

Yes and Let's Watch

Nurturing Playback Theatre with Improv and Viceversa

FERRAN LUENGO

Playback Theatre Leadership 2023

October 24, 2023



This work is licensed under Creative Commons.
In case of use, credit must be given to me, the creator.
Only noncommercial use of this work is permitted.
No derivatives or adaptations of this work are permitted.

Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|-----------|
| 1 | Introduction | 5 |
| 2 | Underlying context | 9 |
| 2.1 | What is Playback Theatre? | 9 |
| 2.2 | What is improv? | 11 |
| 3 | Working with long form | 14 |
| 3.1 | The rules of improv | 15 |
| 3.2 | The story form in PT | 17 |
| 4 | The relationship between PT and improv | 21 |
| 4.1 | When PT and improv overlaps | 21 |
| 4.2 | Bringing improv to playbackers | 22 |
| 4.2.1 | I'm not comfortable with long form | 23 |
| 4.2.2 | I'm being too literal | 24 |
| 4.2.3 | I feel burdened by the teller's actor role | 25 |
| 4.3 | Bringing playback to improvisers | 27 |
| 4.3.1 | You don't have to be funny | 29 |
| 4.3.2 | Don't be scared of emotions | 30 |
| 4.3.3 | Expand your ways of communication | 32 |
| 5 | Conclusion | 34 |

Acknowledgements

This essay owes its existence to the pioneering work of Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas in creating Playback Theatre. My deepest gratitude and admiration goes to them.

I owe a lot to Jimmy, Stefka, Christine, Andrea, Ah Reum, Rajan, Masha, Olga, Marina, Norbert, and Nadia. My companions in leadership were a huge inspiration when it comes to me writing this essay.

Hannah Fox and Michael Cheng, I feel lucky to have your invaluable guidance.

I also want to express my appreciation to Tomás Motos, Ana Fernández, and the entire Iberian community for introducing me to playback and providing me with a “playback home”.

From one home to another, thank you True Heart Theatre and London Playback for opening your arms to me.

Carles Montoliu, you’ve shown me the artistic value of improv, and for that, I blame you for keeping me in the path.

Camp Improv Utopia, you’ve truly rocked my world and showed me that kindness and acceptance is the best way to drive our improv practice.

I extend my thanks to Hoopla and the welcoming London improv community for making me feel so appreciated.

Mai Giménez, your support and encouragement have been instrumental in helping me progress.

Bran and Jon, my beloved cats, I'm thankful for the calm and companionship you provided when needed.

1

Introduction

If I were in a playback theatre performance, sitting in the teller's chair, the conductor would ask me, "Where does this story begin?". I would take a breath and say. . .

College is a perfect time for self-discovery. During this time, we try to figure out who we are and what we really want to do with our lives. For me, I discovered theatre. It wasn't by chance, though. I've always enjoyed goofing around and playing pretend with friends, and some of them encouraged me to join the university theatre group. I did it. The rest is a rollercoaster ride. After spending a couple of years in the group, I became a member of the university's resident theatre company. This was during the mid-2000s, before the 2008 economic crisis. The university was able to fund cultural activities, so it was common for us to travel touring our productions in many places. It was one of the happiest phases of my life, and it was at that moment when I realised that this was what I wanted to do with it.

It was around that time when I discovered improv. Sergi Claramunt, an excellent hospital clown and one of the last students who got to learn from Jacques Lecoq before he passed, invited his fellow classmate, Véronic Joly, to offer a workshop at

the Pallasospital headquarters. Veronic was then the president of the Ligue d'Improvisation de Paris. During the workshop, her focus was on Canadian-style improv matches. We spent a week learning, and she left us with an urge to continue practicing improv. To pursue this, we used to meet in the evenings wherever possible and practice by ourselves, using only a Spanish translation of Del Close's "The Truth in Comedy" for guidance. It was trial and error for us. After some time enjoying it, the focus on personal matters and scripted theatre kept me away from improv for a while.

In the 2010s, I led a double life. From 8am to 2pm, I worked as a computer engineer at the university. In the evenings, I was busy with theatre productions and attending workshops to improve my skills, including getting back to improv with the great Carles Montoliu, a pioneer in Spain. However, there was a time window every weekday where I didn't feel like myself but still needed a salary. That's material for a pair.

A friend and fellow theatre mate, who studied psychology, told me about a postgraduate program on theatre in education she was doing at the University of Valencia. To apply, I only needed a college degree and a cover letter explaining my motivations for joining. So, I summarised my theatre journey in one letter and applied despite my unrelated college degree. To my surprise, they accepted me, and my life began to change.

Tomás Motos, the postgraduate director, is an expert in the field of theater in education. He is a renowned scholar who has collaborated closely with Canadian artist educator George Laferriere on the subject, which was a major reference for the creation of the postgraduate program in Valencia. Tomás also has a keen interest in all kinds of theatre for transformation. He spoke to us about the full range of Augusto Boal's theatre of the

oppressed and, of course, introduced us to the concept of playback theatre. He was very interested in creating a playback theatre company so, when he learnt about my experience in improv, he invited me to join. Teatro Playback Inestable was about to be born.

