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Long Form Improvisation – Creating Spontaneous Communities  
Through Collaborative Comedic Performance

by

Brad Fortier

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
Interdisciplinary Studies

Thesis Committee:  
Sharon Carstens, Chair  
William Tate  
Joel Bluestone

Portland State University  
2008

## ABSTRACT

Improvisational theater can tell us much about the driving social and cultural forces behind collaboration and collective constructions of reality, as well as the sorts of behaviors and practices that bolster their efficacy. The collaboration of the performers on generating a comedic piece of theater spontaneously from audience suggestions in a long improvisation creates a sense of what Victor Turner called *communitas* for the performers. That phenomenon can create a larger sense of socio-emotional unity between the audience and performers.

Turning an anthropological lens on comedy theater, this presentation explores the performer-audience dynamic and its impact on the success of an improvised comedic performance. Research was conducted through an ethnography of improvisational acting troupes and their audiences in Rochester, New York, and presents a series of unique situated references that help delineate a social bond between the audience and performers, or a "micro" version of what Gary Allan Fine and Michaela DeSoucey term a "joking culture."

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Many thanks to Geva Comedy Improv and Shipping Dock Unleashed! for the weeks of fun at rehearsals, their great insights and the warm reception I received. I'm excited that I'll be able to share the stage with you all the next time I'm there. Nate Halloran also deserves my thanks for being my touchstone, friend, and comedy partner in Rochester. Also, to Sarah, Nate's wife, who endured many an evening of waves of black humor rolling off mine and Nate's tongues. Thanks for letting us play in our awful way. You made the weeks in the field fun when, at times, they threatened to be dismal. To all the faculty, staff, and students at Portland State University who inspired, encouraged, and sometimes shared in the frustration of the educational journey, thanks a million.

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## I

*“This whole creation is essentially subjective, and the dream is the theater where the dreamer is at once: scene, actor, prompter, stage manager, author, audience, and critic.”*

- Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961)

### Introduction

Two men walk out onstage. They are both in dressy attire. The stage setting is spare. There are two big metal chairs, a small sofa, and a piano. One of them briefly air guitars to the rock music that is playing in the background as they enter. The music fades and they bandy with the audience for a couple of minutes about the gratuitousness of air-guitaring. The audience chuckles at their playful antics. The tone changes as one performer puts his hands out palms up and asks the audience “What am I holding in my hands?” A woman calls out from the audience “A cheese platter”. He repeats what she has said with enthusiasm, “A *cheese* platter”. The other performer after clearing his throat asks the audience “Could I have a line of dialogue?” A different woman in the audience says “Could you pass the lime?” The performer repeats her suggestion. The first performer asks for a third thing, “What’s an emotional sound that you would make in reaction to something?” “Pssst, What?” comes from a man in the front row. The audience and the performers laugh at the delivery of the suggestion. The performers recap the offerings and nearly speak the last suggestion in unison “Pssst, What?”. One of them adds that they will be occasionally asking for more suggestions during the course of the act. The lights go out.

The lights come up on the performers already engaged in actions. The first performer appears to be miming the slicing of something in the air in front of him. The second, with a coy smile, asks “Could you pass the lime?” The first actor stops miming slicing and silently mimes picking up a lime and passing it to him slowly. “I just thought the punch could use a little lime”, says the second actor with controlled excitement. The affect of his voice and body has changed from the moment the lights have gone up. There is an effete lilt to his character. His back is straighter, and his movements are measured, suggesting a myriad of things about his social class, economic status, and culture. He acts and speaks like a character out of an Oscar Wilde play: audacious yet refined. There are dispersed giggles from the audience. The first actor returns to his mimed slicing seeming disinterested and says, “Whatever you need, Reginald. Whatever you need.” The actor who was given the mimed ‘lime’ has now been named Reginald. Some of the audience giggles at this. “You know, Baltimore”, Reginald replies as he begins to mime squeezing the lime over a space on the stage, which is presumably a bowl. He makes squishing noises with his mouth and continues, “I don’t even need to *cut* the lime.” The audience giggles more, and some chuckles begin. “Yes, I know, Reginald. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen your little parlor trick”, says Baltimore unimpressed and seeming a little annoyed judging by his facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. Meanwhile, the other actor (Reginald) makes squishing noises louder and more emphatically while miming the crushing of the lime in his hand. Baltimore pauses from slicing, looks up to roll his eyes and groans. The audience chuckles and laughs a little. This exchange builds until the

characters have a “tiff”, and the audience erupts in laughter. At this juncture there is a quick change of placement between the actors. Some other suggestions are taken, and a different scenario with two new characters emerges. It has a similar arc of developing characters, story, mime and relationship while building and heightening the audience’s enjoyment. A third scenario comes from another quick shift in the actors’ positions, which seems to come without a signal or sign, and it is begun with a rendition of the third original suggestion. The rest of the act of this improvised show is comprised of returns to these three scenarios through this transition of actor placement on the stage, as well as songs improvised on voice and piano that emerge from the content of the piece.

The actors did not take any more suggestions as the piece took on a momentum of its own. The narratives, characters, and themes expanded and clarified through the course of the performance, all of which were inspired by the original audience suggestions. The audience erupted in ovations of laughter and applause at a number of junctures in this act. The performance and resulting comedy were steeped in a variety of social and cultural norms, transgressions, inversions, and shifts in frame of reference.

The phenomenon of comic improvisational theater has spread across most of the globe with performance troupes in a majority of the world’s major urban centers. This is an impressive trend for an art form that had its contemporary development in mid-twentieth century America. It is the fluidity, potential depth, and explorative nature of long-form improvised performance that has intrigued me for years. The

nature of this specific type of comic improvised performance will be explored at length in the following pages. When it came to doing this research, I wanted to discover a number of things about improvised theater. Why did it spread and grow even before the advent of the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* Who does it appeal to? What are the structure and rules of performance? Why do performers choose this mode of performance? What is at play between the performers and audience in a show that is collaboratively constructed for and with that evening's audience? What does the audience get from this dramatic performance that they don't get from other live performances? What is it the actors do to succeed at engaging each other and the audience? What about this phenomenon is of value to anthropology?

Improvisational theater is similar to other popular entertainments like role-playing games and reality television. These entertainments also have undefined or uncertain outcomes and those outcomes are largely based on the choices of the participants. In the case of reality television, there is a more defined sense of the situation being 'performed' for an audience of viewers despite the premise that the participants are not actors per se. For role-playing games, the performances are largely for the group of game participants who delineate a time and space for this performative game, typically away from the public eye (Williams et al. eds. 2006).

My own involvement in improvisational theater began in 1996 when I began taking "improv" classes. The majority of my experience has been with the Brody Theater in Portland, Oregon. In the time between 1996 and today, I have performed over 1500 improvised shows (a vast majority of those being long form). Directing and

instructing improvised theater are also significant parts of my life as an improviser. I have performed at festivals nationally since 1997 and internationally in Canada and Europe on numerous occasions since 2003, both as an individual and as part of a group. It was my involvement in these latter performance festivals that began to pique my interest as an anthropologist.

The way that people, who have trained from months to years, can get onstage and create meaningful and comedic theater based simply on some input from the audience was and still is astounding to me. Even though I may know the ‘rules’ and techniques of this form of theater, the way that so much is communicated between skilled performers through their performance tends to paint them as experts at observing and understanding human behavior, culture, and relationships. These are aspects of humanity that are the mainstay of anthropological investigation. The comedy in long-form can run the gamut from quips and base jokes to profoundly funny situations that reveal the truths of human existence. Powerfully profound moments encountered during the course of performing long-form are what led to my interest in studying all aspects of this art form, including the anthropological facets. For anthropologists, I can conceive of no better hands-on field training than the insights, observations, and knowledge that is woven into the fabric of this sort of theater training.

As an insider, I have been fascinated with the aspects of how to perform, teach, and direct improvised theater. Of course, it was difficult to remove myself enough to be able to describe and analyze long form improvisation, let alone improv theater in

general. Performers and teachers of improvisation have numerous pet theories that are bandied about, but I was more interested in what an in depth investigation could reveal, an investigation that looked at the whole event and encompassed the performers, the audience, and the performance itself.

It is important to deal with a basic, locally-situated understanding of improvised theater before one can extrapolate to a larger more complex context. As you will come to see, the basic and locally-situated understanding is fairly complex. Even for someone like me who has been improvising for over twelve years, there is always more to learn and more skills to develop as a performer, teacher, and director. It is amazing how this art form bounces between complexity and simplicity, uncertainty and definition, confusion and revelation, individual and group, fiction and truth. When it fails, it is daunting and uncomfortable, and when it succeeds, no drug can replicate the sensational high that can accompany it, like communion. In a metaphorical sense, it is the art of imitating life, that unscripted moment whose outcome is uncertain but dependent on the actions of the actors.

There were several ways that I benefited in this project because of my experience as a performer. I was able to connect with one of the theaters through a mutual contact we shared. My role as improviser allowed me to integrate into the fabric of the performers in both of the troupes I studied far more easily than had I not had any experience or understanding of this art form. For these reasons, I came to find my experience more helpful than hurtful in this research project. Lastly, I will draw

upon some of my experience in Portland and other places to help illuminate and support certain points related to my thesis.

### The Setting and Subjects

This research took place over the course of 14 weeks (9/21/07 – 12/30/07) in Rochester, New York, a medium-sized city situated on the southern shores of Lake Ontario, surrounded by the bucolic hills of the western part of New York State. It has an estimated population of about 208,000. Including the population of the suburban communities which surround Rochester would push the greater metro population to about 500,000. Bausch & Lomb and Kodak used to have large operations in Rochester, but these have been drastically reduced in the last decade, so that the major employers in the area are now the universities including SUNY Brockport; SUNY Genesee; University of Rochester; Rochester Institute of Technology; Monroe Community College; and Nazareth College. At least three of these five institutions have fostered talent that was a part of this study.

There are several Improv theaters in the area and an active college scene. The major theaters are Nuts & Bolts, Geva Comedy Improv, and Shipping Dock Unleashed!. Nuts & Bolts draws from a company of eleven to perform shows that are primarily theater games. They perform high-energy improv games sets that appeals to a younger demographic and families. Younger audience members, who I interviewed in the course of researching the Geva and Shipping Dock shows, had often seen Nuts & Bolts and reported that they enjoyed this sort of high energy, high comedy type of

improvisation with heavy audience involvement and wacky acting in the games.

However, I did not include them in my study because they did not perform any long-form shows.

Geva Comedy Improv (GCI) is a part of the largest regional theater in western New York State, the Geva Theater and was created as a means for drawing younger audiences into the Geva Theater. The Artistic Director for Geva Theater was a friend of the Artistic Director of Dad's Garage, a large successful improv theater in Atlanta, GA (Personal Communication 2007). The two arranged for improvisers from Dad's Garage to come to Rochester (between 2003 and 2004) and train an improv troupe for the Geva Theater. Drawing in a number of improvisers from local college groups, they set up a series of workshops that led to the formation of the initial Geva Comedy Improv troupe. There has been a lot of turn-over in the troupe since its founding, and only three of the current ten members were a part of the initial training.

The stated focus of GCI is to not only entertain audiences but "tell good stories". Their focus artistically is to accomplish good narratives in both the shorter games and their long form shows. They are expected to put on very high quality and entertaining shows because they are tied to a large theater with a reputation for excellence in all of their productions. However, according to members of the company, GCI is often an afterthought in most of the Geva's planning and budgeting, resulting in a disconnect that has grown a bit over the years. This is not an uncommon relationship between improvised and scripted theater.

Geva Comedy Improv's performances are well-attended and well-performed. They provide a quality piece of comedy entertainment and are considered *the* improv show to see in Rochester. Some of this may be due to the marketing machine at their disposal which is the formal Geva Theater. Another factor may be that the Geva Theater itself carries name recognition in the region. The budget and ability to piggy back marketing with the formal theater allows the troupe to easily outspend and out-promote the other shows offered by the other improv troupes in town. Geva Improv performs short-form games shows like Theatersports (a franchised format whose base is in Canada); Guerilla Theater; and long-form shows like their movie formats. The audience rarely knows anything about performance structure or improv ethos and philosophy, unless they are directly connected to the performers and, even then, their knowledge is cursory at best. This will be addressed more fully in Chapters 3 and 4.

The company consists of very talented people who have formal theater training. The ensemble was made up of nine men and one woman in their mid-twenties to early thirties, which tends to give this ensemble a fairly fraternal feeling. They typically have audiences of between 100 and 180 people. Most of the current company emerged from local college groups which seem to be the incubators of new talent for Geva Comedy Improv. In a way, much of the casting for GCI is nepotistic in the sense that people who are invited to audition and play with GCI are often members of groups that current cast members played with in college.

This is not much of a surprise as many improv groups base casting decisions on the word of someone who is a trusted company member who can vouch for the

prospective cast member's abilities to not only perform adequately but gel socially. They tend to rely on an established network of familiar performers. This is an indicator of the degree of intimacy that this sort of performance art requires. If there is one thing that seems to be a common desire in improv ensembles, it is finding members who can connect on a basic level in order to foster the "group mind". This is sought for in all performance formats, but it is especially precious to people who have nothing but each other to rely on in developing a performance product in conjunction with an audience.

In contrast, 'Shipping Dock Unleashed!' (SDU!) was a more grass roots improv group. This troupe began as an offshoot of another scripted theater in Rochester, the now defunct Shipping Dock Theater. The Shipping Dock Theater's name was built on producing more edgy, lesser-known, and newer works. SDU! was formed for a New Year's Eve variety show involving sketch and improv back in 2005. Following a successful first show, they decided to continue and develop the troupe, shifting their focus away from sketch and more towards long form improvisation.

This ensemble was more diverse in terms of gender and age, with four female members who range in age from late twenties to mid-fifties, and five male members who range in age from mid-twenties to early forties. One of the men is African American; the rest of the cast is Caucasian. The higher level of gender and age diversity in this group seems to lend itself to a more family-like atmosphere in working with the ensemble because a number of generations and gender perspectives were welcomed and respected.

Despite the small size of Rochester, there is a regular audience for improv. Much of it may come from students of the universities that are in and around Rochester, some of which have an improv troupe of their own. There is “Barrel of Monkeys” at SUNY Brockport, “In Between the Lines” and “Pretentious Improv Group” at the University of Rochester. This small enclave of students generally attends Geva Comedy Improv with dreams of sharing that stage with the performers, largely because GCI is a high profile show with great facilities. This makes it an enviable company.

In summary, the state of improvisational theater in Rochester is healthy and developing. However, it may remain in its adolescent phase as long as there is something of a brain drain going on in Rochester. Many people come to Rochester for college and leave for better opportunities in other more populous and progressive cities. The turnover that occurs in the improv groups here seems to match the larger social and cultural currents running through Rochester, as many people seemed to see Rochester as a stop on the way to somewhere else. It suggests something about improv, which is also true about theater generally, and that is that it tends to absorb and reflect the social and cultural milieu that it is set in. The nature of the improvised performance is such that these things are seen and felt more immediately because anything that happens that day can be a part of that night’s performance.

## Methods

I chose Rochester as my site for several reasons. As a performer with a long and colorful career, I needed to find a place where I could be distanced from my “improv” identity in order to be an effective researcher. Rochester also provided audiences that were not as versed in the nuances of improvised performance when compared with audiences in larger metropolitan areas like New York, Seattle, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where audiences tend to be riddled with improv students and other performers. My hope was to capture a more “genuine” reaction to the performances than one might get from an audience that may be scrutinizing performance technique more than entertainment value.

My 14 weeks of fieldwork took place primarily around the discreet instances of performances, and a third of my data consists of audio and video recordings of performances. I also conducted one-on-one interviews with performers and audience members; set up an online snowball survey of performers; and surveyed audience members. Living in Rochester and socializing with people involved in theatre provided additional valuable insights.

If audience members wanted to volunteer for more in-depth interviews about their experience watching a show, there was a space provided on the audience survey where they could offer their contact information. All of the performers from Geva Comedy Improv and the Shipping Dock Unleashed were interviewed. All interviewees, performers and audience, were asked to read and sign an informed

consent agreement. In total, thirteen audience members and nineteen performers were interviewed.

Almost all of the one-on-one interviews took place in coffee shops, and 90% of those took place under the vaulted ceiling of Spot Coffee on East Avenue in downtown Rochester. As a way to explore patterns in beliefs, values, and observations, two different lists of questions were utilized in a consistent manner in the interviews, one for audience members, and the other for performers. The lists were further subdivided into informal post-show questions and formal interview questions (see Appendix A). For audience members, the questions focused on their show experience; what shaped their desire to attend the show; their opinions on the interactive portions; and their expectations of an improvised performance. For performers, the questions focused on their experience and involvement in improvised theater; the dynamics involved in collaborative performing; the types of audiences they've encountered coupled with the audience that they would desire; and a description of the experience of performing long form improvisation. Audiences were given surveys to capture basic demographic data like age, gender, education, income, and racial/ethnic makeup (see Appendix B). The post show interviews with the audience members were "quick and dirty", and they rarely went beyond the comments of 'good' and 'creative'. However, there were a few instances of deeper reflection in post-show commenting that made this method worthwhile. In total, 18 performers and 15 audience members were formally interviewed. 95 audience members were surveyed, and 68 performers were surveyed online. Normally, I would not consider

this a large enough sample of formal interviewees to be significant. However, the findings of this sample coupled with my extensive experience in this particular field gave credence to my argument.

The online survey was constructed and administered to a snowball sampling of American improvisers starting with twenty personal colleagues who perform in various places around the United States. I later learned that the link was also posted to a couple of internet sites focused on Improv Theater. The survey itself was split into two sections (see Appendix C). The first was focused on gathering demographic information like age, income, and education. The second was focused on more qualitative answers to questions focused on the material and themes typically encountered in performance. These included: varying experiences with audiences, notions of the ‘ideal’ audience, defining a ‘successful’ performance, and what they personally get from this type of performance. This online survey, which I conducted before beginning, gathered a lot of valuable generalized insights, and it helped shape some of my questions and interview strategies for the field.

At points, ethical concerns arose around confidentiality. Since the community of performers in Rochester is small and troupes are close knit entities, there were a number of times where I was queried about what ‘others’ or ‘person X’ had said or responded with. There were other times where it seemed that certain things a person was saying rhetorically were a strategy to measure my reaction to see if I knew anything about a particular subject of concern to them. Considering the verbiage on the consent forms I signed with every informant interviewee, I took the need for

confidentiality very seriously. There is also a larger context to this, and that is that my parents have retired to a community just outside of Rochester. This means that my fieldwork was not only garnering me data for my research, but also allowing me to connect with the community of performers that I will most likely continue to see and interact with regularly into the future. In some cases, my informants are now also my friends, and that understanding informs the writing of this ethnography and thesis, as is often true for anthropologists and their study communities.

