

business theatre

Improvisational theatre:

*alternative ways
to engage
with reality*



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FOUNDER, ON YOUR FEET – IMPROVISATION FOR THE UNCERTAINTIES OF BUSINESS'

ABSTRACT: A study of improvisational theatre reveals an alternative way to engage with the irredeemably messy, changing and complex reality that we all face. Rather than struggle to control it, improvisers embrace uncertainty and unpredictability. They use a small set of "practices" which enable them to manage a huge number of situations effectively and creatively. These practices have great value off-stage – in our everyday lives and work. Consciously practising "being present" and listening is a simple way to start developing the capabilities necessary to prosper in turbulent circumstances.

About 10 years ago, an unlikely and unpredictable chain of events, involving a Chicago advertising agency, a speech on creative problem solving and a hand-painted T-shirt lead me into the unlikely world of improvisational theatre. Ever since I have been exploring how this peculiar art can be of value to people (like me) who find themselves dealing with complex, changing and unpredictable events in their everyday lives and work. In these articles I will share some of what I have learned. Each piece will examine a few of the practices that improvisation is based on and explain how they can be of value to the rest of us.

In this, the first article, I examine the quality of attention that improvisers cultivate and how that differs from normal. The second article will introduce the notion of "offers" and explain how, using this, improvisers find "free stuff everywhere". The third will expand on that and present a number of tools to sustain and direct flow.

THE CONTROL TABOO. Obvious though it may be, the uncontrollable nature of life is often forgotten (or ignored) once we get to work. Take business case

studies – written in the afterglow of hindsight, we pretend they are a simple record of what happened. It is taboo to admit you aren't (or weren't) in control.

This is a crucial point, because unless we are prepared to acknowledge the uncertainty inherent in the modern world, we won't become adept at dealing with it. Trying to control what cannot be controlled (like colleagues or customers, for example) is dispiriting for everyone concerned. It is a form of combat you can only lose.

AN UNLIKELY PARALLEL. What if we start by accepting that control is not an option? Where do you look for experience, knowledge, guidance, ideas or inspiration? One place to turn is improvisational theatre. Improvisers play out scenes in real time based on suggestions from the audience. In other words, they create a product, under severe time pressure, that delights a customer. They do so with no script or rehearsal, yet still produce something coherent and satisfying. They communicate impeccably and innovate constantly. They manage to prosper in extreme circumstances. How do they do this?

METHOD, NOT MAGIC. The first thing to understand is that improvisers have a method. The results might look magical, but the process isn't. Underlying the instant responses and uncanny connections is a method which can be studied and applied to many situations beyond the stage. The method comprises a small set of rules or practices, for example: "Be changed by what you hear." Such practices guide the attitude and behaviour of improvisers in every circumstance they face. They are general, simple and few; if there were specific rules for scenes involving dentists, downsizing or dandruff, they would be impossible to remember or use.

TWO PRACTICES. The practices are simple, but subtle. In this piece, I will explain two of the most fundamental practices involved, namely:

1. Be present.
2. Listen – and be changed by what you hear.

This is a natural starting point, since these two practices characterise the attitude with which improvisers embark upon their task.

BE PRESENT – A COMBINATION OF SERENITY AND ADRENALIN. If you want to be able to deal with whatever comes as it occurs,

the quality of your attention is very important. It won't help you to dwell on what you were expecting or what you would like to happen. Instead, you need to be highly attentive, aware of and concentrating on exactly what is happening – watching, listening, sensing, feeling.

This is often described (by improvisers) as "being present". Being "present" means a lot more than merely being there in body. At school many of us perfected the art of being physically present, but mentally absent – and this skill is still alive later in life.

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The challenge of concentrating all one's mental focus on what is being said and done to one at every moment requires a specific sort of energy: it also means abandoning a large part of one's defence mechanisms and risking the "raw, unadulterated" version of what we're handed. We are effectively removing the "filters" through which we pour everything we hear and observe, and leaving ourselves wide open to the moment itself.

A businessman once remarked to me: "Most meetings suck, because we decide not to be there."

To be "present" is the opposite of this: it is to decide to really **be** there. This takes a conscious effort. You have to shift your focus away from yourself and towards whoever (or whatever) you are in relationship with. In my observation, this requires quite a shift – we normally expend most of our energy and attention on ourselves, our favoured ideas, how we think we are doing or what other people think of us. Being present can help in various ways. Worries impinge less, so you feel calmer and less stressed. By being less attached to your prior ideas, you become more flexible. This makes it easier to appreciate the contribution of others and means you are less likely you fall into an adversarial relationship with them. You also notice more, which gives you more material to work with.

Being present is an unusual mixture of serenity and adrenalin. It is serene because you are concentrated in the

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moment. There is adrenalin because you are in a state of heightened awareness, open to whatever might come.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PRACTISE BEING PRESENT? Learning to pause helps, even if it is only for a few seconds. Try this: when you next get home, stop in front of your door and notice the sound of the wind, the smell of varnish or the feeling you have in your stomach (is it hunger or anticipation?). You can try this at work – before the start of a meeting, take in the room as if you had never been inside one before. Don't do anything else (like rehearse

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your introduction) – just let yourself notice what is actually happening.

Your body is another place to start. At specific moments in the day, try to bring your attention to it. Is one shoulder raised? Are you slouching? Where is your tongue? Notice how it feels, as well as how it is positioned – do you feel tension, excitement or calm? Don't try to do anything about this – just notice it.

You can make any of these part of a regular routine. Or use a specific trigger to help you remember the practice – for example, every time you get in the car. This is a great place to be really present – it could save your life (or someone else's).