This was another trial and error experience. Thanks to Tomás, we had a huge theoretical background but no practical experience. Fortunately, we had some talented improvisers in our ranks, so we always felt comfortable even when trying things that, in hindsight, I would never attempt again. The story form, which we called “free form”, was the one we did the most due to our experience in other performing arts. Yet, there was a lot to learn.

I got hooked to playback theatre, I started to expand my knowledge in any way possible. I met Ana Fernández and other teatro espontáneo practitioners in gatherings. Ana was the first in the country to form a playback theatre company, in Salamanca, detaching from espontáneo. I visited the city many times after our gatherings and witnessing the creation of a rich community formed by Spanish and Portuguese playbackers. I even went to my first international gathering, being the Asian one, celebrated in Japan in 2017, also learning a lot.

When it comes to my improv-self, Camp Improv Utopia Ireland in 2018 opened my eyes and my improv journey got a strong boost when, thanks to that, I started to attend international gatherings and festivals. A new world of learning that even led me to Chicago, the “Improv Mecca”. Since then, I haven’t stopped learning and performing in an international level.

Here I am in London, where I’m based in now. Year 2023. Over the last decade, improv and playback theatre have become two essential tools that propelled me to become a full-fledged applied theatre facilitator and performer. In this essay, I will discuss both

of these tools and how their use merged within my practice on certain occasions. Specifically, I will offer insight into the enactment of the Playback Theatre form known as story and the long form improvisation.

Before we begin, I want to offer a few **disclaimers**. This essay is about my personal experience using playback theatre and/or improv while facilitating the other. Regarding the story form, I have my particular subjective take on it. I do not intend for my view on this particular form to be seen as an example of how it should be, but rather as how I like to interpret it. In art, there is no absolute truth.

If you are reading this, I thank you for your interest and I hope you find something useful on the following pages.

Ferran Luengo
London, October 2023

2

Underlying context

I would like to provide a theoretical background to help you, the reader, to understand better the topics I will be discussing.

2.1 What is Playback Theatre?

Playback Theatre (from now on PT) is a form of applied theatre established in United States, in 1975, by the couple formed by Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas. This unique theatrical discipline revolves around engaging with narratives willingly shared by the audience, endeavoring to bring these stories to life through enactment. The essence of PT lies in its approach of "playing back" these narratives in a respectful manner, returning them to the teller. In the 1980s, PT transcended its roots in the United States and expanded its horizons. It found its footing in lands such as Australia, New Zealand, and Japan before gradually making its mark across Europe and Africa. In the present day, the practice of PT has achieved a global presence, spanning all corners of the world.

The central drive of PT is rooted in its social purpose. Thanks to its community-oriented nature, it serves primarily to spotlight issues that may impact either a community as a whole or an

individual within it. In educational settings like primary or secondary schools, it proves effective in addressing big concerns like bullying and conflict resolution. Behind prison walls, stories through the lens of PT can offer insight and encourage contemplation. In the realm of social intervention, it finds application among groups grappling with shared challenges, such as patients dealing with an illness or individuals affected by a natural disaster. Furthermore, it's a common practice to use PT as a dynamic tool for group engagement and coaching within the corporate landscape.

PT consists of a format that organizes the practitioners within a space, where they take on three distinct roles. The conductor, functioning as the host and interviewer, serves as the vital link between the audience and the performers. The actors bring the stories to life, while the musician creates an auditory backdrop that complements the enactment, always preceded by **“Let’s Watch”**.

While maintaining an underlying sense of established ritual to structure its performance, PT is fundamentally a spontaneous art form, inherently based on improvisation. In its initial inception, PT took shape through three distinct forms: fluid, pairs, and story. The first two were regarded as short forms, whereas the story form is representative of long form. Short forms are normally used for conveying immediate emotions, whereas the story form demands a more intricate enactment.

In the contemporary landscape, influenced by a multitude of cultures and nations, PT has undergone evolution and assumed new and diverse variations. This evolution has resulted in a many original forms, each offering a unique perspective on story enactment. Whether it veers away from the original concept of PT or not, that’s a discussion for another time.

2.2 What is improv?

Improvisation is something that has existed since humans achieved the ability to communicate and play. All you have to do is take a look at any group of children and observe their behavior. They are living machines of creating stories and taking them to the extreme with the maximum conviction and with a spontaneity that is progressively buried under the social conventions settled inside by the adult individual.

American author Sam Wasson, in his book *Improv Nation*, makes a bold claim: "Many have surmised that improv's origins date back centuries, to commedia dell'arte. I don't agree. Nor do I believe it was always there. Like anything else, improvisation had to be invented - and it was invented, in America, by young, mostly middle-class amateurs, performers, and producers who, in the true spirit of the form, were making it up as they went along." (Wasson. 2017, xi).

