



Impro

Keith Johnstone , Irving Wardle (Introduction)

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Keith Johnstone's involvement with the theatre began when George Devine and Tony Richardson, artistic directors of the Royal Court Theatre, commissioned a play from him. This was in 1956. A few years later he was himself Associate Artistic Director, working as a play-reader and director, in particular helping to run the Writers' Group. The improvisatory techniques and exercises evolved there to foster spontaneity and narrative skills were developed further in the actors' studio then in demonstrations to schools and colleges and ultimately in the founding of a company of performers, called The Theatre Machine. Divided into four sections, 'Status', 'Spontaneity', 'Narrative Skills', and 'Masks and Trance', arranged more or less in the order a group might approach them, the book sets out the specific techniques and exercises which Johnstone has himself found most useful and most stimulating. The result is both an ideas book and a fascinating exploration of the nature of spontaneous creativity.

Impro Details

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Pedro Alcantara says

This is a mind-opening, mind-bending, mind-caressing, and mind-shaping book. It helped me understand some basic mechanisms in all human relationships, thereby making me a more astute and compassionate interlocutor. It invited me to embrace improvisation as a lifestyle and state of mind . . . very constructive! And it gave me a glimpse of a whole other world which you enter when you wear the Mask.

All in all, my favorite book. I never tire of re-reading it.

Nathan says

Overall, I would rate this book a three, but I gave it a four for some excellent insights it has on interpersonal relationships and drama that I think work just as well in business and life.

An eclectic mix of autobiography and techniques, Johnson enlivens this encyclopaedia of improv techniques with stories of how he learnt and applied the techniques in his own work. There are some remarkable insights in the book that I imagine have made their way into other books but I have seen little discussion of them in broader business texts. The book lacks some basic overall structure; particularly at the start and the end (no distinct conclusion), but also in-between the major sections to guide, sum up and coach readers in applying what they've learnt (eg. start with x and y, then use z with this kind of student, etc.).

As an encyclopaedia, it's excellent; as a guide book, it is lacking, as a biography it is interesting but incomplete. Nonetheless, it's worth a read.

The edition I read was published in London by Eyre Methuen in 1981.

Cassidy Barnes says

Definitely a book to reread every few years. I feel a revival of my inner-contrarian and I've gotten a few improv games out of it to boot! The chapter on status is hiLARious. I believe I now have a new perspective on self-expression as not really being about the individual, especially in theatre. I had a lover once who said making art and becoming an artist were peculiar to the West. Johnstone expanded on this idea in a way that made me a bit uncomfortable at times, making broad claims from what seemed to me an imperialist perspective. But at least he was trying not to apply European standards of art to the rest of the world.

Alejandro I Sanoja says

In life we are taught to be polite, to not always express what we are thinking. In business, it is wise to conceal emotions and reactions so that we don't give away information. In improvisation and acting... we have to do the complete opposite! What a challenge.

Thanks to my friend José for giving me this book, it has expanded my mind and perception in many ways. Hopefully, it will make me a better improviser and overall better human.

This is also a great book if you want to be better at public speaking. Yet, it is most valuable if you want to be great at listening. Especially listening with your eyes.

Some of my highlights:

"An artist has to accept what his imaginations gives him, or screw up his talent."

"An artist who is inspired is being obvious. He's not making any decisions, he's not weighing one idea against another. He's accepting his first thoughts."

"Once you understand that every sound and posture implies a status, then you perceive the world quite differently, and the change is probably permanent... This ability to perceive the underlying motives of casual behavior can also be taught."

"I began to think of children not as immature adults, but of adults as atrophied children."

Martin Sebesta says

Není to kniha, ale životní filozofie. A divadla se taky týká vlastn? jen nap?l. Nejvíc ze všeho je to boj proti extrémní racionalit? západní civilizace, která se projevuje selháváním i v bytostn? lidských situacích, jako je dostat se do tranzu (p?enesen? i nep?enesen?) nebo vypráv?t p?íb?h. Svým zp?sobem je to návod, jak se poprat s prokrastinací, který byl napsán, ješt? než se slovo prokrastinace v?bec objevilo. A možná úpln? ze všeho je to p?íru?ka pro západního ?lov?ka, jak žít zase o trochu p?rozen?ji a ob?as ten všudyp?ítomný rozum vypnout.

Rozhodn? se vyplatí p?e?íst, i když se nechystáte na divadelní prkna.

Brendan says

One of my favorite books about improv though I still struggle to apply the lessons I learn from this book. Each time I pick it up I gain something different. This time I stopped without reading most of the "Masks" section as I don't plan on using masks in the near future, but the rest was great. I look forward to picking it up again in a couple of years and seeing what I learn next time.

