

COPYRIGHT (C) 1990  
KEITH JOHNSTONE'S  
THEATRESPORTS™  
AND LIFE-GAME®  
NEWS-LETTER

NEWS  
THREE

\*\*\*\*\*-MAY 1990-\*\*\*\*\*

THEME AND FORFEIT IMPRO	1.
BREAKING THE ROUTINE	4.
ADVANCING	6.
MISCELLANY	10.
Inter-theatre Games	10.
A letter To C.R.A.F.	11.
The Cahill Technique	12.
Update on 'Fast Food Stanislavsky'	12.
QUIZ	13
THECORD	14.
THE THEATRESPORTS ESSAY	
'SURPRISE US!'	24.

THEME AND  
FORFEIT IMPRO®

Description

A theme is chosen, perhaps in consultation with the audience (but don't let them vote because they'll always vote for the silliest idea). The improvisors agree to base every scene on this theme. If they break this agreement then the audience yells 'FORFEIT!', and the offenders take a folded strip of paper from a container. Each strip bears an instruction, like: 'Do a Creative dance', or 'Stand at the door and say "Good Night" to each member of the audience as they leave'. The improvisors then perform their forfeit (or agree to do it later if it's something like 'sing the

national anthem at the end of the show'), and the performance continues.

Origins

I was directing the Loose Moose *All-Star Show* and I was tired of scenes that were funny but pointless. I wanted scenes that we might remember the next day, or month, or next year. I said that I'd like a few scenes that expressed a moral, or that made a statement.

"Why don't we choose a theme for each half of the performance" I said: "like 'Ecology' or 'Sex' or 'Revenge'. Then you'd have to do more than just 'goof about'.

Everyone agreed, but how was this to be enforced? Should we wait for two minutes and then impose a penalty? Should we 'punish' anyone who ignored the theme? We decided to wait until a scene was over, and then make any players who had ignored the theme pay a forfeit. We wrote out about twenty of these, including one that said 'audience choice' (to make it riskier) and one that said 'free pass'.

Forfeits

I hadn't imagined how often the theme would be forgotten, or that the audience would scream FORFEIT! FORFEIT! with such delight. A bad scene would normally depress every one, but once the audience yells FORFEIT, the feeling becomes positive. The audience can be very attentive to a bad scene if the theme has been ignored - hoping to have the actors in their power.

Nor had I imagined that the audience would demand that the forfeits should also express the theme. Some players had to pay forfeit after forfeit and the game would come to a standstill (not that this matters, if the forfeits are entertaining). Inventing a "limerick based on the name of an audience member", is difficult enough, let alone including the theme.

The audience can be so greedy for forfeits that sometimes we have to argue that they're wrong, that a scene really did express the theme. These impromptu debates add variety. If there haven't been enough forfeits, I'll seize an opportunity to wave the lights down early *before* the theme has been established.



This Theme-and-Forfeit game is not as frightening as it appears, because no one ever reads the forfeit except the victim. If you don't feel like singing the national anthem at the end of the show, then you can pretend that the slip of paper says something else!

Typical forfeits might be:

"Invent a limerick on a name chosen by the audience."

"Sing the national anthem at the end of the show."

"Say goodbye to each member of the audience as they leave."

"Play a scene with an audience member."

"Serve at the bar during the interval."

"Tell a joke."

"Improvise a 'creative dance'"

And so on. If the scene has included more than two players then they take a group forfeit - some of these are the same as individual forfeits, like: "Sing the national anthem", but some will be specific to groups, like: "Do a group flagellation!", or: "Apologize while speaking in one voice."

The audience sometimes suggest excellent forfeits (like 'commit suicide in Elizabethan verse') so the 'audience choice' forfeit can be valuable.

Forfeits that ask the actor to play another improvisation game are usually disappointing. The audience wants the actor put 'on the spot'. "Play a four person scene all by yourself" might be O.K. because it seems like an unusual ordeal. So would 'Improvise an epic poem on a theme chosen by the audience'. The audience don't want the forfeits to be 'more of the same'.

If the improvisors have a difficult forfeit, or if we feel that they help, then we'll come to their rescue. For example, Zack has to do a 'creative dance to music' but I send Dennis to the mic to provide a commentary. If someone has trouble improvising an epic poem on a subject chosen by the audience we might shout some of the rhymes. The audience don't mind if the improvisor who is paying the forfeit receives assistance. Nor do they mind if I shout: "Remember the theme!" (I suppose because I wouldn't be shouting this if there hadn't been a glut of forfeits.

Sometimes actors on the bench will whisper to me: 'Shall we let them take a forfeit?'

"Yes" I say.

Then we watch the players improvising blissfully away, with the whole audience on the edge of their seats, eager to scream FORFEIT! at them.

## Themes

Themes might include:

*Religion.*

*Revenge.*

*Injustice*

*Sex.*

*Death.*

*Crime.*

*Ghosts (for Hallowe'en?).*

*Pleasure*

*Punishment*

*Love.*

*Old Age.*

*Ecology.*

*Winter.*

*Addictions*

*Science*

*Health.*

*Madness.*

*Persecution.*

*Good and Evil.*

*Education. (Teachers?).*

*Children*

*War.*

*Authority figures.*

If you're not sure of the value of a theme, say that you're just going to try it for a few scenes - why trap yourself?

Sometimes we use themes in pairs - *Sex* in the first part of the evening, and then *Death* after the interval, or *Crime* in the first half and then *Punishment*. Don't announce the second theme until you're about to do it. If the first half of the show has gone badly, you can have a quick discussion, and perhaps choose a fresh theme, or you can scrap the themes altogether and return to more normal improvisation. Resist the temptation to use the same theme in both halves - if you really like a theme you can always return to it at another performance. A good theme can be used again and again.



The best themes are usually the ones that our audience care strongly about. *Ecology* (our first ever theme) really interested our audience who dislike feeling poisoned every time that they breathe, or bite into an apple. *Injustice* interests everybody, but 'genre' themes - like 'Science Fiction', or 'Romance' have a less universal appeal. Don't do two genre themes in the same performance.

A good theme should neither be all-embracing nor too narrow. *Religion* is O.K. but *'The Past'* can include religion and just about everything else. *Injustice* is fine, but *Prison* is probably too limiting.

### Each Scene Must Express The Theme

If the theme is 'ecology' then it's no use to say: "Good morning! I am an ecologist!" and then play something quite unrelated to this, because the audience will still shout FORFEIT!

"Wasn't that enough?"

"Nooooooooo! FORFEIT! FORFEIT!!

Just mentioning 'pollution', or 'the need to recycle cans', won't placate them: you have to be the Copenhagen Mermaid sitting on her rock because the sea is poisoned, or the Boss of the Chemical Factory who's starting to grow lumps.

If the theme is *Religion* it's no good just being a priest, or saying grace before a meal. The disciple Peter has to be captured by his family who 'deprogramme' him. Or the three wise men have to arrive at an abortion clinic. Or a Priest might tell a boy taking his first communion that the wafer will bleed if he bites it, and the boy does bite it and starts spewing blood like a reverse vampire until a huge torrent of blood bursts out of the church hurling buses and cars aside like flotsam (Dennis Cahill once improvised this as a typing scene).

### How To Begin

Announce the theme:

"Our theme for the first half of tonight's show is *ecology*. If any scene is not concerned with ecology, the players will have to pay a forfeit."

A s'nogger<sup>1</sup> enters from backstage with a bowl that contain strips of paper with forfeits written on them: white-paper for individual forfeits, coloured-paper for group forfeits. At least one strip of paper will say 'Audience Choice', and at least one will say 'free pass' (which absolves the improviser).

A couple of forfeits are then read as examples and are replaced, i.e.:

"Shake hands with each audience member as they leave the theatre."

Or:

"Cast out a demon."

Towards the end of the show we remind people of any forfeits that have accumulated.

### Examples

Zack and Clem played a hat-game with the theme of 'prejudice, and not only was the hat game very funny, but it had a 'point':

They stood side-by-side peering through mimed binoculars, and discussing birds, until Zack admitted that she was a reporter:

"I want to interview you about the rumour that you don't allow Jews into your bird-watching club."

"There never has been and never will be a Jew admitted into the Nazi Bird-watchers of America!"

They continued exploring this theme and it had some point - which is why I remember it.

On another night the theme is Science Fiction. The scenographers have provided a table with a birthday cake so I ask Ron to be a small boy and Clem to be his Dad.

Dad waffles on about how poor they are, and I say the obvious thing:

"Ask why you don't get to see Mummy any more?"

Clem starts to explain that Mum won't be coming back because she wasn't happy ("Didn't she love us Daddy?"). They're getting entrenched in this sad family scene when Clem suddenly remembers that the theme is Sci-Fi - he's had a forfeit for

<sup>1</sup>S'nogger is our term for "scenographer".



about every scene so far, and he's determined not to get one now.

"Your Mother's gone into another dimension" he says. And he explains that there are many universes, and start to explain 'string' theory (which the small child understands better than he does). They go in search of her, using a talking 'dimension machine' - voice supplied by Dennis on the mic - which is very polite, thanking them for traveling by interdimensional timelines and so on. They find Mum (Kathy Foreman) who is wearing Wonder-Woman type costume and who is seated on a throne that the S'noggers have pushed on.

Clem explains that there are Mums in every dimension, and that they have to test her to see if this is the real Mum. She refuses to be tested and they quarrel bitterly.

There is an angry pause, and Ron (as the six year old) says:

"Why do you two fight all the time!"

The lights fade on this brilliant line that makes sense of everything that's happened, knitting it all together.

One 'ecology' scene had two improvisors (who were wearing our Elephant suit) interact with two hunters. The Elephant complained that all it's relatives had been made into ornaments for rich people, and hurled them to the ground with it's trunk and rested a foot on them. The whole audience turned into a sort of Nazi rally screaming "Crush them! Crush them!" I don't think they'd have done this if they weren't used to yelling out 'FORFEIT' with such abandon.

### In Conclusion

I'm not suggesting that you add Theme-And-Forfeit to Theatresports, at least not right away. I want to try giving a theme to each Theatresports team. One could have 'Sex', and one could have 'Death', and so on. I'll report on this experiment in a later newsletter.

The first public Theatresports game had been based on 'Not Blocking' (if actors killed an idea they lost the stage), but the players became so skilled that there never were any blocks. I expected the same thing

to happen with Theme-And-Forfeit impro, i.e. that the improvisors would become so expert that they'd never take a forfeit, but we've been doing this for six months now and this still hasn't happened. The improvisers still forget the theme, even though they may be very experienced.

## Breaking The Routine

One of the easiest ways to create 'point' is by 'breaking the routine'. (A *routine* is whatever you happen to be doing: e.g. peeling a potato, poking the fire, making love, reading this essay - whatever).

