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The Censor Without, The Censor Within: The Resistance of Johnstone's Improv to the Social and Political Pressures of 1950s Britain

By James McLaughlin.

Keith Johnstone is a playwright, director, and teacher who is most renowned for his invention of The Impro System that he sets forth in his two major publications, *Improv* and *Improv for Storytellers*. This system reached its most widely known incarnations in the *Theatresports* format and the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway*. What might appear at first glance as a frivolous light entertainment is actually the result of Johnstone's determined and purposeful artistic journey.

It is my argument that the Impro System was Johnstone's reaction to the normalizing forces he perceived around him. These forces shaped the dulling, repressive society he experienced as a child and were represented by the Lord Chamberlain's office and its mandate to censor the British stage. Because every theatre production had to submit a script prior to performance, improvisation as an artform was illegal right up until the censorship powers of the Lord Chamberlain were abolished by the Theatres Act of 1968.

This is the first of a pair of papers in which I will examine this dynamic. In this paper I will address the relationship of Johnstone's improv with British censorship in a bid to articulate the emancipatory power latent in this mode of performance and suggest potential applications of this in a contemporary context. In the sister paper I will analyse the relationship of Johnstone's improv system to the normalizing forces in British society more broadly and the effects that his move to Canada had on his work.

By the time Johnstone was proposing improvised performances in the 1960s, the architecture of censorship had already begun to collapse. The Lord Chamberlain's office was often on the back foot, reacting to events, and endeavouring to maintain some sort of authority. Despite its weakened state, the Lord Chamberlain was the obvious target for Johnstone. His Impro System seeks to free the spontaneous creativity of the individual which thereby unseats the internal censor that a repressive society implants within the psyche.

Following a childhood Johnstone found repressive and a schooling that dulled his imagination, he moved into the creative industries and was appointed as a play-reader for George Devine's Royal Court Theatre, eventually becoming the head of the play reading department, and the leader of its Studio.

When Johnstone began to lead The Writer's Group at the Royal Court, he instituted a 'no discussion' rule, forcing the playwrights to act out or improvise the ideas that they wanted to work on. He also directly inverted the principles of his own teachers. He writes in *Impro*, 'When I began teaching it was natural for me to reverse everything my own teachers had done. I got my actors to make faces, insult each other, always to leap before they looked, to scream and shout and misbehave in all sorts of ways' (Johnstone, 1977: 14-15).

From the writers group at The Royal Court, Johnstone formed a group called 'Theatre Machine' that would publicly perform improvisations from audience suggestions. Theatre Machine received warm responses from audiences and critics throughout Europe. However, in their home country these performances were illegal.

To achieve a fuller picture of Johnstone's interaction with the Lord Chamberlain, we need to examine the trajectory of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship office leading up to this moment, especially in relation to improvisation. In order to do this, the Lord Chamberlain's

correspondence files, held at the British Library are an invaluable resource. Steve Nicholson's brilliant survey of this material, of which the fourth and final volume is due for publication this year, is an essential guide to the massive profusion of documents held within this collection.

The eroding authority of the Lord Chamberlain's office is very apparent in its dealings with improvised performances, a genre that was increasingly demanding public exhibition through the 1950s and into the 1960s. In the 50s, when a director called Stephen Johnson approached the Lord Chamberlain with a view to producing a play that would be improvised around a premeditated synopsis, the Lord Chamberlain's response is kind and understanding, but firm in its refusal. The parental tone of the correspondence with Stephen Johnson reveals the authority, self-assurance, and confidence of an institution that is still in control. Here is a taste of these letters:

'Lord Scarborough has asked me to express to you his thanks for the responsible way in which you have represented to him the project ... He is ... legally bound to demand from you the full dialogue and descriptions of allied action of any play you propose to stage ... I fear that this will be a big disappointment for you, since I can, in effect, do nothing but confirm that, unless you produce your improvisation in circumstances where the Theatres Act 1843 does not apply, you will be breaking the law.'

Following this polite transaction, in the first half of the 1960s, the Lord Chamberlain was faced with two American shows that pushed it to its limits in a far more aggressive fashion. The first was *The Premise*, that was produced at The Comedy Theatre in 1962. The second was *The Star Spangled Jack Show* from The Second City in Chicago, staged at The Hypodrome in 1963. Both had scripts licenced for performance, but neither mentioned the

fact that they would be improvising large portions of their shows. Once letters of complaint began rolling in and the press picked up the story the Lord Chamberlain's office was forced into an impossible situation of threatening prosecutions that they had no desire to pursue.

