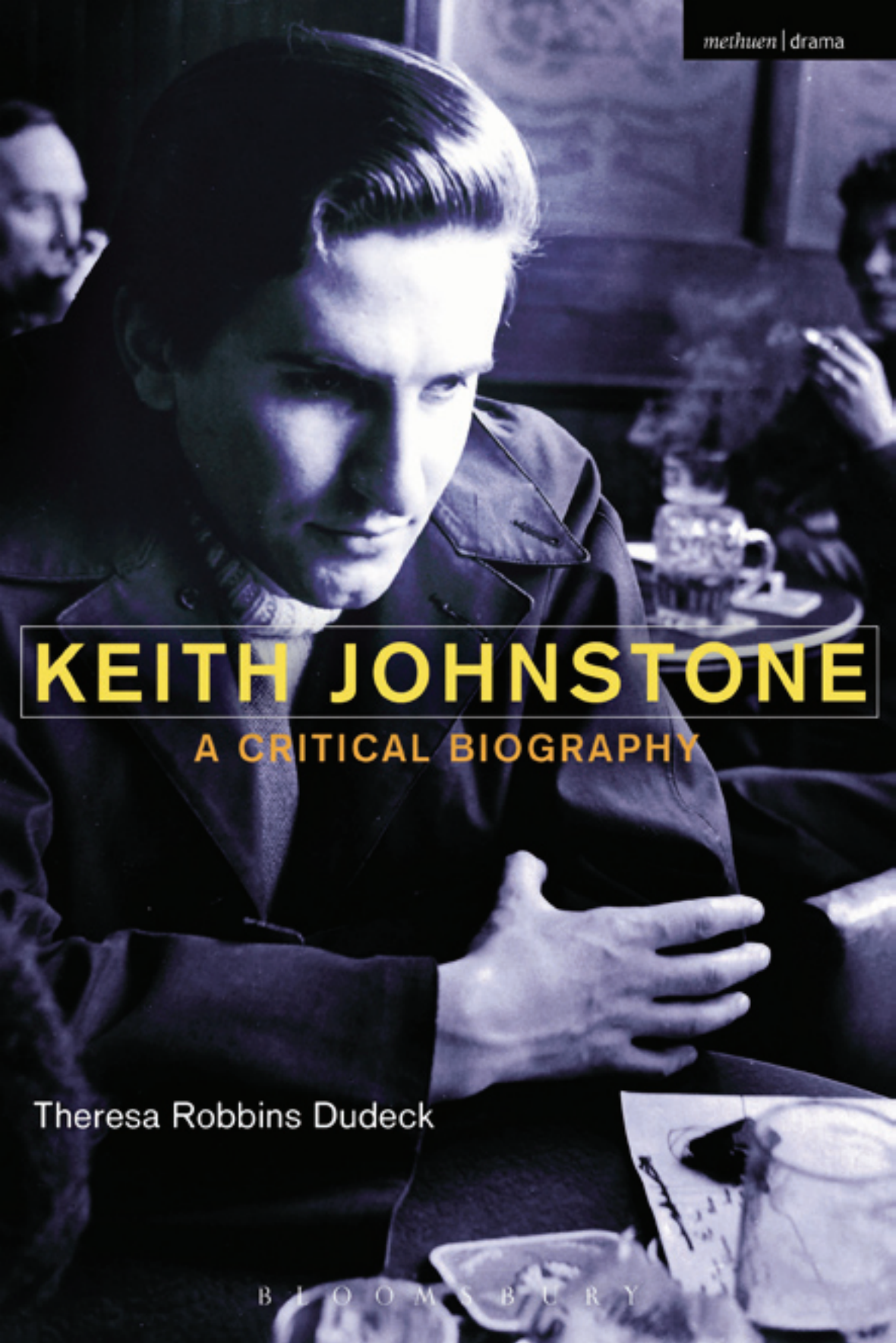
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KEITH JOHNSTONE
A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY
Theresa Robbins Dudeck
BLOOMSBURY

Keith Johnstone

Keith Johnstone

A Critical Biography

THERESA ROBBINS DUDECK

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For Dale

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CHAPTER ONE

Introducing Keith Johnstone and his Impro System

Keith Johnstone is a groundbreaking teacher, theorist, and creator of contemporary theatre practices used worldwide. His contribution to pedagogy, to performers and performance technique, to writers, and to theatrical entrepreneurial models is significant. Partly in response to his personal search to rediscover his imaginative potential, Keith has spent over five decades developing and teaching improvisational theatre methods for the classroom and for performance. For him, theatre is an informal classroom where life experiences can be fleshed out collaboratively in order to re-create genuine behavior, relationships, and imaginative stories spontaneously and in dialogue with the public. This first critical biography of Keith Johnstone uses the concept of the classroom as its structural and theoretical frame. Each chapter journeys not only through the corporeal spaces that have served as Keith's transformative "classrooms" but also into the conceptual spaces which inform his pedagogy. It is a journey that continues today.