An untrained improvisor searches for routines that strike him as being 'original' - like 'defusing a bomb', or 'scubadiving in shark-infested custard', but however 'interesting' a routine may seem, it has little narrative value unless it's 'broken'. *Spectators see any routine that you complete as 'introduction' to a routine that you will not complete.*

An improvisor who approaches the end of an action will usually experience himself as 'uncreative'. Let's say that he's 'milking a cow' - his mime may be superb, but the audience doesn't care: 'So what?', they think: 'So he milked a cow! What's so great about that!'. He senses this, and usually tries to compensate by 'being funny': i.e. by making faces, and exaggerating his gestures and making stupid gags - which make him even *less* interesting (although he may get a laugh).

If the cow looks at him and says "I love the way you do that" then the acting of milking is given 'point'. This 'break of routine' makes the audience think: "Ah! Now I see why he milked the cow!", although you had no idea how to develop the action when you began it.

"You tell us not to be original," says a student, but isn't breaking the routine being original?"

"Having the cow hit by a meteorite" would be original, because it's not in the mind of the audience".

"Nor is a talking cow".



"But the idea develops naturally from the act of handling a cow's udders. At some subliminal level the audience already think that something sexual is going on. Suppose your routine is 'descending by elevator', and a fellow passenger starts doing magic tricks, I'd say that that was 'original'. But if you're trapped in a stalled elevator, then the idea of a passenger demonstrating magic tricks would be 'obvious'. Or let's suppose that while you're 'descending by elevator' you notice that beneath 'Main' and 'Basement' is a button that's marked with an 'H', and that when you press it you descend straight into hell".

"Wouldn't that be original?"

"It would be continuing the action of descending. 'Being original' implies a search for something. It implies the dragging in of some clever idea that has nothing to do with what's actually happening."

"So if you went on 'milking a cow' into bucket after bucket until there was just an empty cow skin and a pair of horns left - that wouldn't be original?"

"It would be sadistic. But 'obvious'."

"And if your automatic milking machine went into reverse. Would that be original?"

"It would be a terrible cliché but it's the kind of thing you'd get in an animated movie - balloon cows fizzing over the landscape".

"Wouldn't that be original?"

"We have to say what the situation is before we can define 'the obvious'. If your action is 'burgling a house' then playing the bagpipes is 'original' so don't do it - but if you're a childlike clown like Harpo Marx then playing the bagpipes would be the right thing to do

"It's very confusing".

"Only because you've always been trained to be 'original', which means not following your own ideas. They taught you to always search for the ideas that someone else might have had."

Lets say that an improviser mimes 'peeling a potato'. You know intuitively (or because I've told you) that once you complete the action the audience will feel cheated. Your response will probably be to abandon the potato in search of some

better idea - answering the door perhaps, or the phone, or playing table-tennis - but this still reduces the peeling of the potato to mere 'introduction'.

My advice would be to stay with the potato, and 'break the routine' by some arbitrary step related to the action of peeling. Lets say you cut your hand, and start looking for a bandage, or for the finger you lopped off. The audience thinks: 'Ah ha! Now we see why he was peeling a potato!', even though you had no particular 'future' in mind.

Or suppose that the potato goes 'Ow!' when you stick the knife in - the sounds being supplied by one of your teammates (or you could ventriloquise it). Peeling the potato is no longer perceived as 'introduction' because this interaction is changing both you and the potato!

Take a routine like 'cutting down a tree'. The audience will be delighted if you try to shout 'timber', and discover you've lost your voice. They'd love to see you waving your arms frantically and gasping feeble croaks. Being unable to shout 'timber' would be an excellent break of routine.

I would be paralysed if I tried to think up comic ideas involving the lumber industry. But if I change the problem into: "How can I break the routine of chopping down a tree" - then ideas come very easily.

I discover that someone is sitting up in the branches.

Or I notice the heart and initials that I carved on it twenty years before.

Or a bird begs me to save it's chicks.

Or the tree offers me three wishes.

Or I feel the agony of each blow on my own torso (a bit poetic perhaps?).

Or a bear falls on me. Or a wasps' nest. Or a cluster of gigantic nuts.

Or I take a swipe at the tree and it jumps away.

Breaking routines is easy compared to thinking up 'gags'. A 'gag' is a laugh you get by attacking the narrative, but every time a routine is broken it generates narrative.

Any 'break' increases 'point': you poke the fire and a lump of coal burns the carpet, you pet an animal and then it forces you to fetch sticks for it. You're



sunning yourself on the beach when you notice a crab taking your photograph.

"Yes, but that's certainly original."

"If you have a beach, why not have a crab? And shouldn't the crab be doing something interesting? Why can't the crab be a tourist as well? Being obvious is not the same as being boring!"

Imagining breaks in routine can become a useful habit. It passes the time in traffic jams, or when you can't get to sleep, or when you are compelled to watch boring plays. Take a routine like 'cleaning your teeth', and then think up ways to break it: notice that they're eroding, or swallow the toothbrush, or notice that it's not your face in the mirror. If you imagine kissing a woman, then you can think of your 'braces' getting entangled, or that you slip a disc, or that you find she's your sister, or that her lips get bigger and bigger until suddenly you're sliding helplessly down a gigantic throat.

*The audience believe that a storyteller is presenting them with an action, not because the action itself is interesting, but because he intends to develop it. The improviser can start with any routine, however trivial, knowing that the audience will wait patiently to see how it will be broken.*

## ADVANCING

### Improvising Alone

An improviser at our *Theme-And-Forfeit Show* is waiting for me to choose someone to play a scene with him:

"Act out a story as you make it up", I say.

"By myself?"

"Good idea. We'll fade the lights in two minutes".

"Augh!"

Two minutes can be a long time, and the audience identify strongly with him.

"Tell me an action", he says. Someone shouts out: "Cleaning the windows", and someone adds: "Of a skyscraper".

He 'wrings out a cloth' in a 'bucket' and mimes 'cleaning a window' on the 'forth wall', making squeaking sounds as he

pushes the 'leather' against the 'glass'. He holds our interest with this for at least twenty seconds. Then he notices someone in the room.

He peers closer, distorting his face as he presses it to the mimed glass.

"There's a naked woman stepping out of her bath! She's seen me!"

He steps back in embarrassment and mimes falling. He screams and waves his arms frantically. He starts to slow down - he can fly! He glides, he soars, he loops, he lands back on the ledge:

"I see the woman running across the room with a towel around her", he says: "She opens the window and this pushes me off the ledge again. I circle round and flap into the room. She is looking down into the street and screaming. A man is in the room, he's hitting at me with a newspaper, trying to drive me out of the window again. I protest loudly but all I can say is 'Cool Cool!'. Wait a minute, what's happening to me?"

The lights begin to fade:

"Oh, nooo! I've been reincarnated as a pigeon!"

This improviser has studied a technique that was mastered by Chaplin, and Keaton, and Harry Langdon, and Laurel-and-Hardy, and many others. To be able to step alone onto a stage, without a idea in your head, and know that you can survive is a skill worth having.

"But what exactly was he doing?"

"Advancing The Action'. It may take a couple of hours to learn the skill".

"A couple of hours to be able to think like Chaplin!"

"A couple of minutes, if you're lucky".

### The Puzzle

The great comedians of the silent cinema made me laugh hysterically, but I couldn't explain exactly what it was that they were doing. The same kind of scenes kept recurring but what was it that they had in common? Books about the silent cinema didn't help and the comedians themselves weren't enlightening: Chaplin stressed the importance of having 'an attitude' and Laurel and Hardy spoke of the importance of pain, but how did Keaton conceive of trapping himself in a paddlewheel like



mouse in an exerciser, or imagine that hurricane in *Steamboat Bill Junior*. How did Chaplin think of getting sucked into that machine in *Modern Times*? Or of the cabin that seesaws over the abyss in *The Gold Rush*?

I read of someone who claimed to have given Chaplin the idea of the cabin. Maybe so, but that idea's not so special - it's the sheet of ice that runs between the two doors that's thrilling (because it traps the characters in a repetitive nightmare).

What interested me about these silent comedians was their 'persistence'. Keaton, decides to keep awake by playing patience (in *The Navigator*), and he continues to shuffle and place the cards even though they're so wet that they're turning into papier-mache. The leg of a grand piano collapses just as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy have manoeuvred a horse onto it. They struggle to hold the piano upright, and the horse knocks off Stan's hat Stan (who can't keep two ideas in his head at the same time) bends down to pick it up, leaving Olly to bear the full weight of piano plus horse. Does this happen once? No it happens seven times with Olly getting more and more desperate.

Stan and Olly stop their car at an intersection and are waved on by a traffic cop - so they walk over to him.

"Get back in the car!" he says, and waves them on again.

Baffled, they get out of the car a second time (meanwhile the traffic starts to back up). This action of 'misunderstanding the trafficcop' continues for practically the entire movie. Another film, *'Blockheads'*, has a long sequence based on Olly believing that Stan is a war-amputee and needs to be carried everywhere. Stan and Olly could make an action like: 'Getting a piano up a flight of stairs', or: 'Fixing an aerial up on the roof', into a completely satisfying 'two-reeler'.

These 'silent' comedians seemed to 'enrich' their actions. Chaplin, as a waiter, blows his nose on a napkin before tucking it into the customer's neck and patting it smooth. When his action is 'washing dishes', he holds the plates down to be licked by the dog, or he dries them by running them through a mangle. If he's

playing a barber he'll mix the shaving soap to music, or taste it to check the 'flavour', or he'll put the brush into the customer's mouth while he hones the razor, or he'll find a fly in the shaving cream and rescue it - perhaps starting to shave the fly as well.

Oliver Hardy picking up a bucket will flex his fingers, adjust his sleeves, look round to see if there's anyone to admire him, twiddle his tie, make sure that Stan is attending, and so on. An actor would regard the picking up of a bucket as incidental, as just a means to an end, but Olly gives the action of 'picking up a bucket' his full attention.

I tried inventing my own sequences based on 'comic repetition', but a man is not comic just because he keeps on opening cans of spaghetti, or because he keeps on stubbing his toe - something more is needed.

## The Solution

This was just a hobby until I took over George Devine's comedy classes at the *Royal Court Theatre Studio*.

I said to a student: "Start an action".

He mimed feeding a dog.

"Make the action more interesting" I said, and he mimed that the animal was running away.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Shouting to my dog".

It was as if I'd said: "Change to a more interesting action". All the students behaved in this way. If I asked someone to make removing a shoe more interesting he'd switch to finding a stone in it, or to taking off his sock. No one would notice that one action had been replaced by another.

"Describe the action in words", I said: "So that we'll know if you've changed it, and then try to stay with the action".

"You mean I can't complete the action?"

"Exactly, because that would involve changing to a new action".

One student defines his action as 'reading a newspaper'.

"Make it interesting", I say:

"But what can I do?"



"Become more interested in what you're reading".

He stares at some item in the paper and tries to look surprised.

"How was that?" he says.

"Fine, but make it more interesting?"

"More interesting?"

"Find a paragraph difficult to read and take out a magnifying glass"

"Isn't that a new action?"

"I don't think so, you'll still be reading the newspaper".

He obeys:

"Now what?"

"Gasp with horror".

The actor gasps.

"Why were you gasping?"

"You told me to".

"Yes but how would you justify it?"