LISTEN – AND BE CHANGED BY WHAT YOU HEAR. Improvisers have to be great listeners because the cost of not listening on stage is very high. The disconnection between two improvisers who aren't listening to each other is very obvious and the audience will quickly withdraw their attention and goodwill. Off stage – at home or at work – the costs of poor listening may not be so obvious, but they are equally high. Listening is, after all, what connects us to each other. It is the glue of human relationships. You and I might sit in a room and take turns to talk, but unless we really listen to each other and hear what is said, there is no conversation – simply alternating monologues.

The great thing about listening is that it improves things for others, as well as for you (which is why it helps

relationships). To feel heard is to be acknowledged and valued. So listen well and you will create a constructive climate. Good listening can even help other people express themselves better – which is a powerful gift to give people. Living in Spain, speaking a second language, I notice that with some people I always speak well, whereas with others I tend to fumble for words. The difference is the quality of their listening – the good listeners have a kind of momentary patience that the others lack.

Listening well isn't just a noble idea: it can have very practical applications that save time and money.

Police in the UK have found that having criminals meet with their victims to hear each others' stories is not only healing for the victim, but a cost-effective way of preventing repeat offences.

The difficulty here is what to do. We are taught very early that it is polite to listen, but no-one tells us how to actually do it. So here are three suggestions, based on improvisational practice:

- **Get bad at poker – be changed by what you hear.** Being changed by what you hear is the opposite of the poker-face – it simply means that you react or respond in some noticeable way to what has been said. You could reply, play back what you understood (ie demonstrate active listening), blush or blanch – all of which show you being changed by what you heard.

For example, in my workshops I often look for an opportunity, early on, to be changed by something I have heard (I might play back a participant's comment or visibly change my plan in response to something that happens). This attitude – of looking for an opportunity to be changed by the group – forces me to listen. It isn't easy – I have had to learn that demonstrating listening is worth much more than the "security" of sticking with my plan.

- **Drop the assumption that you're a good listener.** When asked, most people can reel off a list of people who are poor listeners. Funnily enough, these lists never seem to include themselves. Letting go of this assumption will make space for you to work actively at listening better. If you are serious about it, make it an explicit goal and get help, in the form of feedback, from people around you.

• **Let go of private barriers and “shadow” stories.** The third thing to do is cut out the things that stop you listening.

Here are two candidates:

OUR OWN PRIVATE BARRIERS. We are often too quick to judge and too sweeping in the conclusions we draw. We will frequently judge an idea or a person the instant we encounter them, if not before. And if we do this what chance is there of listening, openly?

“I’m paid to exercise my judgement!” was the spiky response of one participant to the idea that we should stop judging. Perhaps, but there’s plenty of opportunity to exercise judgement without rushing into it. As John Steinbeck observed: “Let me absorb this thing. Let me try to understand it without private barriers. When I have understood what you are saying, only then will I subject it to my own scrutiny and my own criticism. This is the finest of all critical approaches and the rarest.”

We would all benefit if it were not quite so rare.

SHADOW STORIES – GETTING AHEAD OF YOURSELF. Another “private barrier” to listening is what improvisers call a “shadow story”. This is an instant projection about the way a story, or conversation is going to go. We fill in the future before it happens.

This ability helps us discern patterns quickly, but it can get in the way of listening. Our conversations are often riddled with subtle *non-sequiturs*.

You might say: “The timing’s very tight – could we cut out a week?”, to which I might respond: “You know, costs are really getting out of hand.” Am I really listening to you here, or I am projecting my own shadow story (money) into the conversation?

You can’t stop shadow stories coming so, instead, you need to become adept at recognising them, and letting go of them. Another one will soon spring up unbidden which you can also let go of. So you get lots of chance to practise.

THE MIDAS TOUCH RE-VISITED. Imagine for a moment that you had a script for your life. Attractive though this might seem, you only have to think about it for a few moments to surmise that the reality would be disappointing. Much like the Midas touch, it would give you what you think you want, while denying you any possibility of surprise, discovery or learning. Which would quickly become very dull. Control ultimately turns out to be unappealing as well as

unattainable. It robs us of the ability to be spontaneous, and severely limits the greater part of our imaginations. It also alienates us from the magic spark of human connection, which can never work well through a screen.

A foray into the unlikely world of improvisational theatre reveals an alternative way to engage with the irredeemably messy reality that we all face. Rather than struggle against it, or wish for some magical means to conquer it, improvisers embrace uncertainty and unpredictability and, in so doing, they have made some very

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useful discoveries. They have found that a very economic set of rules can allow them to operate very effectively in fluid and changing circumstances. They work collaboratively and creatively to generate flow and create coherent action without ever seeking control. The combination of a simple structure with great freedom allows them to manage a huge number of situations and possibilities.

This structure, in the form of a simple set of practices, can be applied in our own lives. A good starting point is to focus on the quality of attention we bring to our conversations and interactions. Whether it’s a formal meeting, a business discussion or a chat over coffee, being present and really listening could start to transform these interactions for the better.

There is a catch, though; being familiar with the ideas isn’t enough – you have to actually **practise** them! ■

KARATE CHOP. Were it not for a pair of baggy black karate pants you would not be reading this. I once wore them to a meeting with British Gas that I thought was an informal brainstorming session. It turned out to be a high powered meeting where everyone but me had a serious demeanour, a sharp suit and an MBA. However, my unusual attire got me into unusual conversations, one of which led to an invitation to teach at Templeton College Oxford, where, in turn I met Kurt April, who as editor, asked me to write for *Convergence*. This story reminds us of an important (and easily forgotten) truth – that none of us are in control of what happens to us. I could never have anticipated or planned such a chain of events. Yet unexpected things occur all the time and success can depend upon your ability to work with whatever turns up.