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WRITING IMPROVISATION

Franc Chamberlain

“I think the most important moment in improvisation is when you don’t know what will happen next” (Roddy Maude-Roxby quoted in Frost and Yarrow 2007 p.80)

During the mid-1980s I sometimes travelled to Wells-next-the-Sea in North Norfolk to undertake improvisation training with Roddy Maude-Roxby. One of the original members of Theatre Machine, a company of improvisers founded by Keith Johnstone at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1965, Maude-Roxby was, at the time, based nearby in the small market town of Holt. Ralph Yarrow would drive us both over from Norwich in his Renault 4 and we would join a small training group led by Maude-Roxby in the Granary studio at Wells Maltings. We never knew quite what was going to happen and, on a couple of occasions, the other three members of Theatre Machine, Ben Benison, Ric Morgan and John Muirhead, joined us. At that time all four of them were followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (aka Osho, 1931-1990) and were dressed in the oranges, reds and maroons that were the colours Rajneesh’s *neo-sannyasins* were required to wear until after September 1985.¹ As far as I recall, there was usually no reference to Rajneesh in the sessions, but one morning we turned up for the class and Maude-Roxby was standing still with his arms stretched above his head and he said: “I’ve been thinking about pain”. In this moment, Maude-Roxby made no explicit reference to Rajneesh or his work, but there was an implicit reference to the fourth phase of Rajneesh’s Dynamic Meditation where, after leaping up and down with the arms held above the head in the previous phase, the participants freeze for fifteen minutes. Two or three minutes in this position can be

very painful, particularly in the shoulders, but the task is to let go of the tensions causing the pain.²

After we had stood frozen with our arms in the air for some minutes, Maude-Roxby continued with a series of investigations and explorations of pain, including an improvised torture scene. The first attempt at the torture scene in this class involved three players: two torturers and one victim. I played the victim. I sat on a plain wooden chair and the two torturers slowly and silently applied pressure to parts of my body. They started with very light pressure and gradually increased its intensity. My instructions were to stay with the pressure and, at the moment it became too uncomfortable, to go completely limp. The torturers would then leave me in the chair and walk away. The scene was very powerful, both for those watching and those participating. As soon as I went limp the two torturers stopped the pressure and walked out of the scene but, as they did so, they made a joke that intensified the uncomfortable atmosphere in the room. The joke was the only speech used in the improvised scene and so it stood out as a very strong statement. When asked why they had told the joke, the torturers said it was because they felt uncomfortable with their actions, implicitly drawing attention to the mental health issues that arise not only for the victims of torture but also the perpetrators (see Costanzo and Gerrity, 2009 pp.193–196).³ Despite the discomfort of the ‘torturers’ they had stayed close to the instructions given and had released me the moment I had gone limp.

I have no idea whether or not this is a score that Maude-Roxby returned to again; it was the only time I saw it one of his classes, but one reason it has remained with me is that there was no acting, even the joking of the torturers at the end was real in the

sense that it attempted to subvert the reality of the action. “I was just kidding”, writes Schechner, ‘reflexively claims that the “for real” action was, in fact, a performance’ (Schechner, 2006 p.89). By seeking to subvert the situation they had just played out, my colleagues were simultaneously signalling its reality for them and denying it. There was no distress for me as the cue for the torturers to stop was mine to give. I was sitting in the chair simply attending to the pressure they were exerting and the discomfort it eventually brought.

In this paper I try to say something about my work, the principles that underlie it, and some of its sources, without giving a list of exercises or situating myself within a specific lineage. Initially, I planned to focus some time on each of the questions that was sent out with the call for papers and interview myself, but I eventually made the decision to try to improvise the paper by following whatever image, idea, or memory emerged when I sat down to write. I was surprised by what emerged and, as I tried to stay with some of the associations and questions that emerged I began to worry that the piece might lose something of the economy of expression that I think characterizes much of my writing, as well as being a little too out of control because I wasn’t planning what should come next. There was risk that the piece would become self-indulgent and not communicate enough to the reader about my practice of performer training. Hopefully I have managed to avoid that trap.