"It could say that my friend has been shot".

"Read the item aloud. That'll interest us, and it'll be 'reading the newspaper'."

He looks baffled. He wants to rush off and phone the hospital, he wants to avenge the murder, he wants to pour himself a drink, but he's being held to the elaboration of one action.

This game makes him realize that he's always searching for more 'interesting' actions (like the donkey which kept moving to what it hoped would be a sweeter clump of grass until it starved to death in a desert).

An improviser who tries 'not advancing' finds himself pestered by more ideas than he can possibly use.

"You've got lots of ideas for taking the action forwards?"

"Yes".

"Excellent. It's great to have more ideas than you need. Don't hang onto them. Let them float in one ear and out of the other. Attend to what you're doing, take no thought for the future".

I ask another student to: "Think of an action" and her eyes go blank as she starts a frantic search for a 'good' idea, i.e. one that will sustain her selfimage. This is inappropriate behaviour because I haven't told her why the action is needed. After much hesitation she says:

"I can't think of one".

"You misunderstand me. I didn't ask for an interesting action. I wanted any action."

She looks relieved:

"Getting a snag out of my hair," she says.

"Mime it!"

She wrestles with the comb, and expresses pain, and tears at the snag with her fingers - then she runs out of ideas.

"Try cutting the snag out with scissors", I say.

"But I'm not allowed to complete the action."

"See what happens".

She obeys me.

"Now lay the hair on the table, and keep on trying to get the snag out".

The audience laugh at this, because her persistence seems so logical and at the same time so irrational.

An exact description of the action is very important. 'Brushing your hair' is not the same as 'brushing hair', because 'brushing hair' can include 'brushing other people hair', or 'brushing the hair of a giant'. If a student says that his action is 'scratching his head' - this can include scratching it with a chairleg, or rubbing his head against a tree, or 'plugging' an audience member into a 'wallsocket' and using him as a mechanical head-scratcher. If he says that his action is 'swimming' this can involve the breast-stroke, the back-stroke, being swept over a waterfall, drowning, emerging in Heaven in an ocean of champagne - but still swimming! I saw the Belgian clown, Charlie Rivel, extend the action of 'preparing to sit on a chair' for minutes, and he never did manage to get his behind onto the seat.

Refuse to advance an action, and you begin to think like a Chaplin or a Keaton - perhaps not with their genius - but we'll certainly see you as a 'natural comedian'.

Here's another action - 'taking the top off of your breakfast egg.' Does this action inspire you? I doubt it. You might decide to find a live chick in the egg (like every other mime I ever saw), but if we refuse you permission to complete the action, then you may never get to the chick. But you could do other things:

-Mime tapping the egg with your spoon. Nothing happens. Or perhaps it taps back.



-Mime attacking it with a bread-knife.  
-Mime picking up the egg and bashing it in the table. No effect.

-Mime dropping the egg accidentally and let it smash - and continue the action by trying to open a second egg.

-Try the bread-knife again - and find that it works! Mime levering the flap of egg up very slowly and suspiciously and peer in, and receive a squirt in the eye.

-Wrestle with the 'lid' of the egg against something that's trying to keep it closed from the inside.

-Perhaps you discover that there's a screw at the bottom of the egg which you can remove.

-Maybe the egg starts ticking and you take cover.

Such ideas are in the tradition of silent-movies and they're easy to think up, once you are forbidden to advance the action.

Here's a 'not-advancing' sequence from a class at the *Loose Moose Summer School*.

A student mimed 'trying to find something in his pocket'. He stretched the opening so that he could see inside. He contorted his body so that he could peer closer. He mimed that his hand was going deeper into his pocket than seemed reasonable. He discovered that he could stretch the entrance to the pocket as if it were rubber. He mimed putting his head into his pocket, then slipped and tumbled headlong. He mimed that he was in complete darkness, but his action was still 'trying to find something in his pocket', so he felt in his trouser pocket again, looking for a flashlight, and the entire sequence began to repeat itself.

Take 'cleaning your teeth' as your action. You can change the pace, or your mood, or add a resistance, but perhaps you find one of your teeth is coming loose, so you remove it. Has the action changed? Not necessarily - not if you mime continuing to brush it.

I ask my students to work in pairs - one defines his action verbally, and starts to 'make it more interesting', while his partner gives encouragement and advice. If the 'performer' doesn't have an idea, maybe the 'trainer' won't either - which is fine because then the trouble is shared. Let's say your action is: 'Breathing'.

"Make the action of breathing more interesting."

You smile and breath more fully - this holds the interest for a while.

"Make it more interesting," says your partner.

"You start adding a contented: 'Ahhhhhh' sound as you breath out.

"Make it more interesting".

You go over and open the window and start exulting in the fresh air.

Now you're stuck for an idea, but your partner is there to help you.

"Add a resistance" he says: "Make it more difficult to breathe."

You start to strangle. You gasp. You push your ribs in and out manually. You start to die. You stagger over to a 'table' and open a 'drawer' and take out a 'knife' and perform a tracheotomy on yourself - this seems startlingly imaginative to the audience but it's still the same action of 'making breathing more interesting'.

## 'Not Advancing' In Tragedy'

The practise of 'not advancing' can also be seen in tragedy.

Once Strindberg's *Father* has been eased in the straight-jacket, is he led off to a asylum? Absolutely not - he orders his servant to set him free, but the man refuses. Then the wife enters and plays a long scene with him. Then he has a stroke!

The tearing out of Gloucester's second eye is delayed by a servant who tries to defend him - this prolongs the agony and 'makes it more interesting'.

Oedipus enters with bloody eye-sockets - does he stagger across the stage and exit again like the sodomized Lawrence of Arabia in Terence Rattigan's *Ross*? No he doesn't - the chorus react to him with horror, then he complains about his misery, then he converses with the chorus, and curses the peasant who rescued him as a baby, and launches into a massive speech of woe, pleading for death. Then he plays a long scene with Creon.

## Advancing

We train 'advancing' by insisting that the student name an action and then make



it more interesting. But we should really refer to this as 'not advancing'.

*In the real game of 'advancing' we wait until the student's plans for the future have been disrupted, and then we force him to 'advance at the wrong time'.*

Let's return to the action of 'taking the top off of an egg'. The improviser intends to find a chick in it, make friends with it, and then have it fly away so he can be sad, and we'll realize how 'sensitive' and 'talented' he is. But if we hold him to the action of 'opening an egg' then the scene will veer off in unexpected directions. Perhaps he finds that the egg is impervious to everything, including a chainsaw and pneumatic drills (you can see this sort of thing in cartoon films all the time). Perhaps he sighs, and at this instant his partner says:

"Advance! What are you doing now?"

"Trying to open the egg"

"Weren't you sighing?"

"Well, yes".

"Then make 'sighing' your new action. Make sighing more interesting."

This could lead to a suicidal despair because even a egg has defeated him - accompanied by tearful verbalizations about his whole life being a failure. He may now be secretly planning a really interesting suicide but his partner says "Advance!" at the exact moment that he glances back at the egg.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at the egg".

"Make 'looking at the egg' more interesting."

His suicide has now gone into the same void as 'finding the chick'. Perhaps he mimes screwing a jeweller's lens into his eye. Maybe he finds that the egg has a little door. Instead of 'finding a chick in his breakfast egg', or 'committing suicide' he's now investigating a miniature spaceship. His hackneyed idea about the chick has been replaced with ideas that he'd never have arrived at without this technique.

When the skilled 'advancer' feel the need to advance he takes whatever he's doing at that instant, and advances it (irrespective of where he wanted the action to lead). This makes him seem 'original' and

'creative', and we can throw him on stage alone and expect him to survive for minute after minute.

You can think up sequences of advancing 'in your head' while you're waiting for the bus, or trying to get to sleep, or whenever. Imagine that you are advancing smaller and smaller details of an action - if you're 'cooking spaghetti' then make 'Looking for the tin opener' more interesting, or: 'Wondering where to apply the tin opener'. 'Not-advancing' the opening of the tin can involve explosives and steam-rollers. The action of: 'Getting the spaghetti out of the tin' could involve trying to shake it out, ordering it to come out, praying to God to get it out, grabbing one end of spaghetti and starting to wind it into a ball as if it were wool, and so on. The smaller the snippet of action, the more imaginative you seem. Don't make 'playing golf' your action, make it 'trying to set the ball on the tee' - this action could last minutes, and involve irate gophers, and earthquakes.

The most elegant way to choose an action is to decide what you're already doing and advance that.

"What are you doing now?"

"Wondering what to do".

"Make 'wondering what to do' more interesting".

I could have pointed out that he/she was touching his/her nose, or was breathing, or was growing older - 'growing-older' could be a wonderful action to 'advance'. 'Advancing' frees the improviser from the treadmill of always needing a 'good idea'.

## MISCELLANY

### INTER-THEATRE GAMES

Melanie Miller phoned me up from London and said that London Theatresports were about to play a team from the National Theatre.

My suggestion was that on no account should any team use the name of their theatre. Why put the honour of your theatre at stake. It's not right to risk



headlines saying that the National Theatre lost (or won) against such and such a theatre, or whatever.

I suggested that it was a good idea to 'contaminate' the teams by including someone from another theatre company (We did this at the Olympics and it made things friendlier).

## A LETTER TO C.R.A.F

EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER KEITH WROTE TO THE CALGARY REGION ARTS FOUNDATION WHEN THEY REFUSED TO CONTINUE THEIR GRANT TO US. ONE YEAR LATER THEY HAVE AGREED TO GIVE US ABOUT HALF OF WHAT THEY PREVIOUSLY GAVE US. WE ARE TORN BETWEEN THE NEED TO SHOW A PROFIT TO IMPRESS ANY COMPANIES THAT MIGHT OFFER US FUNDING, AND THE NEED TO SHOW A LOSS TO PLACATE THIS CITY OF CALGARY FUNDING AGENCY.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO WRITE TO THEM EXPRESSING OUR VALUE TO YOU, BE MY GUEST. IT MIGHT BE GOOD IF THEY RECEIVE LETTERS FROM ABROAD. WE WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO FORWARD ANY CORRESPONDENCE.

Dear Sirs and Madams,

.....You decided not to fund us this year, on the grounds that our good management (on which you congratulate us) has resulted in our making a profit. Are you proposing that we should always operate in a state of debt.....? Working in that way created states of total panic, ulcers etc., and a constant fear that we were about to go bankrupt.

We are of course a non-profit society so any monies are kept within the organization (if we merely painted and carpeted the place properly we'd instantly be in the red again so it would not be difficult for us to show a loss).

Three years ago I promised the board that I would stay on as Artistic Director for at least three years (or until the theatre was well out of debt). The alternative was to dissolve the company, and sell the assets and hope to thus cut our losses to a minimum.

We had realized (after the demise of an Edmonton Theatre Company) that we might become personally liable for the debts incurred by the theatre. As none of us are rich we decided to have to have a financial 'buffer' against the disasters that may strike a theatre company at any time, and especially to help us survive the Summers - a time when the box-office takes in relatively little money. It is the existence of this buffer that you give as your justification for cutting our grant to zero.

