Between Theory and Practice: Tracing Improvisation with British Muslim Youth

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Improvisation is simultaneously an artistic and social practice, one that is informed by the process of making performance and living life. Drawing on literature from across the social sciences and theatre/performance studies, improvisation can be understood as a practice that requires attention to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's habitus*, theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavksi's "Given Circumstances," and theatre practitioner Viola Spolin's idea of the intuition. When these concepts are put in conversation with devised theatre work that the author undertook with British Muslim youth, both the benefits and limitations of improvisation become evident.*

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What can the process of devising theatre with British Muslim youth teach us about improvisation? In what follows, I draw on recent fieldwork in Manchester (UK) to consider this question. I situate my argument in the liminal space between art and life, building on the work of scholars from various disciplines who have convincingly argued in favor of slippages between the two.[1] Such work is foundational for contemporary understandings of improvisation as in-between.[2] In theatre studies specifically, discussions of improvisation have considered its performative or bodily dimensions, such as when an actor appears onstage and is able to elicit a desired audience reaction while responding to a scene partner's mistake.[3] My efforts, however, draw on the wider interdisciplinary literature in order to construct a theoretical framework for improvisation and test that framework against ethnographic moments from recent devising work that I have conducted. The framework that I employ clusters around three concepts: 1) sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's reading of the *habitus*[4]; 2) an amalgamated concept I am calling the "immediate circumstance" that builds on Konstantin Stanislavski's "Given Circumstances"[5]; and 3) Viola Spolin's idea of the intuition.[6] Applying this framework in light of my devising work results in a practical examination of improvisation theory that examines the benefits and constraints of this socially theatrical process.

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I open with a brief outline of the research context to set the scene. From November 2017 to March 2018, I facilitated regular devised theatre workshops with a group of British Muslim youth in Manchester. Collaborators had to be aged 18–35 and self-identify as British and Muslim. I use the term "collaborator" rather than "participant" to reflect two aspects of this work: 1) workshop content and overall direction of the process were determined by those who attended; and 2) collaborators were recruited ethnographically as I built personal relationships with them, rather than through a single organization or gatekeeper. Workshops occurred in three phases: digging for artistic content from November to early February, deciding on and planning final form in mid-February, and arranging content from mid-February to the end of March. Afterward, I interviewed the five collaborators who had the most sustained involvement in the process, interviews I draw on here. Collaborators received snacks and refreshments at each workshop, and were credited according to their involvement. Attendance was variable. Some weeks, only one collaborator attended, while in others as many as eight were in attendance. Over the whole five-month period, I worked with twenty-two collaborators. The workshops resulted in a radio play that collaborators wrote and voiced, an outcome that was not known at the start of the process. This radio play is titled *The Wedding*, and features two British Muslim young couples in conversation at a wedding.[7] Rather than summarize the plot of the play now, I will introduce the context of particular moments as they become relevant to my argument. This is because I am more interested in the devised process that created *The Wedding* than in the script of the piece itself.

Throughout the devising process, various improvisational theatre activities were employed. These included icebreakers, tableaux-making, hot-seating, storytelling, and role-playing. All of these activities generated artistic content, such as character descriptions and spoken text. Certainly, not all of the generated content was used in the final radio play; this is often the case in devising.[8] However, multiple moments within the activities themselves drew on collaborators' experiences and the theatrical nature of the activity. Describing these moments enlivened both my British Muslim youth collaborators' experiences and my position as the convener of those collaborators and facilitator of the process they underwent. My imbrication in this process leads me to employ an autoethnographic writing style when attending to how moments from our work together can test improvisation theory against its practical application, using (self-)reflexivity to privilege relationships between collaborators, facilitator and collaborators, and collaborators and characters.[9] As a result, what I argue for throughout my writing is the fact that art and life came together in this work to reveal both improvisation's strengths and its limits.