I have written from a first-person perspective and take a very different approach to discussing the work of Roddy Maude-Roxby, for example, ~~than from~~ that of Frost and Yarrow (2007 pp.80–4) who provide a lucid, theoretically sound, and informative discussion that has all the traditionally good things that I fear this paper lacks. That

said, I don't think that Frost and Yarrow's immensely rich practical experience of theatre training comes through in their book with the result that what they do, and have done, is hidden in their evaluation of what others have done. When we are discussing training practices it is quite important to have some sense of the dimension of personal experience in order to better understand how an exercise or process works for different people at different points in time. One problem with this point of view is the sheer immensity of the data that would need to be collected to evaluate even a few exercises over a twenty-year period and across a range of people from different backgrounds. This essay, however, is not so ambitious. It focuses on a fragment of one person's experiencing in order to try to give some meaningful responses to at least some of the twenty questions posed by the editor in the Call for Papers. Questions such as: What is the difference between what you do and how you talk about what you do? Who is unwelcome and how do they know? What remains unsaid? What remains undone? What gets undone? How does it feel? What are the secrets of your method?⁴

I often use stories in talking about what I do even though there may not be a story in what I do. I take up past moments, memories, and imaginations and improvise them into short narratives for entertainment, instruction, and analysis. I don't assume that I remember the torture moment accurately, no matter how clear it seems either in my memory or in my written articulation of it. The version of the story I improvise at any particular moment has no claim to greater honesty or accuracy than any other moment. There are some elements that remain the same, that are always there whenever I recall or talk about the exercise, but there is no guarantee that those elements themselves are accurate. I try to be as truthful to my memory as I can but I am also aware that the

story is not something I tell for historical accuracy. I tell the torture story partly because of the slowness of the action, the emphasis on being in the moment and paying close attention to the pressure applied, how people are caught up in play, and because it seems so far away from the warmth and playfulness of the work I usually associate with Maude-Roxby (even though that warmth is a pre-condition for the exploration of painful situations).

As I write the above I notice that I intend to say more about the playfulness and to bring in a quotation to illustrate what I mean, but I also notice a counter impulse to stay with the sense of slow pressure building to a level where it is unbearable. I will often talk about what I do as if I always find it easy. Now there's an impulse to erase that line, erase everything that has gone before, and start again. And, for a few moments, I freeze. Then I write and erase what I've written. I have no desire to attempt to recover the deleted words. I notice that, when I'm performing or teaching I cannot erase anything. There are differences between what I do and what I say I do, but when I try to write about the difference between what I do and how I talk about what I do, it is the writing that is the problem. When talking about what I can do I can move from talking to demonstrating. I can receive immediate feedback that the other person doesn't understand. I can try again and I can find examples that might be more appropriate for the person with me in that moment. I pause. I can write an email and respond to any queries. I can use images, video, and sound to explain more. Writing itself is not the problem. It is my inner critic that is the problem; the voice that tells me that I have nothing new to contribute, that no-one is interested in what I have to say. This is not an example of credible discourse. There is a Cop-in-the-Head who arrests (freezes) me. The critic/Cop-in-the-Head has contempt for my work and wants

to imprison me in shame so that the work doesn't get out. I become alienated from my own work and reject it before anyone else can do so. I leave my desk and explore the affect with the help of my partner; first I have to notice what it is that I'm feeling. Just being attentive to what I'm feeling helps. I write this knowing that 'feelings of Contempt or Shame are rarely named' because 'it is as if the experience is too embarrassing to admit, perhaps even to ourselves' (Chodorow, 1991 p.91).

Sitting in my chair is torture. I feel the slow, intensifying pressure to write an 'original' piece, a piece that will meet the criteria of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 4* work that is 'world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour' (REF 2014). I can't write the obvious because the obvious won't be original or significant enough, so I slow down too much and, searching for something original to say, I get nowhere - like Johnstone's 'bad improviser [...] desperately trying to think up something original' (Johnstone, 1981 p.88). What a failure! With that acknowledgement I can relax a little and reflect a little on what I've just done.

