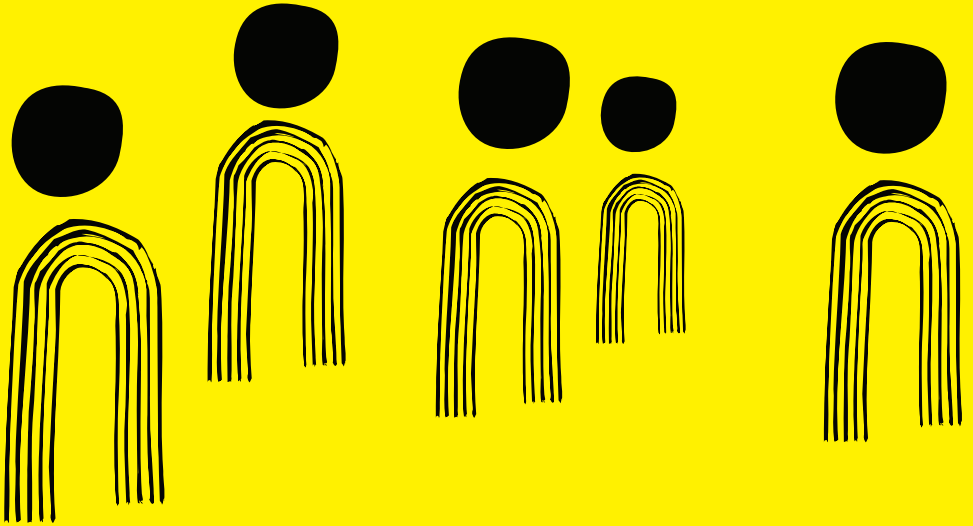


Youth Learning through Arts of Theatre Improvisation



Handbook for
Youth Workers
and Pedagogues



Youth Learning through Arts of Theatre Improvisation

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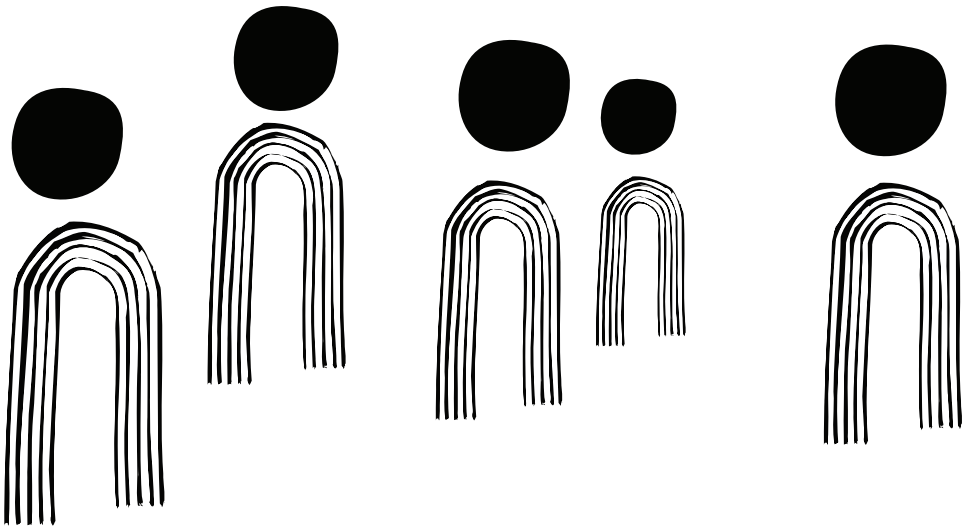
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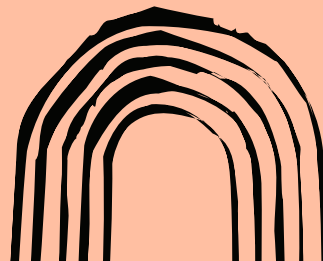
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Introduction



The publication is the product of Erasmus+ strategic partnership Youth learning through Arts, YLTA for short. Art pedagogues and youth workers from Finland, Poland and Slovenia shared and built upon examples of good practises from environmental art, improvisational theatre and culture outreach - accessibility. In the publication you will find thoughts on these subjects and advice on strengthening cultural and artistic competence of the young, alongside to using improvisational theatre techniques in various social topics.

