

The Art of **ACTING**

A Student-Friendly Anthology

Edited by
Effiong Johnson



Concept Publications

Chapter 6

Acting and Improvisation

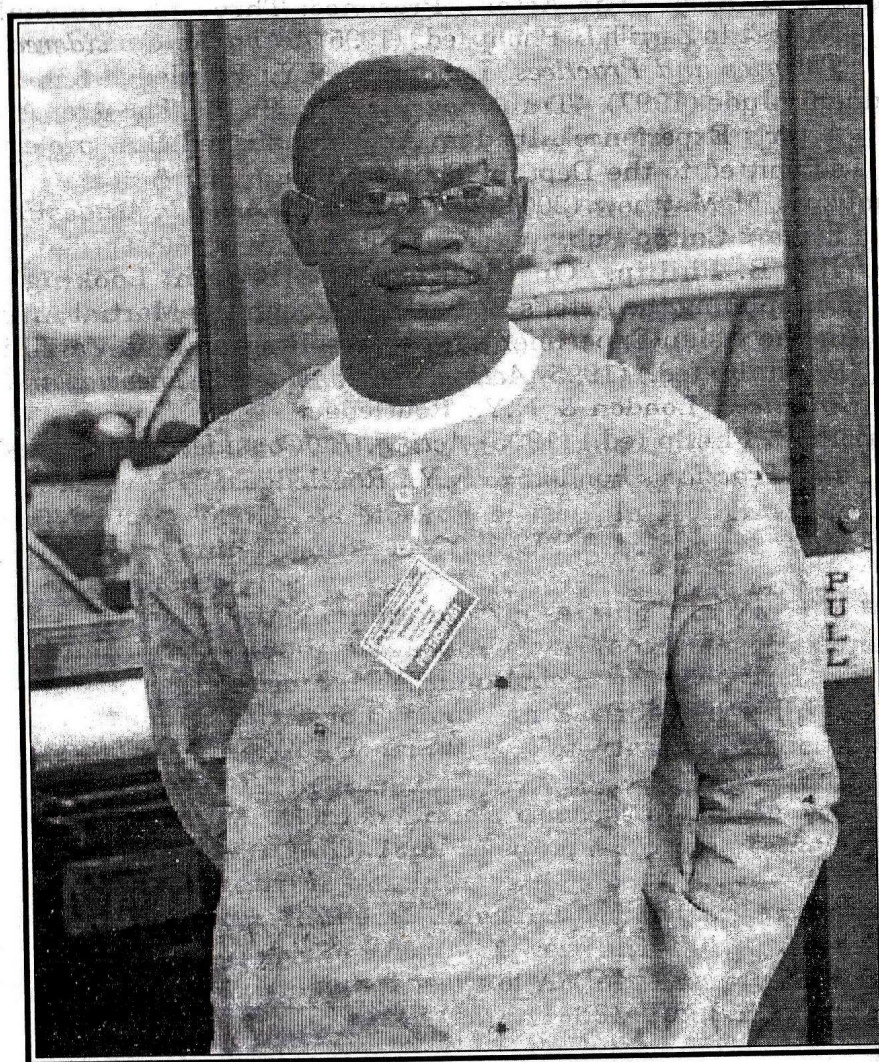
"The precarious and impoverished conditions in which our praxis is based are such that make improvisation inevitable."

Effiong Johnson (2004)

Acting and Improvisation

THESSE two words do not mean the same thing. But one cannot really do without the other. In every acting situation, improvisation has a way of creeping itself (rather usefully though) into it. Sometimes improvisation is resorted to by the actor in a rescue mission, to save a situation on the stage floor. At other times, some actor could truly ad-lib, not necessarily because he had forgotten his lines, but by really *adding* to what is there as the ideal lines. Both instances can be referred to as improvisation.

Acting is a conscious performance by actors as directed by a director before an audience. What is acted was chosen by a director based on his appeal by the text; then rigorous rehearsals were held to realize the director's vision of the performance, and the very perspective(s) he wished the audience to see in the play. Supporting technical elements, such as scenery, lighting, sound, costume and make-up, were injected to the performance-menu to spice it and give it the desired flavour. In addition to these, the rather 'strange' action, line or movement by the actor, which came during the actual acting or during the performance (as diagnosed



Effiong Johnson

by the director and probably other actors on stage because it is unlikely to have been recognized by the audience) was not selected by the director; was not rehearsed and cued-in when it was used. It came on the spur of the moment. It came as a spontaneous and creative invention at the right moment of need. *It was improvised!* But when it was injected into the act, it gave it a measure of sustenance (or survival of the act at that point) to the performance on motion. If perhaps, the actor could not improvise when it was necessary, the performance might have suffered want at that point.