Like every human community, there are gatekeepers who oversee the goings on of their groups, as well as mediate access to their community. Each group studied tended to have two gatekeepers who worked together with the possibility of a third for Shipping Dock Unleashed! Typically, they were people who had either been with the group for a long time or people who had the most training and experience in improvisation. All of them were reasonable, confident, and friendly people and they were also the people who tended to seek out the most advice when they learned about my identity as an improviser. This also opened a window into the history, current events, and tensions in the group. Most of them made note of my role as anthropologist when discussing sensitive issues. One memorable comment from a gatekeeper in regards to the fallout of a conflict was “This has got to be like crack for an anthropologist.”

## Summary

In the following chapters we will be dealing with the various facets of long-form improvised theatre. Chapter 2 will explore the historic context of improvised theatre in America. The first section will introduce some of the major figures involved in the development of this form of theatre, as well as some of the major philosophical and practical ideas that drive improvisation. The second section will discuss prior research of long-form improvised theatre in Chicago to help establish a frame for the discourse on improvisation currently. It will also introduce the major anthropological theories that are useful in explaining the social and cultural phenomena involved in long-form improvised theatre.

Performers take the stage in Chapter 3. The first section deals briefly with a demographic portrait of improvised theatre performers in general as gathered from online survey results. The chapter then moves to one of the main phenomenon encountered in improvised theater, an experience referred to as *communitas*. It will not only explore this term, but it will also frame how *communitas* arises between performers through ethnographic accounts from the field. In the section following, the role of references in affecting an ensemble's ability to enter this territory of *communitas* will also be examined both through ethnographic accounts and an introduction to a theory on how joking helps define smaller more locally and temporally situated cultures. The last section reveals the sorts of social dynamics and practices that hinder or damage an ensemble's ability to enter into this state of *communitas*.

The process of the performance is the focus of Chapter 4. It centers largely on the performer-audience dynamic during a long-form improv show utilizing the ethnographic data. The first section outlines the various aspects of performance, both on and off stage, and it looks at what sorts of things contribute to growing this sense of communion beyond the grouping of performers and into the larger collective of performers and audience. The chapter then moves into how performers navigate a performance through a continuous feedback loop of audience reactions to performance choices and developments.

Chapter 5 highlights the action offstage by exploring the audience's experience. The chapter opens with a brief demographic snapshot of the audiences encountered at the field sites. Once again utilizing ethnographic data, the second section will be a fuller explanation of how joking helps to define culture in smaller groupings and how long-form improvised performance accomplishes this. The final section illustrates the establishing of this phenomenon with an account from a particular Geva Comedy Improv performance recorded in the field, along with the accompanying reactions and reflections taken from interviews of the audience, both immediately post-show and later in one-on-one interviews.

This thesis concludes in Chapter 6 with a retrospective look at the ethnography and ideas involved in the preceding chapters. It discusses how the shared construction of this spontaneous dramatic spectacle contains the seeds for establishing long-lasting social bonds. The chapter closes with a discussion of directions for further research on this form of theatre.

## II

### **History of the Art and Research of Improvised Theater**

*“Civilization has gotten further and further from the so-called 'natural' man, who uses all his faculties: perception, invention, improvisation.”*

-Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899)

#### **History and Background of Improvisational Theater**

Improvisational performance has been a part of human interaction and society for millennia, most notably via shamanic ritual and Commedia Del Arte (Taylor 1985, Sweet 1987). However, the roots of contemporary North American improvisation lead back to Viola Spolin, who began her work as part of the municipal Works Progress Administration (WPA) project in depression era Chicago. While serving as the drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the WPA's Recreational Project (1939-1941), Spolin perceived a need for an easily grasped system of theater training that could cross cultural and ethnic barriers (Spolin, 1963: xi). Many of the people that were utilizing these programs were immigrants and their children, and Spolin began devising theater games as a means to solve certain problems without making the actors self-conscious through too much direction. A 'game' in improvised theatre is a short scene (2-10 minutes) that is governed by a simple rule or rules which require the performers to work with the restrictions or conventions inherent in the rule(s). For instance, her students were avoiding or excluding touch in their performances. To address this she developed the game called "Contact" where the participants are given the rule that they must touch their scene partner in some way before they can speak a line of dialogue (Sweet, 1996: xvii). The development of this simple single rule

theater game resulted in great discoveries for the participants in the realm of developing stage pictures (where interesting/meaningful images are made through the positions/movements of performers onstage) and relationships in their scenes. It led to a discovery for the participants of how touch affects the depth and tone of a dramatic scene, as well as general human relationships. Spolin felt that utilizing the game structure for theater training was “a means to free the child and the so-called amateur from mechanical, stilted stage behavior”. (Spolin, 1963: xi)

Spolin was from an immigrant family, and this may have contributed to an empathetic understanding of the immigrant experience. Her own childhood experiences involved role-playing as a means for processing the difficulties of being an immigrant. She writes that “her uncles and aunts would “dress up” and through song and dialogue poke fun at various members of the family and their trials and predicaments with language and jobs as newcomers to America” (Spolin, 1963: xi). From her own experiences she understood the value of these ‘improvised’ interactions if not explicitly, most definitely implicitly as a means for groups to frame, critique, and explore their lives and the world around them. These experiences figured heavily in her work in developing improvisational theater games, which eventually led to her role in training the first improvised theater company in the US, the Compass in the mid 1950’s. Contemporary American Improvisational Theater was to be born from the seeds of Spolin and the Compass Theater in Chicago (Sweet 1996, Coleman 1990).

The next major figure to bolster the development of the art of improvised theater was Keith Johnstone. Keith came into the realm of improvised theatre soon

after joining the British Royal Court Theatre in the late 1950's, where he originally signed on as a script/play reader. Later, when the Court set up a writers' group and an actors' studio, Johnstone began to teach a style of improvisation that was "based on fairy stories, word associations, free associations, intuitive responses, and later...mask work as well." (Johnstone, 1991: 9) He also devoted much time in his teaching of improvisation to the exploration and understanding of social status and how it is enacted. Much of his work has been through the Loose Moose theatre and school in Calgary Canada.

Irving Wardle in the introduction of Johnstone's first book writes, "Like all great advocates of the unconscious, Johnstone is a sturdy rationalist. He brings a keen intellect, nourished on anthropology and psychology, to the task of demolishing intellectualism in the theatre." (1991: 9) This is an important characterization of Johnstone. Many of his notions of drama are steeped in relationships of dominance and submission, which he came to through reading the works of Desmond Morris, the popular British zoologist (Johnstone, 1999). The focus on social relationships that Johnstone introduced in the 1970's revitalized the improvisational scene and opened a new realm of exploration for performers and instructors alike (Seham 2001: 36-37).

Del Close is most often attributed with the formalizing of long-form through the performance format known as the "Harold"; a name that was given arbitrarily in the spirit of the Beatles calling their haircut "Arthur" in the 60's (Halpern, et al. 1994). Del Close formalized it in conjunction with his partner Charna Halpern at the ImprovOlympic, a theater and training center in Chicago. The push to develop long

format improvisation originated with the San Francisco performance troupe The Committee, of which Close was a cast member, back in the mid 60's. Their intent was to combine the elements of games, monologues, and other improvised theater elements into a single format (Halpern, et al. 1994: 7).

The originating form of contemporary American improvisation was theater games, which were later designated as "short form" improvisation. This designation of "short form" was necessitated by the development of "long form" improvisation. Short form is a format that utilizes a series of unrelated scenes and games which require a suggestion(s) to start each scene or game. These scenes and games have characters and narratives within the short framework of the scene or game. This form typically requires more audience participation and less required or prolonged attention because these scenes/games are unrelated. Short form often utilizes some form of emcee figure(s) to help direct action and attention between the end of one scene/game and the setup of another. The most popular example of this form is the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

Long-form is a format that utilizes scenes, monologues, and game elements to generate a longer piece of continuous improvisation that can explore characters, themes, and longer narratives through departures from and returns to established characters, themes and stories. The scenes/games in long form are related and/or connected to one another in some way. Audiences are often asked for one or more suggestions or inputs which drive the narrative of the performance, as opposed to the more structured short form. This may take the form of a specific existing type of

theater, for example a full-length improvised play or Broadway-style musical that is based around suggestions from the audience. Or, the scenes may be largely unrelated with the exception of a single point of inspiration. Unlike short form, further inputs are rarely solicited once the performance begins, and the length can be anywhere from 20-45 minutes.

Long-form improvisation can at times be episodic, spanning several shows with the same characters, each show taking the aforementioned time. Some long forms are narrative while others focus on character development, exploration of relationships, or the extrapolation of themes and ideas. In long form, the entire ensemble is engaged in generating content, as well as directing the action by sharing the responsibility of transitioning, also known as “editing”, between scenes when it is judged appropriate by any performer, as opposed to an emcee or the end of a game calling for a new transition in short form. It is believed that long form is capable of deeper humor and more meaningful drama because it can explore and develop characters, scenes, ideas and themes over a longer period of time, much like scripted theater.

### Studies of Chicago Improvisation and Useful Social Theories

When you look at the fact that improv performers are largely men, the question of gender imbalance arises. In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, Amy Seham investigates the history of the Chicago improve scene (2001), with a focus on the inequalities that seem inherent in improvisational theatre with the inclusion and representation of

women and minorities. Seham explores the evolution of this phenomenon through outlining the history of Chicago improv in three “waves” and notes that more women and minorities begin to appear in the “Third Wave” as homogenized performance troupes of Asians, African-Americans, Women, Latinos, and Homosexuals. In my experience and in Rochester, two of these three phases that Seham outlines are applicable globally, suggesting that Seham’s work lays out a sort of evolutionary path for an improv scene in general, no matter what city it is situated in.

Seham sees the establishment of improvisational theaters like The Compass Players and the Second City as being the “first wave” (2001). For performers of the time (the 50’s and 60’s), the *liveness* of the improvised spectacle and the immediacy of the material was a revelation compared to the pat scripted comedy of pre-WWII America (Coleman 1990, Seham 2001, Sweet 1987). Seham defines this phase of improvisational theater as being dominated by “white guys in ties” with the ranks of these ensembles largely populated by Jewish white males from the suburbs of Chicago (Seham 2001: 11). Racial, ethnic, and gender diversity were scarce at best during these establishing years for improvised theater, and the stereotyped depiction of women and minority groups was somewhat common (Seham 2001: 13). This phase tends to be seen today mostly with younger improvisers, often college-aged or in college.

The “second wave”, according to Seham, was largely a response to the commercialism and catering to tourists that the Second City turned towards in the 1970’s (2001: 31). Improvisation was recast by a popular phenomenon of the time, the

New Age movement. A new theater, ImprovOlympic, “offer[ed] “universal truths” and transcendence through groupmind (Seham 2001: 34).” Comedysportz “empower[ed] players to “sell” themselves and their comedy (Seham 2001: 34).” It was also at this time that Keith Johnstone, a British expatriate and improvised theater “guru” in his own right, began to influence the world of improvisation. His approach utilized exercises designed to explore “relationships between strangers” in terms of the conscious and unconscious maneuvers of status games (Johnstone 1980: 33-41). As mentioned previously, Johnstone’s ideas for theater exercises were largely inspired by the disciplines of psychology and anthropology (Johnstone 1980: 11). Seham summarizes the second wave as thinking that “the authenticity that mainstream society lacks is revealed in improv’s spontaneity (2001: 38).” This second phase is where most improv communities (outside of major urban centers like Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco) are currently in their development.

The “third wave realigned the structures, goals, and membership of their new companies (Seham 2001: 113).” As briefly outlined above, this wave of Chicago improvisation, which began in the 1990’s, was more concerned with creating an inclusive atmosphere for varying “identity positions based on gender, race, sexuality, and generational sensibilities (Seham 2001: 113).” It arose as a response to the continued lack of diversity in improvisational theater in Chicago. Seham frames this with a discussion about the development of the Annoyance Theater, which is noted for its irreverent post-modern approach to improvisational theater and its risqué ‘no holds barred’ performances. In Portland, there have been two all female groups that

came and went between 2001 and 2005 (All Jane, No Dick & Girls, Girls, Girls!).

However, there have been no other identity-based groups in Portland since these.

Seham's investigation and feminist analysis gives insight into how improv communities develop over time, as well as the undercurrents of exclusion and/or conflict in improvised theater performance communities. Both of these topics are directly relevant to my investigations in Rochester. However, her work does not engage fully in a detailed discussion of the 'how' and 'why' of what makes this form of theatre work nor did it engage in salient discussions of the audience. While she touches on and mentions that improvised theater is often steeped in "utopian" terms in regards to its social ideals (2001), she does not explore the mechanics of the social processes involved in successful and unsuccessful performance. Her discussion about what aspects contribute to improvised theater's breakdown and how some practices can marginalize individuals does help to illuminate some of the phenomena I have encountered in improvised theatre and in the course of this investigation. We will return to this part of her work in the section on performers.

Another investigation into Chicago's improvisational scene by R. Keith Sawyer has focused on the step by step development of dialogue in improvised scenes and the process of the performance. Focusing primarily on the verbal exchanges between performers, and the "*collaboratively emergent*" process that this entails (1999), Sawyer's discussion about improvisation being a "problem-finding" process versus a "problem-solving" process is useful in the analysis of the performers and the performance (2000).

Sawyer describes “collaborative emergent phenomena” as “those that result from the collective activity of social groups (1999: 449).” His investigations into these phenomena go beyond a top-down view of the psychology of individuals involved in a shared activity but rather bottom-up view of how the activity creates emergent trends through the collaborative interaction. This suggests the importance of looking into the collaborative aspects of improvised theater on the grounds of group development.

Long Form Improvisation is a “problem finding” process according to Sawyer because:

In the early stages of a long-form performance, the actors are actually trying to generate complexity and ambiguity, creating problems for themselves that will then provide their dramatic task towards the end of the show (1999: 452).

This helps to outline some of the reasons that social and cultural transgressions and inversions occur in an improvised performance. Granted, the transgressions and inversions are still bounded by the society and culture that the performance is situated in, even more specifically in the sensibilities of the audience present for a particular performance. However, these things provide the problems that will drive the rest of the drama, which will be to enact the social redress ensuing from dramatized socio-cultural breaches. The problem finding process is essential to creating engaging dramatic situations through establishing, then solidifying ‘frames’ of reality within the performance (Goffman 1974).

Sawyer’s discussion of improvised dialogue is fruitful, and his notions of “collaborative emergence” and “problem-finding process” are very valuable to this project. However, the rather strict focus on dialogue leaves much of the unspoken

portions of the improvised performance unaddressed, and like Seham, there is no mention of the audience. Sawyer does make mention of some of the mime involved, but rarely does he engage in discussions of tone, attitude, and body language (1999, 2000). For this reason, I felt that his investigations, though very useful and insightful, are inadequate for the scope of investigation I was interested in. How does the audience factor into performer choices? What about the non-verbal portions of the performance that still communicate meaning? These were questions that Sawyer did not address. In my investigation, I wished to balance my analysis between text and subtext because of the distinct one sidedness of text analysis. Society and culture are expressed in actions as often, if not more often, than words (Conquergood 2002). Some of the most powerful and meaningful exchanges between humans are unspoken. There is an aphorism in improvised theatre that highlights this notion, “Show, don’t tell.” This means that it is better to express emotions or relationships with actions more than words in an improvisation.

One of the main factors in performing improvisational theater is an inexplicable sense of community, often termed “group mind”, which is achieved during performance. Some things that help to explain this phenomenon are the concepts of liminality and *communitas*, as developed by the anthropologist Victor Turner first in relation to ritual and later to performance (1982, 1984). The liminal state is one of social and cultural “betwixt and between”, a space and time that is afforded a place outside of the structured order of socio-cultural norms and is typically situated in instances of ritual and performance (Turner 1982). Turner asserts that

“*liminality* represents the midpoint of transition in a status sequence between two positions (1974: 237).” In the case of an improvised performance, the liminal period of this event moves the audience and performers from being relative outsiders to insiders who share a common experience and references through the collective construction of the spectacle. *Communitas* is an existential sense of unity that often emerges between fellows in liminal contexts (Turner 1982). This sense is what gives an intellectual and emotional high to improv performers during and after a performance. *Communitas* and ‘liminality’<sup>1</sup> are very useful ideas when applied to long form improvisational theatre because they illuminate the emotional, intellectual, and social power of the experience for the performers, as well as draw the frame for the transitory nature of the performance. Humor theorist, James Caron, supports this notion:

Theoretically, liminality can be located at the affective, perceptual, or conceptual level...liminality should also be found in any artistic representation designed to elicit laughter. (2002)

The facets of the liminal that will be used in this thesis are those concerned with the inversion and transgression of social and cultural norms and mores within the frame of a performance.

When we think about improvised theater, we think about comedy that is made on the spot without a plan. Other theatric performances have the benefit of being

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<sup>1</sup> Liminality, in one of Turner’s uses of the term, connotes that a status change occurs for an individual through the process of the liminal event; like individuals becoming a couple through marriage; or a boy becoming a man through coming of age rites (Turner 1982). Turner uses the term ‘liminoid’ (1982) for events like performances and other spectacles where liminal features like transgression, inversion or more generally recasting social norms occur but do not affect or change the social status of the participant. Improvised theater is a liminoid phenomenon, but for the purposes of simplicity, I will use the terms liminal and liminality in this text.

either known by the audience already through prior reading or synopsized in press and programs. That leaves one to wonder how it is that someone would choose this type of performance and how it can actually succeed in entertaining them without any foreknowledge of the outcome or scenario. Typically, the sorts of person that this type of performance attracts are those who are a bit more adventurous, and they tend to be more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. However, these adventurers are rewarded with a comic-dramatic journey that they can have a hand in crafting, which comes from the process of the improvised show.

This process is an inherent factor in the ad hoc construction of a piece of improvised theatre, and it sheds much light on what is at play in the performance itself. Long forms, like the Harold, actually engage in the fusion of the elements and conventions of theatric performance in order to organize it along the lines of spectacles familiar to the viewers and performers. Liminality and *communitas* help outline what is going on between the performers and audience during the course of an improvised performance by defining the social processes inherent in the performative aspects of the social milieu of the spectacle. This helps us understand how a linkage is made between everyone present at the long-form improvised show.

After a show (sometimes days, weeks, even years later), former audience members will approach and identify with performers. They will often reference the comic moments that stayed with them from a show they saw in re-connecting the performer to the performance and ultimately to themselves. In considering this sort of social effect the ad-hoc performance has on both the audience and performers after its

finish, the concept of a “joking culture” as described by Gary Alan Fine and Michaela DeSoucey (2005) helps us to understand this lasting connection. A joking culture is a bond that is formed in a group that is predicated by a shared lexicon of comic events, and it is used as a reference that defines the essential ‘us’ or group identity (Fine & DeSoucey 2005). The notion of forming a “joking culture” through a long form performance is essential in explaining how this performance creates a social bond between the audience and performers (Fine & Desoucey 2005). This phenomenon can be applied to the grouping of performers, but it is also useful in describing the connection that is made between performers and audience through a long form show. I would also assert that this “joking culture” effect is dependent on the degree of *communitas* established between the performers, and between the performers and the audience during a show. These latter theories of Turner and Fine and DeSoucey will be explored at length in Chapters 3-5.

