 2013, pp.41-46.
[180] Endel Tulving, 2000, p. 39.

Long-term memory

Explicit Memory

Implicit Memory

Explicit memory is conscious. It is not **primed** by previous knowledge. We are aware that we are retrieving information. It is linked to **System 2** or **knowledge of facts** or **knowledge of acquaintance.**

Implicit Memory is unconscious. It is **primed** by previous knowledge and produces instinctive answers. We are unaware that we are retrieving information. It is linked to **System 1** or **embodied knowledge.**

Cognitive memory

Procedural memory

Can be equated to or said to be part of explicit memory. This type of memory relies on conscious thought and contemplation of new information.

Can be equated to or said to be part of implicit memory. This type of memory relies on behaviour and doing. New information is experienced without conscious thinking.

Episodic Memory

Semantic Memory

Also called **palinscopic** ("backward-looking"). It is **autonoetic:** it makes the self mentally travel into the personal past.

Also called **proscopic** ("forward-looking"). It is **noetic:** it retrieves information about the world, but is not concerned with the past.

THE LONG-TERM MEMORY TYPES. [181]

The Memory types above are linked to types of knowledge first described by Gilbert Ryle, divided 'between knowing that something is the case and knowing how to do things'.[182] "Knowing that something is the case" can be linked to what Nelson

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[181] Daniel Kahneman, 2012.
Endel Tulving, 2000, pp.33-43.
Endel Tulving, 1995, pp.727-732.
Endel Tulving and Martin Lepage, 2000, pp.208-228.
Robin Nelson, 2006, pp.105-116.
Bruce McConachie, 2013.
[182] Gilbert Ryle, 'Knowing how and knowing that: the presidential address', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, Vol. 46*, 1945-1946, p.4. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4544405,

describes as tacit or implicit knowledge, which is acquired through phenomenological, direct, conscious experience. We keep adjusting this knowledge and building up on it, until it becomes more automatic. Then, it can be described as 'knowledge [sic] how to do things'. [183] This is a type of knowledge that is embodied, that is to say, it does not rely on facts and cannot be consciously explained. Rather, it is acquired through practice and repetition. [184] This is linked to training, which I shall discuss further on. For now, I want to focus on the problems that can be caused by the conflicts between the systems of cognition.

We can add to these types of knowledge an embodied knowledge as it relates to the psychophysiology of creativity, which enables performers to approach acting with a fuller awareness, both internal and external:

> Researchers of cognitive science and performance take as a starting point that the mind is embodied. Not only must the mind work within a living body, but the ways we think – our sense of self and the foundational concepts we use to perceive the world and other people in it – derive from the embeddedness of our bodies on planet earth. Emotional interactions, central to stage performance, between the performer and between performers and audience must also be seen as embodied. The mind–body problem is therefore being addressed through concepts such as 'embodied cognition, based in perception and action' and the study of bodily actions always seen as 'loaded with mental content'. With this approach, cognition is 'not cold and emotional . . . not disembodied. It is not separated from an environment. [… In] all human activities, practically speaking, 'mind' and 'body' are inseparable.[185]

A study of the cognitive processes of improvisational theatre cannot be purely based on the empirical neurological processes at stake in the performer's brain. There has to also be an outward focus. Improvisers react to their entire environment. Knowledge travels: from the mind to the body, to other bodies, to the environment, back to the brain. This is the actor's work as Stanislavski began to approach, as a 'psychophysical' process. What is key is that once we consider knowledge as a travelling entity, we link it back to the core of this thesis, which is the notion of vulnerability. Brown links vulnerability to connection, stating it is the key to overcoming fear and shame. Knowledge connects improvisers to their own conscious and unconscious knowledge, as well as all other elements of their environment.

(accessed 5 February 2020).
[183] Robin Nelson, 2006, p.113.
[184] Robin Nelson, 2006, p.113.
[185] Rose Whyman, 2016, p.166.

Awareness, therefore is the key to making creative choices and overcome the vulnerability of spontaneity. In terms of performance, seeing knowledge as embodied also helps with the missing link between knowledge retrieval and knowledge expression that does *not* have to rely on saying: 'Here's what I was thinking.' If knowledge can be embodied, improvisers could show rather than tell, communicate without needing explicit descriptions of what their intentions are.

Linked to memory and knowledge is what Kahneman describes as the two cognitive systems which are at work when we make decisions under uncertainty:

- *System 1* operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.

- *System 2* allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.[186]

Let us take the example of riding a bicycle, which is also used by Nelson.[187] When we learn to ride a bicycle, we make the conscious decision to learn, and we must consciously control all aspects of it: balance, speed, direction… We think actively about those elements until practice enables the process to become intuitive. Once the initial stage of learning is over the learner begins to use System 1, which is linked to implicit memory and embodied knowledge. Indeed, it is intuitive and primed (influenced) by previous experience and practice. In other words, we first rely on conscious, tacit knowledge until it becomes knowledge of how to do things.

ii. The Issue of Heuristics

Kahneman describes intuition as potentially flawed in the face of uncertainty. According to him, what makes us so prone to mistakes, when we should follow logic in the face of uncertainty, is this two 'protagonist' problem inherent to having two cognitive systems coexist in our brains which are in constant dialogue. System 1 has a strong subconscious influence on System 2. It can, for instance, trick System 2 into trusting intuitive thinking over logic or statistical probability. As an example, let us look at the 'representativeness' heuristic. Representativeness is the process we use to, for example, make a general assumption about someone's job based on their

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[186] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.20.
[187] Robin Nelson, 2006, p.113.

personality traits. While this heuristic is likely to be more accurate than a mere random guess, it is also likely to be inaccurate as it disregards statistics or the quality of evidence, that is to say that whoever is describing the person's character could be unreliable themselves or introduce bias in their description so as to frame the guess.[188]

Similarly, the Halo Effect (another characteristic process of System 1) can influence guesses: a person introduced with positive personality traits will be seen as more likely to be successful in their job, for instance, while negative traits will have the reverse effect.[189] Kahneman also describes representativeness as: 'What You See Is All There Is', thus inferring once again a blindness of System 2, unable to override System 1's intuitive, superficial assumptions by seeking additional information. In improvisational theatre, this would imply accepting all offers as what they automatically appear to be, without taking time to analyse them, which is Johnstone's ideal. [190] While this can actually be a strength, which I shall discuss later, Johnstone also explains that it can make improvisers feel 'unimaginative'. [191] As a result, they attempt to silence their intuition, which implies an awareness of their potential for making mistakes. Their brain's unconscious heuristics are in conflict with their conscious willingness to control the creative process.

While the issue above is to do with System's 1 ability to trigger automatic, fast responses, it can also slow System 2 down, at times when it is needed for a mental effort.[192] Kahneman uses the example of the words "note" and "goat". When people are asked to identify them as words which rhyme with no time to think, he observes a short hesitation. This is due to what Kahneman calls the "mental shotgun", which he describes as the ability of System 1 to spontaneously do more than System 2 instructs it to do.[193] Consequently, while System 2 calls on System 1 only to retrieve habitual grasp of language and sounds, System 1 cannot stop noticing spelling as well, which creates a conflict and slows down the exercise. Another way to explain this would be to say that implicit memory, primed by the stimulus of having to read the words, automatically and subconsciously retrieves information

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[188] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.149-151.
[189] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.199.
[190] Keith Johnstone, 1979, pp.89-92.
[191] Keith Johnstone, 1979, pp.89-92.
[192] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.95.
[193] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.95.

about spelling. The mental shotgun is linked to a common issue described in improvisation literature. Improvisers who are in a state of feeling vulnerable in the face of spontaneity attempt to repress the mental shotgun. Indeed, System 2 is usually a slow, conscious system, only able to work in short bursts of attention, and Kahneman found that 'people, when engaged in a mental sprint, may become effectively blind.'[194] By trying to exert control over their intuition, improvisers can lose their sense of awareness and become 'blind' to offers. Johnstone uses the example of a student who, when asked to say the first word that comes to mind, says: 'Cabbage', despite his lips forming an 'O' shape. System 1 had suggested the word: 'Orange' first, but the unexperienced improviser was approaching the question as a problem to be solved, thus making System 2 work at full capacity and not allowing his intuition to guide his actions.[195]

What emerges is the difference between the issue of heuristics interfering in the decision-making process and the issue of *not* letting heuristics play a part in the improvisation process. The improvisers above came to a creative halt when they became aware of their minds' attempts at using heuristics. What this implies is that improvisers are made to feel vulnerable by the spontaneity of the creative process and their fear of being unable to control it and of their responses to offers being too obvious, too unimaginative. They do not trust their own expertise.

iii. Risk-Taking

Improvisers' inability to trust their own intuitive responses can be related to the notion of risk aversion, which Kahneman mentions as another manifestation of the human mind's flawed way of dealing with uncertainty. He asked respondents in a study to answer the following problem:

> Problem 1: Which do you choose?
>
> Get $900 for sure OR 90% chance to get $1,000
>
> Problem 2: Which do you choose?
>
> Lose $900 for sure OR 90% chance to lose 1,000$[196]

He found that people were overwhelmingly more likely to pick the first option in

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[194] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.34.
[195] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.89.
[196] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.279.

Problem 1, whereas they picked the second option in Problem 2. This is what Kahneman calls 'risk aversion' versus what he calls 'risk seeking'. Respondents weigh out potential loss against potential gain. In the first problem, respondents weigh out a sure gain against a 10% chance to gain nothing. A prospective extra $100 did not seem worthy enough, therefore, the respondents experienced risk aversion. On the other hand, in Problem 2, the respondents decided it was worth gambling on a 10% chance not to lose anything.

As an example, Kahneman mentions a study in which respondents were faced with a bowl of cherries with one cockroach in it, or a bowl of cockroaches with one cherry and asked to pick a cherry from either bowl. None of the respondents wanted to pick from either bowl.[197] This is because some things we see as extremely negative (in this case the cockroach) can outweigh all the positive aspects of a choice, and this causes 'extremely risk-averse choices'. On the other hand, going back to Problem 2 above, when people must choose between two losses of different intensity, our sensitivity to risk becomes lower.[198]

Risk aversion is a manifestation of the inability to logically foresee consequences. CEO Peter Sehan, interviewed by Brown, also mentioned it as a consequence of fear.[199] This implies that emotions can also prime our cognitive systems. While this section focuses on the latter, the former has to be mentioned. Indeed, fear can be felt in situations of vulnerability. Improvisers may not trust their expertise because they believe that their intuition is flawed, and this, deep down, betrays a fear of making mistakes. They see the consequences of trusting System 1's heuristics as negative and therefore, adopt a risk-averse attitude to spontaneity. By doing so, however, they reinforce their state of vulnerability: they are now slow, unaware of offers and unable to make sense of the chaos of creativity. What this hints at is the psychological manifestations of cognitive processes. Improvisers will need psychological tools to overcome – or work with – these processes. I shall return to this in the second part of this chapter.

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[197] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.302.
[198] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.285.
[199] Peter Sehan, interviewed by Brené Brown, in Brené Brown, 2015, p.66.

iv. Cognitive Ease and Cognitive Strain

I shall study the effects of fear on improvisers in the next section. For now, I shall keep focusing on the cognitive processes of creativity. Being spontaneous makes improvisers face the uncertain. Various conflicting processes are happening at once in their minds, and their first reaction is not to trust their intuition, but monopolise System 2 to make conscious, slow mental efforts. Yet, Johnstone suggests that they should rely more on System 1. Kahneman argues that in order to trust one's intuition in situations of creativity, one must reach a state of cognitive ease. This is a difficult process. While System 1 is in charge of habitual responses and its guesses are more accurate than chance, as stated before, it can be affected by feelings of discomfort, to the point where we stop trusting our intuitions.[200] This is what Johnstone argued when he wrote of our awareness of making potentially 'wrong' decisions and what Kahneman describes as the difference between cognitive ease and cognitive strain:

> When you are in a state of cognitive ease, you are probably in a good mood, like what you see, believe what you hear, trust your intuitions, and feel that the current situation is comfortably familiar. You are also likely to be relatively casual and superficial in your thinking. When you feel strained, you are more likely to be vigilant and suspicious, invest more effort in what you are doing, feel less comfortable, and make fewer errors, but you are also less intuitive and less creative than usual.[201]

Kahneman hints at the possibility of the effects of cognitive ease being different in everyday life (lack of critical thinking) and in creative tasks (freer thinking and less restraint). What is particularly interesting about this statement, however, is the idea that, in order to be creative, we have to allow ourselves to make mistakes. It appears that this state of cognitive ease, where System 1 takes over and decisions are made intuitively is the ideal mindset to be creative.

Kahneman illustrates the processes that lead to cognitive ease thus:

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[200] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.69-151.
[201] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.60.
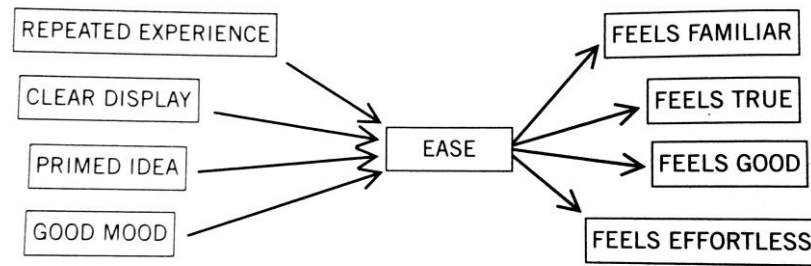
Figure 5. Causes and Consequences of Cognitive Ease

The lexicon used here is very similar to the lexicon of memory established in Figure 1. Repeated experience and priming relate to implicit memory: it is our embodied knowledge, which we have mastered and assimilated. Good mood can also be seen as a form of priming and a clear display (for instance, an obvious offer from another improviser) facilitates information retrieval, making it more intuitive.

While some people may have a natural ability to be confident in situations of creativity, which does not need any form of training or education, *All Our Futures* implies that it is not the case of the majority of the population. This is where the repeated experience comes into play. I shall argue that what separates confident improvisers and improvisers who are unable to trust their intuition is practice that has become embodied knowledge and made them more intuitive, but also more expert. Indeed, if cognitive ease is the ideal mindset for creativity, expert skills are then needed to make creative decisions. To do so, I shall need to discuss matters of training, learning, and the ability to make intuition a skill, instead of a process which happens in spite of our willingness to control it.

v. Achieving Expertise: Training and Learning

The notion of training raises the question of whether intuition, or the ability to be intuitive, can be learnt, practised and expertly used. Melrose links expertise and experience.[203] This is in keeping with Kahneman's mention of a repeated experience that is necessary to achieve cognitive ease. However, she also writes of a 'deliberative expert decision-making processes', which is different to subconscious, fear-driven decisions, but also to the idea of Kahneman's automatic, uncontrollable

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[202] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.60.
[203] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.11.

System 1.[204] Going further, Melrose states that while 'intuitive decision-making is fast because it is informed by "an abbreviation of the cognitive pattern" acquired through prior experience (and, in [her] version, experimentation and critical self-reflection)', it can nonetheless be a conscious process. What expert performers are not consciously aware of is their implicit knowledge, 'because they have internalised rich or complex knowledge practices acquired in the professional environment, through ongoing experimentation, experience (including recognition and judgement) and progressive enculturation'.[205] This is the difference between being conscious of the knowledge between retrieved intuitively, automatically, and being conscious of having an intuitive, automatic response to a stimulus. Intuition as a whole can be both 'fast', automatic, but also 'slow', 'deliberative' and 'linked to cognitive abilities', that is to say that our ability to transform our initial response depends on having learnt the skills to do so.[206]

I must note that Melrose makes the difference between learning, which comes from observation without necessary active practice (knowledge that), and training, which comes from active application of learning and experience (knowing how). [207] Importantly, Melrose writes: 'expert intuition occurs before deliberation – and I would add that the first may seem to suffice in the immediacy of expert practice.[208] Expert intuition is primed, influenced by experience and experimentation, and in turn influences conscious decisions made on stage, which also rely on certain skillsets, a performer's knowing how, in response to a 'knowing that' something is happening on stage and in their mind. Going further, we can also infer from this that even what appear to be spontaneous, intuitive responses rely on pre-show learning, and likely also some degree of preparation and pre-show decisions.

Finally, Melrose states that 'the acquisition of that expertise is likely to be painful or challenging of "habitual intelligence"'.[209] This is in keeping with Kahneman's idea that System 2 can train, reprogram System 1 and its responses, but goes further in adding the idea of it being a painful, uncomfortable process. It is also in keeping with Johnstone's belief that to learn to trust one's intuition is an

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[204] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.8.
[205] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.14.
[206] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.16.
[207] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.19.
[208] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.16.
[209] Susan Melrose, 2015, p.13.

uncomfortable, daunting process, although the benefits include creative (cognitive) ease. To challenge 'habitual intelligence', not through silencing it, but through learning to use it to make expert decisions, is a skill. This also implies the possibility to go against rules, to achieve creative freedom. It goes further than Johnstone did, because the possibilities do not simply stop at embracing our first thoughts, they include the potential and ability to act upon them once they have appeared.

c. Expert Improvisation

i. Expertise in Improvisational Theatre

I want to apply the concepts from the previous sections to an improvisational theatre context and find out what the manifestations of 'knowing how' are in improvisational theatre. I shall begin with strategies linked to the conscious use of learning and experience, both individually and collectively. Steve Steen comments on his creative process:

> I can't control the thoughts that come to me in response to offers, but I'm always aware of them. I make decisions when I ask myself how I can take this response and turn it into something original. I don't ignore it, but I also have to go further. Depending on how many people I have to improvise with, I also have more or less time to think. My expertise lies in my experience, in knowing how to use my intuition and I do that, personally, through building characters and using that character to carry my responses to offers. It gives me all the liberties in the world. [210]

Steen first describes how System 1 subconsciously retrieves information from long term memory and conjures up images, responses to offers. However, like Melrose suggests, he is able to identify which of his responses are automatic. Through experience (learning) and experimenting (training), he has acquired an expert ability to both trust and allow his intuition to express itself and consciously decide how to use it. Steen explains he is able to pause, take his time and use System 2 to make creative decisions, although spectators would see it as thinking fast (an ability which Kahneman links to System 1). After his 'expert intuition' comes 'deliberation'. This goes further than Johnstone's belief that intuitive thoughts should be expressed as they happen without deliberation. Deliberation, in this instance, is not the enemy of spontaneity, but rather a way to make sure that spontaneous creative thoughts are

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[210] Steve Steen, interviewed by Chloé Arros, Liphook, 2020.

used in an expert way which is conducive to the quality of the performance. Steen gives the specific example of blending his responses with the character he is portraying at the time. This is an example of how expert decisions can be made in very personal ways, based on pre-performance decisions. Steen already knows that characterisation is was makes him a strong improviser, and that his creative decisions during the performance will be blended with the character he has chosen. In doing so, he grants himself freedom to bring something to the performance that is not only dictated by the offers of the moment. He is able to contribute with his own knowledge and creative style. It is a form of live editing, of deciding which of his expert intuitive thoughts fit the development of his character and how.

This goes against the general understanding that improvisers should always accept offers that are being presented to them. The reality is more subtle: they are free to favour some offers over others, but also to switch from one to another, leaving behind a storyline which has exhausted its potential. Related to this is the idea of timing, of choosing when to make use of an offer, accepting it right away, but not taking action until the time is right. This is a form of expert deliberation. Rob Broderick's comments:

> I've got something really interesting from the crowd, I do have to go: "Save it, don't open with it, because you'll have nowhere to go." It's almost like the squirrel effect: "Beautiful nut, put it in the tree now, mess around for a while, come back when you need it."[211]

This is about editing, and putting things into artistic form. Once again, it is about choice and it challenges the idea that improvisers should accept all offers presented to them, whenever they are being presented to them, and the idea that expert intuition cannot or should not be controlled. What seems, however, to go even further, is Broderick's implication that timing can create a momentum, something "interesting", as he mentions. Improviser Steve Steen feels that this is a common approach for some performers: "I think there's more of a kind of circus attitude among some performers, who want to get that feeling of, 'tadaaah' at the end of what they do and be honoured for it[212]." This would mean that the rules are perhaps not all that essential to follow, and that improvisers can intentionally, through expert deliberation, perform mistakes, transgression of rules and even vulnerability. I will

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[211] Robert Broderick, interviewed by Chloé Arros, Skype, 2016.
[212] Steve Steen, 2013.

return to this in the last chapter of this thesis.

The concepts I have discussed so far are essential in understanding, first, what is contributing to feeling vulnerable in the face of spontaneity, namely, an awareness of the mind's ability to make mistakes in intuitive assessments of certain situations, or of our intuitive cognitive system to slow down our slower, analytical system. Feeling vulnerable in the face of vulnerability causes unexperienced improvisers to slow down and repress their intuition. However, what Melrose explains, and Steen illustrates, is that experienced improvisers gain enough expertise to slow down, not to repress intuition, but to embrace it and deliberate about how to use it. They also take liberties in making pre-performance decisions that will support their expert intuition and expert deliberation during the performance. In essence, gaining expertise is the main contributor to the achievement of cognitive ease that Kahneman discussed. However, the knowledge studied so far remains for the most part conceptual and what still remains to be discussed is the specifics, in the context of improvisational theatre, of how this expertise is acquired and the ways in which it manifests itself and benefits improvised performances.

In order to provide better illustrations of the concepts I have studied so far, I shall now rely on a more specific example that took place during a Comedy Store Players performance. Steve Steen and Stephen Frost were playing the game "Emotions", in which the audience suggests emotions which must then be played out in the scene that follows. A member of the audience shouted out: "Distress!" Steen exclaimed: "Oh, I don't know what to wear tonight, what are you going to wear?" to which Frost answered without hesitation: "This dress!" The comedy relied in the obvious misinterpretation of both the suggestion and the structure of the game.[213] I showed Steen a recording of the scene and asked him to reflect on it:

> Me and [Stephen Frost] are very familiar with each other's styles. I'm working with a guy who's on the same wavelength as me. I know I can steer him into changing a word slightly, because my question is like a big finger pointing to the answer. I was determined to go out and have a laugh regardless of the suggestions. As an actor, I can play a character who will lend himself to the emotions. I can also rely on techniques like 'Status', so that those emotions come naturally to that person. I can present a serious front in setting up the game and explaining the rules. But I also knew that the show had been going well enough to take a bit of non-playing. My experience has taught me that you can present a very

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[213] *The Comedy Store Players*, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 10 April 2013.

> obvious mistake, in this case misinterpreting the suggestion, and get a laugh. The more obvious, the better it works. The audience knew it was coming. As soon as I heard the suggestion, I knew I wasn't going to follow the rules. I get two laughs, one out of pre-empting his response, and two, his response, because he's now a man in a dress. And once you start the game of changing the emotions into a play on words, the audience is into it and you have to come up with a few more.[214]

I shall analyse the elements of this reflection in more depth throughout the next sections. To begin with, I must note that Steen provides an example of being in a state of cognitive ease. He mentions his positive outlook when he began to play the game. He wanted, not only to make the audience laugh, but to enjoy the experience himself. Following Kahneman's theory of cognitive ease, his good mood enabled him to be more confident and more open to being creative. He also speaks of his past experience, not only of playing the game, but also of improvising with Frost, and his experimenting with the rules of games and of improvisational theatre in general. He knows that he can take liberties and how to do it, here, in the form of deliberately mistaking 'distress' for 'this dress'.

Steen received formal training in the form of improvisation workshops at the Oval House Arts Centre in London in 1972. One of his teachers was *Theatre Machine* member Ben Benison.[215] Stephen Frost studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he learnt improvisation techniques taught by Ben Benison, also in the 1970s.[216] They have learnt from the same practitioner and have both practised improvisation to a degree where their knowledge is embodied, intuitive, and sits within procedural memory, but they are also able to compose with this intuitive knowledge, not only individually but collaboratively. This is something that Kahneman or Melrose do not address but is essential in improvisational theatre. As improvisation is a team effort, I will now discuss how individual expertise in the face of vulnerability can be combined with other improvisers' expertise in collaborative creation.

ii. Safety Nets: Being Wrong and Pre-Performance Decisions

Let us return in more depth to improvisers' learning process. Johnstone explained that improvisers who feel vulnerable can repress their intuition instead of

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[214] Steve Steen, interviewed by Chloé Arros, Liphook, 2017.
[215] "Oval House", *Jim Sweeney*. https://jimsweeney.co.uk/oval.html, (accessed 10 December 2017).
[216] Stephen Frost, interviewed by Chloé Arros, email, 2018.

learning to compose with it. His first strategy to combat this is to teach them that 'getting it wrong' is normal and part of part of the experimenting process.[217] While deliberation is important *after* expert intuition takes place, Johnstone explains the issue with deliberating beforehand: 'Nervous improvisers want to have the rules of a new game repeated several times, but I tell them that if they misunderstand me, they may invent a much better game.'[218] Here, improvisers are thinking too much about the premise and attempt to be right, to understand it perfectly. Yet, as Steen and Frost demonstrated, 'getting it wrong' need not be a problem.

Johnstone also writes of his use of paradoxical teaching, that is to say, how he allows improvisers to deliberately be wrong and disregard rules, thus relieving the pressure to improvise the 'right way'. He explains how learning to use such techniques as blocking or upstaging 'for fun gives us an insight into our defensive procedures.'[219] Improvisers become more aware of the ways they resist being wrong and are more able to give themselves permission to take liberties. Going further, Johnstone also explains that to learn to be wrong can be done by using safety nets.[220] One of them is to switch the focus onto the honour of overcoming discomfort rather than the initial discomfort in the face of spontaneity:

> Try introducing certain games as 'advanced', and predict that the students will fail, but it'll be fun anyway'. This allows them to fail with honour, and it becomes easier to get volunteers (not more difficult, as one might have supposed).[221]

In this case, Johnstone influences improvisers' mindset by making them believe the task they are attempting is harder than it actually is. This makes success more rewarding and gives performers more confidence in their own abilities. It gives them a positive mindset, which is one of the elements Kahneman lists as necessary to reach cognitive ease.

What Johnstone advocates is the possibility of alleviating feelings of vulnerability by either minimising it through the permission to be wrong or disguising it as stronger than it truly is. While this is efficient for beginners, I would

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[217] Keith Johnstone, Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen, London: Faber and Faber, 1999, p.61.
[218] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.60.
[219] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.101.
[220] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.62.
[221] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.62.

argue that more experienced improvisers can more accurately assess the degree of difficulty of a task. In this case, other strategies may be needed. In Steen's case, his ability to be comfortable with spontaneity and 'getting it wrong' is his experimenting with breaking the rules 'for fun', as Johnstone suggested, but also with audience reactions, an area which Johnstone is often wary of. In our example, Steen is using his episodic memory to travel back to situations where he made mistakes and remember the outcome, which would have either been a positive or a negative reaction from the audience. This is a form of training through practice. The vulnerability of the situation above lies within the intrinsic vulnerability of creativity, but not within the risk that Steen takes, as the latter is calculated. Steen's quality check is audience reaction, and this is also where he seeks permission to take liberties from the constraints of set formats and rules. It is a slightly different strategy from Johnstone, performer centred rather than teacher centred (improvisers work on finding approval for their decisions rather than relying on their teacher to shield them from vulnerability).

Pre-performance decisions also alleviate the vulnerability of spontaneity. In this case, they demonstrate an expert understanding of causation: improvisers know which situations can trigger failure and set up their performance accordingly. In the earlier citation, Steen mentioned a specific example in which pre-performance decisions, training and embodied knowledge influences his intuitive responses to offers. He speaks of the improvisation technique, 'Status', which Keith Johnstone uses to teach improvisers to decide on their character's attitude and intention before they begin performing. Through Status exercises, improvisers have to project themselves into a role using body language and their relationship to other characters and the performing/imaginary space, a skill he derives from and applies to real life situations.[222] Status qualifies the relationship between characters in a scene, as well as their relationship to their environment. It is particularly useful in enabling improvisers to create a character with a consistent set of behaviour in the moment. Performers can adopt a superior, inferior or equal status to the one of their partner in a scene.[223] Johnstone gives the following example:

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[222] Keith Johnstone, 1979.
[223] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.36-50.

TRAMP: 'Ere! Where are you going?

DUCHESS: I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch…

TRAMP: Are you deaf as well as blind?[224]

Here, the tramp is playing high status to the Duchess. He does not use any form of courtesy and even insults her and talks over her, despite her higher social status. In contrast, the Duchess plays lows status by apologising and being polite to someone of lower social status. This is, as stated above, a matter of status between characters, but status can also be played to the space[225]:

> Status is played to anything, objects as well as people. If you enter an empty waiting-room you can play high or low status to the furniture. A king may play low status to a subject, but not to his palace.[226]

The key is that Johnstone used real life observations to devise techniques that make improvisation more spontaneous, more authentic.

McConachie described the following issue: 'actors who do not know their intentions […] will tend to falter in their movement.'[227]. However, according to Johnstone, if improvisers know which status they want to adopt before coming up on stage, their improvisation will become intuitive, as their character will already be influenced by the status they chose.[228] He gives the example of asking his students to act entering the wrong room and to predetermine their status. He observes that students who have done so start acting right away, whereas students who have not, stall the beginning of the scene in order to have time to prepare.[229] (This is an instance in which there is no expert deliberation, but a mistrust of intuition.) Improvisers will be able to embody their character's status and give it purpose.

Steen implies a similar idea in using Status to develop a character who will be able to endorse different emotions while remaining consistent with the traits that have already developed. His character, having played a lower status to Frost's in the scene, looked up to him and said: 'I wish I looked as good in that dress as you do', thus consistently maintaining his initial status, while being in keeping with the prior development of the scene. This type of pre-performance decisions can be part of the

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[224] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.36.
[225] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.36-50.
[226] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.50.
[227] Bruce McConachie, 2013, p.33.
[228] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.47.
[229] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.47-48.

concept of a game. In Magerko et al's study, improvisers were instructed to play the game 'Party Host'. In this game, a host has to guess what character the other improvisers are playing. In return, the other improvisers must adapt their behaviour to the setting established by the host. Improvisers must blend their own decision-making process with their character, adjusting their character's behaviour according to clues given by other characters, all within the imaginary setting of the party. In Steen's case, it enables him to rely on a safety net, in not fully facing spontaneity, but rather, allowing it to be part of what he has already created. His willingness to break the rules is also part of his range of pre-performance decisions.

iii. Taking Advantage of Heuristics: Representativeness in Improvisation

Once improvisers learn to either use safety nets or to be wrong, they can be more in tune to their expert intuition. This is where the heuristics described by Kahneman become strengths. Allowing System 1 to run free enables performers to generate a range of possible directions for a scene, based on simple prompts. This can be applied to any creative task. For instance, a blank canvas and a limited set of colours can trigger intuitive images which an artist is free to choose from: their implicit memory in which their knowledge of how to paint is stored is primed by previous experience – i.e., memories – of arranging colours. Their mind subconsciously retrieves solutions to the problem of the blank canvas, solutions which were acquired through practice and are now embodied knowledge.

The representativeness heuristic is used a great deal in improvisation with positive effects on creativity. For Johnstone, it is simply about the power of being obvious. Assessing probability through representativeness in life can be inaccurate. However, Johnstone argues that it enables improvisers to be original: 'An artist who is inspired is being *obvious*. He's not making any decisions, he's not weighing one idea against another. He's accepting his first thoughts'.[230] Two elements are worth noting. First, being obvious means relying on 'What You See Is All There Is'. Second, accepting first thoughts means that System 1 is the one at work. Beyond representativeness, two cognitive processes are at work: inference, which is the act of determining a context from someone' actions; schema generation, which is the act of determining someone's set of recurrent behaviours based on what we know of

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[230] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.88.

them.[231] One of the improvisers playing a guest in Magerko et al's study reflected on the game: 'I thought: "Who is he trying to be?" Like "is he having a house party or is he a college guy? Are we in the middle of the forest?" […] I thought eventually because there was a door [the host pantomimed opening a door], well, we have to be inside then. We have to be in someone's house.'[232] In the scene, the host mimed opening the door and the guest inferred that the setting was inside someone's house. In doing so, he used the representativeness heuristic. He knew very little of the setting and allowed his intuition to fill the blanks. He could have also very easily inferred other settings in which parties can take place: the door could have been the gate of a back garden or a pub door, for instance. In other terms, while the improviser is giving a conscious account of how he made a guess, his 'how to' knowledge was at work. We can infer that his embodied knowledge was retrieved from implicit memory when exposed to an external stimulus. In this case, the stimulus was the miming of opening a door, which triggered an instant, unconscious image. Once he made the deliberate, expert choice to go with his first instinct, what he saw was all there was. It allowed him to carry on with his improvisation without interruption and keep the scene seamless.

Another heuristic I discussed previously was the 'mental shotgun': System 1's ability to slow down System 2 with automatic responses in situations where conscious thinking is required. While this process is described as an issue in everyday life, it is a strength when it comes to improvisation. Keith Johnstone gives the example of reading:

> When I read a novel I have no sense of effort. Yet if I pay close attention to my mental processes I find an amazing amount of activity. 'She walked into the room…' I read, and I have a picture in my mind, very detailed, a large Victorian room empty of furniture, with the bare boards painted white around what used to be the edge of the carpet. […] My imagination is working as hard as the writer's, but I have no sense of doing anything, or "being creative".[233]

Johnstone does not approach the task of reading as a 'mental effort', which would monopolise System 2 and make him blind to the images System 1 conjures. If we attempt to repress the 'mental shotgun' and approach the task of reading

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[231] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[232] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[233] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.80.

intellectually, as opposed to intuitively, then there is no possibility to see beyond the words. We are able to tackle the basic task of reading, but there is no creativity attached to this task.

iv. Substitutions and Associations

In a similar vein to the 'mental shotgun', System 1 can also operate through substitution. This is the process of subconsciously addressing a different issue than the one at stake, for lack of factual information. One can, for instance, when answering questions, substitute a target question (the one that was asked originally) for a heuristic question (which system 1 can answer intuitively).[234] Kahneman gives the following example of a target question: 'How much would you contribute to save an endangered species?, and a heuristic question: 'How much emotion do I feel when I think of dying dolphins?' This substitution of questions happens subconsciously, in a similar way to the 'mental shotgun'.[235] When Steen deliberately mistook 'distress' for 'this dress', he was using the substitution heuristic and answering System 1's instructions, his expert intuition, instead of the suggestion from the audience.

More generally, substitutions, or associations, are a tangible manifestation of expert intuition and ways to process offers in improvisational theatre. Language is highly important in improvisational theatre, and one way to build on other improvisers' offers is to allow word associations to form. 'One Word at a Time' is one example of language and association-based games, in which improvisers have to speak one word at a time. Syntagmatic associations, relying on 'words that frequently occur together', is how improvisers are able to make sure sentences make sense syntactically and in the context of the scene.[236] For instance, on the 22nd of August 2012, the Comedy Store Players played the a scene between an interviewer (Andy Smart) and a rowing coach for kangaroos, played by Josie Lawrence, Niall Ashdown and Neil Mullarkey as one character. Smart asked: 'Which of your kangaroos is the most difficult to work with?' The 'coach' answered: 'Petunia…

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[234] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.98.
[235] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.99.
[236] Reinhard Rapp, "The Computation of Word Associations: Comparing Syntagmatic and Paradigmatic Approaches", *COLING 2002: The 19th International Conference on Computational Linguistics*, Taipei, 2002.

lazy… cow!'[237] Although the improvisers playing the coach were unable to communicate to each other what they thought the word after theirs should be, there was nonetheless a common ability to make sense, to build a sentence, because of the common association between 'difficult' and 'lazy', then 'lazy' and 'cow'. The last association could also be called a metaphorical association, putting the emphasis on the rudeness of calling someone (or in this case, an animal) a cow, and symbolising how difficult it is to teach kangaroos called Petunia how to row.