I'll allow myself to take off my objectivity hat to express my disagreement with him. I can imagine Mr. Wasson making that colonising statement while riding a grizzly bear and waving the Star-Spangled Banner. They might be the land of fast food, but to say that the USA invented improvisational theatre is too much. In the second half of the twentieth century, the United States developed improv comedy as it is known today. I'll give him that. However, Mr. Wasson overlooks a few facts, such as the first documented use of improvisational theatre in Western history, which was found in the Atelian farce of Rome around 300 BC. In this play, actors devised live sketches on stage.

Still in Italy, from the 16th to the 18th century, it was a common practice among Commedia Dell'arte actors to improvise. In the 1890s, many theater theorists and directors such as the

Russian, Konstantin Stanislavski and the French, Jacques Copeau, founders of two great currents of interpretation theory, they used improvisation in training and rehearsal.

It is now when we tackle Sam Wasson's references in the creation of improv. The inception of modern theatrical improvisation can be traced back to its origins as children's theatre exercises. These exercises, which became integral to theatre education, owe much to the progressive education movement initiated by John Dewey in 1916. During the mid-20th century, precisely in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Viola Spolin emerged as a prominent figure in this realm. Her notable contributions include the development and documentation of various improvisational exercises, all of which were encapsulated in her book *Improvisation for the Theatre*. This pioneering work marked a significant milestone by offering techniques for both learning and teaching improvisational theater. Spolin's influence reverberated deeply, shaping the inaugural batch on the modern era of American improvisers like Paul Sills, Bernie Sahlis and Howard Alk; co-founders of The Second City in Chicago in 1959. Later, Charna Halpern and Del Close became another referents in the improv creating, also in Chicago, the improvOlympics (later rebranded as iO).

In the 1970s, in Canada, British playwright and director Keith Johnstone wrote *Impro: Improvisation and Theatre*, outlining his ideas on improvisation, and invented Theatresports which has become a staple of improv comedy in his country.

In South America, improvisation is part of the Enrique Buenaventura collective creation method, the Colombian who defined it as a privileged form of participation in staging whose objective was to explore the relationships between the theme and the textual alternative. From his motto "theater is action",

Augusto Boal uses the improvisation to arrive at the construction of a forum theatre piece, encompassing inside the theatre of the oppressed.

Regardless of their countries, improvisers must accept the proposals of their peers and add, that is, build on them. Therefore, in this discipline, listening and acceptance are as important as teamwork. That's why the universal motto of improv is **Yes, and.**

3

Working with long form

What is long form? Explaining the obvious might seem redundant. In improv comedy, there are different formats. You could find short form sets, these are essentially sequences of improv games where the fun comes from watching the performers adapt to the rules of each game based on audience suggestions. And then there's the opposite, long form.

We can view long form improvisation as the improvisers' playground. Within this category, you'll find numerous derived improv forms, such as the Harold, the Armando, La Ronde, montage, improvised plays, genre improv, to name just a few. What unites them is the spirit of exploration, moving beyond the confines of improv games, and the extended duration. A long-form improv set can range from twenty-five minutes up to an hour, and that's if we do not count the improvathons, where improv sets can extend up to 48 hours.

Mick Napier, founder of The Annoyance theatre in Chicago, simplifies the definition of long form in his book *Behind the scenes*. "Even a single improvised scene between two people could be classified as long form if it adheres to a single suggestion and lasts more than ten minutes" (Napier, 2015, p.2).

Essentially, long-form improv serves as the sandbox where we unleash our inner child and help us reconnect with the joy of spontaneity. However, there's a catch. Improv comes with its own set of rules. I understand it might be against its principle, but there's an established etiquette that enriches the experience of creating an improvised piece.

3.1 The rules of improv

The first rule you will find in improv emphasizes the capacity to embrace a proposal and enhance it through the contribution of your own ideas. This is encapsulated in the mantra “Yes, and...” This principle serves as the cornerstone of improv, the very first lesson to grasp for those looking to engage in this practice. Denials not only disrupt the flow with your scene partner but also destroy any opportunity for the storyline to progress. Look at this example:

A: I'm hungry, let's go grab something to eat.

B: No.

In this example, we see that B is blocking A's proposal so it interrupts any potential flow of the story. However, if the proposal is accepted and built on it...

A: I'm hungry, let's go grab something to eat.

B: Let's! (yes) Oh! We could go to the Korean restaurant (and).

A: You're still in love with that waitress, right?

B: Oh! I can't help it (yes), she's so pretty (and)...

A: Invite her out!

B: Tomorrow I'm signing up for Korean classes.

As can be seen, in this way, it is possible for the story to advance and maintain the interest.