### III

#### **The Performers**

*“A fool’s strength lies in the very qualities that separate him from the conventional image of the heroic: humility and the willingness to support others rather than seeking power or glory directly” (Fader 2001)*

*“A hero suffers in pursuit of a goal...Players who reject the role of hero suffer the very real agony of being trapped in front of a bored audience.” (Johnstone 1999)*

#### **Training: Learning a New Social and Cultural System**

Many different people take improvisational theater classes. They may be interested in becoming better public speakers, meeting new people in a fun setting, getting over a fear of public speaking, or to improve themselves as performers. The last category is who I will be talking about in this section. Some of the people who take classes for the former reasons end up falling in with the people who become embroiled in the training journey involved in becoming an improv performer.

A majority of people who perform improvisation for regular audiences have gone through a training program of some sort. It may only take a class or two to become adept at creating a show consisting of theater games, a short-form show. For people who perform long-form improvisation, the period of training can be much longer. Many beginners attend classes where they are introduced to the basic concepts of ‘agreement’; ‘heightening’; ‘show don’t tell’; creating/maintaining a mimed environment; developing characters; and developing relationships and narratives with these characters. This is done largely through utilizing theater games developed by

Spolin and Johnstone, but it can also be supplemented by exercises developed by individual teachers.

Games and exercises address two different poles of concern. First, they deal with strategies and methods of actually performing. The game “Genre Replay” is a good example of a strategy and performance method game. The performers enact a base “neutral” scene that is fairly plain (possibly even boring), then they re-enact that base scene through the lenses of other playwrights, literary or film genres that are suggested by the audience. This aids players in becoming more adept at switching between character and theme while being able to re-imagine and reconstitute a new scene based on the original but bolstered by the trappings of the particular genre. So what seemed like a boring post office exchange in the base scene could become greater through replaying it as a romance, horror, or in the style of Pinter.

Second, some exercises introduce a framework for building a sense of ensemble or togetherness. For instance, there is the “Clap Game” where participants stand in a circle and pairs of participants clap in unison. They pass this ‘clap’ along the inside of the circle through having one of the participants who just clapped turn to the next person in the circle and clap in unison with them and so on. It is conceptually similar to the ‘wave’ at a sporting event. The clap can move faster around the circle, and rules can be added so that the participants can pass it backwards or across. The result of this interaction can be a warming to the sense of the collective through the interplay.

There is also a focus on social relations through training performers to understand how people exercise and maintain status through their behavior. There are games specifically designed to explore the continuum of social status and how it can be shifted dramatically or subtly between individuals. Another facet of this new ‘social’ training is centered on getting people comfortable with enacting social transgressions like making assumptions about people and stating them as fact; recognizing and exploiting another person’s idiosyncrasies; and interrupting people to go on to something completely different. The improvised theater stage is a place where inverting social rules *is* the polite thing to do (within reasonable limits). There is definitely a line between acceptable and not acceptable social and cultural transgressions and inversions. These limits are usually established through the course of a particular group working together.

When it comes to training for long-form, other concepts are required. There is a greater focus on narrative and ensemble play. Considering the fact that a group will be constructing a piece of theater through improvisation non-stop for 30-45 minutes, it is important that everyone be familiar with the various phases of narrative development, cooperative performance technique, and sharing focus in larger scenes that have 3 or more people. For many training programs, this is done through teaching people how to perform a ‘Harold’. The structure that is often cited as the “original Harold” follows:

Opening exercise [word association, monologues, etc.]  
Scenes: A1, B1, C1 [each is a distinctly separate scene]  
Group Game

Scenes: A2, B2, C2

Group Game

Scenes: A3, B3, C3 [optional, hope/look for connections]

(Halpern et. al, 1994)

However, this is considered an introductory format for long-form by many teachers as it is easy to impart this structure so that students can focus on the larger lesson of establishing and utilizing patterns and connections. Those two things, patterns and connections, are important in long-form by creating structure with whatever material arises from the audience and the performers.

Patterns can be any sort of repeatable phenomenon like someone plucking a flower in scene A1, someone being picked for a team in scene B1, and someone choosing an engagement ring in scene C1. This shows a pattern of types of selection “picking”, but it also gives us three distinct story beginnings. Connections are sought for as the piece develops through looking for places where the disparate, seemingly separate scenes/ideas can be brought together. Something that helps this is a narrative notion known as “time dashing” where the next installment of a scene has moved forward or backward on the narrative timeline, which may also mean a change in location for the narrative as well. So the character that was picking flowers in scene A1 may end up being the person arranging flowers for the wedding that occurs later in scene C3, and the person who was picked for a team might be part of the wedding party in scene C3 as well. That would be a kind of connection. Nearer the end of a Harold, the third set of scenes may only involve one or two scenes because of this connecting, but that is what is hoped for. Skill comes into play by trying to find

‘organic’ rather than ‘forced’ ways of connecting up a piece. The group games are typically focused on exploring a theme or idea from the scenes. In our example Harold described above, this could be something like the performers posing as a blues band with some sort of flower in their name and singing about how “life done plucked me wrong” or it could be something where two of the performers pose as sports commentators who are commenting on the team from the scenes while the rest of the cast portrays the players and field with their fingers. The choices are relatively limitless aside from ideally incorporating or exploring something from the developing piece.

When this patterning and connecting is done adeptly, the show truly does take on the feeling of being scripted because of the apparently seamless way that performers transition through and between narratives and situations. Much of the training involved in developing these skills is focused on performers giving up a measure of their individual intent on where to push the story, or ‘what do *I* need?’, and more on the generalized task of ‘what does *this piece* need to make it better or complete?’ This is the skill that takes more time to develop, which is why some performers go through months and sometimes years of training before they are regularly performing successful long-forms.

The structure and arrangement of the Harold components is reminiscent of basic structure for a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1909). The suggestion is taken and separated and/or diffused through the opening exercise via a word association game (e.g. suggestion = bear trap. Word association = snap, metal teeth, jaws, shark, blood,

screaming woman, etc.) , some monologues (“I used to hunt with my uncle in Alaska, and there was this one time...”, “My science project in fifth grade was on Venus Fly Traps...”, etc.), or anything that allows the performers to expand and explore the meaning of the original suggestion or one of the other words/monologues/movements of their other cast members during the opening. The performance is the transitory phase where these components are mixed and reformed through transgression and inversion through the humor and joking until the end of the Harold when the ideas, narratives, and themes discovered during the show incorporate into each other. This follows with Van Gennep’s three phases in a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation (1909), which suggests why this type of spectacle can have the effect of *communitas* on performers and viewers.

### The Background of Performers in Improv Theater

Today, it is fairly likely that most people living in or near urban centers in America have had some exposure to improvisational theater either through television, corporate workshop, live performance, or through the stories from a friend involved in it. Improvisational theater performers are a fairly heterogeneous group in respect to background. From an online survey that I forwarded to American improvisers via an e-snowball sample of 68 respondents, demographically improvisers tend to be younger (67.7% under 35), well educated (67.7% have at least a Bachelors degree), and work in fairly low-paying jobs (32.4% make under \$25k annually, 53% make under \$35k annually). The latter is not that surprising for people who are involved in

performance, which requires a reasonably significant time commitment and/or a flexible schedule.

Performers come from a cross-section of educators, entrepreneurs, students, restaurant servers, business persons, engineers or service workers. Most performers are male. Although my research did not look specifically into the factors that may contribute to this inequality in gender representation, we might understand this in several ways. It could be how the different genders are acculturated to the use of humor in North America. Some people suggest that women laugh and use humor to diffuse tension, whereas men tend to use humor to gain or maintain status (Tierney 2007). As noted earlier, Amy Seham's feminist investigation of the Chicago improvisational scene traced its beginnings to "white guys in ties" (2001). She notes the lack of minorities and women in the history of Chicago's improvisational scene and posits that the fairly fraternal atmosphere that can be common to improv theater is the potential source for the lack of female and minority involvement in the art form (2001), at least in "first wave" communities by her reckoning.

The cast of Geva Comedy Improv fit the demographic of "first wave" troupes that Seham describes. Of the ten members of the troupe, one of them was a woman, Christin, and one of them was black, Swithun, an East-Indian to be exact. They were fairly young ranging in age from 22 to mid-thirties. The mindset and flavor of this ensemble tends towards the college-aged male, but many of the cast came across as conscientious and empathetic people when interviewed. The professional backgrounds in the troupe were widely varied. Brian is a Phd student at the Rochester Institute of

Technology working on satellite imaging technologies. Christin recently finished her MFA in theater and teaches for Geva. John, who is newer to the cast, works for Exxon-Mobil doing environmental impact work. Liam is a carpenter/contractor who also acts in formal Geva productions. Paul is finishing his Masters in education. Swithun does cognitive rehabilitation work with children. These are some of the members and their professions to give you a better sense of the variation in performer backgrounds.

Shipping Dock Unleashed! also has a diverse array of backgrounds with a clustering of educators. There were nine members that were active during my study. There were five men and four women. One of the men is African-American who is a first generation African. Jill is in her fifties and is a theater educator for the school district. Erin, who is in her forties, also works for the school district training teachers. David, the African American, is a firefighter with the Rochester Fire Department. Mike is a twenty-something who works in a high-end restaurant. Linda is in her sixties, and she works as a dispatcher for the news department of a local television station. Sparky is in his late thirties and works at a corporate job. Beth is in her thirties and manages the office staff for a national staffing firm. This is not everyone, but these descriptions are merely to create a sketch of the diversity in backgrounds that are largely typical of improv troupes.

It is the diversity of these backgrounds and ages that raises certain questions. Firstly, how is it that these people from different backgrounds can actually create a

consistent improvised performance together? How do they make it gel? These questions are dealt with in the next section.

### The Path to *Communitas*

“Group mind” is a phenomenon that is often discussed by performers and teachers of improvisation. This state of group understanding and unified action is not something that can be simply read about in a book and enacted flawlessly. Achieving group mind starts with developing the skills of improvised theater. What sorts of things are wrapped up in developing these performance skills? What are the challenges of mastering the art of long form improvisational theater for performers? What happens during an improvisation that leads to this sense of “group mind” within an ensemble?

First, the challenge of doing *continually successful* improvisational scene work demand a certain level of personal surrender, along with strong listening, observational and communication skills. I say ‘continually successful’ because most people will experience and have moments of discovery, brilliance and connection working with improvisation, something I have seen in every beginner’s class I have taught. However, skill is when a performer can maintain a high ratio of success (pleasing both the audience and one’s fellow players) to failure (not pleasing the audience and/or one’s fellow players) in scene work. One of the first major skills to develop is centered on internalizing the ‘rules’ of improv. Understanding these ‘rules’

and knowing when and how to apply them is an integral part of developing one's skills as an improv performer. There are two major rules for improvised theater that have developed over time that translate into an interactional strategy utilized by performers to collaboratively create a spontaneous yet cohesive performance. The rules of agreement and heightening ("yes, and") are at the core of a majority, if not all, of the training programs in the art. This interactional strategy of "yes, and" does not always lead to an experience of "group mind", what Turner termed "spontaneous *communitas*", but it is often understood by performers that these strategies are the path to creating the potential for the sense of "existential unity" that is inherent in the experience of spontaneous *communitas* (Turner 1982). These strategies also give a somewhat structured approach to the ad-hoc development of drama.

Viola Spolin's insights touch on what Victor Turner later labeled and defined as '*communitas*'. In her seminal work Improvisation for the Theater, Spolin writes:

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other peoples' findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. (Spolin, 1963: 4)

Her thoughts have the same flavor and tone as Turner's writing in the late 60's and early 70's. However, Spolin's work is focused on the individual experience, and Turner's work is more concerned with group dynamics. Turner asserted that *communitas* is an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness. *Communitas* is characteristic of people experiencing

liminality together (Turner, 1982). Liminality to Turner is a period of transition, during which normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to something new (Turner, 1982). It is the combination of spontaneity, shared activity, and communal support through improvising theater that leads a group of performers to this unified state.

It is important to outline some of the processes and structures of improvised theater in order to point to how these techniques link to or may lead to this feeling of *communitas*. In improvisational theater, scenes can fall flat, go nowhere, or become mired in arguments. It can be disorienting for people to approach theater (an art typically linked to scripts, sets, costumes, planning, direction, and other trappings of clear structure and hierarchy) without a plan and without persons ‘in charge’ of the action. Individuals from the Compass Theater, who were inspired by the theater games that Spolin created, later developed a series of qualifying concepts that they gleaned from observing and participating in successful improvisations that were lively, developed narratives, and built relationships between characters. These later became known as the ‘rules’ of theatric improvisation. One of these is outlined by an ensemble member from the Compass and late Chicago improv guru Del Close:

Don’t deny verbal reality. If it’s said, it’s real. “What about our children?” “We don’t have any.” That’s wrong. Same is true with physical reality. If another actor physically establishes something, it is there and you mustn’t do anything that says it’s not there. (Sweet 1987: 141)

To Del, ‘agreement’ is the prime ‘rule’ in improvisational theater. Without it, the drama falters into fragmented bits that tend to lead to dead ends and can result in

feelings of mistrust and anxiety amongst participants regarding the process of improvisation. The act of agreeing on things that arise between two or more actors in an improvisation quickly establishes a “platform”, or basic frame of reality, for the scene, act, or show by way of solidifying and clarifying the parameters of the unfolding reality and relationships for the narratives and characters involved in the improvisation. As outlined by Del in the above quote, agreement is not just of the verbal sort, it is also steeped in maintaining the mimed objects and realities established by one’s partners in a scene. To further explain, agreement in improvisation is not blindly saying yes to any question one’s character is asked and sacrificing one’s will and volition in an improvisation, but rather to be able to roll with the reality one is a part of constructing. Ultimately, this process is a two sided affair, requiring both sides of the interaction to be playing by this rule equally.

The other ‘rule’ that is often coupled with agreement is ‘heightening’. Heightening takes the form of making something that emerges from another performer or from the scene, emotionally and/or personally relevant and important through depicting the appropriate behavior to communicate such an inner state in a scene, and potentially adding more detail and definition to whatever was offered by the other performer. For example, one performer could say, “Here’s your cereal”, and the other could respond, “My favorite! Fruit Loops in chocolate milk.” The cereal became important through designating it a “favorite”, and more detail was added through defining it as being “Fruit Loops in chocolate milk”. The byproduct of this example is also an implied history of a relationship between the two characters in the interaction

by suggesting the first move was a conscious choice to please the cereal eating character. Agreement and heightening (or more colloquially known as “yes, and”) are more guidelines than rules per se, but they are very powerful in constructing theater collaboratively. There are a myriad of other rules/guidelines, but this simple basis of “yes, and” is enough to illuminate the workings of improvisational theater on many levels. These two rules in essence create a process of “problem finding” rather than “problem solving”.

When it comes to creating a piece of longer improvisation, it is essential that the performers develop a good platform from which interesting, compelling, and comedic drama can unfold. In a larger sense this is the problem that a long-form performance must solve. In order to get there, the ensemble must establish or “find” a number of social, cultural, or even logical problems that the rest of the show can engage in solving. R. Keith Sawyer discusses the difference between “problem finding” versus “problem solving” processes in creative endeavors (2000). He defines a problem-finding approach as one where the individual(s) are constantly in search of their creative problem while still creating. Sawyer uses the example of Picasso’s method of painting wherein the painter starts with a line, then another line, and creates through a process of exploration and discovery. “In contrast, a *problem-solving* style involves starting with a relatively detailed plan for a [creation] and then simply [constructing/creating] it.” (Sawyer 2000: 153)

A good example of a ‘problem-solving’ style would be painting by numbers or painting a portrait because it is focused on solving the problem of filling in or meeting

the demands of an established structure or plan. It is the combination of the problem-finding process and the rounds of ‘agreement’ and ‘heightening’ that may lead to this “flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when [the performers] feel that ‘all’ problems...could be resolved.” (Turner 1982: 48) That flash is what Turner calls “spontaneous” or “existential” *communitas*, and it comes from the interaction of an ensemble of improvisers who are fully engaged in agreeing to and heightening multiple levels of relationship, character, narrative, mime, and theme in the course of a long form improvised performance.

It appears that much of the meaning and efficacy for the performers comes from this phenomenon of *communitas*, which also speaks to the larger issue of human collaboration and cooperation. Given that *communitas* is so important, it is useful to ask what helps and hinders the entrance into the state of spontaneous or existential *communitas* and what that means for the larger context of collaboration. Victor Turner asserted that *communitas* is an intense community spirit, the feeling of great social equality, solidarity, and togetherness. *Communitas* is characteristic of people experiencing liminality together (Turner, 1982). Liminality to Turner is a period of transition, during which normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to something new (1982). This part of the ‘liminal’ phenomenon is appropriate in discussing the process and experience of the performers.

Liminal is a reference to both time and place. It is a term that can be simultaneously applied to an instance and a space because of a sense of demarcation that separates the space/time from the normal rules and mores of typical social and

cultural goings on. One of the typical features of the liminal is the transgressing or inverting of social norms. When it comes to comedy and joking, these things are characteristically liminal (Caron 2000). Transgressions and inversions in joking and humor are what lend to making the long-form show a liminal event. In various ritual settings in many cultures, people involved in or undergoing rituals are allowed to or even expected to invert and/or transgress social norms during the period of the ritual and/or in the ritual space (Bell 1997, Turner 1982). For those who perform improvisation, the performance could be considered more formally liminal due to the expectation that they will transgress and invert social and cultural norms in the service of exploring the unfolding comedy and drama. The challenge to performers is how to remain oriented, focused, comfortable, and ultimately free within the liminal frame of the improvised performance.

Within the space of the liminal, one is potentially opened to the experience of *communitas*. Turner distilled his conception of *communitas* into three divisional components that issue from a base experience. It is important to think about these three levels of *communitas* in relation to improvised theater because they help to outline the movement of the social effects of the improvised performance on the larger community (of performers and audience) and how that larger community then feeds back into the improvised performance. The base experience and catalyst for the other two components is “spontaneous *communitas*”, which functions as the metaphoric pebble thrown into a pond. The ripples of this event move outward through the other forms of *communitas* only to reach the margins of the event and community and

feedback to the center, the originating point of existential *communitas*. The three divisions were explained by Turner:

- (1) *Spontaneous communitas* is “a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities,” a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction...this moment when compatible people-friends, congeners-obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that ‘all’ problems...could be resolved...if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as “essentially us” could sustain its intersubjective illumination.
- (2) *Ideological communitas* is a set of theoretical concepts which attempt to describe the interactions of spontaneous *communitas*. Here the retrospective look, “memory”, has already distanced the individual subject from the communal or dyadic experience. Here the experiencer has already come to look to language and culture to mediate the former immediacies...
- (3) *Normative communitas*...is...a subculture or group which attempts to foster and maintain relationships of spontaneous *communitas* on a more or less permanent basis. To do this it has to denature itself, for spontaneous *communitas* is more a matter of “grace” than “law,” to use theological language. (Turner 1982)

All of these facets are encountered and incorporated on the road to becoming an adept long-form performer, and they also manifest to some degree for the audience. ‘Spontaneous *communitas*’ takes place between the performers to greater and lesser degrees during classes, rehearsals and performances. It is the experiential ‘high’ that issues from engaging in the process of theatric improvisation whose techniques are largely based in an ethos of affirmation and collaboration. As mentioned previously, one of the main ‘rules’ is merely to “agree” on elements of the fictional drama as it unfolds in order to create an ordered and/or consistent stage reality. This process of

affirmation may be the key to this existential feeling of unity through the sense of support that agreement can foster between ensemble members.