Keith is still very much alive and teaching all over the world. I have attended and observed his workshops in San Francisco (2006, 2009), London (2010), Stockholm (2010), and Calgary (2008, 2011, 2012). In every location, Keith draws in an enthusiastic group of students who want to learn from the master teacher. In July of 2011, for instance, 14 of the 20 students in Keith's 10-day Calgary workshop hailed from Brazil and other Latin American countries where his improvisational methods are influencing the next generation of theatre makers. This study concludes with a look at Keith's present classroom and at Johnstonian-inspired classrooms developing in various fields and corners of the world.

The Impro System (i.e., my term for denoting Keith's theories, pedagogy, techniques, exercises, games, and terminology) is Keith's most important contribution to theatre practice worldwide. The Impro System is an

approach to actor training and theatre practice that encourages spontaneous, collaborative creation using the intuitive, uncensored imaginative responses of the participants. Since 2005, I have been referring to Keith's process as a "system" because, like other complex systems—the solar system, transportation systems, the nervous system—optimal functionality depends on all components working harmoniously. General System Theory is a scientific discipline postulated by Austrian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1950s. In very basic terms, Bertalanffy's theory dictates that all parts of the system interact with each other directly or indirectly but privileges the wholeness of the system over its parts. In this sense, the Impro System is a system because it cannot be reduced down to its parts without decreasing its efficacy. When students apply the theatre games without understanding the theory or when teachers teach the exercises without understanding Keith's pedagogy, the process is compromised. Theatresports, a format Keith created, serves as an example of what can happen when a system goes global and people begin to privilege the parts over the whole.

Theatresports was the vehicle that catapulted Keith's Impro System onto the world stage. After moving from London to Canada, Keith developed this format with a handful of drama students at the University of Calgary (UofC) who were also members of his Loose Moose Theatre Company. Keith cofounded this company to showcase his plays, his improvisational methods, and Theatresports. Inspired by the British pro-wrestling matches, Theatresports pits one team of improvisers against another team for points and audience approval. By the early 1980s, Theatresports leagues were appearing everywhere. Today Theatresports and two other competitive forms created by Keith—Gorilla Theatre and Maestro Impro—are licensed to leagues all over the world.[1] In 1999, Keith published *Impro for Storytellers*, a sourcebook of his formats and games. While assuring his popularity, the Theatresports franchise has amassed a reputation that often makes it difficult to articulate why Keith matters in other contexts like actor training, playwriting, and pedagogy and perhaps accounts for the lack of recognition in serious academic studies of twentieth-century theatre practice. Furthermore, Theatresports has taken on a life of its own, outside of the classroom so to speak, and often departs from Keith's original intentions.

My personal introduction to Keith Johnstone and his Impro System was not through Theatresports or *Impro for Storytellers*. In the early 1990s, I was trained in and became a strong proponent of improvisational theatre techniques primarily through the work of Viola Spolin. Spolin became well-known in America in the early 1960s following the publication of her foundational text, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, and through the work of her son Paul Sills, cofounder of the Compass Players and Chicago's

[1] The Theatresports-inspired television program, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (United Kingdom and America), was so popular that almost 20 countries have launched their own television shows based on this concept.

Second City. Avery Schreiber, an original Second City member, was my improvisational teacher in Los Angeles, and he taught in the Spolin tradition. Then, in 2001, my friend and colleague, Amy Langer Schwartz, handed me a copy of *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (*Impro*) and said, "You must read this." Published in 1979, *Impro* illuminates the work developed by Keith when he directed and taught classes for the Royal Court Theatre Studio (RCT Studio) in London from 1963 to 1966. Until he moved to Canada, Keith tested his ideas on audiences around the world with his group The Theatre Machine, Britain's first pure improvisational troupe. But the work Keith began developing almost 50 years ago resonates with immediateness today. As I delved into *Impro*, I felt as if Keith was in direct dialogue with me. It was the first time a teacher encouraged me to take risks and to fail good-naturedly; to accept my first spontaneous impulses in lieu of clever or intellectual ideas; to acknowledge my imagination, not my socially-constructed "personality," as my true self; and to be more obvious, since trying to be original only concealed the real me.