Associations are made in other formats or games as well. In the 'Film and Theatre Styles' game played by Ryan Styles and Colin Mochrie in the sixth series of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, Ryan Styles makes Colin's hand on his forehead, previously miming alien antennae, to be a bird, after Clive Anderson asks them to improvise in the style of a Hitchcock film.[238] Those word associations, whether they are syntagmatic, metaphorical, or even paradigmatic (between 'words with high se-mantic similarity', such a words describing colours) are all examples of how expert intuition manifests itself: automatically, but based on long-term memory of the rules of language – in this case, the English language, although this concept applies to other languages, with their respective grammatical and syntactical rules and imageries.[239]

What emerges from this is the idea that there are many ways in which expert intuition and expert deliberation occur. Steen mentioned characterisation, through status techniques and pre-performance decisions. The knowledge retrieved in the moment of intuition is linked to these areas. In the examples above, the knowledge at stake relates to language. Importantly, what also emerged from these examples is the notion that improvisers cannot use complex verbal communication to let their creative partners know of their intentions. They rely on guessing, on awareness and, again, expert intuition, but I have studied this intuition, so far, in relation to individual creative deliberation, and not – bar the example of 'One Word at a Time' which approached it – in relation to collaborative creation. This is, however, another element of creativity which can induce feelings of vulnerability: the lack of control, not only of one's own responses to offers, but also of others' responses. I want to

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[237] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 22 August 2012.
[238] *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, series 6, episode 2, 1994. TV program.
[239] Reinhard Rapp, 2002.

discuss how improvisers are able to overcome this inability to use complex communication in order to create collaboratively.

v. Shared Mental Models and Cognitive Consensus

What still remains to be discussed is improvisers' ability to now use their expertise and ability to overcome the vulnerability of spontaneity to benefit collaborative creation. Earlier in this chapter, I wrote about Steen and Frost sharing similar training and experiences. Those elements are part of an improviser's range of referents. Referents can be explained as a mental database which System 1 relies on in situations of uncertainty.[240] This is another way to refer to elements of long-term memory. When referents are shared between improvisers, they facilitate the building of shared mental images. This is a crucial way to become at ease with uncertainty in collaborative creativity. As Steve Steen and Stephen Frost were taught by Ben Benison around the same time, they will share many referents in the form of a similar set of skills, techniques and exercises, for instance. Besides those shared referents and individual trainings, which they can rely on in situations of uncertainty, their experience of working together enables them to dispense with the need of complex verbal communication to improvise together. The strategy at heart in establishing shared referents is to use each other's strength without making it sound like a call for help.

Shaughnessy describes a type of cognition as extended. It can be shared with other human beings, through what Nelson also calls a 'dissemination of knowledge' which can either be written or expressed through practice.[241] In the case of improvisation, I am concerned with the bodily dissemination of knowledge, i.e., that is done through non-verbal channels. As improvisers cannot use complex verbal communication to share their intentions with their partners, they must establish shared mental models.[242] First of all, we must understand that an improvised scene begins in a state of cognitive divergence, which is 'when the assumptions of two or

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[240] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[241] Nicola Shaughnessy (ed.), Affective Performance and Cognitive Science: Body, Brain and Being, London: Bloomsbury, 2013, p.140.
Robin Nelson, 2006, p.105.
[242] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.

more improvisers do not match'.[243] Improvisers do not know what others are about to do and may have different instincts as to how the scene will develop. In our previous example, Frost does not know that Steen is about to misinterpret the suggestion and break away from the premise of the game. Their aim is to reach cognitive consensus through the process of cognitive convergence. Cognitive consensus 'is a state of agreement of assumptions between two or more people and is necessary for shared mental models to exist.'[244]

Magerko et al describe 3 steps of cognitive convergence:

First is observation, the point at which an improviser realizes that his mental model diverges from others'. Next is repair, which refers to all attempts to reconcile divergences. Repairs can either be attempted in order for an improviser to align himself with another improviser's mental model or in order for an improviser to align another improviser with his own mental model. The final step of cognitive convergence is acceptance, during which cognitive consensus may occur.[245]

These steps can be observed in the case study. First of all, Frost observed Steen go ahead with the word play and had to acknowledge that he was breaking away from the rules they had been following. From that point on, he had the choice to accept or reject Steen's offer. Rejection is not part of the three steps of convergence, however, Magerko et al describe it as a possible choice in improvisation: 'Sometimes improvisers give up before consensus is reached, or they refuse to accept the mental model of others out of stubbornness or intended comedic effect.'[246] This is what Johnstone also calls a block. The 'comedic effect intent' will be studied in the next chapter of this thesis as it does not concern the intrinsic vulnerability of creativity, but rather, the ability improvisers have to perform vulnerability. In the case study examined above, rejection could have happened had Frost decided to ignore Steen's prompt. In this case, he would have created another divergence. Steen could have made the choice to repair it by aligning his assumption that the game is being played by the rules. He would have therefore let go of his original instinct for the sake of harmony. However, Frost accepted his offer and acknowledged his understanding by keeping his range of behaviours suitable for the chosen context. These processes do not rely on complex verbal communication but are part of the development of the

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[243] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[244] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[245] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.
[246] Brian Magerko, et al., 2009.

scene and expressed through individual choices. Using those processes in collaborative creativity enables improvisers to build on each other's ideas rather than interrupt a creative flow.

Improvisers can make different types of assumptions during the cognitive convergence process. Some are diegetic assumptions, that is to say, assumptions which are linked to the structure and existing elements of the narrative. This means trying to guess what other improvisers have created as part of the developing plot of imaginary space of the scene. Some non-diegetic assumptions can also be made, this time linked to elements which are external to the scene but guide its structure. In our case study, in order to match Steen's mental image, Frost had to make both a diegetic assumption (that Steen implied that he was a man who wears dresses) and a non-diegetic assumption (that Steen decided to rejected the premise of the game to concentrate on word plays), in order to achieve cognitive consensus. [247] For instance, the improviser may need to determine how the host is playing the game. Magerko et al explain that improvisers might have been taught to play the same game with slightly different rules. In short, they have to be aware of both the narrative at play and the context of the performance. When improvisers have reached that point, they have a shared mental image of the scene and its various elements.

Drinko's concept of 'group mind' encompasses all the processes studied so far. He writes that: 'the mind is what happens in the brain, in the body, and between people during social interactions.'[248] And indeed, we have seen the intrinsic link between knowledge, memory, which is embodied in the deliberate, expert choices improvisers make, and the ways they establish cognitive consensus. Drinko describes this culmination of shared knowledge as 'syncing up'.[249] He attributes it to the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, which 'seems to have something to do with the ability to relate to other people', but also to the 'mirror system' or mirror neurons, but also admits that the mirror system is flawed and not enough to 'read minds', as it were.[250] Indeed, there is a difference between witnessing an action and experiencing it directly.[251] Therefore, training becomes an essential part of being able to 'intuit to

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[247] Brian Magerko et al, 2009.
[248] Clay Drinko, 2012, p.156.
[249] Clay Drinko, 2012, p.157.
[250] Clay Drinko, 2012, pp.155-158.
[251] B. Calvo-Merino, et al., "Haggard Action Observation and Acquired Motor Skills: An fMRI Study

others'.[252] What improvisers have to learn is to 'focus outwards', allowing 'the part of the brain that censors one's thoughts, speech, and actions [to become] much less involved'.[253] In order to be in tune with others, improvisers' have to extend their awareness further than their own body and train their mind to not only retrieve knowledge spontaneously in their own mind, but to spontaneously analyse and take action from someone else's creative choices. It is as though knowledge in improvisational theatre exists in the environment and becomes collective, rather than resides in individual bodies desperately trying to understand each other. And in more pragmatic terms, this is an illustration of cognitive consensus.

At the heart of this process remains the same concept of expert intuition, expert deliberation and the retrieval and processing of information that I have studied throughout this chapter. Here, the pre-performance decision rests on a mutual agreement to work together towards a common creative goal and to be aware of and willing to embrace each other's cues. While some transgressions are possible 'for fun', there is an understanding, supported by Johnstone, that improvisers have to be generous with each other and allow others' ideas to exist and develop. Establishing shared mental images towards cognitive consensus can only happen if this pre-performance agreement is made, whether implicitly or explicitly. It also implies that all improvisers should share a minimum degree of practice which allows them to use their individual expertise in order to not only accept offers to further their character's development, but also to further the development of the scene.

d. Conclusion

In short, the various systems of cognition described by Kahneman, Ryle, Tulving or Nelson all opposed an intuitive, unconscious branch to a conscious, deliberate branch. The conscious branch affects the other and can reprogramme it. The processing of new information by short term memory, the knowing that something is happening, is what happens when improvisers first encounter offers. Then, knowledge of how to do things comes into play. While Ryle describes this knowledge as unconscious, when Melrose writes of expert knowledge, she makes the

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with Expert Dancers", *Cerebral Cortex*, 2004, p.3.
[252] Clay Drinko, 2012, pp.155-158.
[253] Clay Drinko, 2012, pp.159.

distinction between expert intuition (unconscious responses that are nonetheless informed by past learning and experiencing) and expert deliberation, which is a conscious process. This nuances Ryle's notion and shows that experienced improvisers do not simply learn to embrace their intuitive responses, their mind's heuristics, they are able to use them and shape them, to slow down and think about what to do.

Johnstone gave generations of improvisers valuable strategies against the vulnerability of spontaneous creativity, that help them trust heuristics such as representativeness or the mental shotgun and treat them as tools to think faster, outside the box and enhance our creativity through 'being obvious'. Through teaching improvisers to be comfortable with being wrong, he helps them become comfortable with the vulnerability of creativity, to achieve a state of cognitive ease, which allows freer thinking and less restraint. These strategies, together with the study of associations, also give us an insight into the improvisation creative process. It shows how improvisers' long-term memory, their expert intuition, is solicited and enables them to communicate with other improvisers and create collaboratively without having to voice their intentions. This is how shared mental models and cognitive consensus are achieved, as well as outward awareness and exteriorised knowledge. Importantly, we also saw that offers can be made about everything, from the structure of the story, to the characters, to the content of the story. It shows that Johnstone's belief that our expert intuition should be trusted is efficient in creating stories.

The key findings in this chapter, however, are the differences between Johnstone's teachings and the practice of contemporary British improvisers. What emerged from contemporary improvisation practice is the fact that expertise in improvisation does not manifest itself in a loss of risk sensitivity. Experienced improvisers trust their own abilities, their expert intuition and habitual responses and are therefore more likely to take risk. They are also more likely to better assess the risk at stake. For instance, Steen speaks of being comfortable with audience reactions, implying that improvisers' relationships with their audience is a risk to be managed. However, this does not mean that vulnerability ceases to exist. Indeed, Melrose states that acquiring expertise is a painful, uncomfortable process. It takes skill for improvisers to be able to be both comfortable with their habitual responses and be able to control the way they use those responses. These skills are constantly

challenged as improvisers keep learning and being faced with an infinity of possible creative choices.

Part of what is missing from Johnstone's work is a focus on expert deliberation. He offers a strategy that is in contradiction with his belief that all offers should be accepted, but which enables improvisers to circumvent the vulnerability of spontaneity by making a pre-performance decision: the status technique. What the practice of contemporary improvisers shows us is that pre-performance decisions are more important and prevalent than Johnstone realised (I use 'realised' instead of 'believed', because of the contradiction at the heart of his teaching, between being fully spontaneous, yet using techniques such as status). This is demonstrated by Steen, who explains that choosing a character in advance helps him improvise yet does not prevent him from being spontaneous in the moment. Instead, it is a way for him to shape offers, to slow down and include them in his characterisation. It gives his performance direction and consistency. What this shows is also the difference between stopping to think, disconnecting from the creative process, and taking time to make expert deliberations.

Finally, while Johnstone spoke of breaking rules of improvisation 'for fun' as a training tool, Steen and Frost demonstrated that this can be done on stage as well. This introduces the notion of artistry to this study. Indeed, Steen and Frost's practice shows that breaking rules can be done strategically to achieve creative freedom. Their expertise is shown in their ability to apply their training in very personal ways, to be able to pick offers, to edit them, to shape what is available to them and put it into artistic form. In terms of aesthetics, this hints at the notion of style. When Steen and Frost break rules, they deliberately take risks and they allow vulnerability to be part of the scene they have already created. They are *composing with* vulnerability.

The final main concept that arises from these findings is that of control. The vulnerability of uncertainty cannot be controlled, but it can be overcome. Controlling the creative process is detrimental to unexperienced improvisers, but beneficial to expert improvisers. Control that is not expert deliberation is shutting down expert intuition. This expert deliberation enables improvisers to compose with uncertainty, to turn it into an element of their artistry. There is also a form of control in influencing other improvisers' responses through collaborative creation. Already, we are encountering vulnerability as more than just an obstacle, but an important, intrinsic part of improvisational theatre, and what has emerged is that the fear of it is

the true obstacle that improvisers face, and this is why the next chapter will focus on fear in improvisational theatre.

4. Improvising Bravely

a. Introduction

In this chapter, I shall study improvisers' fears and their manifestations. I will also discuss the notion of courage in improvisation and the ways improvisers overcome their fears. I will argue that courage is another manifestation of expertise. I am continuing to use a neuroaesthetic methodology in order to study how fear arises and its consequences on the mind. The line of thinking is directly linked to the previous chapter, but I have chosen to discuss fear and courage separately as they provide a transition between matters of feeling vulnerable and matters of projecting an image of vulnerability.

While the methodology is similar, I am relying on different authors from the last chapter. I will rely on neuroscientific and biological material, notably the work of Joseph Ledoux on fear.[254] I also rely on literature from the field of psychology, social work and theatre studies. Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* offers a bridge between psychology and theatre studies and gives us an insight into the causes of vulnerability in creativity.[255] His work is concerned particularly with elements of a performance that cannot be controlled and can create disturbances, and by extension, vulnerability. In relation to his work, I shall study Brown's *Daring Greatly*, particularly to understand individual relationship to fear. She also writes about self-exposure, which I shall argue is closely linked to fear.[256] I will draw on Robert Biswas-Diener's work in order to examine how vulnerability can be turned into courage in improvisational theatre.[257]

I have studied the example of the inexperienced improviser who decided to say: 'Cabbage' instead of: 'Orange' when asked to say the first word that comes to his mind.[258] Kahneman's research suggested that the reason for this was a conflict between an intuitive system of decision-making and a conscious one, and that it is impossible to control intuitive thinking and deeply ingrained habitual responses.

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[254] Joseph LeDoux, 2003.
Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, 2016.
[255] Nicholas Ridout, 2006.
[256] Brené Brown, 2015.
[257] Robert Biswas-Diener, *The Courage Quotient: How Science Can Make You Braver*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012.
[258] c.f. p.52 of this thesis.

However, while the two-system theory of decision-making explains the antagonism between what needed to be done and what the improviser consciously wanted to do instead, it does not address the deeper reason as to why he was so reluctant to allow his intuition to speak. Johnstone's explanation is that the improviser wanted to 'appear *un*imaginative' and that this must be in response to a 'crippling experience', a deeply rooted fear. Because of this, he judged that allowing his intuition to speak posed too high a risk. Yet, had he done so, Johnstone suggests the result would have been more spontaneous and rewarding.[259] Therefore, fear plays an important part in priming improvisers' ability to make expert creative decisions.

Ledoux's definition of fear is multifaceted. It can be: 'a feeling that one experiences when threatened'.[260] It can also be: 'Behaviours, such as facial expressions, freezing, flight, and avoidance, as well as physiological changes that accompany such behaviours.'[261] Beyond the biological aspect of fear is a psychological, sociological aspect. One of the respondents in Brown's work described vulnerability as follows: 'You are halfway across a tightrope, and moving forward and going back are both just as scary.'[262] Not only does uncertainty come back as a core idea: 'Where do I need to go?', but fear, something 'scary', also emerges. According to Steven Stosny, people in situations of fear tend to seek connection with others in order to feel better.[263] This implies that fear initially makes us feel disconnected and that our instinct is to re-establish this connection. Indeed, Brown states that 'we are hard-wired for connection' as human beings.[264]

While fear in this instance has a negative effect, I also want to find out if it can act as a stimulant, leading, as stated above, to connection, but also courage. Improvisers are faced with many fears inhibiting the spontaneity at the heart of their performance. Yet, Johnstone and many other seasoned improvisers are able to overcome their fear and allow themselves to be spontaneous despite the vulnerability that spontaneity induces. Brown believes that fear does not just bring about

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[259] Keith Johnstone, 1979, pp.89-92.
[260] Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, 2016, p.1083.
[261] Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, 2016, p.1083.
[262] Brené Brown, 2015, p.38.
[263] Steven Stosny, "What's Your Core Vulnerability?", *Psychology Today*, 2013. https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/anger-in-the-age-entitlement/201305/what-s-your-core-vulnerability, (accessed 18 October 2017).
[264] Brené Brown, 2012.

vulnerability, but that it can also be used as a motor.[265] When reviewing theories of courage, I found that they described fear as being a primordial prerequisite for courage. Brown states:

> Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. […] Yes, we're taking a huge emotional risk when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. But there's no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness.[266]

While improvisers are often guided by what Kahneman calls risk aversion, Brown believes that there is in fact a lot to gain from risk seeking. She also suggests that egocentric bias, our personal circumstances and experience, plays an important part: fear is influenced by personal issues which are inherent to our lives, experiences, style of performance, etc.[267] Improvisers' fear of judgement is based on what they think their audience will see, for instance. Most importantly, Brown equates vulnerability and risk taking to courage. A brief definition of courage can be extracted from her work: courage is admitting to failing and finding solutions.[268] It is these solutions, these strategies, that I want to explore.

In the first half of this chapter, I shall study the mechanisms of fear and the different types of fear experienced by improvisers and their respective causes. I will discuss the consequences of these feelings and biological responses on improvised performances. The notion of connection, or disconnection, is central to this first half as it shows not only the negative effect of fear on a performance, but also a way in which fear can be overcome collectively. In the second half, I will discuss how improvisers can show courage in the face of vulnerability and the implications of acts of courage on improvisers' creative process, as well as approach how these acts affect improvisers' relationship with their audience.

b. Fear and Connection in Improvisational Theatre

i. The Mechanisms of Fear

As previously mentioned, Ledoux understands fear as a combination of definitions, the experience of a threat, but also the physiological responses to this

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[265] Brené Brown, 2015, p.116.
[266] Brené Brown, 2015, p.37.
[267] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.51.
[268] Brené Brown, 2015, p.206.

threat.[269] According to him, fear involves two systems of circuits, just as Kahneman believes our mind functions within a two-system mechanism in conditions of uncertainty. Both systems are activated by our sensory experience of a present ('immediate or imminent') threat: something we see, hear or sense. However, it must be noted that uncertain threats, (a 'possible outcome in the future') can also trigger the fear systems in similar ways.[270] The first system is conscious and uses short term memory to process the external stimuli. It then retrieves information from the unconscious implicit memory, as well as the conscious explicit memory. Short-term memory is 'aware of the fact that the fear system of the brain has been activated' and transforms subjective, immediate experience of stimulus into an emotional experience (we feel fearful and threatened), which is then stored in implicit memory as an unconscious experience of fear.[271] The second system is triggered by those unconscious, intuitive feelings and generates our behavioral and physiological responses to threats.[272] Fear is therefore linked to our environment and objectively dangerous situations, for instance. It can also be linked to past, subjective experience. This means that improvisers can face both immediate and uncertain threats.

Freezing or escape behaviours are what Ledoux classes as 'defensive behaviour', while physiological responses include 'autonomic nervous system responses (changes in blood pressure and heart rate)' or 'neuroendocrine responses (release of hormones from the pituitary and adrenal glands)'.[273] These 'fight or flight' responses are functions of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, which 'directs the body's rapid involuntary response to dangerous or stressful situations', e.g., increased heart rate, heightened awareness, faster breathing and 'infusion of glucose is shot into the bloodstream for a quick energy boost'.[274] On the other hand, the parasympathetic branch is responsible for the 'rest and digest' responses. It 'undoes the work of sympathetic division after a stressful situation. The parasympathetic branch decreases respiration and heart rate and increases

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[269] Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, 2016, p.1083.
[270] Joseph Ledoux and Daniel Pine, 2016, p.1084.
[271] Joseph LeDoux, 2003, p.733.
[272] Joseph LeDoux, 2003, pp.1083-1084.
[273] Joseph LeDoux, 2003, p.728.
[274] Nicoletta Lanese, *Fight or Flight: The Sympathetic Nervous System*, 2019. https://www.livescience.com/65446-sympathetic-nervous-system.html, (accessed 27 March 2020).

digestion.'[275]

To make matters clearer, below is a summary of the relevant binary systems I have discussed so far:

	Conscious	**Unconscious**
Uncertainty *The systems that are activated when we are trying to make decisions without knowing all the elements involved. They interact with one another, often in a conflicting manner.*	Kahneman's System 2 *Linked to explicit long-term memory. It is a slow system which is associated with choice and focus. It can be used to solve a new problem.*	Kahneman's System 1 *Linked to implicit long-term memory.* *It is a fast, intuitive system which is linked to habitual responses. Its responses are instinctive, although they can be reprogrammed by System 2.*
Fear *Those systems work together to trigger all our reactions to threat. System 2 needs System 1 to function. They do not conflict with one another.*	Ledoux's System of Circuits 1 *Linked to short-term memory. It processes threats and triggers emotional responses which are then stored in long-term memory.*	Ledoux's System of Circuits 2 *Linked to implicit long-term memory. It is triggered by System of Circuits 1 and generates defensive behaviour, autonomic nervous system responses (sympathetic and parasympathetic) and neuroendocrine responses.*

UNCERTAINTY AND FEAR SYSTEMS.

Similarly to Kahneman's circuits of cognition, the second circuit of fear which generates physiological responses is the one that can potentially be influenced and controlled to a degree. Going further, within the second system, both branches of the autonomic nervous system are unconscious, but I infer that in the case of improvisers, the parasympathetic branch is the system that needs to be influenced and summoned in order to make expert decisions in the face of fear. This would imply another form of control over our intuition, this time controlling responses to

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[275] Frank R. Noyes and Sue D. Barber-Westin, "Diagnosis and Treatment of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome", in *Noyes' Knee Disorders: Surgery, Rehabilitation, Clinical Outcomes* (Second Edition), Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2017, p.1129.

fear instead of (or at the same time as) our responses to uncertainty. The process of gaining expertise over fear would then be similar to the process of gaining expertise over uncertainty: acknowledging feelings of fear, becoming familiar with them, using experience and practice to make expert decisions in the face of fear. This is the process that I will endeavour to demonstrate throughout this chapter.

ii. The Fear of Failure

Now we have an understanding of the mechanism of fear, I want to discuss the fears that improvisers experience, their causes and their consequences. One fear that I have highlighted before is that of making mistakes, which is linked to an uncertain threat all professional performers face, which is the loss of their reputation, as explained by Ridout: 'The actor herself is acutely aware that her own specialised professional career depends […] on the approbation of the public'. [276] The idea of loss of connection is present: losing approbation means losing future audiences and eventually, work altogether. Performers perform to and for an audience and are aware of their gaze and potential judgement, as Steen stated in the previous chapter. This is where the vulnerability of *potential* failure lies: in the frozen moment of disconnection, before any action can be taken. In the example of the improviser worried about saying the 'wrong' words, instead of using expert deliberation, they pause in fear, weighing up the consequences of their creative choice in terms of how onlookers will judge them. This stops the action and prevents other improvisers from taking part in it.

"The Universality of Shame", a *Science Daily* article based on the research of Daniel Sznycer et al., offers an evolutionary explanation as to why loss of reputation is something we fear. It highlights that the feelings of shame and fear are deeply linked to the idea of connection within a social group or lack thereof:

> Living in small, highly interdependent bands, […] our ancestors faced frequent life-threatening reversals, and they counted on their fellow band members to value them enough during bad times to pull them through. So being devalued by others – deemed unworthy of help – was literally a threat to their survival. […] The intensity of anticipated shame people feel is an internally generated prediction of just how much others will devalue them if they take a given action. [277]

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[276] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.51.
[277] "The universality of shame." *ScienceDaily*, 2018.

The moment of failure is a moment of conscious reflection: 'How will this failure affect the approval that is granted to me?' Fear lies within this uncertain threat, this possibility of loss, as opposed to gain of reputation had the act been successful. This is linked, in turn to lack of 'help', implying that a disapproving audience will withdraw support and therefore connection. The evolutionary argument makes this situation objectively threatening and reinforces the importance of human connection which Brown discussed. This is not just a matter of being afraid of potential failure, it is a situation in which actual, real failure is triggering feelings of fear in the anticipation of its consequences.

In improvisational theatre, failure can bring a scene to a halt. During a Comedy Store Players performance, Josie Lawrence played the 'Who Am I?' game, in which the audience assigns her a complicated job description which she must guess through clues given by her fellow improvisers. Lawrence had to stop the game and admit that for the first time in 30 years, she could not guess the job.[278] Beyond the failure of the game, Lawrence's reputation was at stake. Lawrence felt fear in the anticipation of audience reaction to come. She knew that the audience would recognise her failure and could react to it negatively. Lee Simpson describes what he believes audiences feel in those moments:

> There is nothing more embarrassing than bad improvisation. It's really painful. And what happens is, if someone does bad impro or even bad comedy, and the audience are made to feel embarrassed, they hate the performer. They get angry with the performer, quite rightly, because they're being put through something they don't want to be put through.[279]

Lawrence is not only worried about the loss of her own reputation, she is also reacting to the fear that the audience may experience feelings of anger and directly affect the performance in the form of heckling or booing. A primary cause, as Ridout explains, is that audiences resent a bad performance as a waste of time and money.[280]

Loss of reputation, can have long-term effects. White writes:

> An actor or performer is always discernable in his/her own right, though this continuous individual self is disguised or denied by a variety of techniques of performance and conventions of watching. Those who know the actor or have seen more than one performance are always able

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http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/09/180910173734.htm, (accessed 16 February 2020).

[278] *The Comedy Store Players*, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 13 May 2015.

[279] Lee Simpson, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2013.

[280] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.51.

> to compare, or to consider a performance as part of the greater narrative of a life, or a career.[281]

First of all, performers work hard on hiding themselves, building a 'shell' around themselves and relying on audiences' willingness not to see *them*, the people they are behind the characters and the skills involved. However, White explains that repetitive viewing of one performer's work will give spectators insights into more than the actor, but rather into the person they are and their career. They can judge, not simply the moment of performance, but the skills of the performer from one performance to another. In improvisational theatre, where audience members regularly come back to see the same show over several years sometimes, this divide between the individual professional and the character becomes very fine. Mannerisms become recognisable, personal stories emerge. Fear can arise in moments, like in Lawrence's example, where the individual is exposed and, in her case, could be seen as unskilled. Lawrence repeatedly apologised and made it clear that she had never not guessed the job, eager to show the audience that her loss of control is only temporary. What this points to is also the notion of exposure of the person behind the character or performer. I shall discuss this in the next section.

This anger that the audience may experience when they witness failure points to the notion of communication, which I shall discuss in the next chapter and introduce now. I will be considering shared affect between actors and spectators, and the ways in which the vulnerability of the former is felt by the latter. Any risk the actor takes makes the audience feel like they are in danger too. Beyond this, there is an implicit trust, a delegation of control, from the audience onto the performers. Failure on the part of the performer is a breach of this trust. Lawrence is aware that she owes the audience quality. She apologises for betraying their trust, in a bid to minimise the damage audience anger could potentially cause to the rest of the performance. This is a form of strategy, one that comes after the event.

iii. Exposure and Stage Fright

Brown writes that 'vulnerability is like being naked onstage and hoping for applause rather than laughter'. There is vulnerability in being naked, literally and metaphorically. We are being judged for things we would rather keep hidden. In

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[281] Gareth White, 2013, p.99.

improvisational theatre, the appearance of the private self is obvious in moments of failure. In our earlier example, Lawrence was forced to expose herself as a person, breaking character in order to admit defeat and save the game from continuing for too long. We can link this fear of exposure to a lack of connection. The performer is left with no safety net, alienated, with no means of reaching out for help or use a character as a shield, in the way Steen used a character to channel the vulnerability of spontaneous creativity. This is, according to Ridout, what leads to stage fright, the symptoms of which can be forgetting words or actions or 'blocking' others from the development of the scene.[282] These symptoms are manifestations of the physiological responses to fear and are linked to Brown's notion of disconnection.

I must note that there is also an alternative way to look at this moment of fear and exposure. What Lawrence created in that instance was a wave of empathy from the audience. This is because exposure also brings authenticity. This relates to Lecoq's approach to clowning. His request to students 'to be themselves as profoundly as they possibly can, and to observe the effect they produce on the world, that is to say their audience' is very similar to what happened to Lawrence.[283] In exposure, she showed truthfulness, created an instant of comedy (the audience let out a sympathetic laugh when she admitted defeat) but also, subtly, managed to maintain a certain level of expertise by adding that this was the 'first time in 30 years' that she had not been able to guess the answer. Unlike clowning, the comedy doesn't emerge from spectators feeling a sense of superiority, but rather from having the performer's pedestal lowered to their level for only a brief instant. Nonetheless, this was a tricky moment for Lawrence to deal with, and expertise could have easily been lost.

Loss of reputation and support in the moment of failure, however, is not the only reason improvisers experience fear. According to White, 'the phenomenon of stage fright […] suggests that there is something more complex going on than fear of a bad review'.[284] Viola Spolin goes further in the notion of judgement exerted by the audience, stating that 'once we believe that art is self-expression, then the individual can be criticised not only for his skill, but simply for being what he is'.[285] Self-

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[282] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.59.
[283] Jacques Lecoq, 2020, p.159.
[284] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, second edition, London: Routledge, 1997, p.43.
[285] Brené Brown, 2015, p.39.
Viola Spolin, 1998, p.79.

exposure, therefore, is something that improvisers also fear and it manifests itself in the form of stage fright. We are dealing, therefore, with risk management in balancing exposure – and truthfulness – and judgement which could negatively impact the performance because performers lose composure if they feel judged personally.

According to Ridout, fear of exposure is inherent to the experience of theatre and is heightened in moments where 'eye contact' is made'.[286] Again, this suggests a disconnection issue. Stage fright arises in the anticipation and/or acknowledgement of the 'gaze' of the other, and this state of fear and vulnerability is projected onto the audience, who are also, at times, aware of looking at the person behind the character. In this instance, this discomfort may be exacerbated by the stage and audience lighting and the degree of direct address involved between performers and their audience. The more transparent the fourth wall, the higher the level of discomfort. While this is not specific to improvisational theatre, the venues in which improvisation takes place tend to facilitate the phenomenon. The audience is often lit, and direct address happens regularly.

What this also means is that the address can go both way: from performers to their audience and from the audience to the performer. In the latter case, this takes the shape of a feedback loop that improvisers have to interpret as best as they can. There can be vulnerability in not being able to assess which type of feedback is being received from the audience. In improvisational comedy, for instance, it can be difficult to decipher laughter. Indeed, the line between negative judgement and approval is blurred through laughter. It is not easy to know if it is alienating, singling-out (disconnecting) the performer for something about themselves that is being disapproved of, or if laughter is a sign of appreciation.[287] It could even be both, if we consider 'the idea that all jokes are made at someone's or something's expense'.[288] The anticipation of this also induces stage fright. The audience may laugh at the performance or the performer or both.

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[286] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.26.
[287] Gareth White, 2013, p.131.
[288] Eric Weitz, 2015, p.17.

iv. Immediate Threats: Technical Issues and Physical Threats

Before I move on to the ways in which connection can be used to overcome fear, I want to discuss the immediate threats that improvisers can face in relation to events that are not within their control, such as technical issues, or the behaviour of others. Rob Broderick comments on his pre-show routine:

> I'm checking the stage – is there access into the crowd? I'm worried about lights, I'm worried about sound. […] Technically I am worried: will the sound person make my mic loud enough? Will the sound person respond to the music not being loud enough?[289]

What Broderick describes are initially uncertain threats. The situation could be objectively problematic for Broderick's specific act. His opening number, 'What's In Your Pocket', involves improvising a hip hop song based on objects held out by members of the audience. Not being able to physically access the crowd means that Broderick's range of offers will be limited and it may be more difficult for him to improvise seamlessly. As a singer, he also needs to be heard clearly. He does not know whether those threats will become reality or not, but he is running the risk of not providing the audience with any entertainment at all. Those threats become immediate when technical issues do arise. In a 2012 recording of his improvised song, 'What's In Your Pocket?' at the Brixton academy, he is seen performing to a fenced off crowd. As a reminder, he is relying on objects that members of the audience show him. He cannot physically access the audience and is initially seen struggling to grab objects from people in the front row. [290] This means an immediate risk of failure, an objectively dangerous situation likely to trigger reactions of fear.

Steve Steen gives another example of an immediate threat:

> The sound of a broken bottle used to be very scary. It stops you dead, because you immediately think: "violence." If you're a stand-up comedian, you talk to your audience, you can address it directly. If you're an actor, you can go back to your script. In impro, it can take you completely off track.[291]

Steen is referring to his time performing the club and cabaret circuit, in which he has

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[289] Robert Broderick, interviewed by Chloé Arros, 2015, London.
[290] *Abandoman - Edinburgh Comedy Fest 2011*, online video, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvtCn6UpMFw , (accessed 2 April 2020).
[291] Steve Steen, 2017.

indeed encountered violence – including being threatened with a knife onstage.[292] The issue is exacerbated by the setting, which gives audience members easy access to the performing space. Steen is aware of this. His long-term memory stores past experiences and the knowledge that, combined together, enable him to analyse the situation as potentially dangerous. First of all, Steen's short-term memory processes the sound of the broken bottle, then interacts with Steen's first circuit of fear, which triggers the emotional reaction. The second circuit then comes into action, retrieving stored memories of violence from his implicit memory and triggering defensive behaviour (freezing) and physiological responses.