Bourdieu's *Habitus*

I begin with Bourdieu's habitus. Despite improvisation's free-flowing nature, an individual's ability to improvise is constrained by a variety of evolving social structures. These can include familial expectations, religious attachment, and so on. For Bourdieu, these structures become fixed over time through repetition. In so doing, they create the context for an individual's habitus, which Bourdieu defines as a "dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality."[10] That is, individuals oscillate between how much they allow the outside world to affect their inner world, and how much they allow their inner world to affect their external actions. This back-and-forth shapes the meaning of everyday life:

> Each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning. Because his actions and works are the product of a *modus operandi* of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery, they contain an "objective intention" . . . . The schemes of thought and expression he has acquired are the basis for the *intentionless invention* of *regulated improvisation* . . . his discourse continuously feeds off itself like a train bringing along its own rails.[11]

Improvising individuals do not have control over the ways in which they produce and reproduce meaning, because their improvisations are "intentionless." Instead, each of their actions is dependent on the "dialectic" of the habitus and the structures that inform it. As such, an improviser's actions become second nature. This lack of intent loads actions with meaning: "It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know."[12]

I understand the habitus as a dialogical space. By this, I mean a space that allows multiple approaches to coexist, approaches that build on one another to best meet the needs of the moment. For performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, the dialogic allows two voices to speak, "neither of which succumbs to monologue."[13] Rather, they speak "simultaneously and interactively" while engaging in "cooperative enterprise[s]" that "question, debate, and challenge" reality.[14] In a dialogical space, a "genuine conversation" takes place between multiple points of view.[15] Within this space, there are "struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs," struggles that resist conclusions.[16] The dialogic encourages possibility of response and attends to the process of how debate occurs in the moment.

In terms of Bourdieu's habitus, the Conquergoodian dialogic recognizes improvisation as an ongoing process of specific meaning-making. It is not only that the habitus allows the improviser to create and recreate "objective meaning"; this

meaning is also context-specific, related to a particular experience. Conquergood argues: "Genuine dialogical engagement is at least a two-way thoroughfare."[17] The metaphor is not accidental. The notion of a "thoroughfare" recalls images of long-distance freeways and highways. These types of roads disappear into the distant horizon, but guardrails or concrete barriers bound them on either side. The immediate limits of the thoroughfare are real. At any given moment, a driver cannot exceed the constraints set by the physical boundaries of the road. Yet while drawing on her past experiences of driving a vehicle, she can continue in this manner for miles. Likewise, the habitus as a dialogical space requires that an improvising individual's actions create meaning for specific purposes and contexts.

An example from my own practice is instructive here. Five young men of Pakistani heritage attended the first workshop that I conducted in November 2017. They were friends who knew one another through a local university. All five were aged 18–25. We began the workshop with an icebreaker that I call "Snaps." In it, collaborators snap their fingers to represent sending or receiving an imaginary ball of energy. The ball is sent when an individual makes a throwing motion while snapping, and the ball is received when an individual makes a catching motion while snapping. Collaborators are free to send the ball to anyone else in the circle. Depending on group size and available space, multiple variations are possible: saying the recipient's name while sending the ball, introducing a second or third ball, and moving around a room while playing.

One collaborator, whom I'll call Mustafa, arrived late. The rest of us already had begun playing when he arrived. I explained the rules of the game to him, and he joined in. The group moved through all three variations before settling on a knockout version of the activity played while standing in a circle: whoever slowed the tempo of the snaps or forgot to say his recipient's name was out. Collaborators would then tighten the circle, and the collaborator who had been knocked out was responsible for standing outside the circle and judging his peers within it. The competition was going well, and collaborators were enjoying the game's lively rhythm. During a lull in the action, after one collaborator had been knocked out and the circle was closing, Mustafa commented that he felt a black woman would enjoy this activity due to all the snapping. He struck a pose, putting one hand on his hip and snapping the fingers of his other hand in the shape of a letter *Z*. His actions and statement made me uncomfortable, but I said nothing. The rest of the group laughed, and the activity continued.

I did not interview Mustafa about his involvement in the project, as the workshop described above was the only one he attended. However, multiple collaborators whom I did interview pointed to the importance of recognizing "colorism" within British Muslim communities. (Their use of the term "colorism" rather than "racism" recognizes that "racism" is intertwined with whiteness and power rather than sited in interactions between minority groups.) Two interviewees—a man of Afro-

Caribbean heritage who had converted to Islam (I'll call him Malcolm) and a woman of Pakistani heritage who was raised Muslim (I'll call her Rahmah)—described colorism as a "problem." They saw it as discriminatory and sometimes bigoted behavior directed from British Muslim youth of Arab or South Asian heritage toward those of African or Afro-Caribbean heritage. Specifically, Malcolm and Rahmah cited interracial friendships and romances as particular sites where colorism can be found. Anthropologist Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, working with Muslim youth in the United States, is helpful here. She refers to the "ethnoreligious hegemony" of Arab- and South Asian-heritage Muslims who look down upon African-American Muslims as somehow less worthy of practicing or being able to claim Islam.[18] Notably, both Malcolm and Rahmah indicated that this behavior is not limited to British Arab or South Asian Muslims' treatment of other Muslims. They insisted that colorism extends beyond British Muslim communities to affect how British Arab and South Asian Muslims interact with others in British society.