Nicholson notes that censorship operates most effectively when invisible, arguing that 'Preventing the unacceptable from being written or even imagined is probably the ultimate goal of censorship' (Nicholson, 2003: 2). I would argue that Nicholson's analysis bears some resemblance to Foucault's interrogation of Bentham's Panopticon. In this theoretical framework, the inmates of the Panopticon are trained to correct their own behaviour at all times because they could be being watched at any moment.

It would appear that one reason the system of censorship presided over by the Lord Chamberlain unravelled so quickly is that radical and subversive theatre producers realized that the gaze of the censor was not omnipresent. Furthermore, the Comptrollers were so eager to preserve their authority by operating with the consent of those they were policing, that the producers could get away with more and more.

Having been forced to walk an increasingly thin and fragile line between embarrassment in the courts and ridiculed impotence, the Lord Chamberlain's office was very sensitive towards the issue of improvisation when in 1965 Keith Johnstone proposed to hold public clowning lecture/performances. While retreating to some extent by allowing the improvised elements of the performances to proceed, they are explicit about drawing some new lines in the sand in a bid to demonstrate their control.

In the Correspondence file for the Star Spangled Jack Show two years earlier, one official remarks, 'We are embarrassed over 'improvisations', which at present are harmless, but

which are illegal and if allowed would destroy censorship.’ I find it intriguing that the improvisations are at once classed as harmless, and in the next breath are considered capable of destroying censorship. The primary reason for this is that improvised performance attacks the instrument of censorship at the level of process rather than content. Where Bond's *Saved* has repellent content, it is still presenting objectionable material upon an agreed playing field. It is still an authored play with a script that is performed in a particular production. Where improvised performance differs is that it represents the spontaneous expression of the creative imagination in the moment of performance. The inability to submit a script prior to performance is not simply a technicality, but a rejection of the discipline that lies at the heart of censorship.

A mechanism of censorship provides the means by which a central authority controls broader society's expression and keeps it within permitted parameters, usually as a means to prevent the dissemination of ideas that threaten the status quo. This centralising urge of censorship to eliminate difference of thought stands the best chance of success within a traditional model of the theatre system where a central author or director is ultimately responsible for the meaning created by a performance. Ideally this meaning is hermeneutically contained within a play text that can be read, analysed, and licenced or banned. This text contains the ideas of the author which are considered to be the potentially dangerous and censorable material.

Improvisation on the other hand breaks open the text as a container of meaning. There is no text from which the performance is produced, but instead the performance emerges from the particular conditions of its enactment, the participants involved, the space it is staged in, and the audience who view it. Rather than being the embodiment of a

premeditated script that might be assessed beforehand for censorable material, it is the spontaneous expression of the creative imagination and as such cannot be censored prior to its performance unless it is banned outright.

What is more, this liberation of the creative imagination is extended to the audience, who, in Johnstone's case at least, participate through the suggestion of scenarios and interaction with those scenes as they are acted out. The Comptrollers of the Lord Chamberlain's office were very sensitive to this aspect of improvisation and they often reminded one another that the improvisation of scenarios spontaneously suggested by the audience, what they describe as, 'audience inception', must never be permitted. This makes it apparent, that the prospect that most concerned the Lord Chamberlain's office was the dispersal of creative potential to an ever wider section of society. While it is never made explicit in the Lord Chamberlain's files there is an overriding sense that all kinds of public disorder would erupt if the audience of a performance was given a voice and allowed to suggest the ideas and situations to be performed on stage.

Such an extension of creative potential to the audience of a performance further breaks down the barriers of the author and the script that were traditionally seen as the origin and ultimate container of meaning. This process of the dispersal of meaning-making faculties from a central author to the multitude of the audience is a direct echo of Roland Barthes' advocacy of the death of the author and the birth of the reader. In the case of improvisation, this dispersal of meaning-making activity is exacerbated by the audience taking on some of the roles of a scriptor of the event, suggesting scenarios and interacting with the scenes.

Improvisation's dispersal of meaning-making processes corrodes the control of permissible meanings by a central authority. Therefore, I would argue, improvisation was not banned by the Lord Chamberlain on a technicality, even if this is what the comptrollers claimed, but that it is by its very nature the nemesis of censorship.

