

Improvisation and Depth: trusting what comes up
Chris Crickmay 17.11.08

Improvisation, by its nature, is living at the edge of the unknown. As such, it is fundamentally about creativity. Working spontaneously, we draw upon worlds within us that are largely inaccessible to conscious thinking. In the course of doing this, we come to discover over and over again that we know and take in from our surroundings much more than we generally realize.

In terms of a working strategy for improvisation, it doesn't matter so much where you begin - it's the state of attention you bring to it that counts. This is an open and listening state, rooted in the body and the senses. One simply follows a track of attention, discovering at every moment what one is drawn to and allowing responses to arise of their own volition.

Of course, with a group of improvisers working together, a highly sensitized and responsive set of exchanges are in play. But the basic form of the work is no different from an everyday conversation. Conversation as a form unfolds unpredictably; no one orchestrates what happens; each person is free to contribute in response to what has come before; the participants need to be able to listen as well as speak. As the conversation progresses through many twists and turns, it gathers meaning – a meaning that is unknown at the start.

An important outcome of the work is to nourish and articulate that 'other' side of ourselves: our intuitive and imaginative world; the world of our deeper feelings, the world of our dreams and reveries. When things go well in an improvisation, the forms that arise feel relevant and satisfying. This is perhaps because the often illusive, nebulous, world of our inner feelings has found a degree of clarity and expression in 'conversation' with the physical and human world around us and with the forms we have created. Metaphorically they hold meaning for us – a meaning that can be sensed in what emerges, but is hard to express literally in words.

The starting point for the improviser is in immediate sensory experiences as they arise from within the body and from surroundings; but what offers itself physically in the present moment also evokes a wider world of association, imagination and memory. Allowing these associations etc., to enter the work is a process of 'dreaming into' things (as distinct from disembodied fantasy). This is the use of imagination as applied to immediate tangible experiences, as opposed to that other sense of imagining that belongs in a purely interior world. While exercising the wider world of their imagination, performers remain constantly available to what is present. The work does not retreat into a private inner realm either of bodily experience, or of fantasy. Instead it remains in dialogue with what is present. This is what makes the process shareable with an audience.

As a working principle I find it more useful to try to be real than to try to be creative - that is, to stay close to one's actual second-by-second experience, which is the source for the work, rather than trying to act in a way that one imagines might look good to a spectator. In point of fact a performer's own interest and absorption is probably the best basis for what will interest anyone else.

In terms of sensation and bodily response, we are always looking for particularity - the specific feel of something seen or touched, the exact quality of a sound or movement. This way we can go beyond our own repertoire of habitual responses, moving into something that feels both strange and yet oddly familiar; we find ourselves in worlds that we can feel at home in and yet are new to us.

Work is generated through spontaneous bodily response rather than directed by the purposive controlling mind - allowing the body to find movement/ action without knowing what this is going to be, even slightly in advance, or where it will take you - a certain rigor of staying within the unfolding moment. But this takes time and practice to achieve and can quite easily slip from one's grasp on particular occasions. Always the controlling mind lurks in the shadows and seeks to take over - especially in the face of uncertainty.

Often in my own work I use objects/ props as well as movement and try to root the work firmly within a chosen place. Choice of a place to work in and a set of objects to come and go within it (often projected images as well) are a key first move. As with other aspects of the work, the emphasis is upon 'listening' - being receptive to these objects and spaces, rather than manipulating them - in some sense allowing them a voice - also allowing them to escape from the narrow confines of their names and everyday uses and to enter a more ambiguous world of suggestion.

This opportunity for a shifting, fluid kind of identity, just described in terms of objects, applies also to the people who take part in this work. It is the chance to transform oneself, to metamorphose, to reflect and express the prismatic quality of all our lives, that makes this work so absorbing both to do and potentially to watch.

It is on this point that I imagine the voice of an objector who says: "this whole approach is all very well and is no doubt fun for the participants and possibly educational - it could be useful if it throws up raw material to be worked on - but as a performance mode in itself, it is bound to lack either shape or meaning; in short its a recipe for chaos." The force of this objection is that it has some weight of established practice and tradition on its side. But improvisation as a mode of performance has a history too and is not inevitably chaotic – rather it looks to a different organizing principle to the one our objector believes in. This principle is evident in nature and in all forms that arise from an internal coherence of process rather than an imposed shape. It is precisely this internally generated coherence that is at work in improvisation. The forms and meanings that arise in this unplanned way are often subtle and complex – actually impossible to plan or even to conceptualize outside the moment of action. Most people who do this work will recognize the many times when something happens that is richer, more subtle, more unexpected, more natural, more appropriate, more genuine.... than they could ever have dreamed up beforehand. Rather than relying upon a pre-conceived form, the improviser draws on an innate sense of shape, timing and balance – seeing and taking care of the whole of what is happening while contributing to a part of it.

Trusting that coherence and meaning can arrive in this way is a profoundly different attitude to the one that says, such qualities can only be achieved through deliberate intention and external control.

Improvisation as an approach to performance emulates the simple fact of being alive – just like our lives it is constantly discovered. The audience for an improvisation witnesses real uncertainties and moments of living choice.

c. Chris Crickmay 17.11.08