He also feels that this type of threat – beyond the obvious risk of personal harm which is universal – has a specific effect on his work, as opposed to the effect it could have on a stand-up routine or a scripted play. His feeling that fear can affect an improvised scene is justified, as explained by Biswas-Diener:

> When we feel fear, we receive an extra dose of adrenaline to make our hearts pump faster. Our blood becomes rich with coagulants to help clotting in the event that we are injured. […] And interestingly, our thinking goes off-line. That is, we are less able to consciously make clear, rational decisions or plan in a careful way or anticipate consequences.[293]

He gives an example of autonomic nervous system responses and neuroendocrine responses and a direct consequence of fear: it prevents us from thinking consciously and logically. In this particular case, more than intuition, instinct takes over, bringing about self-protectiveness and distracting improvisers from their creative intuition. The inability to anticipate consequences is also interesting. In the moment of fear, improvisers are feeling vulnerable as they are momentarily disconnected from the scene. The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system takes over, which means that consecutive actions will be dictated by unconscious, instinctive reactions rather than logic. This means that expert, creative deliberation cannot take place in that moment.

v. Establishing Connection and Fear as a Stimulant

In most cases I have studied so far, fear was detrimental to performances,

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[292] Steve Steen, 2017.
[293] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.47.

cutting improvisers away from creativity and preventing them from establishing connection with their colleagues and their audience. When connection is sought in response to fear, the effects are more positive. For instance, Lawrence initially felt vulnerable in the moment of failure. However, she was able to remain connected to her fellow improvisers by admitting defeat and allow them to come to her rescue. They stopped the game and encouraged the audience to applaud her. This act of honesty prevented loss of reputation and disconnection. Lawrence overcame her fear and took positive action. I will argue further on in this chapter that this is a form of courage.

What Lawrence did is similar to what Ridout calls the 'Angel of Death':

> A rule set for an improvised performance I was once involved with stipulated that if you are on stage and all attempts to come up with performance to make the audience laugh failed, you performed the "Angel of Death", a disappearing gaze into the heavens from which physically to relaunch yourself against the wall of the audience's rejection. After several such Angels you would be rescued by the entrance of another performer.[294]

The admission of failure here is not verbal and as obvious as Lawrence's. However, it is an implicit contract formed between improvisers to come to each other's rescue, to reach out. Interestingly, Ridout also talks about 'relaunching' oneself. The idea is to use fear and disconnection as a springboard for positive action. In the moment of exposure and disapproval, expertise manifests itself in analysing the situation as requiring connection. Improvisers regain control by momentarily admitting defeat and trusting others to take over, with the understanding that such help would be requited if needed.

Some improvisers describe fear as a stimulant, which makes them better at handling spontaneity. Working with people whose performing and thought patterns they do not know or understand can make improvising more interesting, less relaxed but more focused, for instance, according to Steen.[295] The initial feeling of fear is triggered by the uncertain threat of failure to establish shared mental images. However, it helps improvisers to break habitual patterns and pay attention to their expert intuition, slowing down the expert deliberation process with positive effects on creativity. Following a similar idea, Ridout writes:

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[294] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.148.
[295] Steve Steen, 2020.

> The moment, or even, in fact, the possibility of the moment of embarrassing self-disclosure in the event of the theatrical face to face, is essential to the self-recognition that we enjoy. If self-recognition is the pleasure that we gain, then some degree of self-disclosure is the price to be paid for it, and there is a particular pleasure in that very expenditure.[296]

Again, he speaks of the uncertain threat of exposure, the anticipation of it as being enough to induce feelings and physiological manifestations of fear. However, the idea of fear as a springboard comes back. Exposure of the self leads to 'self-recognition', a better awareness of one's creative process and abilities to overcome vulnerability. He speaks of exposure, not as just something which happens in spite of the performer, but a compromise which can be willingly –and happily – made. When Steen performs with improvisers whose creative process he is not familiar with, he does so willingly and knowingly. He knows what there is to gain and enjoy, in his case, the thrill of novelty.

If self-recognition is what self-disclosure – or exposure – can lead to, Ridout also states that 'embarrassment is the price to pay for a beneficial disruption of conventional theatrical alienation of the audience'.[297] Forced intimacy, the 'theatrical encounter' which triggered stage fright, can also be turned into a positive. Once performers and audience members alike accept looking at and seeing each other, connection can be made. Lawrence and her fellow improvisers acknowledged the audience's gaze in the moment of failure. She, by accepting to disclose herself as a fallible human being; they, by directly asking spectators to lend their support to her. This encounter can be frightening, but it can provide yet another safety net. Indeed, it can help improvisers gain the approval of the audience by immediately acting upon failure, even if it is only to limit angry reactions. What still needs to be discussed is expert strategies to fully act in the face of fear in improvisation, rather than just limit its effects.

c. The Courage to Improvise

i. Learning to Be Less Fearful

What has emerged from the previous sections is the idea that fear can slow

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[296] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.79.
[297] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.94.

down and disconnect improvisers. However, I have also discussed that connection can be re-established to overcome fear. What I have not yet studied is why some improvisers are able to do this successfully and not others. I have suggested that this is another form of expert deliberation. Therefore, this ability to lose one's sense of fear is a learning process and can be taught. Johnstone, for instance, helps improvisers overcome their fear through what he calls 'progressive desensitization', inspired by treatments in which 'phobic patients' are presented 'with a "hierarchy of fear", i.e., exposing them to whatever they were scared of from least to most threatening until they were comfortable.'[298] He suggests that improvisers should face their fears, particularly fear of spontaneity and failure, in stages, 'coaxing' them into 'dangerous areas' by allowing them to practice the worst case scenarios.[299] He wants them to treat 'their failure as survivable'.[300] In doing so, he is using 'paradoxical psychology': practising a tic or disordered behaviour to bring it 'under conscious control'.[301]

Johnstone states that 'fear is still as much a part of us as our ribs', emphasising that it cannot be fully ignored, but should rather be treated as a normal part of the creative process, to desensitize from it without ignoring it.[302] He writes:

> 'Sometimes being average is the best possible strategy.'
>
> Outrage.
>
> 'Anyone can walk a plank, but if it stretched across an abyss, fear might glue us to it. Our best strategy might be to treat the abyss as something ordinary (if that were possible) and to walk across in our average manner'.[303]

The practice of fear as 'something ordinary', according to Johnstone, progressively teaches improvisers to be more immune to its negative effects. Fear is still present, but it can be navigated with confidence, or at least, casually. This is similar to the 'Angel of Death' strategy to acknowledge failure.

Interestingly, Johnstone uses the word 'strategy'. So far, I have spoken of vulnerability as an emotional or instinctive state in the face of spontaneous creativity,

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[298] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.56.
[299] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.56.
[300] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.62.
[301] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.56.
[302] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.178.
[303] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.65.

and the ways improvisers are able to overcome both this state of being and the situation that triggered it. These ways are indeed strategies in the context of expert deliberation. Improvisers are consciously deciding the best ways to overcome vulnerability. However, Johnstone also adds a new dimension: using the state of fear itself as a strategy: 'I explained that 'looking sick' is a ploy to get sympathy if they screw-up, and to win them extra credit if they succeed'.[304] While he sees this 'ploy' as an easy way out, it is a strategy that can also work in improvisational theatre, particularly in comedy. Lee Simpson, for instance, often performs fear and reluctance when prompted to sing on stage, only to masterly improvise a rhyming and scanning song once music starts.[305] This suggests that vulnerability can be performed and strategized, as a step further to learning to overcome it. I shall return to this in the final chapter of this thesis.

ii. Defining Courage

I shall now argue that improvisers who use expert deliberation to overcome their fear are showing a form of courage. I already mentioned Brown's definition: courage is admitting to failing and finding solutions.[306] Lawrence took the first step to courage in admitting to failing. What we need to find out is the solutions that improvisers can find to the problem of fear. Biswas-Diener offers a more complete definition of courage, which is summed up as follows: 'Courage is the willingness to act towards a moral or worthwhile goal despite the presence of risk, uncertainty, and fear.'[307] We have already established that uncertainty – which in improvisation is linked to the spontaneity of the creative process – induces fear and vulnerability. Improvisers face both in their work and in doing so, they have to put themselves in positions where they risk failure. Therefore, courage seems to counterbalance vulnerability, with those common elements in the middle.

Biswas-Diener writes about a 'courage quotient', a simple equation which opposes the ability to deflate fear and the ability to take wilful action.[308] He goes further and offers an insight into the neurological process of courage, which once

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[304] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.61.
[305] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 19 June 2011.
[306] Brené Brown, 2015, p.206.
[307] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.10.
[308] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.11.

again confronts us with a binary definition:

> We are built with two motivational systems. One is called the *behavioral inhibition system* (…). This inhibition system is what helps us stay wary of novel situations, especially those that carry the risk of harm or punishment. (…) The *behavioral activation system*, by contrast, is rooted in our brains' pleasure centers and is all about beginning or processing toward goals. (…) Those with a high courage quotient often know when it is best to work on controlling their fear and when it is wiser to try to muster the will to act. [309]

These systems are binary and define the ways in which we act upon fear, as opposed to physiologically respond to it. The behavioral inhibition system seems to be linked to the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system: it is ruled by fear. The behavioral activation, however, is linked to the parasympathetic branch: we are still answering to fear, but once our body has calmed down, we can make conscious decisions about the situation. The two systems do not interact with each other as they are opposed and cannot be used at the same time. When we use the behavioural inhibition system, we are more likely to step away from dangerous situations and allow fear to guide our actions. Our instinct tells us that flight is the safest course of action. On the other hand, when we use the behavioral activation system, the actions we take are in spite of fear. We consciously go towards dangerous situations, in ways that Biswas-Diener qualifies as courageous, as long as we are able to assess that we have the abilities to do so.[310] Indeed, as Johnstone states:

> We all have some special area we reserve for 'risk-taking': we shop-lift, or hang-glide, or break the speed limit, or gamble, or get drunk, or procrastinate, or deceive our lovers, or climb mountains. But only fools take risks that are suicidal.[311]

Using the behavioural activation system to show courage, therefore, can only be done if we have the expert ability to assess dangerous situations and acknowledge whether we have the skills to face them. This is a conscious process, an expert deliberation process.

The chart below provides a summary of the concepts above:

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[309] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.11.
[310] Jeffrey S. Simmons, Robert D. Dvorak and Cathy Lau-Barraco, "Behavioral Inhibition and Activation Systems: Differences in Substance Use Expectancy Organization and Activation in Memory", *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: Journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2009, pp.315–328. Available from: Researchgate, (accessed 15 November 2017).
[311] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.66.

Courage	Behavioural Inhibition System
The systems of courage rely on all types of memory and work in opposing ways. They cannot work simultaneously. In order to be brave, one has to temper the Inhibition System and let the Activation System take over.	*Processes new information and links it to negative memories stored in implicit long-term memory. It does not interact with the Behavioural Activation System. However, it is linked to the fear systems and triggers defensive behaviour.*
	Behavioural Activation System
	Processes new information and links it to positive memories stored in the implicit long-term memory. It does not interact with the Behavioural Inhibition System. It is the system activated when we seek a reward or a positive outcome.

While the notion of courage, as we are about to see in more detail, is philosophically subjective, the main idea that emerges from these theories is that vulnerability can be found in fear, and that while fear does not always bring about courage, courage is always born out of fear. However, our reasons to be courageous vary and can be biased. Biswas-Diener makes a distinction between general and personal courage, which he sums up in the following chart:

	General courage	Personal courage
Comparison group	Others.	Self.
Why is the act courageous?	You face an obvious risk.	You overcome a personal limitation.
Is the same act courageous if performed by another person?	Yes.	No.

Is fear present?	Sometimes.	Yes.

Personal courage is only linked to one's egocentric bias, i.e.: 'Which of my own fears am I overcoming?' On the other hand, in situations of general courage, risk is 'obvious' to others. This implies that the perception of courage can be biased and influenced by factors such as personal experience, culture or context.

iii. Personal Courage in Improvisational Theatre

I shall begin by studying personal courage and its manifestations in improvisational theatre. In Bieswas-Diener's notion of personal courage, a personal fear is overcome. In Broderick's case, which I studied in the context of immediate threats, it would be the fear of not being able to access the crowd. In the 'What's In Your Pocket?' at the Brixton academy example, he cannot access the crowd. However, as the song progresses, he allows his behavioural activation system to take over and prevents his behavioural inhibition system to prevent him from thinking clearly. He finds solutions to the issue he is facing: he stalls his verses by repeating fillers such as, "This is how we do it/Yes, you see" while he is waiting for an item to be thrown to him, and even includes invitations to throw objects at him in his rhymes. He also makes use of a security man to relay items, which he then throws back into the crowd, trusting audience members to return it to their respective owners.[313] What Broderick is doing can be read as both personal and general courage. In terms of personal courage, what is doing is courageous because he overcomes a personal fear which has been generated by the difficult conditions and is intrinsic to his own act. However, anyone unaware of his existing fear of not being able to access the crowd would not see this as a form of courage.

According to Biswas-Diener, Broderick overcomes his personal fear through "a belief in [his] own mental prowess", which is "a potent tool to increase courage."[314] Biswas-Diener believes that those who have practised their ability to believe in their mental prowess are able, in the face of fear, to:

> 1. *Reestablish your personal narrative*. This means shifting your

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[312] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.15.

[313] *Abandoman – 'What's In Your Pocket?' - Live @ The Brixton Academy (Official)*, online video, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v77X-sJ748E, (accessed 19 August 2016).

[314] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.76.

focus away from an overwhelming situation and back upon yourself.

2. *Narrate the duress*. This means making sense of the situation by understanding who the players are, what motives are afoot, and how you fit in.

3. *Create a collective narrative*. This means shifting your understanding away from personal fears and towards a sense of collective responsibility: 'We have to do something.'[315]

These abilities can be seen as strategies for personal courage, which have links to expertise and the strategies against vulnerability I studied in the previous chapter. Reestablishing personal narrative implies trusting expert intuition. Narrating the duress is about making assumptions about the scene, the story, relationships with other performers, the structure of the show. In other words, it is the ability to be consciously aware of the parameters of the performance, with the aim to be able to make expert decisions. This leads to creating a collective narrative, the establishing of cognitive consensus essential to collaborative creativity. Again, the latter also implies that connection is an essential element of courage.

In 2015, Broderick mentioned that his pre-show routine is to rap for 30 minutes, and that he is consequently not worried about his own ability to come up with rhyming verses on the spot.[316] He believes in his own skills, in his own mental prowess. As stated before, he trusts his expert intuition. Consequently, he is indeed able to reestablish his personal narrative (he knows that he is a skilled improviser). He is also able to narrate the duress. He knows that the difficulty lies in accessing the objects he needs, which are located in the crowd, while attempting to improvise a rap song and follow the music being played by the two musicians behind him. He also quickly assesses who can help him access objects and he knows the musicians are able to understand when he is stalling verses to gain time. Finally, he creates a collective narrative by actively involving not only the audience, but the security staff in throwing items to him: he makes a connection and achieves a form of cognitive consensus in which the audience and staff understand what he expects of them. Everybody is involved and responsible for the success of his performance.

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[315] Ryan Quinn and Monica Worline, "Enabling Courageous Collective Action: Conversations from United Airlines Flight 93", *Organisation Science*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2008, cited in Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.90-91.
[316] Robert Broderick, 2015.

iv. General Courage in Improvisational Theatre

Let us now consider Broderick's actions as general courage. While he demonstrates personal courage in overcoming a personal fear, he is also facing an objectively dangerous situation in trusting his audience to help. Trust implies a high degree of uncertainty. Nevertheless, he invites the crowd to help. This is not the only form of general courage he shows. Courageous acts can take many forms. Biswas-Diener mentions a scale of worthiness which ranges from finishing a task to risking one's life for others.[317] While Broderick does not go as far as saving anyone's life, he is nonetheless finishing the task he had set himself. Before this, even simply walking up on stage is a courageous act, that audience members, the onlookers, would not want to try out for themselves. As previously discussed, improvisers face many objectively risky situations when they step on stage. These situations are not only personal limitations, they are also perceived as dangerous by the onlooker. Therefore, when Broderick walks up on stage and does not give up on the show despite the hurdles he is facing, it is an objective risk, and therefore it is objectively courageous.

Another example of both personal and general courage can be found in the previous section of this chapter. When Steen and Frost disregarded the rules of the 'emotions' game they were playing, they also disregarded their personal fear of the uncertain and their behavioural inhibition system, allowing their behavioural activation system as well as their intuitive system of decision making to take charge. They did it because, as Steen explained, they knew they could because they had done it before and received positive feedback. Biswas-Diener mentions the ability to be disobedient in certain situations as brave.[318] In terms of general courage, they showed disobedience to rules that the audience were aware of. Their transgression was therefore obvious and courageous.

What varies is the degree of danger and courage which is granted by the onlooker. Indeed, Biswas-Diener explains that general courage needs witnesses to exist. This implies that the same action may not be seen as courageous, or as having the same level of courage, by two different onlookers. We may, for instance, see a given action as more courageous depending on the social role of the person

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[317] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.6.
[318] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.98-99.

performing it, or their age.[319] In the case of improvisational theatre, spectators who see the same improvisers repeatedly may not find what they do as impressive and courageous as they did when they first starting attending improvised shows. This is part of the notion of reading a performance as part of a performer's overall career, as discussed in the previous section on loss of reputation. What would not be seen as courageous, however, is facing risky situations without the right skills. The ability to be courageous is also linked to practice and training.[320] It is, for instance, undeniable that risking one's life for others the way firefighters do is morally valued. Yet, there is a fine line between this and jumping into a lake to rescue someone drowning without knowing how to swim. This is what is described to school children as dangerous instead of brave. Therefore, part of courage would require an awareness of one's own skills and a form of expertise.

v. Awareness and Expertise

The examples of courage I have studied raised the question of awareness. First, improvisers must look inward and assess whether they can overcome a risky situation alone or need help. In Lawrence's case, she was able to assess her inability to overcome failure alone. She was also aware that she was feeling afraid, but consciously disregarded her behavioural inhibition system and allowed her behaviour activation system to take over in order to take positive action in a situation of risk and be courageous. She reached out and connected as a result. The awareness also comes from the audience, who are able to assess, with more or less accuracy the levels of risk and danger faced by improvisers. I shall return to this in the next chapter. For now I shall focus on what improvisers can exert expertise over.

Improviser Phelim McDermott also demonstrates his awareness of the fear element of improvisation. He comments on an interaction between two performers during a workshop:

> There's a moment here where there's an interaction and they are playing the space between each other and one of the performers kind of hits an edge. They reach a point of vulnerability maybe and they back off from it. She goes "This is a bit scary" and she checks out […] It's a demonstration of how a game or the space can lead you into a space where you might have to do something that your conscious mind

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[319] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.96.
[320] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.9.

wouldn't necessarily choose to do. Attending to the space is an exciting
way of putting yourself into these moments of vulnerability.[321]

McDermott offers a definition of bravery. The performer in difficulty is strongly rejecting her intuitive decision-making system's suggestion of what action to take. Her behavioural inhibition system, triggered by her fear of uncertainty, takes over and causes her to 'go the other way', to avoid vulnerability. However, McDermott suggests that instead, she should deliberately embrace vulnerability, treat it as 'ordinary', as Johnstone suggests. We find the idea of accepting the potential for failure: the performer must accept her fear and not block it off, be aware of the risk she is taking and embrace it. Then, the body can activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, return to a calmer state, and expert decisions can be made. Going even further, the improviser needs to fail on purpose, to put herself in 'moments of vulnerability.' This is the price to pay to achieve cognitive ease, as Kahneman explained that allowing oneself to be more intuitive, and therefore more prone to letting cognitive heuristics take over, leads to better creativity. This is something that Biswas-Diener also classes as courageous, the act of failing 'on purpose'. [322] Brown's book begins with a quote from Theodore Roosevelt, in which he talks about 'the man who is actually in the arena, […] who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly'.[323] The implication is that there is (general) courage in taking risks, regardless of the outcome, because the work being put in is laudable.

Taking the idea of embracing failure even further, Phelim McDermott explains that in improvisation, 'you have to allow failure to happen in order to create something new, whereas going back to what you know is successful is just repeating what you already know'.[324] 'Going back to what you know' is what Johnstone's student did in choosing a word he thought was safe, 'Cabbage', and would not appear too imaginative. His lack of practice meant that he did not have the necessary tools to believe in his mental prowess, in his ability to take risks. Improvisers have to take risks and accept offers in order to create a scene. In this case, the offer is the

[321] Phelim McDermott, *Phelim McDermott at the Jerwood Space*, recorded by Dick McCaw, London, 2001.
[322] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p. 121-132.
[323] Theodore Roosevelt, "Citizenship in a Republic", speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, 23 April 1910, cited in Brené Brown, 2015, p. 1.
[324] Phelim McDermott, interviewed by Dick McCaw, 2003-2005.

offer of failure. It means accepting the uncertain and the fear that surrounds it in order to go into new creative territories. Ridout describes such an instance, after a performer has performed the 'Angel of Death' strategy silently I discussed earlier, calling for help from other performers:

> The most glorious moments of performance were those when the rescuer, entering to save the show, entered in a state of already full-blown Fiasco, found herself on stage with nothing, laughing at the absence of anything to perform and pointing at the fact that she had nothing to offer. The pleasure an audience takes in such moments is far from schadenfreude. Perhaps it is closer to the connoisseur's delight as seeing how the mechanism works at the moment of breakdown.[325]

Here, the new creative territory is not the development of a scene. It is an insight into the workings of performance that the audience is granted access to. The improvisers involved are allowed to fail – and they allow themselves to fail – and acknowledge failure as part of the performance. What is also in the subtext is what Biswas-Diener describes as reasons to be courageous: 'You lose esteem in the eyes of others when you do not perform well, face your fear, or take a risk. Shame may be sufficient to overcome your fear'.[326] The loss of esteem, bad public feedback or 'rejection' makes people feel vulnerable and is their motor to take courageous action. I argue, as Biswas-Diener writes, that beyond this, accepting failure in improvisation is deliberately risking shame in order not to avoid, but to overcome fear. It is adopting a risk-seeking led attitude as opposed to a risk-avoidance led one.

American politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez provides a more contemporary closing remark than Roosevelt:

> Vulnerability is something I am proud of. In many ways, I see it as a coat or arms. If we are unafraid to cry, to acknowledge our mistakes, to fall down and get back up, to offer a vision so ambitious that it makes the short-sighted laugh. If we are brave enough to be human in front of the whole world, then what can our detractors really do? What do we have to be afraid of when we lift our own veil? The answer is nothing. Nothing at all.[327]

She speaks or overcoming fear and being brave through embracing shame. She does not simply want to 'dare greatly', she negates the possibility of failure if she is being

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[325] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.148.
[326] Robert Biswas-Diener, 2012, p.36.
[327] Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@ocasio2018), "Vulnerability", *Instagram*, 26 April 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BwsxHYxhLNz/, (accessed 14th August 2019).

true to herself and honest. And this is true of what happened in the 'Angel of Death' performance: failure was not truly failure because it was welcomed by all parties involved. The audience, the onlookers and potential detractors, were appreciative of the honesty of the performers who were offering their own shame instead of succumbing to fear.

d. Conclusion

One of the key notions that emerges from the findings in this chapter is that of balance. To deal with fear effectively, expertly, is to balance out many things: intuitive and deliberate responses; risk and gain; connection and disconnection; inaction and strategies. Similarly to chapter 3, this balance can be studied through the differences between the known theory of improvisation and its contemporary practice. First of all, Johnstone advocates acknowledging fear as a normal part of the creative process. What I have studied is that there is an objectivity to the danger faced by improvisers, whether it manifests itself in the form of an uncertain threat (failure or exposure) or an immediate threat (technical difficulties or physical harm). These threats can affect improvisers strongly, as they cannot fall back onto the safety of a script or a rehearsed routine. In these situations, fear and its physiological responses cannot be controlled.

Johnstone mentions consequences of fear taking over such as not being spontaneous enough. What is missing is a word for the one notion that ties together the many consequences, and that word is: disconnection. First, fear disconnects improvisers from the creative process, it freezes the moment and triggers a fight or flight response which takes the individual away from the action. Fear also disconnects improvisers from other improvisers involved in the scene. They become focused on saving themselves from failure and do not reach for help. Finally, fear disconnects improvisers from their audience. It creates a vulnerability loop whereby spectators feel embarrassed on behalf of the improviser who does not have the skills to overcome their fear and withdraw their support.

In order to counteract the effects of fear, Johnstone's strategy is to use progressive desensitisation. It involves making improvisers more and more comfortable with fear, particularly by tricking them into believing that the risk they are taking is higher than it really is. Inexperienced improvisers' fear of having the wrong response, of being 'unimaginative', is partly due to their inability to correctly

assess the benefits of being obvious, and therefore it makes sense to attempt to try and prevent them to focus on risk and their own feelings of fear. It gives new improvisers the push they need to stop anticipating consequences and start being creative. Yet, as established in the previous chapter, experienced improvisers can accurately assess risk. This means that Johnstone's theory is missing the idea that experienced improvisers can weigh out the benefits of an action against the risk at stake. This is what Steen does, for instance, when he willingly performs with improvisers he's never worked with or even met before for the sake of novelty.

What Johnstone omits is the possibility of making expert decisions in the face of fear, or at least, once the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system comes into play and returns the body to a calmer state. And the best course of action that is highlighted by Brown's work and contemporary practice of improvisation is to make a connection, to reach out and ask for help. This can be done in many ways. Some of those ways, such as apologising and being honest about failure are a form of damage control. It restores some sympathy from the audience after the event. Improvisers can also ask for help from the audience and encourage them to clap and support the improviser in difficulty. Another strategy to rescue an improviser who is failing and afraid is to put into place contracts with other improvisers, techniques such as the Angel of Death, for instance, or a simple understanding that others can take over if needed. In this case, expertise manifests itself in an improviser's ability to identify a need for connection. Communication is key in these situations, as well as facing fear rather than minimising or ignoring it.

What Steen's practice also shows is the possibility to use fear as a springboard for positive action, to take risks for the sake of creativity. Improvisers can show expertise in their ability to assess the levels of danger of a situation, the benefits of taking actions, and whether they have the right skills to act, in which case they can consciously decide to take a risk. This form of expert deliberation can be seen as courage. The notion of courage applies perfectly to a study of improvisational theatre and vulnerability. Indeed, it happens in the face of risk, uncertainty and fear, it requires expertise and is a form of control, of wilful action. Therefore, it ties together chapters 3 and 4. It adds a final strategy than improvisers can implement to overcome the vulnerability of spontaneous creativity. It also involves connection as courage needs witnesses to exist, but also because some of the acts of courage that improvisers can perform are acts of connection themselves

when they ask for help. To be courageous enables improvisers to take their creative endeavours further. This is the key that McDermott gives us: uncertainty and fear, and therefore courage, are necessary to create something new, original, and to access unbridled creativity. As Brown stated, there is nothing more vulnerable than to create something new. And therefore, a medium as spontaneous and intrinsically vulnerable as improvisation, where something new has to be created on the spot, is the perfect catalyst for courageous creative actions.

Moving forward, two notions bear further examining. Indeed, something that has emerged from this chapter is the importance of the audience in the process of overcoming fear. First, there is an awareness of the audience's ability to see the performer behind the character, and this is particularly true of improvisation where spectators return regularly. Spectators' perception is also essential in order to perform courage and they can also be trusted to help. As Ridout states, it is worth risking exposure in order to bring the audience in. They also appear to have an empathetic connection with improvisers as they feel embarrassed when they fail. As such, they cannot be left out of a comprehensive study of vulnerability in improvisational theatre, and therefore, the next chapter will focus on participation in improvisational theatre and both the consequences and benefits of involving the audience in the creative process.

The second notion which has begun to emerge is that of composing with vulnerability. While Johnstone does state that it is possible to perform fear as a 'ploy' to garner sympathy, he does not see it as an effective strategy. Yet, other improvisers use this strategy on a regular basis, as Simpson shows. This, in particular, is an essential point which raises the question of performing vulnerability, rather than simply experiencing it. And indeed, Spolin provides a link between exposure and art, when she explains that 'art is self-expression'. This means that the vulnerability of exposure can inscribe itself within the creative process. This is a first step towards an aesthetics of vulnerability, which I shall study in detail in chapter 6 of this thesis.

5. The Vulnerability of Participation

a. Introduction

In this chapter, I will study the manifestations of vulnerability that both improvisers and audience members face through participation. I will also study how improvisers communicate and connect with their audience and how participants can protect themselves and each other from the risks of participation. I do not propose to argue that participation in improvisational theatre presents radically new types of vulnerabilities compared to other genres of theatre, or that it is unique to improvisational theatre. Indeed, as White states: 'theatre is participatory in that audiences are needed to convey theatricality and witness art in action, or in the case of improvisation, in the making.'[328] What I will argue is unique are the strategies that improvisers use to deal with the vulnerability of participation.

White also defines participation as 'the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance'.[329] The phrase 'in the action of a performance' implies a broad spectrum of involvement, from letting audience members walk around the venue (such as *Punchdrunk*'s productions) or being active participants in the making of a performance, to more controlled forms of involvement such as 'participation on stage in ways that are controlled and almost risk-free, and the use of suggestions by participants to be enacted by performers'.[330] The latter two possibilities are White's summary of Johnstone's preferred degrees of participation, degrees which seem to belong at the bottom of the involvement spectrum. While White seems to believe that this leaves little room for 'risk', he nonetheless uses the word 'almost', implying that there are still possible risks linked to lesser degrees of participation, and therefore room for vulnerability.

The mere thought of participation can make spectators feel vulnerable. White writes:

> The prospect of audience participation makes people fearful; the use of audience participation makes people embarrassed, not only for themselves but for the theatre makers who choose to inflict it on their

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[328] Gareth White, 2013, pp.2-3.
[329] Gareth White, 2013, p. 3.
[330] Gareth White, "Odd Anonymized Needs: Punchdrunk's Masked Spectator", in *Modes of Spectating,* Alison Oddey (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, p.226.
Gareth White, 2013, p.94.

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audiences.[331]

Those feelings of fear were the main focus of the previous chapter, and we can already see that they are closely linked to participation as well. White suggests that participation is viewed as negative, something to 'inflict' on audience members. He then explains that, as we established that improvisers face real vulnerabilities and fears in situations of creativity, spontaneity and liveness, these fears and vulnerabilities can be experienced and projected onto all participants of a performance:

> Audience participants are not professionals, so they do not put their reputations in jeopardy […], but they have reputations nevertheless, which can really and actually come to harm in a performance. In everyday life the risk of embarrassment has a disciplinary effect on people. We are under injunctions to control ourselves, to present performances of ourselves that fit the personae we present the world.[332]

While the loss of reputation was a tangible fear for improvisers in that their career rests on their image and quality of performance, it is true that audience members do not risk more than temporary loss of face which will not impact their life in the long-term. Nonetheless, it can lead to feelings of vulnerability through exposure of our private self. Indeed, White describes participation as 'up-close, responsive or invasive'.[333] 'Invasive' is a strong term, which does suggest discomfort. I will study the manifestations of this invasiveness.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I also approached the idea of bodily dissemination of knowledge as an improviser's way to share creative choices without the need for complex verbal communication. In this chapter, I want to apply this notion to the concept of communicating vulnerability. In doing so, I challenge Ridout's statement that vulnerability in the theatre manifests itself through 'the encounter with another person, in the dark, in the absence of communication'.[334] First, the concept of participation itself challenges the conventional separation of performers and their audience, the metaphorical fourth wall, and thus, uncertainty and potential chaos seep through. (I do not, however, suggest that improvisational theatre is the only form of theatre to challenge conventional divisions through

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[331] Gareth White, 2013, p.1.
[332] Gareth White, 2013, p.73.
[333] Gareth White, 2013, p.25.
[334] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.9.

participation, and this is not the matter at stake in this chapter.) Secondly, I offer the suggestion that communication does happen in non-complex verbal ways, and that this is how improvisers and their audience assess, more or less efficiently, each other's degrees of vulnerability and act accordingly. I have approached the idea that the theatrical encounter in improvisational theatre rarely happens 'in the dark', and this has implications of its own which I shall also discuss.

As I explained in the introduction of this thesis, works on mirror neurons provide a better understanding of non-verbal communication of and about vulnerability. Rizzolatti explains that mirror neurons enable us to recognise and remotely experience movement thanks to those neurons.[335] These findings have been applied to performance arts in the past, particularly in the field of dance, through the theory of kinesthetic empathy, i.e., a spectator's ability to feel movement as they witness it.[336] First, this shows that it is relevant to apply neuroscience theory to performing/participatory arts in order to understand non-verbal communication. Second, beyond movement, kinesthetic empathy and mirror neuron reactions have been linked to empathy and the sharing of affect.[337] In order to study the ways empathy and sharing of affect happen more specifically in participatory theatre, I shall also rely on the work of Erin Hurley in *Theatre and Feeling*, in which she deals with the emotions and affects which can be shared and explored through theatre.[338]

Finally, the most central work to this chapter is that of Gareth White in *Audience Participation in the Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, on participation in the theatre. He writes of his work as a systematic study which can be applied to 'audience participation of any kind'.[339] A great part of his work focuses on the risks faced by both spectators and performers of participatory theatrical forms. Importantly, he does not solely focus on the vulnerability of participation, but also on the responsibility of performers to protect their audience, although he does not go into details about the audience's responsibility towards the performers. In order to go further into this notion and fill the gaps in the manifestations of risk/vulnerability that

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[335] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Craighero, Laila, 2004.
Marco Iacoboni et al., 2005.
[336] "What is Kinesthetic Empathy"
Joslin McKinney, 2012.
[337] Marco Iacoboni et al, 2005.
Joslin McKinney, 2012.
[338] Erin Hurley, 2010.
[339] Gareth White, 2013, p.2.

White discusses, I shall rely the work of Johnstone, who developed many a strategy to protect improvisers from vulnerability, and to a certain extent, their audience. However, I will argue that Johnstone's school of improvisation does not encompass all the ways of making and the forms of participation which can be involved in the whole of improvisational theatre. In order to complement his work, I shall therefore also rely on interviews I conducted with improvisers and improvisation fans, as well as recordings and transcripts of improvised performances which show alternative ways to handle participation.

The first section of this chapter is thus concerned with manifestations of vulnerability in improvisation, from the vulnerabilities that audience members carry with them through their relationship with participation (whether they feel apprehensive or excited towards it), to the actual risks faced by all participants. The second section will deal with how vulnerability is communicated between them and how connection is achieved between performers and their audience to facilitate participation. This will allow me to transition into matters of protection. I shall discuss the ways in which improvisers not only protect themselves, but also the performance as a whole, from the excesses of participation, and how they can gain the trust and support of their audience.

b. Participation and Vulnerability in Improvisational Theatre

i. Holding on to Control

Improvisers takes risks when they allow participation. Who is in control, when and why is strongly linked to balancing risk in performance, and I want to discuss how this balancing manifests itself in improvisational theatre, including the reasons improvisers fear losing control of the performance parameters, the story-telling process and the audience's responses through participation. I will also argue that some attempts at controlling the involvement of the audience can be detrimental to the performance and their relationship with the audience. I have already discussed the notion of control in the previous chapters. So far, control had to do with expert responses to the intrinsic vulnerability of improvisational theatre, i.e., the vulnerability of uncertainty and risk. Improvisers were the only one exerting such control. In this chapter, I am interested in:

- the control of the parameters of the performance (e.g. the types of

suggestions allowed) the creative process and the quality of it, which is exerted by the improvisers;

- the control of the audience in the form of establishing rules and regulating responses, also exerted by the improvisers;

- the control that the audience have over their own involvement and the involvement of other members of the audience.