Are you saying that instead of alternating between say \$60,000 and zero, we should alternate between zero and a debt of \$60,000? - i.e. that we ought to risk becoming bankrupt, and that we should put ourselves entirely at the mercy of grant-awarding bodies? I would call this *bad* management, although it follows from your letter that this would have kept us our grant.

In order to become solvent we cut all the scripted plays - we used to present about six a year and now we present none (this is not good for the local playwrights). We cut the publicity budget and the production budget to just about zero (for some of the improvised shows it has been zero). We continue getting an audience - mostly by word of mouth - but we are still working with minuscule production budgets, and with an overworked staff.

Cutting all the 'main-bill' productions and cutting the publicity and production budgets to zero was an act of desperation. If you consider this as an act of good management, please recommend it to the groups that you are currently funding.

In spite of these restrictions we still present about two hundred and eighty performances a year, and have become one of the best known and most influential improvisation theatres anywhere - I can't think of any other Canadian Theatre company that has had a comparable influence.....

.....The work at Loose Moose is not to every person's taste, but we serve the people who have been disenfranchised by conventional theatre. (We have the young audience that other theatres always talk about the need to attract).



Our spectators pay taxes, and are citizens, and it seems unjust that they should in effect be punished because you will not ask other theatres to make the sort of cuts that we have made.

Normal theatre companies find it relatively easy to get support from the private sector. But everyone knows that it's difficult or well nigh impossible to get corporate funding for unconventional theatre companies. It's easy for Theatre Calgary, or A.T.P. to get support from oil companies, or whatever - not so for Loose Moose. We're not a safe middle-of-the-road theatre serving an affluent middle class audience. Don't you therefore have a *greater* responsibility to assist us?

It was long ago indicated to us that we could expect federal funding if we'd alter our ways, and become a 'normal' theatre company - we refused, because we see ourselves as having a different mission. Had we agreed then we certainly wouldn't have been exerting the kind of influence that we exert now. We are doing something important - at least in the view of our supporters in other cities and countries - and we are certainly adding to Calgary's good name, and making it a better place to live for some thousands of the citizens who live here - so it's bizarre to be denied funding from our local Arts Foundation.

The Chairman of the California State Arts Council (which used to allocate twenty million dollars a year to the arts) wrote a letter to C.R.A.F. saying something like: 'we see everything in California, but Loose Moose is the group that we would fund from California if our mandate permitted it because the Calgary work is so valuable to us'. You must have the letter in your files somewhere - perhaps filed under Peter Coyote.

I was shown the response of your then Chairperson which suggested that if the Californians knew more about us they wouldn't be so enthusiastic, or words to that effect. Actually they knew my work very well, and their Chairman had traveled to Calgary to see the performances at Loose Moose. This response does suggest a certain lack of appreciation on the part of C.F.A.F towards the whole *idea* of Loose

Moose - and is the opposite of the response I would have hoped for.

.....Are you really saying that you will not fund any company that becomes temporarily solvent? Do you maintain that if any Arts organization shows a profit you will withdraw your support from them?

.....Do you forbid us to have some sort of 'buffer' against the emergencies that regularly occur?.....

Yours sincerely etc.

## THE 'CAHILL' TECHNIQUE FOR GETTING VOLUNTEERS

Sometimes it's difficult to get volunteers from the audience to work onstage with the improvisors. Dennis Cahill - Associate Artistic Director of Loose Moose - has invented a method that usually works.

Clutch your head as if inspired and tormented by some powerful but still vague inner vision. Stagger. Cry out. Turn towards audience, dramatically, like a Victorian hypnotist, and announce that somewhere in the audience you can sense someone who has a great urge to volunteer. Wade into a section of audience. Announce that you mind is clearing, that:

"Yes....it's.....I sense someone in a blue dress.....An attractive young lady who is at this very moment about to rise from her seat and come down onto the stage....."

This works nine times out of ten and is a sight worth seeing.

"How do you know that someone is willing to volunteer?" I asked.

"I chose people who look back at me, and I avoid those who won't make eye-contact with me."

## UPDATE ON 'FAST-FOOD STANISLAVSKY

NEWS TWO described a way of teaching acting by writing a purpose at the top of a list, and then writing down a list of ways to achieve it.

Some of the lists had forty or fifty suggestions. When I taught in London, and



later to Norway I discovered that many people couldn't work the lists at all.

My instructions for playing the lists are: "Look at the list and pick the first thing that that you can make truthful." But this was being understood as: "Choose the best possible thing on the list so that you'll be sure to be a success." Some improvisors would read right through a list of perhaps sixty suggestions to find the 'best'. Their scenes were in slow-motion. Such improvisors would have been far better off with only six or eight suggestions (hunting for the best idea is something that never happened at Calgary, because we don't really believe in 'good ideas').

My current lists are still very long, but a few activities are now highlighted. This seems to have solved the problem. Or players can take a list and highlight the choices they'd like to try.

Here's a highlighted list:

**To-Be-Thought-MENACING**

Be intent on revenge.

**Be strong and athletic.**

Big mood changes.

Confess terrible crime.

Evil laugh or grimace.

Growl.

Have an imaginary friend.

**Have terrorist and/or criminal friends.**

**Have An Obsession**

Heavy breathing.

Inject someone, or yourself.

**Interrupt and then don't continue.**

Make violent accusations.

**Project hostile motives onto other people.**

Make enigmatic statements. .

**Refuse to discuss things.**

Show guns, bombs, etc.

Show sado-masochistic equipment.

**Someone is hunting you, trying to kill you.**

Speak loudly, or very quietly.

Stare into distance, or at other person.

Stony-Faced

Sudden threatening movements.

Take drugs (Frank in 'Blue Velvet')

**Talk of death, torture, etc.**

Tear some object to pieces.

Use and offer terrifying new drugs.

This gives a choice of nine items plus a lot of backup if you need it. Each time you use a list you could make another selection.

## 'Lists' As A Public Performance Game

Make the actors announce each action clearly to the audience before they do it. For example, let's suppose that someone is using a 'to be thought psychotic' list. He announces: "Be suspicious" to the audience in a clear voice, and then behaves suspiciously. Then he chooses another item from the list. "Scream" he says, and he then screams - and so on.

Another performance version. Have each action chosen and read into a mic' by audience volunteers. .

## QUIZ:QUIZ:QUIZ:QUIZ:QUIZ

### Answers To The Last Quiz

1. After booking his passage to America the Austrian playwright, Von Horvath, sat on a bench contemplating the future. And then a tree fell on him.

2. Aeschylus was bald, and an Eagle, looking down from a great height, chose his head (all polished and gleaming in the sunlight) as a suitable object to drop a tortoise on. The results were fatal for Aeschylus.



### NEW QUIZ: NEW QUIZ:

1. What famous Hollywood Movie Star traveled to Moscow in the Thirties, and was turned down by Stanislavsky's Moscow Arts Theatre after auditioning on four consecutive days?
2. What playwright kept crashing his motor-bikes, smashed the dishes in the family pantry and threw a pudding into the bushes, played the flute from midnight to dawn driving everyone crazy, wrote to Eisenstein offering himself as an unpaid assistant director, and then decided to be a commercial airline pilot?
3. This playwright pumped iron and did magic tricks and allowed everyone to stand up as a mark of respect when he entered his favourite 'pub - name please.

.....  
SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE ASKED  
WHAT MY PLAYS ARE LIKE (AND  
WHY THEY ARE SO SELDOM PER-  
FORMED) THAT I'VE DECIDED TO  
INCLUDE ONE. HERE GOES:  
.....

# THE CORD

A ONE ACT PLAY BY

## KEITH JOHNSTONE

TO HELGE SKOOG

AN EMPTY STAGE SURROUNDED BY DARK  
CURTAINS WITH A TOILET BOWL IN THE  
MIDDLE (OR A BOX WITH A TOILET  
SEAT).

### SCENE ONE

JOHN STICKS HIS HEAD THROUGH THE  
CURTAINS. HE ENTERS. HE IS DRESSED AS  
A MOTHER-DOMINATED TEENAGER. A

THICK REDDISH TUBE COMES OUT OF HIS  
FLIES AND VANISHES BACK-STAGE. (SEE  
NOTES)

JOHN IS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING AND  
GETS INCREASINGLY BAFFLED AND DES-  
PERATE WHEN HE CANT FIND IT.

Mum (FROM OFF-STAGE) John?

PAUSE

John?

PAUSE

John! Answer me! What are  
you doing in that bathroom?

John Nothing Mum.

Mum I thought you was going to use  
the lavatory....

John Well, I'm constipated.

Mum I don't hear you straining or  
anything. I know what you get  
up to in there!

PAUSE. JOHN FEEL GUILT  
ABOUT MASTURBATION -  
DON'T 'ACT' THIS GUILT.

Book-reading! You're in there  
reading books while I'm stuck  
out here on the landing.

John No I'm not Mum.

Mum Have you taken your laxative  
pills? You need a good clean  
out! I think you flush them  
down the toilet!

John No I don't Mum.

ENTER MUM, PERHAPS  
PLAYED BY A MAN? SHE IS  
TERRIFYING. WE STUFFED  
NEWSPAPERS DOWN 'HER'  
TIGHTS TO MAKE 'HER' LEGS  
LOOK KNOBBLY. THE OTHER



END OF THE CORD RUNS UP  
HER SKIRT

Mum Ah! Caught you!

John Oh Mum, you said you'd never  
come in without knocking.

Mum I thought you come in here to  
use the lavatory. I ain't hear it  
flush though. (RAISES TOILET  
LID) And I don't see nuffin' in  
there! Oh no, you was coming  
in here to find something  
you've hidden!

John Don't be silly Mum.

Mum Silly is it! And what do you call  
this then? (SHOWS HUGE AXE  
THAT SHE'S BEEN HOLDING  
BEHIND HER). Stuffed under  
the bath where you thought I  
wouldn't find it! (SWIPES IT  
ABOUT DANGEROUSLY)

John Careful Mum!

Mum Sneaking in here to play with  
your Father's chopper! You was  
planning to cut yourself off  
without so much as a by-your-  
leave!

John No I wasn't Mum.

Mum To think of a son of mine  
wanting to cut off his own  
umbilical.!

John I'm not a baby any more!

THIS RELEASES A PAROXYSM  
OF BLIND RAGE IN MUM WHO  
SEEMS ABOUT TO CHOP HIM TO  
PIECES.

Mum Your Father would turn in his  
grave is he did hear how you do  
speak to me!

John He was cremated!

Mum You've brought on one of my  
migraines! I shall have to lie  
down in the bedroom with the  
curtains drawn!

John Oh no, Mum!

SHE FLICKS HIM INTO AIR BY  
SENDING A WAVE ALONG THE  
CORD

Mum Come on!

John Why can't I be like the other  
boys?

Mum I don't want you to be like the  
other boys! I want you to be a  
credit to your family!

John I want to use the lavatory.

Mum Well you'll have to use the po!

