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The Spontaneity Drain:

The social pressures that shaped and then exiled Keith Johnstone's improvisation

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, *Impro* and *Impro for Storytellers*. This system reached its most widely known incarnations in the *Theatresports* format and the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway*.

This is the second of a pair of papers in which I will examine this dynamic. In my paper, 'The Censor Within, The Censory Without', presented to this year's Popular Performance Working Group at TaPRA, I addressed the relationship of Johnstone's improv with British censorship.

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This paper will take a broader view of the environmental conditions surrounding the development of Johnstone's work. I will analyse three relationships vital to this narrative: The oppositional reaction of Johnstone's improvisation to the social pressures of 1950's Britain, the creative glasshouse that The Royal Court Theatre provided for Johnstone within this broader cultural context, and the effects that the new social situation of Calgary, Canada had on his practice.

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At the conclusion of the paper I will draw out the consequences of these analyses for contemporary British society and attempt to identify the normalising forces at work within this context and how our arts institutions and creative incubators might foster novel reactions to these pressures.

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Keith Johnstone reacted strongly against the society he grew up in. He dismissed his parents as 'small' people with middling ambition and no real imagination. He remembers that they, 'said no to everything and they had a very tedious, terribly boring life' (Johnstone in Dudeck, 2013: 22). In fact he found that the society in which his parents had found their place stagnant, slow, and narrow minded. [SLIDE] As he grew up his body manifested the awkwardness and alienation he felt towards his environment. What might have been a statuesque height turned into an apologetic, gangly disposition with a lopsided gait.

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Turning inwards from the world he saw around him he took inspiration and stimulation from books on a wide range of subjects. He could read fluently from the newspaper by the age of three, and by the age of 12 had devoured the Bagavhad Gita and the Epic of Gilgamesh. (Dudeck, 2013: 24). He doesn't give his parents the credit for his precocious reading habits, and claims that when his teacher asked them about his reading they had not noticed that he could read at all. However, his wide-ranging and voracious appetite for books might have set him up perfectly to flourish at school.

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However, the already stunted and frustrated Johnstone found that his schooling set about driving all of the creativity and inquisitiveness out of him. Johnstone later claimed that the system set out to dull and stunt every child that was subjected to it. [SLIDE] Foucault notes that the purpose of Christian elementary schools established from the 17th Century onwards was to inculcate moral values into children whose parents could not be trusted to do so (Foucault, 1979: 210). This moral imperative was subsequently fortified with further disciplines of fortifying the body of the child 'for a future in some mechanical work.'

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If Johnstone's perception of the British education system of his time is accurate, it would seem that the values that British society wished to impart to its working class children in the 1940s were blind, unquestioning obedience, the memorizing of accepted and sanctioned knowledge, and a repression of natural creativity and original thinking, effectively dulling the mind for a future in some mechanical work.

Johnstone's independent learning through his self-directed reading allowed him to see the disjunction between what education claimed to be doing (expanding minds) and what it was in reality doing (closing them down).

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He was put into a position to personally make a difference to this situation by enrolling in teacher training college when was refused entrance to University. Here he was taught by Anthony Stirling, who probably had the largest effect on Johnstone's subsequent career. Stirling was an advocate of Lao Tzu's eastern philosophy of the 'unseen leader' where the students are guided through tasks in such a way as they feel that they are responsible for

any discoveries and achievements they make, but subtly protected from failing (Dudeck, 2013: 27). This was a sharp departure from the 'banking' style of education that Johnstone was subjected to in which the teacher enforced discipline and forcibly imparted accepted knowledge to the pupils.