White mentioned control in his summary of Johnstone's degrees of participation in improvisational theatre. He describes the link between control and vulnerability as follows:

> When participatory theatre invites performances from audience members, it presents special opportunities for embarrassment, for mis-performance and reputational damage, such that the maintenance of control and the assertion of agency that protect this decorum is important to the potential audience participant, especially at the moment of invitation.[340]

Control, according to White, is a direct form of protection. He does not say who risks embarrassment or reputational damage, and consequently, it is safe to assume all participants face those risks. Therefore, if the strategy for negotiating the vulnerability of participation is the assertion of control, it implies some form of power game between participants. Improvisers may have to relinquish some of the control they exert over the performance to allow the audience to have some agency, for instance. Conversely, audience members could accept to be put in a situation of risk by the performers for the sake of entertainment, in which case, 'both [parties] give up some of the control they might expect to have over their part of the event'.[341]

Before improvisers learn to let go of control, their attempts to hold on to it can be detrimental to their performance. This is linked to the notion of reputational harm I discussed in the previous chapter, a risk faced through failure in situations of spontaneity and through self-exposure. In the context of participatory performances, White writes:

> Participation is risky for […] practitioners too: the presence of non-professional volunteers on the stage is a risk. […] Practitioners who are used to the conventional roles in the theatre will not find it easy to make the sacrifice that has to be made.[342]

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[340] Gareth White, 2013, p.73.
[341] Gareth White, 2013, p.3.
[342] Gareth White, 2013, p.73-74.

First of all, we encounter the notion of risk again, which can manifest itself in various forms such as reputational harm. Performers may be worried about handing over too much control to the audience and view it as a sacrifice. This relates to Biswas-Diener's notion of courage: performers must overcome their deep-seated fears related to participation in order to allow spectators to take part and provide material.

This is, however, not an easy process. After an experiment in which performers and spectators were involved in the same space, Joslin McKinney reported:

> At first the performers found it hard to hand over control to the audience because they worried about the performance losing shape and momentum. Often, around the mid-point, it did.[343]

Here, the fear of reputational harm lies in the potential loss of quality of the performance. If a spectator performs badly, it may reflect on the performers themselves, unable to correct the course of their action and restore quality. In the example above, the potential is real: the performance does lose quality, at least in the eyes of McKinney. The actions of the spectators, because they can be unpredictable, and because the spectator is involved in the same physical space as the performers, can very negatively impact the quality of the story-telling process. This is another form of uncertainty that improvisers have to face when allowing spectators to participate.

In the *Colin and Brad Two-Man Group*, Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood's improvisation double-act, they are particularly at risk of loss of control due to the high level of audience involvement in the games they play: they begin with a game in which spectators have to physically move them like puppets. They have to improvise the scene while two volunteers move their limbs or tap their legs to make them walk. Thus, they hand over a great deal of control to the spectators involved, not only because they give them the right to touch and move them, but because they have not selected them beforehand and do not know if they will be up to the task. This implies a tremendous amount of trust as well as a belief in their own skills and abilities to counter any mistake from the volunteers. And indeed, Mochrie and Sherwood have to rescue the scenes from the mis-performance of spectators on occasion. At the very

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[343] Joslin McKinney, 2012, p.12.

beginning of the game where volunteers have to move them, for instance, one of the spectators forgets that she has to help Sherwood to walk in. Sherwood can be heard backstage shouting louder and louder: 'Ding, dong! Ding-fricking-dong!' and Mochrie repeats: 'Walk in, walk in!' until the spectator understands that this is her cue to go and move Sherwood. [344]

Sherwood and Mochrie then move on to a sound effect game involving the entire audience, one spectator at a time. They entrust the audience with a microphone. One spectator makes a sound effect to go with the scene being improvised, then passes on the microphone to the person next to them, and so on.[345] This brings on an extra challenge: on top of dealing with the vulnerability of spontaneous creation, they have to deal with the unpredictability, as well as the confidence and skill disparity of the audience. The difficulty lies in having to simultaneously incorporate offers from the other performer and offers from the audience. There is potential for reputational harm in not succeeding to do so, like a magician failing to perform a trick.

Mochrie and Sherwood display a resourceful ability to overcome such issues. However, other improviser's perception of risk will affect how they handle this kind of situation. According to Stella Duffy, many will try and avoid participation:

> It can be very comfortable to be in bright light and not know who's out there. You know, it's quite a security blanket to not have to look at them. […] So, actually, there's something quite brave for a performer to take in that there's an audience there.[346]

Duffy is discussing lighting as a shield, a reinforcement of the fourth wall. The visual separation of improvisers and their audience, in this instance, is 'comfortable'. No risk of reputational harm is being taken, or at least, to Duffy, that risk is being conveniently ignored. On the other hand, to simply look at the audience and embrace all the potential risks that come with breaking the fourth wall – and eventually allowing active participation from the audience – is brave, though it is a difficult step to take in the face of fear.

Ironically, Johnstone, as a pioneer of improvisation and champion of overcoming one's fears of spontaneity as an improviser, did not offer any ideas about

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[344] The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group, 2011.
[345] The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group, 2011.
[346] Stella Duffy, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2016.

how to overcome the fear of participation. Johnstone, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, is a champion of 'being obvious' and allowing intuition to take control of the creative process. In doing so, he embraces the spontaneity of on the spot creativity. Yet, he criticises the uncertainty that comes with audience participation. He writes of the latter as improvisers 'enslaving themselves to the whim of aberrant individuals'.[347] This betrays a form of vulnerability in the face of participation and a strongly worded fear. He also does not seem to view improvisation audiences as literate, a view which can be explained by the lack of visibility of improvisation when he started working with the medium.

Turning to participation, Johnstone's strategy is to avoid it or control the parameters of it as tightly as possible. He advocates self-protection as a rule, encouraging improvisers, for instance, to 'never accept a suggestion that fails to inspire you, or that is degrading'.[348] Commenting on the limited use of suggestions in *Theatre Machine*, Roddy Maude-Roxby confirmed that this was indeed the underlying philosophy:

> We […] found that the audience tended to give unpleasant subjects or something like a gents' loo or something that you didn't want to do. So what we did more was that we did have a form where we individually spoke to an individual in the audience about a subject […] on their mind which concerned them – and they say: "Syria", or they might say their mother is in hospital or something. For doing that, you were informed about subjects to bring in, and the audience had heard them mentioned.[349]

They deprived the spectator of the safety of the crowd. This is because they know or assume that being hidden in the crowd can make individual spectators feel more inclined to be disruptive. Furthermore, they controlled the spectator's contribution by framing the suggestion. Participation, for Johnstone and the members of *Theatre Machine*, is a carefully managed, almost God-like grace bestowed upon audiences. The audience is allowed their moment of participation and a confirmation that the show is improvised. Yet, the performers protect themselves from the group of spectators by only allowing individual, carefully managed encounters that leave little place for disruption. While participation is allowed, it is controlled in a way that protects improvisers and saves them having to handle potential mis-performance

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[347] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.27.
[348] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.29.
[349] Roddy Maude-Roxby, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2016.

from the audience. To an extent, it protects the story-telling process but it also potentially limits the creative contributions from the audience.

ii. The Vulnerability of Removing the Fourth Wall

The risk of reputational harm is not the only reason improvisers can fear participation. I have found that the proximity of the audience to the improviser is also an important trigger of feelings of vulnerability, as Stella Duffy argued. Whether physical or more metaphorical, proximity has the power to induce fear in the mind of improvisers, reluctant to relinquish the control and safety offered by distance. Indeed, while improvisers have to face the vulnerability of being spontaneously creative, they now must also deal with the audience as a participant, which is yet another unpredictable element of a performance. This relates to the idea of removing the fourth wall, which I mentioned in relation to fear of exposure in the previous chapter. Indeed, through participation, improvisers directly address the audience and are directly addressed in return, thus breaking character repeatedly and breaking the fourth wall.

The most obvious manifestation of breaking the fourth wall in participation is the physical act of entering the audience's space. In the previous chapter, Steen mentioned the time a spectator wandered onto the stage with a knife in his hand, but the situation was facilitated by the setting rather than the participatory nature of the performance. In an interview for *Freestyle Rap,* Rob Broderick spoke about the consequences of gaining a bigger audience after performing as the first part of Ed Sheeran's tour:

> Sometimes I jump into the crowd to try and freestyle about, like, things in the crowd, and people would touch you in a way that I had to stop the show and that's just like, 'What are we doing here, people? What are we doing? […] do not be touching, that's not the show you're at. I am not your new teen idol. I'm no one's teen idol.'[350]

He is referring to his 'What's In Your Pocket' song, which I mentioned before. As a reminder, he asks spectators to hold objects up in the air, which he then uses in his improvisation. While he was walking around the audience, some spectators began to touch him, evidently believing there was no harm in doing so and assuming he was

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[350] Robert Broderick, interviewed by Sara Shulman, in "Rob Broderick interview with freestyle rap", *Humour Me Comedy Podcast*, 2013.

inviting them to, likely based on their knowledge, their literacy of concert conventions. However, Broderick saw it as harming his physical integrity and had to interrupt his performance to address it. This is in line with White's theory that the rules of participation can be confusing to spectators.[351] Nonetheless, neither I, nor the improvisers I have spoken to, have encountered situations of actual physical harm linked specifically to participation. The vulnerability that comes with the fear of physical harm is more likely to be linked to Kahneman's theory of risk aversion: the fear of what could happen is stronger than the actual risk itself. Nonetheless, there is also a heightened awareness of the presence of the audience and their own agency and ability to disrupt the show.

Allowing the audience to physically enter the performing space can also conjure up feelings of vulnerability. Michael Smith and Jenny Roche devised a dance performance aimed at exploring the notion of kinesthetic empathy. The audience was walking in the same space as the performers and given props to handle, placing, quite literally, some creative responsibility into their hands. One performer reported: 'I feel vulnerable being so close to the audience, as I have to trust and be open to sharing a moment with complete strangers'.[352] Trust and openness are linked to the idea of connection, or rather, disconnection, which Brown links to feelings of vulnerability. In *Daring Greatly*, she recalls the case of a man explaining to her that all his life, he tried to suppress feelings of shame brought up by being told to 'man up' and not be afraid as a young child. Eventually, he turned 'his fear and vulnerability into rage' and directed it at members of his family and his friends. [353] In other words, fear caused him to disconnect from the people who could have helped him. In the example above, the performer is aware of his need to connect to overcome his fear but finds it a difficult process, because he would have to potentially subject himself to personal judgement through being open, and relinquish control through trust. Closeness is both what he needs to achieve and what scares him, because he finds physical proximity uncomfortable.

In the case of improvisation, fear of closeness can also happen when one improviser is more comfortable breaking the fourth wall than the others, forcing

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[351] Gareth White, 2013, p.43.

[352] Michael Smith and Jenny Roche, "Perceiving the Interactive Body in Dance: Enhancing kinesthetic empathy through art objects" , *Body, Space & Technology, vol.14*, 2015, p.12.

[353] Brené Brown, 2015, p.97-98.

them to deal with a degree of involvement that they were not comfortable with. Such an instance happened when Mike Myers guested with the Comedy Store Players in 2011. During an improvised musical, he walked into the audience to get them to play villagers with him. While he was being their main voice and merely encouraging them to repeat a few interjections, the other performers were visibly uncomfortable and broke character to tell him to come back on stage. Unfortunately, by asking him to return to the performing space, they also disconnected themselves from what could have been an interesting moment of participation.[354] Myers' closeness with the audience was a display of fearlessness as well as an act of courage which was not acknowledged by all participants in the moment. The offer he was making was blocked, and the story had to be stopped and resumed at a different point in the emerging plot. It is clear, therefore, that fear of participation is present in even seasoned improvisers.

This is directly linked to Kahneman's theory of risk-taking and risk aversion which I discussed in the previous chapter. As we saw then, inexperienced improvisers tend to fear risk to the point of supressing their intuitive response to creativity. The principle at stake in participation is the same: a higher perception of the potentially negative effects of closeness (the cockroach and cherries issue) can lead to the refusal to take part in it.[355] Ultimately, a performer's perception of what is too close or too risky is potentially flawed and more likely to trigger fear than the real consequences attached to the situation. Proximity through the breaking of the fourth wall and risk-perception are at the heart of the feelings of vulnerability that an improviser experiences.

iii. The Vulnerability of Direct Address

Linked to the removal of the fourth wall is the notion of direct address. Mochrie commented on his own brand of improvisation's use of space: 'No part of a theatre is safe from an improviser, you use it for whatever your horrible needs are'.[356] It is very clear from the first game in Mochrie and Sherwood's show that not only will volunteers be required, but that people who may have felt safe further away

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[354] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 3 July 2011.
[355] Daniel Kahneman, 2012, p.302
[356] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

from the stage may also be required to participate. This may be in order to hear a broader variety of suggestions, or to make the spectators who attempt to shout out obscenities from the back of the room contribute more intelligently. As Steen commented, this strategy does not always work. Requesting participation from spectators who openly display their intention not to participate may be an attempt at enforcing a wave of participation. Whether this is always successful or not, games that involve a microphone circulating around the room seem to democratise the participation process, giving everyone a say, which is the opposite of Johnstone's strategy of limiting participation. Mochrie's choice of word, mentioning lack of safety and 'horrible needs' is not so much a reflection of his intentions as an improviser as a reflection of what audience members may be feeling in anticipation of how much involvement will be required of them.

Another manifestation of proximity in participation is direct address. To explain why this makes audience members feel vulnerable, White, summarising Ridout's thoughts, writes:

> [Nicholas Ridout] considers his own embarrassment when he catches the eye of a performer directly addressing him, an unease caused by his inability to place himself, either as a fellow performer with a duty to maintain the fictional narrative, or as a spectator who has become invisible to the circuit of reception that usually operates in the theatre.[357]

In terms of physical space, the idea of 'placing' oneself relates to that of spectators deliberately sitting at the front or the back of the room, for instance. As discussed previously, this can be a way for an individual member of the audience to disconnect themselves from the wave of participation. They do not want to be part of a group and be subjected to the same rules, often out of fear or misunderstanding. Again, this is a process of deliberate disconnection. Direct address from improvisers to individual spectators can also disconnect them from the group. This is what Johnstone and *Theatre Machine* did in order to keep audience disruptions under control. This time, the disconnection process isn't under the spectator's control.

The direct address that comes with participation also contributes to the confusion of the rules of participation. In the citation above, Ridout as an audience member is unsure what degree of involvement and responsibility is expected of him as he is not a performer in the show. He is also feeling disconnected from the rest of

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[357] Gareth White, 2013, p.226.

the audience. Ridout cannot 'place' himself, he does not know what his role is. Susan Bennett writes of the audience of the *People Show*, who are in the light during the performance: 'Individual spectators felt threatened by the light playing conditions and the gazes of the actors, the audience remained fragmented and alienated'.[358] Not everyone feels comfortable even giving suggestions from the back of a room for fear of exposure, but the lighting, as Bennett describes, can heighten this fear.

During the 2016 London Palladium run of *Whose Live Is It Anyway*, the stage show adapted from the concept of the TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?,* whenever a spectator was giving a suggestion, technicians shone a light on them while they were handed a microphone in order for the suggestion to be heard. According to Kerri Clegg who attended as a spectator, the spotlight made the people giving suggestions vulnerable, exposed, and put off others from volunteering at all. Consequently, it became more and more difficult for the performers to convince the audience to participate at all. She stated that spectators do not tend to want to be in the literal spotlight. They are happy to participate with suggestions but do not aspire – at least in her case – to the same level of exposure as improvisers who, as I discussed before, have learnt to handle said exposure.[359]

Putting a member of the audience on the spot is not limited to occasional suggestions. Again, Mochrie and Sherwood, as well as Abandoman, go so far as to invite spectators onto the stage to be more available providers of material in scenes. This gives much more responsibility to all participants: the performers have to jointly decide when to start the improvisation and how, while the spectator is not only used to provide material, but is also physically singled out from the audience and left to decide what their 'place' is. In Mochrie and Sherwood's show, they can be actively involved in the ongoing creative process, while not being completely a performer either, which is the state that Ridout found embarrassing and uncomfortable. In Abandoman's shows, they are often left to stand on stage while Broderick sings to and about them. They are not instructed to perform, but they are not instructed to do nothing either. I have witnessed a man attempt to sing some verses with Broderick, but I have also witnessed another awkwardly standing and bobbing his head to the

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[358] Susan Bennett, 1997, p.153.
[359] Kerri Clegg, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2016.

music, visibly embarrassed.[360] He had been made the butt of a joke during the introduction to the song, and this had set him apart from the crowd even more. Physical disconnection, particularly without a clear idea of what their place, their role in the overall performance is, makes spectators feel uneasy, embarrassed, vulnerable.

Lastly, I wish to come back to the feeling of 'duty' that Ridout felt in relation to direct address. This is another confusion of the degree of involvement expected of the audience. McKinney, commenting on the audience's experience of her study, writes:

> Some felt inhibited by what they perceived to be the expectations on the part of the performance makers and their anxieties about fulfilling them; whilst others felt their actions would be inconsequential in the face of what they suspected must be a pre-determined plan. Even though both of these reactions might be considered negative responses they arise, nonetheless, from empathetic awareness. In both cases the participants were trying to picture the intentions of the performers and director.[361]

First, she repeats the idea that spectators can feel disconnected from both performers and fellow audience-members in the moment of participation, being neither fully in charge of the creative process (like Mochrie and Sherwood's volunteers, who can contribute but are not performers), nor passive witnesses (like Broderick's spectators, left to stand on stage, who attempt to fill the void and find their place in the performance unfolding in front of them). But more interestingly, he introduces the idea of expectations and the 'anxieties' that come with them. Audience members are afraid of doing the wrong thing, of being too little or too much involved in the process. A volunteer too eager to perform instead of, rather than with, improvisers would have to be reminded of the rules of participation and who is in charge of the story-telling process. A spectator who stands on stage saying nothing when they are asked questions puts the performer in an uncomfortable position, having to either become more forceful or choose someone else. At the heart of this is the idea that vulnerability, once again, is about risk assessment, but in this case, there is no clear answer and spectators have to make a guess and act on it, never fully knowing if they got it right. There is also another idea that emerges from this: that vulnerability can be communicated through empathy and that participants could potentially, if not

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[360] *Abandoman*, improvised performance, The Black Box Theatre, Galway, 25 October 2014.
[361] Joslin McKinney, 2012, p.11.

fully, grasp the improvisers' intentions and gauge their level of vulnerability. I shall return to this in the second half of this chapter.

iv. Mishandling Participation

Johnstone's strategy in handling participation appears to be driven by fear, but this fear stems from the very tangible risk of disruption. The fear of losing control of the story-telling process can result in making risk-averse choices, resulting in mishandling interactions with the audience. While Johnstone's experience of improvisational theatre audiences seems to inform his view that they are not to be trusted with participation, Mochrie and Sherwood's audience, however, is more likely to be familiar with the games being played thanks to the popularity of *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, the television show which brought fame to comedy improvisation. Both Mochrie and Sherwood appeared very regularly on the show, and the games they play are often very similar to those played on *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. In their show, in the introduction to their sound effect game, Mochrie says to his volunteer: 'Jeff, you obviously know what the game is, or you wouldn't have volunteered, that would be embarrassing.'[362] Jeff, indeed, quickly demonstrates that he is confident in participating and understands what is asked of him. There is nonetheless a true risk. Performing the same games in Galway in 2017, the double act encountered a lot of reluctance and silence from the audience when they tried to interact with them.[363] This has the potential to harm the performers' professional reputation in not giving them anything to perform with, in a format that needs participation to fuel creativity. It also comes back to the idea of cultural differences in the face of participation that White approached. Steen comments:

> American audiences are more eager to be the centre of attention. British audiences are more reserved. They're happier shouting stuff out in the dark from the back of the room.[364]

Mistakes in understanding these cultural differences can bring on a challenge to the performers who find themselves standing on stage with no back up material. Similarly, performing for corporate audiences can be a challenge. Broderick

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[362] The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group, 2011.
[363] *The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group,* improvised performance, Galway Vicar Street, Galway, October 2016.
[364] Steve Steen, 2017.

explains, for instance, that they are not necessarily in the mood for participation, being distracted by eating a meal.[365] The skills at stake are to do with the ability to bounce back from those challenges in order to reassert control and mastery. I shall discuss what those skills are in the second part of this chapter.

Participation, and the potential confusion of its rules, can also invite in feedback that would not necessarily be openly shared during the performance. Writing of working-class audiences, John McGrath stated:

> Working-class audiences demand more moment-by-moment effect from their entertainers. If an act is not good enough they let it be known, and if it's boring they chat amongst themselves until it gets less boring, or they leave, or they throw things.[366]

While feedback is an important indicator of quality, heckling in improvisational theatre is disruptive. Chatting also happens often. At the Comedy Store, Andy Smart often addresses it with: 'Don't you hate it when you sit down to have a chat and someone builds a comedy club around you?'[367] Although the purpose of this thesis is not to study the demographics of improvisational theatre audience, improvisation as a form has spread outside of conventional theatrical spaces to cabaret, clubs or the street, inviting in audiences from various walks of life. This makes McGrath's general idea applicable to improvisational theatre: that through participation and the openness of the performing spaces, unwelcome feedback can be shared in the moment and disturbances are more likely to occur.

In improvisational theatre, audience members often do not know whether they are invited to give feedback during scenes or not. The invitation to participate is made from the start and often renewed, but it can also, as White implies, be confusing.[368] The Comedy Store Players do not, for instance, explain to their audience that they are *not* to interject during games. In the introduction, they make the audience practice shouting out suggestions, but do not ask them *not* to heckle. They only address disruption as it happens. Unfortunately, fear of escalation can influence improvisers' understanding of certain interjections. And indeed, the risk can be real. Colin Mochrie told me that 'there are some people who want to be a part

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[365] Robert Broderick, 2016.
[366] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form,* 1981, London: Nick Hern Books, 1996, p.57.
[367] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 7 January 2018.
[368] Gareth White, 2013, p.43.

of a show in a way that's not really conducive to the enjoyment of the audience'.[369] Most of the time, these are spectators who, like in the example with Broderick, don't understand the rules and conventions of improvised performances and believe that they are entitled to perform as much as the improvisers on stage or interact in ways that are not acceptable or respectful. They compete with them to be funnier, shouting out rude suggestions, for instance. Others heckle, which is something spectators often do in stand-up but is frowned upon in improvisational theatre. Often, the misapprehension of risk can cause improvisers to overreact. In an attempt to deal with such an instance, Richard Vranch once told a member of the audience off for heckling during a game.[370] The spectator immediately replied, visibly upset: 'I was just showing you my appreciation.' She then took a long time to begin laughing with others again, clearly feeling disconnected from the performance, but also singled out from the audience. Her public self was harmed, being called out as a disruptive element. According to White, her upset is justified:

> People are likely to employ defensive practices in avoiding public performance, and, to a degree, have a right to expect that theatre practitioners will demonstrate some tact in the way they engage with their participants, that they should take some steps to protect their dignity.[371]

The interaction with Vranch did two things. First, it forced the spectator into the spotlight and triggered defensiveness. Second, it betrayed an expectation to be treated with care and respect. While Vranch did not wilfully disrespect her, she thought that her intentions were clear and that she should have been given the benefit of the doubt. What caused Vranch's defensiveness in this instance was not the situation itself, but his perception of risk.

While the consequences affecting Vranch were not clear in the moment, the situation was equally negative for him. A misjudgement in the need to discipline a member of the audience (a real need in many cases, as I shall study later on) made him seem uninviting and unfair as an improviser and facilitator of participation. He reacted instinctively, allowing his fear system to overtake his decision-making process. To some extent, he also lost control of participation, as the spectator's

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[369] Colin Mochrie, interviewed by Chloé Arros, 2016.
[370] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 13 May 2015.
[371] Gareth White, 2013, p.77.

response was not what he expected. This demonstrates, again, a form of vulnerability in having to make simultaneously creative decisions and decisions concerning the handling of participation. In this case, mistakes are not beneficial as they can be to creativity. Not only this, but the audience member did not perform as expected by the improviser, and the improviser did not perform as expected by the spectator.

v. The Audience's Mood

In this section, I will focus on the audience's mood, linked to their apprehension of participation, how it contributes to spectators' feelings of vulnerability and how it can affect performances. I have approached this already when I discussed how certain spectators come to the show with the intention to disconnect themselves from the performance by sitting at the back of the room, for instance. It is important to understand that the risks taken in participatory performances are also influenced by 'the perception of risk in the minds of the participants'.[372] This perception is influenced by the participants' mood, 'their expectations of, dispositions towards and prior experiences of theatre and audience participation' (which includes their literacy in the genre they are attending).[373] To begin with, 'mood' relates to the emotional state spectators display during the performance. As defined by Hurley, it 'prepares us for the specific affective and emotional responses' of performance.[374]. Steen explains that some audience members come to improvised performances in a defensive mood: 'Some people are stubborn, they sit back with their arms folded', they refuse to participate 'because they're too "intelligent" to join in. Usually, the best response is to tell them: "I think you're in the wrong show mate". Others are just plain terrified because they don't have a full understanding of what's being required.'[375] These emotional predispositions, whether due to defensiveness, feeling like participation would be belittling, or a misunderstanding of the rules of participation, can prevent spectators from enjoying the performance. In this respect, they disconnect themselves from the audience as a group and stand out as individuals.

The expectations surrounding participation that White mentions will be

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[372] Gareth White, 2013, p.77.
[373] Gareth White, 2013, p.81 & 118.
[374] Erin Hurley, 2010, p.21.
[375] Steve Steen, 2020.

affected by the type of participation at stake and how it is presented to audience members. For instance, some forms of participatory theatre, such as pantomime, have very well-known and defined conventions for participation, which means that spectators know what is expected of them.[376] They come to the performance already literate in its workings. In this instance, there is little vulnerability to be expected: a clear frame, a fairly removed type of involvement – because they are usually performed in large proscenium arch theatres with a darkened audience – and a willingness to take part with the security of not being asked to perform or be original.

While audience members can indeed feel comfortable with participating when they feel confident in what is asked of them, literacy in what participation could entail at its worse could also induce fear – or at least, apprehension – in their minds. Helen Freshwater gives the example of the *Blue Men Group*, describing that audience members in their shows 'are coerced, rather than liberated; manipulated, rather than emancipated; instead of agency, they receive entrapment'.[377] Knowing about such genres of performing arts that work at the expense of audience members may make the latter fearful to take part or anxious that they may be part of a trick without realising it. I have encountered many instances of audience members being fearful before an improvised performance. Interestingly, these were always people who had never been to an improvised show before, hence lacking the necessary literacy, but had, in majority, been to comedy clubs to see stand-up shows, in which heckling (and subsequent defence/attack from the comedian) has become conventional. Therefore, it would be fair to assume that those audience members know that there is a possibility of being picked on.

This fear of being picked on or humiliated can have negative effects on the spectators' reception of the performance and project a certain degree of vulnerability onto performers, as Ridout states:

> The audience now share an additional set of reasons for harbouring latent antipathy towards the performer. Each of them has paid money to see a performance at a specified time. […] Furthermore, the actor herself is acutely aware that her own specialised professional career depends, to a greater degree than in the past, on the approbation of the public.[378]

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[376] Gareth White, 2013, p.41.
[377] Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p.65.
[378] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.51.

Audience members expect to be entertained. They may be seeking a certain amount of thrill. Indeed, Ben Walmsley lists having a 'visceral response' as one reason that drives people to the theatre. However, they want that thrill to be entertaining and worth their time and money[379]. This has a direct influence on performers' risk of loss of reputation, which I studied in the previous chapter. Audiences who experience negative feelings towards participation are less likely to enjoy the performance. They will judge improvisers negatively if they cannot win them over. The work of the performers is harder in this respect, depending on the audience's predispositions. This means it is essential, not only to read the audience and attempt to guess the mood they are in (which improvisers often do before the show by having a look at the room and the spectators), but also to introduce the participatory aspect of the performance in a way which will reassure the audience and draw them in.[380]

Improvisers often take a look at the audience before a performance, to assess their mood as one entity, the atmosphere of the room: does the audience seem happy, quiet, loud… To Steen, the mood of the audience can be influenced by the venue. Corporate audiences, for instance, 'have had a day's worth of having their whole energy sapped through speeches and trainings. They have a lot of alcohol in front of them, they can be quite hostile.'[381] This makes participation difficult to initiate. Knowing this, improvisers expect to have a tough time and can be 'over the top explanatory about the games' to make sure some participation will happen.[382] Numbers are another factor. Too few spectators makes people reluctant to shout out. On the other hand, a full room, 'as long as there are no major big parties or stag dos', makes spectators more excited to participate as they 'feed off each other, […] feed off a wave of people calling stuff out.'[383] In a way, Mochrie and Sherwood's sound effect game that involves circulating around the room recreates this wave of participation, but in a slightly forced way. Having witnessed the game being played on stage (as opposed to a video recording specifically selected for a DVD), Steen points out that forcing participation from spectators who sat at the back on purpose emulates a classroom effect, with shy or stubborn students sitting at the back either

[379] Ben Walmsley, "Why People Go to the Theatre: A Qualitative Study of Audience Motivation", *Journal of Customer Behaviour, vol.10, no.4*, 2015, p.14-15.
[380] Steve Steen, 2017.
[381] Steve Steen, 2020.
[382] Steve Steen, 2020.
[383] Steve Steen, 2020.

refusing to take part or becoming obnoxious when put on the spot.[384]

Current events can also affect the audience's mood. Steen recalls a show in Hong Kong on 11th of September 2001. At the interval, audience members learnt of the twin towers collapsing. Many of them had relatives in New York. The rest of the show did not continue in a positive mood as the audience had lost their enthusiasm.[385] Similarly, when Lady Diana passed away, the Comedy Store Players had to adapt the first game of their show. Indeed, their first game is a quick-fire story told one improviser at a time. The first performer to hesitate or trip over a word is sent off the stage by the audience who have to shout: 'Die!' For a few shows following the event, the word was swapped for: 'Whoops.'[386] Mood related to current events goes beyond the immediate context of participation, but it is nonetheless something that, as human beings, spectators are always bound to bring with them to a performance. It is linked to the notion of personal vulnerabilities, which I shall now discuss.

vi. The Spectators' Personal Vulnerabilities

Another form of vulnerability linked to audience member's pre-show experience is the personal, everyday vulnerabilities that they carry with them.[387] I will only minimally refer to 'social vulnerabilities'. This is because this thesis is not concerned with Applied Theatre theory. However, as theatre is a social event, it is not possible to entirely forego mentions of social issues. What I am specifically interested in, however are the vulnerabilities inherent to the creative process and the event of improvisational theatre, and vulnerabilities which directly affect or are part of the way of making of improvisers. The latter may include vulnerabilities to do with everyday life but are not necessarily related to socially vulnerable individuals. Most of the time, improvisers do not have to force audience members to suggest themes related to everyday life vulnerabilities:

> [Andy] Smart asks us for a workplace. "Condom Factory," shouts someone. "We get that quite a lot," says Smart. Bog brush is another bugbear. "There are so many times you get stuff about toilets," Steve Steen told me later. "Maybe there's something about sitting in a darkened

[384] Steve Steen, 2020.
[385] Steve Steen, 2020.
[386] Richard Vranch, 2013.
[387] Helen Freshwater, 2009, p.6.

> room and being able to call out stuff without necessarily being seen."
> Whenever they ask for an occupation, you can bet someone will shout
> out "gynaecologist."[388]

It may be that these suggestions come back so often as a form of control over the performers: 'I can stop the show. I can put you in an embarrassing situation.' Perhaps spectators unconsciously test the skills of improvisers, seeing how they can improvise themselves out of a difficult situation. It could also be the simple childish pleasure of being able to shout obscenities from the safety of one's seat. However, it could also be a form of projection in seeing performers experience what makes us uncomfortable on our behalf and turn it into a relatable, yet potentially cathartic performance. This is improviser Richard Vranch's theory:

> The reason comedy exists is, people worry about stuff, they worry about toilets and sex and death. And when we ask for suggestions, someone always shouts, "toilet". […] The reason they're saying this is that our job as clowns is to be on the stage and pretend to shit ourselves, pretend to die, pretend to have sex.[389]

Thus, spectators' personal vulnerabilities can have a direct influence in the making of improvised performances. Spectators can find, in improvisational theatre that invites short, thematic suggestions such as improvisation comedy, a way to exorcise some of the things that make them personally uncomfortable.

Eric Weitz takes the point further:

> The capacity to take life, experience and an immediate situation *not* seriously is far from a stain on our collective reputations, but, rather, is a vital feature of human being and a saving grace for the species.[390]

Human beings need to laugh at life. Weitz describes this ability as vital, which would place it within the realm of instinct. This would explain why spectators cannot help making crude suggestions or mention political or world events. In the case of improvisation, not taking life seriously is displaced to the laughing *at* the interpretation of life that is displayed. This is akin to what Jacques Rancière describes as a 'monument', i.e., a symbolic catalyst of human emotions in the form of the performer.[391] The monument metaphor makes the improviser a beacon, a living representation of the emotions being performed. In practice, this is perhaps a

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[388] William Cook, 2001. p.137.
[389] Richard Vranch, 2013.
[390] Eric Weitz, 2015, p.5.
[391] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator,* London: Verso, 2009, pp.56-57.

little too grand, but nonetheless, it shows that improvisers can endorse emotions and situations on behalf of the audience to re-enact them and make light of them. Mochrie offers a slightly different view:

> Someone will come up after a show and go: 'You know? I was going through a divorce' or: 'A parent's dying and we used to watch the show together' and just at that moment there was nothing but good times and laughs. […] I truly believe there's some medicinal properties to laughter.[392]

For him, the improviser (and the same can be said of theatre as a whole) is not so much a monument representing the vulnerabilities projected onto it. Instead, he has a duty, or perhaps rather, a privilege, to be able to make people forget about their own vulnerabilities, their own sadness, fear, etc, by making them laugh. He is not necessarily exorcising vulnerabilities on behalf of others, but he nonetheless takes on, consciously or not, the role of buffoon or minstrel that Vranch implied, who lightens up and relieves spectators. It is a form of emotional protection, though it is a temporary one.

Interestingly, Weitz's statement also hints at the notion of protection. We protect ourselves from life's difficulties by laughing at them. And the ability to do so within a safe space is a sign of quality, as McConachie describes:

> Good performance situations provide a safe space in which actors and spectators can explore many of their emotional vulnerabilities and needs without embarrassment.[393]

This is an essential question: how is this safe space is achieved, to protect audience members from the vulnerability and shame of participation, so they can willingly explore whatever theme they wish improvisers to perform about, but also to protect improvisers from the extremes of such exploration and involvement so they can produce quality entertainment?

c. Acts of Protection

i. Communicating Vulnerability

I will now study how participants of an improvised performance don't simply

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[392] Colin Mochrie, 2016.
[393] Bruce McConachie, "Introduction: Spectating as Sandbox Play", in Nicola O'Shaughnessy (ed.), 2013, p.189.

experience vulnerability independently, but can also be aware of the others' feelings, which is a first step towards communication between improvisers and their audience. In relation to this, I will show how participants of improvised performances can try and assess other participants' intentions and levels of vulnerability without the need for complex verbal communication.

