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# IMPROVISATION IN REHEARSAL

Foreword by Mark Rylance



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# Introduction

## Using This Book

This book is about using improvisation in the rehearsal of a play, but since all plays are different it's impossible to outline a series of improvisations that would be useful each and every time. So rather than giving a clear set of instructions, I've tried to identify various stages of the rehearsal process and then I've made suggestions and given examples of how improvisation can be used to help the actors build their characters, develop character relationships and solve rehearsal problems.

Each chapter starts with an anecdotal preamble which may or may not have something to do with the theatre. These stories and reflections always have an allegorical connection with the main thrust of the chapter and are there to stimulate the imagination. Actors are creative people and like to tell stories. After all, that is what their job is all about. As a director, I find that an allegory or a story can be a far more productive way to explain something to an actor than a simple description of what I want them to do. It gets their creative juices flowing and, before you know it, they have got the point. It helps them think for themselves and encourages a personal commitment to that new way of thinking.

Chapters 1 to 3 are about preparation and research. You can't just start using improvisation in rehearsals unless you have a good grounding of information. I feel it's important to outline my method for doing this, since some people may only be familiar with rehearsal processes that immediately start by act-

ing out the dialogue. Actors often let their characters develop gradually as they rehearse a play with scripts in their hands, and research is slowly incorporated as the rehearsals proceed. But if you are going to ask actors to use improvisation in the early stages of rehearsal, they have to be properly prepared beforehand so their work is built on strong foundations. During these early chapters I describe both 'exercises' and 'improvisations'.



For the purposes of this book, an exercise – indicated with this symbol – is a rehearsal device which uses the actors' skills to develop an understanding of various aspects of the play, but doesn't necessarily require the actors to be in the role of their characters. As the director, I will often talk the actors through an exercise, feeding new ideas to them as they work.



On the other hand, an improvisation – signalled by this symbol – is when the actors 'become' their characters for a certain period of rehearsal time without any outside direction. This is usually done in pairs or in groups, but sometimes actors will be improvising on their own. To put it simply, whenever an actor is 'being' a character and trying to think and react in role for an extended period of time, without any external influence, then that is called an improvisation.



I tend to outline each particular exercise or improvisation and then give examples – generally as a separate boxed section containing this symbol. These describe how I have used improvisation in the rehearsal of a particular play. I hope this approach will give a good understanding of how the exercises and improvisations could be applied to other plays.

Chapters 4 to 7 describe how to use improvisation in the development of character and the exploration of relationships, and there are a number of exercises and improvisations that can be applied to most plays with a little adaptation.

The improvisations discussed in Chapters 8 to 11 are somewhat harder to describe since they are part of the creative process and would be different for every play. Generalised descriptions are almost impossible. In order to shed some light on my approach to using improvisation to solve rehearsal problems, I have described the rationale behind my choice of scenarios by giving specific examples. In doing this, I intend to reveal the possibilities of improvisation as a rehearsal technique and I hope that my examples will be a stimulus for your own creative thinking.

### The Plays

Throughout this book I have made reference to specific plays in my discussion of improvisation techniques, and I often illustrate the work by referring to Frank McGuinness's play *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. It's a marvellous play about three people being held hostage in Lebanon and is well beyond the experience of most actors. As such, it is ripe for exploration through improvisation. Also, despite the fact that it only has three characters, the play embraces a web of shifting moods and relationships which need to be examined.

Where necessary I have tried to explain the plot, but it might be useful to read *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* as a companion to this book. Anyway, I have no hesitation in recommending it. It's a very interesting play.

I also mention *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller on several occasions. Like other American plays of the period, it contains some very complex and multifaceted relationships. I have attempted to outline any plot elements that you might need to know, but it would be better to read the play.

I also refer to several Shakespeare plays since they are likely to be known by most people, and they are full of fascinating plots, characters and relationships. A deeper knowledge of *Hamlet* would be useful since I mention it several times, but

it's a great play and if you don't know it already, then you should read it.

Modern English should be used by the actors in all improvisations, even if you are rehearsing a play written or set in any other period of history. There is so much to think about that it would be asking far too much if the actors had to invent period dialogue or speak in verse while they were improvising a scene. A character is a character no matter what the sentence structure of the period. A relationship is a relationship whatever the vocabulary. And objectives, moods and social etiquette can be thoroughly explored without the use of heightened language.