Improvisation is therefore requisite to the charisma of the actor, crucial to the acting experience, and essential in smoothening the course of the play for the audience's comprehension and delectation.

Improvisation: Brief Background

Improvisation may have been identified with even Thespis, the first lone actor, as there are bound to have been occasions in his performance when he forgot a line, and had to "cover up" by improvising something. And whatever Thespis might have improvised on the spur of the moment – near enough to the actual thing, close enough to the original, and most unnoticed enough to escape the classical critical consciousness, must have passed the test of creativeness. From this thinking, the argument can be extended that improvisation has been a recurrent phenomenon in the acting experience throughout history; since it has been known that stage fright, overconfidence, sudden relapse into blankness, forgetfulness of lines by follow-actors on set etc, are often noticeable occurrences during acting by "no perfect" humans.

Oscar Brockett (1974:158) holding discussion on the *commedia dell'arte* form, identifies improvisation as typically idiosyncratic of the art form and as their exceptional tool. Also, because of the troupe's overt dependence on improvisation,

some scholars have had to argue that *commedia dell'arte* originated not from Atellan farce, nor from Byzantine mimes or even the comics and antics of Plautus and Terence comedies, but solely from improvisation. Whether this can be absolutely accepted as one of the origins of improvisation remains a contestable fact in the hands of scholars. But it is sufficient at this juncture to note that *commedia dell'arte* may have contributed perhaps more professionally to the development and practice of improvisation in the theatre than any other known theatre movement.

Improvisation as a Performance Style

In a conventional setting, a performance is most often based on a playwright's script. But most experimental groups, such as Joseph Chaikin's *The Open Theatre*, Jerzy Grotowski's *The Poor Theatre*, Peter Brook's *The Immediate Theatre* and Richard Schechner's *The Performance Group*, to mention but a few, approach performance or arrive at play productions mostly through improvisations. Their reasons vary. Brook, for example, sets out to achieve a "communal celebration" in his experiments. Hence, everyone is given equal opportunity to "participate". Grotowski, on his part, with his idea of the 'holy actor' who is absolutely dependent on himself and is willing to offer that self on the altar of performance, voids off any reliance on anything other than himself. Joseph Chaikin, on his part, is non – conformist – he removes the conventional theatre and "its conditional public." Poised to present a theatre which integrates the audience into the actor's world, he reasons that improvisation is the only dependable, flexible and resourceful tool as a means to an end.

The experimental groups employ collaborative efforts in their constructs; and in that typical setting of generating a "contributive art," only improvisation could be the easy methodology for creating. The dependence of a performance

group on improvisation – a system in which group members contribute to the fleshing-out of a scenario – can only be possible in a setting with very *creative* artistes; artistes who are either well-read or quite experienced. By this is meant that they cannot create from nothing. There must be a base from which they draw. Invariably, improvisory groups, like that their early mentor, *commedia dell'arte*, can only function in a sustainable manner with intuitive, imaginative and disciplined artistes.

If there can exist a group of this quality for many years, the advantage can be enormous. They can adapt easily to any setting, any situation and create thrilling scenarios which meet their goal and satisfy their audience. They may not need many weeks of rehearsals to perfect their acts because the performance is *in-born*. They are not struggling to learn 'strange' lines from a playwright from Greece or Germany. What is before them is theirs, fabricated from their familiar raw materials, namely, themselves – using their language in their familiar nuances.

The only major disadvantage is that, unless the groups meticulously record their performances in video forms, or provide for a chronicler who writes down the finished 'compositions', their performances may not be known by many people, courtesy of their rejection of textualism.