When we are watching other people's actions, the mirror neurons in our motor cortex are at work as if we were performing the actions.[394] As mentioned before, the theory of mirror neurons has been applied to the performing arts before, particularly in dance studies, through the notion of kinesthetic empathy, which states that spectators of dance not only experience the movement, but also the 'related feelings and ideas' of the performers.[395] Indeed, further research into mirror neurons has found that beyond the experience and learning of movement, they help us understand and anticipate the intentions of other people, which lays the foundations for a more cognitive theory of empathy.[396] Rizzolatti, who pioneered the research into mirror neurons, found that mirror neurons can help guess the goal behind an action:

> John sees Mary grasping an apple. By seeing her hand moving toward the apple, he recognizes what she is doing ('that's a grasp'), but also that she wants to grasp the apple, that is, her immediate, stimulus-linked 'intention', or goal.[397]

Once the goal of the action has been recognised, the intention behind it can be coded according to context. Rizzolatti gives the example of watching a person grasp a cup. If the context is that the cup is full, placed on a table that has been laid for tea, then the intention is likely to be to drink from the cup. If the cup is empty and placed on a table with dirty plates after tea, then the intention is likely to be to clear the table.[398] This is another way in which human beings are able to communicate non-verbally, like the establishment of shared referents I studied in the first chapter of this thesis. This is not just about empathy, but also cognition and mutual understanding as well as audience literacy.

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[394] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Craighero, Laila, 2004, p.174.
Marco Iacoboni et al, 2005, p.529.
[395] "What is Kinesthetic Empathy"
[396] Gallese et al, Gallese et al, "Action recognition in the premotor cortex", *Brain*, 1996, cited in Erin Hurley, 2010, cited in Erin Hurley, 2010, p.31.
[397] Marco Iacoboni et al, 2005, p. 529.
[398] Marco Iacoboni et al, 2005, p.530.

The mirror neuron theory can be applied to the notion of empathy. As theories of kinesthetic empathy suggest, if one is able to guess the intentions of others, one can also infer their emotions. This happens through the process of 'sensorimotor coupling' (the experience of an action via the mirror neuron system), followed by 'imaginary transposition' (the attempt at coding the intention behind the action). Both are important steps in establishing empathy.[399] In theatre, if spectators are attentive and understand the rules of the performance, they can be more in tune with the actions of the performers and, in the case of participatory performance, anticipate moments during which performers pause the creative process in order to facilitate participation, for instance. However, while Hurley equates witnessing and experiencing, she also concedes that the process can be flawed.[400] This means that there is a limit to what our premotor cortex can tell us without us experiencing the action directly. It is easier to share emotions when placed in the same context as others. Our levels of expertise in certain motor skills influence how strongly we can empathise with movements that we observe.[401]

Transposed to feelings of vulnerability in improvisation, it would therefore mean that spectators cannot accurately assess the level of risk of what improvisers are doing, as they lack their degree of expertise. They are bound to see the actions, in fact, as more dangerous than they are. Broderick, for instance, describes watching his audience look sad while he was pretending to tear up during a song (demonstrating that the audience was not fully able to grasp his real emotions and that they were nonetheless able to feel the same emotion as a unit).[402] In this case, Broderick benefits from his audience's flawed assessment. They empathise more strongly with the story being told. This example raises the question that I will discuss in the final chapter of this thesis: how can improvisers actively influence the audience's perception of vulnerability to their benefit?

The vulnerability of participation, for spectators, lies in, first, not knowing what the improviser in front of them is truly feeling. This is similar to the perception of danger and courage: it is also flawed and subjective. Spectators grant the

[399] Bruce McConachie, 2013, pp.192-193.
[400] Erin Hurley, 2010, pp.37-38.
[401] B. Calvo-Merino, et al., "Haggard Action Observation and Acquired Motor Skills: An fMRI Study with Expert Dancers", *Cerebral Cortex*, 2004, p.3.
[402] Robert Broderick, 2016.

performers levels of courage as well as levels of vulnerability based on what they perceive it to be. Again, it raises the question of whether this perception can be willingly influenced by improvisers. Beyond this, the idea that all participants of a performance can have empathy towards each other, as flawed as it is, and communicate feelings such as 'shame, embarrassment and blushing', offers the possibility that vulnerability (to which these feelings relate) is needed in order to 'aid the trust-building and empathic processes of the theatre'.[403] The wave of participation that I mentioned previously could also apply to a wave of discomfort travelling through to the entire audience. For instance, in the case of Vranch telling off a member of the audience mistakenly, the whole audience became briefly silent, feeling embarrassed on behalf of the spectator. On the other hand, empathy could also have a positive effect, fostering 'trust-building'. Indeed, there must be ways to acknowledge and turn the vulnerability of participation into a positive force, a process in which performers and spectators attempt not only to protect themselves from vulnerability, but also to protect each other and work towards a common creative goal. The first step in this process is to use the awareness of each other's vulnerability to connect, to not only to communicate feelings, but to begin working together.

ii. Connecting with the Audience

For Viola Spolin, connection is very important. She writes that 'when the audience is understood to be an organic part of the theatre experience, the student-actor is immediately given a host's sense of responsibility toward them which has in it no nervous tension'.[404] What is interesting about this statement is its complete opposition to Johnstone's line of thinking. Where he viewed participation as dangerous, she views it as 'organic', beneficial and an implicit contract between improvisers and their audience. The performers do not have to shield themselves from spectators, but rather, they have a duty of care towards them. They must overcome their fear in order to reach out. I must note that Spolin and Johnstone are discussing different forms of improvisational theatre. Spolin's was educational, and

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[403] Natalie Bainter, "An Exercise in Shame: The Blush in A Woman Killed With Kindness", in Nicola O'Shaughnessy (ed.), 2013, p.93.
[404] Viola Spolin, 1998, p.13.

therefore aimed at teaching 'student-actors' to be more comfortable with communication. Gaining the trust of the audience is essential in establishing true communication. Johnstone's improvisational theatre, however, was for 'entertainment', as such, he placed expertise in the hands of the improvisers. This makes sense as improvisers have practice, experience and skills the audience do not have. This is why he is less concerned with establishing connection with spectators than making sure they are simply not disruptive. I need to examine other improvisers' practice in order to understand how connection and trustful communication can be established between improvisers and their audience.

Susan Bennett offers a first example of how performers can connect with their audience, even prior to the beginning of the performance:

> In non-traditional theatres it is not unusual for the actors to fulfil non-performing roles such as collecting tickets, ushering, or even serving behind the bar. Actors may welcome the audience into their seats. This can be done as 'actor', then reminding the audience of the actor/character split inevitable in theatrical production, or as 'character', thereby activating performance and interpretation on point of entry rather than through a more formal opening scene.[405]

Comedian and improviser Greg Proops does indeed greet his audience before the recordings of his largely improvised podcasts, which take place in comedy clubs, in what could be considered a non-performing role in that he is essentially not in character. He walks around, shaking hands, taking photos and handing out stickers.[406] This allows him to make a physical and emotional connection with this audience and give them a glimpse of the man behind the performance. For a moment, he engages with the audience almost as of the same peer group. The amount of control he sacrifices is calculated, and in this respect, he is performing to a degree, making conscious decisions as to the kind of interaction he is ready to have. He is still the only person in charge of all the parameters of the performance, but he has given his audience the chance to connect with him, to trust him, and he trusts them to be more involved in the success of the performance once he has gained their sympathy. As his podcast includes a section during which the audience can ask questions, it also allows them to feel more comfortable doing so. Broderick could

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[405] Susan Bennett, 1997, p.135.
[406] *The Smartest Man in the World,* live improvised podcast recording, Soho Theatre, London, 4 May 2014.

have argued that there is a risk of physical vulnerability, based on his experience of spectators touching him. Nonetheless, he agrees that this form of closeness with the audience is also beneficial and worth risking:

> I'll tell you one thing that I noticed, I really like being within the crowd. I hate the distance, I despise it, I fucking hate it aggressively. I love being in the crowd because I think then a. it's much easier to create a connection and b. […] something much more special happens.[407]

To Broderick, there is no question that physical distance creates emotional disconnection. While physical closeness is not necessarily achievable, nor needed, for all formats of improvisation, it certainly is important for his act to work its best, as he relies heavily on the audience giving him objects with which to improvise and personal stories from the audience. To him, engagement comes from this physical closeness that he establishes from the start.

To Jim Sweeney, connection can also be a matter of attitude:

> I was at the Comedy Store, you could almost get a 'click' sound, you thought: 'The audience are with me. I could do or say anything. They'll come with me.' And a lot of that is actually down to the performers.[408]

The main idea is the same as Broderick's: connect to allow for freer creativity, to limit negative consequences when improvisers take risks. In Sweeney's case, this means improvisers must look like they have no fear, or if they do, that they know how to overcome it. If they show fear or lack of skill, the audience becomes frightened on their behalf and lose their connection to them as performers. They see the human being in danger. As such, improvisers must be in charge of the quality of the experience and the image they convey, even if they can't control every single element of it. Mochrie has a similar notion of connection, commenting:

> It's almost like a first date, a first date where one person kind of knows what's going on and the other person is trying to catch up. So, it's up to the gentleman or the lady on the date to take charge, but also be able to give and take.[409]

Mochrie believes it is his role as an improviser to take charge, to, ironically, be in control of the show while handing out some control to the audience – the give and take process. The aim is to facilitate participation of the audience once a connection

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[407] Robert Broderick, 2016.
[408] Jim Sweeney, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2014.
[409] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

is established. What the two statements above imply is the importance of perception, in this case, the perception that improvisers are in control of the storytelling, but also of the participation process. Spectators, as Sweeney states, will trust improvisers that they perceive to be in control and importantly, both Sweeney and Mochrie give improvisers the responsibility to maintain this perception, and therefore to maintain the connection, the relationship with the audience. Indeed, although initial trust is important, in improvisational theatre, or indeed any form of theatre or dance, the constant potential renewal of the creative process extends to participation, and therefore, trust has to be gained again and again. This means engaging repeatedly with the audience to ensure they continue to participate. Improvisers must remind them of the rules or lay out new ones (asking for a different type of suggestion for a new game, for instance).[410] This keeps the audience invested and minimises vulnerability due to confusion of the rules of participation.

Another form of connection and communication of the rules of participation is also based on shared cultural resources and references:

> The cultural resources might include language, genres, and stories that will be shared by the spectators and the performers at an event, allowing participants to take the roles offered to them or the conventions of how to behave during audience participation. When a performer in improvised comedy (professional performer of volunteer from the audience) acts a scene 'in the style of…' they make use of shared resources in an obvious way.[411]

Some of those shared resources are less obvious than others and there is an element of trust in expecting the audience to identify them. Provided improvisers and their audience share the same cultural background, the rules of participation can be easier to identify. The Comedy Store Players, for instance, often perform scenes in the style of a pantomime play. Often, mid-scene, the audience starts joining in with the expected: 'Oh no it isn't!' This is made possible by their shared understanding of the conventions of pantomime. Here, the spectators have, as White states, taken on the role that was non-verbally expected of them. They knew that they did not have to remain quiet and that the performance would be enhanced by their joining in.

Facing an audience with a different cultural background could be an issue. However, according to Steen, what matters is to find a common reference, shared

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[410] Gareth White, 2013, p.43.
[411] Gareth White, 2013, p.47.

knowledge, something audience and performers can share as an 'in-joke'. When he and the Stephen Frost Impro All Stars perform in the Middle East or Hong Kong, for instance, they often ask for a geographical location. Oftentimes, a street name comes up followed by general laughter, at which point, they 'know it's the red-light district'.[412] This newfound connection, as vulgar as it might be, makes communication easier. The participants understand each other, the audience sees that the performers are listening. Steen does add that he has never felt it necessary to slow down or change how he explains games depending on the country. While some cultural references within games might change, he feels that even with audiences who don't speak English as their first language, it would be belittling to them to change the pace of the show.[413] In a way, this is what English theatre troupes travelling to schools abroad to do theatre workshops in English do: engaging their audience without belittling them, trusting their willingness to be involved. Again, this means that connection is about trust, trusting that performers are in charge on the one hand and trusting that the audience is able and willing to participate on the other hand.

Trusting in the audience's ability and willingness to participate implies that a degree of responsibility has to be given to the audience, which is what Mochrie advocates. Broderick mentioned that corporate audiences may be difficult to interact with and they may not have chosen to attend in the first place. Mochrie gives the example of a strategy to engage with them:

> If we're working in maybe a corporate show, we try to do a little warm up at the beginning to get them comfortable yelling out things and being a part of the show, trying to explain to them that they are the unsung members of our ensemble, because we don't have a show without them, they're the ones giving us everything to work with, so they all in a way have to work – not as hard as us – but they all have to work a little.[414]

Mochrie and Sherwood begin by practising participation, so as to teach corporate spectators the rules of the games they are unfamiliar with and take the pressure off the audience to perform 'well' right away. However, by then telling them about the responsibility they have and their need to be involved in their own enjoyment, the improvisers ensure that the spectators will remain invested in the participation

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[412] Steve Steen, 2020.
[413] Steve Steen, 2020.
[414] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

throughout the show. This is the strategy White describes as 'making the audience feel that they want or can explore the horizon' of risk (the sense of responsibility towards their own enjoyment), but also of 'beginning well within the general horizon of risk and gradually becoming more difficult and more risky' (the practising of participation with no creative gain, moving on to suggestions and involvement that will be incorporated into the performance).[415] Connection becomes a two-way process, a carefully balanced distribution of control that empowers the audience enough to feel invested in the quality of the show and does not leave improvisers to face too much unpredictability.

iii. Protecting the Performance

This degree of responsibility that is bestowed upon the audience comes with a risk of disruption to the story-telling process. Therefore, improvisers are aware of their duty to protect the quality of the performance by making sure that the audience's involvement is constructive. This is what led Vranch to misinterpret the audience member's shout of appreciation for heckling. As discussed, Johnstone does not trust spectators to make worthy contributions without strong guidance from improvisers. He believes, for instance, that 'bad', obscene suggestions should be refused. There are limitations to this method. First, performers such as Broderick believe that if several of those suggestions follow each other, there remains little choice but to take a 'bad' suggestion to avoid breaking the pace of the show.[416] Isolating individual spectators, removing them from the crowd, and asking them to participate is also a flawed method of risk management. White writes:

> The casting of participants can be arranged so that facilitators have control over who will be offered a task, and they might use this as an opportunity to try to make sure that a suitable person is invited to take part. There is huge scope for error in this course, unless the facilitators know the audience beforehand.[417]

There is indeed a certain safety in lack of numbers in this instance, because an individual participant is more easily guided. Yet, besides the difficulty to select a participant who will be involved in the way the improvisers expect, unless they have been briefed in advance, there is also another issue, which is that improvisers are

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[415] Gareth White, 2013, pp.83-84.
[416] Robert Broderick, 2016.
[417] Gareth White, 2013, p.88.

disconnecting themselves – through fear – from potentially interesting and fruitful participation from physically inaccessible participants.

This is why theatre company Improbable took on Johnstone's *Lifegame* format and made changes to it:

> In the beginning, they tried to select guests they could work with, guests who would make their job a little easier. Today, Improbable is much more interested in "unsuitable guests", namely, in guests whose unfolding process offers a challenge to their expectations. […] Instead of getting irritated with a guest who might be considered less-than-ideal, Improbable welcomes the opportunity to practice patience and to deliver a broader point-of-view."[418]

By being less selective and more spontaneous in their handling of participation, Improbable have broadened the range of offers available to them. This took overcoming fear and taking a leap of faith, showing courage in the process. Unlike Johnstone, they place a lot of trust in their guest's ability to make a worthy contribution. However, we could also argue that while they attempt to select 'unsuitable', more challenging guests, they nonetheless go through a selection process which allows them to control how unsuitable and how challenging the guest will be. Indeed, a guest is not a randomly selected spectator. Therefore, Improbable's process is one step closer to embracing the risks of participation, but it does not fully do so. This comes back to the notion of controlling the parameters of participation, and this form of control is an attempt at limiting risks.

Other methods to limit degrading or uninspiring methods include dismissing them with humour:

> Ask, with just a trace of disapproval or boredom, 'Do people really want to see that?' Or say, 'We did that last week!', or 'We've done that so often.' If you're asked to be a proctologist (yet again), just say, good-naturedly, 'Not your profession, sir!'[419]

Another method Maude-Roxby mentioned included the use of a fish bowl, a practice started by Steve Steen and Jim Sweeney, that *Theatre Machine* also implemented.[420] Roxby explained that they would attempt to guide the audience as to the type of suggestion they expected them to write:

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[418] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, 2013, p.183.
[419] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.28.
[420] Roddy Maude-Roxby, 2016.

> Something that might be, maybe, the subject for a poem. Maybe better than you giving us something that's rude." Because we'd probably be rude anyway, most likely, and when you're obliged to be it's not as good as when it just comes up.[421]

This way to brief the audience is a form of risk-management of the quality of the suggestions. It is also linked to another method that Johnstone uses, which is to make sure that the audience is 'benevolent', i.e., that they love improvisers unconditionally and are coaxed to do so.[422] This can also be done through the implementation of judges, such as in *TheatreSports:*

> When Keith invented *TheatreSports*, his reason for that was that he saw *TheatreSports* as a training tool, and if someone did a bad scene – if a beginner does a bad scene then the judges give them a low score, and then the audience hate the judges, they don't hate the performers. It takes the heat off the performers.[423]

In this instance, the strategy is beneficial to all parties, while still manipulating the audience's view of the reality, which is that the improvisers may have been performing badly indeed, and make them cheer regardless. Johnstone also writes that, 'in the early days, [they] gave the money back if [they] performed badly, and the audiences would leave the theatre searching for positive things to say'.[424] There seems to be a confusion, a blurring of the line between two types of control. On the one hand, there is the control of spectators as potentially disruptive individuals. The aim of this is to protect the quality of the performance, but the process stems from fear and lack of trust and restricts offers. As White comments, 'the ethics of participation [Johnstone] proposes are entirely to do with the safety of the participant from embarrassment, and not at all to do with giving away the control of the theatrical event'.[425] On the other hand, there is control that protects the quality of the performance without isolating an individual participant. Giving out free tickets for the best suggestion of the night, for instance, gives the audience an incentive to be creative and helpful. This is something that the Comedy Store Players have also implemented in recent years. This shows more trust in the audience's ability to regulate itself and act as one helpful voice. It also implies, again, that improvisers do

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[421] Roddy Maude-Roxby, 2016.
[422] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.341.
[423] Lee Simpson, 2013.
[424] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.2.
[425] Gareth White, 2013, p.94.

not have to fully relinquish control over participation but have to find ways to control it that are more open, less defensive.

iv. Protecting the Audience

I mentioned improvisers' duty of care towards their audience. Part of this duty involves connecting with them and making sure the parameters of participation are clear. It also involves controlling the audience's participation so as to protect the quality of the performance. But I will argue that improvisers can also actively protect their audience from the risks of participation in other ways. Sweeney believes that this is indeed the responsibility of improvisers, even if, again, it is only a matter of attitude at first. To him, 'the performer needs to walk onto that stage, and everything about them has to be screaming to the audience: "Don't worry, it's going to be alright."'[426] This is similar to Johnstone's idea that acknowledging the audience as individuals, or at least making it look so, gives them a sense of security. By looking at different parts of the audience in turn, 'the whole audience will experience themselves as "being seen", and will warm to [improvisers], and feel in "safe hands"'.[427]

While a small amount of unpredictability, or uncertainty, is the price improvisers pay in order to give their audience a sense of responsibility, they are nonetheless the experts and control the parameters of participation. What this means, again, is that spectators are aware that they are not fully in control of what can happen to them if they do participate, and they expect improvisers to protect them. Mochrie states:

> It's totally foreign to so many people who walk up on the stage: bright lights, you're in front of an audience, so it's really our job to make sure they're focusing on us and to calm them down and make sure they understand what they're supposed to do.[428]

This is another responsibility of improvisers besides establishing connection, trust and the rules of participation: they have to be aware of their audience's levels of vulnerability, to constantly monitor whether their audience is comfortable, willing and engaged. They must communicate to them that they are not being judged on a

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[426] Jim Sweeney, interviewed by Chloé Arros, London, 2014.
[427] Keith Johnstone, 1999, p.262.
[428] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

right or wrong answer, because they are not the ones in charge of the story-telling process. Mochrie acknowledges that his audience do not have the skills he has, nor the drive to be on stage, singled out from the rest of the audience, therefore he has to engage and make sure the audience is willing to engage back.

Besides this, improvisers must protect their audience from their own individual vulnerabilities. I mentioned before that I have not encountered instances of physical harm facilitated by participation on the side of the audience. However, emotional harm can happen in formats that require suggestions. Beyond the way participation is handled, the content of the show can have a negative impact on the audience's feelings. As discussed previously, some current event topics may make some spectators feel uncomfortable or upset. Particularly in comedy, there are topics that may be sensitive to laugh at, and performers run the risk of alienating part of their audience.[429] Mochrie expresses his willingness, for instance, to spare his younger audience:

> Our theatre shows, we have a large demographics, from kids to grand-parents, so we're always aware of not going too blue or letting our language get out of control. We certainly get risqué, but nothing more than what is allowed on television these days on your basic television networks.[430]

First, it must be noted that in comedy clubs and the cabaret scene, where many improvised performances take place, underage audiences are not allowed, which makes the statement above a non-issue. It is nonetheless a potential concern for Mochrie, who is aware that different rules apply to different audiences in order to gain their trust.

Furthermore, returning to the idea of the effect of current events on spectators, Mochrie feels he has a duty to be sensitive in accepting or refusing certain suggestions:

> We get ISIS on a regular basis and like, horrible suggestion and we go: "Well, we can't do it, for one thing, it's happened yesterday and we don't know if someone who has been touched by these tragedies have a relative in the audience or some sort of connection to it." So, we try to keep aware of our audience's feelings and such in that sense.[431]

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[429] Eric Weitz, 2015, p.68.
[430] Colin Mochrie, 2016.
[431] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

Here, unlike Johnstone's strategy to dismiss degrading suggestions, the dismissal is made with the aim to protect the audience's feelings. Improvisers do not risk anything personally by taking on these suggestions, but they do, as professionals, risk losing their connection with the audience. They make a conscious choice also, as human beings, to be respectful and protect their audience, and this is a choice that is made before the show and will be made obvious early on in the show.

While managing the risks that audience members take is important, there is another element of this management that I have not addressed yet, which is the exaggeration of risk in order to make participants feel better about their own performance. White explains that one strategy available to performers in order to facilitate participation is to '[misrepresent] activities so that the horizon is not a fair representation of what they will be asked to do'.[432] This means essentially manipulating the audience's perception of the vulnerability of the action they undertake. This seems counter-productive in terms of protection, but the aim is to make the audience feel proud of their achievement without letting face truly dangerous situations. White sees Johnstone's practice to give gifts to his audience for participating as more than fear-driven damage control: 'By giving prizes for coming onto the stage the performers draw attention to the risk taken, rather than taking attention away from it.[433] Acknowledging and praising good suggestions has a similar effect.[434] This is another form of connection between improvisers and their audience: raising the status of the volunteer so they feel equal to the performer for a brief moment and leave the stage or return to their role of witness feeling a sense of achievement. Yet, in reality, they still have very little control over their own degree of involvement.[435] Mochrie betrayed this strategy when he said that 'no part of a theatre is safe from an improviser', as later on in the same interview, he admitted that by handing out a microphone for members of the audience to circulate during the sound effect game, 'they get so excited that they are part of a scene and they're completely in the dark, so nobody knows [who did] that sound effect that they came up with and they feel totally safe too.[436] The participation principle in this game is

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[432] Gareth White, 2013, p.83.
[433] Gareth White, 2013, p.93.
[434] Steve Steen, 2020.
[435] Gareth White, 2013, p.94.
[436] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

designed so that the volunteers feel a sense of achievement while remaining safe from embarrassment.

v. Protecting the Performer

When members of the audience are willing to explore the 'horizon' of risk, the latter becomes exciting, just like fear can be a stimulant for improvisers. Vulnerability, or the promise of it, can be as thrilling as it can be off-putting. Sitting in the front row at the Comedy Store in London, I have heard many an audience member tell their friends, with excitement in their voice: 'I hope they don't pick on us', when truly, they were hoping to be picked and very willing to participate. Sometimes, these spectators can be disruptive, but most of the time, I have found that they want to be entertained and they want to performer to succeed, hopefully thanks to their contributions. This also betrays a degree of agency on the part of the audience that improvisers may not always expect: the drive to risk vulnerability in order to help the performer. Mochrie states that this willingness to help can come as a surprise to improvisers:

> There are people who come up on stage and as they're walking up, you go: "Oh, this may have been a mistake to pick them, they seem a little timid." And then, all of a sudden, they become tigers and they really get committed to helping you out. […] That always kind of surprised me. It always surprised me that an audience would go out their way to do as well as they can.[437]

This is a direct benefit to letting go of some control. It allows audience members to be involved beyond what is expected of them in a positive way, to go the extra mile for the benefit of improvisers. However, Mochrie believes that audience members' willingness to support improvisers is mainly due to wanting to preserve their own enjoyment: 'They don't want us to fail completely, because also, they paid money, they want a show'.[438]

Mochrie talks of individual spectators making efforts to be helpful, but he also mentions the audience as a group. I shall argue that audiences can also work as one and are able to self-regulate their collective behaviour to a degree in order to protect improvisers. Improvisation fan and regular Comedy Store Players audience

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[437] Colin Mochrie, 2016.
[438] Colin Mochrie, 2016.

member, Jo Eden, shares what she believes is her responsibility towards the performers:

> No heckling, helping out with better suggestions if bad ones are all that are offered, filling in the blanks with other audience members who are new to impro.[439]

Eden believes – and I have found this to be the case with the many regular audience members who come to see the Comedy Store Players – that she and her fellow spectators must not only participate, they must provide suggestions that they know will be helpful to the improvisers. Admittedly, knowing what constitutes a good suggestion is difficult to acquire as a newcomer to improvisational theatre. Some examples are given at the beginning of the show, but each show and frame of invitation within the show vary nonetheless. With experience, however, one can find out that the 'Film and Theatre Styles' game has more momentum when it ends on a musical vignette and be ready to shout out: 'Sondheim musical' or 'opera'. This does imply that improvisational theatre, through participation, facilitates the creation of a community whose self-appointed mission is to '[provide] good suggestions on the night, and [turn up] up to other events'.[440] Those members of the community of improvisational theatre also often intervene in order to police the behaviour of other participants.[441] In the end, what facilitates those behaviours, be they isolated or regular, is the connection that the performers establish with their audience before, during, and sometimes, as Eden also explains, after the show.[442]

Bruce McConachie explains that it is 'empathetic relationships', connections established between performers and their audience, which make spectators 'take the well-being and goals of specific actor/characters as their object and respond to them accordingly in the moment-to-moment byplay of their interactions'.[443] Although McConachie is not talking about improvisational theatre specifically, his point applies nonetheless. It implies that if improvisers are able to gain the trust and empathy of their audience through connection, expertise and protection, they will not simply participate to guarantee their own enjoyment but will also feel sympathy towards them and want to help them succeed in their creative endeavour. When this

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[439] Jo Eden, interviewed by Chloé Arros, email, 2014.
[440] Catherine McGahey, 2014.
[441] Catherine McGahey, 2014.
[442] Jo Eden, 2014.
[443] Bruce McConachie, 2013, pp.195-196.

empathetic connection is achieved, the audience does not simply support successful improvisers, they also forgive mistakes. Duffy explains that this is because mistakes, when they are acknowledged with honesty, yet balanced with expert recovery, make improvisers human.[444] Mistakes in this respect put all participants on the same level for an instant. Spectators are able to empathise with the vulnerability of the situation and acknowledge that improvisers would benefit more from their help than their disapproval. Improvisers regain control of their own vulnerability by allowing the audience to laugh *with* them, rather than *at* them. This creates another connection, this time not through raising the status of the audience but lowering that of the performers. This opens the door to the possibility for improvisers to manipulate the audience's perception of the vulnerability of improvisation. Indeed, if they can make volunteers from the audience look good by exaggerating the risk they took, it seems logical to think that they can make themselves look good in the same way. Therefore, I shall explore this line of thinking in the next and final chapter of this thesis.

d. Conclusion

Control is again an important notion in this chapter, this time to do with the power game between improvisers and their audience. There is also another form of balancing act linked to control. Improvisers have to deal with the forms of vulnerability I have discussed in previous chapters on top of the unpredictability of audience behaviour. They must, simultaneously, remain in control of their own creative actions, the performance parameters and the amount of involvement they allow the audience to have. On the other hand, spectators face their own vulnerabilities related to participation and also fight for control over their own involvement, either removing themselves from the participation process (and sometimes forcibly pulled into it) or positioning themselves as participants (and sometimes attempt to wrestle some control away from improvisers or project vulnerabilities onto them).

It becomes clearer in this chapter that Johnstone is not an artist of vulnerability. Yet another main difference between his teachings and contemporary practice of improvisation is that he did not offer to overcome the fear of participation. In fact, his strategy to disconnect spectators, limit and guide their

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[444] Stella Duffy, 2016.

involvement to the maximum betrays a deep-seated vulnerability that many improvisers may feel in regard to participation. Johnstone undermines the audience's potential and willingness to be helpful. He limits the very real potential damages that spectators could cause to the performance, but also denies them the chance to be positive forces in the process. And as Steen argued, enforcing participation from a selected individual can also cause harm if the spectator in question did not intend to participate. What is needed for improvisers to truly overcome the vulnerability of participation is connection.

Connection is difficult to achieve, if only for the skill disparities between improvisers and spectators. The spectators themselves are aware of these disparities, and have expectations, moods and anxieties which can make them hesitant to participate. The study of the mirror neurons' part in establishing an empathetic connection highlights how fragile this connection is. First, because mirror neurons' abilities are limited to what we can experience cognitively without being in the same physical context as another person. This means that spectators can wrongly assess the levels of vulnerability that improvisers are experiencing and, importantly, improvisers can wrongly assess vulnerability levels in spectators and misread their intentions. This leads, on both sides, to defensiveness, mistakes, sometimes disrespect, mistrust, forceful engagement and eventually, disconnection. Mirror neurons also explain how a wave of participation can quickly become a wave of discomfort, where spectators empathise with the discomfort of other spectators.

This means that another careful balance has to be struck between allowing participation and the risks and vulnerability it entails and protecting all participants from this vulnerability, in order to protect connection and enable participation to take place efficiently. Establishing and maintaining connection is yet another risk to take, bravely, this time with the benefit of opening the creative process to material originating from the audience. It is done knowing that it is a two-way process, where trust has to be given and gained, but importantly, even when they relinquish some control, improvisers are both the facilitators and protectors of the process. They gain sympathy by establishing cognitive consensus with their audience through cultural connection, repetition and clarification of rules, meeting with them before the show or even progressive desensitisation, making audience members feel a sense of achievement while limiting the risks they are effectively taking.

Improvisers benefit from connection in many ways. Their mistakes will be

forgiven more easily. They will allow a wider variety of material to be generated. But most interestingly, they will also benefit from the audience's flawed assessment of their vulnerability. An engaged, connected audience which sees an act as more dangerous than it really is raises the status of a performer. They see them as skilled, in control in spite of the risks being take. What this suggest is again the possibility to compose with this perception. Improvisers can take the risk of allowing less restrained participation on purpose. They may also be able to let spectators see them as more vulnerable than they really are on purpose. Vulnerability would then be intentionally let in to the creative process, not just through accepting that it is an intrinsic part of it, but through performing it.

6. The Art of Vulnerability

a. Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the ways in which vulnerability manifests itself in improvisational theatre, its effect on the performance, improvisers and spectators and the various expert strategies that can be used to overcome it. In this final chapter, I will argue that vulnerability is not just an element of improvisational theatre to be accepted as 'ordinary', intrinsic to it, but a state that can be turned into a stylistic device and performed in order to achieve virtuosity. It is part of the aesthetic of the form. The concept of virtuosity is particularly important because it carries the ideas of skill, intention, control and expert deliberation. It also, as White writes, contributes to the audience's ability to acknowledge the performers as harbouring a higher status, a higher level of skill, something not everyone can do.[445] I will argue that what is unique about improvisational theatre is the way performers are able to play with the image of mastery that they convey by using vulnerability as a strategy, in the same way Lecoq gave intentionality to failure and exposure in order to convey comedy in clowning. By doing so, they can guide 'spectator perception towards that to which they might profitably and enjoyably pay attention.'[446] The main goal of this chapter is to define another form of expert artistry which improvisers demonstrate, not through dealing with the vulnerability of performance, but through *performing vulnerability*. This is another form of control, not based on strategies *against* vulnerability, but *of* vulnerability.

In *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sara Jane Bailes states that 'most conventional theatre […] labours precisely to conceal […] vulnerability and to avoid the incidence of rupture or loss of control'.[447] Improvisers often attempt to conceal their vulnerability by repressing their intuition, with consequences detrimental to their spontaneity and originality. This is because they fear failure, and because they lose connection with their audience if they lose control of the performance. They can also choose to allow their feelings of fear and shame to exist in parallel to their art, to treat them as 'ordinary', and develop strategies, through

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[445] Gareth White, 2013, p.78.
[446] Erin Hurley, 2010, p.27.
[447] Sara Jane Bailes, Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service, London: Routledge, 2011, p.99.

learning and training, to overcome those feelings. They cannot suppress the intrinsic vulnerability of spontaneous creation, but they can master the skills to overcome it in order to present an expert performance and take charge of the parameters of participation. In this respect, there is no difference between conventional theatre and improvisational theatre.

Yet, as Bailes writes, not all theatre attempts to display control, seamless narrative and lack of vulnerability. This seemingly goes against Johnstone, who states that: 'Good improvisers seem telepathic; everything looks prearranged. This is because they accept all offers made - which is something no **"normal"** would do'.[448] One of the main implications of this statement is that Johnstone sees good improvisation as presenting what looks like a scripted piece, when that is not the case. Thus, he believes the vulnerability of creativity should not be shown. In doing so, improvisers who accept all offers are elevated to a higher status, above 'normal'. And indeed, they have a higher level of control and being in tune with their intuition than inexperienced improvisers. Johnstone's statement also emphasises flawlessness as an ideal. However, his belief that offers should all be accepted is not always respected. Indeed, one of the main transgressions of this rule is known as *blocking*, which is the act of refusing an offer. Johnstone gives an example of blocking:

> If I say "start something" to two inexperienced improvisers, they'll probably talk, because speech feels safer than action. And they'll block any possibility of action developing.
>
> "Hallo, how are you."
>
> "Oh, same as usual. Nice day, isn't it."
>
> "Oh, I don't think so."
>
> […]
>
> The motto of scared improvisers is 'when in doubt, say "NO".'[449]

In this context, we are dealing with 'inexperienced', 'scared' improvisers, which is very important to note. The problem in this exchange is that improvisers ignore their intuition and, for fear of failure, do not take any risk and stall the scene, preventing any development. However, particularly – but not only – in comedy improvisation, experienced improvisers often display visible difficulty, attempt to avoid

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[448] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.99.
[449] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.94.

suggestions, break established rules or even openly argue and still manage to trigger genuine laughter and appreciation from their audience. They show the possibility of failure, yet they succeed in creating a scene. Therefore, a transgression of the rules by an experienced improviser seems unlikely to be dictated by fear.