I strongly believe that this experiential rehearsal process which uses improvisation extensively can be used on any play from any period because plays are about character, relationships and plot. I've used it on Shakespeare, William Wycherley, Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward. I've used it on Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. I've used it on Kaufman and Hart, Jim Cartwright and Harold Pinter. I've used it when I was directing a one-man show, although I had to use it selectively for obvious reasons, and I've seen it used on musicals and films. On every occasion it has added life and depth to the production, and so far I haven't experienced a rehearsal period where it wasn't massively helpful. Obviously, throughout this book I've referred to plays that are quite well-known, but improvisation can be used across the spectrum. The greenest first draft of a script can benefit from this technique just as much as a tried and tested classic.

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## Background Improvisations

I've always enjoyed watching Wimbledon on television. I used to play tennis when I was younger, before I smashed up my right arm in a car accident, so I know the subtleties of the game quite well. The scoring system in tennis is the most wonderful device for creating tension and excitement. I've no idea how it came about, with its 'fifteen-love' and 'game, set and match point', but it really works. Two players can have been going at it hammer and tongs for a couple of hours and then get to a point in the match where one of them is about to become the victor. He serves wide; his opponent returns a cross-court pass and the potential victor miss-hits the ball and loses the point. Two hours of tough tennis later his opponent serves an ace on match point and becomes the champion. What an upset.

Tennis players, like all sportsmen, prepare like mad for competitions. They train and exercise and practise. Especially the sportsmen who become champions. They are totally one-track about it all. But the interesting thing about a sport like tennis, where one person is in direct competition with another, is that the champions never get to practise or train with people

who can beat them so they are not used to losing, and they can never properly practise the tension and drama of a challenging competition. They can work on their serve. They can analyse and discuss tactics with their coach. They can talk endlessly with a sports psychologist. They can exercise in the gym and they can play hours of tennis with lesser players. In fact, they can prepare mentally and physically day and night. They can train and analyse. They can eat the right food and get the right amount of rest. But they can't practise a championship tennis match until they are actually playing it.

And, of course, championship matches are what they live for.

That's when they are totally focused and that is why they train. They learn more about themselves and the quality of their tennis when they are playing in tournaments than they do at any time in practise.

Let's face it, no matter how much they train, professional tennis players are at their best when they are in important competitions. They'd be nowhere without preparation, but in the end it's playing under pressure that counts. That's when they are 'in the moment'. That's when they truly discover how to play championship tennis.

That's because they learn the most when they are actually doing what they do best.

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**W**HEN ACTORS ARE IMPROVISING, THEY ARE 'IN THE moment' exactly like tennis players in a championship tennis match. They will have prepared as thoroughly as possible by reading the play, researching the playwright, looking at pictures, reading books, surfing the internet and sharing information with each other. Now they can do what they do best. Through improvisation, they can start to experience the world of their play and make discoveries by using their own creativity and skill.

## Rules of Improvisation

As I said in the Introduction, when improvisation is used as a rehearsal tool, the actors should never feel the pressure to entertain. All they have to do is be truthful to their character and keep themselves open and receptive to whatever may happen. They should try to imagine the environment in which the improvisation takes place, and they should make sure they know their character's objectives and emotions before they start. Since these improvisations are all about making new discoveries, there should be little or no pre-planning beyond setting up the scenario clearly and then just letting the improvisation unfold.

## Stop Self-censorship

Not everything that actors do or say in an improvisation will turn out to be valuable, or even be true to the production, but that doesn't matter. It is far more important for the actors to go with the flow of an improvisation and let it develop naturally, however bizarrely. If they continually try to analyse and censor their creativity during an improvisation, then they will become inhibited and tentative, and not learn anything new. I've often seen actors stop an improvisation because 'it's not going right', but to my mind that is indicative of self-censorship and will block any new discoveries. They are not allowing themselves to go into unexplored territory because it scares them. And how can they learn like that? Anything that veers from the path of prior knowledge can be useful. New things can be learned, some of them may be inappropriate, but others will be exciting and informative. If an improvisation goes completely off-track, it doesn't matter. The inaccuracies can be a useful point of discussion when the improvisation has finished. In that way the apparently 'wrong' discoveries become productive and interesting, and the 'right' discoveries will be exciting, original and unique.

