

THE IMPROVISATION BOOK

The aim of this book is to take away that fear. That's all. And in order to take away that fear there are a number of exercises and techniques that are easy to learn, easy to apply and easy to put into practice. And the more technique that actors have, the less fear; and the less fear they have, the more they will be free to be creative and original.



I teach on the B.A. (Hons) in Acting at the Arts Educational School in London, where the improvisation training is closely linked to actor training, so, although this is a book about improvisation, a lot of the things that are discussed as improvisation techniques apply to text-based acting as well. Trusting, listening, emotions, having objectives, etc. etc. However, to avoid confusion I have used the term 'improviser' throughout this book rather than 'actor' or 'student', although a lot of the time these words are interchangeable.

And that leads to the next question. Is this book for actors, or is it for directors, or is it for teachers? Well, in a way it's for all of them. And it's also for people who just want to play games. Each chapter deals with an area of technique that can be explored, practised and refined in order to give an actor the tools to improvise truthfully, creatively and without fear. As such, it is

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written primarily to be used by a *teacher* to create a series of classes. On the other hand, a small group of *actors* could get together to practise the techniques on their own. Or a *director* could use some of the exercises to help the cast discover more about the characters in whatever play they are rehearsing, be it Shakespeare, Pinter or a new devised piece.

Each chapter is, in fact, based on one of the technique classes that I teach at the ArtsEd and is divided into three distinct sections. In order to underpin the practical exploration of technique with a mildly philosophical or anecdotal illustration of the thinking behind it, I begin each chapter with a personal journey into my own memories and experiences to find some sort of correlation between parts of my life and the particular technique I want to discuss. Then in the second section of each chapter I talk about how this rather cerebral approach can have a practical application for an improviser. The third section of each chapter contains a set of carefully explained ‘exercises’ that can either be used individually to explore the technique under discussion or collectively as a recipe for a class. Finally, each chapter ends with ‘improvisations’ which allow the improvisers to put the learned techniques into practice.

For the purposes of this book, an ‘exercise’ is something the teacher has control over and can adjust while it is taking place. And may or may not include improvisation. But an ‘improvisation’, once it has started, belongs to the improvisers and shouldn’t be interfered with at all, until it has finished. Then, of course, it can be the subject of discussion and analysis.

After each exercise or improvisation, I have included what I call ‘Debriefing’ notes. These are supposed to be points of discussion that a teacher can have with a group of students about the purpose of the exercises. I don’t usually explain why we are doing various exercises until after we have done them. Most of the people who attend these classes have come to the school because they want to be actors rather than improvisers, and they can be quite nervous of improvisation. In the past they have often been expected to be funny or to be entertaining and to have had their improvisations closely scrutinised and criticised, so

naturally they have become inhibited. I try to let the work sneak up on them through games and simple exercises, so they find themselves doing something quite serious and concentrated without knowing how they got to that point. Saying, 'Today you will be doing a group improvisation about people being shipwrecked on a raft, to see how well you relate to each other,' at the beginning of the class would throw everyone into a panic. So I start with some silly games and subtly move on to some simple solo acting exercises, which in turn lead to more dramatic solo acting exercises and before they know it they are in the middle of a dramatic group improvisation without any pressure. (This series of games and exercises is explained in detail in Chapter 2: Trusting Others.) If they had been aware of the 'goal' before they started, some of them would have become tense and inhibited.

But, of course, it's important for them to understand why they are doing these classes, so a discussion afterwards makes them realise what they have achieved and how useful and productive each individual technique can be.

You will notice that I take strong control of the early classes, often 'talking them through' an exercise or improvisation while they are doing it. They are expected to use their acting skills to imagine they are in a particular situation and to behave accordingly, yet at the same time they mustn't lose concentration while I describe various changes or sensory experiences which I want them to think about and incorporate. As part of the description of the exercises, I have included examples of the things I might say and the way I might say them in order to clarify this particular way of working.

I would also recommend that teachers join in some of the games in the early stages, since this takes pressure off nervous people.

As the course progresses and the improvisers develop a greater confidence and creativity, it is possible for the teacher to take a back seat, interfere less and less, observe their work and subsequently lead analytical discussions.

At the end of the book there is an Appendix with a selection of warm-up games and exercises that can be used at the start of a

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session to 'shake out the cobwebs' and put people in a creative frame of mind. Most of these games have no specific purpose other than to bring the group together and focus their concentration. They can be used as and when necessary since they are not connected to any particular technique or topic of exploration.