From this I derive two hypotheses. The first is that that vulnerability can be *used* as a composition device. Then, as Anya Peterson Royce links mastery of technique to virtuosity (which, she writes, is 'a necessary part of an aesthetic system'), my second hypothesis is that improvisers could be playing on the audience's perception in order to raise their own status and achieve virtuosity.[450] To address these hypotheses, I shall study the aesthetics of vulnerability in improvisational theatre: how improvisers can choose to include vulnerability in the composition of their act and the effects of this choice on their performance, namely, raising their own status and achieving virtuosity. I shall argue that audiences can perceive virtuosity when they believe improvisers are taking risks, and when vulnerability is performed and narrowly avoided, thus leaving them in awe of the performers.

Improvisational theatre is not the only form of theatre to compose with vulnerability. *The Play That Goes Wrong*, for instance, presents failure as a stylistic choice. Yet, ironically, staged failure that makes people laugh is a form of success. Furthermore, failure is only part and parcel of what contributes to feelings of vulnerability in improvisational theatre. It leaves out fear, risk and courage. A play that is entirely based on a performance of failure is also different from pretending to fail temporarily in order to influence the audience's perception of risk. We know that improvisers are making up the scene as they go along, therefore we know there is a real risk of the entire performance failing. The whole process of improvisation is vulnerable. We know that plays are written and rehearsed and that even real moments of failure are less likely to bring the whole performance down. Actors and improvisers do face the same types of vulnerabilities, but improvisers face them all at once, all the while creating material from scratch. This is why this thesis focuses on the performance of vulnerability in improvisational theatre without extending the study to other forms of theatre: because the balancing act between real and

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[450] Anya Peterson Royce, Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Artistry, Virtuosity and Interpretation in a Cross-Cultural Perspective, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004, pp.19-21.

performed vulnerability that improvisers perform is unique, and because, as I will argue, this act is representative of the aesthetics of improvisational theatre as an artform, rather than an anecdotal performance within a genre. To demonstrate this, I will study how improvisers make a consistent style out of performing (with) vulnerability.

The work of Bailes is particularly relevant to this chapter. It provides an understanding of failure as a style of performance and its benefits to the performers and their audience. As fear of failure and vulnerability are closely linked, a poetics of failure offers many parallels with an aesthetics of vulnerability, following the definition of aesthetics of Denis Dutton, which I have discussed in the introduction of this thesis. I shall also study the works of Royce as well as that of V.A. Howard. Howard and Royce study the notion of virtuosity extensively, not only in music, but in other artforms, and provide a way to legitimise the aesthetics and benefits of vulnerability in improvisational theatre.[451] In order to continue on with the science-based angle of this thesis, I will bring in the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt on elevation.[452] I am particularly interested in his findings regarding the ways certain morally valued acts can trigger feelings such as admiration in onlookers and I wish to transpose the study of this process to that of audiences witnessing an improvised performance. Indeed, if the *act* of virtuosity is controlled by the artist, the *quality* of virtuosity is granted by the spectators. Therefore, it is essential to study the impact of virtuosic artistry upon audience members.

In the first half of this chapter, I shall study the relation between the notion of aesthetics and vulnerability. I will also discuss the benefits of composing with vulnerability, and how this stylistic choice is conducive to achieving virtuosity and elevating the performers' status in the eyes of their audience. The notions will help

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[451] Anya Peterson Royce, 2004.
V.A. Howard, *Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts*, New-York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008, p.16.
[452] Jonathan Haidt, "Elevation and the positive psychology of morality", in M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt (eds.), *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived,* Washington DC: American Psychology Association, 2003, pp.275-289.
Jonathan Haidt and Sara B. Algoe, "Witnessing excellence in action: the 'other-praising' emotions of elevation, gratitude, and admiration", *J Posit Psychology,* author manuscript, 2009. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2689844/, (accessed 16 October 2017).
Jonathan Haidt, "The Positive emotion of elevation", *Prevention and Treatment*, vol. 3, art. 3, 2000. http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/articles/haidt.2000.the-positive-emotion-of-elevation.pub020.pdf, (accessed 16 October 2017).

me analyse how improvisers use vulnerability as a compositional device and turn it into a style within the various genres of improvisation in the second half of this chapter.

b. Aesthetics and Vulnerability

i. Vulnerability, Style and Composition

I summarised Dutton's 'universal features of art' in the introduction of this thesis. As a reminder, they were:

- 'Expertise or virtuosity';
- 'Non-utilitarian pleasure';
- 'Style';
- 'Criticism';
- 'Imitation';
- 'Special' focus;
- 'Imaginative experience'.[453]

I have partly studied most of the characteristics above, but I have not yet discussed how they form an aesthetics based on a performance of vulnerability. I have, for instance, studied 'expertise' in relation to expert intuition and expert deliberation in improvisational theatre, which take the form of strategies against the vulnerability of uncertainty and against the risks of failure, self-exposure and participation. Yet my thesis is about a balancing act that improvisers perform, and how this act inscribes itself within the aesthetics of the form. One manifestation of this balancing act between facing vulnerability and using it is in the definitions of composition. Bogart and Landau write that 'Composition (…) is the act of writing as a group, in time and space, using the language of theatre'.[454] It is a way to practice art and create original work.[455] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling's definition of devising is not too dissimilar, although it also puts the emphasis on the fact it is creation 'without a pre-existing script', which can be applied to improvisation as well as conventional theatre.[456] The principles of composition themselves imply an

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[453] Adapted from Dutton, 2002. (See "Methodology", p.21 of this thesis, for more detail.)
[454] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, 2014, p.137.
[455] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, 2014.
[456] Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History,* Basingstoke:

intrinsic degree of vulnerability: 'Through Composition work, we learn to trust our instincts, […] to recognise our strengths and weaknesses as artists and, above all, we learn secrets about ourselves through what emerges'.[457] We saw in the first chapter that spontaneous creativity and having to trust expert intuition is a vulnerable process. Improvisers have to navigate their own fear of the uncertain, but also feelings of shame in revealing weakness and the person behind the character. This vulnerable state is exacerbated by having to both create and perform a scene simultaneously. The definitions of composition are a reminder and a summary of the vulnerability that improvisers face through their creative process. In situations where they would compose *with* vulnerability, which I will describe further on, improvisers would be performing a balancing act as they would also continue to use strategies *against* vulnerability. The very notion of aesthetics, therefore, through the definition of composition in particular, has a link to vulnerability.

Importantly, one final aspect of composition also relates to the notion of courage: 'Without an intuitive *leap of faith*, work remains academic. Have the courage to make choices that you cannot justify at the time. These choices constitute a leap'.[458] However, to be able to make these choices without failing creatively requires a certain degree of expertise. Inexperienced improvisers, for instance, may be keen, but lack the necessary strategies against vulnerability. In this sense, they are very similar to the Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes character, Wile E. Coyote. Wile E. Coyote's determination to catch the Road Runner is only matched by his consistently painful failure to do so. Often armed with useless ACME products, he is ready to attempt anything, yet often ends up plummeting to the ground after falling off a cliff, while the Road Runner speedily beeps away. While the coyote's leaps of faith are laudable, his physical abilities do not match the Road Runner's. He is doomed to fail, just like improvisers who are unable to face the increasing vulnerability of freer and freer creativity.

Experienced improvisers, on the other hand, have the ability to take risk that matches their expertise.[459] They not only avoid actual failure, they turn it into art.

Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, p.3.

[457] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, 2014, pp.175-176.

[458] Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, 2014, p.161.

[459] Jeffrey S. Simmons, Robert D. Dvorak and Cathy Lau-Barraco, "Behavioral Inhibition and Activation Systems: Differences in Substance Use Expectancy Organization and Activation in

They can play with vulnerability and decide to let it be seen or not. They can pretend to fall and soar at the last minute, flirting with failure, or they can be very honest about the possibility of a fall and include their own fear in their performance, which is what Duffy suggested is the right thing to do in order to establish connection with the audience. This idea of flirting with failure implies a form of expertise that composes *with* vulnerability. Importantly this stylistic choice is in opposition to Johnstone's ideal of flawlessness: it deliberately presents a performance which *looks* imperfect, but is in fact very carefully crafted in its imperfection. (In this sense, Johnstone was right in stating that good improvisation looks flawless, although the nuance here is that it is that deliberate staging of flaws that ironically make the finished product perfect.) This suggests that improvisers are able to reinvent established ways of doing, which makes it all the more relevant to update our knowledge of the form.

This choice to compose with vulnerability can also be called a stylistic choice, as 'style' or 'rules of form and composition' is part of Dutton's definition of aesthetics[460]. Eran Guter mentions some parameters that are generally accepted as defining of a style:

> It is commonly agreed that the attribution of style implies some sort of cohesion of certain aesthetic properties across the oeuvre of a single artist, a group of artists, or an entire era. It denotes a way of art-making.[461]

It is however difficult to speak of a single style or 'way of art-making' of improvisational theatre. Indeed, improvisational theatre has many forms (or genres) and rules of composition (styles within the form). Its basic definition, that it is theatre without a script or rehearsals, is not, on its own, enough to define a style.[462] Improvisers rely on many games and formats with more or less specific guidelines. There could be as many styles in improvisational theatre as there are artists. However, this does not mean that there can't be any unity within the form, and this

Memory", *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors*, *vol.23, no.2*, 2009, pp.315–328. Available from: Researchgate, (accessed 10 December 2018).

[460] Adapted from Dutton, 2002.

[461] Eran Guter, "Style", *Aesthetics A-Z*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. http://ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/eupaes/style/0?institutionId=8498, (accessed 13 June 2018).

[462] Charna Halpern, 1994, p.13.

unity can be achieved through vulnerability: the common ways of overcoming it and the common ways of composing with it. Therefore, a style, a way of art-making which stems from vulnerability can be part of the aesthetics of improvisational theatre. What I now want to make clearer is the relationship between aesthetics and vulnerability so as to apply it to improvisational theatre.

ii. Performance-Composition and Virtuosity

I will argue that one of the benefits of using vulnerability as a compositional device is the achievement of virtuosity. First, let us define virtuosity and find out how if it can be applied to improvisers' work. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a virtuoso is 'a person highly skilled in music or another artistic pursuit'.[463] The key word in this definition is 'skill'. It links virtuosity to technique rather than style, i.e., to the ability to interpret, rather than create. Howard disagrees with the separation of technique and style. To him, a virtuosic performance isn't just a technically proficient   response to stimuli: performers also need 'facilities' ('or routine habits or capacities such as instrumental fingerings or vocal agility') and 'critical skills' ('deliberate judgement in their deployment').[464] In other words, they need expert intuition based on learning and experience and expert deliberation. They can make artistic choices. His definition does not separate technique and style but makes them both requirements of virtuosity. It is therefore possible for a performance to be both virtuosic and have a unique style, but what these definitions do not tell us is if it is possible for improvisers to be virtuosic if they are not interpreting someone else's work.

Howard writes that virtuosic 'performance is *of* a work, specifically a work of art.'[465] This implies that a virtuoso offers an interpretation of the work of another artist. Howard makes the distinction between autographic works and allographic works – autographic works being the original work of art, such as a music score or a play script, and allographic being an interpretation of an autographic work, such as a specific performance of a piece of music or a play. Allographic works can rarely

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[463]   "Virtuoso", *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, website. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtuoso, (accessed 15 October 2018).
[464] V.A. Howard, 2008, p 42.
[465] V.A. Howard, 2008, p.5.

exist without autographic works, and they never reproduce these works exactly.[466] Is it then possible for an artist to be both a creator and a virtuoso, if virtuosity is more about interpretation than creation? For Howard, those are 'extreme' cases of 'performance-composition', which 'are not so much *of* a work than that each of them *is* a work'.[467] According to this definition, should we consider an improvised work autographic or allographic? It could be said that, while in improvisational theatre, as in some forms of theatre in which a play has been devised through improvisation, the performers are also the creators of the work being displayed, they very often have to interpret suggestions, use prompts, or create collaboratively, answering offers from other improvisers. Yet, these suggestions and prompts are not original works themselves. It would therefore seem that improvisational theatre is simultaneously allographic because it uses 'others', their ideas and their skills, and autographic because it presents original works, as ephemeral as they may be, in the same way some musical improvisation works can be.

Is it possible for these improvised performance-compositions to be virtuosic? As I have not found a study of virtuosity in improvisational theatre, I shall study some examples of improvisation in other artforms, to see if it is possible to produce a virtuosic performance of a work being created on the spot. In jazz, Howard believes improvised compositions remain allographic, because they are usually inspired by previous compositions, however loosely:

> In jazz, it is often the starting theme that is incidental to the performance-composition, or re-composition, of the work. In effect, each performance-composition is a "Variation on a Theme by…."[468]

Close to this idea is a scene from the 1984 movie *Amadeus* where Salieri composes a march for Mozart, which he not only is able to reproduce after one single hearing, but also has already changed and improved by the end of his demonstration.[469] Eventually, he transforms it and gives it his own style, notably by playing part of the bass line as an Alberti Bass (the decomposing of a chord as an arpeggio, which is typical of Mozart's style).[470] Of course, the scene is a creative licence and did not

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[466] V.A. Howard, 2008, p.9.
[467] V.A. Howard, 2008, pp.6-7.
[468] V.A. Howard, 2008, p.7.
[469] *Amadeus,* dir. Miloš Forman, USA, Orion Pictures, 1984, DVD.
[470] *Jean François Zygel Basse d'Alberti*, online video, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFunurw8jM0, (accessed 16 October 2018).

truly happen, and the march itself is in fact a derivation of *Non Più Andrai* from Mozart's opera *Le Nozze di Figaro*, which is then played as the original. However, Mozart's performance is both compositional and virtuosic, even if it is a 'Variation on a Theme by…' He is able to make stylistic choices, engage in expert deliberation, on the spot, all the while demonstrating technical mastery.

A real-life example which is even more telling in terms of answering a prompt to both compose and perform is an exchange between Spanish musician Carlos Nuñez and Jean LeMeut, a Breton man he asks to sing a lost Celtic song. LeMeut sings as he remembers it, having only, as he says, heard it twice and singing it in the style of his own father. Upon hearing it, Nuñez's fingers begin fluttering over the recorder he has brought to the interview, and while another musician transcribes note for note what is being sung, Nuñez soon begins to play a tune of his own, similar but full of stylistic elements that are typical of his own practice. The brief performance-composition can be seen as virtuosic in its ability to answer a prompt and create an original work which undeniably combines personal style and technical mastery, recorded in the instant.[471] While the question of whether this work is allographic because it is based on a theme or autographic because it stands as a unique piece remains, what truly matters about the examples above is that virtuosity is linked to creation and artistry, and therefore shows that it is possible to apply the notion of virtuosity to improvisational theatre, despite its ambiguous nature, between allo- and autographic.

iii. Virtuosity and Recognition in Improvisational Theatre

Another important element of virtuosity is that it cannot exist without witnesses and needs recognition. Recognition of virtuosity seems easier to achieve amongst performers of the same artform. Some form of education or experience appears essential to accurately identify the technical mastery behind a virtuosic performance. Other performers, well-versed in the codes and conventions of the form, are of course best suited to recognise achievements in colleagues. Furthermore, to Howard, "like a high jumper who sets a world record, a virtuoso performance sets a standard for subsequent performers".[472] Recognition, in this case, is beneficial in

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[471] *Bretaña – Carlos Núñez*, dir. Christian Rouaud, France, 24 images, 2003.
[472] V.A. Howard, 2008, p.12.

two ways: it raises the status of the performer within their field and helps inspire and pass on skills to a new generation.

Howard goes further, writing that 'without recognition – by which I mean critical recognition by a field of experts – virtuosity simply does not exist'.[473] The two key points in this citation are the presence of onlookers and the notion of expertise. Just like the level of danger or courage of an action is granted by the onlooker, virtuosity needs witnesses. However, these onlookers need to be experts according to Howard. This would imply an impartial judge, able to make an objective assessment of quality. Yet, arguably, particularly in improvisational theatre where rules and conventions are continuously reinvented, this seems a difficult endeavour. While Howard introduces the critical notion of recognition in relation to virtuosity, his definition denies the audience the ability to be critical. I disagree with his views, because audiences do come to events with a certain amount of knowledge and understanding of rules and conventions, and their own understanding of quality. They are also the prime witnesses of the event, and therefore it is relevant to ask them what the experience felt like, regardless of whether they are objective in their judgement or not.

I want to show that it is possible for spectators to recognise virtuosity. Royce does not agree with Howard. She states that not all members of the audience need to be able to put into words their own vision of the skills at work in order to recognise virtuosity:

> In the case of the general population, it may be that, while virtuosity and artistry are sensed and recognised, there is little articulate naming of them. This is similar to the case of a language of which one may be a fluent speaker; that person may recognise the highest levels of competence but be unable to articulate its rules and elements. The metalanguage that would allow this tends to be the province of specialists.[474]

Again, there are two main points in this statement which need to be addressed and are slightly contradictory: that specialists have access to the language needed to *define* virtuosity; that this language is not needed for the general public to *recognise*

[473] V.A. Howard, 2008, p.12.
[474] Anya Peterson Royce, 2004, p.25.

virtuosity. First, I must note that the notion of specialists in improvisation is a difficult one to deal with outside of performers themselves. Indeed, improvised shows are rarely reviewed, and when they are, the reviews almost always lack critical analysis of the skills at work and rather, focus on one particular performance and snippets of its narrative content. A lot of the time, it even only focuses on one performer, usually a famous guest. For instance, a *Chortle* review of the Comedy Store Players show of the 6th of July 2011, written by Marc Butler, focuses mainly on the guest of the evening, Mike Myers. Although Myers started his career as an improviser and was a founding member of the Comedy Store Players, he has not been a member for decades and became famous for his roles in the cinema. The review does not give a good idea of what the regular experience of the show is like either. The following passage could be confusing for anyone who has not seen much or any improvisational theatre, let alone a Comedy Store Players show in particular:

> Five minutes of Phelim McDermott mumbling a completely nonsensical, made-up language (he was supposed to be a Peruvian landscape gardener obsessed with pissoirs on mountain tops) contained more laughs than an entire Michael McIntyre DVD.[475]

Butler is referring to the 'Foreign Translator' game, in which one Player plays an expert on a couple of subjects chosen by the audience, in the language of a random foreign country. The other Player translates. There is no way, without knowing about the game, to know that this is the game that is being written about. It also lacks any technical terms, any reason as to why it is funny and why McDermott in particular elicits so many laughs. Not to mention that the comparison to Michael McIntyre is subjective and potentially detrimental to McDermott if the reader happens not to find McIntyre funny in any way. The review is written by a fan, and most importantly, *for* fans, yet it is not an expert review. To take this idea further, it would seem that expert knowledge of improvisation is not revealed in critics, as is the case in other forms of theatre. Who remains to take on the role of experts, therefore, is other improvisers, as stated previously, but also the audience and scholars. This makes academic studies of improvisational theatre all the more essential to the recognition of the form. And in terms of virtuosity, it gives spectators a crucial part.

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[475] Marc Butler, "Myke Myers with the Comedy Store Players", *Chortle,* 2011. https://www.chortle.co.uk/review/2011/07/06/28293/mike_myers_with_the_comedy_store_players, (accessed November 2013).

What Royce also implies is a form of expert intuition of the audience. They can *know* a performance to be virtuosic without being able to vocalise why. They can nonetheless communicate this recognition, through channels such as laughter or applause, for instance. This is what improvisers are seeking: acknowledgement that their performance is successful and has an impact. Most importantly, the contradiction between Howard's and Royce's definition highlights that it may not matter if spectators accurately recognise virtuosity in improvisation. What matters is that they perceive – or are made to perceive – a performance as virtuosic. And in this sense, this is a reason why performing vulnerability would be beneficial to improvisers: to influence the perception of the audience to make themselves look more masterly than they are, to make an impact.

iv. Elevation

In the previous chapter, I have discussed the empathetic connection between improvisers and their audience, and how it enables them to overcome the vulnerability of participation. I also introduced the idea that they can make volunteers from the audience look good by exaggerating the risk they are taking. It then seemed logical to assume that improvisers could manipulate the perception of the audience to make themselves look good. In doing so, they are using the psychology of elevation to their advantage. Indeed, in improvisation and in everyday life, the onlooker plays an important part in establishing whether an act is brave or not. Dutton addresses this in his definition of virtuosity, which he sees as elevated by the onlooker. He gives the example of sports, writing that, 'in modern society, sport is a major area when technical virtuosity is publicly admired and rewarded.'[476] This response to a virtuosic performance is what Jonathan Haidt calls the 'other-praising' feelings of elevation: the admiration that one experiences from witnessing a courageous or expert act.[477]

According to Haidt, elevation is a positive feeling different from joy or amusement which 'is triggered by witnessing acts of human moral beauty or virtue'.[478] I have previously linked the overcoming of vulnerability and courage in

[476] Denis Dutton, 2002.
[477] Jonathan Haidt and Sara B. Algoe, 2009.
[478] Jonathan Haidt, 2000, p.1.

improvisation and defined courage as a morally laudable act. Like courage, virtuosity needs an onlooker to be present, and therefore it makes sense to apply the notion of elevation to a study of virtuosity in improvisational theatre. Besides, Haidt's definition of people able to trigger feelings of elevation in others is rather broad, 'encompassing leaders, saints, benefactors, and heroes, as well as by ordinary people who do extraordinary things'.[479] In one of his major studies, participants 'were exposed to cases in which another person displayed talent, perseverance, generosity, kindness, or other skills and virtues'.[480] It appears that what matters about elevation is not so much what is being done or by whom, but rather, the value that the onlooker attributes to the act being witnessed. And just as courage can be seen differently in various cultures, virtuosity is not necessarily recognised by certain communities.

Haidt's definition of elevation is more valuable when it comes to its relationship with status. He states that elevation relates to the 'dimension of social cognition' linked to 'hierarchy, power, or status'.[481] As a brief reminder, status is part of Keith Johnstone's lexicon and qualifies the relationship between characters in a scene, as well as their relationship to their environment. Status between performers or performers and environment can be superior, inferior or equal.[482] Using status is one way in which improvisers can build characters. Status can also be used to describe the relationship between performers and their audience. According to Haidt, it is a normal human behaviour to elevate people we see as more virtuous or skilled and grant them a higher status. Through acts of virtue or talent, he states that a 'blurring of the human/god divide' happens.[483] In both cases, the implication is that people who can demonstrate superiority of skill, talent or courage take on a higher status. Again, it would seem that it does not matter whether spectators accurately recognise a demonstration of skill. The notion of 'human/god divide' itself seems rather exaggerated. Improvisers do not need to be seen as gods, they just need to be seen as skilled, sometimes virtuosic, and the audience is there to grant them these statuses.

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[479] Jonathan Haidt and Sara B. Algoe, 2009, p.1.
[480] Jonathan Haidt and Sara B. Algoe, 2009, p.21.
[481] Jonathan Haidt, 2003.
[482] Keith Johnstone, 1979, p.36-50.
[483] Jonathan Haidt, 2003, pp.275-289.

v. Repair and Virtuosity

If one benefit of performing vulnerability is to influence the audience's perception in order to look more masterly, this implies that improvisers are able to follow a low status performance by raising their own status. This seems contradictory. One final aspect of Howard's definition of virtuosity raises a similar issue. According to Howard, 'virtuoso(a) is one whose performances have been consistently *recognised* as being virtuosic, as exhibiting exceptional musicianship and technical proficiency sufficient to set an interpretive standard.'[484] Again, we are dealing with the idea of passing on knowledge, of reinventing ways of doing, and of recognition, but what appears problematic is the notion of consistency. Can improvisers be consistently virtuosic when their creative process is inherently uncertain, vulnerable and involves taking risks? Could it not be possible for them to create short, isolated virtuosic performances? The process of following a low status performance with a demonstration of skill is what Bailes calls 'repair'. Repair is the act of not wasting moments that happen on stage, of not allowing material to have been generated for nothing.[485] She compares this process to Buster Keaton's ability to recover from dangerous situations in his films, a comparison which is also fitting in the case of improvisation, writing that 'clumsiness and frailty are transformed into grace and strength through Keaton's expertise in recovery'.[486] This means that material can be generated, not just from the chaos of creativity, but also the pretence of chaos.

This is the case for companies such as Forced Entertainment, which Bailes writes about. In the opening scene of their show called *Bloody Mess*, for instance, two characters have a strong disagreement over the position of a row of chairs, each of them carrying them, in turn, to different parts of the stage while the scene becomes increasingly chaotic. It is not clear if it is the characters or the performers that disagree. It is not clear to what degree the scene has been devised and rehearsed prior to the performance. In the end, everything is pre-written, but what is interesting is the staging of the ambiguity between what could be a real failure to agree or a perfectly

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[484] V.A. Howard, *Charm and Speed: Virtuosity in the Performing Arts*, New-York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008, p.16.
[485] Sara Jane Bailes, 2011, p.142.
[486] Sara Jane Bailes, 2011, p.46.

staged piece of slapstick comedy. By staging failure, Forced Entertainment allow the audience to see what they normally would not see, not only the creative process behind the performance, but the vulnerability of the creative process: the worst-case scenario of the performance failing to be polished and professional. Yet, like improvisers getting laughs despite apparently struggling, the members of Forced Entertainment turn failure and unpreparedness into a style and deliver a performance which fails the ideals of theatre but fulfils its own goals of artistic ambivalence.

The prospect of danger or failure is exciting to the audience. It draws them in, provided that, as Sweeney stated previously, improvisers balance this prospect out with a demonstration of skills. Ridout goes further, stating that 'the pleasure an audience takes in such moments is far from *schadenfreude*. Perhaps it is closer to the connoisseur's delight as seeing how the mechanism works at the moment of breakdown.[487] Audiences are drawn towards the possibility of seeing the person behind the character, but also catch a glimpse of the 'trick' behind a performance, the breakdown of the skills at work. Those benefits of staging failure are similar to Charles's belief that improvisers selflessly return 'the tools of the theatre to the people'[488]. I have also discussed how important it is for the latter to retain control of the creative process and the participation parameters. Forced Entertainment show how material can emerge from staging chaos, and indeed, there is a dimension of opening up to the audience about the creative process of theatre. But repair, the recovery illustrated by Keaton's pirouettes, is what is needed to trigger elevation in the mind of audiences, to achieve virtuosity.

I believe that improvisers are able to *un*consistently demonstrate virtuosity through a performance of vulnerability. This is because their intentional performances of failure are meant to achieve expert recoveries. They need these performances to show virtuosity. As discussed before, improvisational theatre heightens the awareness of vulnerability for both improvisers and their audience. This empathetic connection means that, as Mochrie states, audience members are constantly wondering: 'How are they going to use this, how are they going to make sense of it, how is it going to work out?', and are all the more impressed when

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[487] Nicholas Ridout, 2006, p.148.
[488] See pp.12-13 of this thesis.

improvisers do succeed.[489] Repair, or recovery, is, therefore, another form of expertise that improvisers demonstrate, and most importantly, something that they are aware has a strong impact on their audience and can therefore use to their own advantage. I will discuss how in the following half of this chapter.

c. Performing Vulnerability in Improvisational Theatre

i. *Lifegame* and Vulnerability

I now want to study how vulnerability manifests itself as a way of artmaking across the various forms of improvisational theatre. I am particularly interested in vulnerability that is performed as a way to achieve virtuosity. However, I want to begin by studying the way *Lifegame* uses stories of vulnerability as material. In doing so, I offer a short digression on content rather than process, but as Lifegame is a well-known format of improvisation, its study is nonetheless important. Again, this format, created by Johnstone then performed by Improbable from 1998, creates stories based on an interviewee's life.[490] In *Lifegame,* improvisers compose with vulnerability by weaving it through the story. The themes performed are intrinsically vulnerable and the questions being asked to the interviewee are very personal:

> What are your memories of early childhood? When was your first kiss and with whom? What is the most romantic thing you've ever done? What was it like when your father died? What's the happiest experience of your professional life? Finally: how would you like to die?[491]

Here, the participants are not placed in a situation of vulnerability against their will. They are willing to answer those questions, to talk about their lives and have it re-enacted in front of them. The show is not using their vulnerability to make fun of it, it uses it as material to be respected. The vulnerability of the interviewee becomes intertwined with the performance, which becomes a performance of vulnerability, not in pretending to be experiencing it, but in actually allowing it to exist as a narrative element.

Improviser Jim Sweeney, who was both performer and interviewee in *Lifegame*, gives an insight into the performance which was based on his own life story:

Colin Mochrie, 2016.
"Formats", *Keith Johnstone*. https://www.keithjohnstone.com/formats, (accessed 2 August 2018).
"Lifegame", 2004.

> I was surprised by how raw and emotional it was. In one scene, I was watching my first daughter being delivered by caesarean; I had to supply the voice of my daughter and my voice was choking. […] I've never seen anything work so strongly on the emotions.[492]

This raw emotion sets *Lifegame* apart from other forms of improvisation. It is unique in the way it inscribes vulnerability, not just as part of the aesthetics of the form, but as its main aesthetic. This time, composing with vulnerability is not about laughter. While it is not possible to establish a type of hierarchy of what type of personal memory is more vulnerable than others, meeting one's child is certainly one of the most vulnerable times in a parent's life. There is nothing more uncertain, chaotic and emotional. It is not difficult to imagine that Sweeney was feeling vulnerable on many levels: as a participant, even though he was not performing in this instance, and because he was sharing a personal story and because that personal story was one of complete vulnerability.

As for the performers, they were bringing to life a very emotional, vulnerable story, which had to be carried with respect. In doing so, they shared a common affect, reflected by Sweeney's memories and performance. Phelim McDermott puts it in more general terms: 'Very often what you find is that it's vicariously really therapeutic, but the most therapeutic, genuinely therapeutic shows, were the ones that were the most theatrical, dramatic'.[493] I must note again that while McDermott mentions 'therapy', I do not propose to fully focus on vulnerability in improvisational theatre as therapy and shall remain within concerns of aesthetics, however, in *Lifegame*, there is an overlap in the sense that, as McDermott describes, there is a cathartic side to exteriorising personal stories. *Lifegame* is (auto)biographical theatre, which uses vulnerability and personal stories as a medium for creation, rather than with a goal to help the audience. In this respect, it is closer to performance art and what Roselee Goldberg calls autobiographical performances, which emerged in the 20th century. She describes them as 'intimate and confessional', while explaining that their aim was to break away from the conceptual: art for art's sake, not art for service.[494] Ultimately, those performances were for entertainment, and although *Lifegame* is significantly deeper in content than

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[492] Jim Sweeney, interviewed by Maddy Costa in "You've Been Lifegamed", *The Guardian*, 2004. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/may/06/theatre1, (accessed August 2018).
[493] "Phelim talks about Lifegame", 2013.
[494] Roselee Goldberg, 2011, p.153.

game-based improvisational theatre, its main goal remains to create stories, as opposed to providing therapy through re-enactment.

'Dramatic', in McDermott's quote, is linked to theatricality, to story-telling, but it could easily be understood in relation to vulnerability as well. It is through the story, through composition, that emotions emerge, and although the vulnerability is real and obvious, it propels the performers upwards, because they are able to not just overcome it, but use it to fuel a whole storyline and create original material as an ensemble. This is a form of virtuosity. Here, the elevation of the performer is subtle. It is not so much done through the technical expertise of an individual, but rather, a shared creative vision, which puts improvisers in charge. The audience takes a step back and allows the performers to take on the emotional load of the stories being shared and make art out of it.

As such, the recognition process is also subtle. Laughter can arise, but it is more episodic, arising for instance, when performers get some of the facts obviously wrong and have to be corrected by the interviewee, or perhaps if one were to relate to a particular event being re-enacted. Recognition in *Lifegame* happens through channels that are not as tangible or obvious as laughter. One of those channels can be silence, which Royce describes as follows: 'Silence is not simply the absence of sound, nor stillness the absence of movement, when performed by an artist. Silence and stillness are filled with all the possibilities of a sound and movement. They have a texture'.[495] If silence and stillness (such as pauses in music) can be part of the composition, then silence can also be studied as part of the audience's reactions to a scene. When I asked some improvisational theatre fans what impact various shows had on them, the word 'fascination' was attached to *Lifegame*, as well as 'reflection' and the will to go and learn more about certain topics that were raised during performances.[496] This is in keeping with Haidt's notion of elevation.

What *Lifegame* shows is the potential for vulnerability to be an important element of the stories being told through improvisation. Of course, using vulnerable, real-life stories to make art is done in many, if not all, forms of art. However, in improvisational theatre, the vulnerability of the live process and the participation, combined with stories or performances of vulnerability open the door to a unique

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[495] Anya Peterson Royce, 2004, p.30.
[496] Catherine McGahey, 2015.

experience, a singular way of artmaking which navigates all aspects of vulnerability at once. And most importantly, this balancing act can be sensed by all participants: improvisers, spectators, students, critics… In the moment of improvisation, of live creation, vulnerability exposes the difficulty of the process, contributes to the expertise of the performers, influences the perception of the audience and, finally, lends itself to being controlled, shaped and turned into a work of art.

ii. Promising Danger

Lifegame introduces the possibility of making vulnerability an important part of the story in improvisation. However, what is unique in improvisation is how process-based it is as an artform. I am interested in the part vulnerability can play in the story-*telling* process. This can be done by including vulnerability in the premise of a show. To that effect, non-competitive game-based improvisation can rely on the promise of danger. This is the case of the *Colin and Brad Two Man Group*'s 'Mouse Trap' game. The following is how Mochrie and Sherwood introduce the game:

> Ladies and gentlemen, we are now going to play the world's most **dangerous** improv game. To the stage are being brought two tables on which are placed 250 mousetraps. These are actual mousetraps for the purpose of **killing** mice. They have not been tricked in or rigged in any way. […] These are actual mousetraps there being placed all around the stage to create a **minefield** of mousetraps in which to perform this next improv game.

While dramatic music played in the background, Mochrie and an aide demonstrate to the public that the mousetraps are indeed functioning by snapping them onto their fingers. The game itself is an improvised opera. Every new verse has to start with consecutive letters of the alphabet starting from the letter 'q'. The premise of the scene is that 'someone has taken someone else's mail.' The announcement, however, des not stop there. Sherwood continues:

> SHERWOOD : The reason this is the most dangerous improv game is because Colin and I are going to perform in this **minefield** of mousetraps completely barefoot […] for your enjoyment and our **sheer terror**. And to make this even more **treacherous**, Colin and I are also going to be performing completely blindfolded. […] Colin, are you ready?
>
> MOCHRIE: Erm, you know, it's kind of **dangerous,** but… I don't think it's the most **dangerous** game in the world.
>
> SHERWOOD: you're absolutely right, Colin, we could make this game more **dangerous**. Bring in the **chamber of doom**!

More dramatic music plays and additional mousetraps descends from the ceiling, stopping at face, stomach and genitals height. Sherwood now brands the '**dreaded**' game as 'the most **dangerous** game on planet Earth' while the audience cheers.[497]

Risk and fear are introduced through the lexicon employed by the improvisers: 'dangerous', 'minefield', 'terror'. They are also heightened by the accompanying music and repetition of key words and phrases. The audience is asked to check the blindfolds are not rigged and witnesses the efficiency of the traps. While the presentation of danger seems exaggerated in its delivery, there is nonetheless a form of honesty in it. There is true vulnerability in the mere fact that while playing the game, both performers will experience actual physical pain, the promise of which, uncertain in that the 'when' and the intensity cannot be predicted, will automatically trigger their intuitive systems of fear. Spectators empathise with the possibility of sharp pain through their mirror neuron system. Here, the comedy emerges from the audience's *schadenfreude* at witnessing the performers get hurt, and eventually transgress their own rules by removing their blindfolds and throwing mousetraps at each other. However, the spectators are not worried about the success of the scene. Indeed, while the improvisers are visibly in physical discomfort, they still display a lot of technical control and manage to improvise the whole scene and include the suggestions from the audience. As a double-act, Mochrie and Sherwood are able to rely on each other very closely, only having each other, as opposed to a whole team, to improvise with, which limits the uncertainty of the creative process.