## Group Improvisations

When a group of actors start to explore a play through improvisation, their knowledge and understanding will be rather limited and that can make them a bit insecure, so I usually start with generalised group improvisations to help everyone get the feel of the larger world in which the production is set. I will often ask the actors to abandon the characters they will be playing and create new ones. For this they can be anyone they like, as long as their new character is appropriate to the period. I find it best to make these improvisations fun and straightforward so that the actors get used to working together and start to trust each other.

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## The Street

Life happens on the street. No matter where you live or what you do, sometime or another you have to walk down a street. Even the idle rich living on their country estates will sometimes visit the town to stroll along the shopping boulevards. And all these streets, roads and avenues are quite different, some of them are crowded and full of life and some of them are quiet and empty. They could be narrow thoroughfares hemmed in by tall buildings or they could be wide, shady avenues. They could smell disgusting and oppressive or the air could waft with the sweet smell of flowers. They could be dusty and uneven with an open drain running down the middle or they could be modern tarmacked roads with heavy traffic. But whatever the streets are like, you can be pretty sure that the characters in the play will have walked down them recently. Maybe even just before they entered a scene. Walking in the street will have been an experience that will have been shared by most of the characters in the play.



### Street-life Exercise

Start this group exercise by asking all the actors to imagine that they themselves are walking down a street. They shouldn't be their characters at this stage, they should just be themselves. If the production is set in another time or in another culture, they will have to imagine that they themselves are of that time or of that culture and see how it affects the way they move and their view of the world.

To start with they should imagine that they are on their own. They may be aware of other people in the room, but they should just ignore them as if they were strangers.

Once the actors are walking, start to describe the street, road or path they are walking down by using the information that has been gathered through research. If they have seen pictures of streets with trees planted along the sidewalk, then ask them to imagine those trees. Imagine how they look. Imagine how the sun shines through the leaves and imagine the way they smell. If the production takes place in a medieval town, then ask the actors to imagine the uneven quarry stones or the cobbles. Ask them to imagine the way the buildings form canyons that press in on the narrow alleys. Ask them to imagine the smell of raw sewage and the sound of dogs barking. Using sensory input, describe as many sights, sounds and smells as possible so the actors can immerse themselves in that world. Are the streets crowded? Then let the other actors be the crowd, and jostle past each other. Are they empty? Then let them imagine how a passing stranger might disturb their solitude.



### Street-life Improvisation

Once the actors have explored the above exercise on their own, ask them to get into small groups of maybe two or three people, and then suggest that they create some sort of relationships. Are they lovers or are they a family? Are they colleagues from work or are they neighbours just passing the time together? If the street would have a market, then a couple of people could have stalls. If there is likely to be a police presence, ask someone to be a police officer. Whatever seems appropriate.

Once everyone has a role, let the group start the street-life improvisation. It's usually a good idea to allow these group improvisations to last for about fifteen minutes, so the actors have the time to experience the world that they, as a group, are creating.

Afterwards there should be a group discussion so that each actor can share their discoveries and experiences.



### *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare

The Rialto is a bridge in Venice that has shops built along the sides. It has long been a place for Venetians to gather in the evening and pass the time. In fact, it is still very common for Italians to appear in small groups at the end of the day and just hang out in the street to gossip and chat. In *The Merchant of Venice*, one of the characters asks, 'What news on the Rialto?', so that would be a sensible starting point for a street-life improvisation. With the proper research, the actors should have a clear mental image of the environment and the sort of characters who may be on the streets, so bringing this world to life will give them a solid basis for various scenes that take place in the street during the production.



### Street-life Improvisations in Character

Street-life improvisations can also be used later in rehearsals when the actors have created their characters and their characters have developed relationships with other characters. In this case, of course, the actors would be improvising as the characters they are playing in the production. This is particularly useful for plays that are partially or wholly set in the street and have crowd scenes in them, like *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare, *Street Scene* by Elmer Rice or *Balm in Gilead* by Lanford Wilson.