Another important premise of improvisation is listening. Stage listening not only refers to accepting the words of our interlocutor, but there is much more to perceive. Body language, emotional tone or arrangement in space can affect the development of a scene. We must avoid generating any contrast that causes a disruption of the scene and, therefore, alarms the public's attention. If a scene partner comes speaking in a sad tone, it would be bizarre to respond in a celebratory tone. If a partner enters the scene and through mime establishes that there is a table in the middle of the stage, you cannot cross that space as if there were nothing. In short, listening is very important to prevent the public from perceiving anomalies.

In PT, we have to add another layer in the listening category. We are literally listening to a story, and we have to do it properly. The goal is always to honour that story and this cannot be done if we get incorrect details. During the enactment, we cannot invent new characters or create anything on the scene that wasn't in the story.

Lastly, performers must hold deep respect and commitment to their performance. In scenes, partners should strive for equality and wholeheartedly embrace their companion's suggestions, even if it means letting go of personal ideas that only serve individual brilliance. When actors consistently demonstrate consideration for each other, the scene shines naturally.

Again, this is particularly crucial in PT. Respect should be always present as well as commitment and dedication to the truth of the story being reenacted and the suggestions of fellow

performers. Nobody who steps forward to share a story, to see it represented, would like to witness how it gets distorted due to a dull interpretation by someone who doesn't align positively with their subjective judgment of the proposal or even the narrative itself. This can create tension on stage or, even worse, transfer tension to the teller of the story. It's important to convey to the actors that they must align themselves with the narrative, regardless of the source of the suggestions or the interests they may represent when it comes to bringing it to life.

Some introduce many more, but these can be considered the basic rules of improvisation. Not everything is allowed under the "Yes, and" umbrella and that might be contradictory. But once these premises are internalized, they can be practiced through various exercises to improve our scene work either in improv or PT. Most of these exercises aim to sharpen mental agility, while others are a combination of activities designed to enhance acting skills.

3.2 The story form in PT

Story, or scenes, is the original long form originated in PT. Stories appear in the middle of a performance to allow longer sharings from the audience in order to be represented. But, is it really improvised if we already know the story? It may seem a prompted form rather than improvised. However, there are many different kind of stories that might need different approaches. The deeper and more traumatic the story is, the more skills we might need to reenact it successfully. That's when the improv brain of the playbacker comes to life.

The fact that the story is provided doesn't necessarily simplify the actor's task. It's not an easy job to extrapolate the received information without possibly adding any details that may elicit a

negative reaction from the narrator. It's advisable to exercise caution in using clichés or popular songs that haven't been mentioned in the story, as using these resources without knowing their connotations for the person can be delicate. Doing so runs the risk of bringing up something associated with a negative memory. Sometimes as performers, we might deem it appropriate to take certain actions because we believe they could contribute positively to the story. These actions may even be artistically sound and have the potential to work. However, they are not without risk. PT performers must be willing to yield for the sake of the story, regardless of their strong aesthetic or dramaturgical judgment. In opposite to improv performers, they have to juggle a lot of factors.

When we throw a stone into a pond, it creates circular ripples that spread in all directions, generating several concentric circles. All stories, to a greater or lesser extent, have a similar effect on our consciousness. In PT, this is referred to as the echoes of the story. The task of PT performers is to recognize the echoes that emerge in each story, moving from the individual to the collective and societal. However, mere recognition is not enough; as performers, they must also be able to bring out the relevant dramaturgical conflicts when representing certain aspects of the stories. That's why I mentioned that listening is crucial for them because they also need to analyse the story.

Jo Salas established five echoes: the face of the story, here and now, personal, socio-political and myth and archetype. While the first two come from the immediacy of the teller sharing their story, as performers we might want to give special awareness to the rest of them so we can indentify and introduce the dramaturgical conflicts attached to them. I've learnt from the Valencian playwright Paco Zarzoso that, when delving into a dramaturgical text, we encounter three distinct types of conflicts: vertical,

horizontal, and transversal.

When it comes to personal echoes, this refers to the individual's relationship, the performer taking on the role of the teller, with the story. These types of conflicts are known as vertical and concentric conflicts. Vertical conflicts pertain to the metaphysical conflicts that the individual has with the story. These can include conflicts of values, moral convictions, religious codes, etc. All of them are centered around individual transcendence. Mental disorders like paranoia and other psychopathologies also fall into this category. We say conflicts are concentric when, although they are also individual dilemmas, they revolve around more commonplace issues like decision-making. Concentric conflicts can trigger vertical conflicts, for example, in decisions with consequences that impact an individual's moral convictions (e.g., returning a found £100 bill). However, if decisions relate to something more trivial, they remain as simple concentric conflicts (e.g., what to wear, what to eat, etc.).

In improv long form, vertical or concentric conflict is rare. It's more likely that a type of "eye-level" conflict will come into play, known as horizontal conflict. It's easier for everyone to identify with it because it's the one we're always in by default due to our social nature as humans. Interactions with friends, family, and anyone else bring about this type of conflict. Of course, this kind of interaction will appear in PT stories, specifically in the moments where the literality is stronger.