Mustafa's actions in the workshop did not specify that the black woman he stereotyped was Muslim. However, the colorism that Malcolm and Rahmah highlighted was evident nonetheless. Mustafa's bigotry typecast a black woman in order to earn a cheap laugh. His behavior was targeted toward the six of us in the room, four of whom were his friends. In that context, I was the outsider, as both the facilitator who did not want to upset the group dynamic and the only non-British person in the room. However, as a man of South Asian heritage, I was assumed to be sympathetic to Mustafa's perspective. Mustafa performed both his masculinity and the colorism to which Malcolm and Rahmah alluded, constituting both through casual bigotry. Crucially, that bigotry manifested itself in a space with individuals who—on the surface—seemed to share Mustafa's perspective by virtue of laughing with him.

Mustafa's actions test the limits of the habitus as dialogical. Conversation between a bigoted and nonbigoted response here ended up reinforcing the colorism and "ethnoreligious hegemony" of British South Asians. The actions that Mustafa undertook were specific to the moment, informed by his interpretation of the other collaborators in the room and my own ethnic heritage and gender. Bourdieu's "intentionless invention" is evident here, because Mustafa's actions at that exact moment were likely not thought through. Yet his actions in the workshop space highlighted the social meaning that Malcolm and Rahmah alerted me to when I interviewed them. The dialogical habitus revealed structures of racial preference and masculinity in Mustafa's performance.

At the same time, the limits of Conquergood's "thoroughfare" metaphor appear in my failure to contest Mustafa's bigotry. In that moment, I sought to maintain the status quo rather than contradict Mustafa's actions. I did not challenge the gendered and racialized social norm in which I had been implicated. Doing so would have risked losing control of the session, undermining my own research objectives,

and damaging my relationship with collaborators—or worse. To continue in my position as facilitator, I had to momentarily quiet my feminist, antiracist politics in one of Conquergood's "struggles." Abdul Khabeer's reading of feminist literary critic Hortense Spillers is instructive: "[W]hen enacted upon racialized, specifically Black, bodies, the regulatory power of gender entails different orders of gender performance and consequently different means of agency and resistance."[19] The habitus as a dialogical site for improvisation allows a performer to undertake immediate responses, even if those responses are heavily regulated.

The Immediate Circumstance

As the above example shows, some of the constraints on improvisation are structural. But there are also other constraints, which I refer to as the "immediate circumstance." By this, I mean the immediate situation in which an individual finds herself at any point: at a bus stop, playing a card game, standing on stage, etc. Here, Stanislavski's Given Circumstances are foundational: "the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the time and place of the action, the way of life . . . everything which is a given for the actors as they rehearse."[20] (My focus here is on everything apart from Stanislavski's "way of life," which I view as akin to Bourdieu's habitus.) Improvisational theatre practitioner Keith Johnstone understands the immediate circumstance differently. For Johnstone, improvisers need "to follow the rules and see what happens."[21] This allows players to "go where the verse [or action] takes them," since "the important thing is the effect the revelation [or action] produces."[22] Whether in Stanislavskian or Johnstonian terms, effective negotiation of the immediate circumstance results in a "double life" that blurs onstage and offstage reality.[23]

Underlying the immediate circumstance is the concept of relationality. For anthropologists Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam, improvisation as "relational" means that "it is continually attuned and responsive to the performance of others."[24] That is, improvisation is more than just the performer's personal experience. Instead, it requires attention to others and how they negotiate their worlds. The way an individual responds to others is dependent on how those others are perceived. Using the example of walking along a crowded street, Ingold and Hallam argue that our ways of living are "as entangled and mutually responsive as are the paths of pedestrians on the street."[25] Onstage, Johnstone echoes the importance of relationality when discussing the notion of the offer, which is "anything that an actor does."[26] Offers onstage can be accepted or blocked, such that accepted offers develop action and blocked ones obstruct it. Accepting offers indicates the classic "yes, and" attitude needed for theatre improvisation.[27]

What Johnstone calls accepting and blocking aligns with what psychodramatist Jacob Moreno calls "giving and taking," or bridging what occurs onstage with what occurs off it.[28] In Moreno's work, drama can be a form of therapy. His three

major techniques allow a patient's past to be replayed in the spirit of the event and the emotions that it invoked.[29] This allows a patient to test their decision-making abilities and different solutions to real-life problems, propelling them "towards an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation" that draws on a "giving and taking" of feedback between audience and patient.[30] This back-and-forth movement reflects relationships that are generated through and uncovered by improvisation. Constant communication occurs between people in everyday life, just as it does on stage. In the immediate circumstance, the to-ing and fro-ing of relationality enables action while delimiting improvisational possibility.