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Johnstone had great success in applying these techniques in a Battersea Comprehensive with classes of children who had been categorized as 'average' and 'uneducatable'. Johnstone remembers that the school, 'referred to [these students] as "poor stock", and they disliked precisely those children [he] found most inventive' (Johnstone, 1977: 20). By following the methods of Anthony Stirling, distilled from Lao Tzu's philosophy, Johnstone was able to overturn the rules of the classroom in 1950s Britain and foster the spontaneity and creativity of children who had been written off by the education system. Johnstone's methods provoked the anger of his headmaster, who said that he was 'not the right type' to enter the teaching profession. He was actively trying to terminate Johnstone's employment when the school was routinely inspected by the education authority. The inspector who audited Keith's class was so impressed by his methods and the results he was achieving that the Headmaster was given firm instructions to allow him the freedom to continue developing his own pedagogy.

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When Johnstone saw Peter Brook's production of *Waiting for Godot*, he began his transition from education into the theatre. [SLIDE] Taken on as a play reader for The Royal Court Theatre under George Devine, he rose to become the unofficial head of the play reading department, and was subsequently given the responsibility of leading the Writer's Group.

This group consisted primarily of William Gaskill, Anne Jellico, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Wole Soyinka, and Edward Bond. In this group he began applying his contrary attitude, honed in the classroom, to the theatre studio. Johnstone 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).

[SLIDE]

As the Writers Group melted away, George Devine established the Royal Court Studio. Keith began teaching his Narrative Skills class that he had devised and developed with the Writers Group to this newly formed group of professional actors. After a year Keith took over the full running of the studio. From the studio he formed a small company called Theatre Machine with who he would give clowning 'lectures' both at The Royal Court and in schools around England. These were in fact improvised performances that were framed as lectures in order to get around the Lord Chamberlain's powers of censorship. While he also wrote and directed for the Royal Court over this time, his main artistic drive was poured into these improvised performances.

So we can see that Anthony Stirling in the first instance, and George Devine's Royal Court in the second, provided the space for Johnstone to develop his Impro System. Outside of the creative bubble these figures provided, the broader environment he was working within was oppressive and resistant to the anarchic style of education and performance that he was developing. We have

already mentioned how the school system in 1950s Britain resisted his innovative pedagogy, but these forces were also present in the theatre world into which he moved.

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To briefly recap my paper 'The Censor Without, The Censor Within', I discussed how Johnstone was seeking a way around the censorship rules that made any improvised performance illegal. The reason for this was ostensibly a technical one, in that every public performance had to submit a script to the Lord Chamberlain for approval before the performance took place, a condition that was logically impossible in the case of improvisation.

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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.

[SLIDE]

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.

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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.

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The Royal Court Studio was forced to close in 1965 due to a lack of money. Keith continued his association with the Court, but also began to teach at RADA. Following two years of intermittent employment, but increasingly outward looking tours to Europe and Canada, Keith took up a lecturing post at the University of Calgary in Canada. [SLIDE] The main reason for taking this position was the financial security it offered as he had a young family to support.

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In Calgary, however, his authorised biographer, Theresa Dudeck claims that he was able to 'breathe better'. The broad and seemingly endless farming plains that surrounded Calgary presented more physical space than could be imagined in Johnstone's home town of Brixham, or in London. As a rural capital that valorised the contributions of the pioneers who settled the land, and those who continue to work it, it was also free of the centuries of 'civilised' history, traditions, and class structures that governed British society.

Calgary only began to grow as a population centre in 1883 when the Canadian Pacific Railway reached it, and enabled it achieve incorporation as a town a year later. When Keith emigrated in 1971, it was therefore only 88 years old. Whereas the Britain that Keith experienced relied on received knowledge of traditional ways to maintain the stability of society, Calgary had been built on the innovation necessary to build a community in a harsh and unforgiving climate. Despite being one of the more temperate prairie cities, in the depths of winter, the temperature stays below

freezing for months on end. The largest event on the Calgary Event Calendar for the past hundred years has been the Calgary Stampede, a rodeo that celebrates its farming heritage and culture.

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This room to breathe allowed Keith to flourish, producing anarchically creative productions at the University of Calgary, and founding his own theatre company, The Loose Moose Theatre. The main format at The Moose was Theatresports that was franchised to more than fifty countries around the world. The influence of Johnstone on popular performance today is considerable, inspiring the television shows *Whose Line is it Anyway*, playwrights such as Mark Ravenhill, and providing the studio culture for innumerable comedy troupes such as Improbable in London.