By becoming aware of the social frame of the story, we begin to identify transversal conflicts, which connect the individual with their socio-political environment. It is the performer's task to demonstrate this relationship and how it affects them individually (vertically) or in their interactions with peers (horizontally). This echo is particularly crucial when working with groups such as

refugees, victims of natural disasters, those affected by a specific illness, and so on. Again, this is something that we will rarely find in improv unless they're doing an improvised piece inspired by Brecht's or Ibsen's plays where there's always a socio-political event lingering in the background.

The archetypal or metaphorical echo seeks to represent the story in an analogous manner, drawing on typical archetypes from tales, legends, mythology, etc. In this way, it provides a more symbolic version and fosters greater empathy from the audience by expanding from a specific case to a more abstract and general one. The identification of conflicts is more elusive in this echo though. Typically, the conductor may offer a narration and the actors could take on static forms, presenting the story in a tableau format. It can also be represented freely while attempting to maintain a coherent archetypal imagery in each actor's intervention.

In order to be aware of the echoes, PT performers need to let the core impact the surface of the story and develop from the inside out as much as possible, guided by the identification of the types of conflicts described earlier. Naturally, not all stories may provide enough information from the teller to carry out the desired expansion exercise. It's the responsibility of the conductor, during the interview, to bring forth the conflicts of the narrator with their story if they doesn't naturally arise.

4

The relationship between PT and improv

Having delved into both improv and PT individually, I'd like to talk about the synergy that exists between these two art forms. As a proficient practitioner in both, I find it natural to infuse elements from one into the other, creating a symbiotic relationship that enriches my practice in both realms.

4.1 When PT and improv overlaps

Numerous improv forms draw inspiration from real-life stories. One notable example is "The Life Game," a form devised by Keith Johnstone himself, who even filed a copyright for it. In this format, an individual is interviewed, and a team of actors spontaneously creates scenes based on the stories and details shared by the teller.

In 1995, Armando Diaz, a prominent improviser from Chicago, introduced a new format. In this format, there's someone who opens delivering a monologue about themselves. After that, an ensemble of improvisers create scenes inspired by it. However, these scenes aren't required to directly reenact the stories shared

in the monologue. This form is now known as the Armando, in honour to its creator.

Still in Chicago, the iO Theatre was the place of birth of another format rooted in real-life experiences known as "The Living Room." In this format, the ensemble seeks a suggestion of a word from the audience, sparking a conversation about genuine stories associated with that word. Once the cast feels there has been sufficient sharing, they start a series of scenes inspired by these experiences and conversations.

Numerous variations of these forms exist, all with the common premise of drawing inspiration from real stories shared on the stage. For instance, the London-based company Dreamweaver Quartet interviews an audience member who tells a recent, vivid dream, and they transform it into a musical. In Germany, a company utilizes the pretext of a birthday party to share stories inspired by the unexpected gifts found in their boxes, then they create scenes based by them. These examples are just a couple of derivative formats among many, so using the same source of inspiration as PT is not a new concept in improv.

But, what happens when an improviser tries PT? And what about a playbacker doing improv?

4.2 Bringing improv to playbackers

At the start of 2022, I had the privilege of receiving an invitation from Portuguese playback artist and scholar, Antonio Gonzalez. The purpose was to assist the *dispar* theatre group members in enhancing their story form within their PT practice. This intensive workshop spanned over two days, totaling 12 hours of dedicated training.

As I sat with the group, composed of relatively young members, I started to get to know them and their concerns and challenges tackling the story form. What became apparent was a shared sentiment of both fear and respect towards the long form. They also shared that their main aim was to being able to feel comfortable in this particular type of reenactments. When I asked them how was their experience with the story form, they replied that they had many tendencies like making it too literal or trying to bring a solution to the teller sharing. Some added they felt a heavy responsibility whenever they were chosen to be the teller's actor.

Once their concerns were identified, I was able to address them with the adequate exercises.

4.2.1 I'm not comfortable with long form

On the initial morning of our workshop, following an enjoyable warm-up session, we worked on playfulness and heightened awareness among the participants through a series of improv games and brief three-line scenes. It was only after this lighthearted warm-up that I introduced them to a more challenging exercise: engaging in long-form scenes. This practice, used at The Annoyance Theatre in Chicago, can be seen as a form of "shock therapy". Essentially, it involves selecting two actors and placing them on stage for an unprompted ten-minute scene. While this approach might seem intense to some, like tossing someone into the deep end to learn to swim, there's indeed considerable value in acclimatising oneself to the stage and its demands. I always like to use a "floating device" though. I told them there was an envelope on the table, a letter, and it was up to them if they want to open it and read it, or just ignore it.

I saw them pull through, effortlessly, very compelling scenes. After all, there's a difference working with playbackers instead of improvisers. No one was trying to be funny. The participants were really enjoying the scenes, making them eager to join the next one. All they had to do was...being in it. The feedback I provided to them following the scenes mostly delved into technical aspects from a theatrical standpoint, such as emphasizing voice projection and avoiding turning their backs to the audience or other space awareness issues. However, they appeared to be primarily content with the accomplishment of "surviving" and managing to hold the spotlight for an extended duration.