You will also notice that I sometimes suggest dividing the group into two smaller groups. I usually work with about eighteen students, so that would mean they would be nine or ten people in each group. If I suggest three smaller groups, there would be about five or six people in each group.

The Improvisation Cards

Anyone who has taught improvisation on a regular basis will have found that the continual need for new improvisation scenarios has been a great drain on their imagination. You can buy books of improvisation scenarios, but they are often rather specific and not necessarily of much use in more general classes. So in order to make my life easier, I created some Improvisation Cards. These cards are 'Mix 'n' Match', and can be used to make an enormous variety of improvisations simply by rearranging the ingredients. (The cards are all reproduced at the back of this book.)

THE SCENARIO CARDS

There are sixty-three Scenario Cards, split into three sets: *Simple*, *Complex* and *Extreme*. With these scenarios it is better not to let people try to run before they can walk. Start with the Simple Scenarios and only when they have been fully explored, move on to the Complex Scenarios. Similarly, save the Extreme Scenarios until you are absolutely sure that you have finished with the Complex Scenarios. (As you read the book, you will find that I have indicated when it is appropriate to start using each set of Scenario Cards.) Most of the scenarios on these cards are for two people; however, there are some that can be used for three or even more (i.e. 'Strangers in an all-night café at 5.00 in

the morning.')

When two or more people are preparing to do an improvisation, the information on the Scenario Cards is usually shared with the whole group.

S The SIMPLE SCENARIOS can be used for a lot of the exercises in this book and are basically situations that the improviser should be reasonably familiar with. Shopping. Friends. School. Work. Etc.

C The COMPLEX SCENARIOS are situations that are still in the realm of a familiar reality but that haven't necessarily been within the experience of the improvisers. Consequently they require the improvisers to use their imagination rather than their experience (i.e. 'Musicians in a band.' 'Strangers stuck in a lift.' 'A kidnapper and a victim.' Etc.). As I said, the Complex Scenarios should only be used when the improvisers can confidently tap into the truth of unfamiliar situations.

IE The third set of Scenario Cards are the EXTREME SCENARIOS and should only be used after all the techniques have been absorbed and all the other scenarios have been fully explored. In fact they are probably best left until after Chapter 16: Interruptions, because these Extreme Scenarios often work better with a larger number of people. Two or three main characters can start the improvisation with the rest of the group becoming part of the 'scene' by 'interrupting' or joining in.

The scenarios in this third set are what could best be described as fantasy, but in fact they have to be played with an incredible dedication to truth and reality, otherwise they just become an excuse to have a laugh. I always refer to the film *Alien* where the newborn baby alien bursts out of John Hurt's stomach during a meal and runs off across the floor. Although this is not in the realm of any of our 'realities', the scene was acted with a total commitment to truth and as a result was shocking, dangerous and totally believable.

These Extreme Scenarios can be risky if used too early; no one will learn anything. However, they are familiar cinematic situations –

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Aliens. Invisible Men. Superheroes. Goblins. Cave-dwellers, etc. – and as I said, the improvisers have to be quite experienced in order to play them truthfully.

THE CHARACTER CARDS



These cards should be used with the Scenario Cards to give the improvisers a sense of character. I have tried to be both subtle and generic in creating these cards. They should indicate a ‘sort’ of person. However, to use them correctly they must be treated with caution. I will explain how to use them in more detail in Chapter 9: Character, but suffice it to say now that a melancholic person is *sometimes* happy and that a hypochondriac doesn’t *always* talk about their health. These cards are *indications of character* rather than one-dimensional characterisations that must be played exclusively and relentlessly.

USING THE CARDS

First of all, two improvisers will select a Scenario Card and tell everyone what the scenario is. Then each improviser will select, and read, a Character Card. They usually keep the information on this card to themselves, since it is more interesting for the other improviser in a scene to see their partner’s character unfold. However, this is not a rule and in some circumstances it is important for each person to know the character traits of the other person. If they are siblings, for instance, they would obviously know quite a lot about each other.

The great thing about this ‘Mix ’n’ Match’ system is that they generate an enormous number of variations. If, for instance, an improviser has already used the ‘Kidnapper and Victim’ Scenario Card in a previous improvisation, he or she will not only be with a new partner, but they will now pick an entirely new character. Their partner will also have a different character and consequently the second improvisation will turn out to be quite unlike any previous ‘Kidnapper and Victim’ improvisation that has gone before.