Improvisation: Meanings

According to Merriam-Webster (eds.) [2001:318], to improvise means to perform or provide on the spur of the moment; to ad-lib, extemporize, improvisate, concoct, contrive, devise and invent. Improvisation is that creative and alert mind, which, reliably, in an unguarded and yawning moment of want, supplies an acceptable "make-up" alternative, satisfactory and adequate to fill an emergent vacuum. It is a product of quick-witted imagination whose form or type is shaped by an actor's

creative quality. That is noteworthy, because there are known instances where an actor attempts to rescue a scene which has suffered a sudden hitch either from himself or the shortcomings of another actor, but the improvised solution does not exactly fit into the accidentally-created vacuum. So, it would seem that the quality of an actor's creative impulse is what determines the quality of the improvised art.

Essentials of Qualitative Improvisation

How can an actor develop qualitative improvisation? This question is similar to asking how an actor can have good talents. Yes, talent comes from God. It is an endowment on someone. It may not be purchased, but it can and must be maintained. Everyone who is an actor comes with a measure of talent; invariably with a measure of ability to *improvise* from the rich resources of talent. Primarily, the actor must realize and believe that he, at every given moment, whether on the rehearsal floor, or on the performance floor, has the resource he can readily tap from, should any occasion warrant such. He must yield himself willingly to this belief and work in this confidence always. He must not tolerate any doubt as per his creative ability to handle any situation which might suddenly erupt in the course of his performance. With this alertness and confidence in a talented frame, improvisation is bound to manifest at the point of need by the actor.

Participation in Performance

One certain way of developing a repertory of improvisations is in participating in play productions. Like already mentioned earlier in this chapter, either in the course of rehearsals, or in the middle of a performance, the need is bound to arise which would place a demand upon the actor to improvise. If the actor stands bereft of any ability to improvise, the director will shout at him to use his head, and not stand like a fool watching the situation. With that type

of directorial “abuse”, albeit very unpalatable in content, the actor will definitely whip himself to a point in which improvisation is birthed, *at least* to avoid the “insult”. The more performances an actor plays in, the more directly or indirectly he will come to terms with catering for on-the-spur demands for improvisation, and the more he would have built capacity for it.

Regular Improvisational Games

While certain people may not accept that the human brain can be dormant, yet it is common knowledge that many a brain has not been exercised enough for creative alertness, or stretched enough for elastic functioning. Patricia Rowe (1970:62), writing on dance, makes this provocative statement. How apt this applies to acting too!

Just as the body can grow unresponsive and toneless from disuse, so can the mind grow dull, slow and careless. Thus, a concentration on the development of the body alone in preparation for a career in dance (acting) becomes a questionable decision.

Games which task the imagination, or which facilitate quick-wittedness, must be devised and often injected into the exercise agenda, during acting/technique lessons, workshops, warming-up or winding-down exercises during rehearsals. This is crucial not only for the fact that such fora constitute the only learning grounds on improvisation to most people, but also because an imaginative actor is a confident actor and a dependable asset.

Improvisory Play-Making Approaches

Quite apart from relying on scripted plays for acting lessons, the acting teacher should accommodate the art or collaborative play-making sessions in his outline of studies. This is deliberately suspending the script (which tends to

shut-in the imagination of the actors) while challenging the actors to improvise their own scenario. This would task the imagination – in the form of establishing the scenario, determining its sequences, choosing the characters, apportioning their characterizations, framing the lines, assessing their suitability, etc. By this improvisational approach, imagination is awakened to its responsibility while the mind will ascend to the point of accepting and utilizing its capability. Thereafter, confidence will build in the actor capaciously and he will then be undaunted by any imposing challenge.

Being Deeply Involved in the Production Process

When in my year three, I had to play the role of *Captain* in August Strindberg’s *The Father*, the volume of lines I had to carry initially intimidated me. But as I inescapably (how could I when everything centred around the Captain in the script) participated intensely in the rehearsals, my total self-chemistry accepted my role as my sole responsibility, and before I knew it, all the lines were simply flowing. Moreover, I discovered that I knew everybody else’s lines and could prompt them in the event of their forgetting them. By deep involvement, my imagination stretched beyond the fringes of my artistic preoccupation, unwittingly. When an actor is well-involved in the production process, especially during the blocking of the play, he will be building his improvisational capacity; and, if his co-actors fumble on stage, he would quickly diagnose the fault and be at home with what to say or do, to re-stream them to a free-flowing course.

Broad Reading Pays Too

Are you wondering what reading has got to do with improvisation? I tell you, a whole lot. Don’t you know that imagination of what is being read is what sustains your interest? Don’t you know that you become acquainted with,