

The Art of **ACTING**

A Student-Friendly Anthology

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Improvisation: The Actor's Technique

“To be able to improvise, the imaginative mind of the actor must be highly functional and ready to compose.”

Margaret Akpan (2004)

Introduction

THE new *Webster's Dictionary of English Language* defines improvisation to be something that is, composed, performed or spoken extemporaneously – that is, without advanced preparation. In improvising, you assume a role and begin to feel, think, see, speak within the context of the given circumstances which direct your actions. Within this framework, there is need to quickly adapt to the different status, appropriate language and action. Improvisation helps students to gain insights into situations and calls for quick decision-making. It also helps in the understanding of a character and gives practice to good acting. It is a theatrical element and does not allow for rehearsals and costumes. It is acting equivalent of performing 'without a net,' and is an exercise that allows actors to go out on a creative limb and test themselves artistically. For professional actors, it is a wonderful method of developing their craft, but anyone can have a great time performing improvisation.

One may ask: why improvisation? It is pertinent to state here that, improvisation aims at.

- (a) Freeing the actor's natural impulses.
- (b) Allowing the actor to think creatively on his feet.
- (c) Encouraging freedom in both the physical and verbal expressions of the actor.
- (d) Improving the actor's skills at simplicity and honesty.
- (e) Improving the actor's skills at comedy and improvisation.

When improvising, do not always be in the affirmative, i.e. always saying yes, yes, etc. Accepting means accepting what is offered. You must learn to react logically to situations. Take, for instance, if robbers threaten your life, you won't say yes, go ahead but, rather, you will start pleading for your life, offering money, sexual favours, etc., in order to save your life. And this would be a logical reaction. So, you are allowed to say no, on the condition that your no, does not imply an acceptance of the offer.

Improvisations can be based on others' experiences. Remember, you build a base from experiences by training and rehearsing, and by watching others. Similarly, improvising from a list of someone's experiences gives players a kind of an unconscious permission to do things they might not do being themselves, and hence can help them play others. Others' experiences help broaden our horizon.

Improvisations must not always be funny. It is theatrical though, but remember audiences are not only interested in funs but also in thrills, deceit, death, horror or anything they can relate to. It is misleading to believe that improvisations should be original. It may not always be so and in fact are not necessary. It is refreshing to know that people relate well to what they can recognize easily. What is recognizable, leads to truth and truth helps in relaxation.

While trying to do improvisations, don't try to be funny, just go with the flow of whatever happens naturally. Do not also block others by making a mockery of them. Rather, try as much as possible to be an expert speaker on a subject you know nothing about.

Activity

Improvise the following exercises:

- (a) Imagine that you are out with a friend, amusing yourselves happily when one of you has a motor accident. What do you do?
- (b) With a friend, you are messing about in a favourite place, when one of you makes a find. Decide first what it is to be, and what kind of discussion you are going to have about it, then improvise the whole situation.
- (c) Imagine that you are exploring a strange house. You come to a particular room, what is it like? Is it large or small? Is the ceiling high or low? Are there any windows? Is it bright or dark in your room? Are there any sounds? Is it clean or dirty? Walk slowly around it and, explore every object, touch and examine things. Handle some objects and react as though something strange has begun to happen. Discuss your experience with a partner.
- (d) Improvise an adventure in which you try to defend yourself from strange animals and monsters after which you feel tired and find some place in which it seems safe for you to spend the night. Find a partner and describe to each other the monsters you met.
- (e) You have been kidnapped – wake up in a strange place.
- (f) Describe the street in which you lived as a boy and discuss the following:
 - ◆ What were the houses like?
 - ◆ What sort of people lived there?

- ◆ What is the major difference between it and other streets or
 - ◆ What details and important features distinguish it from other streets?
- (g) You are irritated and you strike your partner, develop this situation after considering together what is likely to happen.
- (h) Imagine you broke something valuable in the house (as a housemaid) and you try to blame your mistress's son - develop an argument.
- (i) Try to remember or imagine a situation in which you are looking hard for something and are worried about what will happen if you do not find it. Really express your worry.
- (j) In groups, imagine you accidentally locked yourselves in a room. As you search desperately for a way of getting out, how do you react to each other's suggestions?
- (k) Someone has done something that has aroused your suspicion. Decide what it is and what you suspect him of doing.
- (l) One of your friends has disappeared in mysterious circumstances. Build up improvisation in which the discovery is made and where a search is conducted. Conclude with an outcome.
- (m) Imagine you had a dream which woke you up and also woke up members of your household.
- (n) Write a story about a lonely boy who imagines himself to be someone else doing something exciting.
- (o) In groups, discuss how it is like to be caught in a storm either inside or outside the house, or at sea. Work out the improvisation of a crisis that occurred on deck when the storm was at its height.

- (p) Discuss an encounter with your fiancé or fiancée caught in the act with an alluring younger lover or a buffer.

Games As An Aid to Improvization

It is not possible to wake up one day and be an expert on improvisation. Just like in any other social or economic activity, something must ginger you and prepare you, and give you the desired impetus.

On this note, we recognize the power of games as an incredibly useful tool in the theatre. All aspects of social life can be mirrored in games. Games reawaken the creative instincts and rebuild the mind. Any kind of games could be played to increase performance or creative skills. These kinds of games have no winners, no losers. Games contribute to building a peaceful and better world; give mutual understanding and instil the spirit of friendship.

Apart from helping to develop skills, exercising the body helps circulation of blood, growth and good health. All games have rules, codes and styles, which give equal terms for everybody. The principle of fairness is imbibed and carried throughout life through games. Participants work individually, in pairs or in groups to accomplish the goal of the game, thereby learning from the experience. Games therefore constitute some of the interesting and effective tools used to motivate actors for their training, performances and professionalism.