I now return to my theatre practice to consider the efficacy of the immediate circumstance. In February 2018, in the first session of the arranging phase, collaborators realized that they had generated little in the way of spoken dialogue between any of the four characters in *The Wedding*. They decided to use the aforementioned basic character descriptions as a frame to improvise a conversation between those characters. During the session in question, the improvisation was between the characters Sam and Saba, a couple in a same-sex relationship. Sam is in the process of becoming Muslim, which she believes will strengthen her relationship with her father, who is Muslim. Her partner, Saba, is already Muslim and is worried that Sam will leave the relationship upon becoming Muslim. In the moment I examine here, Rahmah embodied Sam and another collaborator (I'll call her Fatimah) embodied Saba. My role was to audio record and transcribe, as best as I could, what was being said. After a warmup game, we were about to begin when Fatimah indicated that she needed to go to the bathroom. Meanwhile, Rahmah and I chatted. When Fatimah returned to the room and took her seat, Rahmah was at the snack table getting some tangerines and something to drink. I was preparing my laptop to record and transcribe while carrying on my conversation with Rahmah.

As soon as Rahmah moved from the snack table to her chair, Fatimah began the improvisation, immersed in the decided-upon fictional setting of a wedding. Noticing that Rahmah was carrying a bowl of fruit, Fatimah embodied Saba and asked: "You got your food without me?" There was a moment's pause as both Rahmah and I switched attention from our chat to the improvisation that had already begun. We had to catch up to Fatimah, who was focused on a level at which neither of us was present. "They had vegan options," Rahmah replied, embodying Sam and recovering her concentration. And away they went. The conversation ebbed and flowed so quickly that I did not have time to press record. I struggled to catch their words, my fingers flying frantically over the keyboard. The momentum of the scene was palpable, and the two only reached a natural stopping point fifteen minutes later. By then, I had adjusted to the pace of the conversation but had abandoned the audio recording in favor of writing down the dialogue itself. Fatimah was disappointed to learn this and told me to interrupt them the next time that happened.

In the words of Ingold and Hallam, Fatimah was "attuned" to what was going on around her.[31] She took into consideration not only Stanislavski's Given Circumstances but also the relational dimensions of her wider situation. As Saba, she was an individual at a wedding. The surrounding venue, her place at the table, and the food that was available all played into Fatimah's embodiment of Saba. But perhaps more importantly, she took into account her scene partner's performance. That is, Fatimah understood that Rahmah getting food from the snack table—some pieces of fruit, specifically—was related to her own position as Saba and the wider context in which the improvisation was set. Even though Rahmah had not yet taken on the role of Sam, Fatimah noticed that getting fruit was an example of the Johnstonian offer. She accepted that offer and built on it by accusing Sam of getting her food without waiting for Saba. Here, Fatimah did not worry about what would happen next. She was aware that it is "the effect the revelation [or action] produces" that matters.[32]

Fatimah's incorporation of the immediate circumstance made its way through the arranging phase and into the final script of *The Wedding*. The play opens with these lines:

> SABA: You got your food without me?
> SAM: They had vegan options.
> SABA: Except that's not vegan.
> SAM: Most of it is.
> SABA: Is that lamb?
> SAM: Maybe.[33]

In the play, Sam begins to abandon her vegan lifestyle, which serves as foreshadowing for the other major life change that Sam makes: becoming Muslim. The opening two lines were lifted, word for word, from the improvisation referenced above. Collaborators kept those lines but shifted subsequent ones to reflect a linkage between Sam's multiple lifestyle changes. They wanted the focus of the conversation between Sam and Saba to be on Sam's decision to become Muslim, so they used the notion of Sam abandoning her vegan lifestyle as an introductory metaphor. The move from vegan to not vegan anticipated the move from non-Muslim to Muslim.