In the long-form format *The Actor's Nightmare*, devised by Stephen Frost and Steve Steen, danger is promised in a different way. The performers open each show by being very honest about having no structure, no pre-requisite for content, and very often having not met or worked with the other participants beforehand.[498] This is how Steen and Frost introduced the show to potential venues in the past:

> Take some actors, tell them there is no script, no set, no costumes and then tell them they have to create a whole new play instantly in front of a live audience. That's the actor's nightmare. Now take some actors who know there is no script, no set and no costumes and can't wait to create a play from scratch in front of a live audience. That's *The Actor's Nightmare: An Improvised Play*. This company embraces the actor's

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[497] The Colin and Brad Two-Man Group, 2011
[498] *The Actor's Nightmare*, improvised performance, The Pleasance Theatre, London, 1st December 2013.

deepest fear to turn it into a unique and exhilarating, never-to-be-repeated piece of theatre.[499]

The principle of the show relies specifically on the vulnerability of the creative process in improvisational theatre, the fears that actors face and improvisers learn to overcome: a play that is fully improvised with not even suggestions from the audience. Here, the promise of danger is in the premise of the show itself. While Steen and Frost do not compose as such with vulnerability within the stories they tell, they nonetheless made the artistic decision to explore how far they can push the vulnerability of the creative process.[500] According to Steen, being honest with spectators about this decision is not an exaggeration designed to make the show more impressive. He mentioned that the first time he performed the show, he felt like a beginner again and suddenly was very aware of his own vulnerability. What he and Frost wanted was to find out how they and other improvisers taking part overcome their fear throughout the show.[501] In this sense, they are showing genuine courage when they perform, as they are fully aware of the layers of difficulty that lie ahead of them, and the audience is also able to assess the situation as dangerous and empathise with the improvisers.

iii. Composing with the Discomfort of Others

Deliberately inflicting pain onto themselves or exploring the intrinsic vulnerability of the creative process are, in the end, very honest ways to present vulnerability to the audience. Improvisers, however, do not necessarily compose with their own discomfort. They can also put other participants', whether improvisers or spectators, in a position of vulnerability to make themselves look better. The vulnerability, in this case, becomes more enforced, sometimes aggressive, and is more of a gamble based on the receiver's willingness to play along. Sometimes, this pushing of vulnerability onto another is part of the premise of a format. The 'Who Am I?' game performed at the Comedy Store, for instance, involves making up a very complicated, often ridiculous job that one improviser must guess thanks to clues from his colleagues. The improviser guessing the game, however, puts themselves in a position of uncertainty willingly. Indeed, they are aware of the real potential for

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[499] Steve Steen, interviewed by Chloé Arros, email, 2016.
[500] Steve Steen, 2016.
[501] Steve Steen, 2016.

failure if they do not guess the job correctly. This is another form of risk assessment: they nonetheless trust that the other improvisers will help them.

Other ways to put an improviser in a position of vulnerability is to impose a ridiculous character onto them with the expectation that they will take on that character no matter how difficult it may be to portray. Smart gives an example: 'Oh, look at this old man coming on with only one leg and a bad Scottish accent'.[502] Admittedly, this is funnier when the improviser being made to take this on is known to be both willing to do it and notoriously bad at accents. This implies an expertise of sorts, in knowing other improvisers' weaknesses and playing with them, without going as far as risking the quality of the whole show.

Similarly, leaving the stage can be an efficient way to force vulnerability onto others, by breaking the fourth wall and leaving the improvisers temporarily cut off from the creative process. When Stephen Frost left the stage after losing a game at the Comedy Store, exclaiming: 'That's it, I'm going to the bar!' and indeed going to the bar to buy a beer, the other improvisers were left on stage, momentarily unsure what to do. It was difficult, for an instant, to work out if Frost was expressing genuine anger or if it was all for fun, but nonetheless, the audience laughed, because Frost did go and buy a beer which transgresses conventions, and because the other improvisers resumed the performance, signalling that Frost's outburst was not a true disruption to the show as a whole.[503]

Finally, improvisers can deliberately make the audience uncomfortable for comedic purposes, but this is a dangerous gamble, and does involve some planning. The improvisation element comes from the unpredictability of the audience's reactions. At the end of the *Wow Show,* devised by Stephen Frost and Mark Arden, instead of finishing on a punchline, the performers staged a performance of discomfort at the expense of the audience[504]:

> [Mark Arden] was being left on stage tied up and gagged (a dildo in his mouth) because we'd had a big row on stage as to how the show should end. The whole show was a series of arguments belittling each other and winding each other and the audience up. He would wriggle about, begging the audience to help him with his eyes and grunts and groans. Eventually someone would get up and take the dildo out of his mouth and

[502] Andy Smart, 2013.
[503] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 11 November 2018.
[504] *The Wow Show*, improvised performance, Gilded Balloon, Edinburgh, 1989.

> straight away he would say very angrily: 'What are you doing? What the fuck are you doing? You've ruined the end of the show now. Would you go up the Lawrence Oliver during Hamlet and take his skull away from him? Would you? Would you?' Then me and the other two would appear from the wings and back of the auditorium shouting: 'What you doing? What you doing? What's going on?' In very high-pitched voices. […] And we'd say something like: 'Well you've ruined it now, you might as well go home, Jesus Christ, call yourselves an audience, get out!'[505]

Improvisers become in control of the audience's vulnerability, but this time, they let go of the responsibility of protecting them. There is a power game in this ending: the improvisers retain full control of the audience, because they do not let them explore the horizon of risk honestly. They manipulate their audience and, in a way, betray their trust. They also cannot predict whether one particular audience will be keener than another. The vulnerability comes from being audibly insulted and the uncertainty of whether Arden is in danger or not, and the contrast between what spectators know to do during the show and having no clue what to do in this particular interaction. Frost and Arden gamble on getting laughs, a very risky choice and a very brave decision, and a rather extreme example of controlling the vulnerability of the audience and inscribing it into the creative process. There is no repair that follows as the audience then leave the show. The expertise of the performers lies primarily in their ability to let go of their fear of consequences, to take a creative leap of faith.

iv. Breaking the Rules

So far, I have studied examples of using vulnerability in the story-telling process of improvisation, from the premise of a show to deliberately pushing the limits of discomfort. In a way, these examples show the extremes of the spectrum: from presenting danger in a very honest way, to tricking the audience into a very uncomfortable situation, which also navigates a very thin line between trust and betrayal. I now want to study how performances of vulnerability can be used to achieve virtuosity.

Besides pretending to be in difficulty, breaking the rules can also enable improvisers to introduce vulnerability into their process and perform acts of repair. Improvisers can break established rules and conventions, not just of theatre (similarly

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[505] Stephen Frost, interviewed by Chloé Arros, email, 2020.

to Frost breaking the conventions of theatre by buying a beer in the middle of a show, or breaking the fourth wall in the ending of the *Wow Show*), but of improvisational theatre specifically. Andy Smart believes that in improvisational comedy, blocking is 'where most of the comedy comes from. By subverting the rules, […] by deliberately blocking'.[506] Smart, however, mentions that it is important to have a good understanding of the rules of improvisation in order to do this: 'You have got to always be aware of the rules. The thing about the [Comedy Store] Players is that they know the rules and therefore they know how to break them properly'.[507] This is a form of risk-taking: letting go of one form of safety net in order to explore a different creative path. Although blocking as a comedy enhancer is not a rule that is openly taught, a systematic subversion of an established principle becomes a style if it is cohesive, in the way Guter described. And indeed, blocking and other intentional subversions of rules are very common in improvisational comedy.

Blocking is a form of composing with vulnerability. While it can prevent a scene to develop smoothly, if at all, when used as a way to introduce comedy, it temporarily fails the objective of the scene in similar ways that gags, as Bailes describes, do:

> Gags [produce] formal resistance to the cohesive world that narrative seeks to establish. The gag is, however, a constituent of that narrative, an ineradicable intervention within its logic, running through and alongside it. […] In this way, gag culture models an economy in which failure and breakdown are constitutive.[508]

Bailes does not present gags as isolated, random events, but as repeated, intentional occurrences, which operate in the same way as intentional blocks in improvisational comedy. Similarly, blocks stand out because they disturb an established narrative or rule, but they are nonetheless an organic part of the performance. In this respect, they can more accurately be described as 'other ways of doing that counter the authority of a singular or 'correct' outcome'.[509] In improvisation, blocks not only fail the predicted, 'correct' outcome, they break the structure and rules of the creative process, introducing an element of real failure that relies on the improvisers' expertise to be fixed, in the moment, without falling back onto a script. This means

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[506] Andy Smart, 2013.
[507] Andy Smart, 2013.
[508] Sara Jane Bailes, 2011, p.45.
[509] Sara Jane Bailes, 2011, p.2.

that breaking the rules for comedic purposes, even though it is done willingly, introduces an element of real potential failure and the promise of vulnerability for a fleeting moment. This, again, goes against Johnstone's ideal of flawlessness.

A 'Film and Theatre Style' game from *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* illustrates the concept of successful blocking (refer to the footnote for a recording).[510] In this game, Tony Slattery and Paul Merton play the parts of a prisoner and a jailor, respectively. Merton repeatedly blocks Slattery throughout the game:

> **Beginning of the scene, no assigned style:**
>
> SLATTERY: 'I didn't do it, I didn't do it, I don't deserve to go in there.'
>
> MERTON: (pauses and stares at Slattery) 'I think you're as guilty as Hell.'

There are two blocks here: the pause, which prevents Slattery to carry on improvising, then describing him as guilty, going against the character's claim that he is innocent. The presenter, Clive Anderson, interestingly stops the scene at this point to assign the scene a film style. He knows that nothing more will come out of the exchange. Yet, the audience laughs, in part because Slattery also laughs at the situation, allowing Merton to block him and signalling that he is okay with it.

> **Horror:**
>
> SLATTERY: 'What a horrible suit.'
>
> MERTON: 'That's grand coming from someone who's dressed as Doc Holiday.'

The block here is more subtle. Merton bounces the gag back onto Slattery rather than switching roles: he remains in control and keeps a higher status. Again, Anderson pauses the game after this exchange.

> **Film Noir:**
>
> MERTON: 'Listen Noris, you're never gonna get out of this… (pauses as Slattery looks puzzled) Yes, Noris, that's your name. Burt Noris! You're never gonna get out of this prison, I'm gonna turn the light off, look…
>
> SLATTERY: (mimes smoking a cigarette) 'Yes, it's interesting the way the light…'
>
> MERTON: 'Hang on, where does the cigarette come from? What's all

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[510] The recording of the game is available on the following link: *Tony Slattery WLIIA - Cigarette out of nowhere,* online video, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0ja8ohWZVQ, (accessed 8 May 2020).

this? Excuse me while I just get on me moped!'

Slattery partly blocks Merton when he looks puzzled at his choice of name, but again, Merton maintains his higher status. He fully blocks Slattery when he questions his mime, making fun of the absurdity of a prisoner suddenly producing a cigarette out of nowhere. He pushes the absurdity by adding a moped to the scene. Interestingly, this also shows his ability to inscribe the block within the narrative process, by using it as the start of a pythonesque performance.

Pirate film:

SLATTERY: 'Arrr! I'm gonna swing through those bars and then I'll be outside! Quick, come on me hearties, let's break out of jail!'

MERTON: (mimes opening a door) 'But I'm the jailor.' [511]

This block also, ironically, reassigns his original character to Merton, who had broken out of it for most of the game. It is a block in that Merton refuses to go along with Slattery's offer, but also a demonstration that he did not truly lose track of the story.

Again, the fact that Slattery laughs and accepts to lower his status and be on the receiving end of this performance of failure makes the blocks successful. The format also works in Merton's favour: it is designed to facilitate gags and Anderson is able to stop the scene after a block, which gives it more power and turns it into a punchline. On stage, another improviser would be able to do the same and move on to a different style. The blocks have indeed temporarily failed the objective of the scene: characters are broken, the plot barely moves on apart from Slattery's attempt at the very end. Vulnerability is being pushed onto Slattery who appears to be out of control, submitted to the whims of Merton, his small act of rebellion quickly thwarted.

Most importantly, this example shows that what makes the blocks truly work is Merton's and Slattery's ability to recover from them, to take them in their stride. Slattery accepts to be on the receiving end of them and continues to perform, generously allowing Merton to shine. Merton demonstrates his ability to compose with the blocks, to let them become offers of their own. His and Slattery's

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[511] The recording of the game is available on the following link: *Tony Slattery WLIIA - Cigarette out of nowhere,* online video, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0ja8ohWZVQ, (accessed 8 May 2020).

performance is a technical, virtuosic display that demonstrates, as Smart mentioned, a thorough understanding of the rules of improvisation, and an ability to create collaboratively and adopt roles without the need for complex verbal communication. In this sense, they efficiently achieve cognitive consensus. Breaking the rules is a very delicate balance, an objectively risky yet rewarding act which channels virtuosic performances.

v. The Pretence of Vulnerability

Now I have studied one way of achieving virtuosity through a performance of vulnerability, I want to take the demonstration a step further and study how improvisers can make a virtuosic performance even more impressive by influencing the audience's perception of danger – and therefore triggering feelings of elevation. This implies another skill that improvisers must have: an understanding of audience psychology – and indeed, elevation as defined by Haidt belongs to the field of social psychology. There are many ways in which performers can pretend to be in difficulty in order to influence the audience's perception of risk. There are performers who make it a style to look constantly vulnerable on stage, for instance. This the case of Joe Rooney, an Irish comedian who regularly guests with improvisational comedy troupes in Ireland. When appearing with the *Stephen Frost Impro All Stars* in October 2015, he consistently looked like he had no idea of what was happening but kept getting laughs by always appearing to be a step behind everyone else.[512] Rooney is out of place because the other performers are in control. They are not displaying fear or lack of skill, therefore their status is raised by Rooney's performance of discomfort. The consistency of Rooney's onstage persona is what makes it a style, in the way Guter describes. However, his is a personal style of performance that is not common and only works if the improviser is still able to come up with responses to offers and is the only performer doing it, while the others are in a position of power. There is no act of repair in this instance and Rooney is entirely reliant on other improvisers to play along and show control and expertise.

Other improvisers can occasionally play low status to garner sympathy from the audience. It can help mask a lack of skill, as is the case for Neil Mullarkey, who

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[512] *The Stephen Frost Impro All Stars*, improvised performance, The Róisín Dubh, Galway, 25th, 27th and 26th October 2015.

almost always acts reluctant when made to sing. A good example can be found in a recording of the *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* part of the *24 Hour Panel People* challenge from the 2011 Comic Relief.[513] Mullarkey is asked to perform an improvised hoedown about Rubik's cubes with three other improvisers. He begins by placing himself at the end of the line, against the presenter's orders. When his turn comes, the audience expects him to have had enough time to prepare something while the others were singing. Yet, all he sings is 'la-la-la… Rubik's Cub… la-la-la… River Danube.'

There is a difficult balance to strike in this instance. Indeed, Mullarkey needs to perform an act of repair to an extent: if he is fully unable to sing, he is taking a risk without the skills to match, which is what Biswas-Diener said could not be considered courage.[514] But conversely, if he is able to improvise a perfect verse, it makes him look like he was only playing for time. Mullarkey is not a singer; in this sense, he is not lying when he hints at not being the best at the game. What tells us that he was pretending to be worse than he actually is, is that he *did* have the time to prepare and nonetheless *chose* to come up with something intentionally bad. Moreover, he performs with enthusiasm at that point, letting out a small laugh at his own expense. The gamble works as the audience laughs. This could be said not to be a virtuosic recovery because it is not an obvious demonstration of skills, but it is arguably virtuosic in its understanding of the dynamics of the form. It demonstrates an awareness of how effective a performance of vulnerability can be in connecting with the audience. By getting them to empathise with him, he minimises the risk he is taking. The audience see him as honest, but nonetheless worthy of encouragement. Again, this is what Duffy said is a good way to remind the audience that improvisers are human, while nonetheless retaining control of the creative process.

Improvisation troupe the Omelette Broadcasting Company attempted a similar gamble during their shows in Copenhagen: they would begin each show either sitting amongst the audience or pretending to be technicians setting up the stage.[515] According to Steen, their intention was to voluntarily place themselves in a position of vulnerability to create a connection, both special and emotional, with the

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[513] *Whose Line (24 Hour Panel People) Hoedown*, 2011, online video. https://youtu.be/w5R4m4T9sJM, (accessed 2 May 2020).

[514] c.f. p.91 of this thesis.

[515] Omelette Broadcasting Company, improvised performance, Copenhagen, 1979.

audience. The performers (Jim Sweeney, Steve Steen, John Dowie, Pete Wear and Justin Case), would use their real names, intentionally exposing themselves. To Steen, they were reinforcing the contrast between the vulnerability of pretending to be clueless, or late, or not the performers, or of pretending the show was not going to take place (thus making the audience uncomfortable for an instant), and the demonstration of control to follow, the return to the normal roles that was expected of them. This is a form of repair. What follows is a positive reaction from the audience, who laugh and are excited to see what develops.[516]

vi. The Trick of Improvisation

I want to study one last example of an improvised performance which synthetises all the elements I have studied in the previous section: the promise of danger, deliberately putting another performer in an uncomfortable situation, breaking the rules of improvisation, and a pretence of vulnerability. This performance triggers feelings of elevation in the minds of spectators and enables the performers to achieve virtuosity. In January 2018, Smart and Steen performed the 'foreign translator' game at the Comedy Store.[517] The game consists of one Player – Steen – playing an expert from a country suggested by the audience. The latter also suggest the speaker's field of expertise. The first improviser must then perform the scene pretending to speak in the language of the chosen country, while the other acts as translator. There is objective difficulty in the task, in that Smart can exert control over Steen by making him say or do whatever he wants. That night, Steen was an expert in hunting and taxi driving from Montenegro. Towards the end of the speech, while he and Smart were speaking about Steen being the face of a famous taxi company in Montenegro, Smart translated Steen's gibberish into: 'Let me sing you the advert I do on the telly!' Steen immediately looked at Smart with intense confusion and they both started arguing in gibberish. Steen put his hand to his face, his body language indicating fear at the prospect of having to sing. Using Johnstone's terminology, this was a sign of Steen lowering his status, not only in relation to Smart, who had given him a seemingly impossible task, but also in

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[516] Steve Steen, 2020.

[517] The Comedy Store Players, improvised performance, London, Comedy Store, 7 January 2018.

relation to the audience, which he may disappoint.[518] When the music started, however, he sang and danced immediately with great enthusiasm and no appearance of any fear or shame, his performance of vulnerability having entirely vanished.

Steen's performance of vulnerability is an isolated event in an overall confident performance. Thus, he surprises the audience by suddenly genuinely looking at a loss. What the audience does not know, however, is that although the content of the game is indeed improvised every time, over the years, Smart and Steen have developed their relationship to the point of always ending the translator game on a song. Steen knows that Smart will find a way to announce a song and dance episode, and he consistently performs vulnerability, only to throw himself into the song a minute later. His performance of vulnerability is carried by Smart's consistency in announcing a song and making it look like an imposition on the performer, beyond the character. This is Steen and Smart's way of artmaking, and it has become a style over the years, which, ironically, is very predictable, yet efficient in making the audience laugh – which they are both aware of. However, their style is coherent, is it shared and is based on established rules between them. It also inscribes itself within the roles they play and becomes part of their characters, of the aesthetics of the game.

What Steen experiences as a performer is not vulnerability. Although creativity is inherently vulnerable, Steen's experience carries him so that he is in no danger of failing. He is however letting the audience believe that he could fail for a fleeting moment, before they realise that he was never in a position of vulnerability after all. Bailes writes of staging failure that 'the world presented isn't *really* unpredictable [...]; yet it *stages* unpredictability and cultivates material out of that condition'.[519] Through unpredictability emerges vulnerability, or at least the promise of it, and from this promise emerges art. It is this promise that Steen and Smart offer and break in an instant. Vulnerability in this instance it is essential to perform an act of repair. The comedy in Steen and Smart's exchange emerged from the appearance of chaos followed by a demonstration of control and skills, recognised by the audience who acknowledged the recovery by cheering and applauding. Steen and Smart were able to use the audience's perception of vulnerability and empathy

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[518] Keith Johnstone, 1979, pp.33-74.
[519] Sara Jane Bailes, 2011, p.100.

towards them to raise their own status.

Steen and Smart know that carefully executed disruptions of a seamless narrative create comedy. This example, however, is both a transgression and a perfect example of following the rules. It is the disruption of a seamless scene and a shift in the way of doing in the performers – from basing the comedy on the absurdity of the speech to suddenly showing a lack of confidence and teamwork. The latter seemingly breaks the rules of efficient collaborative creativity. Yet the exchange also lets the mechanism of improvisation be seen. Steen could have simply challenged the translation, which would have been logical had he stayed in character, and would also have been a block, but a block which would have made sense within the reality of the scene. But, by not challenging what the translator is saying, he, as a performer, is choosing not to block Smart. In a way, he is unintentionally demonstrating to the audience that the rule of accepting offers is being religiously followed. This is also virtuosic.

This example shows the freedom that improvisers enjoy. They do not necessarily need to influence the audience's perception of risk to appear virtuosic. However, they can choose to do it, and this is a choice that implies a knowledge of psychology as well as technical mastery. Vulnerability is a channel for this knowledge: it gives improvisers a way to add grandeur to their act and reap the rewards, camouflaging more awkward moments in the process. For who can tell real danger in a performance that uses vulnerability as a springboard for virtuosic recovery? The expertise of improvisers in the face of vulnerability is multifaceted and unique in this sense: it rests on acknowledging that failure is always possible, and managing to make their audience forgive them for it, a trick that many improvisers are fond of.

d. Conclusion

In the conclusion to chapter 4, I began to hint at the possibility of composing with vulnerability willingly, of using it as an artistic device. In this chapter, I have discussed how improvisers are indeed able to create an aesthetics of vulnerability. This chapter also brings together all the main notions I have studied so far:

- the *inherence of vulnerability*, experienced throughout the creative process and echoed in the principles of composition;
- several types of *balancing act* in simultaneously composing with and

acting against vulnerability, as well as in the ways improvisers compose with vulnerability;

- the *control* of the creative process in taking the vulnerability at its core and shaping it, making it into art;

- the *expertise* at stake in the latter;

- the *courage* to take such a creative leap of faith;

- the *connection* that is essential to make with spectators in order for them to grant improvisers the status of virtuosos;

- the *difference* between *known theories* of improvisation, which tend to shield improvisers from vulnerability, and the *British contemporary practice* I studied, which embraces vulnerability as a compositional device.

Studying vulnerability in improvisational theatre in terms of composition and virtuosity has enabled me to offer a final insight into the creative process of improvisation. Understanding that a performance that is simultaneously allographic (that relies on the work of others or is a variation of) and autographic (that is a spontaneous composition) can be virtuosic, whether consistently or in isolated bursts, enabled me to apply the notion to improvisational theatre. This brought the study back to concerns of aesthetics. Vulnerability became an intentional tool which did not only rely on technique, which originally seemed to be the only requirement for virtuosity, but also on style. This understanding that virtuosity arises in the combination of expert technique (and therefore intuition) and stylistic choices (expert deliberation) is what enabled me to say that vulnerability is a channel for artmaking.

This way of artmaking relies on many a balancing act. I have mentioned the most obvious one, which is that improvisers navigate all aspects of vulnerability at once while also consciously composing with it artistically. Material in improvisation can be generated, not just from the chaos of creativity, but also the pretence of chaos. There are many forms of balancing within the act of composition itself.

The balance is quite subtle in formats such as *Lifegame*, which rely on stories of vulnerability as material. Improvisers have to create an entertaining performance while being respectful and caring towards the interviewee and their story. There is also a balance between the vulnerability of creativity and composing, not from chaos as such, but from life, the inner self that can be so difficult to expose. *Lifegame* also offers a two-way process, a give and take of affect, whereby improvisers take on

some of the interviewee's affect to re-enact it. At the same time, again, the format is about entertainment and not therapy, and in a way, there is another form of balancing in not going as far as analysing what is being created, but rather watching it unfold creatively. Performances of *Lifegame* can be virtuosic in weaving vulnerability throughout the story, through an emotional connection and an exposure of the creative process, even though the channels of recognition are less obvious than in improvisational comedy. Ultimately, improvisers constantly perform not one, but many balancing acts, and within those acts is where their expertise and virtuosity lies.

In some formats, the balance lies between the promise of danger and the safety of the improviser's expertise. Sometimes, more subtly, the balance lies between the objectivity of danger and the improviser's open, honest willingness to explore the horizon of risk. This is an aesthetic endeavour, a conscious decision to expose the vulnerability of the process. Somewhere in between are performances which, like the *Omelette Broadcasting Company*, strike a balance between willingly experienced vulnerability and performed vulnerability aimed at raising the status of the performer.

When vulnerability is enforced onto others, the balance is particularly difficult to navigate. Whether vulnerability is pushed onto other performers or onto members of the audience, there is an objective danger to the endeavour. Sympathy can quickly become antipathy, collaboration can shatter, and the power imbalance between two improvisers, or between improvisers and their audience, can become bullying. In this case, what is at stake is a disparity of skills and a lack of awareness of the other participant's levels of vulnerability. The line can be blurred between success and failure, between danger and safety. The risk taken is higher, because the reward depends on the mood of the audience and offers very little control to the improvisers.

Most performances of vulnerability in improvisational theatre play on the line between flawed perception and accurate recognition. To perform vulnerability, followed by acts of repair, influences the perception of risk of the audience and makes an impact on them to the point that they forgive mistakes and praise the recovery. There is also another form of balance that is essential to performing a successful recovery in cases like Neil Mullarkey's attempt at avoiding singing. Performing failure only to gain sympathy is embarrassing without the skills to

recover, but to show too much mastery removes the risk element and exposes the ploy that Johnstone was so wary of. Performances of vulnerability followed by virtuosic recovery, on the other hand, often strike a balance between transgression of the rules and an expert knowledge of them, through breaking the fourth wall or blocking intentionally. Breaking the rules, in particular, is an objectively dangerous act, but which can be very rewarding and impactful.

The link between vulnerability and virtuosity also brought to the fore the importance of connection and recognition. Spectators can participate in the creative process, but they are also essential as witnesses to courage, expertise and virtuosity. They hold the power to subconsciously elevate improvisers to a higher status, and by extension, grant them the status of artist. Recognition is also revealed in improvisers' appreciation of each other's work and triggers a process of passing on knowledge, which is essential to the evolution and growth of an art form. Finally, studying virtuosity in improvisation also showed that scholars can succeed where critics fail in bringing recognition to improvisational theatre, thus making academic studies of the form all the more essential.

7. Conclusion

Strategies of Vulnerability: Balancing Acts and Control

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out to answer the question: **'How do improvisers develop strategies against and strategies of vulnerability in their art?'** Vulnerability is not unique to improvisation, but improvisation is a catalyst for vulnerability. The main types of vulnerability at stake in this thesis were the vulnerability of creativity and spontaneity (creating something new, under uncertainty); the vulnerability of dangerous situations, which can trigger failure or exposure, for instance; the vulnerability of participation; the vulnerability that is intentionally made part of the creative process of improvisation.

What this study has shown, more than the inevitability of vulnerability in improvisational theatre, is its necessity. I chose vulnerability as a framing device for this thesis because, as Brené Brown stated in her work on vulnerability in contemporary culture, creativity is an intrinsically vulnerable process, and because in improvisational theatre, the process is as important, if not more important than the end result. And indeed, vulnerability has proved to be necessary to create something new, original, and to access unbridled creativity. But more than this, vulnerability has emerged as a channel for connection, a channel for influencing the perception of others, a channel for control, a channel for expertise and, finally, a channel for artmaking.

This thesis has also revealed that improvisers perform many balancing acts when they create. The main ones are:
- between different types of vulnerability in play in British contemporary improvisational theatre (that of spontaneous individual and collaborative creativity and that of participation) and the strategies that improvisers implement in response to them;
- between fear and courage;
- between disconnection and connection (which can happen in relation to fear and/or in relation to participation);
- between navigating vulnerability and composing with it;

- between a performance of vulnerability and virtuosic repair;
- between the spectators' flawed perception and their accurate recognition of virtuosity;
- between established rules and an alternative practice (which is apparent throughout this thesis in the dialogue between Johnstone's theory and the contemporary practice of improvisational theatre);

The strategies against vulnerability are the establishment of expertise over intuitive responses; the ability to take risk and courageous action in the face of fear; establishing connection with other performers and the audience through participation, as well as protecting the quality of the performance and its participants. Those strategies are linked to the notion of control and its various degrees, mostly control of responses to vulnerability, rather than the control of vulnerability itself. Rather than being detrimental, as it can be to inexperienced improvisers, control is beneficial when it stems from expertise, and when it is carefully distributed. Indeed, inexperienced improvisers tend to lack trust in their intuition, and therefore attempt to control it to the point of silencing it. On the other hand, experienced improvisers know to listen to their expert intuition, *then* make expert choices about how to use it in their process. It is control that is informed by spontaneity.

From control emerges courage, the ability to influence the audience's perception, the ability to protect the quality of the show and its participants. When control is relinquished for the sake of a risk worth taking, then regained through repair and expert deliberation, art emerges. This is the strategy *of* vulnerability, which takes control of it to turn it into a compositional device. It enables improvisers to establish themselves as artists with a common knowledge and common ways of artmaking. It legitimises improvisational theatre as a complex, variegated artform with its own style and codes, and shows that an improviser's expertise is more than just techniques they know, it is also personal and complex, informed by a multitude of experiences and experiments, and enables them to make artistic and even virtuosic choices.

Connection and Disconnection: The Importance of the Human in Improvisation

I had predicted that balancing acts and control would be central to this thesis. However, connection has also emerged as a singular and important notion in dealing with vulnerability in improvisational theatre. There is a tendency, for improvisers

who are not comfortable with vulnerability, to disconnect, particularly with their audience. Connection is a difficult, fragile process, an understandably daunting one, which opens the door to types of vulnerability that improvisers may not want to face when they are already facing the vulnerability of their own creative and thought process. Moments of fear also strengthen disconnection. Yet, connection is courageous and beneficial and can provide improvisers with the safety net of audience sympathy, as well as allow for new material to be used in a performance.

The notion of connection highlights the importance of the human in improvisation. As Alexandria Ocasio Cortez wrote, 'if we are brave enough to be human in front of the whole world, then what can our detractors really do?' And to be human, to be brave, is to connect, because as Brené Brown believes, we, as human beings, are hard-wired for connection.[520] As strongly as improvisers may fight connection, it remains central to their art. Their medium allows then to pause and ask for help without it being seen as a weakness, as mistake, like actors forgetting their lines. They benefit from the sympathy of the audience who see the vulnerability of the process and allow them to be human, as long as they can recover eventually. This unveiling of the human behind the professional is also facilitated by improvisation audiences' unique opportunity to get regularly and strongly acquainted with the performers behind the characters. When improvisers are honest with their audience about failure, about fear, or about the vulnerability of the format they are presenting, it is a unique opportunity and blessing that they have as artists. They have the chance to connect and turn their fallibility into part of their art. This, for example, is what Neil Mullarkey does when he plays on his inability to sing.

Thanks to this connection, improvisation also emerges as an artform that can be *recognised* by its audience without the need for critics and experts to *define* it. Spectators are able to elevate improvisers and recognise their virtuosity. Whether they do the latter accurately or not is immaterial. Improvisers are aware that the perception of the audience is essential to an artform that does not leave an artwork after the performance. Through connection, honesty, and occasional influencing of the audience's perception, they make sure that they are the status of artist in the moment of creation. Scholars step in to define the form, but improvisation exists as

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[520]   Brené   Brown,   "Listening   to   shame",   *TED*,   2012. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psN1DORYYV0, (accessed 3 November 2016).

an artform thanks to the recognition and elevation it already enjoys in that moment.

Critiquing Johnstone: A New Paradigm for Viewing and Practising Improvisation

Demonstrating the importance of the human in improvisation also meant that it is essential to consider it a human-led, and therefore ever-changing process. It is important to not simply study improvisation as an ensemble of rules, but as a multitude of individual practices and styles, which may differ from established theory. In British improvisation, Keith Johnstone's voice is often regarded as canonical. Yet Johnstone, as I wrote, is not an artist of vulnerability. On the one hand, he gave generations of improvisers valuable tools against the vulnerability of their creative process. He taught them to trust their own intuition. He taught them to become insensitive to fear. He taught them to ignore risk. He taught them to avoid disruptions from the audience. In the case of competitive improvisation, he found a way to deflect vulnerability away from improvisers. In short, he gave improvisers a set of tools to ignore vulnerability. He believed that vulnerability should not be shown.

While this has prevented neither him nor his students from being successful in the world of improvisation, Johnstone's practice only unveiled part of the wealth of improvisational theatre and left out a whole world of possibilities, and importantly, missed out the fact that even when vulnerability is ignored, it continues to exist. Johnstone's is a form of improvisation that fights the inevitability of vulnerability and rejects its necessity, but consequently, sees its creative potential limited. The practice of improvisation I studied has shown that pre-performance decisions can be made, expert deliberation can follow expert intuition, risk can be taken knowingly, participation can be welcomed and encouraged, and vulnerability can be a very efficient ploy and composition device.

Critiquing Johnstone did two things. First, it opened the door to a new way of viewing improvisational theatre. It exposed a side of improvisation which teaches performers a way to improvise, but not necessarily a way to show artistry. This is down to practice and personal style. Some artists show their artistry through their ability to negotiate and shape vulnerability. Second, opposing his practice to that of contemporary improvisers has taught us is that at the heart of improvisational theatre, there is yet another hidden balancing act: the one between having a rule book and

tearing it up on purpose. Improvisers do not deny the importance of Johnstone's teachings, but their personal expertise take them beyond His Master's Voice.

<u>Reflections on Field Research</u>

In order to fully critique Johnstone, I relied on primary material I collected in the form of recordings of improvised performances and interviews with practitioners. My approach to field research was empirical to a degree. Without practising improvisation myself (bar the occasional workshop), I could nonetheless get as close an idea as possible of the experience of improvisers via interviews. I could also find recordings and attend performances of as many types of improvisation as possible to have a comprehensive overview of the form and experience the form as a spectator. When my experience was not enough, I spoke to other spectators of improvised performances. I wanted to find the information that was not at my fingertips, then let this information speak. This approach also matched the objectivity of the neuroaesthetic methodology. I collected evidence, not just examples. What this new world of practice showed me, as I claimed in the introduction to this thesis and explained in the previous section, is the difference between how improvisation is taught in manuals and existing works such as Johnstone's or even Spolin's and how contemporary British improvisers have adapted their practice to suit their own artistic vision. This material itself makes this thesis original. It is knowledge that needed to be brought to light.