Impro is a loosely structured practical guide for psychologically and physically unblocking human beings, thus enabling them to generate good stories with three-dimensional characters through spontaneous collaboration. In the foreword to the book, critic and historian Irving Wardle called it a "guide to imaginative survival." In the foreword to the Swedish translation, Suzanne Osten, film director and artistic director of Stockholm's Unga Klara, an influential theatre company championing children's issues, wrote that *Impro* comprised "alla idéer till ett teaterspråk vi sökte" ("all the ideas for a theatre language we were looking for"; trans. Bagdade). The popularity of Theatresports has indisputably added to sales, but *Impro's* appeal is widespread. Drama training programs, directors, writers, animators, educators, psychotherapists, and an ever-growing number of organizational scholars and business consultants have exploited various tools contained in this text. Keith's second book, *Impro for Storytellers,* organizes the exercises and techniques found in *Impro* into categories and offers additional games and terminology created for or during the evolution of Theatresports. It is a useful resource and does build on and extend his earlier work; even so, it targets Theatresports audiences and this limits its accessibility.

Keith's wit, intelligence, and personality jump off the page in all of his writings (e.g., in his plays; his short stories; *Impro for Storytellers*; *Don't Be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers*; and *Keith Johnstone's Theatresports and Life-Game Newsletters*). *Impro*, though, seems to capture Keith in the midst of discovery and his writing enables him to integrate the variables into a whole system as if for the first time. Perhaps this explains why *Impro* has been translated into numerous languages and is in its eighth printing. Even though Keith continues to rework, revise, and refine his theories and techniques, *Impro* still illuminates the heart of the Impro System in a way that attracts generation upon generation. In the following introduction to the Impro System, *Impro* serves as the primary source of

information; however, other writings by Keith are occasionally utilized to reinforce a specific theory, technique, or term.

So what is Keith Johnstone's Impro System and how does it intersect with, shatter, and/or radically depart from other improvisational processes? First of all, "impro" and "improv" are abbreviations for improvisation. In standard British pronunciation, the first and fourth syllables of "improvisation" are given more stress, and the "o" in "pro" has a partially open "ə" sound as in "the" (ˌɪm-prə-vī-ˈzā-shən) which is closer to the ō in "imprō." Whereas in standard American pronunciation, the second and fourth syllables receive more stress and the "o" has a very open "a" sound as in "father" (im-ˌprä-və-ˈzā-shən). Therefore, the preferred use of the abbreviation "impro" in Britain and "improv" (-präv) in America originally stems from phonetics. Largely due to the title of Keith's book—*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*—"impro" is mistakenly interpreted to mean British-style improvisation, but actually "impro" and "improv" are synonymous.[2]

Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, professors and historians at the University of East Anglia (United Kingdom), coauthored *Improvisation in Drama* (1990, 2007). In both their first and second editions, they define improvisation as:

> [T]he skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text); to do this spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one's environment, and to do it *à l'improviste*: as though taken by surprise, without preconceptions.(4)

Prior to Keith's work with the RCT Studio, improvisation as defined above was not a new concept in European actor training and developmental processes. Konstantin Stanislavsky, Jacques Copeau, Michel Saint-Denis, Jacques Lecoq, Joan Littlewood, and Michael Chekhov all relied on improvisational theory and technique to develop truthful moments in text-based performance, to flesh-out characters (masked and unmasked), and to explore the nature of acting. Improvisations were also used to liberate the actor's body and imagination, to generate new material, to achieve authentic ensemble interaction, and to incorporate "play" into the theatrical process. The Impro System is useful in all of these ways and Keith owes much to his predecessors and contemporaries; however, several factors render *Impro* and the Impro System unique. One is its emphasis on "pure" improvisation, that is, improvisation as a performance in and of itself. In Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s, Paul Sills was presenting performances improvised around scenarios in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* and later using the structure of Spolin's theatre games. But in Europe, Keith was the first to advocate and