This episode points to strengths and weaknesses in the notion of the immediate circumstance. A major strength is that taking into account the specificity of the current moment allows improvisers to make unexpected connections. Fatimah's incorporation of Rahmah's selection of fruit into her character's speech confirms improvisation as a fluid process situated between art and life. Crucially, that moment of incorporation depended on the improviser—Fatimah, in this case—attending to all aspects of her immediate circumstance. Conceptually, the immediate circumstance involves personal and fictional relationships, just as much as it

involves the limitations of plot, time period, setting, and so on. The meeting point of these concerns enlivens the in-between character of improvisation.

A weakness of the immediate circumstance was evident in my ineffective response, for it revealed a gap between who was ready to improvise and who was not. Speaking about the experience of improvisation, jazz drummer Leroy Williams claims that "[y]ou can never know in advance of the situation what you will do at the time," a sentiment evident in my rush to catch up to Fatimah and Rahmah.[34] Despite my own background as an improvisational musician, I was not as attentive to the immediate circumstance as Fatimah was. Perhaps other concerns, such as concluding my conversation with Rahmah or setting up the recording, were more pressing. More instructive, though, is the notion that each individual improviser has differing interpretations of the immediate circumstance. My understanding of the situation did not match Fatimah's or Rahmah's in that instance, leading to our momentary disconnect. The immediate circumstance can thus be understood as an external situation *and* what individuals within that situation make of it.

Spolin's Intuition

Finally, there is Spolin's articulation of the intuition, which she argues is essential for improvisation. The intuition is affected by time, the subconscious, and virtuosity. In terms of time, the intuition is "an explosion that *for the moment* frees us from handed-down frames of reference."[35] Immediacy allows an improviser to face reality and respond accordingly. Though it manifests in behavior that appears free, the intuition is actually under major, noncognitive pressures. Time limits the intuition, framing an individual's actions. This seeming contradiction—immediacy as a framework—results in an instantaneous physical or verbal action that the improviser carries out, enabling the subconscious to emerge in intuitive form. Because improvisation is iterative, the intuition inserts a spontaneous moment into this cycle, or what critical theorist Judith Butler has called "the possibility of a variation on that repetition."[36] Structurally, repetition enables improvisation's free-flowing nature.

In addition to time, an individual's subconscious also affects the intuition. Johnstone argues that historical conceptions of artists frame them as "medium[s] through which something else operated," highlighting an ambiguity that renders fluid the subconscious and the conscious.[37] Similarly, Stanislavski speaks of "the borderline between physical and psychological" that can occur based on an unanticipated event.[38] He describes a moment in which something unexpected happens on stage, such as the dropping of a prop or part of the set, which an actor has to respond to. The actor has to choose "whether to accept an accidental moment, that has burst in from the real world, and include it in the role, or deny it and step outside the role."[39] Crucially, as Bourdieu claims, this choice is "intentionless."

The process of improvisation is, momentarily, free of cognitive decision-making. It draws on a deeper instinct.

In that instinctual moment, missteps are possible. Bourdieu, for instance, argues that it is impossible for anyone to improvise successfully in all situations. Instead, "only a virtuoso with a perfect command of his 'art of living' can play on all the resources . . . doubtless there are slips, mistakes, and moments of clumsiness."[40] The degree to which this "art of living" has been internalized and become an Aristotelian "second nature" affects how an individual's intuition responds to the immediate circumstance.[41] Though Bourdieu and Aristotle disagree on how the habitus is formed, the end result is some degree of an "art of living" that enables effective or ineffective individual responses to particular situations.[42] For Bourdieu, improvisation entails both perfection *and* the "slips, mistakes, and moments of clumsiness" that appear within the habitus. For Aristotle, virtuosity "depends upon what we do" over time, on the performances that solidify our character.[43] Levels of virtuosity are thus in constant evolution, depending on the moment and an individual's own subconscious.

A final example from my devising work tests this perspective. One of the sessions during the arranging phase saw Rahmah working together with a collaborator I'll call Khadija. They engaged in an activity similar to the one that Rahmah and Fatimah undertook in the previous example. In this moment, though, Rahmah and Khadija improvised a conversation as *The Wedding*'s other two characters: Yasmine and Yusuf. The driving force of Yasmine and Yusuf's narrative is that they are in an interracial relationship. Yasmine is of Arab heritage, and Yusuf is of Bengali heritage. Throughout, Yasmine pushes Yusuf to tell Sajid, Yusuf's middle-aged uncle and adoptive father, who is in the hospital after having suffered a heart attack, about their relationship. However, Yusuf is reticent to do so because Sajid wants Yusuf to marry a Bengali woman. Yusuf grows suspicious at Yasmine's insistence, which she reveals to be based on her desire to stop dealing drugs, an activity she has taken up to financially compensate for her failing dental practice.