I had no idea why I started with an event that happened thirty years ago. Nor why, of all of the things I might have taken from my various trainings and teachers, I decided to start with this moment; Maude-Roxby with his arms in the air telling us that he'd been thinking about pain. It was after the selection of the event that I chose the epigraph. By following the moment and trusting that, in the story I was telling, there was some point, I discovered that 'freezing', 'torture', 'pain' 'intensifying pressure' and 'going limp' were echoed in aspects of my own process as I tried to write about what I do and what is left unsaid. I didn't know until a moment before I wrote it down

that a part of me was feeling contempt for my writing and I was feeling ashamed of it. The shame/contempt is also there in the two torturers; not necessarily in the two individuals themselves, but in the event as I re-imagine it: they reveal their shame in the joke that shows contempt for their 'work'.

The need to be able to address potential exposure to shame and contempt when playing a perpetrator was apparent when I was working with a class of first year undergraduate Drama students at the University of Huddersfield, UK, in Spring 2015. In the Creative Devising module, students are briefly introduced to various starting points for devising theatre and, after several weeks of exploration, the group decided that they were going to create a piece based on the story of Medusa (she who freezes/arrests her enemies). One version of the story is that Medusa was transformed into a Gorgon because she was vain and believed herself to be more beautiful than the goddess Athena; another was that she was a priestess of Athena who was punished by the goddess for allowing herself to be seduced, by the god Poseidon, into breaking her vow of chastity. A third version of the story, and the one the students decided to give most attention to, was that Medusa was raped by Poseidon and then transformed into a Gorgon by Athena in a classical Greek instance of victim-blaming. The student who was playing Poseidon considered how the god might not feel any guilt or remorse over the rape but, instead, delight in it. A day or so before the work was to be shown, however, he came to see me to discuss some discomfort he had with the role. He was attempting to show the character's delight but he was encountering feelings of disgust which were evident in his face as he spoke.

I asked him what he was imagining as he spoke the text, which he had written himself.

He didn't give me precise details, as it wouldn't have been appropriate to do so, but it was clear that he was trying to imagine a rape scene and insert himself into it.

I asked him why he would want to imagine the rape: wouldn't it make more sense for him to imagine doing something that he genuinely enjoyed? I suggested he imagine eating an ice-cream; he made the counter suggestion of drinking a pint of beer. It wasn't particularly important whether he chose one of those two suggestions or something else to imagine. What was important was that it was something that he genuinely enjoyed and would not cause him any harm, either through any shame he might feel about playing the role or from the reactions, such as contempt, he might get from his fellow performers. When we did a group de-brief I discovered that he hadn't told any of the other members of the cast that he was imagining enjoying a pint of beer as he spoke his text. I thought it was important that he inform his colleagues of the memory he was focusing on so that they didn't hear his words, see his delight, and imagine that they knew what he was experiencing. I know that I usually pay some attention to providing support for those playing the victims and as well as others in the cast who may be disturbed by the work, but I wonder whether, in the past, I have given enough attention to the distress that might be caused to the person playing the perpetrator. I would like to think that I have shown appropriate care, but why would this moment stand out for me if it didn't point to a previous absence? Do I feel that Maude-Roxby failed to pay enough attention to the torturers and the memory of this incident with the student is pointing me towards that? No, I don't think so.

The memories of the torture scene and the role of the rapist remind me that the conditions have to be right in order for people to play with this material. The slowing down of the action in the torture score and the handing of the power to end the

pressure to the player of the victim role, ensured that the risk of injury was almost non-existent. Substituting the imaginary rape scene with something in which the player took a genuine and harmless pleasure, and the communication of that substitution to his colleagues, reduced the risk of the player self-identifying with the role, being identified in the role by others, and strengthened his performance by removing his feelings of self-disgust. This sense of disgust is different from the attitude of the actor towards the character that we associate with Brecht: an actor who adopts an attitude of disgust towards a character is not adopting an attitude towards himself.

I realise that, in my initial discussion of the torture scene, I assumed that the importance of trust, warmth, playfulness, attention, and an attitude of care or compassion were self-evident not only in Maude-Roxby's work but in my own. These qualities allow for difficult material to be explored; material that might be personally or collectively very painful. It is not just a case of trusting the workshop leader and the other players, but also oneself. Being willing to trust what emerges from the situation and to accept the possibility of failure allows for mistakes to be 're-evaluated as possibilities of new directions' (Frost and Yarrow 2007 p.83). In an improvisation, how would an audience know that something is a 'mistake', especially if the player is able to incorporate whatever happens in the ongoing flow of action? Even if the performer acknowledges it *as* a mistake in the performance does not confirm for the audience that it *was* a mistake.