SHE DRAGS HIM OFF AS THE  
LIGHTS FADE

SCENE TWO

MUM IN ROCKING CHAIR. THE  
AXE IS BESIDE HER. ALSO A TEA  
POT WITH A COSY - IT STANDS  
ON A LITTLE STOOL. JOHN IS  
SITTING ON THE FLOOR. THEY  
FACE THE AUDIENCE, THE CORD  
EXTENDING BETWEEN THEM. A  
PAUSE FOR THE AUDIENCE TO  
TAKE IN THIS STAGE PICTURE.  
BEGIN WITH A SLOW TEMPO.

Mum (PAUSE) John.

PAUSE

John!

John Yes, Mum.

Mum What are you thinking?

John Nothing Mum.

Mum Don't sulk then.



John I'm not sulking, Mum.

PAUSE

Mum Jumping out that lift and hoping the doors would snap it when it closed!

John Don't go on, Mum.

Mum If I hadn't hit that emergency button I don't know what would have happened.

John (PAUSE) It was an accident.

Mum Yes, like the time you ran over it with the lawnmower. (PAUSE) Not to mention running across in front of that ship-launching!

John (PAUSE) Well.....

Mum Well, what!

John Well it's awkward having to drag behind you everywhere.

Mum You don't normally complain. You was always on at me to come out in the street and play skipping games. What do you want to do you can't do when I'm here?

John Oh.....Lots of things.

Mum You want to hang around street corners getting young girls into trouble.

John No I don't, Mum.

Mum We had that nice Jennifer Lorum over for tea the other day.

John She's silly.

Mum She do better at school than you do.

John She's all spotty. And people keep coming up to pat her hump.

Mum She can't help that, poor girl. No, you want one of they fancy women. You don't want the sort of girl you can bring home to me

John Well, I'm fed up. You know how it itches in hot weather, and everyone laughs at that stupid lagging you knit for it in the winter!

Mum You'd be the first to complain if we caught a chill in it.

John Can't I ever have a life of my own?

Mum Life of your own? What ingratitude! Didn't I suffer for you? Didn't I lie hour after hour in the most appalling agony. We had bucket after bucket of hot water. The Doctor helped with his forceps. The Nurse helped push. They could hear me screaming right up forestreet!

PAUSE

And that was just your conception!

A PAUSE TO LET THE AUDIENCE APPRECIATE THE IMAGE. THEN KNOCK KNOCK. ENTER SPOTTY, HUMPBACKED, GOOD-NATURED JENNIFER LORUM, WHO IS REALLY VERY SWEET AND NICE. SHE HAS TRIED TO 'MAKE THE BEST OF HERSELF'. SHE CARRIES A CLOTH FILLED WITH DOMINOES.

Jenn Anybody home?

John Hello Jennifer.



Mum We was just talking about you Jennifer.

Jenn I thought my ears were burning. Would John like to play dominoes?

John Alright.

Jenn I'll just set the pieces out.

SHE SPREADS THE CLOTH JUST UPSTAGE OF THE CORD AND SETS THE DOMINOES ON IT

Would you like to play, Mrs Sindbad?

Mum No thank-you Jennifer. I'm just going to take one of my catnaps. You may have to keep shaking John awake. He does tend to drop off when I do.

MUM PUTS HANDKERCHIEF OVER HER FACE AND TAKES A NAP. JENNIFER AND JOHN PLAY DOMINOES. JENNIFER SITS OR KNEELS BETWEEN JOHN AND MUM. SHE BECOMES FASCINATED BY THE CORD WHICH RUNS DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF HER.

Jenn (VERY QUIETLY) Can I touch it?

John What?

Jenn I mean she won't wake up or anything?

John Oh no.

JENNIFER STRETCHES OUT HAND DARINGLY, AND STROKES THE CORD. JOHN DOES NOT EXPRESS PLEASURE.

It's all silky.  
PAUSE

Why aren't you nicer to me, John?

John Well....

Jenn Tell me.

John I can't.

Jenn You would if you liked me.

John (TORN) Well.....It's just that you're so horrible. All the boys laugh at me because I see you.

Jenn (NOT UPSET) They laugh at you anyway.

John That's what I mean.

Jenn (GREATLY DARING) Cut yourself off!

John Mum says I won't survive on my own.

Jenn We could live together. I may not be much to look at, but I'm alright around the house.

THEY LOOK INTO EACH OTHER'S EYES. THEY KISS.

John (GUILTY) Ssssh. She'll wake up.

Jenn We could go out on the landing and cuddle.

John Alright.

THEY EXIT. GIGGLES ETC. FROM OFF-STAGE. THE CORD BEGINS TO TUG AT MUMS CHAIR, ROCKING IT MORE AND MORE VIOLENTLY (MUM CAN SECRETLY HELP). MUM WAKES UP AND IS BAFFLED FOR A MOMENT.

Mum John? What are you doing, John?

SHE LOOKS ABOUT HER.

John!



SHE COMPREHENDS

John!

John Just coming, Mum!

Mum You get in here this instant!  
You hear me!

SHE HEAVES ON CORD AND  
JOHN IS JERKED ONTO THE  
STAGE, PULLING UP HIS  
TROUSERS. JENNIFER FOL-  
LWS, STRAIGHTENING HER  
DRESS, TUCKING BREAST BACK  
INTO BRA, ETC.

Mum Ohhhhhhh. You'd better make  
yourself decent and go home  
Jennifer Lorum. I'll have a  
word with your Father - he'll  
know what to do! Oh what a  
wicked boy, John - you've  
made me all hot and sticky!

John Give me the axe, Mother.

Mum How dare you!

John I'm going to cut myself off!

HE WRESTLES MUM FOR THE  
AXE - MUM IS STRONGER.

Mum You see what you do Jennifer  
Lorum! You turn my own son  
against me! (PULLING AT AXE)  
Let go! Let go! I won't be left  
here on my own! You won't be  
rid of me until my funereal!

Jenn It's not fair, Mrs Sindbad! It's  
not fair!

MUM SLAPS HER.

Mum You run on home, Jennifer  
Lorum! Don't you ever set foot  
in this house!

JENNIFER HAS BURST INTO  
TEARS. SHE RUNS OUT TAKING  
THE DOMINOES IN THE CLOTH.

John (SPELLING IT OUT) I don't  
want to go on living with you  
till I'm old!

Mum Do you think I scraped and  
cringed to the Grownups  
without expecting my turn?  
Wicked boy!

John I'm different than you are!

Mum Are you going mental? People  
who talk like you, John, are  
mental people! Now take hold of  
yourself and act sensible! I  
don't fancy sitting outside your  
padded cell all day!

John I'm going to masturbate!

Mum What!

John Into the tea-cosy.

Mum (GRABBING TEA-COSY) I'll lay  
my hand to you!

John Well what am I supposed to do?  
How can I help getting excited  
with all the hormones from  
your menopause.

Mum Don't you dare touch my tea-  
cosy!

John Alright! I'll warm up a  
grapefruit!

Mum You have gone mental.

John We do everything else together!  
I even have to watch when you  
go to the lavatory!

MOANS. RUBS HIMSELF  
AGAINST FURNITURE, CUR-  
TAINS, ETC.

Mum Stop it! Stop it! You'd better  
take one of my tranquillizers.  
You're not well.

John I feel particularly well!



Mum No, you're ill! You're ill!

John Perhaps I could masturbate into you?

HE PULLS HER TOWARDS HIM WITH THE CORD

Mum Keep away! Don't touch me. I won't have you touching me!

JOHN STRANGLES MUM USING THE CORD. MUM DIES.

John I've done it! (AMAZED). I'll cut myself off. I'll be free at last!

HE CHOPS THE CORD APART, USING THE LITTLE STOOL THAT THE TEA-POT WAS STANDING ON AS A CHOPPING BLOCK

Done it! I'll run away. Never come back! Never!

HE RUNS AS FAR AS THE CORD WOULD HAVE PERMITTED, BUT IS THEN JERKED BACK BY AN IMAGINARY CORD. MUM'S BODY MOVES AS IF THE CORD HAS JERKED HER.

Damn!

HE TRIES AGAIN IN OPPOSITE DIRECTION - SAME RESULT.

Mum (DEAD BUT LAUGHING LIKE A DEMON) You won't get rid of me that easily, John!

John (AGHAST) You're dead! You're dead!

Mum Dead I may be, but I'll make sure everyone knows what sort of a son I have! Murderer! Murderer!

John Shut up! Be quiet! Be quiet be quiet!

HE KILLS HER AGAIN - STABBING WITH THE KNITTING NEEDLES?

Mum You won't shut me up that way, John! Murder! Murder!

John I'll run away!

HE RUNS BUT IS JERKED BACK AS BEFORE.

Mum (TRIUMPHANT) You can't, can you! That's how weak you are!

John (GRIEF) You did this to me.

Mum You should thank God for my bringing you into this world. (TO AUDIENCE) I brought my son up clean and respectable! (YELLS) Murder! I've been murdered!

VIOLENT KNOCKING. THEY FREEZE.

Voice (PAUSE) Are you alright, Mrs Sindbad?

Mum (COLLECTING HERSELF) Yes, yes, it's alright! Everything's lovely!

### SCENE THREE

JOHN CARRIES MUM ONTO THE STAGE. HE SETS HER DOWN AND PROPS HER UP. ALL IS BARE EXCEPT FOR A NOTICE SAYING 'DEATH VALLEY'. HE WEARS ONE OF THOSE PLASTIC BALD-HEAD AND SPECTACLES.

John (TO AUDIENCE) Now that I'm old I can see Mum's point of view.

Mum (TO AUDIENCE) I said to him, I told him over and over, but would he listen? No, he always had to have his own way. He



didn't think about his dear old Mum.

John (LOOKS AROUND) Death Valley! Who'd have thought we'd end up here?

Mum While there's life there's hope (CACKLES)

John Someone's coming.

Mum Take no notice John.

JENNIFER LORUM STAGGERS IN, CARRYING HER FATHER ON HER SHOULDERS (CHOOSE A LIGHT FATHER AND A STRONG ACTRESS). THE FATHER LOOKS WILD AND UNKEMPT AND HAIRY AND INSANE - A TERRIFYING 'WILD-MAN' WHO WIELDS A BIG RED PADDED CLUB.

Jenn Ahhhhh.....Help me!

John What's wrong?

Mum (SHARPLY) Mind your own business, John.

Jenn Help me down! The pain in my shoulders, it's killing me!

John (HELPING HER) Here, gently.....

SHE SITS OR SQUATS. DAD STAYS ABOVE AND BEHIND HER, CLINGING TO HER, BUT TAKING HIS WEIGHT ON HIS OWN LEGS

Jenn Thank-you, thank-you. I'll just rest for a minute. The pain gets worse and worse until I start moving again. It's as if someone were beating me. (CHEERFUL) Ah well, what can't be cured must be endured.

Mum Keep away John! They in't our family!

Jenn I know that voice! It's Mrs Sindbad! Is that you Mrs Sindbad? It's me, Jennifer.

John (HE HADN'T REALIZED) Jennifer!