Having learned from my misstep in the improvisation between Rahmah as Sam and Fatimah as Saba, I was able to record this improvisation between Rahmah and Khadija embodying Yasmine and Yusuf, respectively. I transcribe it here. In the middle of the improvisation, Yasmine claims that Yusuf does not want to marry her:

> YASMINE: You just don't seem to want the same thing [I do]. And if you, and if we don't want the same thing, then what are we even doing.
> YUSUF: No, no, don't say that, I mean . . . I want the same thing. Of course I do.
> YASMINE: Then why don't you act like it?
> [*pause*]

> YUSUF: I dunno, I just don't want to lose [*long pause*] I don't wanna lose my dad, you know?

This transcript fails to capture the weightiness of the "[*long pause*]" in the middle of Yusuf's final line. In the recording, however, the silence is heavy while Khadija as Yusuf struggles to articulate her emotions. The space is laden with affective heft, as if the character and Khadija are both holding back tears.

I later interviewed Khadija about embodying Yusuf. She indicated that it was both difficult and "cathartic" because she had lost her own father approximately one year earlier. She said that losing her father occurred under "similar circumstances" to the situation in which Yusuf's uncle/adoptive father found himself. (By "circumstances," she was referencing Sajid being middle-aged and suffering a heart attack.) The significance of that event came through in the way that Khadija delivered Yusuf's lines; she aligned her own experience with the gravity of Yusuf's situation. In an instant, the actual past and the fictional present were linked as a feeling "burst in from the real world."[44] Khadija chose to include and incorporate that feeling, and it did not dissipate. Eight minutes later in the same improvisation, there was a recapitulation of the above sentiment that Yusuf voiced. This time, the line was phrased as "I don't want to lose my uncle like I lost my dad," alluding to Yusuf losing his biological father at an early age. In this case, the word "dad" bore the emotional register: Khadija's voice cracked when she said it. With the shift in feeling from silence to the word "dad," Khadija exemplified Butler's "possibility of a variation on that repetition."

Khadija channeled her emotions in other ways as well. In a different part of the same improvisation when Yasmine was berating Yusuf, Yasmine insulted Sajid. The exchange, which I also recorded and transcribe here, went like this:

> YUSUF: I don't think he'd [Sajid] approve of you. And I'm scared that I will lose him.
> YASMINE: Is it because I don't wear the hijab?
> YUSUF: No. It's because you're Arab. And I hate that, of course I hate that.
> YASMINE: Well that has nothing to do with religion. Like, that's just him being . . . a prejudiced prick. I don't care if he's ill. I'm not wrong.
> [*pause*]
> YUSUF: What did you just say?
> YASMINE: I said he's a prejudiced prick.
> YUSUF: Wow, he's my dad—how can you say something like that?
> YASMINE: I mean, to be fair / my parents are pretty prickish

> YUSUF: / you know what, fuck it. You know what, no, no, no. No. Don't say that. He's, he's in the hospital bed—how are you saying this to me? I get that you're mad, but you know how much he means to me.

Again, the transcript does not capture the affect of the recording. Khadija uses her anger at Yasmine insulting Yusuf to mask her own sadness when recalling the memory of her father. She embodies both Stanislavski's "borderline between physical and psychological" and Spolin's momentary freeing "explosion." Much of this energy is heard from the first moment that listeners encounter Yasmine and Yusuf in *The Wedding*, a feeling carried from improvisation to the final script.

In terms of Spolin's intuition, Khadija's improvisation is compelling. The intuition has the capacity to draw on a performer's personal experiences and funnel them into effective performances. The limited amount of time meant that Khadija had to respond in immediacy to her scene partner's provocations. Importantly, this had to occur within the context of the scene she was playing rather than as avoidance of a difficult topic. By channeling her raw feeling, Khadija was in "perfect command" of her "art of living" at that moment.[45] The emotional slippages that she allowed only strengthened her performance.