[2] I use "impro" and "improvisation" interchangeably and *Impro* in italics to reference Keith's text, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*.

first to present purely improvised performances without scenarios. He put his improvisers on stage with nothing prepared and with no idea what was going to happen. "It was the ultimate risk," says Keith, "and partly from a mistake. Cause in those days, when I didn't know so much, I thought the *commedia* did that. Actually, they didn't, but it worked."[3] Training in the Impro System also meant training in Keith's clown work, very physical work which required little or no dialogue, so Keith's improvisers had success performing for non-English-speaking audiences.[4] Another factor that renders *Impro* and the Impro System distinctive is its accessibility and this has everything to do with *how* Keith situates himself in his writing and in his process. In order to better understand how Keith processes, imagines, teaches, and creates, one should be acquainted with the Impro System.

Impro is divided into five chapters: "Notes on Myself," "Status," "Spontaneity," "Narrative Skills," and "Masks and Trance." A short chapter on Theatresports was to be included but, after the publishers told Johnstone that the book was too long, he took out what he thought was the least interesting material. In retrospect, Keith feels leaving that chapter out was a disastrous decision. That chapter on Theatresports included vital material for those early Theatresports groups who had to learn the game by copying other groups. "You had groups who had no idea what the basic principles were," says Keith. "It was the least interesting material to me, but it would've been the most interesting thing to Theatresports players."

Keith opens the first chapter of *Impro* with: "As I grew up, everything started getting grey and dull" (13). He concludes the first section with an assertion that serves as the impetus behind the creation of the Impro System: "The dullness was not an inevitable consequence of age, but of education" (14). Going forward, it is clear Keith developed the Impro System not just for unblocking and releasing the talents of the actors at the RCT Studio but for rediscovering the imaginative potential of individuals, like himself, who had been oppressed by their education.

Keith's schooling had conditioned him to favor intellect over imagination: "I learned never to act on impulse, and that whatever came into my mind first should be rejected in favor of better ideas" (82). For a time, he had forgotten that inspiration wasn't intellectual and that failure was part of the learning process. In order to reverse or undo what had been done, Keith began to embrace and teach spontaneity. Although he developed most of the exercises, techniques, and terminology in *Impro* teaching at the RCT Studio in the early 1960s, the theories underpinning his inventions (i.e., solutions to problems) had been germinating since childhood and continued to consolidate until his manuscript was published in 1979. It is important to

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[3] Unless otherwise cited, quotes by Keith and other biographical information are primarily from the personal conversations/correspondence I had with Keith dating from August 2009 to January 2013.

[4] See section on Theatre Machine in Chapter 3.

remember that Keith had no interest or formal training in the theatre before he saw Peter Hall's production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 at the Criterion Theatre in London. His theories, therefore, are not based solely on theatre research, observation, or practice but on a broad range of sources and experiences.

Keith was moved by great silent films before he had any interest in the theatre, and he credits a 4-minute sequence in Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) as having an epiphanic impact on his way of judging himself and others. Vassily, a young, Ukrainian farmer, walks home alone in the twilight after a long day of reaping corn with a new tractor purchased collectively by the poor community. The tractor symbolizes a sense of unity and this agitates the well-to-do landowners. The audience senses imminent danger but Vassily heroically continues down the country road. Keith wrote: "The fact that he walks for so long, and that the image is so beautiful, linked with my own experience of being alone in the twilight—the gap between the worlds." Then Vassily dances ecstatically just moments before he is shot and killed. Keith continued:

> The dust swirls around his feet, so that he's like an Indian god, like Siva—and with the man dancing along in the clouds of dust something unlocked in me. In one moment I knew that the valuing of man by their intelligence is crazy, that the peasants watching the night sky might feel more than I feel, that the man who dances might be superior to myself—word-bound and unable to dance. (*Impro* 18)

In *Impro*, Keith does not advocate a complete shutdown of the intellect but rather closing the gap that divides rhetoric from actions. Keith is an intellectual, whether he likes it or not. He is thought of by many as a genius and, over the years, has been invited to attend international think tanks. He aptly uses his intellect to illuminate a moment, an experience, or a process supporting his theories. But the driving force of the Impro System evolves from Keith's desire to dance, that is, to defy his intellect in order to enter the world as an imaginative, physically liberated human being.