David says

A strange book with a lot of interesting observations, even for those uninterested in improvisational theater. Sometimes he fixates on a concept (like masks) which incrementally raises his new-age mumbo jumbo tally for me--but generally he tells an interesting story about his experiments, outcomes and thoughts about

understanding characters and their motives.

For example, he talks about how he was finally able to get his actors to improvise realistic dialog when he had them imagine that, with every line, they were to try and change their social status in the group by the smallest amount possible. It is extremely illuminating and unsettling to pay attention to these status exchanges in your daily communications.

I highly recommend it!

Lisa says

This book was recommended to me by a friend who was acutely aware of my interest in the occult and my active practice of magic. I was surprised to find that many of the techniques used and goals sought after are the same. I started with little interest in theater but this book was incredibly hard to put down, and actually may inspire me to pursue improv in the future.

Huyen Chip says

The merit for this book's four star came entirely from the chapter "Status". Johnstone saw life as nothing but a series of transactions of status. This chapter made me conscious about how I carry myself and what I do with the space around me. Space has everything to do with status. The more space you take up, the higher you put your status. The more uncomfortable we are in a situation, the less we know what to do with space around us. What Johnstone wrote about status suddenly made me understand why we are so awkward around people we have a crush on. When we have a crush on someone, our status goes lower in regard to that person, yet we try to act higher status to impress that person.

The other chapters are just "meh". It was difficult for me to finish the first chapter "Notes on myself". The author's self-absorbedness bothered me, and I had to constantly remind myself that a work of autobiographical nature would inevitably suffer from self-absorbedness since it requires a certain degree of self-lovingness for someone to write about himself.

The chapter "Spontaneity" struck me as politically incorrect. Keith Johnstone kept talking about "carving coffee tables" as a degrading job and I wonder what's wrong with carving coffee tables. The way he talked about artists of different cultures is not how I would be comfortable with saying in public. The book was written in 1979, so people probably different values back then. I also don't quite agree with Johnstone's belief that education was the sole culprit for our loss of spontaneity. He argued that we all had spontaneity as we were kids, but school gradually killed it. I think another huge culprit is time. We grow up. When we start having responsibility, we have to think about consequences of our action, and subsequently spontaneity becomes a luxury.

I had expected more from the chapter "Narrative". Narrative techniques Johnstone talked about are very helpful when we encounter writer's blocks. However, Johnstone also noticed that most of these techniques would be considered tricks that don't have a lot of literary value.

Mark Gomer says

This was a fun read. I will probably do some of these improv exercises with my partner. The last section, on "Masks and Trance", contains some good anecdotes about trance states, hypnosis, and general suggestibility, which I found particularly interesting.

Sara says

A book that changed my life. The idea of saying yes and being present, of not blocking and not needing to be the cleverest person in the room have made me more open to adventure and, I'm pretty sure, happier overall.

Michael Roman says

I like books that help you think differently about the world.

There are some key insights in this book about "status" and body language that I haven't read elsewhere.

Those ideas alone make the book worth reading - eye contact, trading in status, what your status is to others and how that affects your interactions.

There are also some great insights about education in the book.

My favorite quote I shared right away on social media: "When I hear that children have an attention span of ten minutes, or whatever, I'm amazed. Ten minutes is the attention span of bored children."

Isn't that true for all of us? When we're bored, our attention span shrinks.

Don't bore people is great advice.

Sarah says

"Switch off the no-saying intellect and welcome the unconscious as a friend: it will lead you places you never dreamed of, and produce results more 'original' than anything you could achieve by aiming at originality."

Nick says

This is going to sound corny: this isn't just a book about improvisation, IT'S A BOOK ABOUT LIFE!! Okay, terrible, but true. Johnstone writes about human psychology and the way we interact socially as a way into comedy and improvisation. That bestseller "Blink" shamelessly quotes from it, yet the surprising insights this book reveals make that book rather dull in comparison.

Nicholas says

The part about status was very good. The rest, meh.

Quotes:

"People think of good and bad teachers as engaged in the same activity, as if education was a substance, and that bad teachers supply a little of the substance, and good teachers supply a lot. This makes it difficult to understand that education can be a destructive process, and that bad teachers are wrecking talent, and that good and bad teachers are engaged in opposite activities."

"I play low status physically but my actual status is going up, since only a very confident and experienced person would put the blame for failure on himself."