‘Ideological *communitas*’ is situated in the ‘rules’ that govern and/or inform the performing of improvised theater. The concepts and jargon, that are essential to communicating *to* and *between* people who are learning and performing improvisation, comprise the ideological core of this art. The theory and philosophy that makes up the lexicon of improvisers is kept in the oral and written works disseminated to people who are learning and practicing improvisational theater. A quick search of Amazon.com came up with over thirty titles focused on improvisational theater and how to apply its techniques and philosophy to various contexts, a clear sign that there is support for the phenomenon of Ideological *communitas* in improvised theater. For many, their initial exposure is at this point through the controlled setting of classes.

One can consider the fact of numerous online and local networks of improvisers to be ‘Normative *communitas*’. Nearly every urban center in the western world and some in the developing world have some iteration, if not several, of a local improvised theater scene.<sup>2</sup> An improv ‘scene’ is usually comprised of several different groups or even theaters that operate within the same city or town. These groups/theaters are performing and teaching improvised theater to their communities thus expanding the network of improvised theater. It is because of one of these networks that I was able to connect to Geva Improv Comedy and ultimately to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://fuzzyco.com/improv/groups-world.html#Rest>

Shipping Dock Unleashed! The phenomenon of Normative *communitas* has led to a number of international collaborations where improvisation has even bridged the language barrier to create meaningful and highly entertaining shows despite all of the participants speaking in their own languages for a performance. Ideological and Normative *communitas* for improvised theater made the ground fertile for the experience of Spontaneous *communitas* to arise between a diversity of individuals from differing cultural and lingual backgrounds, a sort of artistic ‘speaking in tongues’.

These elements of *communitas*, which arise within the frame of liminal events like rehearsals and shows, are an essential key to the performers producing the dynamic needed for the efficacy of the spectacle. As will be shown in this chapter on performers, the breakdown of this process can lead to conflict which bears resemblance to conflict that arises over polluting elements in more sacred contexts, and the typical reaction to pollution, cleansing.

When it comes to how this sense of *communitas* is approached by the community of performers, they often refer to it as “group mind”. In the following pages we will see how some of the performers I interviewed describe their experiences of group mind/*communitas*. But first, the use of the term “group mind” may be due to the fact that one of the major titles in the artistic literature of improvised theater, *Truth in Comedy*, terms it as such:

...the group mind is a very real phenomenon. This is not to say that each person can read the others’ minds or project specific thoughts; but when a group mind is achieved, its members have a very strong sense of the group as

an entity of its own, and connects with its feelings and requirements. There is an empathy among the individuals involved, almost an instinct. The members exist to serve the needs of the group, much like the Inuit Indians who place themselves in a group trance to attack a polar bear or a whale. (Halpern et al. 1993: 92-93)

For many performers, their first exposure to discussions of “group mind” occurs in classes and the artistic literature on improv theater, but what exactly contributes to this sense of “group mind”? To approach this question, it is important to engage in some of the ground work of establishing what goes into performing “long-form”. *Truth in Comedy* is co-authored by the late Del Close, the “guru” who is attributed with developing long-form. This book deals with the ethos of improvised theater generally with emphasis on utilizing truth and sincerity to find comedy, but it also talks about the prime format of long form improvisation called “Harold”.

This form intertwines scenes, games, monologues, songs, and all types of performance techniques, and it is the basis for all long form improvised performances world wide. Harold is improvisational theater’s equivalent to  $E = MC^2$ , meaning that the concept is versatile enough as to be applied in a myriad of ways but has a uniformity to its core. The text also codifies “Yes, and” as “the most important rule in improvisation” (Halpern et al. 1993: 46). It holds importance for the artistic product, but I wish to assert that these simple rules also foster the experience of *communitas*, which is often short-handed as “group mind”.

Many ritual activities require the participants to agree on the activity and focus in the now, and that, if they bring sincerity and honest investment into the ritual focus

building on emergent trends in the interaction, they may achieve the “state of grace” wherein they garner a sense of connecting with a larger whole, a group unity, *communitas*. Even though long-form improvised theater is not intended as a ritual, this unity and mutual understanding is important to the performers of improvisational theater, as well.

Now that the conceptual groundwork has been established, it is necessary to see how this applies to the situations that were encountered at the shows in Rochester. To look at spontaneous *communitas* as understood by performers, I drew on the words of Erin, Jill, and Sparky from Shipping Dock Unleashed! Their testimonies were the most representative of the larger body of data. This helps to illustrate more clearly the things that contribute to entering this state of *communitas*, and how it can be achieved through an ordered system of interaction governed by simple sets of rules like “yes, and”. We begin with Sparky’s take on the unity of thought:

...I think being on the same mental wavelength, being able to finish each others’ thoughts, that sort of thing is real valuable. I think that’s the best thing you can get, in one sense; in the sense of like getting out there and doing the best scenes and the best improv.  
–Sparky (Personal Interview 2007)

Sparky is the leader of Shipping Dock Unleashed. He is a college educated, married, white male in his late thirties who works in an office for his day job. As stated by Sparky, performers know that this “being on the same mental wavelength” is important. It can also be consciously recognized as noted in Erin’s testimony,

When it works, and you know it’s working, There’s like an automatic pilot thing that sets in between 2 or 3 or even all of us at once, where you sense that

it's writing itself, and you're just kind of there along for the ride and enjoying it.       –Erin (Personal Interview 2007)

Erin's reference to "an automatic pilot thing" illustrates the lessening of personal/individual control over the performance, and she links it to a state that affects "2 or 3 or even all of us at once". This highlights the state of unified understanding that arises through the course of an improvisation. The basic meaning of her statement implies that when long form improvisation is succeeding for the performers it begins to become more of an unconscious process resulting in a decrease of intense focus on a single phenomenon (like a script or one's own character) and an increase in intense focus on numerous phenomenon (like several lines of narrative; mime; the tone and intent of dialogue; and how the characters in the various scenes can potentially relate, as well as how they are actually relating). Erin is, in essence, entering the territory of ideological *communitas* in order to communicate "the former immediacies" of her experience of spontaneous *communitas*, to use Turner's language. She is forced into the textual world of simile and metaphor in order to communicate some iota of the social/intellectual/emotional experience of the spontaneous *communitas* that came from the long form performance.

This focus on numerous phenomena during a performance, which was being discussed in the previous paragraph, means that the necessities of making particular choices issue more from intense group interaction and construction than from individual focus, desire and initiative. Those individual choice elements are still present because no action would be able to be undertaken without them, but they are

subsumed into a higher state of social-intellectual functioning. The performers move from a state of normal function and interaction to the heightened unified state of spontaneous *communitas*. In a successful performance, the milieu of action and thought is focused so intensely outward on the unfolding performance process that individual concerns are subjugated or extremely minimized in order to free one's attention and focus to allow for the reception and processing of all levels of social and cultural information that may arise through speech, mime, and body language. This is the entrance to the state of *communitas* for performers when their sense of individuality is reduced by a giving over to the group process. Jill's testimony helps to outline this sensibility:

First of all, there's that feeling that, once it starts, once the monologues or the gathering of information or whatever we're using to start it off with is over, there's that sense of of, um, ok. You're on this roller coaster ride, and you can't get off until it stops. And so, there's an intense, an intense [pause] I think I'm a good listener, but I have never had to listen and use so many different parts of my brain at the same time. And, um, it's exhausting. Afterwards, it's like 'oh my god', but you don't realize that *in* it.  
(Personal Interview 2007)

This intense multi-layered outward focus factors heavily into creating the sense of unity amongst the performers by way of diminishing personal concerns in favor of group concerns. It literally requires a majority of their focus in order to maintain the contiguousness of the piece let alone a single scenic interaction. Not only must a performer listen to the words of their scene partner, read and interpret their partner's body language, but they must also consider the scene's place in the larger unfolding thematic and narrative tapestry, and justify actions against the attitude and attributes of

the characters they play in order to depict the characters and situations sincerely (or at least discernibly).

This is an intense amount of information and focus for an individual to process, and so to have a social network present that is functioning on the dynamics of affirmation, incorporation, and building upon each others' ideas and words helps to foster a sense of abandon despite the daunting task at hand and potential odds of failure. These dynamics foster the "sense that it's writing itself, and you're just kind of there along for the ride and enjoying it." Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi would consider such a sense as a state of "flow" (1996). There is a Shinto meditation practice that is focused on creating an atmosphere of cacophony through shouting, ringing of bells, and shaking tambourines in order to free the conscious mind into a meditative state. In ways, the task of long form improvisation for performers is much like mitigating sensory and cognitive cacophony to find a place of operational calm where the performers are free to act, much like the Inuit group trance referred to in the quote earlier in this section. Even though there are usually only two to three people out of an ensemble engaged in a scene at any one time, the performers offstage are focusing on when to cut in to add the next scene, monologue, game, song or movement, or they are focused on how they can add to or improve on the depth, meaning, and clarity of the scene at hand. Of course, this deals with the ideal situation, but this is why Turner presupposed in his description of *communitas* that it was "more a matter of "grace" than "law"" (1982: 49).

It is that feeling of grace that charges the performers and performance with a sense of inexplicable accomplishment and connection.

I started to feel, um, a little more ownership in the stories and a little more of that kind of thing where [pause]. There was one time where I came out with somebody else in the group during the performance, and, um, we came out and the same idea about [pause]. This was two characters who hadn't been introduced yet. Both [of us] came out with characters and a situation and a focus that was identical. I mean the characters were not identical, but they were complimentary. And we just started talking, and I was like 'Oh my god, this is the coolest thing'. It was *so* cool...and this was the first time this had happened to me...That gave me a real sense of 'Ok, that *can* happen.'...That was a *great* feeling. That was a great feeling.

-Jill (Personal Interview 2007)

Jill is a married woman in her fifties. She is an educator as well as a long time performer with the Shipping Dock Theater. She had been involved in SDU! for about a year when she was interviewed. As we see in Jill's statement, when she began to perform improvisations, she was uncertain of whether or not she could achieve such a state, or possibly if it could be achieved at all. Yet, without conscious attempt, she found herself engaged in some sort of subconscious connection with another ensemble member seemingly without effort. It not only confirmed for her that such a state could be achieved, but it was reinforced by generating an extremely positive emotion linked to this deep sense of communal identification. This is probably one of the most repeated and reiterated experiences told and retold by improvisational theater performers everywhere (Sweet 1987, Halpern et al. 1993, Coleman 1990). This feeling is largely dependent on the performers being equal partners in the collaboration. There can be times in performance where one or both performers give away or take too much

of the initiative to act upon and within a scene. It is times like these where the ‘play’ can become ‘work’ because this imbalance can lessen connection between players and lead to difficulty. They then move from the ‘ludic’ problem-finding frame to the ‘everyday’ or problem-solving frame where one or both of them switch to merely making the scene functional rather than playful and surprising.

#### Shared Lives and References: Balancing Heterogeneity and Homogeneity

Another way to understand the phenomenon of improvised theater is to consider it as a type of ‘Joking Culture’. Gary Alan Fine and Michaela DeSoucey describe such a phenomenon through utilizing ethnographic work they each had done on amateur mycologists and professional meteorologists (2005). Their discussion is very valuable when applied to improvised theater because it helps to explain how this performance practice can create such strong social bonds over a short period of time for performers, and to a degree with the audience as well. I will discuss some parts of their notion here, but it will be explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

Fine & DeSoucey assert that references are one of three major components at play in creating a joking culture (2005). The phenomenon of the joking culture bears direct relevance to the performance ensemble. An improvisational theater ensemble can be considered a joking culture in terms of Fine & DeSoucey’s description by possessing:

a set of humorous references that are known to members of a group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis for further interaction (2005).

When considering improvised theater, these references not only need to be humorous, but they must also pertain to one's general social and cultural knowledge in the larger sense. When it comes to what it takes to master long-form and what the difficulties are to this art, the construction, foreknowledge and sharing of references is one of the major challenges that performers face in long-form performances after the rules (and not just situated performance references but references to pop culture, history, science, home décor and any other subject the audience may know). Sharing references is not only important in bringing the audience together in an improvised show, but it is a major concern for performers regarding the work they must do. As Sparky observed when asked what his ideal improv troupe would be like:

I think that set of interests is a good place to start. I tend to think that [sharing interests] really breaks down the barriers between people. You know, if you know what I'm talking about, then we can really get past a lot of mental barriers... I think that being on the same wavelength and being homogenous would be advantageous to a group.  
- Sparky (Personal Communication 2007)

So *not* sharing references can lead to barriers in interpersonal and intersubjective understanding. That seems like common sense in seeking successful social interactions. Essentially, all interpersonal interaction is steeped in this process to some degree. Homogeneity of reference, according to Sparky, is something that would aid an ensemble of performers in being able to have a more cohesive, coherent experience *and* performance. Since the process of improvising is so dependent on the knowledge that the performers have at their disposal at the time of performing, it stands to reason

that the more overlap there is between the individual actors' scope of references, the less likely misinterpretations or misunderstandings will arise in performance.

Although, much can be gained from the occasional misunderstanding, misstep, or misinterpretation by way of comedy, this is not the ideal that performers tend to strive for.

The effects of not sharing references were felt by two of the older members of SDU! They both carried a bit of anxiety with them because of this understanding that their references were not in alignment with a bulk of the ensemble's references.

They all tell me I think too much, I worry too much, and that I just need to let myself go. And in that zombie one, I could. I mean, Jesus, anyone can be a zombie. There are so many ways to be a zombie, but there aren't that many ways to do the Matrix.

- Linda (Personal Interview 2007)

The ability to connect to reference material was a major factor for Linda to be able to relax into and connect with the performance and the performers. Linda is an actor in her mid-sixties, who works for a local television station for her day job. A widowed mother of two, she has done numerous scripted productions with the formal Shipping Dock Theater. This part of the mix in performance, the references, is the sticking point that can keep performers from being able to bridge from functional performance, where the rules of agreement and heightening can be utilized and applied in mechanical fashion, to *communitas*, where a deeper sense of connection and inclusion occurs that integrates agreement and other 'rules' into an almost autonomic process. Linda reported that:

...this one night somebody chose *Zombies*. And I'm a big science fiction fan, and my husband *loved* the George Romero movies. So I could get in there and do it, and it was wonderful. I finally felt like I was fitting in...(2007)

The decoding of the humorous metaphor is a decoding of the meaning structure of the social system in which it is embedded (Douglas 1968). Feeling oriented to the material that was being used as the establishing referent for the performance allowed her to relax into the collective space of the performance and feel more a part of the group of performers. Her previous statement about thinking and worrying too much seem to be predicated by the fact that she feels that she does not share a requisite number of references with her cast mates.

I'm a little behind on some of these cultural icons. I just can't keep up with all of them. That for me is hard being a different age, a different generation, and they all say "shut up about it. Stop saying you're an old lady". You know, buck up, and talk to me like I'm one of them. When it comes to "let's do an improv", and someone says "let's do the Beastie Boys". I can't do that.  
- Linda (Personal Interview 2007)

This same sentiment was shared by Jill, another woman over fifty.

I'm older than almost everybody in the group, and, in some cases, I'm a generation older. You know, some of the members could actually be my children.  
So when I was starting, I was nervous about that. Our cultural references are different, very different, and, um, one of them just the other night was like "have you ever played a video game?" [Laughing hard] And I said, "Pong!" [Laughing] (Personal Interview 2007)

It is clear from these statements that a lack of shared references creates anxiety in some performers. It also highlights the notion that was mentioned in the introduction about how references can be temporally located and therefore harder to comprehend depending on where in time one's experience of popular culture is focused. On the one

hand, it is nice to have some diversity of experience and knowledge in an ensemble, but on the other, it can lead to difficulties in cohesion and comprehension between performers, which can lend to feelings of isolation and exclusion at a time when one is, ideally, open and vulnerable through the course of an improvisation. Isolation and exclusion are feelings that are in direct opposition to the feelings of unity and inclusion inherent in the experience of *communitas*. This is why I have designated this component of the performer dynamic as one of the major impediments to an ensemble's entry into the state of *communitas* in the short term of performance and rehearsal. It is also clear in Fine and DeSoucey's positing that reference is a major factor in building the cohesive unit of a 'joking culture' in the long term for the ensemble (2005). This is not to say that people with varied references cannot become a cohesive group, but they must accrue a lexicon of shared experiences and references in order to achieve cohesion. That is the essence of Fine and Desoucey's argument in regards to joking being 'referential'.

This element of referential accuracy ultimately translates to introducing a black and white dichotomy of a 'right' and 'wrong' way to represent or depict something onstage as evidenced by Linda's note that "there aren't that many ways to do the Matrix." It is this sense of right and wrong, good and bad, accurate and inaccurate that keep a person trapped in the everyday world of hierarchy, and socio-cultural norms and mores, and it prevents the establishment of the sense of unity and *communitas* (more of a socio-cultural grey area) and leaves one in the realm of fixed social structures rather than the shattering and recombining of social and cultural structures

through liminality wherein structures are fluid, broken and reformed. This also validates the importance of reference in Fine and DeSoucey's theorizing on "joking cultures" (2005) as it puts one outside the dynamic of the essential 'us', an in-group that shared references reinforce.

### Threats to *Communitas*: Rule Breaking and Poor Listening Skills<sup>3</sup>

Like any creative endeavor, disagreements occur of varying shades. Sometimes this is focused around style choices, and other times it is focused on control of the project or someone's perceived or demonstrated skill. Since Improvised Theater is an art form steeped in cooperation, collaboration, intimacy and immediacy, conflicts and difficulties can occur sooner than other creative projects. In this section, we look at some of the sources of conflict and how these situations are navigated by the performance ensembles in the hope that it can tell us something about the larger context of collaboration. We turn again to Linda's experience to highlight one of these difficulties:

I thought I was doing great in one scene in rehearsal, and I wanted to give Ken this car. I wanted to give it to him as a gift. And he came outside, and he said "Oh, it's a doghouse". I, I wanted him to have a car, and I totally forgot the rules. "It's a car", I said. It was a yugo or something. "I bought this for you." So he had to go with that, and afterwards he said "You know, ya blocked me." And I felt terrible, but I was so excited about giving him this car. I get into the playing part of it, and I forget the rules. So there's a fine line between disciplining yourself and just letting go. – Linda (Personal Communication 2007)

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<sup>3</sup> And sometimes Infidelity.