After completing his secondary school education, Keith attended a teacher's training college in Exeter. "I had a brilliant art teacher called Anthony Stirling, and then all my work stemmed from his example. It wasn't so much what he taught, as what he *did*" (18). Stirling's teaching methodology was inspired by Lao Tzu's concept of the invisible or unseen leader—a leader who facilitates in such a way, that when the work is accomplished, the followers think they did it all by themselves (Lau 73). Stirling also believed in the artist within and that it was the teacher's job to bring the artist out of the child, not through demonstration or by imposing values of "good and bad" or "right and wrong," but by skillfully setting up experiences in which the student could succeed (*Impro* 20). Keith's first primary school teaching assignment was an opportunity to put Stirling's ideas to the test. Keith succeeded in

excavating the "art" from these students who had been written off by others as "ineducable"; and, instead of treating children like "immature adults," he began to regard adults as "atrophied children" (25, 78).

In the early 1960s, behavioral therapist Joseph Wolpe, M.D., published his studies on systematic desensitization of phobias, and Keith immediately saw connections to Stirling's ideas and to his own development of these ideas with the RCT Studio's professional artists. Systematic desensitization is a method of inhibiting neurotic anxiety-response habits in patients. First, the patient is put into a state of relaxation and then, by degrees, exposed to his anxiety-evoking stimuli. Wolpe progresses from the least disturbing stimuli on the patient's "anxiety hierarchy" to the most disturbing until all stimuli are deprived of their ability to evoke fear and anxiety (Wolpe 66). If, however, the patient experiences a setback, Wolpe returns to the bottom of the hierarchy and starts again. Keith immediately incorporated this idea into his work at the RCT Studio and into his Impro System. With students who remained in a constant state of "stage fright," Keith would return to the basics. Instead of writing these students off as "untalented" or as "failures," he saw them as "phobic" (*Impro* 31). Because Keith openly acknowledges that he is also a work in progress, still searching for ways to overcome his own phobias, he establishes an egalitarian classroom space.

Keith's pedagogy is integral to the efficacy of his Impro System as he himself noted: "If you want to apply the methods I'm describing in this book, you may have to teach the way I teach" (29). The ideas he set down in *Impro* represent only the beginning of an ongoing battle against what Paulo Freire called the "banking" concept of education. Freire, renowned theorist of critical pedagogy, used this term to describe an educational system that views students as empty accounts into which teachers deposit information. I see Keith as a Freirean educator who strongly advocates dismantling the "totalitarian teacher" versus "passive student" relationship and creating a partnership in its place. Freire branded this critical and reflective way of transmitting knowledge as "the problem-posing method." This method promotes the idea that "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire 80). Keith never spends too much time explaining the rules of a game or exercise because, he wrote, "If [students] misunderstand me they may invent a much better game" (*Storytellers* 60).[5]

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[5] Keith doesn't necessarily believe students will invent a better game, but he tells them this so they will laugh and relax. "It's an example of latent manipulation like telling Japanese students I'm deaf and they have to speak up even though they are speaking in Japanese. And it works, it works." In March of 2012, 29 Japanese students from Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music in Toyko had come to Calgary's Loose Moose Theatre to study with Keith. They spoke no English and were assisted by two translators. I witnessed Keith doing what he said in the quote above and the students did indeed begin to speak louder.

Keith's belief that process cannot be static and that every human being, including himself, is in the process of becoming is crucial to his problem-posing methodology. It is why the Impro System is flexible and has evolved from classroom to classroom.

A few key pedagogical principles should preside over any process utilizing the Impro System. From the start, the teacher teaching the Impro System must adopt a pedagogy that alters the students' attitude to failure. "In a normal education, the student had been very competitive and they're judging the end reward rather than the process," Keith says. "So [the students] have to be happy when they fail and they have to understand that they cannot learn anything unless they fail." Teachers also need to encourage collaboration, not competition, value actions over thoughts, and the authoritarian teacher versus student relationship must be dissolved through the teacher's conduct and transparency. To create a safe space where students do not have to play it safe, the teacher must give students permission to tap into forbidden areas of the mind. "Imagination is as effortless as perception, unless we think it might be 'wrong', which is what our education encourages us to believe," Keith wrote (*Impro* 80). Further reassurance comes from the teacher presenting himself as "living proof that the monsters are not real, and that the imagination will not destroy you" (84).