Mum We don't want your sort here, Jennifer Lorum.

John Why doesn't your Father get off and give you a rest?

FATHER STARTS BEATING JENNIFER WITH THE CLUB.

Jenn Augh! Must be going then! Help me! Help me up!

John (TO DAD) Stop that!

Mum You keep out of it John.

FATHER LASHING OUT AT JOHN, JOHN DODGING AWAY.

Jenn Help me up! What are you doing?

JOHN WRESTLES THE CLUB AWAY.

Is it John? Are you John?

John Yes, we've changed.

Jenn (IN TERROR) Where did you get that stick? Father used to beat me with that stick!

John I took it away from him.

Jenn But we burned it after he died. We burned it years ago.

John He was hitting you with it!

Mum John! That's enough John! I need you over here, John!

John He's on your back! Your Father, he's.....



DAD CLAMPS LEGS ROUND HER  
NECK.

Jenn Auuughhhh! I can't breathe! It's  
my asthma! It's my asthma! I  
can't breathe!

John (ATTACKS FATHER) Stop it!  
Stop it!

JOHN BEATS FATHER WITH THE  
CLUB.

Let her have air! Let her  
breathe!

MUM DOING HER DEMON  
LAUGH

Jenn (TO JOHN, FRANTICALLY)  
leave me alone! Stop torturing  
me!

John (FRANTICALLY) It's your  
Father! You've got him on your  
back.

Jenn It hurts! It hurts! (TO AUDI-  
ENCE) Doesn't anyone have an  
aspirin?

John He's on your shoulders! That's  
why you stink of shit! He's  
living up there! That's why you  
hurt - that's why you stink of  
shit all the time.

Jenn No! No! We buried him years  
ago. We put a big stone over  
him so he couldn't get back at  
us!

John (TO MUM) A mirror! A mir-  
ror! Where's your mirror?

Mum (SMUGLY) Lost it!

John (TO AUDIENCE) Does anyone  
have a mirror! Can anyone lend  
me a mirror?

JOHN EITHER GETS MIRROR  
FROM MEMBER OF AUDIENCE,

OR WRESTLES ONE FROM  
MUM'S CORSAGE.

Jenn Help me! Help me up! I'll be  
alright so long as I keep mov-  
ing. Why do you torment me  
John. Don't you care for me any  
more? Help me! Help me!

John (SHOWING HER THE MIRROR)  
Look! Look! Don't you see?

Jenn Yes, we've aged!

John No! Look again! There! Above  
your head!

Jenn (TERROR) No, it can't be! It's  
Dad! He must have pushed the  
stone off the grave to get back  
at us! (DISBELIEF) No! No! It's  
a trick! It's a trick!

John No, it's real!

Jenn You're lying! You're lying!  
John (INDICATING FATHER'S  
KNEES) What's this then?

Jenn It's my breasts.

John It's his knees! It's your Father!  
He's been up there all the time!  
Help me pull him off!

Mum Bad boy John! Stop it! Stop it!  
It's not our business!

DESPERATE STRUGGLE.  
FATHER DRAGGED OFF. HE  
SPRAWLS ON THE FLOOR  
GASPING AND GROANING.

Jenn It's Dad! It's Dad! Don't let him  
near me! He came in the night!  
His hands were all over me!

John Run! Run!

JENNIFER WEeping? FATHER  
LEAPS ON JOHN'S BACK.

Auuggghhhhh! Auuggghhhhh!



Mum I warned you! I told you! You  
maze coon! (TO AUDIENCE)  
Didn't I tell him!

John Help me! Help me!

Jenn I can't! I'm too afraid!

MUM ATTACKS FATHER.

Mum Get off him! He's mine! He's  
mine! He's not your son!

Jenn (EXCITED) Beat him with the  
stick! Beat him with the stick!

MUM BEATS FATHER WITH THE  
STICK. FATHER DROPS OFF AND  
SCRABBLES ABOUT IN THE  
AUDIENCE LOOKING FOR  
SOMEONE TO MOUNT. HE  
SHOULD BE VERY ALARMING,  
THREATENING AND FILTHY

Dad No! Nooooo! Not good enough! No  
strength this one! Her? No  
stamina! Him! Bad stock! Get  
that anywhere! Them! They're  
all mounted. Mounted since  
infancy!

COMES BACK TO STAGE

Jenny! Jenny! You won't desert  
your poor old Father? Let me  
climb on you! Let me climb on  
you like in the old days! Give  
Daddy a kiss and let him mount  
you! Give Daddy a hump up!

JENNIFER SEEMS ABOUT TO  
AGREE.

John No! No! It's death here! You  
must run far away from here  
and never come back! Never!  
Never come back!

Dad (OVERLAPPING END OF JOHNS  
DIALOGUE) You bugger! You  
bugger!

DAD SCRABBLES AFTER JENNY  
AS SHE EXITS. THE SOUNDS DIE

AWAY. WE NOTICE A MAN HIGH  
UP - MAYBE HE'S PEERING  
THROUGH GAP IN CURTAIN OR,  
BETTER, LOOKING OVER THE  
TOP OF THE CURTAIN. HE  
THROWS HANDFULS OF LITTLE  
PAPER STRIPS THAT FLUTTER  
DOWN LIKE SNOW. WE SEE  
JUST HIS HEAD AND HIS ARM.  
HE LOOKS LIKE A WORKMAN.

Mum You see John....what happened!  
(PAUSE) But you don't listen!  
(PAUSE) You don't listen!

THE STRIPS HAVE ALL BEEN  
THROWN NOW, AND THE  
WORKMAN HAS DISAPPEARED.  
JOHN PICKS UP SOME OF THE  
PAPER STRIPS AND READS  
THEM ALOUD. HIS TEMPO IS  
SLOW.

John ....Whist-drive can-  
celed...(GIVES STRIP TO  
MUM).....spiral helix.....  
(T H R O W S I T  
AWAY).....Twenty percent  
off.....(GIVES IT TO MUM)....My  
face between her.....(PUTS IT  
IN HIS POCKET)...Tower of  
Pisa...(TURNS STRIP OVER)  
...Collapsed...(GIVES IT TO  
MUM).....One electron....  
(TURNS IT OVER).....weaving a  
Universe .....(THROWS IT  
AWAY).

JOHN GOES TO PEE AGAINST  
REAR CURTAIN, BUT THE  
IMAGINARY CORD IS TOO  
SHORT. HE DRAG MUM ABOUT A  
YARD AND TRIES AGAIN. THE  
DISTANCE IS O.K. BUT HE CAN'T  
URINATE.

John (ZIPPING UP) Once I thought I  
could do everything and now I  
can't even pee.

ENTER JENNIFER RUNNING.

Jenn John! Come with me!



John I can't. I've got to drag her everywhere!

Jenn No you don't if you don't want to!

John I must! I must! It's my fate! It's my doom!

Dad (CALLING FROM OFF-STAGE AND OVER-LAPPING) Jenny! Jenny my love! Don't desert your poor old Father! (ETC.).

Jenn (OVER-LAPPING DAD'S DIALOGUE) Leave her. She was dead long ago. Look at her! The worms crawl in and the worms crawl out!

John No, she's alive, she's alive.

Mum Stop it Jennifer! Mr Lorum! Mr Lorum! Come quickly! Come quickly!

Jenn (OVERLAPPING MUM'S DIALOGUE) Ride me! Ride on me!

John No, I like it here!

Mum (OVERLAPPING) Mr Lorum. Mr Lorum! Mr Lorum! Mr Lorum!

Jenn Liar!

John You get used to anything!

ENTER FATHER

Jenn Liar! Liar!

CARRIES JOHN OFF (SHRIEKING?). THE INVISIBLE CORD PULLS AT MUM, THEN SNAPS WITH A SOUND LIKE SOMETHING FALLING DOWN A MINE-SHAFT. THEY EXIT.

Mum Augh! Oooof! Buggers!

EVERYTHING SLOWS DOWN

(PAUSE) He don't take after my side of the family!!

Dad She's no daughter of mine!

MUM SETS OUT TWO CHIPPED CUPS AND PREPARES TO POUR TEA.

Dad A generation of serpents.

Mum (CALM) Tea?

Dad I can always do with a nice cup of tea.

Mum It's got a bit cold.

FINAL IMAGE OF MUM TRYING TO SHAKE ONE OR TWO DROPS OF TEA INTO THE CUP FATHER HOLDS OUT TO HER.

## NOTES

We made our 'cord' of rope. We tied newspapers around the rope, and smeared them with red paint. Then we wrapped the whole thing in old pairs of tights, cutting the toes off of the tights and pushed the rope up one leg and down the other. Then we wrapped the pelvic parts of the tights around the rope and taped them. Our cord looked ludicrous, and knobbly and swollen - a 'cartoon' image.

In Helge Skoog's production at Unga Klara (in Stockholm), an actor rejected my 'cartoon' cord as too disgusting, so they used a rubber tube that looked 'real', and that I thought really was disgusting - far too literal.

I realize that this play is bizarre but the characters should be played as truthfully as possible. They should be like people you know. The audience should say: "Yes, that's what what some families are really like".

Cast a strong Jennifer and a light Father. Dialect (if you care) is South Devon.



.....  
**THE THEATRESPORTS  
ESSAY:**

**"SURPRISE US"**  
.....

*"What would you like me to be?"  
"A Brain Surgeon."  
"And where would you like me to  
be?"  
"In a hospital."  
"And what's the problem?"  
"Your patient is dying."  
"Super. Now tell me something  
funny to do!"*

*Howie Mandell (the 'happy  
idiot' comedian) mocking the  
average comic improviser.*

*The most stupid suggestion is  
always the one that's shouted the  
loudest!*

*Zackary Quinn.*

*"Surprise us!"  
A spectator.*

**Are Audience Suggestions  
An Essential Part Of  
Theatresports?**

I've heard Theatresports introduced as "a game in which improvisors compete against each other with scenes based on suggestions from the audience". This was never my idea, but it's quite normal for public improvisors to accept suggestions before every scene. It can be shocking to hear me say that that suggestions can be crass, and stupid, and that the audience often don't want to see the suggestions acted out. All over the world improvisors react in the same way:

"But if the audience don't want to see these scenes" they say: "Why do they make the suggestions?"

**Are The Suggestions Meant  
To Be Helpful?**

Few of the spectators will shout anything useful like: "At the Vet's", or "Coming down for breakfast on Sunday morning", or "Out on a first date". They want to be 'funny' so think up stupid things that will get laughs.

"Why don't more improvisors realize this?"

"Because they judge the value of a suggestion by the laugh it evokes - not by the scene it helps them create".

Laughter is reassuring: "They're laughing! We're on the right track! Yippee!". As a rule of thumb, the funnier the suggestion the greater the damage. The setup may be hysterically funny, but the scene itself may be worthless.

*A useful suggestion is likely to be the one that does not get a laugh*

"Who is giving these suggestions?" I say.

"The audience, of course"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure".