In Theatre Machine's work the critics and audience members sometimes thought that the work was '*too good* to have been improvised' and there was a tendency for them

to view 'whatever did not work in a performance [...] as improvised and what did work [...] as scripted' (Dudeck, 2013 p.80). In my own work, I don't believe that the audience should be able to tell the difference between something that is tightly rehearsed and something that is spontaneously improvised and I hope that they are engaged enough not to worry either way.

I pause as I write...; I feel on the edge of terror again, a goose-pimpling along my arms. I am curious about this feeling. If I am leading a class and I feel this way, I will mention it and ask if anyone else is feeling the same way; perhaps it is a response in the group to the material we are dealing with, in which case it is something we can explore together. If I am the only person feeling it, I might demonstrate how to take such a feeling as an impulse for movement or for improvising text, perhaps creating a short scene with two or more characters. As I write and try to stay with the feeling, I get an image of being balanced on a tightrope, and the tingling in my arms mutates into a balancing pole in my imagination. I stand slowly, walk across my room, weight sinking, arms outstretched, but there is no risk. I can imagine that I'm up in the air but I don't feel any risk. Sitting in front of my screen and typing this brief description of what I've just done feels much more uncomfortable. There is no more chance of falling literally from a great height sitting in my chair than there is acting out the image, but the act of typing feels much riskier. At the same time, this terror takes place within a context of safety: the feeling is real but I know that I'm safe with it - as safe as I was in the torture scene. The worst that can happen is that this piece turns out to be a failure. Having said that, I can think of worse things in a chain of causality: the piece fails, it doesn't get published, I'm light on my REF submission and I lose my job and my ability to support my family; but this seems an unlikely outcome.

When I'm improvising (whether I'm teaching, performing, speaking at a conference, or writing), I never know exactly what I'm going to say. Sometimes I have ideas about what I'm going to say: how wonderful, enlightening and empowering they are going to be; how wise and clever I am going to look. Or I imagine nothing getting said, drying up and not being able to speak. It has happened. Whether it's in a well-rehearsed piece, or improvised. Suddenly everything goes blank. No, that's not accurate. It's not 'blankness' but tightness and an inability to feel at home in the moment; an unsettling. In a performance context, I might change channel, moving from sound into movement, or mode, moving from speech into song. When I'm writing with a pen and paper I might shift from writing into drawing and doodling, I might have pastels nearby and use those, I might even switch hands and write/draw with my left hand rather than my dominant right. Or I might just stay in the discomfort and see what comes next.

Recently, I was giving a paper at a conference and I started by saying that my conference presentations are usually prepared improvisations; I know what my basic argument is going to be but I don't have everything rehearsed. The presentation was going well enough and then I dried up. I could still speak but I had lost the thread of the argument. I'd reached a dead end. I stayed with the moment of unknowing and a member of the audience threw me a lifeline, asking me to explain something that I had mentioned earlier. It was a very helpful intervention and, in response to the question, I began to talk freely again. On reflection I think that I started my presentation from the wrong place, making assumptions that my audience would already have the information that I was eventually asked to unfold in more detail. If I had fixed the paper in written form and read it aloud, or held it as support for my

improvisation, to refer to if I lost my way, I wouldn't have found myself in the moment where I really didn't know what was going to happen next.⁵ I genuinely had no idea, but in that moment of unknowing I felt that I was more in touch with the audience than I had been a few seconds before. By staying in the pause I was able to be ready for what did emerge, in this instance it came from the audience member who asked the question, but if an intervention from the audience hadn't come, I trust that something else would have come to mind – if I was adequately sensitive to what was happening in the room, then an exploration of the same material required by the question might have resulted.