In the above quote, we see that the task of agreeing to something is not necessarily a simple matter. From the explanation, it seems as though there was a lack of clarity in Linda's communicating her intention about the car to the other actor, Ken. The act of agreeing on things that arises between two or more actors in an improvisation quickly establishes a "platform" for the scene by way of solidifying and clarifying the parameters of the unfolding reality and relationships, as mentioned previously. Sawyer describes this process as "collaborative emergence" (2000). Ken presumably made his choice to define Linda's offer of a gift as "a doghouse" because he wanted to add clarity to Linda's open ended offer of some sort of large-sized gift that matched the rough spatial dimensions she would have to indicate through mime in order to imply her intention of a "yugo or something". The rule of agreement in improvised scene work, as stated in the previous section, would require that the thing indicated by Linda, once defined verbally by Ken, is now what Ken has stated it to be. However, the next step required to complete this improvised interaction successfully is for Linda to abandon her original concept and accept the new definition as matter of fact reality. Hence, we would see 'agreement' in practice. Since Linda did not do this, Ken fulfilled the agreement by assenting to Linda's assertion that the "doghouse" was actually a "car".

However, we also see that Linda is also dealing with an implicit assumption that improvisation is "Just letting go." She is recognizing in her own practice that she must balance the implicit structure of "the rules" and the explicit reality of the performed process and its effects on social relations with her fellow players. The

“terrible” feeling of Ken’s comment about blocking is, in essence, a result of a breach in the artistic training of improvisers to ‘agree’ on the facets of an unfolding scene reality as much as possible. If these breaches continue in a consistent manner, they can lead to a larger social breach in the fabric of the collective of the ensemble.

In essence, these breaches become a polluting factor that consistently inhibits the entrance into the state of “grace”, *communitas*, because of the impediments that arise from the need to restart along a new path of logic, character, relationship, or narrative resulting from the block in the process of agreement and heightening. They may also erode trust and confidence in the person who perpetrates these breaches in regards to performing, or in the ensemble one is a part of as evidenced in the quotes that follow:

I mean I’ve had at least two hissy fits. We’ve all had little incidents, but I’ve had two hissy fits where I’m stomping around saying “You don’t want me here; I don’t know what I’m doing.” You know, just being a bitch...  
- Linda (Personal Communication 2007)

I became annoyed with Linda when she brought out, I think it was Nancy Travers; the ghost of a person who wasn’t dead. It’s just simply, we establish the game [of using ghosts of famous dead people as characters] and she doesn’t get it, and then she blames us. I knew in the back of my mind we were going to get yelled at for that. It was like ‘man, I know we’re going to get into it for that’.  
- Mike (Personal Communication 2007)

The denial of this process and subsequent blame-laying directly after performances led to Linda being asked to reduce her participation in SDU! to involvement in the short games and sketches when they do them. Because SDU! is transitioning to a stricter focus on long form improvisation, this translates to a distinct lessening in involvement

for Linda. As we can see in Mike's statement, the effects of such behavior are felt deeply enough to create tension and distraction in the midst of performance which further erodes the possibility of being able to establish *communitas*. Linda was asked to take a lesser role because she had listening issues and trouble integrating the rules of improvisation. Jill, another woman over fifty in the group, continues to perform with the group because she has been able to fulfill these criteria in performance. Mike is a college-educated white male in his mid-twenties who works as a server at a high-end restaurant in Rochester. He is one of the members with a high degree of training in improvised theater, and he was also a member of GCI before coming to SDU!

In an online flare up on their yahoo news group, Linda expressed exasperation over the 'handling' of the request to sit out of long forms. In response, Mike stated:

despite constant coaching and advice being given- you STILL block constantly, you STILL don't listen, you STILL tend to steam roll and distract during scenes and you STILL do scenes without adding anything significant, either in terms of plot or relationship. (2007)

Despite the terse framing<sup>4</sup>, this simple list paints a pretty clear picture of the things that hinder the "group mind": the stopping of action or denying of an established reality by another player; failing to pay attention and listen to others in the group in process; trying to control and guide the action oneself through insistence; being vague about 'who' one is, 'where' one is, or 'what' one is doing in a scene; and being able to track the movement of the themes and narratives of the piece. All of these things point to maintaining an inward individual focus rather than an outward group focus, but these things are understandable considering the complexity of the task.

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<sup>4</sup> Several of the members of SDU! felt that this blunt approach was too harsh.

Linda did have a sense that her breaches were affecting the group dynamic. She revealed as much in her interview, which by happenstance directly preceded the rehearsal where she was asked to reduce her participation:

I mean, they've all been very generous to me, and I keep waiting for them to say "look, we can't have you here anymore" [laughing]. I mean I'm not kidding. I wouldn't be surprised if they finally said "look, you're really, you're just not making it" <sigh>. (2007)

Clearly, she was tuned in to the dynamic enough to sense the tension the behavior issuing from her anxiety was creating in the group. These anxieties blocked her from being able to enter into the liminal space where one can relax the "normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior" (Turner 1982). This very thing was noted by her fellow player, Mike, in his interview:

I don't think there's a more important thing in improv than listening. If you're gonna nail it down to one thing, it has to be that. And it's something Linda doesn't do...She lacks a filter. I told her "you don't seem to be able to shut out everything else." (2007)

His comment about 'shutting-out everything else' denotes the separation of the performance instance from normal life and action, which highlights the liminality of performing improvisation. His insistence on the primacy of "listening" supports the idea of needing to be open and attentive to others. Listening and being sensitive to not only positive but also negative feedback from one's audience plays a major role in becoming an effective comedian who is able to construct 'quality' jokes and/or other humorous artifacts (Dewitte & Verguts 2001). For a group of people focused on creating a comedic show together, this dual sensitivity is essential to a performer's development and success. It also suggests that even slight reactions and movements

from the audience contribute to the choices of performers who have this quality.

Mike's comment suggests that Linda seemed unable to enter that space with the rest of the cast. The theme of exclusion and isolation from the group played through much of Linda's interview, but the emotional impact of this is distinct:

And I have to be honest that I get paranoid that they're not including me or they're denying me. If I say something, sometimes it gets overlooked, and that's what makes me feel like they don't want me in the group anymore. But nobody will admit it. (2007)

From Linda's perspective, the group was denying and overlooking her when they were choosing and discarding elements of the improvisation that served the larger purpose of the unfolding piece. Rejecting and replacing material is common in all performance genres (Schechner 1985). In improvisation, there is no space or time for discourse on the process of selection and omission.

Linda's focus in the long form was still on the level of individual recognition for individual contribution, which was understandable considering her breadth of experience in traditional theater where individual contribution and accomplishment are more clearly recognized and applauded. What she may not have recognized is that contributions of others were also being sifted through for utility in the unfolding performance because she was mired in a focus of only her contributions. Other performers seemed to identify less with individual contributions to the full performance. Jill made specific note of this group focus in regards to how nebulous individual contributions can be in hindsight.

For the group, I think a successful performance is everybody feeling that they have, um, contributed to the story that we've told. And I love it when people

can't remember who started something, or you're not sure how that thread got where it got. (2007)

This statement highlights the fact that when a group has entered into the 'group mind', *communitas*, they enter into "the feeling of great social equality, solidarity and togetherness" (Turner 1982: 48). The remark that they cannot remember distinctly which individual was responsible for particular elements in a "successful performance", denotes that the sense of individuality is distinctly diminished in favor of unity of focus and intention, *communitas*.

Issues of poor listening and rule breaking are not the only threats to *communitas*. Somewhat reminiscent of Seham's "first wave" paradigm in the Chicago improvisational community (2001: 13) and further illustrating the utility of Seham's notions of ideological evolution in a community's improv theater scene, Geva Comedy Improv dismissed a member one month after my data collection trip to Rochester. Swithun was the only person of color in Geva Comedy Improv. By his own admission, there were a number of times where issues of race came into play onstage, and he felt like he was there to give legitimacy to the comedy surrounding that. He had been becoming increasingly distant from the ensemble due to several factors; he did not drink or smoke, he was beginning to miss rehearsals because he was fostering other groups, and he had also been vocal about being more reflective and critical about the ensemble's work in regards to issues of gender equity and other facets of political correctness which he felt were lacking in GCI. This led some of the ensemble members to regard him with suspicion in their dealings with him. They

reported feeling as if he was always “talking out of the side of his mouth” whenever they had ‘sit down’ talks with him.

GCI had a cast comprised of eight men and one woman. Because of this gender imbalance the group has a distinct fraternal feeling. In a conversation about being reflective and considerate about gender and other issues of political correctness one member suggested that such things slow him down, and that he feels freer when he is able to “cross those lines” in rehearsal and sometimes in performance.<sup>5</sup> Since this seems to be acceptable and comfortable for a majority of the cast, it is the level on which they are homogenous, and it is the gateway to their feelings of cohesion and *communitas*. It is not whether they are justified or correct in finding fun in overturning or not being politically correct, it is about being able to “be on the same level” to quote Sparky. In GCI, that level is informed by the overarching demographic of the twenty to thirty-something college educated white male.

For Shipping Dock Unleashed, the difference in demographic is blurred by an informal agreement between performers to focus on things that aid the process of improvisation, like the rules and techniques, as outlined in this conversation between Jill and myself about her fear of not sharing references:

J: I’d have to say that the dynamic in the group has dispelled a lot of those fears [of not sharing as many references].

B: The dynamic being that sense of generosity that you’re talking about?

J: Yes, and also the focus on ‘ok, so what’s the best way to tell this story?’, you

know, ‘what’s the best way to bring in everybody’s strengths?’

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<sup>5</sup> Geva Comedy Improv must put on a ‘family friendly’ show that cannot cross the PG-13 rating line because those are the stipulations of being a part of the formal Geva Theater, which is concerned with putting forth the proper appearance to its subscribers in all of its productions.

(Personal Communication 2007)

It's not that these same concerns do not enter into the picture with GCI, but they may be less critical in a milieu where there is a high degree of homogeneity in reference. For SDU!, these rules and techniques must be focused on to a greater degree because of their group's heterogeneity. All of the members of Shipping Dock Unleashed praised the fact that there was a high degree of gender equity in their group, and both men and women in the group felt that it lent to a more "family-like", warm feeling to the group. For Shipping Dock Unleashed!, *communitas* has defined the boundaries of their performance family. For Geva Comedy Improv, *communitas* has defined the boundaries of their somewhat fraternal family.

In the larger picture, we can see these currents as illuminating the social processes involved in collaboration. Some of the core issues involved in the conflicts described above revolve around clear communication, listening and transparency. Linda was not able to find a way to clearly communicate her intentions through the milieu of performance, and she was unable to recognize "the forest for the trees" in her own words. Swithun's ensemble could no longer clearly discern his intentions and viewed his behavior as a performance in the pejorative sense.

Despite the codified 'rules' that inform the process of performing, intentions, motivations, and other things that might be discussed in rehearsals regarding the performance frame in a scripted or planned show are largely communicated through individual performative actions, a 'performer text' that underscores the 'spectacle text'. Performers draw on a lexicon of performative acts (learned in classes, rehearsals,

performances and also observed in everyday life) as well as the rules of improv theater to create in ad-hoc fashion what dramaturges would term a “Spectacle Text” (Elam 2002), or the sum total meaning of dialogue, staging, mis-en-scène and mime in a performance. This utilization of performative acts as medium for communication between performers via the rules of improvisation (in the midst of utilizing the same acts to communicate comedic tales of strange or mundane worlds, characters and relationships) seems to be the epiphany that may be necessary for a performer to fully understand and engage in long form improvisational theater. This is also the conundrum that performers face.

A performer must be able to understand the actions of another performer in the frame of performance as a “character” while being able to read the intent of their fellow performer through the frame of improv rules and techniques as a “player”. For Linda, the intent of the other performers seemed to be exclusion at points, but the behavior of the other performers was in reaction to the idiosyncrasies of her developing improvisational skills coupled with her emotional outbursts. Performers must also be able to translate both their own understanding and interpretation of the performance *and* that of the other performer as player into a response in the form of another performative act. This not only confirms their understanding and interpretation of the unfolding spectacle but also adds to the meaning and efficacy of the performance. This is the process that Sawyer terms “collaborative emergence” (1999). As the performers go through rounds of this sort of collaborative interaction, the

frames of reality and meaning coalesce and solidify through the process (Sawyer 1999, 2000), as does their sense of unity of purpose, understanding and action, *communitas*.

If one is not listening well, if one does not compose a performative act clearly enough to communicate intention (like Linda's car/doghouse scenario), and if one does not see through the performative act to the intention (or conversely does not see the performative act because they are overly concerned with the intention like Linda's legitimate paranoia regarding exclusion), then there is a breakdown in finding a synergy of performance, intention, and understanding in process during the collaboration. Isolated breakdowns do not threaten the larger process and product, but given enough, the collaboration breaks down and diminishes the quality of the output of the collaborating entity.

There are a number of social and psychological factors that could contribute to an individual's ability to invest fully in a productive collaborative effort, which is why Turner asserted that *communitas* was more a state of "grace" than one of "law" (1982). The main threats to *communitas*, and more generally to collaboration, are anxiety from miscommunication and misunderstanding because these tend to redirect one's focus back on oneself until clarification can be sought and reconnection, or 'agreement', with the group can be achieved. If these threats cannot be diminished or fixed, then they become polluting factors that are expelled, or cleansed, from the collaborative context. The following statement by Mike from his online response to Linda's flare up supports this idea:

You're right- the troupe does indeed seem to be headed towards more a long-form-intensive performance, which does leave much less room for someone who isn't at the same level as everyone else...I think I speak for all of us when I say that we all care about you and consider you a friend, so no, you weren't "way off on that." But in the long run, this is probably for the best for everyone involved, no matter how it was handled. (2007)

So it is that we see the collective outweighing the individual as the primary concern.

Mike's reference to Linda's statement of being off-base about friendship connotes the depths of intimacy that this sort of theater, and the corresponding phenomenon of *communitas*, creates.

## IV

### The Performance

*“The only things that matter are the human limitations one must try to overcome and one’s relationships with other people.”*

-Ingmar Bergman

*“One hearty laugh together will bring enemies into a closer communion of heart than hours spent on both sides in inward wrestling with the mental demon of uncharitable feeling.”*

-William James

### Liminality and Joking in Performance

In an improvised theater performance, the show generally bridges into humor and comedy. This seems to be a natural byproduct of this form of spontaneous unscripted drama. It is important that we look into this facet of the performance as much of the audience data supports the notion that people attend these shows for this affect. Joking is also where we find much of the liminality of this spectacle. In particular, we will be looking at joking as a system of “frame-shifting” (Coulson 2001, Ritchie 2005). This means that, in a joking interaction or other humorous exchange, several layers of logic, reality, and relationship are established then shifted or re-arranged incongruously as to create a type of intellectual dissonance in the viewer resulting in laughter.

Prior to the introduction of frame-shifting as a way to analyze humor and joking, the major theories on humor were focused on aggression (Freud 1976, Zillman & Cantor 1996), incongruity (Raskin 1985, Giora 2003), and arousal-safety (Ritchie

2005, Sperber & Wilson 1986). Aggression theories were focused on jokes being some form of attack on a lesser class of people (e.g. “Polack” jokes and other ethnic/minority humor). Incongruity was concerned with jokes pertaining to two compatible frames of reality which are in some sense opposite. The arousal-safety approach saw joking as a way of creating tension in the listener/observer that was then released with the punch line or humorous reveal. Frame-shifting is a more parsimonious approach to the analysis of humor and joking because it incorporates and is able to explain all the previously mentioned theoretical foci on humor (Ritchie 2005). This frame-shifting approach is especially useful for analyzing long-form improvised theater.

In prior chapters, long-form has been described as a “liminal” phenomenon in the way that it inverts and transgresses social and cultural norms. This links well to the setting and shifting of frames in the humorous interaction as a transgression requires the setting up of a norm in order for it to be transgressed; establishing a frame or frames then shifting them. We should recognize that there are two major frames in improvised performance due to the general lack of costume and setting. There is the frame of the performers dressed in everyday attire rather than costume, and there is the frame of the performed/imagined reality of the show which is typically played out on a bare or blank stage with a few chairs. In long-form improvisation, there are also separate frames for the things suggested by the audience, each narrative and, in some cases, each character. The creation of this complexity of frames can be linked back to the ‘problem-finding’ process as outlined by Sawyer (2000). In order to explore this in

the context of the data, a synopsis of Erin's carpet purchasing scene from the

November 16<sup>th</sup> show is useful:

- Erin enters stage with hand to chin, looking thoughtful.
- Jill enters miming some sort of object in her hands.
- Erin looks through her hands as if framing an image and begins talking about how mesmerizing the pattern on the carpet is.
- Sparky runs onstage and strikes a pose where she was looking [crowd laughs].
- Jill begins to regale Erin with a sales pitch about the "carpets".
- As she does this, Mike and Marc run onstage.
- Mike poses identically next to Sparky, and Jill says that Mike is the mirror image of the carpet that Sparky represents [crowd laughs].
- Marc lies down face-up, spread eagle down-center stage.
- Erin says, "I'm looking for something soft with a soft texture" while stroking Mike and Sparky's chest and belly [crowd chuckles].
- Jill encourages her to touch the rugs.
- Erin interrupts Jill's pitch as she crouches over Marc and begins to stroke his chest and crotch (although barely) in circles while emitting a breathy "Oh yes. Yes! Oh, this is fantastic!" [crowd laughs loudly]
- Erin continues stroking Marc but switches to stroking from head to toe until finally reclining luxuriantly across his legs and pelvis [crowd roars, someone chokes and coughs from laughing].
- While this is happening, Erin and Jill continue the sales pitch and shopping interaction very nonchalantly [crowd is in between laughing and roaring].
- Jill highlights the rugs' ease of rolling as a selling point, and then demonstrates by rolling Mike up with Sparky.
- They oblige by wrapping around each other [continued crowd laughter with some applause].
- Erin insists on lying back down on Marc and agrees to purchase all the rugs. (Shipping Dock Unleashed! 2007)

When we examine the example scene above, it begins with an introduction to the frame of the performed/imagined sales interaction between Jill and Erin as shopkeeper and customer. Both of whom portray high class dilettantes which further defines the status of this interaction. Sparky, Mike, and Marc enter the scene representing inanimate objects which introduces the frame of performers representing

objects as well. This first shift in frame, where the performers represent objects as well as characters elicits a response from the audience. This provides the first opportunity to transgress a social norm within these shifting frames. By stroking the “carpets”, Erin further solidifies the shopping frame while she transgresses a touch taboo by stroking her fellow performers somewhat inappropriately. Erin further exploits this transgression and incongruity by her breathy exclamations, which can be read as sexual enjoyment of stroking Marc and consumer enjoyment of a comfortable carpet. One could also read a subtle inversion in this scene through the fact that the men are literally being objectified by the women.

