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## BEGINNINGS

Before walking on stage, the improviser has to prepare. Even if he or she consciously avoids preparation, there's still a decision being taken to avoid it. Which is a kind of preparation in itself. Keith Rowe, a co-founder of the improvising band AMM, looks at the issue of preparation like this: *'How do you prepare for a performance? I think you prepare by preparing yourself. The difficulty is not in the manipulation of the instruments; it's in the perception of how you view performance. For me, I put the guitar on the table, I get it all working, I go off and do something, and then it's eight o'clock and it's time to play. I look at the guitar in absolute horror at that point. I really don't have a single idea. I'd go further and say that when my hand descends to play the very first notes of the performance, I still don't have any ideas. As the hand or the fingers are just beginning to touch the strings, ideas begin to come – and then you take it from whatever happens at that stage. I think the only way for me, preparing for a performance, is through observation, observing the world around: that means listening, paying attention, focusing. What a performance is, is basically focusing on what is happening in front of you – in order to focus and have something worthwhile within you, to be reflected. That comes from constantly observing what's happening around you.'*<sup>29</sup> It's interesting how this musician observes his own processes much in the way that a dancer or actor might. There are no structural preoccupations, it's just the listening and the observing that's important. This gives him all that he needs since the externals in turn provoke feelings and sensations within. They are observed *'in order to focus and have something worthwhile within you.'* His comments also highlight the importance of being *in the present*, rather than for example thinking about previous performances or anticipating too carefully the performance to come.

To begin the journey then, the improviser reacts. But what if the improviser is simply carrying onstage feelings that have nothing to do with reaction but are consequent on other, earlier events? Some improvisers find that at the beginning of the show, a pressure to 'perform' is at its strongest. That's when fears are magnified. It's why bullying, cowardice and other demonstrations of negative behaviour can appear early during shows – these emotions surface in character that really belong to the performer. It's certainly been my unconscious default on a number of occasions: to play a bullying character. In this way, I unconsciously I think I'm solving the problem of the scene. But if I can bring more awareness to that impulse, and focus more consciously outward at the onset of the journey, then maybe I'm not that fear's slave.

What to react to externally? The question is particularly pertinent in solo work for the evident reason that there's basically no one else on stage to react to. There's simply the improviser, the space and the sounds within the space. So the problem is condensed. In Sten Rudstrom's solo performance at Greenwich UK in 2004, as he moved on to the stage he heard a child whispering in the audience. To him it sounded like a mouse. So the first word he said aloud was 'Mouse.' It gave him the start he needed. The start came from his listening. This was his equivalent of a first note played on a piano – immediately setting parameters for what was to follow musically. If the improviser is open, is open to be moved by what he sees, touches and feels, it won't

'One of the things I work on in teaching, is stopping the dancers just wandering around the space, looking for the next idea.'

Sue McLennan

take long before he starts to engage with something. He might feel there should be a 'correct' starting point, and that something like a child whispering in the audience is evidently not that 'correct' start point. He might be tempted to keep looking. The problem is, you can look for ever, and since he's alone, who is to agree

with him that one start point is better than another? Maybe in a group show, it would have been right to ignore the mouse-whisperer. There might be other signals more important coming from the other players. But in Rudstrom's case, he felt that to ignore that sound would have been a mistake at that point in time. In fact, responding to that sound becomes an act of incorporation.

As the dancer and teacher Sue McLennan observes in the quote alongside, you can't be searching around for too long. The tendency of the mind to go constantly picking things up and putting things down inhibits engagement. The improviser should be operating out of courage and trust. Supporting the early decision as far as possible. However, to return to the anxious improviser referred to earlier, if that person's mind is solely preoccupied with judgement, then that judgement can't be ignored. So best for that improviser to go with it, and accept it. As Rudstrom advises, *Alright, here comes this "judgement" – say hello to it – then use it as material.*'

#### BOLD CHOICES

This argument about being positive indicates a strong case for the dramatic improviser to make a *bold choice* at the top of any scene. If this is made on the back of a reaction, then that reaction is given clarity, purpose and forcefulness. The improviser has committed to something – it almost doesn't matter what – and that choice transmits to the audience the idea that there is something at stake here. Something matters. If the improviser is on stage alone, then the reaction has to come from engaging with the space. But that's no less a case for making a strong start. To hesitate around it, to do the equivalent of making a mark on the blackboard and then crossing it out, simply signals indecisiveness and lack of confidence to the audience.

A strong start also does something else crucial: it makes the possibility of later dramatic shifts more likely. This is particularly the case when there are two or more improvisers on stage. Let's take an example. If two performers walk on stage, look at each other, then move rapidly around the space constantly with fast, dynamic movements, this sets up a fierce, energetic pattern. Any sudden alteration of that pattern will create an impact, a sharp bend in the road. If, for example, they suddenly drop to the floor and become almost still, it creates a terrific effect. Maybe they don't even 'know' what they're doing – it doesn't matter. They're doing something and in time we'll find out whether or not it has some defined meaning. The initial offer or idea – fast movement – has been developed sufficiently that it's a shock to suddenly leave it behind. This is a shift: a break with the past. The movers have given themselves something to *move on from*. If they'd just come in and wandered about aimlessly, hoping that

something would turn up ('Throw something at me – I'm great at reacting'), they would be in a less strong position to make a shift. It's something you see frequently both in workshops and on the stage, this dilatory vacillation:

*A single male actor enters, picks up a hairbrush, makes a face, puts it down again. He looks out of the window, waves to someone. Actor sits down and looks at newspaper. Puts down newspaper, goes to the edge of the stage, calls to second player offstage. 'How are you getting on in there?' 'I'm fine.' (Because the other player is also afraid of committing to anything) 'Where were you?' 'I was mucking out the pigs.' (That's something defined.) 'I'm glad I didn't have to do that.' Comes back. Picks up the newspaper again. And so on . . .*

Mick Napier and colleagues at the Annoyance Theatre have made something of an issue out of this business of starting scenes boldly: *'As an individual when you start a scene, it's about whether or not you create a point-of-view for yourself, a character for yourself, an emotional base or whatever the fuck that thing is, if you create that for yourself it creates a roadmap for the rest of the scene . . . For me, improvisation's mainly about that.'*<sup>30</sup> As Yat Malmgren famously used to observe to his students at the Drama Centre, *'Nothing comes from nothing.'* Now of course some improvisers rightly point out that something can come from nothing if you make the 'nothing' the 'something' that is sought. In other words, rather than avoid the sense of there being nothing there, and looking around and so on, you externalise the sensation of 'having nothing' – and hence it becomes something.

But let's go back to the idea of the strong start, a reaction to something within or around you that will give the journey a beginning. If the improviser is sharing the stage with other improvisers, there may be a temptation to avoid a strong choice. It might be the fear of 'boxing in' your colleague to a particular idea that makes the improviser hesitate. 'I'd better not be too strong because that will take away my partner's choice.' In fact, your partner may be only too grateful that you've narrowed the

'All thoughts about structure and emotional content become inadequate to the task of improvising once the first note has been sounded.'

Eddie Prévoist

field a little. It's true in music as in drama. If someone starts strongly, probably the others will be happy. 'OK, we're in the key of B flat, I can go with that.' 'OK, that's a four-three rhythm, I can go with that.' 'Oh, we're meeting in a mortuary, I can go with that.' 'Oh, we're singing in B flat in a mortuary, I can go with that.' By stopping ourselves over-protecting others on stage, we set up something interesting. Napier in his book argues clearly the importance of not acquiescing to a phoney kindness towards others: *'At the top of an improv scene, in the very beginning, take care of yourself first. That's right, be very selfish at the top of your scene. Do something, anything for yourself first. You'll have plenty of time to "support your partner" later . . . I only feel supported by my partners if they make a move, if they do something. If they just stand there and look at me thinking about supporting me, I am absolutely unsupported. The more powerful a choice they make, the more I am supported.'*<sup>31</sup>

This also connects with what is sometimes referred to as the point-of-view of the character. Or I might call it the stance. It's about the way the performer playing a character looks at the world in that moment. What is the attitude towards the surrounding space? Contemptuous? Proud? Excited? The stance embodies both the drive (motivation) of the character as well as the world-view. It has a certain energy that won't be dropped whatever you throw at it.

A: I love this place! I want to buy this place.

B: *You're trespassing.*

A: Great! So you have rules about strangers being here. I like that!

B: *No, I'm just a big guy who likes threatening people.*

A: When I buy this place I'm going to employ you.

B: *You can't buy me, buddy. I'm my own guy.*

A: That's the spirit. Unconquerable. Now we're going to play a game. I'm going to put down money here and when it gets to the sum you like, you're going to tell me who owns this place and what their weak spot is. (*Gets out wallet.*)

In this example, a strong positive stance helped the improviser drive through a scene that the colleague is threatening to halt in its tracks. Matt Elwell of Comedy Sportz might describe such a trajectory as 'achieving full extension'. He argues that the task of the improviser is

to extend as fully as possible the material that is present. As Napier describes, there is a great temptation for improvisers to bale out on these early decisions. As soon as a conflict starts to build or some new information intrudes, an anxiety about conflict starts to play in the mind, and the improviser gives in unnecessarily. Doubtless this will be way too quick for the audience, who were just appreciating the contest.

A: I love this place! I want to buy this place.

B: *You're trespassing.*

A: OK, take it easy . . . I'll be going in a minute.

I think this has to do with a latent fear of violence. There's an anxiety that conflict situations can't be explored. They'll end in violence and we're improvising here, for Christ's sake. Anything could happen. People might get hurt. Perhaps there's an unconscious association between vulnerability and aggression. 'If I am seen as aggressive, I may become vulnerable. Or you may.' There's also the legacy of Johnstone-itis, a false belief that good improvisers always and only say 'yes' to things. Which means 'Do you want to fight?' only has one answer. In this corruption of Johnstone's approach the idea of 'acceptance' is taken literally. It's taken to mean that you have to say 'yes' to everything and not argue, otherwise you're breaking a fundamental 'rule.' It's hogwash and turns improvisers into performers who can't handle conflict. Should any improvised scene develop to violence, then so be it. There are a thousand ways to express that violence gesturally, symbolically or representationally. Improvisation training should encourage learning about inventiveness so situations such as these can be negotiated with ingenuity. The audience doesn't mind any kind of technique employed in the moment; slow motion, punching the air, sudden jumps of time. What they do want to see is the performers going for something and making that something work. If the performers are comfortable with each other and there's complicity, they will find a way to explore the conflict in the scene. After all, it's likely that within that conflict the real secrets of the relationship will come to the surface.

So the important thing is to respect your first decision and hold to it long enough for any shift to come about organically rather than out of a felt sense that you need to shift because things might turn ugly later. Having said that, the opposite is probably also true . . .