Of course, the danger of the intuition is that it is not in the performer's control. It is important to recognize the challenge of this position, for the intuition can recall traumatic or painful memories. I did not anticipate Khadija's emotional experience; she and Rahmah decided by themselves whom they would embody. Nonetheless, I am cognizant of theatre scholar-practitioner James Thompson's warning that intentionally linking "theatre work to story work to trauma relief" can be "a deeply problematic chain."[46] If telling one's story is positioned as "an imperative rather than a self-directed action," it can reentrench difficult experiences such as the loss of a loved one.[47] Those facilitating improvisational activities must take care in such situations, trusting and enabling improvisers to establish their own limits. In this way, improvisation has the capacity to draw on difficult experiences as well as lighthearted, comedic ones.

Improvising Well

How can we improvise well? First, improvisation reflects broad worldviews while being designed to fulfill a particular purpose, what architects Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver refer to as "adhocism."[48] This is evident from Mustafa's actions, in which he used bigotry to meet the needs of how he understood his moment.[49] Second, whether on stage or in life, improvising well requires attention to mistakes made in similar situations in the past. My initial failure to audio record, for instance, taught me to be more alert in forthcoming workshops. Third, it is necessary to adapt to the immediate circumstance, drawing on physical context and incorporating it

into a response. A prime example of this is Fatimah's inclusion of Rahmah's bowl of fruit. Finally, the improviser is always in a relationship. She responds to a scene partner, a line of spoken text, an object, a movement, or another stimulus. Even when working alone, she responds to the space around her or an internal thought. Khadija exhibited this internal responsiveness in her dialogue with Rahmah as Yasmine, but she also exemplified the intuitive aspect of improvisation that gives it its open and free-flowing nature.

Beyond these characteristics, it is also worth recognizing that improvisation is iterative. The implication of this, for improvising well, is that individual missteps are possible. Those missteps make iteration distinct from repetition, in that iteration requires learning and improvement based on past mistakes. Incorporating past mistakes allows an individual to grow over time. This occurs as long as individuals are committed to becoming better improvisers in life or onstage. Effective improvisation can be learned. Comfort with the general principles of improvisation can improve, even as new specific challenges emerge. Improvisers must push the boundaries of the habitus, immediate circumstance, and intuition while examining the spaces that these boundaries create. Exceptional improvisers are not the proverbial one-trick ponies of genius, even if they may appear to be so in a particular moment. Rather, they are in "a never-ending state of getting there."[50]

"Getting there" once is not the challenge; effective improvisers do so consistently. The excitement of this challenge is that there is no one aspect of improvisation that supersedes the rest. Learning to improvise by favoring the habitus, immediate circumstance, or intuition over one another is unproductive. Improvisation is a complex process that must be considered as a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. To improvise well over time is to attend, with regularity, to the interplays between these three dimensions. Individual moments that illuminate improvisation do so because they reflect its interlinked nature. The task for any budding or experienced improviser, therefore, is to be and continue to be comfortable at spaces in-between.

Notes

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful engagement with this essay and helpful suggestions for revision.

1. Specifically, I'm thinking of work such as Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor, 1959; Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Beacon Press, 1968; Victor Turner's *On the Edge of the Bush: Anthropology as Experience*, U of Arizona P, 1986; and *The Anthropology of Performance*, PAJ Publications, 1986; and Richard Schechner's *Between Theater and Anthropology*, U of Pennsylvania P, 1985. More recent contributions from anthropology, theatre studies, and other disciplines have continued this trend. A limited selection of examples of the type of work I'm referencing includes Elin Diamond's *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Routledge, 1996; Veit Erlmann's *Nightsong: Performance, Power, and Practice in South Africa*, U of Chicago P, 1996; Jan Cohen-Cruz's *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response*, Routledge, 2010; Nitasha Tamar Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness*, Duke UP, 2010; D. Soyini Madison's *Acts of Activism: Human Rights*

as Radical Performance, Cambridge UP, 2010; Jenny Hughes's *Performance in a Time of Terror: Critical Mimesis and the Age of Uncertainty*, Manchester UP, 2011; James Thompson's *Humanitarian Performance: From Disaster Tragedies to Spectacles of War*, Seagull Books, 2014; Jenny Hughes and Helen Nicholson's *Critical Perspectives on Applied Theatre*, Cambridge UP, 2016; and Su'ad Abdul Khabeer's *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, New York UP, 2016.