However, these transgressions are occurring within the frame of the performers as actors and people who are ‘crossing the lines’ while maintaining the somewhat mundane frame of the performed/imagined reality of the sales interaction between the shopkeeper/customer dilettantes. This scene also activates the frame of the audience’s suggestions as it utilizes the story of an audience member who was rolled up in a carpet by his sibling as a child. It does this by Jill and Erin rolling Mike and Sparky together later in the scene, which led to an ovation from the audience on top of gales of laughter.

This example is very representative of the sorts of things that occur in the course of long-form improvised performances. In some performances, performers may also introduce a meta-frame that involves commenting on the show’s construction, performance, or audience reaction. This sort of frame breaches the performed reality and enters into the realm of the audience and real world. An example may be where an

audience groans at something off-color a performer says, and that performer turns to the audience and remarks “Come on. We’re all adults here” then returns to the performed reality of the show.

The liminal features of improvisation occur in tandem with this frame-shifting phenomenon. From experience, inversions, which were only dealt with subtly in the above example, typically arise in the context of representations of religious, political, or other authority figures. These figures are usually recast as something incongruous to their ‘true’ selves. This further illustrates the utility of frame-shifting as an analytical tool for the humor of improvised theater, and it also helps us to understand how the construction of the performance engages the audience and increases their intellectual and emotional engagement in the show.

### Uniting the Viewer and the Viewed

Since an improvised performance has no set script, the audience and performers must find an understanding of the performance through the performance. In the world of dramaturgy, the show itself would be considered “spectacle text” (Elam 2002), meaning that the compendium of performative acts and staging throughout the course of a show become a sort of text for the viewer. The spectacle text of improvised theater is developed collaboratively by the performers through a process of experimentation and discovery during the performance itself, and this performed text relies heavily on established social and cultural understandings that, presumably, the audience shares. The audience’s feedback plays a role in finding the

borders of appropriateness for a show, as well as which elements are useful in developing a particular performance. We could consider this feedback a sort of ‘Spectator Text’ for the performers to read. This begs certain questions. How does the relatively small amount of feedback given by the audience at a long form show affect the performers’ decision making? What sorts of things need to happen for the audience of an improvised performance to *connect to* and be *entertained by* a show? How do performers navigate a show in order to make it entertaining for the audience? These three questions help frame the forces at play in a long form improvised performance.

In a show, the actors typically call for some sort of catalyzing interaction with the audience; they request ‘input’. These “suggestions” or other input requested of the audience is the first step in creating the audience/performer collective. It signifies that the performance is informed by them, and it invites them to watch what will be created from their offering. These performances draw from the catalogue of collective representations situated in the culture or society that a particular long-form show is situated in. As mentioned previously in regards to references, performers use audience suggestions as the launching point.

Much of the initiation segment at the beginning of a long-form is centered on using what the audience has suggested as the pivot point for the casting of a web of referential connections to be drawn upon to guide and inform that particular performance. This is the first step in the process of navigation into and through a long-form improvised show, and it can take the form of word-associations, shifting stage pictures that create image associations, monologues (both true and fictional), or

merely launch into scenes that draw directly on what was suggested by the audience.

In some cases, no suggestion is taken at all.

It has been argued that “the democratic spirit is rarely felt in the theater, but it is felt in improvisational theater more often than elsewhere” (Sweet 1987: xxxvi). It is the centrality of choice rather than design at the heart of improvised theater that bolsters this sense of democracy. Even though the performers make a lion’s share of the choices within the performance, the audience still has a hand in deciding where it begins and possibly what direction it takes (if not through suggestion then through reaction). The actors are central to the interactional dynamic because a majority of the symbolic action that occurs in a long form show arises from them. Aside from suggestions, the other contribution from the audience is their reactions in the form of applause, laughter, gasps, comments and other emotional sounds.

Wrapped into the action on the side of the actors are the elements of text and subtext, mime, the social/emotional state of ensemble, and shared social and cultural references. The text and subtext take the form of spoken words and body language that combine to provide a picture of a performed character’s outer and inner life, as well as relationships between characters. Mime is all of the actions involved in depicting an imaginary environment in order to provide a framework for visualization on the parts of both audience and performer. This element takes the place of the more traditional trappings of the *Mis-en-Scène*; costume, furniture and props, as well as other environmental factors like scent, and various forms of weather (although those tend to be referenced in dialogue more than mime). The social and emotional state of

the ensemble also affects the dynamic. A group in conflict tends towards distraction and lack of cohesion, whereas a high-functioning group in a positive frame of mind comes together far easier.

Lastly, the actors must share a base level of social and cultural references with each other, as well as the audience. The social references are typically situated in the mores of the culture that the improvisational performance is situated in, and it also includes a base of goodwill and good faith established through the social bonding of rehearsals, workshops and previous performances. The same goes for the cultural references. However, since cultural references can often be more temporally (and sometimes geographically) located, this has the potential to be a more specified and less universal element for both performers and audience, and it can be the aspect of this element that impedes the establishment of *communitas* between the performers and connection with the audience.

An example from recent personal experience occurred while I was performing in Antwerp Belgium. There was a scene where the French performer, Matthieu, was playing a depressed king. A Belgian, Olivier, and I played his advisers discussing his depression to the side of the stage as he squatted center stage pouting. As the adviser, I stated, "I have had all the children in the kingdom placed in the dungeon. Maybe their presence will raise his spirits?" An odd offering that came and went without reaction, and that story also did not return in the show. After the performance, the Belgians disclosed that Belgium is in a hunt for its second child rapist-killer. The last one was known to keep children in his basement for his depraved entertainment. This lack of

shared reference not only led to the audience being cold, but it also made the Belgian performers self-conscious.

During a performance, the performers must concentrate a great deal of psychological and emotional energy on multiple persons, things, and ideas. Through their performance, they must encode and embed social and cultural practices, references and meanings, and the audience must be able to connect to and interpret the implicit and explicit meanings of the performance intellectually and emotionally in order to warrant success for any show.

In navigating the long-form performance landscape, performers need to understand the various aspects of character, narrative, theme, dialogue, mime and subtext involved in a particular performance individually and how they may potentially synergize and synthesize in order to create a coherent narrative. Maintaining the continuity of a single show is a shared responsibility that often times is the provenance of only a segment of the actors by the right of their particular intellectual approach to the performance (Online Survey 2007) meaning that even among performers there is a diversity of strengths and weaknesses in their skills. Some performers may be good at bringing characters to life. Others may bring wonderful frenetic energy into scenes, while some may be strong at solidifying the narratives. However, in my experience, the best ensembles truly do share in these tasks equally.

Spontaneous *communitas* is the process emergent from the interaction and effective combination of these elements. This phenomenon of *communitas* was described in the chapter on performers, and it was linked to the strategy of the ‘rules’

or agreement and heightening. It should still be assumed that these rules are functioning beneath all of these elements. The degree to which these elements synergize often relates to the degree to which a group can achieve a sense of *communitas* whether or not they connect with the audience. The degree to which there is *communitas* often translates to the cohesiveness, readability, and entertainment value of a performance. The *communitas* of the performers is often what draws the audience into the spectacle on an emotional level, which leads to the audience being swept into the sense of *communitas* themselves. To use colloquial terms, they can experience a sort of ‘contact high’ from the performers and performance.

This shared sense with the performers connotes emotional involvement in the spectacle by the audience, which suggests a deeper engagement in the show beyond intellectual appreciation. Effective performances of any sort move the viewer in some existential manner. It is the production of this inner state in the viewer/audience that is the hallmark of what I am suggesting is a subtle engagement in the state of *communitas* on the part of the audience. The achievement of *communitas*, a state where Turner asserts:

we place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness. We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic...way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex, or other structural niche. (1982: 48)

is established between performers and fuses them into a collective whole which in turn may read out to the audience as fun, excitement and unity resulting from the input that they have provided through the cultural extension of the performance. This heightens

the psychological identification with the spectacle on the subconscious level of seeing their contributions of suggestions or other input as a trigger for or even an integral part of the performance product. Improvisational theater, rather than being a spectacle that only asks that they view and appreciate a performance, often requires the spectator's agency in setting the stage, tone, or direction of the performance with their input, which makes the performance, on some level, theirs. This requirement leads to a sense of inclusion, which is the doorway to the feeling of *communitas*.

### Sensing Connection and Understanding Audience Perspective

In a scripted performance, performers have a clear understanding of how their performance is doing if laughs, applause, sniffing, or gasps occur at the right places in a performance. Long form improvised performers, as discussed in the previous section, are in a 'problem-finding' process in regards to constructing and discovering the "right places" in a performance that will elicit the same sorts of reactions in an improvised show as in a scripted show. Unlike scripted performances, the performers in an improvised show must engage more heavily in focusing through the imaginary 'fourth wall' (the imaginary wall at the front of the stage, through which the audience sees the action in the world of the play) in order to be able to develop a meaningful, entertaining, and engaging show for the present audience. So when it comes to how performers navigate an improvised performance to connect with and entertain an audience, it leads us directly to what sorts of feedback the audience provides and how

this creates a loop between the performers and audience. For example, Erin described the behavior and feedback of her preferred audience in this way:

What a great audience. They participated. They got everything. They were right there connected with us. There was a give and take through applause, laughter, eye contact. You just knew they were with you, and when you ask for a suggestion they're thinking and not...introverted. You know. Their shoulders turn in. They turn their head. They don't look like they're actively seeking for ideas to give us, to work with us...

- Erin (Personal Interview 2007)

Erin's testimony demonstrates that performers do have a distinct sense of their audience. She also notes the fact that participation is an essential element to the improvised show and distinguishes that the give and take of participation is established through their reactions and eye contact. Her detailing of the sorts of physical behavior that denote a lack of connection with the performance highlights the fact that improvisational performers devote mental and emotional energy toward understanding and establishing a linkage to the audience.

The process of doing a long form show can be even more reflective for a performer when you add in the level of audience reading and understanding that accompanies the process of connecting with other performers. Erin is reading the audience's reactions and body language, their spectator text. This translates to a performer gauging an audience's level of psychological identification with a particular performance. This is highlighted even further by Erin:

If I'm in a scene where I'm like 'Wow, they're really reacting to that certain thing I'm doing', or when that other character has that other thing that they're doing. Ok, how do I go about playing that up? How do I, I don't want to say "milk it", but how do I foster that to get it to the point where it's fully manifested? I guess I'm tuned into what their personalities are because they

might find certain kinds of things really funny that another audience wouldn't. I think that you're just looking for that connection and looking for that doorway into their psyche or whatever they're into... (Personal Interview 2007)

This sort of sensitivity to audience feedback, both positive and negative, is what makes for a good joker (Dewitte & Verguts 2001). The synopsis from the previous section on liminality and joking illustrates Erin's strategy. We should recall that the suggestions taken from the audience included personal stories of being rolled up in a carpet as a child and left by the brother that rolled them up.

- Erin enters stage with hand to chin, looking thoughtful.
- Jill enters miming some sort of object in her hands.
- Erin looks through her hands as if framing an image and begins talking about how mesmerizing the pattern on the carpet is.
- Sparky runs onstage and strikes a pose where she was looking [crowd laughs].
- Jill begins to regale Erin with a sales pitch about the "carpets".
- As she does this, Mike and Marc run onstage.
- Mike poses identically next to Sparky, and Jill says that Mike is the mirror image of the carpet that Sparky represents [crowd laughs].
- Marc lies down face-up, spread eagle down-center stage.
- Erin says, "I'm looking for something soft with a soft texture" while stroking Mike and Sparky's chest and belly [crowd chuckles].
- Jill encourages her to touch the rugs.
- Erin interrupts Jill's pitch as she crouches over Marc and begins to stroke his chest and crotch (although barely) in circles while emitting a breathy "Oh yes. Yes! Oh, this is fantastic!" [crowd laughs loudly]
- Erin continues stroking Marc but switches to stroking from head to toe until finally reclining luxuriantly across his legs and pelvis [crowd roars, someone chokes and coughs from laughing].
- While this is happening, Erin and Jill continue the sales pitch and shopping interaction very nonchalantly [crowd is in between laughing and roaring].
- Jill highlights the rugs' ease of rolling as a selling point, and then demonstrates by rolling Mike up with Sparky.
- They oblige by wrapping around each other [continued crowd laughter with some applause].
- Erin insists on lying back down on Marc and agrees to purchase all the rugs. (Shipping Dock Unleashed! 2007)

We can see that Erin quickly moved from stroking the chests of Sparky and Mike to outright stroking, nearly fondling, and eventually lying upon the supine Marc to “fully manifest” what the audience clearly enjoyed in the first go. We also see that Mike and Marc also jumped in to add to a move that got the crowd laughing. The same idea applies to the moves of rolling up the “carpets”. Jill in her interview also offered this about more subtle forms of audience feedback:

I love those little, um, there almost like little gasps of “Oh”, you know or “Oh yeah”. You hear that sometimes when *they* make a connection, or they see you make a connection. They’re little sounds of approval and affirmation. I like those little sounds and for me that makes me think we’ve been pretty successful. (Personal Interview 2007)

As illustrated by Jill’s comment, the performers are tuned into the subtle feedback of the audience, the ‘spectator text’, and using it to gauge their performance, or in Erin’s case, using it to guide the choices one makes in constructing the performance. In a very real way, the performers are applying their training in the rules of ‘agreeing’ and ‘heightening’ to the interaction with the audience through the show. The audience’s reactions could be judged as ‘their’ offers or initiations within the scenes, and the performers are choosing to heighten those things that the audience selects as funny or otherwise emotionally moving. These are very clear measures taken to entertain an audience. Much like the process of affirmation that should be taking place between performers, we see the performers engaging in a sort of affirmation of the audience’s own sensibility and engagement in the portions of the spectacle that are distinct, meaningful, and emotionally moving.

To offer a thoughtful remark, the following is a very balanced point of view offered by Sparky on the audience's process during a performance:

I give the audience credit. I think they're going to notice if we say something that doesn't make sense, and I don't want to let that go...On the one level, I don't want to have the audience think 'Well that was stupid', I want to be up there saying, "This is stupid, and let's figure out why"...Sometimes there's a part of me that feels bad about it...If somebody is out there [discernibly noting, exploring and incorporating mistakes], then the audience will forgive it, if we own up to it, I guess, but if we just let it go, then the audience kind of feels let down... I definitely believe that you have to take into consideration what you're communicating to the audience or promising them. (Personal Interview 2007)

Sparky's observations are astute, and he is well intended. Once again, we see this element of openness and group orientation even in regards to considering the audience as a part of the larger dynamic of everyone at the performance being a part of the essential 'us'. In the same show where Erin pawed at her fellow performers as "carpets", there was one of those 'mistakes' that Sparky is talking about which he was party to. Here is a short synopsis of that exchange:

- Sparky enters stage and sits down in the lotus position as if meditating.
  - Beth enters and mimes opening a door.
  - B: [in a southern accent] Come on, honey. We've got to go soon.
  - S: [angrily] I'm breathing!
  - B: [apologetically] I'm sorry, honey. Don't let me stop you. Just remember, in with the bad and out with the good. [Stops. Looks up to her left quizzically and places a hand on her chin]
  - Offstage: 5 minutes later!
  - S: [slumps a little, and is wheezing seemingly out of breath]
  - B: Oh!
  - Offstage: An hour later!
  - S: [nearly slumps onto his side gasping for air]
  - B: Oh my god! I'm calling EMS!
- (Shipping Dock Unleashed! 2007)

We see Beth stop to realize that she has misspoken the common aphorism of ‘out with the bad and in with the good’. A cast member offstage realizes the mistake and offers the actors onstage an opportunity to explore the new reality of taking her misspoken phrase as literal. This is a nice example of the phenomenon that Sparky is concerned with in an improvised show. This consideration of the audience’s process in understanding and enjoying the improvised performance align well with interviews of audience members. This is what one male audience member had to offer:

So as things were happening, I was thinking ‘oh, that’s switched’ or ‘oh, he was the husband. Now the other guy is the husband’. And then it took ten minutes to get to ‘Oh, this crazy evil genius woman has two husbands’, you know...I’m kind of detail oriented, and I would sometimes notice the things they slipped up on, and I’d be like ‘Oo. I wonder how they’re going to deal with that.’ (Jared 2007)

Jared was a 29 year old web developer, works for a local university, and this was the first live improvised performance that he had seen. His process in following the show is much like Sparky has envisioned it. For Jared, the process of problem finding is part of the intrigue of the show. Not only is he keyed into the problems the performers are getting themselves into, but he is drawn into the reality of needing to solve the problems that are encountered through the performance.

Laura, another audience member, addressed the validity of the other side of Sparky’s assumptions about the audience’s take on the quality of an improvisation:

There were whole things that got forgotten. There was a whole major strand that got lost completely. [There were] a couple major strands that were never heard from again. It left me thinking ‘Where did it go? Where did it go?’, and I think that’s why it didn’t create a lasting memory because it didn’t lock in. The pieces didn’t come back and lock in and say ‘Ah, here it is!’ (Personal Interview 2007)

Laura was not speaking of the same show that Jared was, but her feedback was telling. If the show is not coherent and the narratives are scattered because the performers are missing each others' moves or not able to engage in the larger picture of what is developing in the show, then the audience remains distant and critical. There was more feedback from another audience member, Genevieve, about the show Laura was describing:

There was a little hyperbole involved in their interaction. It was, um, really the opposite of being real and in the moment. It was projecting this other thing out there that was going to take the place of really living. It seemed to me that they were really aping or pretending to be people like that. And I thought they had thrown up a wall. I thought they were kind of frightened of any real interaction. (Personal Interview 2007)

Jared, Genevieve and Laura's comments clearly show that the audience is adept at reading the spectacle text of an improvised performance. They can spot the flaws in narrative, character and relationship logic, and these things affect the experience for them. Much like the process for performers, if the basis of references (the performance) is inconsistent or untrustworthy, the audience is unable to relax into and connect on a deeper level with the long form piece and the event. This suggests that the listening, affirmation, and incorporation involved in creating a sense of spontaneous *communitas* amongst the performers also applies to the audience. We can read into Genevieve's comment that a level of sincerity and vulnerability in the performance makes the piece more accessible for her. The "aping" for Genevieve cast the performance back into the realm of the false rather than the true.

This phenomenon of sincerity and genuineness is highlighted by sociologist

Jeffrey Alexander in regards to performance:

...those who assume social roles, whether ascriptive or achieved, can continue to inhabit them only if they enact them in an apparently natural manner...This is all the more true in social dramas that instantiate meanings without the benefit of a script, and sometimes without any prior clarification of an actor's roles. (2004: 562)

Since this performance is unscripted, the more distinct and more genuine the roles are that are assumed by the performers, the more clear and deep the reception and connection is for the audience. It also reflects back on prior mentions of the characteristic state of openness, sincerity and lack of subterfuge that are an inherent part of Turner's conception of spontaneous *communitas* (1982).

There was another comment made by Genevieve that perfectly illustrates this point:

G: I like characters. I like a distinct character. Maybe depict somebody who we've all met or seen in movies. I like that.

B: Like an impression of someone?