"Do they really want to see scenes about nose-picking and gynaecology? Take a look. The suggestions may be coming from a small group of misfits who want to be up on the stage *instead* of you. Pander to them and soon your entire audience will consist of idiots, all competing to see who can shout out the most idiocies. Anyone with any sensitivity will have gone somewhere else - including your best players".

**Should We Get Suggestions  
From The Audience?**

Yes, in moderation, but it's the improvisors who are the experts, not the audience.

"We'd like a location for a tea-party", says an improvisor.

"At the bottom of the sea in diving suits", shouts someone who wants to be thought 'funny' and 'original'.

"And who are we?"

"Abbot and Costello and the Sugar-Plum Fairy!"

This scene is already dead. Improvisors would never ever accept such stupid suggestions from each other, and yet some Theatresports group make it compulsory to get suggestions, claiming that this:



1. Excludes the use of rehearsed material (i.e. proves that the improvisations are genuine).

2. Adds variety, and stops the work from being too repetitive.

Yet ask for a room in a house and someone will yell:

"The Bathroom!"

Ask for an activity you're likely to get.

"Picking your nose!"

Ask for a profession and you get:

"Gynaecologist."

Most suggestions are very predictable. A player can always select the suggestion he 'hears first', and you can always drag in 'old material'. We know this, the audience knows this, so what is being proved?

The audience is always influenced by the scene it's just been watching. Play a Frankenstein scene, and then 'request' three objects to be used in the next challenge and you'll get 'a scalpel', 'a severed head' and 'a heart lung machine' because the spectators are still preoccupied with the previous scene - this makes for even less variety.

### How Can You Prove That You're Improvising?

You can't! It's hopeless! People will even believe that there are stooges in the audience paid to shout out the suggestions. Spike Milligan saw the *Theatre Machine* improvising and asked: "You are rehearsing some of this aren't you?" and they said: "Of, course, Spike," because how could he believe them?

When *The Theatre Machine* performed at Canterbury School a teacher buttonholed me:

"Surely that scene wasn't improvised!"

"Oh yes".

"And the scene with the teacher in the bordello?"

"Absolutely".

"I wasn't born yesterday you know!"

I can resent his discourtesy, but not his scepticism. Like almost everyone else in this culture, his imagination has been so brutalized that the idea of walking on to the stage without anything prepared is inconceivable. On a great night the improvisors' achievements are literally

incredible, but even when the improvisors are uninspired, the audience still feel that they're being 'cheated' (because they can sense the absence of daring). However inept the work they'll believe that you rehearsed it, and thought it worth serving up to them, i.e. not only do they see you as incompetent, and dishonest, but as idiots who are incapable of self-criticism, and nothing can be done about this.

I saw the *Theatre Machine* perform without me (just before I left for Canada) and I found myself saying: "Was that improvised? Had you prepared the phonebox scene? Had you rehearsed the scene in the sewer?". I had worked with them for eight years, and if I didn't believe they were improvising, then who else would?

Dario Fo was performing before 70,000 people in a football stadium (at Milan I think) when bolts of lightning started ripping across the sky. He launched into a debate with God, but was he improvising? Perhaps he was just adapting 'old material'. The truth is that no one cares (except other improvisors). It must have been wonderful either way.

### Towers Of Suggestions

"Give me a character to be".

"The Easter Bunny".

The 'Easter Bunny' is on most people's list of: 'funny things' (together with giraffes, and elephants, and jello and so on) but the scene is still viable - the Bunny could protest about the commercial exploitation of Easter (do this as an 'Arms' game perhaps), or maybe a Father could take his offspring out hunting and the Easter Bunny could get shot:

"Oh Daddy, look what we did!"

"Shut-up and start collecting the eggs"

But now the improviser is asking for another suggestion. Perhaps the Easter Bunny doesn't enthuse him, or he thinks that if one suggestion is good, half a dozen will be better:

"And what's so special about this Easter Bunny?..

"He's wearing scuba gear".

This gets a bigger laugh because it's so stupid. Does the improviser want to



perform this scene? No he doesn't, so he asks for a third suggestion:

"And can you give me a problem"

"You've got no legs".

Everyone laughs, but these suggestions aren't witty! They're intended to make a fool of the improviser - why else would anyone be laughing? Who wants to see a scene about a double-amputee Easter-Bunny wearing scuba gear? Absolutely no one! Does the other team profit from this example? No they don't, because the laughter has blinded them.

"Give me a profession", says their Captain.

"A photographer."

A sensible suggestion (probably made by a photographer), but the absence of a laugh is unnerving.

"And now give me an animal"

"A giraffe!"

A few people chuckle. Is the scene doomed? maybe not - perhaps our photographer can take on the persona of a Giraffe, and move in a wonderfully giraffe-like way, or whatever, but yet another suggestions is requested:

"And now give me an action!"

"Milking a cow."

This is a tabooed activity for city dwellers, so the audience laugh even louder.

"Great", he says, proudly (although it was the audience member who got the laugh). He beams happily and says:

"My teammates will now present a scene involving a Photographer, a Giraffe, and the milking of a cow."

They limp on-stage looking defeated. And what is their scene? A 'photographer' looks for a Giraffe in a desert, starts dying of thirst, and saves his life by milking an improviser who pretends to be a passing cow. The audience laugh but who would be content with this rubbish?

There are games that ritualise these 'towers of suggestions'. For example, the old 'Moosette' game - 'In a.....With a....While a.....', which can be found on many game-sheets. This game has produced an incredible number of stupid scenes, but players like it because it absolves them from the need to be imaginative. You get scenes like:

"In a goldfish bowl with a harpoon while whistling Dixie".

Or:

"In a diving suit with a moose while making an omelette".

Or:

"In a baked-bean can with an inflatable dingy while doing handstands".

If you *must* asks for suggestions, try to ask for only *one* suggestion. Only in rare cases - in setting up of *endowments* for example - are towers of suggestions of the slightest value.

A player tells the audience that he'll work to sound effects provided by someone at a microphone (why tell them what they're about to see anyway?). Then he asked for 'a room in a house' and he got 'the bathroom' (of course so why bother to ask?). Then he asked for three objects that he should interact with, and he got a 'boot', a 'dead penguin', and a 'bar of chocolate'. His scene is destroyed before he's even begun - he may get a few laughs but it'll all be a stupid waste of time. Yet he's strapped himself into this straight-jacket in order to feel 'safe', as if he had no imagination of his own. Anyone can invent some rigmarole that includes a bathroom, a boot, a penguin, and a bar of chocolate. This 'trick' is pathetic, and these lead-lifebelts make it impossible for him to soar and be inspired. (See 'Bridging' News One).

### Why Does This Lunacy Persist?

Many improvisors want to involve the audience in the general carnage. It's as if they're saying:

"Well what can you expect if you ask us to mime drowning in custard while putting an elephant into pantie-hose?"

The audience is supposed to think:

"Poor things, after all they are just making it up as they go along. They're really being very clever!"

The only people who react like this are Mum and Dad and perhaps not even them. If a meal were disgusting would you accept the excuse that: "the cook doesn't know any recipes so he's improvising?". Should we expect less of a violinist because he's



improvising rather than playing the Bach Chaconne? Shouldn't we should expect *more* skill, *more* passion, *more* invention, *more* inspiration from an improviser than from a orthodox performer? Why settle for second best?

And who says that improvisation is more difficult than scripted theatre? Both are difficult (unless you know what you're doing), but improvisors can adapt to the audience in a way that is quite impossible for an actor. Many rehearsed plays are a disaster, yet an actor who may have been told in print that he has '...a face to launch a thousand dredgers' is condemned to repeat the same horror night after night. Isn't it *easier* to be an improviser?

There's a more subtle reason why improvisors ask for audience suggestions. Our minds are a reservoir of forbidden thoughts, but the average improvisor lacks the courage to reveal this 'psychotic' universe. It feels 'safer' to be dull than to be imaginative. Once the audience has asked you to be tickling a Nun in a fishtank while licking food-stamps there's no risk that you'll reveal the tiniest thing about your inner self. Suggestions are a bulwark against anything significant or meaningful that might emerge. Start 'cold' and where do the suggestions come from? From the improvisors! And then there's some chance that they will reveal their inner demons. We'd like that!

*The audience's suggestions protect the player from a confrontation with his own unconscious.*

### Should We Ban Suggestions?

No we shouldn't, because the very act of asking for a suggestion can add variety. Suggestions can even be creative. Asked for a location a small boy yelled out: "On top of a moving train", and he wasn't trying to be stupid, he really wanted to see this.

Only ask for suggestions some of the time. Learn how to protect yourself against the really stupid and destructive ones. Regard audience suggestions as sometimes very valuable, but as dangerous and destructive when misused, or accepted uncritically.

### How Can We Setup Scenes If We Don't Use Audience Suggestions?

Some improvisors really will actually ask this because they've never improvised in any other way. Let's say you're challenged to a Word-At-A-Time game; do you really need:

"A place to end at?"

Or:

"A quest to go on?"

Or:

"A title?"

Why not start the story from no where:

"We...are...STANDING...outside...OF...the  
...GATES...of...HEAVEN...we...RING...the  
...Doorbell...."

And so on. This is more interesting than it would be if the title of the story had been 'Entering Heaven' - not that you'd have been given such an interesting title. And if no suggestion has been given as to where the story will end then you won't have to 'twist' your invention to achieve a particular goal. The excitement of Word-At-A-Time is that it's 'out of control' and that the story can lead anywhere. Maybe St Peter slams the door in your face, and you notice a little door, so you creep through and step onto a chute that slides you straight into hell. Or perhaps Heaven is in ruins with bomb-craters and dead angels everywhere and St Peter was trying to hide this from you.

Lets say you're doing a 'No Blocking' challenge. If you just make dull offers like "Hello!" or "I like your shoes" then maybe you do need audience suggestions, but if you're willing to make less guarded offers, the scene will express you, not the comic ambitions of some fool in the audience.

### "Who Am I?"

Don't ask "Who am I?", or some prig may shout out: "Thomas Aquinas".

Even if you've read all sixty volumes of the *Summa* your audience have no interest in St Aquinas.

Some improvisors hedge against this by asking:

"Which *wellknown* historical figure would you like me to be" - this is usually



asked by improvisors with no knowledge of history at all.

"Copernicus!"

One in five Canadians think the sun goes round the earth, so many people are going to know no more about Copernicus than they do about Aquinas.

Let's say that you ask for historical figures that everyone knows - isn't that safer? No it isn't. You'll get something like:

"Abraham Lincoln and Donald Duck".

This juxtaposition gets a laugh, but can you imitate these characters convincingly? Probably not, so why submit to such torture? Why did you want to play historical figures anyway? Only because it was on someone's game list - someone once saw a scene with historical figures that got some laughs (or didn't get any laughs) and wrote the game down. Some people write down *any* game - especially beginners who often have no discrimination at all.

Instead of asking 'Who are we?', try asking for *professions*. You may get some 'Gynaecologists', and 'Morticians', but many people will shout out their own jobs, and this can be quite inspiring. You can even get them up on stage to train you - most people are very good at demonstrating their jobs to a 'new recruit'. A zookeeper taught us how to handle snakes, and explained the 'snake alarm' that you hit if a snake escapes or bites you, and it was fascinating - I'll never forget it.