4.2.2 I'm being too literal

Tackling this concern from an improv perspective is quite naive since improv is the epitome of literality. In PT, it's indisputable that we have foreknowledge of the story we're about to bring to life. However, the execution is still entirely in the hands of the actors. This is where the dynamic interplay between creativity, technique, and the imperative to remain faithful to the narrative unfolds. Actors and actresses grapple with finding the balance. Their innate creativity is set in motion, utilising not only their body and voice, but also drawing upon available resources like fabrics or any other relevant elements for support in order to delve into the realm of metaphor.

In order to achieve a compelling reenactment, there are several exercises for trying to expand the way of thought and work on creativity. One of the simplest exercises that I brought to them is trying to rephrase something several times. Line up five participants and give them a simple statement like, for example, "the sun is shining". The first one has to say the same but without using those words, "the yellow ball in the sky is bright", they might say. The second one has to rephrase it again without

also using the previous version's words, "the closest star blinds me", that might add. The exercise iterates five times with the same statement before moving on to the next with the participants in round-robin. This exercise pushes ourselves to find metaphors and even delving into a poetic language.

Another approach to steer clear of literality is, once identified, is reshaping the arc of the story. We might consider commencing with the climax moment and then navigating both backward and forward in time from that central point. And, of course, as playmaker we have a whole range of tools to play with: movement, poetry, song, point of view, analogy, fabric, chairs and, of course, music. So, the next time you wonder what could you do to be less literal, just take a look in your toolbox.

4.2.3 I feel burdened by the teller's actor role

There's a misconception about being the teller's actor, assuming we must bear the burden of the story if we are endowed with it. This is far from accurate. One of the best things of improv is the "I've got your back" statement. It is within improv nature the obligation to make our scene partners look good. That also extends to PT.

In the improv scene, there exists a plethora of short-form games where an actor steps out of the room, there are one or many suggestions asked to the audience, and the player re-enters the stage. There, they are tasked with identifying the information that has been withheld from them while playing seamlessly. Of course, this is for fun but a skilled actor might act convincingly and relay the guessed information with grace and pathos.

When I was in Japan, back in 2017, I attended an intensive workshop with the Taiwanese playmaker Josephine Linn, after the

Asia-Pacific PT Conference. Josephine brought into my attention the possibility of the teller's actor leaving the room during the conductor's interview to the teller, keeping them oblivious to the story. Once back in the room, it's up to the rest of the cast to support the teller's actor in order to build a faithful reenactment that honours the story. Surprisingly, it works very well. Since then, I've used this exercise with many companies and workshops and I've never seen a reenactment that left the teller unsatisfied. Of course, mind that this is an exercise and it never should be considered in a PT performance.

This exercise brings out in full blaze the improv motto of having each others back. If we are endowed with the teller's role, it's not up to us to carry over the reenactment. The rest of the cast will offer enough support to achieve a successful piece. The teller's actor just have to react to the offers, and that's something you definitely can train with improv exercises. For example, there's this exercise called the "goal keeper" where one participant stays neutral and continuously gets quick offers from everyone else. The participant just have to react accordingly, deal with the offer and go back to neutral.

Train your improv skills, trust your team mates and let them share the burden of responsibility with you.

Upon completing the training intensive, the final segment of the workshop in Portugal involved story playback. I could clearly witness the tangible outcomes of our efforts. They skillfully implemented numerous concepts we had discussed. Observing their satisfaction with the results and feeling their gratitude was truly fulfilling.

4.3 Bringing playback to improvisers

I had the privilege of being invited to be a facilitator at the Belfast Improv Festival, back in 2019. During the event, I had the opportunity to introduce PT through a six hours long session for two different groups. I couldn't help but feel a bit concerned about how it would be received by a comedy driven community.

The initial group I worked with was rather curious; it consisted of just six attendees, all of whom happened to be female. These participants were improvisers who were eager to explore a more delicate and nuanced approach to the art form. Among them, there were individuals with backgrounds in acting and/or dancing, which proved to be quite valuable. Throughout the day, our focus was primarily on fluid sculptures and stories, encouraging them to use the elements for symbolism typically found in the PT toolbox. During the last hour, we had the festival resident pianist to underscore the stories in order to warm them up for the showcase.

I was aware that this was a bit out of the ordinary for an improv comedy festival. In this type of festivals you often have teams coming together on the spot to perform. We had about six hours to work, but I have to admit, from a PT good practice point of view, I was being a little irresponsible. We were going to wrap up a night full of improv comedy acts with a 45-minute showcase.