Warm-up exercises allow the participants to get familiar with and feel comfortable working with their fellow players. Exercises are a more formal type of games but should not be performed before the audience.

Games allow the participants to learn how to develop character and other necessary improvisational rules. They are meant to entertain as well as educate. Games can be

played either indoors or outdoors, depending on the nature of the game and they are differently categorized according to their content. There are so many kinds of games. They cannot all be listed here. Participants can also suggest games they are familiar with. Here, I am only going to list and explain a few of them that are my favourites.

Games	Skills	Description
Do you love your neighbour?	Concentration	Have all the students sit in a circle. One person approaches someone in the circle and asks the question "Do you love your neighbour?" The person answers "yes, I love my neighbours but I don't like people who... (He fills in the blank with anything that refers to any one in the group), like "who are very short" or "wearing black." Those people then jump out of their chairs and must find a new seat. The person left standing continues the game by asking a person in the group, "do you love your neighbour?" The process is repeated.
Mirrors	Perfection	Have the group stand in a circle. The instructor creates a poise, followed by the person on his/her right. She then changes the poise, imitated by all. This should continue around the circle.
Hunter/Hunted	Perception	Students sit in a circle. Two volunteers are blindfolded. One will be the hunter trying to hit the other with a rolled-up cloth or newspaper. They move around the circle and try to be as quiet as possible, so as not to be caught or detected.

Free Fall	Concentration	Have a group of students stand in a circle shoulder to shoulder. One person with his eyes closed and arms folded across his chest stands in the middle. He stiffens and falls backwards; and is caught by others who push him forward or side-wards. Each person should take turn.
The Jungle	Imagination	Divide students into two groups. One group is blindfolded. At a signal, the blindfolded ones move in and try to catch a partner. Seats should be juggled to create obstacles. The seeing ones move around and can whisper to give directions but they should not touch the blindfolded ones.
Catch me	Concentration	Have the class stand in two lines – A and B – facing each other, a distance apart. Each person in line A has a number, which is duplicated on line B and a leader stands in the middle dangling headscarf. He calls any number and the people in lines A and B bearing the number run out to catch the dangled headscarf and run back to their respective lines without being caught. This is repeated with different numbers. Already used numbers could be repeated to catch attention and concentration.

Other traditional games include: (a) Ekpe ino Ebot mi; (b) Kanade Ekpri Obio kanade; (c) Esasat owo; and (d) Mkpok eto.

Workshops

A workshop is an activity involving groups of people working intensively towards a particular goal. For a workshop, divide the class into various groups. Each group will work on the same subject matter. Here, a story is created and each group is allowed to develop the story. When the story is ready, the best story is chosen and participants take part in acting the story out. Time must be taken into consideration as workshops do not last forever.

There must be a leader who naturally may be the instructor. His function will be to arouse, challenge and coordinate actions. Through workshops, a repertoire of improvisational exercises will be built and this could later be worked on and presented to an audience. Workshops tend to develop characters and create scenes through improvisations.

The following situations can help in the building up of improvisational repertory.

Workshop Activities

For Warm-ups

Form a circle. Say your names one after another. Second time around, add a descriptive word to describe yourself. And third time around, make actions to describe yourself. Each person, one at a time, stands and tells a couple of lines of a story ending on "and they said..." They point to the next person who takes over for a couple of lines.

Give a person a mobile phone that has been switched off. Give a situation like "I'm just back from the market, things are tough". Or, "A long lost boyfriend just phoned and wants to come around for dinner", etc. Let these be acted out.

Fold an empty hand and present a "gift" to your partner. He takes the "gift" and says "wow, it's a ... (mentions any gift) I

got one for you". He also presents a folded hand to his partner who receives and says "wow it's a... (mentions the gift).

Other games could be played also.

Main Work

For the main work, the theme of the exercise is given and the participants, after warming up, are divided into different groups depending on the work at hand.

They may be required to work on different scenes showing the beginning, middle and end, or they may just be involved in building one solid scene.

For example, scene-by-scene development may take this turn:

- (i) There is a quarrel in the market-place which results into a fight. The culprits are taken to the police station, and are later charged to court.

Divide the participants into three groups. One group will develop the cause of the problem leading to the fight. Another will decide what happened in the police station; and the third will decide what happened in the court, including what fines or otherwise were extorted from them.

- (ii) At home, a person is sick and is taken to the hospital. He sees a doctor and is admitted and later becomes well.
- (iii) In a family, the wife is childless. The in-laws visit and make trouble with her. She eventually returns to her parents.

In all these examples, at least three scenes could be created and developed. It is not the idea of this work to explain and expatiate on what should constitute the scenes and what characters are expected to be created for such scenes. This is the task of the workshop participants.

Points to Remember

- (a) Before any improvisation is composed, there must be a situation, a story or a question to be answered. Questions help to define the platform, or open doors to interesting actions.
- (b) Discussions on familiar subject matters help the mastery of skillful improvisations.
- (c) Improvisation is an art seasoned by the understanding of comprehensions.
- (d) To be able to improvise, the imaginative mind of the actor must be highly functional and ready to compose.
- (e) To be able to take part in improvisations, a lot of reading must be done. This will alert the mind and stack up experiences in the memory. Books to read include those on adventures, animal stories, fantasy, history, literature and science.
- (f) Improvisation demands the actor's use of his own words, body movements, or gestures to express situations before him.
- (g) Improvisational games sharpen the actor's mind and help him to play along.

The essence of improvisation is flexibility - which means that changes are made as ideas develop.

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