Most of the improvisational exercises in the Impro System encourage collaboration because they combine the imagination of two or more people and rely on the principle of "give and take" to move the story forward and to create relationships. One improviser will make an "offer" (i.e., any physical or verbal input) and the other improviser will "accept" or "give" credibility to that offer and then "offer" something else, "taking" the initiative, without cancelling any previous offers. Chapter 3 of *Impro* includes offer/block/accept exercises that train students to develop action. "A block is anything that prevents the action from developing, or that wipes out your partner's premise. If it develops the action, it isn't a block" (97). Saying "no" to an offer, therefore, doesn't indicate a block if this response moves the action forward. Exercises in which students "block" actions make it quite clear that accepting (i.e., collaboration) is more rewarding. "In life, most of us are skilled at suppressing action," wrote Keith. "All the improvisation teacher has to do is to reverse this skill and he creates very 'gifted' improvisers" (95).[6] Gifted does not signify an improviser who comes up with clever or better ideas. Any idea is a good one *if* it moves the action forward and solves problems. Many beginning students have difficulty accepting this because, like Keith, they were taught at an early age to "search" for original ideas.

[6] We are skilled at suppressing action, Keith reminds me, because as adults we don't want to be altered or out of control. We want our lives to be predictable, planned, and manageable.

Again, Keith reverses this habit by telling students to "be average" or "more obvious" or to "accept your first thoughts."[7] He reminds students that they are one-of-a-kind and "Striving after originality takes you far away from your true self, and makes your work mediocre" (88). An improviser who effortlessly develops action, solves problems, and accepts offers will seem gifted (and benevolent) to audiences.

Developing action is important to writers, too. Like everything else, Keith's theories and techniques on playwriting evolved through personal observation and practical experience, not via a formal education. The legendary Writers' Group (1958) at the Royal Court implemented Keith's "no-discussion" policy, and the playwrights would improvise scenarios as a way of developing relationships and moments in their scripted and nonscripted performances. Also, as a Royal Court play reader and head of the script department, Keith read up to 50 play submissions a week. The plays that interested Keith had characters that altered each other—"If the characters are not altered, you just got a writer, a novelist or something, but I [was] trying to find playwrights." In *Storytellers*, Keith defines "dramatic action" as: "the product of 'interaction'" and he defines "interaction" as "a shift in the balance between two people" (77). So, even if a plot has one action sequence after another, if characters are not altered, if the balance does not shift, the action is useless.

Chapter 4 in *Impro*, "Narrative Skills," includes on-your-feet exercises which develop skills in collaborative structuring of narratives that advance primarily through dramatic action resulting from interaction. Keith doesn't want students to concern themselves with the content (i.e., the underlying meaning) of what they are doing until they master structure. Students must be able to get out of their own way, to let go of their fear and self-consciousness, and allow their imagination some space before they try to assess what it all means psychologically. But "the best improvisers, at some level, know what their work is about," wrote Keith (142). What's important is to return to content only when the student improviser is strong enough to accept responsibility for whatever they unearth from their unconscious. Writers find these narrative techniques appealing and adaptable to their own process. For example, Mark Ravenhill, a contemporary British playwright, credits Keith for turning him into a writer. More specifically, he praises Keith's concept of "reincorporation." Ravenhill's simple paradigm of reincorporation is: "If there's a gun in the first act, have someone fire it in the third. That's pure Chekhov" (Ravenhill). In other words, offers previously introduced should be reincorporated at a later stage in order

[7] Keith says getting beginning improvisers to accept their first thoughts is important. But advanced improvisers, who are no longer working from a state of fear, should be aware of the process, aware of what is happening to them and to the story that is unfolding. They should have the ability to choose from a variety of ideas to move the story forward.

to give the story a sense of cohesion for the audience who remembers what happened, perhaps subconsciously, and expects shelved offers to be reintroduced. While many writers and improvisers "reincorporate" instinctively, for the multitudes that don't, Keith turned this concept into something concrete and practical by naming it and creating exercises to develop it. "I made Mark look back instead of forward," says Keith. "He was obviously searching ahead trying to find good stuff. But *Impro* made him suddenly realize that he should look back to see if there was stuff he could reincorporate because that would give him structure."

