

impro improvisation and the theatre by keith johnstone

Impro Improvisation and the Theatre by Keith Johnstone is a groundbreaking work that has significantly influenced the world of theatre and improvisation since its publication. Keith Johnstone, a Canadian-born theatre director, teacher, and playwright, is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of modern improvisational theatre. His innovative techniques and philosophies have transformed how performers approach spontaneity, creativity, and collaboration on stage. This article will delve into the core concepts of Johnstone's work, his contributions to the field of improvisation, and the lasting impact of his methods on theatre.

Background of Keith Johnstone

Keith Johnstone was born in 1933 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He began his career in theatre as a playwright and director, eventually becoming a prominent figure in the British theatre scene. In the 1960s, Johnstone began to explore the possibilities of improvisation as a theatrical art form, which led him to develop unique techniques that would later be integral to his teaching and performances.

Johnstone's approach to improvisation was influenced by his experiences as a director and his observations of traditional theatre practices. He recognized that many actors relied heavily on scripts and pre-determined character arcs, which often stifled their creativity and spontaneity. This realization sparked his interest in creating a more organic form of theatre that allowed performers to engage in collaborative storytelling.

The Fundamental Principles of Impro Improvisation

At the heart of Johnstone's improvisational philosophy are several key principles that guide performers in creating compelling and authentic theatre. These principles focus on spontaneity, playfulness, and the importance of the ensemble.

Spontaneity

1. **Embracing the Unexpected:** Johnstone encourages actors to embrace the unexpected moments that arise during performance. Instead of adhering strictly to a script or predetermined outcome, performers are urged to react authentically to the evolving situation on stage.
2. **Trusting Instincts:** Johnstone emphasizes the importance of trusting one's instincts and impulses during improvisation. This trust allows performers to make bold choices that can lead to exciting and unexpected developments in the narrative.
3. **Letting Go of Perfection:** A critical component of spontaneity is the willingness to let go of the need for a perfect performance. Johnstone teaches that mistakes and imperfections can often lead to

the most memorable moments in theatre.

Playfulness

1. **Play as a Tool for Exploration:** Johnstone believes that playfulness is essential in unlocking creativity. By creating a fun and relaxed environment, actors are more likely to take risks and explore new ideas.
2. **Games and Exercises:** Johnstone incorporates various games and exercises into his teaching to promote playfulness among actors. These activities help develop crucial improvisational skills, such as listening, reacting, and collaborating with others.
3. **The Importance of Humor:** Johnstone highlights that humor is a vital element in improvisation. It not only engages the audience but also fosters a sense of connection between performers, making the experience more enjoyable for everyone involved.

The Ensemble

1. **Collaboration Over Competition:** Johnstone advocates for a collaborative approach to theatre, where the success of the ensemble takes precedence over individual accolades. This philosophy fosters a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among performers.
2. **Building Trust Among Performers:** Trust is a fundamental element of a successful ensemble. Johnstone encourages actors to build strong relationships with one another, fostering an environment where they can take risks and explore new ideas without fear of judgment.
3. **Creating a Safe Space:** Johnstone emphasizes the importance of creating a safe space for improvisation, where actors feel comfortable expressing themselves and making bold choices. This safe environment allows performers to take risks without the fear of failure.

Johnstone's Techniques and Contributions

Keith Johnstone's contributions to the field of improvisation extend beyond his principles; he has developed specific techniques that have become foundational in improvisational theatre.

The Status Game

One of Johnstone's most influential concepts is the "Status Game." This technique involves the dynamic of power and status between characters in a scene. Johnstone posits that every interaction between characters is influenced by their perceived status, which can shift throughout the performance.

1. **Understanding Status:** Actors must be aware of their characters' status and how it affects their

relationships with others in the scene. Higher status characters may dominate conversations, while lower status characters may exhibit submissive behavior.

2. Playing with Status: Johnstone encourages actors to experiment with status shifts during performances. By altering the status dynamics, performers can create tension, comedy, and depth within their scenes.

3. Audience Engagement: The Status Game also plays a crucial role in engaging the audience. As viewers observe the shifting dynamics between characters, they become invested in the unfolding story and the relationships at play.

Theatre Sports

Johnstone is also credited with popularizing the concept of "Theatre Sports," a competitive format of improvisational theatre. In Theatre Sports, teams of improvisers compete in various games and scenes, judged by an audience or a panel of judges.

1. Structure and Format: Theatre Sports provides a structured format for improvisation, allowing performers to showcase their skills in a fun and engaging manner. This format encourages quick thinking, teamwork, and creativity.