If you decide to accept 'gynaecologist', don't do a scene that degrades women - have two gynaecologists playing golf, or have a man be pregnant, and so on.

If you're a brain surgeon, or a fortune-teller, or a lavatory-attendant, and you happen to have a great Donald Duck or President Reagan imitation, you can still do the brain surgeon as Donald Duck, or Reagan as the lavatory attendant.

*Never ask 'who you are' unless you are a genius at mimicking people. Ask for professions.*

## "Where Are We?"

Be cautious about asking "Where are we?" - scene after scene has been destroyed by this question.

A team was challenged to 'the most thrilling adventure'. It would have been fairly safe to ask for a genre, but they asked for a county to have the adventure in.

"Bangladesh!"

Bangladesh is 'funny' because it's associated with starvation and our wellfed audience has some guilt about this (There used to be Bangladesh jokes, i.e. how does a native of Bangladesh fall out of a tree? Answer - "like this!". The joke-teller then makes a motion with his hand like a falling leaf).

To set an adventure in Bangladesh and ignore starvation would be heartless, but to deal with starvation on the spur of the moment in some sort of reasonable and humane way is quite beyond the average improvisor. The suggestion paralyses them *but they did it to themselves*.

Requests for a 'Geographical Location' almost always lead to disappointment.

"Where are we?"

"Liechtenstein!"

They know nothing about Liechtenstein. They don't even know where it is, and they have absolutely no desire to set a scene there, so they try again and get 'Bolivia'. They know nothing about Bolivia either!

It's wiser to ask for:

"A nongeographical location, please".

If you want a geographical location - choose some place that you know about, and that you respond to.

## 'A Place To End At'

Having 'A place to end at' (or a 'quest to go on') makes improvisation far less thrilling and dangerous. The improvisors waffle on, trying to delay the ending for as long as possible while trying to entertain the audience with whatever jokes they can dredge up (See 'Bridging' NEWS ONE). Having 'a place to end' is reassuring, but it spoils the adventure. 'Statue' games where the audience places you in weird positions and the scene ends when these positions are reached are typical of this school of improvisation.



If this is your regular way of working, ask your colleagues to help you stop doing it (of course they may all doing it as well). It's a dead end.

### Decide Which Games Are The Most Vulnerable?

If you ask for a wellknown proverb, or a cliché to enact - as when you play: 'Guess The Phrase' - the answers will not screw-up your work, and you'll cause no offence if you pick and choose. But if you set up a 'moving bodies' scene (in which two actors are moved about as if they were inert puppets) and then ask "Where are we?" you invite total disaster:

"On an escalator!", shouts someone, trying to be helpful, but from that moment the scene is worthless. You may know how to set up a 'moving bodies' scene, but the audience haven't a clue.

'Arms' scenes are wrecked by practically any suggestion (in an 'Arms' scene 'A' stands behind 'B' and puts his arms under 'B' shoulders, while 'B' puts his arms behind 'A' thus making one person out of two people). I saw a group ask for an activity to base an 'arms' game on, and they got:

"Directing traffic!".

This suggestion was meant to be helpful, but no one wants to do an 'arms' scene 'directing traffic'.

Had the suggestion had been: "Sawing logs", or "Driving a car" - it wouldn't have helped. The Arms is a static game, in which mimed objects are lifted from an imaginary table in front of the players, but how are the spectators to know this?

Suppose the whole group speak in one voice, pretending to be a Professor who will answer the audience's questions. Never ask for a subject, because even if the spectators try to be helpful (and don't yell 'Ichthyology', or 'Quantum Physics') the average mental-age of a group playing the one-voice game is about four years old, and if no subject is chosen, the questions will have a greater range and they'll be more varied:

"What's your name?"

Or:

"Why is the sky blue?"

Or:

"How old are you?"

Or:

"What's the secret of life".

Discuss which games are helped by suggestions and which are wrecked by them.

### Typing Scenes

Don't ask for titles for Typing Scenes. (These are scenes in which one player mimes typing a story that the others act out). A suggestion like "Rin-Tin-Tin-and-the-Fall-Of-The-RomanEmpire" is unlikely to inspire anyone, and 'clever' or 'stupid' titles are what you're likely to get.

If you want suggestions, ask for a genre - then whatever they shout will be O.K. - 'Western', 'Science Fiction', 'Horror', 'Sherlock Holmes' or whatever.

### Don't Cheat The Audience

Someone collects twenty emotions from the audience and writes them down - this takes a couple of minutes but he's a guest so we don't count him out. He then shouts some of these emotions during the scene so that the actors can instantly express them. But gather any list of twenty emotions and you can predict that they'll include 'Anger', and 'Lust', and 'Fear' and so on, so what is being proved?

You can also cheat by accepting a suggestion, and then avoiding its implications.

"Where are we?"

"Hawaii!"

"Can we have an activity".

"Dancing!"

The audience laugh, wanting to see the improvisors interpretation of a 'hula', but the improvisors don't want to do a hula. They create a pointless scene about an improviser who is bitten by a crab and dances about. This scene has nothing to do with Hawaii, or Hawaiian dances, so the audience are thwarted.

The audience is asked to suggest an object to use in a scene:

"A red-nightie" shouts someone

The audience laugh, expecting that a wife will find a strange red-nightie under the pillow, or that her husband will buy one



to excite her, or whatever. No one wants a scene about a red-nightie that's made of plutonium but this is the scene they are foisted off with. The players recognize that the object is 'dangerous' but they suppress the sexual implications. Why raise expectations that you won't satisfy?

Two men ask for a type of scene for them to play.

"A love scene" say someone, and the audience give strong approval to this.

These improvisors could have 'attacked' the person who made the suggestion, pretending to take offence at being asked to play a homosexual scene in cowboy Alberta, or they could have played the scene. Instead, they instantly established that they were brothers and not incestuous brothers. The speed and skill with which they came up with this defence gives an indication of the level of their anxiety (and of their potential skill). But there hadn't been a homosexual scene that evening, so why shouldn't they have done one? A friend could have told someone of the same sex that he/she was desperately attracted to them. The audience might have remembered that forever, whereas most scenes are forgotten instantly.

"Can you give me an activity" asks a man.

"Changing a diaper".

The team instantly switch the man for a woman, but the audience had wanted to see a man changing a diaper, anticipating the trouble he could get into - dropping the baby, getting the diaper over it's face, whatever (perhaps the baby could have kept criticizing him) but these male improvisors are trying to stay 'safe'.

Another way to 'cheat', or certainly to disappoint, is by 'forgetting' about an object or location that you requested.

"Can you suggest an object to use in a scene?"

"A potato peeler".

This starts a scene in a kitchen, but a potato peeler is not used - they've forgotten it, but the audience haven't.

If you ask for the best scene using a object, and you get 'A tree!', then it's no use just playing a love scene under a tree, or fishing under a tree - you have to involve the tree in the action. Carve your

lovers name into the bark, and then notice the same name carved by about twenty other people. Or notice a door in the tree. Or climb up to eat it's fruit and have God catch you and then blame Eve. An object or place suggested by the audience mustn't play a merely 'decorative' role, or why bother?

### Ask For Something Specific

You're less likely to get stupid and useless suggestions if you restrict the context. If you've set up a love scene between teen-agers, then why not ask for something that might happen on a first date? It's unlikely that anyone will yell: "You get hit by a ton of jello", and it's easy to reject inappropriate suggestions without giving offence.

### Try To Get Personal Material

Asked for a phobia, a woman calls out: "fear of flying", and a fear of flying is acted out. But she's not asked if she's afraid of flying. Or when this phobia started. Get the details.

Another request:

"Has anyone ever broken up with somebody?"

A woman says "Yes".

"Who's fault it was".

"His".

"Why did you break up?"

"Another woman".

This was done very quickly and efficiently, but they don't ask how she found out about the other other woman? Or when she realized it was all over? And what she did to keep her lover? Personal material is very interesting to the spectators, and makes for better scenes.

### Don't Always Accept The Suggestions Literally

At the Olympics someone asked for a activity and got 'fly tying'. He then played a Rodeo scene in which he galloped after a steer-sized fly, leapt on it, dragged it down, tied it's six legs together and bowed to acknowledge the applause. This was not an evasion, since 'fly tying' had set up no exciting expectations.



If 'nose-picking' is requested for the umpteenth time, and you finally decide to go with it, don't just stand on the stage picking your nose - become a labourer on a chain-gang that is shoveling out the nose of a giant. The spectators will like this - it won't disappoint anyone.

Harold asks for an activity and gets:  
"Picking off bits of fluff."

He mimes picking fluff out of his navel and the audience are delighted. And as no scene had been established, no damage was being done.

### Always Repeat The Suggestion

The suggestion may be audible to you, but people at the back or at the other side of the theatre may have missed it. Repeat suggestions even if you are sure everyone heard them - it's a way of adding to your authority, and it dramatizes your 'control' of the stage and of the audience.

### To Sum Up

All over the world improvisors are accepting suggestions that bore them and that they secretly despise, believing that they're giving the audience what it wants. The indiscriminate use of suggestions puts you at the mercy of those audience members who want to be on the stage instead of you. The audience may laugh, but that doesn't mean that they want to see a whole series of stupid scenes. Never think: "They're laughing! We must be on the right track!"

I used to argue that improvisors should always accept the first idea offered (because if doesn't look good if they start hemming and hawing) but I hadn't imagined a time when suggestions would be obtained for every scene. When I directed the *Theatre Machine* I used to ask for only two or three suggestions in an entire performance. If you must keep asking for suggestions, then please reject any that fail to inspire you. Why build on quicksand?

Let's say that you ask for an action and get:

"Knitting with spaghetti!"

If you want to do this scene, fine, but if you think there's already been too much stupidity, try saying: "We did that last week", or get several suggestions, and then choose the one that interests you (ignoring the knitting with spaghetti). Always remember, that although the audience may laugh at an idea, this doesn't mean that they want to see the scene that's based on it.

Ask for a dream someone has had, and some fool will start making one up. Tell him that you're serious, that you want a real dream, not one he's inventing. If you can't get a genuine dream, then say: "O.K., we'll use one of our own, who's dream would you like to hear?"

If the audience really like an idea, then go along with it, even if the suggestion seems stupid - but don't be the audience's slaves; you can even use friendly put-downs:

"A profession?"

"Proctologist"

"Not your professional, Sir!"

Stronger and less playful putdowns like: "Out of all those millions of sperm how is it that you were the fastest?" are more appropriate for a comedy club. In *Theatresports* we want the hostility to be directed at the Judges, not at individuals in the audience.

We don't hear the tears dripping onto the carpet, but we're immediately responsive to every chuckle. Unless we help each other to struggle against this conditioning we'll just end up as experts on 'goofing about'. Be more pleased by a scene that has a story, and/or expresses a moral, than by a scene that was 'just funny'. Think of improvisors as story-tellers, or as people on their way to becoming story-tellers, and we'll be on the right track.