

Complicity

Complicity refers to the act of being an accomplice. We might say ‘both parties were complicit in the robbery’, meaning that they were both accomplices in the crime. For example, if one person makes a movement and another person copies that movement, in a sort of mirror image, we have the start of a game of complicity. We can develop this game in three ways: I can copy you, or you could copy me, or we could both share the copying as we like, without stopping the action. If we do that, then we’ll inevitably reach the stage where you might think that I’m leading and I might be convinced that you’re leading. At that point, the action will become less predictable and more playful. This is complicity.

Complicity is the art behind everything; once you know what you’re looking for, you’ll see it everywhere: in sport, in the military, or in any team of people who have to work together in a way that demands structure and spontaneity. In theatre, complicity is a creative force in its own right.

The Group With No Leader Game

A small group of people move about the space as one, stopping and starting as they like. They see an object. As one, they all approach that object and take hold of it, as far as possible, in the same place. The group then proceed to play with that object in any way they like, going naturally from one idea to another.

This is perhaps the most intense feeling of complicity that you’re likely to experience, and it’s as simple as that. The most important thing is that we don’t see a leader. The group must always move as one. If you were to end up stopping dead in your tracks, waiting for divine intervention, then I’d have to intervene and get you to move from one thing to the next a little quicker.

I love this game because it gives you the safest feeling of being out of control that you’re ever likely to experience. For example, the group might look towards a chair. Then the group walk towards the chair. As an individual in the group, you might think you’re going to pick the chair up but then all the hands get hold of the jacket on the back of the chair and pick that up instead. No single individual decided that. This is a game where the group ‘take over’, and to play it effectively everyone has to be prepared to delegate their individual responsibility to the group and let the group get on with it. You don’t have to be clever, and you don’t have to be original. In fact, you can be quite anonymous in the crowd, and still have a significant influence on what happens. It’s an enervating and inspiring feeling, and it’s enormously liberating not to be responsible for how something’s likely to turn out.

The Ultimate Takeover

The Balinese have a word for this phenomenon. They call it ‘taxus’ – a trance-like state of mind that enables you to go beyond what you think you can do – where you can transcend your potential. We’d probably call it inspiration or ‘getting off’ on something. To the Balinese, ‘taxus’ is the key to all artistic endeavours, be they cooking, carving, painting, dancing, making music, or playing a grotesque little half-mask on a street corner.

“*I was sitting on a wall, feeling bored. I’d been in the temple for about an hour, and nothing much was happening. I was just about to leave, when an elderly gentleman sitting next to me said:*

‘In Bali, we have rubber time.’

‘I believe you,’ I said, ‘When will it start?’

‘When everyone is here.’

‘When will that be?’ I asked.

‘Oh, early,’ he said, and burst out laughing at my expression of incredulity. It turned out that he was a retired teacher of English.

‘Have you looked round the temple?’

‘No,’ I said, and continuing our conversation, he led me through a narrow gateway, and into a small courtyard dominated by several large stone plinths. I

was expecting to see the customary statues of Shiva and Ganesh, as in Hindu temples in India, but there were none.

'Where are the statues of the gods?' I asked. 'I suppose it's too humid for you to keep them out here in the open all the time.'

'We don't need statues in Bali because gods always come when they smell food.'

I searched his face for irony, but there wasn't any.

'So they're a bit like house pets,' I said, chancing my arm – I didn't want to cause any offence, but he smiled patiently as if he were talking to an inquisitive child.

'They only eat special food.'

'What's that?' I said, guardedly.

'They only eat rasa.'

'What's that?' I asked, and he beamed with delight.

'At the beginning of time, the gods broke the top off the tallest mountain they could find – just as if it was the top of an egg – then they hollowed it out to make a huge bowl, then they put every living thing that they could find into the bowl: every bird, animal, reptile, leaf, flower and insect. Then they ripped up giant tree trunks, and used them to pound all these living things together to make soup. They called this soup 'rasa'. Today, when the gamelan plays, and the dancing is beautiful, the gods smell rasa, and they sit there, and when the dancing is very, very good, they eat. The gods are always hungry.'

'And they'll come tonight?'

'Of course – as soon as they smell it and you will smell it too. The memory of that smell will bring you back to the temple again.' And his smile was the same.

(Personal Journal, Ubud, 1985) ♪

In Bali, artistic activity of any kind is seen as making food for the gods, and to the Balinese, all creative acts, no matter how profane, are seen as sacred. They seek 'taxus' to make their work inspiring. When they do that, so they say, they make 'rasa' – a sort of celestial soup. The gods have insatiable appetites. In our culture, money and fame are the nearest we get to the sacred. The profane and the comic never get a look in. Comedy is never sacred. There's an enduring universal belief in the

West, one of those deep-seated concepts that the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins would call a 'meme' as opposed to a 'gene': namely, the idea that comedy is more associated with devils than gods. Fun, laughter and impish delight invariably emerge from the darker side of human experience. Goodness is invariably solemn and serious. But we all understand the idea of 'taxus' and we can achieve it, at least our version of it, through complicity. We all want to get off on what we do, and we all want to transcend our potential even if our gods are so much more prosaic.

Here are a few more games to develop complicity.

The Starting and Stopping Game

If I ask the entire group to walk round and to stop, and then to start again, all at the same time, and with no commands from me, and no 'cues' from anybody else, so that there are no leaders in the group, then you'll have complicity.

Here are some variations on the game:

If I ask the group to go as if to stop, and then to change their minds, this will introduce a dynamic uncertainty into the game.

Now people are likely to make mistakes, and to be caught out, which of course is even more entertaining. The slightly ragged nature of big-group complicity games like these keeps everything in the 'here and now'. You'll all desperately be trying to maintain concord, but little conflicts will emerge all the time. 'Are we stopping?' you'll think, looking round. 'Yes, yes, I think we are . . . No, not yet, oh just a minute!' The game of trying to keep things together whilst deliberately messing things up creates a feeling of volatility that brings the smallest incident to life. The key to playing this sort of game is to convince yourself that everybody else knows better than you. Put your attention on everybody else. You've got to keep reacting rather than acting.

If you play the same game, but with the group running and then stopping all at the same time, and with no cues from anybody else, it will be much more demanding to do.

Though this version is more demanding, it's perfectly possible with a little practice. Now the tension when you're about to run