In her *Unlocking Us* podcast, Brené Brown used a phrase which struck me as the main reason why, as a researcher, I needed to gather my own primary material and conduct interviews with practitioners. She was speaking about vulnerability and her lifelong work on the matter and said, commenting on her personal dislike of uncomfortable situations: 'I am the researcher, not the representative.'[521] While my work as a student is important in contributing to the knowledge of improvisational theatre, my voice does not and must not substitute itself to that of improvisers. I have a duty of respect for a form I understand and can analyse, but do not practice myself. I wanted to let the representatives of improvisational theatre have a voice in this work, even though I am the one who dissects, frames and draws conclusions from

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[521] Brené Brown, "Brené on FFTs", *Unlocking Us*, online podcast, 20 March 2020. Available from Deezer, (accessed 25 March 2020).

that voice.

Neuroscience: Expertise and the Frame by Frame Study of the Improvisation Process

In order to dissect information, to slow it down to a frame by frame study, I relied on neuroscience theory. Neuroscience, applied to primary material generated through field research, played an essential part in establishing the *how*, the process through which improvisers experience, overcome and shape vulnerability. In using neuroscience, I also connected theatre practice with a wide range of other forms of thinking in order to be able to analyse the creative process slowed down, frame by frame. Indeed, as a crucially time-based process, improvisation is extremely difficult to analyse, because it leaves no literary trace. It is art without a tangible artwork. It is art that resides in the process. I have solved the problem of studying this process by understanding the underlying cognitive, emotional and unconscious dynamics. I have exposed a creative process which, although it is specific to improvisational theatre in some ways, is generally similar to the creative process of theatre. The difference is that it is spontaneous, and that improvisers experience all aspects of vulnerability at once. As such, improvisation is shown to be both firmly anchored into the performing arts and also worthy of being studied on its own, as a unique form of performance.

Neuroscience revealed the flaws of the ways in which inexperienced improvisers face uncertainty or in the way empathetic connection is achieved during the participation process. It also revealed the complexity of the emotions that improvisers and their audience experience in the moment. It showed, thanks to Melrose's work on expertise and intuition, that there is a crucial difference between intuition and expert intuition, the latter being informed by learning and practice. In short, it once again nuanced a belief expressed by Johnstone: that intuition should be trusted. It is more accurate to say that expert intuition should be trusted, as intuition that is not linked to expertise is flawed and misleading. Neuroscience also nuanced the notion of risk in improvisation, showing that the ability to accurately assess risk is crucial for improvisers to take creative leaps of faith. Finally, neuroscience revealed cognitive consensus as the key to understanding how improvisers create collaboratively.

Examining fear from a neurological point of view also unveiled how it can be

felt by expert improvisers yet does not paralyse them. It can be assumed that experienced improvisers are not afraid of spontaneity anymore, but what the systems of fear show is that they take advantage of the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system's ability to returns the body to a calmer state, which is when they are able to take action even in the face of fear, and rely on their expert knowledge.

Returning to the difference between intuition, expert intuition and expert deliberation, I have been able to demonstrate that the improvisation process is not instant and that improvisers are not, as is commonly believed, fully submitted to their intuition, as expert as it may be. The process of accepting offers and adding to them is not as fast as it looks. Improvisation does not happen in spite of improvisers. Instead, their thought process happens within a frozen, stretched-out moment of expert deliberation in which they are in control of their actions, but still improvising, not relying on a script or a rehearsed performance. This was a truly original finding which enabled me to slow down the improvisation process and study it frame by frame, to isolate moments of deliberation and expertise in improvised performances. These moments, in turn, opened up a discussion of artistry, of deliberate stylistic and compositional decisions.

I did not claim to be coming to new conclusions within the field of neuroscience or biology. I believe it is possible to go further into that side of improvisational theatre. What my thesis has done is strengthen the link between two fields that have rarely been studied together, but there is still a lot to study with regards the exact chemical processes at stake in expert intuition and deliberation, for instance, or the building of long-term memory throughout the training process of improvisers. However, what I was interested in in this thesis was the way improvisers make art, and this is why I used neuroscience as a means to study aesthetics.

Aesthetics and a New Manifesto for Improvisational Theatre as an Artform

Returning, therefore, to concerns of aesthetics, Dutton's aesthetics universals and the notion of virtuosity were crucial is establishing improvisational theatre as an artform which can be simultaneously allographic and autographic, yet still virtuosic, and therefore worthy of recognition. And again, it solved the problem of studying improvisation as an artform in which artistry resides in the process. It showed that

improvisers' expert technique, stylistic choices and artistry can be studied in spite of a lack of trace.

Studying the difference between established theories and contemporary British improvisational theatre practice has exposed the variety of ways of doing that exist within Western improvisational theatre, and how much still remains to be written about it. It updated knowledge of the form, but also gave credit where credit was due, as one way of doing does not necessarily invalidate another. It confirmed the ever-changing nature of improvisational theatre, a form which has vulnerability, and therefore growth and change at its core. This study, combined with the aesthetic methodology, enabled me to speak of artmaking and legitimise improvisational theatre as an artform. Improvisers are artists in their own rights and create and recreate their own styles and codes. Vulnerability is one medium through which to achieve this.

This thesis can be read as a new manifesto for improvisational theatre that shows the potential for new ways to read and study the form. I speak of a 'new' manifesto, because I was not the first to attempt to legitimise improvisational as an artform. However, this thesis was the first to achieve this process by studying improvisation, not within an artistic movement, or through the scope of other artforms, but by trusting it to reveal itself as an artform than does not need to be compared to anything else. I predict that it will be possible to create more manifestos for improvisational theatre by finding other forms of aesthetics, other ways of artmaking that are common to certain groups of improvisers. The more studies of improvisational theatre emerge, the more it can be understood to be much more than a technique, but a rich artform that can stand the test of time.

Crucially, I solved an issue that I often heard being raised when I began this project: that there are as many practices of improvisation as there improvisers, that the possibilities that the form offers are infinite, and that therefore it is difficult to frame a study of it without relying on comparisons to other forms of theatre. This, to me, always denied that improvisational theatre can stand by itself as an art form, and while other forms of theatre offered important insights into some of the key points of this thesis, they were not needed to frame it, and the reason is: because even infinite ways of doing can have similarities that tie them together. In improvisational theatre, improvisers all face vulnerability, and many have developed similar strategies of and strategies against it, with the aim to make art. As such, vulnerability becomes a

framing device for a study of improvisation, which does not deny the complexity and multitude of improvisation practices, but links many of them into a common way of artmaking. And this common way of artmaking is particularly visible and relevant to improvisational theatre because it rests on a state of being that is constantly exposed through spontaneity and performances of failure followed by expert recoveries.

What I hope will follow is also a drive for improvisers to tell their story, to share their practice and claim it as unique, different and ground-breaking. The history of improvisation should continue to be built upon and completed. Following Brown's definition of vulnerability, a form that has uncertainty at its core can only drive change, and hopefully this change will become more and more visible as time goes by and unveil even more ways to make art in improvisation.

Appendix

a. Introduction

This appendix includes a full list of the relevant interviews I conducted for this thesis as well as previous work on improvisational theatre. I have also provided non-exhaustive samples of interview transcripts which best represent the interview process. The aim of this collection is to give a complementary insight into my field research process and its evolution as I narrowed down the scope of my thesis. I have not included samples from every single interview, but rather, I have selected the ones which best show the evolution of my research, gave me the most reliable and interesting material and raised some of the most important questions I set out to answer in this thesis. Some interviews were complimentary to previous ones and did not last long or were done over email. I have not included them in the samples as I cite them almost entirely in the body of the thesis. Some improvisers also asked not to be quoted on certain passages of our interview, and I have therefore not included those excerpts.

b. List of Interviews in Chronological Order

i. Improvisers

• Lee Simpson, 17 March 2013.

• Steve Steen, 25 March 2013.

• Andy Smart, 24 March 2013.

• Neil Mullarkey, 31 March 2013.

• Richard Vranch, 28 April 2013.

• Jim Sweeney, 27 January 2014.

• Robert Broderick, 1 April 2015.

• Steen, Steve, 14 April 2014.

• Stella Duffy, 13 January 2016.

• Lee Simpson, 30 January 2016.

• Rob Broderick, 16 February 2016.

• Colin Mochrie, 22 February 2016

• Steve Steen, 11 March 2016.

- Roddy Maude-Roxby, 19 May 2016.
- Steve Steen, 24 September 2017.
- Stephen Frost, 2 August 2018.
- Steve Steen, 6 February 2020.
- Stephen Frost, 5 May 2020.

ii. Spectators

- Catherine McGahey, 18 January 2014.
- Jo Eden, 30 January 2014.
- Catherine McGahey, 12 April 2015.
- Kerri Clegg, 22 November 2016.

c. Improviser Interview Samples

i. Steve Steen, 2013

When did you discover improvisation?

Many, many years ago I went to a theatre club in South London called Oval House Theatre Club. And it was because I left school at 16 and I didn't know what I wanted to do. But a friend of mine said: 'You've got to come to this place, it's fantastic, it's full of the weirdest people on earth, very strange, very artistic, very theatrical, hippies, and the girls are stunning, so you've got to come to this club.' That was in 1971 and there were people there doing improvisation workshops, and I was terrified of it, and I didn't do anything for a year, and I didn't even speak to anyone for a year, really, I used to sit in a corner of the room and not talk to anyone, I must have looked very odd. Eventually somebody said: 'Go to this workshop, try it. If you don't like it, you don't have to do it.' But I went to one and I liked it and I kept doing it. That's when I started doing improvisation. It was taught by [Ben Bennison] who would teach at RADA. So I figured: 'He's got to be good. He knows what he's doing.' So that was it. So that was the first man to teach me improvisation.

When did you start professionally?

About 3 years later, 1974. Me and my working partner Jim Sweeney went to the Edinburgh Festival for the first time. And we were very young and naïve, but the show we'd created was from improvisation. We built up a show we knew kind of

backwards, but we kind of thought: 'Alright, it's loose enough for us to improvise within that structure', but the structure itself we created through improv.

What was the improvisation scene like when you started?

When I first started improvisation, as far as I knew there was only one other group outside of myself and Jim Sweeney. As far as I knew. But in the 80s, when we were doing improvisation as a cabaret show. The cabaret circuit just exploded in London. Comedy was becoming *the* big thing. We didn't want to miss out. So we thought: 'We've got to adapt our improvisation shows, the full length theatre show, for cabaret.' So we had to do that. Suddenly we met other people who were doing kind of similar-ish bits of impro. It wasn't quite the same but it was sort of similar. There was an American doing a cabaret thing. And I remember we were on the same bill together. And me and Jim were top of the bill that night. And this other group were closing the first half or opening the second half, something like that. So anyway, they stayed to watch our show. And one of the American guys in this group came up to me and said: 'Hey, I really liked that thing you did when you were doing that and everything and the cigarette, I'm gonna steal that.' But he was serious. And I said: 'Yeah, go on.' I really didn't care. Because I thought: 'We've been doing it for years, if you just try to stick it in whatever you're doing it's going to fail miserably because you haven't practised. You haven't been doing it for a long time.' I think there were groups around that were doing loads of different games because all those games developed from actor's exercises. And that's a big thing. When I look at the *Whose Line?* TV programme, obviously that had a lot to do with the explosion of impro groups all over the country. You can't go up to Edinburgh now without there being 19-20 different impro groups up there from all over the world, an awful lot from this country, an awful lot I don't know from which country. But to me it's a good thing. Just because when I started there were only 2 or 3 groups, it means nothing. It's the fact that people have learnt that it's actually a good thing to do, whereas when I stated it was considered a bad thing to do, it was considered a thing that you don't do. "Why don't you become a serious actor? Learn the craft. Learn the intricacies of script and lines and character development." You can do all that with impro. The joy for me is playing different characters. I wouldn't be able to do that if it wasn't for improvisation. There are many plays out there that would allow me to play multicharacters during the course of an evening, and improvisation does that. So

I'm pleased that there are more groups and more and more things to do, as long as it continues it's fine, I don't want it to fade away.

Would you consider your training as formal?

No, I think I've been thrown into the mix, really. I've been thrown into the mix with some very good teachers. All the people that taught me were either performers themselves, teachers themselves, or belonged to theatre groups of the time. One of the guys who taught me was John Ratzenberger. He had a theatre group which also worked from improvisation called 'Sal's Meat Market' and all their stuff was improvised. And I would watch their shows, and we could see that these guys were doing impro. Because it was so loose and they would corpse all the time, they would laugh all the time.

What drew you to improvisation?

It wasn't like anything else. You know, when you go to the theatre and you see a show and you think: 'I can't act as well as these people, I can't even articulate as well as these people.' But then you go and see an impro show which is just a bunch of people on stage having fun. I used to go watch a group called *Theatre Machine*. And *Theatre Machine* were the first impro group I ever saw. And they used to do games and sketches. A bit like the Comedy Store Players do now. A lot of games. But their shows would last a bit longer. And they were really, really funny. But it had more the effect of showing me: 'This is what I could do', rather than: 'Here is just something for you to be impressed with.' We're all impressed when we go and see shows, we're all impressed when we go and see theatre groups, and we're all impressed when we go and see theatrical events. But I really looked at that group and thought: 'I could do that, I'd really like to have a go at doing what they do.' And that was the key, that was the hook for me, I wanted to try. I think that's really important.

As an improviser, do you think it is important to have a formal, proper training like Second City provides, for example?

No, in fact everything that I've heard from Second City goes against everything that I believe in. There's an awful lot of preparation that goes into some of their work. I've heard for instance that they will ask for a subject and then they

will go backstage and have an interval break and go backstage and prepare a sketch based on the audience suggestion that they've been given. Well, to me that's wrong. If the audience give you a suggestion, do it there and then in front of them. If I ask for a fried egg, I don't want it 20 minutes later, I want it now. To me, that's the essence of improvisation. Improvisation is having to think on your feet.

What is the key to improvisation?

Basically, what we're doing now is a form of improvisation. You're asking me questions – in fact, in improvisation terms, one of the worst things you can do is ask a person a question, because that puts them on the spot for an answer. People will have to fill in gaps. People don't like leaving gaps in the conversation. Someone will fill in the conversation. It's a kind of improvisation. It's not the most entertaining thing in the world, but you can hear that there is a flow of conversation between people. It's kind of what I like. A lot of people get the wrong idea that you have to be funny all the time. And you don't. The main thing is to stay on top of what you're doing. There are key points, you know. Listen. If you don't listen, you won't be able to react to what someone said. From that comes a certain amount of understanding. If you know that person very well, then you get more understanding. Friends do this all the time. You'll have close friends that you talk with and sometimes you feel like you could finish off their sentences. You know each other so well, sometimes you only have to mention one or two words and that sets you off into a fit of giggles about something that can relate to a film you saw last week or a person you are talking about, but you only have to say one or two words. There are certain triggers in between close friends. It's the same thing for improvisers, you know, you can get into scenes much easier if you know that person. Suddenly you know how they're going to react when they're going to speak. You can almost lead each other down certain kind of avenues where you know you'll be able to develop an idea, make an idea funnier. All this you can do with experience and understanding.

How important are the rules?

They're very important when you start. You've got to learn certain rules before you can proceed, before you can go on. Some people might think they're hysterically funny. Some people might think they're the joker of the class, some people might be the joker at work, and some people might come to shows and think

they're the funniest thing ever. But until you know the rules you cannot get loose. You can't learn to do without those rules. Again, many years ago, we used to think it was very funny to be on stage and show the audience openly that we were having fun by laughing at everything we did. The problem there is that suddenly you look like you're the only people in the room having a good time. It alienated people. That's the problem. There are certain rules of stagecraft that you need to know. If I'm standing in front of the audience and somebody is standing behind me, just doing funny stuff and pulling faces – that's called upstaging – that's no good in improvisation, not unless I know the person is there. If I know the person is there, I can react with that person, but I need to see them. Once you've learnt those rules and you're comfortable with them, get rid of them. Just forget all about them. It's like driving, riding a bike, standing on a log in a river. After a while you're going to go, 'This is so easy, I don't even need to think about it anymore.' Because it's really good to have fun without the rules.

ii. Lee Simpson, 2013

When did you discover improvisation?

I was at school, and my English teacher read Keith [Johnstone]'s book. My English teacher and drama teacher – he was both – read Keith's book and we started doing the exercises at lunchtime and we ended up doing a show to the rest of the school. That would have been 1979-80.

When did you start professionally?

So, that was where I grew up in Great Yarmouth, at school. Then I went to drama school to learn to be an actor supposedly. So we didn't really do that in drama school. The first gig I did in London was a gig at the Gate Theatre which was run by a guy called Andy Harmon, and he had an improvisation company called Trouble in Public. I left college in 1985, so that would have been somewhere around then.

Do you believe that formal training is important?

I think everybody has their own path. And there's no right way, there's no wrong way. The notion that one can become familiar and easy with the informal structure of improvisation is of course nonsense. Equally, to say that no development can happen in a formal structure is nonsense. There are no rules. If impro teaches us

anything, it is that there are no rules.

How does improvisational theatre translate to television?

Well, it's interesting because I think probably on television the person they try to keep happy is the producer, and the producer will have a perception of what will keep the audience happy. The reason why they have points on something like Whose Line? is because that makes it look more like a game show, so that makes it look more like television that already exists, which supplies the viewer with a context within which to view it, so I guess that's why they do that. When Keith invented *Theatresports*, his reason for that was that he saw *Theatresports* as a training tool, and if someone does a bad scene then the judges give them a low score, and then the audience hate the judges, they don't hate the performers. What you're doing is you're displacing the audience's judgement. Because there's nothing more embarrassing than bad improvisation. It's really painful. And what happens is, if someone does bad impro or even bad comedy, and the audience are made to feel embarrassed, they hate the performer. They get angry with the performer, quite rightly, because they're being put through something they don't want to be put through. So they've got a lot of anger, so what you want to do is find a way to redirect that anger. I think it's slightly different on Whose Line because there was no room for someone who was a brave trier but who wasn't very good.

iii. Robert Broderick, 2016

What kind of relationship do you have with your audience?

With *Abandoman*, I find that when I leave the show, I want to say hello to people. So I feel like I've noticed that when I don't say hello to people, I feel like: 'Fuck, I've missed out on something.' I actually feel like: 'Oh, there's something that I should have done here', so I'm kind of like, personally – and every improviser differs – me with the crowd, I'm really keen on them being relaxed and them being able to feel like they don't have to be fearful. It's like a good date, you get moments where you're like, you come to the table and you're like: 'Oh, this is about to go off' and you know it so quickly and you – it's actually very similar to dating, you become funnier, you become more engaged and you become more engaging and everybody leaves going: 'Ah, we should see each other again.' And then I think other times – It's funny, I rarely have moments of being like: 'Fuck you,' to the crowd, like

aggressively, 'fuck you guys.' I'm more like: 'Okay, this is where we are, we're in a tricksy place.' And I feel like there are certain things that become part of your less conscious brain, and things that are part of your conscious brain. The less conscious part of the brain, I think is kind of calibrating.

What does audience engagement mean to you?

I think creating that moment where the whole crowd's like: 'This is it.' The best moments of audience engagement, I think, are when I, as an audience, have been like taken in, or when I feel like this is personal, this is maybe about, you know, the people in this room, I have a chance of getting involved this is- there's an element of two-way to the whole process. I want the performer to do well, and I'm kind of willing to go with their non-perfectness.

Somebody came on stage and went that their job was raising money for charities. We're in Glastonbury, it's kind of midnight, after Rolling Stones, maybe it was even closer to 1am. So I said: 'Let's get you to run around this massive tent.' Dave who was playing keys with me at the moment, played kind of this beautiful like: 'We are the Champions' sound and I, as a performer, actually just had to kick back and let this thing unfold. Some nights are just, you know, last week at a show I asked this couple, and both were albinos, how they met and one of them is like: 'An albino barbecue in South End.'

How do you use space when you improvise?

I'll tell you one thing that I noticed, I really like being within the crowd. I hate the distance, I despise it. I, like, fucking hate it, aggressively. I love being in the crowd because I think then a. it's much easier to create a connection but b. I don't know, something more special happens. I think that when I think of the space, I'm not so much thinking about the stage itself, because the stage is a stage, you wander in and you go: 'This is how much we have to use.' When I think in terms of more classic improv, each time you walk out in your mind you're walking out to a different room environment, whatever it is, outdoors, indoors. With me, I'm often thinking of: 'How do I get in amongst them?' or: 'How do I create maybe less distance between us?'

iv. Colin Mochrie, 2016

When you perform, how do you encourage the audience to participate?

It's a little unfortunate in one way, I tour with one of the other guys who've done Whose Line, so everyone who comes to our show knows Whose Line, so they know what is expected of them. So they're all ready to get involved in any way they can. If we're working in maybe a corporate show, we try to do a little warm up at the beginning to get them comfortable yelling out things and being a part of the show, trying to explain to them that they are the unsung members of our ensemble, because we don't have a show without them, they're the ones giving us everything to work with, so they all in a way have to work – not as hard as us – but they all have to work a little. We try not to – you can only do too many scenes about gynaecologists and proctologists, so we're also trying to educate them as we go along, to sort of think outside the box and maybe play at the higher end of the intelligence scale.

Do you feel like you have some kind of responsibility towards the audience?

Oh, absolutely, because they're the ones who help us. Whenever we bring people up on stage – in our improv show, we have people on stage, for about 80% of our games, because it's just the two of us, so it's our job to make them feel as comfortable as possible, because we want them to help us, so we don't want to be insulting to them, we want them to love us, so that they will be there when we need them and be as relaxed as they can be in that environment. I mean, it's totally foreign to so many people who walk up on the stage: bright lights, you're in front of an audience, so it's really our job to make sure they're focusing on us and to calm them down and make sure they understand what they're supposed to do.

And conversely, would you think that the audience has any kind of responsibility towards you?

Depending on the audience. There are some people who want to be a part of a show in a way that's not really conducive to the enjoyment of the audience. I think the audience likes to see us get into trouble but they also want us to get out of it. You know, they'll give us things that are – suggestions that may be tough, things that we haven't heard before, they want to see us struggle, because that's, sometimes, the most fun part of the scene: 'How are they going to use this, how are they going to

make sense of it, how is it going to work out?' I don't think they – they don't want us to fail completely, because also, they paid money, they want a show.

What do you understand by audience engagement?

To engage the audience is trying to impress upon them what this event is. The show that they're seeing will never be seen again. It is a one-night-only show. You're all part of this special process where two or however many improvisers just walk on stage and they have to come up with a show and they don't have anything. It's almost like a first date, a first date where one person kind of knows what's going on and the other person is trying to catch up. So, it's up to the gentleman or the lady on the date to take charge, but also be able to give and take. So, I think that's an important thing, engaging with the audience, there has to be a give and take. We have to be accepting of their ideas – within reason. So it's more – when an audience goes to see a play, they know what their function is, they just sit and watch the play and react to the actors. When it comes to an improv show, as I said, they're participating. They have to be listening as much as the improvisers are, so we're not getting the same suggestions scene after scene, so that they're – sometimes, in the audience, they'll almost do a running joke about a suggestion that may have worked well, and that makes it kind of fun for us to, it gives us something to play with. So, it gives the audience, I think, that chance to be a performer while they're sitting comfortably in their own seats, judging us.

When you improvise, how do you use space?

We try, actually – the guy I improvise with, Brad Sherwood – we try to use the audience perception of – we try to use as much of the theatre as possible. Obviously, on stage, when we're doing scenes, we try to set up the environment so everybody has some idea where we are. But also, there's one scene we do where we bring an audience member on stage and he does all the sound effects in the scene for me. My partner, he goes into the audience and hands a person a microphone and the audience is going to do all the sound effects for him. So, one person does a sound effect and then hands it out to the next one and it really gets the audience involved and its gets them – they get so excited that they are part of a scene and they're completely in the dark, so nobody knows [who did] that sound effect that they came up with and they feel totally safe too. No part of a theatre is safe from an improviser,

you use it for whatever your horrible needs are.

Does the way you perform influence your relationship with the audience?

Oh, yes. You know, you have to, I think, be respectful of the audience that you have. You know, we've done corporate shows where everyone is basically just drunk and they're shouting at you. You can pretty much do anything, so it doesn't really matter, they're not really invested in the show, they just want to have a good time. Our theatre shows, we have a large demographics, from kids to grand-parents, so we're always aware of not going too blue or letting our language get out of control. We certainly get risqué, but nothing more than what is allowed on television these days on your basic television networks. But you have to be careful, you can't make – when Bush was in office, we were doing a show and one of us made an off-hand comment about Bush and it was nothing really derogatory, it was sort of a, almost 'what he's done' category. But it was nothing that harsh and we immediately split the audience. You could feel the audience immediately splitting in two: pro-Bush and anti-Bush. But, for an improviser it's hard because we don't do political humour, we don't really do current events but it was really odd to have that become a thing. Because the Americans really love making fun of their presidents, it's something they've always done but for that period, it couldn't be done. And so, with an audience, you have to sort of be aware, you know, every once in a while, if there's a tragedy happening, we'll get that as a suggestion and you can feel half the audience go: 'Oh my God, if they take it…' And of course we're not going to take it. We get ISIS on a regular basis and like, horrible suggestion and we go: 'Well, we can't do it, for one thing, it's happened yesterday and we don't know if someone who has been touched by these tragedies have a relative in the audience or some sort of connection to it.' So, we try to keep aware of our audience's feelings and such in that sense.

Can you be surprised by the audience?

Sometimes. We've have members of the audience up on stage helping us out and for me, the best time is when they can come up with a line that ends the scene. There's something that's so funny in that, we thought: 'Oh, I'd have never thought of that.' And I am a veteran improviser. But that was just like the perfect end to the scene. So they have surprises. There are people who come up on stage and as they're walking up, you go: 'Oh, this may have been a mistake to pick them, they seem a

little timid.' And then, all of a sudden, they become tigers and they really get committed to helping you out. There's always a little trepidation as they're first walking up, but then they start getting into the spirit of it and become part of the team. That always kind of surprised me. It always surprised me that an audience would go out their way to do as well as they can.

What would you like the audience to remember from a show?

But so many times, over the last however many years I've been doing it, someone will come up after a show and go: 'You know? I was going through a divorce' or: 'A parent's dying and we used to watch the show together' and just at that moment there was nothing but good times and laughs. And that makes – of course it makes my ego feel great, but that's what I want people to remember, just that you can have a good time, even if you're in the middle of the worst time of your life, there's always time just to sit back and have a good laugh. And it can – I truly believe there's some medicinal properties to laughter.

v. Roddy Maude-Roxby, 2016

Could you tell me about Theatre Machine?

The other people from *Theatre Machine* were Ric Morgan, Ben Benison and Tony Trent. We – Tony Trent was an art student, I was an art student, and he was, I think at the Central school and we had workshops at, I can't remember the name of the theatre, but there was a theatre which still exists up on the top of Holborn right near the Central school and we'd sit in the stalls and go on stage and so on and suddenly there was this art student alongside who'd just come in off the – unrecorded really, from the art school. And then he started improvising and in the beginning of *Theatre Machine* he was the leading light somehow, but I can remember sitting with Keith [Johnstone] watching Tony when he was working on a scene when we were in those workshops and him saying: 'See, he's thinking ahead, see he's thinking ahead', because you could see from his face that he's answering but he's actually going way into the future and Keith was very insistent: 'Don't do that, stay in the present. Now he's in the present, look. Now, now it's all going!' so some of those things stuck, and then when Keith was taking people out on the road, he'd take, as Bill [Gaskill] had, a group of actors, and gradually, gradually, we settled down for the four that became *Theatre Machine*. And then as we toured and travelled and played we had rows often

with Tony and eventually he left, sort of pushed out, but also deciding to leave, I think, and was replaced by John Muirhead who was also one of the people who could well cope with him when he was most difficult.

When we used the masks, when we were doing the shows we, with Keith, we would get set up and then Keith would start off the evening by talking to the audience, and Keith tends to say in his writing that he didn't enjoy – didn't want to be a performer, didn't enjoy being a performer but I would say, I can remember him getting high, and he was wonderful at describing something that he'd observed from society such as status and then saying: 'It may be different if we were in Germany, it may be different and it is different in Germany', or: 'Different countries have a different attitude to' – whereas, in England, it was linked to class as well and yeah, he, I think he, as Keith said: 'An actor either understands status in their system or they have a problem with it and if they have a problem with it they need to get familiar with it because otherwise it gets in the way of acting.'

And all of that was short form really and the overall form of Keith instructing or his presence, there was something that when we were on our own, when he went to Canada and we were on our own, we lost and the audiences lost. I think there were 27 techniques that we knew, and quite often we'd put up a list of them, oh we had them up on little travelling boards so they were packed in with the costume and props and stuff and we'd put them around to left and right of the stage so you could pick one up, to give yourself an idea of which one to play if you were going on in the next moment without a thought in your head, really. And then when we were working without Keith we sometimes made agreements: 'I want to do that and that and that and you want to do that, ok we'll start off with' – very soon, actually, the group realised that they could start by letting someone go on and not knowing what they were going to do, or they didn't know themselves and then there were other techniques that came out of the anxiety of the stage manager telling us we can run now, we're ready to run, and we're not actually ready.

I think it's in general parlance by now but we had one exercise which was called One, Two, Three, Four and it was that when the lights go up and someone must come out on stage within a fairly short, you can almost count to three, and then someone must go on stage. And then we found that if you didn't want to go on and it came to that moment and you didn't want to go on and no one else went on, you could take on a prop, and place the prop, as if you were a stage hand at an exit and

that meant that you'd made a clear signal to the others: 'I'm not playing here,' and with any luck, it was a break for the next one who said: 'Oh it's just perfect, I'll go on to that prop, I know what I'm doing.'

I think the first go with Keith went about ten years, eight years or so, and then without Keith we went for another number of years.

When you were working with Theatre Machine, did you use audience suggestions at the time?

Very, very little. We, I think very soon, found that the audience tended to give unpleasant subjects or something like a gents' loo or something that you didn't want to do. So what we did more was that we did have a form where we individually spoke to an individual in the audience about a subject that – we either asked them whether there was a subject on their mind which concerned them – and then say: "Syria", or they might say their mother is in hospital or something. For doing that, you were informed about subjects to bring in, and the audience had heard them mentioned.

Maybe I'll say a bit more about the other groups too because they'd often have a jar with them and write things down and fold them up. We used that as well. And that was better because they put in many, and we sometimes could talk to the audience beforehand and say: 'Something that might be, maybe, the subject for a poem. Maybe better than you giving us something that's rude.' Because we'd probably be rude anyway, most likely, and when you're obliged to be it's not as good as when it just comes up.

What would you call being in the moment in improvisation?
Really, like now, if we can, having no preparation or plan in mind, so that you are responding very much in the moment to what the other person says or does. The thinking ahead, for me, is very likely to happen. The same way as if I'm painting, I'm starting to see an opportunity, I start going towards that – and in writing. And the being in the moment, I think, is allowing more and more to just happen.

How do you become aware of the audience's feedback?
I suppose that the laughter is a very good indication. We could always see the audience because we had enough light up. Time and again, we saw someone with

their arms folded and their legs folded looking at the time and occasionally looking up and we thought: 'God! they're so bored!' And then we met them after the show and they thought that it was a very fantastic show! We were also told by people that when they saw us coming to a venue, they thought we were very frightening.

d. Spectator Interview Samples

i. Catherine McGahey, 2015

Before an improvised show, what do you expect?

I try to keep an open mind with impro shows, especially the ones which are not a consistent format as they have even more flexibility to head in any direction. It's fair to say that for comedy impro I have just the general idea that it will be funny, but with other genres it is harder to set a level of expectation in that way.

When I am trying out new format shows, there is always someone on the bill who I have previously seen in other shows - so my expectations are usually based on knowing the quality of the previous work of the performer(s) rather than any particular format or content of the show.

What do you pay for?

Entertainment certainly is a factor, but the entire experience is what you are paying for. What that experience might be is entirely up to the cast and the audience and wherever they meet on the night.

What do you owe the artist?

As an audience we owe the artist respect and support when they are on stage. In this I include the lack of heckling, observing the usual theatre etiquette (phones off etc), and providing suggestions to allow scenes to progress. The audience can choose to engage or not, but if they don't, then impro can fall flat. It needs everyone to buy into what they are seeing, and everyone can enjoy it. People who attend these shows and make it clear they don't intend to engage, end up ruining it for others.

What does the artist owe you?

To return that respect, I suppose, in the form of producing the best work they can on the night, given the scene and suggestions.

When you leave the venue, what do you think about?

Quite often I will think about the show and its contents - when it comes to the comedy shows it is more about remembering the funny points of the show and that will usually keep you smiling all the way home. Regarding the straight impro shows - these will often trigger a period of time post-show where I will consider the questions raised during the show. I have seen improvisations involving professionals who specialise in things like voice dialogue and non-violent communication, which explored on stage the ways that we deal with our inner voices and how we communicate our thoughts. You could simply enjoy the stage time you see, where the cast produce some theatre which is somewhere between acting and just being themselves working through various processes with the expert. However, I find it impossible to simply treat those shows like it's only about the time on stage. Good theatre should be thought-provoking and encourage you to reconsider the world almost - certainly your immediate world and how you view it.

ii. Jo Eden, 2014

How did you encounter improvisation?

I started seeing improvisation around 2008, after a friend recommended it and told me I'd love it.

Do you feel part of a community as an impro fan?

Definitely. I think there's a realness to improvised comedy that you don't always see in more mainstream performance, and that connection that the performers have with the audience helps them connect with each other. If you have a basic understanding of impro, you can feel like you're in on a secret, as if you're one of a group of people witnessing something quite special that won't ever be repeated. I think that makes you more likely to talk to people around you about what you're seeing.

Do you feel there are rules within the community?

As far as suggestions and behaviour, regular members of an impro audience learn what works and what doesn't. We also see the suggestions that are offered on a regular basis, which we'll try to avoid. We know individual performers' skills and

sometimes running jokes, which we can play to. No heckling, helping out with better suggestions if bad ones are all that are offered, filling in the blanks with other audience members who are new to impro. Interacting with performers pre/post show is a tricky one. Impro involves putting yourself in ridiculous positions and laughing at yourself, as well as others, so you get a glimpse of the person behind the performance - they don't have as much opportunity to hide their personalities and reactions. But while you might FEEL that you know them, you really don't. I'm uncomfortable with people getting starstruck over the 'genius' of impro and trying to befriend performers.

For you, what remains of an improvised performance once it's over?

There's a feeling you get after an improvised performance, which lingers. It's an overall sense of having just experienced something very special and unique. And it's not just immediately after the performance. There's something I call the 'Comedy Smile', which isn't unique to impro but definitely features in most of the shows I see. The Comedy Smile happens hours or even days after a performance, when a memory pops into your head and fills you with the feeling that you had during the show. It's special with impro, because you tend to forget the specifics of a performance as soon as it's happened, but the Comedy Smile is when your brain suddenly remembers something it thought it had forgotten. I can't explain the feeling, but you know when it hits you - you end up smiling stupidly and confusing the people around you.

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