The pause, for Michael Chekhov (1891-1955), the great Russian actor and teacher, allows one action to come to an end and another to begin (Chamberlain, 2004 p.121). Another, slightly different way of working with the pause is to consider it as a moment of decision. In one exercise I use quite regularly in classes and workshops, the player is putting on, or taking off, an item of clothing and pauses. In the pause she or he makes the decision whether to carry on with the action, e.g. continue removing the coat, or to reverse it and put the coat back on. I can remember a time, however, where I felt that it was important, in general, for there to be no gap between an external impulse and a response in an improvisation. So, when I was in a workshop with Phelim McDermott and Arlene Audergon, about twelve years ago, I was surprised and confused when I was criticised for my response to an offer – I responded very quickly and there was virtually no gap between offer and response. I thought I'd done well, but they weren't so happy. I resolved to take a class with another teacher I had trained a little with in the past, Francis Batten, who was someone who I thought would see what I did from a different perspective and would help me see the problem if it was something that recurred in different contexts. I was

interested in whether I had simply made a bad choice at a particular moment or whether there was something missing from my work in general. I didn't tell Batten that I was looking to identify a particular problem, I just trusted that if there was one then it would appear and he would notice it. What he noticed in an improvisation, on the first or second day of the course, was that I didn't take the time to receive an offer from my partner. I didn't allow the time to take the impulse in with my breath. My breath could have different speeds or qualities, but once I started working in that way I **think I** understood what McDermott and Audergon were seeing. The impulse from my partner was bouncing off me and returning to them rather than being received and responded to: I was *reacting to the impulse rather than responding to it.* It feels odd to say this because it is such a simple thing and I wonder how I could have worked in this field for so long and taken classes with a range of teachers, sometimes regularly over three or four years, and not been able to see this weakness.

In the previous paragraphs I've not tried to say what I do by listing a set of exercises, or a programme but by trying to adapt what I do to the processes of writing. There are no secrets but so much is left unsaid. I hope that something of the flavour of some of my work comes through. I fear that some of the fun has gone missing. By starting with a focus on Maude-Roxby's torture exercise I set up a sequence of events that privilege a feeling of difficulty over a feeling of ease. All of my favourite teachers, not just the ones mentioned here, have had a lovely sense of ease, and playfulness, and generosity, and compassion. I hope that, however slow a learner I am, these positive qualities are present in my work. Recalling that Maude-Roxby and the other members of Theatre Machine were, for a while, *neo-sannyasins*, and the ongoing, yet little explored, intersection of performance training and contemporary spiritualities, the following quotation seems appropriate to stand in for some of what is missing

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from this paper:

“These are the qualities of meditation: a really meditative person is playful; life is fun for him, life is *leela*, a play. He enjoys it tremendously. He is not serious. He is relaxed.” (Rajneesh 1987. p.23)

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¹ 'Followers Allowed to Stop Wearing Red: Guru Renounces Book of Rajneeshism' *Los Angeles Times*, 27th September 1985. http://articles.latimes.com/1985-09-27/news/mn-18112_1_bhagwan-shree-rajneesh accessed 11th February 2015.

² Rajneesh writes: "If you feel pain, be attentive to it, don't do anything. Attention is the great sword – it cuts everything. You simply pay attention to the pain" (Rajneesh, 1980 p.33) and "You be a watcher. You just forget that you are a doer and, by and by, everything will subside so beautifully and so gracefully that you cannot believe it unless you know it. Not only does the pain disappear [...], because the energy which was creating pain, if watched, disappears – the same energy becomes pleasure. The energy is the same. Pain or pleasure are two dimensions of the same energy. (Rajneesh, 1980 p.34-5)

³ I am not suggesting that there is symmetry of suffering between the perpetrator and the victim.

⁴ The other questions were: Would you say all this to someone you are training with? What kinds of discourses are (in)credible? What have you already assumed? What is impossible to explain? What can only be known in retrospect? What kind of person is produced by this process and how will they talk? What is (in)substantial? What will change if we do things the same way we talk about them? What will happen if we don't? What will change if we don't change anything that we're doing right now? What is impossible to articulate in words? How do you know you belong somewhere? Who do you think you are talking to?

⁵ I remember the words slightly differently from how they are quoted in Frost and Yarrow. This may be because I've mis-remembered or simply remembered another conversation. "The most important thing to focus on is the moment when you really don't know what's going to happen next"