G: Not like an impression of someone, I mean someone like a truck driver, depict a truck driver, or a fireman. You know, he's a fireman because he's got a real carriage of a fireman to him. It's wonderful! It, it's the essence of [pause]. It's economical. I guess I like that. Yeah, economic, the essence of whatever it is you're doing. I like that.

B: So for you, that is one of the main characteristics, is that people would immediately inhabit these characters?

G: Just instantly, just do it, and I've got the message already. It's very fun just to see that. (2007)

Genevieve's observations echo those of Turner and Alexander. She enjoys a sincere depiction of a role (any role). For her, it is a way of accomplishing much with less effort, "economical" in her words. This makes sense as 'aped' performances are more

of a ‘putting on’ in the sense of covering the actor’s presence in the role as opposed to the ‘revelation’ or ‘vulnerability’ of the actor *becoming* the role through naturalistic depiction. In theatric terms, the latter situation is distinctly Stanislavskian in approach, as Stanislavski’s school of naturalistic acting was focused on the incorporation of the actor’s own feelings and thoughts into the inhabiting of a role in order to achieve a level of realism and naturalism (Stanislavski [1934] 1989).

Genevieve’s testimony validates Stanislavski’s standpoint on naturalistic performances, and it also supports the notion that the audience possesses a desire for this sense of *communitas* with the performers through the performance.

Insincere depictions are something that some performers understand to be something that keeps the audience from fully engaging. Marc had this to say:

If you’re honest, and you know, most of the time they’ll stick with you. If they trust you, so...If you’re trying to force it, and I guess it might relate back to what I said about the audience trusting you, I think they can pick up on that. If somebody’s not clicking or somebody’s trying to force their way in, the audience can pick up on that as easily as the performers can. (Personal Interview 2007)

Marc’s comment displays a significant level of empathy for the audience. He seems to understand that there is a distancing that can happen if flaws in narrative, character and/or relationships become too numerous as to become distracting. He recognizes that part of the process in improvisation is establishing a bond of ‘trust’ with the audience that shows that the performers are sincere in their efforts of crafting that performance and entertaining them. He also made note of the sense of connection that can be had with an audience through a performance:

In an improv when [the audience is] really getting it and they're there with you, that adds to the rush. Because just like within the group, the group mind, when that sort of extends out into the audience, you can feel that energy, and I think that ups everybody's performance. (2007)

According to Marc, there is a feeling that comes from this sense of “group mind”, which grows out of the performers’ sense of *communitas* and can bring the audience into the larger sense of unity. This phenomenon of connection actually “ups” the energy moving between the performers and the audience during an improvisation. When this larger *communitas* is achieved with the audience, long form improv performers also gain an even greater sense of emotional movement, which deepens their feeling of connectedness to the audience. The fact that this emotional state is achieved on both sides of the performance interaction supports the idea that spontaneous *communitas* can encompass everyone at a performance. They become “moved” by the performance uniting them with the performers and those around them who are sharing in the experience. Laura, a retired public administrator and improv student in her mid-fifties, remarked after attending a particularly good performance:

After [the show], the next day I had to sit down and write in my journal...I thought ‘oh my gosh, what if I lived this way? What if I really lived this way in the world with people?’ I was very touched by watching [the performers] work together. I mean, that’s no lie, and I just said, “What if I lived that way?” And it caused me to examine, on the lowest level, what if I said “yes, and” to *you* and *you* and *you* [pointing randomly at people]. (Personal Interview 2007)

If the ‘spectacle text’ sets up problems and narratives, but fails to address them adequately, the audience and performers remain unconnected individuals (performers and observers). The audience remains detached; taking critical note of the

performance rather than connecting emotionally and surpassing surface appearances and mechanics to gain a deeper existential connection to the piece and the performers.

The performers are taking note of the audience's reactions above and beyond the laughter, the 'spectator text'. We have seen in some of the testimony that performers' choices to follow certain elements of a show are influenced by the behavior and feedback of the audience from 'their shoulders being turned in' to the 'oh's and whispers of understanding and connection, as well as the laughter.

This form of real-time empathetic and reflective understanding is also another significant task added to the list of tasks performers need to juggle in the course of a long form improvisation, the task of reading the spectator text. This is one more way in which the performers navigate a long-form performance in order to make it entertaining for the audience. However, as we saw in some of the audience's testimony on shows where this was *not* the case, this task for the performers (of reflection and consideration) is as important to the enjoyment and entertainment value of a show for the audience. If the performers do *not* display an understanding of the quality, or lack thereof, of their performance *through* the performance then the audience becomes distant and disaffected (the opposite of communion).

In terms of collaboration, we could view the elements of audience feedback as commentary on the functioning of a collaborative entity; the performance ensemble in this case. This suggests that a process of ongoing review and feedback for a collaborating entity is actually healthy to its functioning. However, being overly controlling or giving too much praise can be deleterious to the functioning of the

collaborative entity. We can read this into a comment from Erin when the cast had encountered similar phenomena in performance from the audience:

E: The things that [a drunk audience volunteer] was saying were really hard to improvise because you knew they weren't real to begin with. That was hard because we couldn't connect with him because at that point I don't think he could even focus.

B: Why is it hard to make something up from what's already made up?

E: I guess because when things are truthful to begin with, when the seat of it is truthful, then it makes for more truthful improv...I guess I was disappointed, and maybe you go into the improv somewhat disappointed, I did, that he didn't tell the truth. I think that when the story we get is truthful, there is a trust formed. When someone is making something up and trying to pull it off as truthful, there is a distrust or disconnect, I think. So, if you sense that somebody's genuine and invested and truthful, and then you are going to take that and then build from that, I think that is a more meaningful experience. Then they see themselves being depicted onstage really representing what really happened to them or what they said. There is more of a connection that way, I think. If it's truthful, it's more baring, more intimate. (2007)

For Erin, this volunteer, who was trying to take the reins of the performance through giving a false (read 'performed') interview for their suggestion, discounted and discarded the relevance and purpose of the performers in favor of his own drunken amusement. His actions ignored or did not account for the undercurrent of trust and goodwill that is typically sought for in an improvised performance. His taking advantage of the volunteer situation damaged the feeling of 'intimacy'. In contrast, an offering that comes from a genuine and sincere place, according to Erin, increases the level of intimacy by affirming the implicit understanding that all those gathered are working together to make this performance experience valuable. Something similar happened at a short-form Geva Comedy Improv show that I caught the night before their long-form. The first two audience volunteers were high school age, and they each

made up ridiculous and obviously fictional stories after being asked to share their own “scary” experiences. In ways, this can also be viewed in comparison to the feelings that threatened the *communitas* of Geva Comedy Improv in relation to the feelings that Swithun was not being entirely truthful. These feelings contributed to his dismissal. The same feelings are present in Erin’s testimony regarding the drunk audience member.

Jill offered a comment on too much praise:

I think some of the groups that come in they’ll almost laugh at anything because they’re just convinced that they’re supposed to be having this great time. And, after a while, the indiscriminate laughter is a little annoying. It kind of precludes some listening or whatever. (Personal Interview 2007)

On the other side of the spectrum, where there is too much ‘positive’ feedback that translates as overreaction or in more emotional terms ‘gushing’, the performers are once again confronted with a feeling that there is a lack of sincerity and connection. It leads one to question whether one needs to invest much effort at all, considering the low expectations that seem to be established through what seems like unwarranted praise, which could also be interpreted as insincere or hollow praise.

The themes of sincerity and intimacy are at the core of this sense of spontaneous *communitas*. In the larger milieu of the performance, it is necessary that a reciprocal demonstration of sincerity and intimacy through displays of active listening vis-à-vis an audience giving appropriate and relevant feedback and the performers enacting appropriate, validating and entertaining performative acts in kind. This openness of process coupled with a sense of candor established through the

transactional call and response of the performance dialogic is what leads to the sense of success for a collaboration on the sides of both the shareholders (the audience) and the stakeholders (the performers). It also keeps both sides abreast of the relevant aspects of a developing product throughout the process of production.

## V

### The Audience

*“Your audience gives you everything you need. They tell you. There is no director who can direct you like an audience.”*

- Fanny Brice (American Actress, Comedian and Singer 1891-1951)

*“Never treat your audience as customers, always as partners.”*

- James Stewart (American Actor 1908-1997)

#### From ‘Macro’ to ‘Micro’ “Joking Cultures” through improvised performance

We have looked at how the performers cohere into a unified entity through establishing *communitas*. We have explored how the performers and audience meet and find their own sense of *communitas* through the course of a show. In this chapter, we will engage in a more detailed accounting of this idea of a “joking culture” put forth by Fine and DeSoucey (2005) and explore how audiences become a part of a ‘micro’ joking culture through the performance.

One could consider several things when approaching the notion of a joking culture, ‘micro’ or otherwise. How does it manifest for the audience versus the performers? What role does *communitas* play in constructing it? Is this a byproduct of achieving a sense of *communitas* between performers and audience? These questions help us look at the functioning agents, the process, and the product in establishing a “joking culture” through a long form improvised performance.

According to Fine and DeSoucey, a “joking culture” is “a set of humorous references that are known to members of a group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis for further interaction” (2005). Fine and DeSoucey also note that

joking elements that endure to become part of the “joking culture” of a group come from a “precipitating incident” that is “locally situated and unpredictable (2005: 7).” There are few things more locally situated and unpredictable than a good improvised performance, save for daily life. This has relevance to long form improvisation on two levels. The first is that this formation of a joking culture is a large part of how performance ensembles establish relationships of trust and mutuality amongst themselves, especially considering the fact that it is assumed that they will be producing comedy. This much was established in Chapter 3 regarding references. The second is that a single performance generates enough contexts (by way of creating a number of shared situated comical references) that the audience and performers share something of a micro joking culture; the degree to which may be dependent on the level of *communitas* that occurred in the performance.

Fine & De Soucey (2005), describe joking as being embedded, interactive, and referential. It is embedded by way of being part of an ongoing relationship between the joker and the audience (Fine & De Soucey 2005). It must be clear to the audience that these people onstage are ‘jokers’ because:

It provides the potential for role distancing, so that the joker, by virtue of the trust established by the embedded relationship, achieves considerable role distance. This allows the speaker to say things that he or she “doesn’t” really mean,” separating him or herself from the jocular remarks as a “true” belief, denying it implicitly and as a matter of course (Fine & De Soucey 2005: 3).

Considering some of the commentary that improvisational actors make in performance, this role-distancing is essential to maintaining an atmosphere of good fellowship. This is also implied by establishing a ‘liminal’ context through the

medium of a performance where there is the expectation of transgression and inversion.

Joking is interactive because it is part of an ongoing relationship and demands a response from other group members (Fine & De Soucey 2005). Joking is also temporally immediate, and calls for audience involvement; the absence of a response becomes a judgment on the teller and/or the remark (Sacks 1974, Norrick 1993). This is the juncture where performers assess the success of their improvisations and choose their next move based on the presence/absence of a response or reaction, as discussed previously as assessing the ‘spectator text’.

Finally, joking is referential in that it presumes that the performers and audience share references by which they make sense of the implicit meanings of the jocular interaction (Fine & De Soucey 2005). Presumably, most people performing or attending a performance would share these social and cultural references to some degree.

The reason for outlining these elements is to help establish how Fine & De Soucey’s (2005) work on “Joking Cultures” fits well with the longer ranging social cohesion effects of a long-form improvisational show through uniting an audience with the performers in a sort of temporally fixed micro ‘joking culture’ that emerges from a single show. Since each show is unique to a large degree in that it is not based on any sort of prior plan or script, this leaves room for the audience to feel more like this is a one time experience that is for everyone who is there. The humor, narratives, and characters may take on a greater meaning because of this notion of impermanence

in the performance; that when the show is done only those present will know the references and interactions that were meaningful and why. Fine & De Soucey state that:

Five elements together affect the creation and continuation of themes within joking cultures: the items need to be known, usable, functional, appropriate in light of the group's status hierarchy, and triggered by some collectively experienced event (2005: 5).

The performance itself serves as the 'collectively experienced event', and the contents of the show become the known, usable, and functional items. The appropriateness of the group's status hierarchy becomes a bit more nebulous in application. Many performers attest to the fact of being approached and talked to as an acquaintance by someone who attended a performance, whether or not they are even acquainted. Often, the audience member opens with a description of the performance they attended followed by a narrative of how they have continued to use certain phrases or ideas from the particular performance in question. This narrative has been reported by performers frequently enough as to bear mentioning in relation to the discussion of joking culture. This phenomenon suggests that through a performance an audience is made to feel like they are part of the show, 'in communion with' as it were, because of these shared elements that were discovered more or less simultaneously with the performers.

One of the most explicit examples of the performers' joking culture for the Shipping Dock Unleashed! cast was the list of "Favorite Improv Moments" on the back of their t-shirt:

- Security Guy in the Ice Bucket
- Dueling President Bushes
- The Dysfunctional Zombie Family
- Turtle Orgy
- St. Patrick's Day Prosthetic Legs
- The Curious Case of the Itchy Queeter
- Wanna Reproduce?
- The Don Johnson Purina Cat Chow Commercials
- Television Eye Implants
- Nude Chickens and Fried Beer
- You look like an angry chicken with asthma!

All of these items are curious at best to a person who has never seen any of the shows.

A majority of these references took place before my field work. I was present for the "Turtle Orgy", which was a hilarious stage picture inspired by a performer's true story of a visit to a zoo with his high school students. His monologue was part of the opening of that particular piece where monologues were the method for expanding the idea of the initial audience suggestion. The inspiration was an audience suggestion of "Safari".

This is the nature of a true "joking culture" as conceived by Fine & DeSoucey (2005). The references are particular to this ensemble and the audience for the particular evenings where each of those references comes from, and there was some conversation and debate in their online yahoo forum about what should and should not have gone on the t-shirt. "Rape Guy" was a controversial item that was debated. It did not make it to the shirt for the obvious reason of selling 'uncontroversial' t-shirts to the public, but it was in the running for a few weeks before the t-shirt order was placed (Shipping Dock Unleashed! 2007). This list is a concrete example that sets the

boundaries of 'insider/outsider' in relation to the ensemble of Shipping Dock

Unleashed!

These references are what signify the group *to* itself. The list of elements and scenarios are moments they've shared, albeit with audiences present, that have been significantly entertaining enough to themselves that they have endured time and become ensconced in memory. In Fine and DeSoucey's view, these are especially significant signs of group cohesion:

When joking references continue over time, they are given a power more consequential than those jokes that emerge spontaneously and then vanish in the mists of interaction because lasting jokes enter group memory. The solidification of group culture gives it a power that passing jokes lack. (2005: 8)

The fact that these references have made it through a year or more of shows to be printed on the group's t-shirt delineates them as significant components of SDU's own joking culture.

### The Demographics of Rochester's Long Form Audiences

Geva Comedy Improv puts on its shows on the Next Stage, which is the smaller theater in the theater complex of the Geva Theater in downtown Rochester. GCI performs one weekend a month. The Geva Theater is the largest regional theater in western New York State. There is a considerable amount of name recognition because of this. The Next Stage is a 180 seat theater with stadium seating and full technical capabilities, lights, sound, etc. There is a café and bar in the lobby between the entrances of the Main Stage and the Next Stage which sells alcohol and snacks

before the show and at intermission. The facilities are spacious and modern. They even have a number of ‘green’ design features. The Geva Comedy Improv shows were \$7 for general admission and \$5 for students. Typically, these shows were late nights that began around 10:30pm after another performance occurred in the same space. This meant that often the performances took place on the set of another production.

Shipping Dock Unleashed! performed in the Visual Studies Workshop, which is a facility owned and operated by the University of Rochester. It was just outside of downtown on the same strip with Rochester’s Museum of Art. The Shipping Dock Theater rented a large auditorium space within the VSW. There were three sets of bleachers arranged in a ‘U’ that had a total of 75 stacking chairs. The lighting was a bit ad hoc, and the room at the VSW was cavernous when compared to the actual performing space. There was a small concessions stand that sells pop, water and snacks. SDU! would perform one weekend a month, and they also performed on a number of Sundays. They charged \$8 for their regular weekend shows and \$1 for their Sunday shows.

When it comes to the breakdown of the audience surveys, this difference in context is distinct. For Geva Improv Comedy, 32 surveys were collected from a single performance, and for SDU, 59 surveys were collected over the course of 5 performances. The disparity in audiences can largely be attributed to the fact that Geva is a known and respected institution and Shipping Dock is not that well known.

In terms of age, over half (53%) of those surveyed for GCI were under 25, and for SDU a large proportion (75%) were over 25. This seems to match up well with the

makeup of the respective casts. Like attracts like. The younger cast attracts the younger demographic, and the older attracts the older. This supports the idea of finding *communitas* with like minded people with similar experiences and references. The split between genders was nearly identical in both cases; 58% female for GCI and 60% female for SDU!

Income was a distinct factor between the two with a majority (62%) of GCI's audience making under \$25k annually, as opposed to SDU's audience who was the converse with a majority (64%) making over \$25k annually (and 2/3 of that segment making over \$35k). This is just another example of how the audiences that come to each show match up well with the demographic of the performance troupe. We also see some difference between the two theaters when looking at the breakdown of education between their audiences. 53% of GCI's audience has a college degree or more, and 76% of SDU's audience has a college degree or better. Both casts were well-educated, so this is not as clear a correlation, but GCI definitely appeals to the younger set by offering short-form shows as often as long-form. In terms of diversity, both audiences were predominantly white (GCI 82%, SDU 94%), but we can see that GCI does have marginally more diversity which may be from the college demographic that they clearly possess.

When it came to whether or not those surveyed had seen long-form before, a surprising majority *had* seen a long-form show before (GCI 69%, SDU 66%). For the most part, both audiences had attended between 1 and 5 improv shows before this (GCI 72%, SDU 62%). The remainder is a bit curious. 19% of GCI's remainder had

seen between 6 and 10 shows, whereas a full 25% of SDU's remainder had seen over 15. However, this is more of an indicator that partners and family members of the cast attended SDU's shows regularly, which suggests more of a community involved with SDU. This was further clarified by the breakdown of how individuals heard about the shows. For the category of "Know a cast member", 25% of those surveyed for GCI knew someone, and fully 51% of those surveyed knew someone in SDU. This is interesting when considering factors like intimacy and trust as being a basis for creating a sense of *communitas* between groups of people, as discussed previously.

#### The Audience's Engagement and Establishing a 'Micro' Joking Culture

Geva Comedy Improv put on a Halloween themed show called "Slasher Movie". I was able to interview seven members from this show. This section will draw largely from that performance and the interviews that came from it. For GCI, the movie format is one of their most successful long forms. GCI chose to stop and solicit the audience for suggestions through much of the performance. This performance was situated in the "Slasher" film genre, which is defined by movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. It is also a genre that has been caricatured in the *Scream* films and lampooned in the *Scary Movie* films.