2. Audience Participation: One of the hallmarks of Theatre Sports is its emphasis on audience participation. Audiences are often called upon to suggest scenarios, characters, or locations, making them active participants in the storytelling process.

3. Promoting Improvisation: By incorporating competition and audience engagement, Theatre Sports has helped popularize improvisational theatre and introduce it to broader audiences.

The Impact of Johnstone's Work on Contemporary Theatre

Keith Johnstone's contributions to improvisational theatre have had a profound and lasting impact on contemporary theatre practices. His techniques and philosophies have influenced countless actors, directors, and educators around the world.

Educational Influence

1. Improvisation Training: Johnstone's methods have become integral to many theatre training programs. Acting schools and conservatories now incorporate improvisation into their curricula, emphasizing its importance in developing well-rounded performers.

2. Workshops and Seminars: Johnstone continues to conduct workshops and seminars, sharing his insights and techniques with aspiring actors and educators. His teachings encourage a new generation of performers to embrace spontaneity and creativity.

3. Global Reach: Johnstone's influence extends globally, with improvisational theatre groups and schools adopting his teachings in various cultural contexts. His work has transcended geographical boundaries, fostering a worldwide community of improvisers.

Influence on Popular Culture

1. Television and Film: Johnstone's techniques have permeated popular culture, especially in television and film. Shows like "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" and "The Office" showcase improvisational elements that reflect Johnstone's influence on comedic storytelling.

2. Improvisational Theatre Groups: Numerous improvisational theatre groups have emerged, inspired by Johnstone's principles and techniques. These groups continue to entertain audiences while pushing the boundaries of creativity and collaboration.

3. Cultural Events: Improvisational theatre has become a staple in cultural events and festivals, showcasing the power of spontaneous storytelling. Johnstone's work has played a significant role in popularizing improvisation as a legitimate art form.

Conclusion

In summary, Impro Improvisation and the Theatre by Keith Johnstone offers invaluable insights into the world of improvisational theatre, emphasizing spontaneity, playfulness, and collaboration. Johnstone's innovative techniques, such as the Status Game and Theatre Sports, have transformed how performers approach their craft, fostering an environment where creativity can thrive. His influence has permeated educational institutions, popular culture, and global theatre communities, ensuring that his legacy will continue to inspire and shape the future of improvisation for generations to come. As audiences and performers alike embrace the unpredictability of live theatre, Johnstone's teachings remind us of the magic that arises from the unplanned and the unexpected.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core principle of Keith Johnstone's approach to improvisation?

The core principle of Keith Johnstone's approach to improvisation is the idea of spontaneity and allowing performers to embrace their instincts, promoting creativity without the fear of failure.

How does Keith Johnstone define 'status' in improvisation?

Keith Johnstone defines 'status' as the inherent power dynamics present in social interactions, which can be manipulated by performers in improvisation to create tension and humor.

What is the significance of 'mask work' in Johnstone's teaching?

Mask work in Johnstone's teaching is significant because it allows actors to explore different characters and emotions without the constraints of their own identities, fostering deeper improvisational skills.

How does Johnstone suggest improvisers should handle mistakes?

Johnstone suggests that improvisers should embrace mistakes as opportunities for creativity rather than viewing them as failures, encouraging a mindset of 'yes, and...' to build on unexpected moments.

What role does 'storytelling' play in Johnstone's improvisation techniques?

Storytelling plays a crucial role in Johnstone's improvisation techniques, as it helps performers to structure their scenes, engage the audience, and develop narratives organically during performances.

What exercises does Keith Johnstone recommend for warming up improvisers?

Keith Johnstone recommends exercises that focus on physicality, spontaneity, and collaborative storytelling, such as group games that encourage quick thinking and responsiveness among participants.

How does Johnstone's concept of 'spontaneity' differ from traditional acting methods?

Johnstone's concept of 'spontaneity' differs from traditional acting methods by prioritizing immediate reactions and the authenticity of the moment over pre-planned performances or scripted lines.

In what ways does Johnstone believe improvisation can enhance theatrical performances?

Johnstone believes improvisation can enhance theatrical performances by fostering creativity, enhancing collaboration among actors, and allowing performances to feel fresh and dynamic each time they are presented.

What impact has Keith Johnstone had on the field of improvisational theatre?

Keith Johnstone has had a profound impact on the field of improvisational theatre by pioneering new methods of teaching and performance that emphasize creativity, playfulness, and the importance of

status and relationships.

Can you explain the concept of 'theatre games' as developed by Johnstone?

Theatre games as developed by Johnstone are structured activities designed to promote improvisation skills, encourage collaboration, and help actors explore various aspects of performance in a playful and supportive environment.

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