2. My view of improvisation as in-between is echoed in both theatre and anthropology literature. In theatre, Augusto Boal sees improvisation as a practice that occurs in *metaxis*, a "state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (43). These worlds remain separate so that the Boalian "spect-actor" can transform onstage alternatives into real life actions, until those worlds are bridged by improvisation. Similarly, anthropologists Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam see improvisation as in between when describing it as "the way we work" (1), a process that allows for "fluent response" that makes "the most of the multiple possibilities" that result from life being "unscriptable" (12–14). This calls for "a degree of precision in the coordination of perception and action that can only be achieved through practice" (12–14). For more, see Boal's *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, translated by Adrian Jackson, Routledge, 1994, and Ingold and Hallam's "Creativity and Cultural Improvisation: An Introduction," *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, edited by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold, Berg, 2007, pp. 1–24.

3. Lesa Lockford and Ronald J. Pelias, "Bodily Poeticizing in Theatrical Improvisation: A Typology of Performative Knowledge," *Theatre Topics*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, pp. 431–43.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, edited by Jack Goody, translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge UP, 1977.

5. Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Work on a Role*, translated by Jean Benedetti, Routledge, 2009.

6. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, 3rd ed., Northwestern UP, 1999.

7. Zainab Ahmed, Afshan D'Souza-Lodhi, and Iqra Choudhry, *The Wedding: A Radio Play*, edited by Asif Majid, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/user-664055028/the-wedding-a-radio-play> (accessed 9 July 2018).

8. Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling's *Devising Performance: A Critical History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, and Alison Oddey's *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook*, Routledge, 1996, both speak to this tendency.

9. By an autoethnographic writing style, I mean what communication scholars Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner frame as a socially just "process and product" that "attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art," creating "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience" in an effort to "sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different." Attempting to extricate myself from the relationship I have with my collaborators would be both dishonest and unproductive, limiting understandings of how my actions and those of my collaborators both uphold and challenge improvisation theory. Thus, I encourage readers to understand my position and style of documentation as advantageous. For more, see Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, art. 10, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108> (accessed 9 July 2018).

10. Bourdieu 72.

11. 79; first two italicized phrases in original, final italics added.

12. 79.

13. Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1985, pp. 1–13.

14. 9–10.

15. 5.

16. 9.

17. 9.

18. Abdul Khabeer 15.

19. 149.

20. Stanislavski 52–53.

21. Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Methuen Drama, 2007, p. 111.

22. 105, 141.

23. Stanislavski 302.

24. Ingold and Hallam 1.

25. 7.

26. Johnstone 97.

27. Multiple improvisational theatre groups claim that "yes, and" is an essential prerequisite for onstage improvisation, but it has implications offstage as well. The idea of "yes, and" involves improvisers saying or embodying "yes" to the most recent action, followed by them saying or embodying "and" to further that action. For more, see Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton's *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses "No, But" Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration—Lessons from The Second City*, HarperBusiness, 2015, as well as Bob Kulhan's *Getting to "Yes And": The Art of Business Improv*, Stanford UP, 2017.

28. Jacob Moreno, *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity*, edited by Jonathan Fox, Tusitala Publishing, 2008, p. 152.

29. These three techniques are: "the double," "the mirror," and "the reversal" (129–53). In "the double," an improviser serves as a clone of the patient, provoking the patient by speaking and interacting with them. In "the mirror," a distorted theatrical representation of the patient reenacts a past event, allowing patients to watch from outside the scene and assess their own behavior. In "the reversal," a past event is reenacted in which a patient takes the role of someone else in the scene, thus watching and responding to someone else acting as them.

30. 44.

31. Ingold and Hallam 1.

32. Johnstone 141.

33. Ahmed, D'Souza-Lodhi, and Choudhry.

34. Quoted in Paul F. Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, U of Chicago P, 1994, p. 370.

35. Spolin 4; italics added.

36. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 2006, p. 185.

37. Johnstone 78.

38. Stanislavski 209.

39. 163.

40. Bourdieu 8.

41. Aristotle quoted in Cary J. Nederman, "Nature, Ethics, and the Doctrine of 'Habitus': Aristotelian Moral Psychology in the Twelfth Century," *Traditio*, vol. 45, 1990, p. 90.

42. Bourdieu's process of the dialectic between internalization and externalization compares to Aristotle's process that solidifies an individual's character based on repeated attention to what we do and how we do it.

43. Quoted in Nederman 91.

44. Stanislavski 163.

45. Bourdieu 8.

46. James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 45.

47. 45.

48. Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*, Secker & Warburg, 1972.

49. I am not condoning his behavior, but rather considering the implications of viewing it as improvisational.

50. Art Farmer quoted in Berliner 285.