It is not a coincidence that the number of disputes arising over the issue of improvisation bloomed in the lead up to the removal of the Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship. I am not claiming that these cases directly forced this change in public policy. Rather, I am suggesting that they were a symptom of a liberalisation of the theatre community at this time, that they cut right at the heart of the operation of the censoring apparatus, and that they might therefore suggest ways that systems of control and repression might be challenged in other contexts.

I would like to close this paper by comparing the Lord Chamberlain's censorship with the current situation where the free market wields a far more insidious and effective power of censorship, a mechanism that is strengthened by the panoptical operation of social media.

Following the victory of freemarket ideology over alternative worldviews, the market has been looked to as the final arbiter and judge of what should appear on British stages. In the age of austerity, as Britain and the West seek to come to terms with the biggest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, public funding of the arts is under threat, and arts organisations increasingly have to make a case for the legitimacy of their work based on the economic benefits that can be directly attributed to it. The lauded model of the public-private partnership is currently in ascendancy and arts organisations are told that to survive they must seek funding from the commercial sector in return for whatever capital they might have to offer in return.

So now, at the centre of our panoptical censorship we have replaced an aristocratic servant of the crown with the Invisible Hand of Adam Smith. Beyond any political and ethical difficulties that this condition leads to, the commercial model has one significant limitation in its evaluation of performance -- its commodifying gaze. By treating performance events as commodities, product is valued over process. If the commercial imperative obscures the other guiding principles of our public arts institutions the integrity of the artistic process is devalued in favour of the profitable product. On this view, all that matters is that highly profitable shows, perhaps relying on the draw-power of celebrities, are created and sent out into the world to return money to the organisation which it needs to ensure its survival.

What improvisation might contribute to this slightly dystopian interpretation of the current climate is the destabilising of central mechanisms of control. Just as improvisation challenged the Lord Chamberlain's censorship at the level of its process rather than content, it might also resist the indirect censorship of the commercial model by its emphasis on process over product that defies the commodifying gaze of the profit motive.

If the product of improv cannot be known before it emerges, it cannot fit neatly within the strategies of commercially driven organisations. An improv performance might work; it might be hilarious, and generate unforgettable stage moments. However, it also might not. It might fail, the audience suggestions might not inspire the improvisors who may fail to listen to one another resulting in poorly realized scenes that do not satisfy the audience. Rather than being a flaw of the artform, this uncertainty is central to its identity and generates the excitement that partially defines it. When viewed from this perspective, the nature of the improv product is the processes by which it destabilizes itself.

The contra-example to this argument is the tremendous and sustained success of *Whose Line is it Anyway* that would seem to be the ultimate proof of improv's ability to be packaged and commodified. However, the effort required to produce such a reliable product from the improvisation process is immense. Colin Mockery points to the hours of filming required for even a short broadcastable segment. When compared to the much more economically efficient model of the standup show, where acts have been written, honed, and field tested by extensive touring, it is easy to see why there are so many more television shows based around standup than improv.

The profusion of social media since the turn of the century is often seen as a democratisation of media by the dispersal of perspectives. However, because it operates within the free market system, this ever-present gaze can also act as an extension of the surveillance by the invisible hand at the centre of our contemporary panopticon. Theatre and improv groups are under pressure to ensure that what the public can see of them is slick and polished. This increases the pressure to subjugate an authentic creative process to the production of a reliable and consistent product, something that is directly opposed to the DNA of improvisation where the emphasis is on taking risks and being prepared to fail.

However, one group that has found a way to defy these pressures and to turn them back on the indirect censorship of the free market is Barbixas. This Brazilian improv troupe shot to stardom in their home country because of the youtube videos they uploaded of their shows. These videos break down the idea of a polished product in a similar way as improv breaks open the text as a container of authorial intention. Although they began by posting polished excerpts of their craft, or product, they soon added scenes that failed, and more documentary-style videos which described their process. In fact, videos of their spectacular

failures often became more popular than those that show them succeeding. This connects with Johnstone's later theories, when he moved from protecting students from failing to helping them embrace their failure with enthusiasm.

Barbixas explicitly acknowledge Johnstone's influence and have worked extensively with him over the past five years. When I worked with the group in 2011 they were passionate about the use of social media to spread what they called, 'the improv message.' In this instance, such a message of failing spectacularly and with good humour serves to subvert the panoptical gaze of social media in order to privilege process over product. Their overriding goal of encouraging others to engage in improv fights back against the model of free market production and has the opportunity to resist the current indirect censorship that such a model imposes on the British stage.

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