Obviously, I took the role of conductor and I got up in front of the crowd to let them in on what was about to happen. I asked them to toss out a deep topic or dilemma to get us started. Of course, it being a comedy festival, someone yelled out "haircuts" Yep, I should've seen that coming with this crowd. But then, someone else shouted "relationships with parents" and that was just perfect. I got real with the audience, sharing a bit about my

own experiences with my parents, and it set the mood just right. Then, one by one, the cast introduced themselves, sharing a little about their own dynamics with their parents, followed by fluid sculptures from the rest of the members. The audience was impressed. After those introductions, I asked the audience to share their thoughts and experiences on the topic, and some of them did. This gave our cast a chance to turn those audience stories into fluid sculptures.

Then, we got into the stories, and I was surprised, they were fairly deep. We heard experiences about self-acceptance, body image, and even someone shared what was like living with an hereditary congenital heart condition that led to the early demise of her father. The cast was flawless and treated all the stories with the deserved respect. They used analogy, points of view from objects withing the story, poetry, and even the cast member with dancing background found herself performing a routine. They were also able to find the lightness on that stories. The performance was quite successful. The audience loved it, and the cast was thrilled. They were very grateful to find out that you can dive into deep topics and still have a blast improvising in all sorts of creative ways.

A few days later, I had to run the workshop again with a fresh group. This time, possibly because of the positive results from the previous showcase, the group size doubled, and we had a more diverse mix of genders. The main difference with this group was that there wasn't the added pressure of a showcase looming over us. We went through the same processes and exercises, but when it came to sharing personal stories, some participants struggled to resist the urge to be funny. It's understandable; humour often serves as a shield, a way to protect ourselves. PT, on the other hand, demands vulnerability, and not all improvisers feel comfortable with that. I wouldn't say it was a bad workshop; they

picked up valuable exercises and techniques, and they successfully played back each other's stories, some of which were quite deep. However, I would have been concerned if we had been preparing for a showcase with this group.

In general, I had a great time at this festival. Looking back, I realize that it might have been a bit bold of me to try to introduce PT in a crash-course style, especially with the added pressure of a public showcase, for a group of improvisers. Fortunately, things worked out well with the showcase group, but after that, I made a decision to stick to a more traditional approach when facilitating PT, without rushing it in such a short time frame. I learned a lot from this experience, and I haven't stopped incorporating playback elements since then, but I tend to tailor them into improv and not the other way around.

Since then, everytime I start facilitating an improv workshop, the key messages I emphasize are ...

4.3.1 You don't have to be funny

I'm not saying this in line with the typical improvisation standards of not needing to intentionally seek humor to find comedy. Of course, there's a certain beauty in discovering humour in sincere situations, and this also happens quite often in PT. However, in PT, there's no requirement to be funny whatsoever. This is a concept I aim to convey to improvisers, acknowledging that dramatic improvisation is also a valid and valuable form. It's crucial for participants not to feel compelled to be clever, witty or original.

People who feels the need to be funny might feel that way for different reasons. Doing it successfully it's compelling and addictive, it helps us establish connections while boosting our self-esteem. Everytime I facilitate for improvisers, there's someone

who struggles with this a lot. They just cannot avoid trying to be funny. That's one of the reasons I don't try to "sell" what I'm doing as PT. As for those kind of improvisers, I encouraged them to reflect about this urge but there might be a lot of underneath personal work that they have to do by themselves.

Little footnote here: I'm that kind of person. Doing PT helped, and keeps helping, me work on that. Exposing ourselves, gradually, to vulnerability helps us reaching a point where our empathy channels are open. I'm sure that any comedic improviser is able to get to that point with time and training.

4.3.2 Don't be scared of emotions

Typically, in improv comedy, when we encounter a scene involving someone dealing with emotions, those feelings tend to be portrayed in an exaggerated or caricatured way. Emotions in improv often remain on a surface level, played for comedic purposes. However, there's a trend that's evolving, it's becoming increasingly common to witness emotionally grounded scenes in improv shows. These scenes offer audiences something beyond just laughter, appealing to those who value deeper and more meaningful scenes. Suddenly, improvisers are not fishing for laughs only, but for those "aaaw" moments. Consequently, there has been a rise in the popularity of workshops on acting for improvisers and emotional connection.

A valuable exercise for working the emotional engagement of improvisers is the good old PT fluid sculpture. To begin, we start simply by forming a circle and asking the person to the right how they are feeling at that moment. This is followed by the next individual creating a fluid sculpture that embodies their emotion, while also encouraging them to incorporate sounds and/or words alongside their movements.

Another exercise that I like to use for the emotional workout is the battle of insults on pairs. I have to thank Carles Montoliu for teaching it to me. Battle of insults sounds heavy, it's not about shouting offensive things to each other. The insults have a simple structure, the participants are only allowed to say "You are a [object] without [anything]" in a interaction similar to the following.

A: You are a window without glass!

B: Well, you are a car without wheels!

A: And you are sock without a foot!

B: And you are a door without a knob!

This goes back and forth as long as the facilitator allows it to. As you can imagine, the words are the least important thing about the exercise and it doesn't have to make sense. The goal for the participants is to receive those insults and process them, as if they are really offensive to them, and find the emotion to insult back. They are encouraged to invest themselves emotionally delivering those lines.