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However, although Calgary provided the base of operations for Keith to grow his improv empire, there was a degree of disinterest from the city about his work. The company was constantly subject to financial worries, it became isolated and alienated from the other theatres within the city, and was not widely known by the local population. The environment that Calgary offered, with its greater room to breathe, both physically and culturally, ultimately proved more of a problem to Johnstone's work than the oppression he experienced in his native Britain. Although there was no one telling him what he couldn't do, the local apathy towards his internationally celebrated work nearly closed his theatre on several occasions because the ticket sales weren't sustaining the theatre and the local government didn't see it as culturally significant. Accordingly, Johnstone has been slowly distancing himself from the theatre he established in Calgary for the past fifteen years. He now occupies the role of an international improv guru, not tied to any particular theatre or city.

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This narrative tells us a number of things about the conditions necessary to foster creative artists. Johnstone developed the key principles of his Impro System when working within the educational

system of Britain and the new theatre scene. Johnstone found both of these environments to be repressive and creatively crippling, but in each of these instances he found a smaller subculture within the broader culture that encouraged dissent, original thought, and creativity. In the case of education it was the classes of Anthony Stirling that provided Keith with the tools to resist the dulling, repressive culture within schools. In theatre, it was the Royal Court under George Devine that provided an oasis of revolutionary creativity within which Johnstone could develop his own practice.

It would seem therefore, that an arts incubator needs to provide a different space, an oppositional reality that counters the repressive forces that operate outside it. It is not just enough for the artist to be free of repressive forces, because in this instance (as Johnstone found in Calgary), the artist's activity is less vital and urgent. The artist must be a participant within a repressive culture and simultaneously have access to a subculture that resists this broader culture.

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In the contemporary situation I contend that there are two primary repressive forces operating on the artist: the commodification of performance, and a narrowing of ideological diversity.

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. We live 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, and are now facing the spectre of a 'triple-dip recession'. 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.

This acceptance of free market ideology contributes to a narrowing in ideological perspectives more generally. As free-market economics are seen as the only legitimate way of understanding the world, we are in danger of falling into a binary, black and white view of the world in which a single method of evaluation is seen as right and natural. The right wing evolutionary metaphors of the market facilitating a Darwinian survival of the fittest support the impression that it is a natural, and therefore unquestionable, order of the world.

This singular perspective on the a self-perpetuating dynamic in that alternative perspectives are marginalized and discredited simply for questioning what is universally accepted as truth.

While such a cultural climate might be fertile ground for the inspiration and development of artists, just as oppressive education and censorship were for Johnstone, this is only the case if there are effective incubators within society. There needs to be different spaces within the broader culture that resist the particular repressive forces at work. In contemporary Britain, I argue that these incubators must resist the acceptance of free-market ideology as natural and the associated and consequent narrowing of ideological perspectives.

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The National Theatre Studio for example, claims to offer external companies the chance to experiment with new ideas or processes on a limited basis. Most of the studio's work is to develop new work for the National's main stages. One of the key objectives for the National Theatre is Sustainability: to operate in a financially and environmentally responsible

manner, whilst striving to increase self-generated income. This focus on increasing self-generated income means that work developed in the National Studio, a supposed incubator of new ideas and processes, is subject to the profit motive. Therefore, rather than creating a different space where artists are protected from the oppressive forces of wider society, these forces bleed through and influence the work of the Studio. Rather than creating a different space, where new and contrary artistic processes can be developed (as The Royal Court did for Johnstone), the National Studio creates a feeding tube where artists are moulded and channelled towards satisfying the financial imperative that dictates artistic practice in the wider society.

I contend that such incubators are ineffective and that we need to look harder at how we foster dissenting voices within our culture and how we shield them from the oppressive forces in our society, in order that these voices may be raised against the prevailing ideology and enrich our cultural discourses.

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