Keith's "circle of probability" is another concept for structuring narrative and engaging audiences. He did not begin using this term until the early 1990s, but the circle of probability factors into every component of the Impro System.[8] It is another example of how Keith decodes and gives a name to what is obvious to proficient storytellers—writers, improvisers, and directors. Keith has always been rather awkward on the stage proper. He is more comfortable situating himself among and in alliance with the audience, insisting that theatre should be engaging to each and every spectator. If a performance fails to entertain, Keith wants improvisers to ask themselves if trying to be "original," "clever," or, even worse, "funny," interrupted the flow of the narrative or took it outside of the audience's "circle of probability." The circle contains an amalgamation of shadow stories anticipated by each spectator as the plot develops onstage. When the plot parallels and/or is compliant with the imagined shadow story, the spectator is more likely to be dynamically engaged in the journey. Staying within the circle of probability does not mean pandering to the spectator's own ordinary, everyday logic, but rather moving the story forward according to the logic of the imaginary, extraordinary world that has been established in the theatre.

During a rehearsal with actors at the Moscow Art Theatre in the 1920s, Stanislavsky expressed his understanding of what constitutes the circle of probability when he asserted: "The audience that watches a play has its own ideas of how the plot will develop, but it cannot be sure until the end" (Gorchakov, *Stanislavsky* 105). In *Impro*, Keith put it like this: "An audience will remain interested if the story is advancing in some sort of organised manner, but they want to see *routines* interrupted and the action continuing *between* the actors" (141). In *Storytellers*, Keith uses the term "tilt" to define a surprising event that interrupts or "tilts" an everyday routine into the chaotic future. The "platform" is the everyday routine, the "stability that precedes the chaos" (89–92). A strong tilt should alter the characters, throw them off-balance, and if the tilt lands just outside of the audience's circle

[8] Keith also uses the term "circle of expectation."

of probability, a justification is needed. In other words, an improviser or playwright can do something illogical and unexpected as long as she can justify her action and integrate it somehow back into the audience's circle of probability.

Not unlike the film hero Vassily walking and dancing into imminent danger, Keith believes: "The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future" (*Impro* 116). Keith reminds his students that audiences want to see actors get into trouble, to go on adventures, and to accept offers normal people would block when survival instincts tell them to play it safe. Brave improvisers must be willing to accept the role of "hero" which means taking great risks and suffering in the pursuit of a worthwhile goal (*Storytellers* 78). Only in his later writings does Keith articulate this concept in this way, but it is imperative to the Impro System's theories on structuring narratives and on overcoming fear. In his *Theatresports and Life-Game Newsletter One* (1987), he wrote:

> [A] story establishes a hero and then torments him, physically or psychologically (I think that covers most of the world's literature). . . .
>
> Dramatists have an unspoken agreement with us. They present us with a hero, and then guarantee that something unpleasant will happen to him. Everyone understands this, at least at an unconscious level. If the film opens with the hero (or heroine) standing at a bus stop, we won't be in the least surprised if a car screeches around the corner and machine-guns the queue. If nothing untoward occurs, and the hero gets on the bus, then we classify the line-up as 'introduction', and we presume that something will happen on the journey. (3–4)

But even if a beginning improviser understands this, once he steps onstage, "fear" often stops him from entering the dark forest and encountering the monsters.

Keith observed time and again improvisers protecting themselves from "imaginary dangers" as if the dangers were really happening (*Storytellers* 130). Similar to Wolpe's technique of getting patients into a state of relaxation before exposing them to their anxiety-evoking stimuli, Keith establishes a safe theatre classroom space where students can confront their own personal creative blocks without fearing actual harm. When improvisers trust the "safety net," they are more likely to "jump" and ignore their protective instincts for fun and for the enjoyment of the spectators. Getting beginning improvisers to "jump," to be in the moment, and to abolish self-consciousness requires some manipulation. Split-attention games and techniques are meant to engage the conscious mind so the intuitive, creative part of the mind can take over. They require total involvement. Trying to steal someone's hat while playing a scene, or asking insane questions to

"jerk" spontaneous answers from a fellow player, or two players creating a story alternating one-word-at-a-time are some of the Impro System's split-attention techniques.

As mentioned earlier, the teacher/student hierarchy needs to be dissolved by means of the teacher's conduct and transparency in order to create an ideal environment for learning the Impro System. Teaching and using "status" is how Keith accomplishes this. Chapter 2 of *Impro* names, decodes, and offers ways to reconstruct "status" behavior, that is, social behavior that can be achieved voluntarily. This chapter alone has had a profound effect on drama training worldwide and is probably the most important component of the Impro System.[9] In Eva Mekler's *Masters of the Stage: British Acting Teachers Talk About Their Craft* (1989), acting teachers from The Drama Studio (London), The Guildford School of Acting and Dance, and The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama professed to be using Keith's status theory and exercises with their students.