To switch from negative emotions to positive ones, later we change the script and, this time, is about love. Preferably, I like to maintain the same pairs from the insulting exercise. The new line they have to use is "If you were a [word A] I would be [word B]", always making a daisy chain with the last word as shown in this example.

A: If you were a pencil I would be a letter.

B: If you were a letter I would be your envelope.

A: If you were an envelope I would be a stamp.

B: If you were a stamp I would be the face on it.

This time, they have to charge with love every sentence and, again, it's not about what's being said but about how it's being said and processed by the participants. Again, they are encouraged to go over the top with the emotions.

However, even in a supportive and safe space where the release of emotional energy is encouraged, some individuals may still find it challenging. At times, we may encounter resistance, as some participants might feel hesitant about fully expressing themselves, particularly when it comes to making loud sounds. This reluctance can be attributed to the societal constraints that we developed as adults, being taught to not to be too loud, to avoid making scenes and to keep ourselves together. And again it's up to the improviser to break free from these social constraints in order to get the release of emotion needed for the practice of PT or any other demanding acting role, something that can be achieved with any exercises that pushes them to work with feelings.

4.3.3 Expand your ways of communication

Improvisers rarely stay quiet. They rely on words to establish their relationships on stage and make things happen. They also focus on the horizontal conflicts (mentioned on chapter 3) and other interactions between peers on an eye level. Speaking of eyes, from an audience perspective, sometimes, closing ours wouldn't change the experience significantly in front of those types of scenes. If only they had tools to deliver their message in another way... we'll, PT might be able to help.

PT allows us to ditch conversations in favour of symbolic offers using any of the many options inside our toolbox. Of course, we have the advantage of knowing a story beforehand so, no matter how symbolic we get, the audience is going to interpolate what

happens on stage and attach it to the story in a subjective way.

I've mentioned earlier the intensive workshop I attended in Japan, led by Josephine Lin. In this workshop, we delved deep into the core elements, or "treasures," of PT. I also mentioned these treasures: body, fabrics, chairs, character point of view, poetry, song, analogy or metaphor, and music. The challenge presented by Josephine was to reenact stories using just one of these elements as our creative vehicle. This deconstruction of PT allowed me to have more insight in order to apply it to my performance both as an improviser and a playback and it gave me the idea of opening the door of magical realism to improv.

I designed a workshop to adapt some of these tools for use in improv. Naturally, I left out chairs, fabric, and music from the equation. Instead, I guide participants to establish a stronger connection with their bodies. We engage in various emotional workout exercises, explore the use of metaphor, and encouraged different points of view when it comes to the ongoing scene. Also, if participants choose to speak, I emphasised the importance of expressing emotions rather than just stating facts. It's rare to see an improv scene where the characters on stage take some time to look at the audience and address their feelings.

As improvisers, we need to view the stage as a canvas for artistic expression an empty space, like Peter Brook said. Even if we want to remain in the comedy realm, we possess the ability to infuse depth into any scene. Embrace the freedom to transform into inanimate objects, providing a unique perspective. Don't shy away from spontaneously breaking into song, even in non-musical improv shows. Feel free to incorporate poetry, dance, or break the fourth wall. In essence, let your performance flow from your heart. It may look that I'm trying to encourage a kind of "new age" style of improv but... wouldn't it be nice to have such a playground?

5

Conclusion

In Playback Theatre, I've learned to really listen and try to honor people's stories. Taking someone's experience and bringing it to life on the spot helps us grow empathy. This listening has been very helpful to me when it comes to improv. It helped me to better engage in scenes and build trust among my peers.

Improv's emphasis on quick thinking and embracing the unknown has boosted my confidence as a PT actor. It helped me respond better to the unexpected things that can happen during a performance. The free-spirited nature of Improv has brought more lightness, even humor and fun, into my PT practice.

My everlasting journey through PT and improv has not only given me insights into human relationships but also shown me how they can enrich each other. Both PT and Improv, share a common goal of celebrating humanity. No matter if the stories come from the audience or are created on the spot. It's all about making deeper connections with others.

In summary, I'm a better PT practitioner thanks to improv. I'm a better improviser thanks to PT. I'm a better human thanks to both.

Bibliography

- [1] Fox, Jonathan (1999). *Gathering Voices*. Tusitala Publishing.
- [2] Salas, Jo (1993). *Improvising Real Life*. Tusitala Publishing.
- [3] Munakata, Kayo (2016). *The Way of Playback Theatre*. School of Playback Theatre Japan.
- [4] Boal, Augusto (1974) *Teatro del oprimido*, Alba Editorial (Ed. 2009).
- [5] Brook, Peter (1968) *The Empty Space*. McGibbon and Kee.
- [6] Wasson, Sam (2017) *Improv Nation*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
- [7] Napier, Mick (2015). *Behind the Scenes. Improvising Long Form*. Meriwether Publishing.