Geva Comedy Improv approached it by establishing stock characters that appear in these "Slasher" films. The genre is most often situated in the teenage milieu of high school. So the characters the cast chose were a "female" and male nerd, a

male jock, a “female” exchange student, a “female” sexual libertine, a female teacher, a male police officer, and a male doctor (who was the father of the “female” nerd). I use quotes to note where a man played a woman. The cast had gone to some length to bring a more concrete sensibility to the *mise-en-scène* through wearing costumes; using several different plastic weapons for props; and preparing lots of fake stage blood. They also covered much of the stage and the first two rows of seats in plastic to minimize the cleanup from ‘spray and splatter’ from the stage blood. One cast member remained outside of the narrative portion of the performance and served as a sort of director who called for scene changes and solicited audience input to help guide or inform the piece.

At the top of the show, the performers were called onstage one by one by the emcee/director, and the audience was asked to give particular details for each character. The exchange went like this: Director, “What is this nerd into?” Audience, “Dancing.” Director, “What country is this exchange student from?” Audience, “Russia.” Director, “What is he a doctor of?” Audience, “Gynecology.”, and so on. This depiction is a simplification. It was nearly a sold out audience with approximately 170 people in attendance. There were often a multitude of suggestions for each question, and the emcee would choose, somewhat arbitrarily, from the suggestions shouted out. Through this process the audience begins to see how they affect and shape the performance; in a way customizing their entertainment experience and starting to commune with the show.

The number of times the audience was asked to contribute to GCI's show diminished as the performance progressed because the narrative and characters became so well developed from the earlier audience suggestions. However, the audience seemed un-phased if not at ease with this progression. After the intermission, the show rolled more smoothly with fewer interruptions for suggestions other than getting a few suggestions for narrative choices. It had taken on its own life and meaning for all those gathered because they could see clearly how their contributions had been incorporated into the fabric of the show. The clearest example of the audience's engagement and enjoyment of (read 'communion' with) this performance came at the end, at nearly 1am, when the audience gave a standing ovation at the final blackout.

This audience had a very clear sense of what led to their enjoyment, and it was situated in distinct particularities of the performance they helped construct. These brief responses from the interviews immediately after the show help outline the notion of establishing a 'micro' joking culture through a performance:

Q: What did you like about the show? What stuck with you?

A: I like the Russian person and the cop.

A: [Laughing] The hammer and sickle.

A: Um. I like the Russian. He was really good. He was the best one at sticking to his limitations because other people had their character trait, but they would be like 'oh, yeah yeah yeah' [feigning remembrance]. And he just stuck with it.

A: The Russian kid. The Russian thing was really funny, I thought.

A: The hammer and sickle was really it.

A: Ah, man. The Russian.

A: Honestly for me it was the dancer, because I was a dancer and it was just hysterical to see that part. The Russian girl was also hysterical. And the whole girl's bathroom thing was great because it's almost actually what we do, but we don't like to say it out loud.

There is a lot to unpack in these responses. It is clear that Liam, who played the “female” Russian exchange student, was extremely effective in his performance. He was not only able to create a sense of believability with his role because of his commitment to the characteristic the audience provided at the beginning of the performance, but he was also astute enough to spontaneously bring in a distinctly Russian symbol, the hammer and sickle, at the climax of the show when his character was in a struggle with the killer. The situation was such that, by chance, Liam (the Russian Girl) was fighting the killer with a plastic sickle and got knocked over in the conflict. He landed next to the plastic hammer that had been knocked from the killer's hands in the conflict. In that moment, he grabbed the hammer and brandished the sickle crossed with the hammer above his head as he gained his feet. He/she then screamed and chased the killer off-stage and into the audience with this symbol brandished above his/her head. Ultimately, the Russian girl lost the fight when the chase came back onstage as the genre typically requires the innocent ingénue (rather than the exchange student) to save the day, but the audience cheered loudly when Liam exploited the fortunes of the moment and brandished that symbol. This is clearly a “locally situated” and “unpredictable” comedic occurrence, which is a distinct requirement for establishing what Fine and DeSoucey call a “joking culture” (2005).

As discussed previously in regards to Turner, Alexander and (ironically) Stanislavski, the genuine and naturalistic engagement with his Russian character through accent, mannerism, and appropriate (if not somewhat stereotypic) Russian phrasing (“In mother Russia...”) allowed the audience to connect more deeply with the performance through the believable depiction of Liam’s character which was given to him by them. The synergy, or *communitas*, of the cast in supporting and providing each other moments to exploit the suggestions of the audience heightened the experience for all, thus bringing all into a sense of unity or a subtle *communitas*.

This sense of communion appeared in a more in depth interview with Phil, an African American man in his early 30’s:

For instance, that one guy who played the, uh, Russian girl. He did so well, that after a while, you actually believed he was a Russian girl. You know, because he kept the character, and he really did a good job...That guy, I was like ‘Wow, that’s quite impressive’ because he really got into his character. He stayed in his character with the accent and everything...Those kinds of actors you cannot forget. They draw you into the story because after a while I totally forgot it was a guy. (Personal Interview 2007)

This sense of *communitas* plays a major role in constructing a ‘micro’ joking culture. Phil was drawn in to the reality of the performance by Liam’s deft embodiment of his character. It cements the moment into lasting memory. The recounting of that moment led to renewed laughter and bonding between he and I during the interview. The show and its situated references were the basis for mutuality in the interview situation, and it definitely helped to leap past the undertone of talking to a stranger (me) during the interview. This was often the case when it came to interviewing audience members who had seen a really good show.

As noted previously by Fine and DeSoucey, inconsequential jokes “vanish in the mists of interaction because lasting jokes enter group memory.” (2005: 4) We see that these situated performance instances, where the humorous artifact is discovered in concert between performers and audience through spontaneous interaction amidst a performance that has established *communitas* for the performers and audience, *do* stick in the minds of the audience. These situated references can then lead to further interaction between performers and audience members in other contexts outside of the theater.

Another audience member, Mike, had this to say about the situated reference:

M: The one joke that really stuck out for me was that, uh, like, when that Russian chick had that scythe and the hammer and crossed them, and that would have never happened, you know, if we’d ‘ve had a different suggestion or anything if he’d have dropped the scythe. So that joke is completely, you know,

B: situation specific?

M: Yes, that *was* the scene pretty much.

So it is clear to the audience that these references are connected to them through the suggestions they give. They understand their role in creating the comedy of the event, and this connects them to the spectacle in a way few other live entertainments can.

This is why Jeffrey Sweet (1987) among others (Coleman 1990, Halpern et al 1994, Nachmanovitch 1990) considers improvisational theater to be a ‘democratization’ of theater because the audience has a hand in shaping the performance that they are and/or will be viewing. This democratization leads to the audience’s sense of inclusion in the social and cultural fabric of a particular show. This sense of inclusion is at the heart of what Fine and DeSoucey are defining in their notion of the joking culture

(2005), and it is established through the initial experience of Turner's spontaneous *communitas* within the liminal space of the long-form improvised show (1982).

## VI

### Conclusions

*“Words were never invented to fully explain the peaceful aura that surrounds us when we are in communion with minds of the same thoughts.”*

- Eddie Myers

#### Shared Myths, Shared Lives and Community

This thesis was largely focused on detailing and analyzing long-form improvised theater in order to catalogue what I consider to be a very striking socio-cultural phenomenon that synthesizes performance, humor and community under one umbrella. It was important to demonstrate the very real intellectual, emotional and social effects that this performance practice imparts to its practitioners and its audiences. Having been addicted to the ‘charge’ that comes from improvised theater, the compulsion to deepen my understanding of this art through anthropological inquiry was irresistible. The questions that drove me (Why did it spread and grow even before the advent of the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* Who does it appeal to? What are the structure and rules of performance? Why do performers choose this mode of performance? What is at play between the performers and audience in a show that is collaboratively constructed for and with that evening’s audience? What does the audience get from this dramatic performance that they don’t get from other live performances? What is it the actors do to succeed at engaging each other and the audience? What about this phenomenon is of value to anthropology?) ultimately led me through a roadmap of investigation and discovery. Since much of peoples’

conception of improvised theater is focused on short-form games, I felt that it was important to outline the virtues and intricacies of long-form.

The larger question that was being addressed was ‘Why is it that performers choose this type of performance?’ We saw how the training and rules of improvisation are a big key to managing the challenges of improvised theater as well as creating the long-form improvised show. The basic rule of “Yes, and” (agreement and heightening) not only informs all facets of the process of performance but is also the way to generating this sense of unity, or existential/spontaneous *communitas* as described by Turner (1982), through fostering an atmosphere of support and trust. The emotional power of this experience was evidenced in the testimonies of some of the members of Shipping Dock Unleashed! Those responses were not the only ones but rather the most representative of what came from performer interviews. We also reviewed what forces hinder, threaten, or destroy the chances of entering into the state of *communitas*; rule-breaking, poor listening, and sometimes infidelity which are directly opposed to these elements of support and trust. This tells us a lot about contexts of collaboration in the larger sense.

This thesis offers a look into the forces at play in the long-form performance from the process of “yes, and” being not only between performers but also applied to things offered by the audience through suggestions and reactions. Looking at this helped to answer the question of what happens between performers and audience during the show to make it succeed or fail. The same forces that aid and threaten the entry into this state of *communitas* for performers also apply to the larger dynamic of

the performer/audience collective. As we saw from the audience interviewees, sincerity, listening, empathy, affirmation and trust are the building blocks for creating a sense of unity between everyone, which leads to the feeling of success in a performance for all. We also saw that the same things are hoped for and expected from the audience by the performers to establish a feeling of a reciprocal relationship at the beginning of and during the performance. When these social elements are satisfied during the course of a show, the performance is a success for all. This element is what is largely missing in modern entertainment.

This research project also focused on the audience, particularly the outcome of successful performances in the form of a ‘micro’ joking culture (Fine & DeSoucey 2005). It dealt with what the audience gets from a long-form improvised performance, but it also suggests why people attend. We saw that, when an audience is drawn fully into the spectacle through participation and more so through the full fruition and realization by the actors of their contributions, an audience can feel a deeper social bond with the performers which may extend into time and create a framework for further social interaction. As opposed to popular culture and other scripted or organized performance products, these audiences have intimate personal connections to the material because of its basis in the social fabric of the instance of the show. As we saw in the example of the Russian girl, the effective and novel use of the audience’s ideas and offerings creates a sense of shared identity in the way that a sporting event can create camaraderie and unity. The performers are viewed as ‘of us’

and ‘for us’ as suggested by the notion that improvisational theater is a democratization of drama (Sweet 1996, Coleman 1990, Halpern et al 1994).

In the larger picture, this thesis demonstrates that long-form improvised pieces are not just a story or a play that is made up on the spot. It is a performance that accounts for and includes to some degree everyone in the room. It paints a particular performance as being ‘our’ story and/or ‘our’ play, and that is the key distinction in looking at this type of performance as a social phenomenon. This is the essential element in outlining the boundaries of social groups and cultural identities, and in a modernizing world where electronic entertainment provides us with ever more isolating means to entertain ourselves, it is a rare opportunity to engage in live entertainment that is not only entertaining but also personally engaging and aware of and incorporating the shifting world moment to moment. It is a mythos created ad-hoc in the presence of and with help from the community. Similar phenomena can be seen in other ritual contexts analyzed as performances (Schieffelin 1985, Atkinson 1987). This blend of awareness, adaptation and incorporation in long-form improvisation is not geared to get a performance ‘on track’ but to ‘build the track’ as the performance moves with the community gathered for the event.

For these reasons, long-form improvised theater tends to attract adventure seekers to its audiences, classes, and stages. What keeps all of these people coming back is the intimacy, connection and unity that can be felt coming out of the mix of the experience of improvised theater. It can be daunting to some performers to be told that one is free to be the actor, director, writer and choreographer, but the fear becomes

drastically reduced when one realizes that they are a part of a group of people who are all collaborating on filling any role that is not being filled for the good of all (in the ideal, at least). However, as previously mentioned, these experiences are states of “grace” rather than “law” but that state of grace is very intoxicating and worth the effort. The evidence of the effects of this intoxication is seen in the global trans-national improvised theater scene that developed prior to improvisation coming to television.

Like most research, hindsight is 20/20. There are many directions to take with researching improvised theater. Of interest to me would be a more extensive look at training programs in improvised theater to get a fuller sense of the process of indoctrination into this community (some of my friends through the years have suggested “cult” may be a better term). Being a teacher, I have some sense of what I try to put into my own classes in order to get students to experience that moment of support, connection, and unity, but I also know through anecdote that there are a myriad of other approaches that work. More importantly, the question in my mind is ‘What makes some students stay the course to become performers, and what makes others move on?’ My suspicions are of course tied to what I have established in this thesis, the availability of opportunities and ability to achieve *communitas* with a group (and later an audience).

It would also be interesting to mount a comparative study on differences between improvised theater internationally (for instance: the US, Canada, Europe and Latin America). From my own travels, I know that there are differences in execution

and style, but many of these theaters have their grounding in the rules and formats that originated from the US and Canada. The main questions center on ‘How much is from these roots?’ and ‘How much is centered on customizing the experience to fit the audiences of the culture?’, or to take a less ethnocentric view ‘Are these peoples merely adding to their own already existing improvised theater tradition?’

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## **APPENDIX A Questions for Performers and Audiences**

**Note:** This is an exploratory project. The following questions are among some of the questions the researcher will be asking. Their may be modifications and additions to this list during the course of the investigation as a result of developments in the field.

### **Questions for Performers (group format)**

- 1) What kinds of ideas did tonight's performance bring to your mind?
- 2) Was any of the content of the show from a personal experience? If so, which part(s)?
- 3) Was this show easier to perform than others? If so, why? If not, why?
- 4) Did you feel connected to the audience? If so, how?
- 5) How was this audience in comparison to others?
- 6) What sorts of emotions did this performance elicit in you?

### **Questions for performers (formal interview)**

- 1) What is your age/gender/marital status/income & education level?
- 2) What attracted you to improv theater?
- 3) How long have you been doing improv?
- 4) What sorts of dynamics are involved in group acting?
- 5) What types of audiences have you encountered?
- 6) What is the ideal audience?
- 7) What is the ideal improv group?
- 8) What sorts of feelings did this performance bring up in you?
- 9) How would you characterize a good/successful performance?

- 10) Could you describe what the experience of improvising a long form show is like?

**Questions to Audience Members (informal pre-performance)**

- 1) What is your age/gender/marital status/income & education level?
- 2) Have you ever seen an improv show before?
- 3) Why did you decide to come see \_\_\_\_\_ perform tonight?

**Questions for Audience Members (informal post-performance)**

- 1) What part(s) of tonight's show stuck with you?
- 2) Did this show elicit any feelings other than humor? If so, what was that, and what part brought that on?

**Questions for Audience Members (formal interviews)**

- 1) What is your age/gender/marital status/income & education level?
- 2) How many live improv shows have you seen?
- 3) What is it about improv theater that attracts you to see it?
- 4) Do you go alone or with friends?
- 5) How does this compare to other forms of live entertainment that you've seen?
- 6) Were you ever so engrossed in the show that you lost your sense of being at a show?
- 7) Did you feel like the performers connected well with you (the audience)?
- 8) Was the suggestion used well? If not, how did that affect the experience for you?

- 9) Did you find that you connected with the content of this show, or did this show depict familiar things from your own life? If so, what were those things?
- 10) Was there anything confusing or hard to understand about the show? If so, what was that?
- 11) What would you expect out of a great improv show?

## **APPENDIX B Audience Paper Survey**

### **Improv Audience Questionnaire**

Thank you for taking some time before this performance to tell us a little about you. Your survey information will be used to help this theater company understand their audience better, as well as contribute to an anthropological study on improvisational theater run by Portland State University.

Male or Female (Circle one)

1) What is your age?

- A. Under 18
- B. 18 – 25
- C. 26 – 35
- D. 36 – 45
- E. 46 – 55
- F. Over 55

2) What is your annual income level?

- A. Under \$25,000
- B. \$25,000 - \$35,000
- C. \$35,000 - \$45,000
- D. \$45,000 - \$55,000
- E. Over \$55,000

3) Have you ever seen a long form improv show before? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

4) How did you hear about tonight's performance? (Circle all that apply)

- A. Saw it in the newspaper.
- B. Heard about it from a friend.
- C. Know someone involved in the troupe/show.
- D. Saw it on a poster or flyer.
- E. Read about it online/Got an email.

5) What level of education have you completed?

- A. High School.
- B. Some College
- C. College Degree
- D. Advanced Degree (MA, Phd, etc.)

6) What is your race/ethnic origin?

- A. Latino/Chicano
- B. African American
- C. Asian/Pacific Islander
- D. Native American
- E. White
- F. Other \_\_\_\_\_

7) How many improv shows have you seen before? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for completing the survey! Please read the following.**

If you would be interested in participating in an interview about your experience as an audience member at tonight's show, please leave your name and an email or phone number. Your interview would help us understand the experience of an audience member at a long form show, and it would only take about 30 minutes at a time convenient to you. Please leave your name and a way to contact you below, if you are willing to be interviewed. Thank you.

Brad Fortier  
Anthropologist  
Portland State University, Dept. of Anthropology  
Portland, OR

(Fill in only if you wish to be interviewed)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX C Questions from online performer survey**

### **Section 1**

1) What is your age group?

☐ Under 18

☐ 18 - 25

☐ 26 - 35

☐ 36 - 45

☐ 45 - 55

☐ Over 55

2) What level of education have you completed?

☐ High School

☐ Some College

☐ College Graduate

☐ Graduate Degree

☐ Advanced Degree

3) What income bracket are you in?

☐ Under \$25,000

☐ \$25,000 - \$35,000

☐ \$36,000 - \$45,000


☐ \$46,000 - \$55,000

☐ \$56,000 - \$65,000

☐ Over \$65,000

4) Are you currently rehearsing and performing improvisational

shows?

Please select 

5) How long have you been involved with improvisational theater, including taking classes?

☐ Under 1 year

☐ 1 - 2 years

☐ 2 - 4 years

☐ 4 - 7 years

☐ 7 - 10 years

☐ Other (Please Specify):

6) How many times have you performed during your involvement with improv?

☐ Under 20

☐ 20 - 50

☐ 51 - 100

☐ 101 - 150

☐ 150 - 300

☐ Over 300

7) How many performance troupes have you worked with?

☐ 1

☐ 2 - 3

☐ 3 - 5

☐ 6 - 9

☐ 9 - 12

☐ Over 12

## **Section 2**

- 8) How would you characterize the material that you generate in a typical show?
- 9) Are there particular themes that you have seen occur again and again in improvised shows?
- 10) What was your best experience with an audience?
- 11) What was your worst experience with an audience?
- 12) Describe what the elements of an 'ideal' audience are.
- 13) Describe the elements of an 'undesirable' audience.
- 14) What would you say are the common elements of successful improvised shows?
- 15) In your experience, would you say there are 'types' of performers? If so, what are the types?
- 16) In dealing with audience input, how would you characterize a *good* suggestion? Explain why a suggestion is *good*.
- 17) In dealing with audience input, how would you characterize a *bad* suggestion? Explain why a suggestion is *bad*.
- 18) What do you personally get out of improvised theater? What sorts of tangible and intangible rewards have come of your involvement with improv theater, if any?