Status, according to Keith, is not what a person *is* but what he *plays*. It is learned physical and verbal behavior which determines placement on the social pecking-order. Status operates on what Keith calls the "see-saw" principle, or what Frost and Yarrow define as "a dynamic interactive process of continual adjustment" (115). At the RCT Studio, Keith noticed this continual and automatic adjustment to other bodies, objects, and to the space among his students having casual conversations and he called it "the kinetic dance," that is, the dance of movement (*Storytellers* 232). Both comedy and tragedy work on the "see-saw" principle. "A comedian is someone paid to lower his own or other people's status" and a tragic plot usually involves "the ousting of a high-status animal [character] from the pack" (*Impro* 39–40).

Many of Keith's status and pecking-order games were adapted from naturalist Konrad Lorenz's documented observations of a jackdaw colony in Alterberg, Germany. In his most popular book, *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways* (1952), Lorenz noted that these socially inclined birds maintained a "pecking-order" analogous to human beings. "In the jackdaw colony, those of the higher orders, particularly the despot himself, are not aggressive towards the birds that stand far beneath them," observed Lorenz. "[I]t is only in their relations towards their immediate inferiors that they are constantly irritable; this applies especially to the despot and the pretender to the throne – Number One and Number Two" (148). Keith's status exercises start with simple scenes in which students keep their status slightly above/below their partners or play status to the space using both

[9] In his review of *Impro* for *Theatre Journal* in 1984, Albert Pertalion wrote: "The section on Status, which explains the shifting power in relationships, is worth the price of the book alone" (441).

physical and verbal adjustments. Increasingly, the exercises and games become physically challenging and absurd (e.g., master-servant games, pecking-order clown games, *commedia dell'arte* scenarios, and maximum status gap scenes).

Keith has a hard time understanding why colleges do not teach status skills to teachers. He himself is a status expert in the classroom and raises or lowers his status as needed in order to keep discipline and, simultaneously, to create a safe space for students to step out of their "preferred" status roles. According to Keith, bad drama schools exploit the habituated status of their students, casting them into "types" instead of widening their range (*Impro* 55–6). Frost and Yarrow expressed that Keith's status work releases actors and "actors as people" from habitual modes of behavior and "produces an extension of the range of existential choice, which is the most serious and far-reaching effect of the play element in culture" (154). They also wrote that status exercises are invaluable to writers and suggested that writers think of "status" as a verb (213). Human beings, like other social animals, constantly work to maintain or adjust their level of dominance. Once students recognize this, then it is possible not only to challenge and disrupt their own socially constructed positioning but to re-create truthful—which does not imply natural—behavior on the stage. In the end, status work renders conduct in the classroom, of the teacher, and in everyday life transparent.

Chapter 5, "Masks and Trance," was inspired by the mask classes taught by Keith and William Gaskill at the RCT Studio. It was the Royal Court's artistic director George Devine who introduced both men to the basic mask techniques that his teacher, Michel Saint-Denis, inherited from Jacques Copeau, the uncle of Saint-Denis. Chapter 5 is the longest and most dense in *Impro* and Keith relies largely on secondary sources to flesh out his ideas on mask work and trance states, whereas the previous chapters ("Status," "Spontaneity," and "Narrative Skills") rely mostly on primary sources or personal experiences. It is Keith's least favorite chapter and the one that has continued to trouble him for over 30 years. In fact, he spent the last few years writing a new, longer mask treatise called *The Thing in the Mirror*. In this new essay especially, it is clear Keith's understanding of the mask is informed by his own search for self and from his experience of feeling "other" in an Anglo-centered world that tends to universalize rather than particularize. Unable to elude his whiteness or his British heritage likely intensifies the problematic aspects of writing about something as precolonial and primitive as masks, and he struggles to work through any unintentional biases in all of his writings.

The "Masks and Trance" chapter in *Impro* is divided into 15 subsections: an opening section on Devine and the half-mask or "character mask" classes at the Court; examples of mask work by Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov, and Chaplin; a short explanation of why masks were driven out of our Western culture; facial expressions as masks; entering trance states; possession cults