"For example, many students will begin an improvisation, or a scene, in a rather feeble way. It's as if they're ill, and lacking in vitality. They've learned to play for sympathy. However easy the problem, they'll use the same old trick of looking inadequate. This ploy is supposed to make the onlookers have sympathy with them if they 'fail' and it's expected to bring greater rewards if the 'win'. Actually this down-in-the-mouth attitude almost guarantees failure, and makes everyone fed up with them. No one has sympathy with an adult who takes such an attitude, but when they were children it probably worked. As adults they're still doing it. Once they've laughed at themselves and understood how unproductive such an attitude is, students who look 'ill' suddenly look 'healthy'. The attitude of the group may instantly change."

"If someone points a camera at you you're in danger of having your status exposed, so you wither clown about, or become deliberately unexpressive. In formal group photographs it's normal to see people guarding their status. You get quite different effects when people don't know they're being photographed."

"Such animals confront each other, and sometimes fight, until a hierarchy is established, after which there is no fighting unless an attempt is being made to change the 'pecking order'."

"Normal people are inhibited from seeing that no action, sound, or movement is innocent of purpose."

"Breaking eye contact can be high status so long as you don't immediately glance back for a fraction of a second. If you ignore someone your status rises, if you feel impelled to look back then it falls."

"Again I change my behavior and become authoritative. I ask them what I've done to create this change in my relation with them, and whatever they guess to be the reason - 'You're holding eye contact', 'You're sitting straighter' - I stop doing, yet the effect continues. Finally I explain that I'm keeping my head still whenever I speak, and that this produces great changes in the way I perceive myself and am perceived by others."

"It's very likely that you will increasingly be conditioned into playing the status that you've found an effective defense. You become a status specialist, very good at playing one status, but not very happy you competent at playing another. Asked to play the 'wrong' status, you'll feel 'undefended'."

"Non-defense is exploited by the wolf who exposes his neck and underbelly to a dominant wolf as a way of ending a losing battle. The top Wolf wants to bite, but can't. Some Congolese soldiers dragged two white journalists out of a jeep, shot one and were about to shoot the other when he burst into tears. They laughed

and kicked him back to the jeep and let him drive away, while the waved and cheered. It was more satisfying to see the white man cry than to shoot him."

"He believed that it was necessary to play low status within his working-class community, not realizing that you can play high or low in any situation. His problem is that he plays low status well and he won't experiment with other skills."

"Ten golden rules' for people who are Number Ones. He says, 'They apply to all leaders, from baboons to modern presidents and prime ministers.' They are:

1. You must clearly display the trappings, postures and gestures of dominance.
2. In moments of active rivalry you must threaten your subordinates aggressively.
3. In moments of physical challenge you (or your delegates) must be able forcibly to overpower your subordinates.
4. If a challenge involves brain rather than brawn you must be able to outwit your subordinates."
5. You must suppress squabbles that break out between your subordinates.
6. You must reward your immediate subordinates by permitting them to enjoy the benefits of high ranks.
7. You must protect the weaker members of the group from undue persecution.
8. You must make decisions concerning the social activities of your group.
9. You must reassure your extreme subordinates from time to time.
10. You must take the initiative in repelling threats or attacks arising from outside your group."

"Many teachers think of children as immature adults. It might lead to better and more 'respectful' teaching, if we thought of adults as atrophied children. Many 'well adjusted' adults are bitter, uncreative, frightened, unimaginative, and rather hostile people. Instead of assuming they were born that way, or that that's what being an adult entails, we might consider them as people damaged by their education and upbringing."

"Sanity has nothing to do with the way you think. It's a matter of presenting yourself as safe. Little old men wander around London hallucinating visibly, but no one gets upset. The same behavior in a younger, more vigorous person would get him shut away. A Canadian study on attitudes to mental illness concluded that it was when someone's behavior was perceived as 'unpredictable' that the community rejected them."

"There are people who prefer to say 'Yes', and there are people who prefer to say 'No'. Those who say 'Yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say 'No' are rewarded by the safety they attain. There are far more 'No' sayers around than 'Yes' sayers, but you can train one type to behave like the other."

"You have to trick students into believing that the content isn't important and that it looks after itself, or they never get anywhere. It's the same kind of trick you use when you tell them that they are not their imaginations, that their imaginations have nothing to do with them, and that they're in no way responsible for what their 'mind' gives them. In the end they learn how to abandon control while at the same time they exercise control. They begin to understand that everything is just a shell. You have to misdirect people to absolve them of responsibility. Then, much later, they become strong enough to resume the responsibility themselves. By that time they have a more truthful concept of what they are."

"There is a box that we are forbidden to open. It contains a great serpent and once opened this monster will stream out forever. I lift the lid, and for a moment it seems as if the serpent will destroy us; but then it dissipates into thin air, and there, at the bottom of the box, is the real treasure."