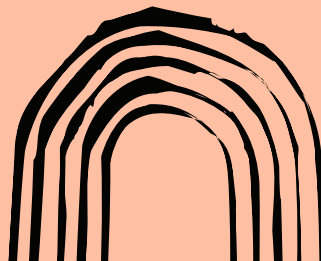
In the first part of the publication, you will find information about improvisational theatre and the application of the methods that improvisational theatre uses. In the second part there is information on ways to use theatre improvisation to achieve wider inclusion or working with various groups. In the third part, we address theatre improvisation as a method to deal with social issues. Theatre improvisation can be used to encourage creative output, to establish a safe environment and to discuss various social issues.

The authors have been working with youth for many years; we come from informal education in youth and cultural organisations. Together with other youth workers and teachers, we wish to share the usefulness of improvisational theatre through ways of formal education, especially our experiences, our thoughts and practical advice that has become beneficial in many years of working in youth programmes. We also want to relay new advice and ideas that we have encountered while working in the project Youth learning through Arts, when we connected with new partners and started expanding our fields of expertise.

The whole publication uses feminine forms as gender-inclusive language.

Improvisational Theatre and Theatre Improvisation

Authors of the chapter: Mistral Majer and Urša Strehar Benčina





What is improvisational theatre?

Improvisational theatre (often called impro or improv) is a form of theatre in which performers collectively create without a script. The peculiar feature of this form of theatre is that the improvisors create a show on the spot based on the principle of collaboration. To form a show, they collaborate together, with the audience and other theatre workers, such as theatre technicians and musicians. They also respond to the environment and react to what is happening in the space they are in. All this gives improvisational theatre a very strong interactive character, for example in form of direct questions for the audience or a spontaneous response to sounds and happenings, which the improvisors incorporate into the scene.

The shows and scenes are based on creative techniques of improvisational theatre, which enable improvisors to create mutual stories, relationships and characters in cooperation and reaction to each other. With that they form content through live performance that is created spontaneously in the moment and cannot be repeated twice. Theatre improvisors also assume roles and responsibilities of directors, dramaturges, scenographers and other theatre professions, which is not something you can encounter in more classical forms of theatre.

Improvisational theatre enables different forms of theatre shows, which can be formed in short or long formats and can be performed as cabaret, impro match, research or theme show or any other form or genre.

The history of improvisational theatre

Modern improvisation theatre is deeply rooted in rituals, the tradition of storytelling, Comedia dell'Arte and similar forms of theatre performance, which put emphasis on spontaneous mutual creation. The tradition of improvisational theatre as we know it today is based on the work of the pioneers that developed methods of theatre improvisation in the 20th century, with different goals in mind;

- to create improvisational show, performative form: improvisational theatre
- to train actresses and to prepare classical or devised theatre performances
- other goals: applied theatre improvisation, which highlights other purposes (e.g. learning soft social skills, teaching certain subjects, revising, movement breaks etc.)

Some of the most widely recognised pioneers of the modern theatre improvisation and improvisational theatre are Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin and Del Close. They developed different methods and approaches, which are still recognised as the basis for impro around the world. One of the most significant advantages of impro is the community, which is build and formed through games, exercises and disciplines (performance formats); they represent some sort of a mutual language of all theatre improvisors.



What is theatre improvisation?

Different techniques and methods that enable creating shows of improvisational theatre have found their place in fields of research and teaching, due to their versatile nature, which goes beyond show creation. Values, goals and skills, which improvisational theatre develops through games and exercises, are useful for learning and developing communicational skills, group participation, storytelling, taking responsibility and similar. This is where theatre improvisation begins, which can be understood more as an applied method, with which we can achieve different goals, albeit theatre or cultural, social and applied in forming different communities, awareness, solution making, collaboration, thinking outside the box, listening and observing, taking responsibility, public speaking, assuming different roles in a group and other things.

The basis of theatre improvisation is play – non-mandatory action, which can be started or finished at any time, and needs safe space in which we can explore different situations, test boundaries and make bold decisions. After the play is finished, we can come back to the starting point, but that does not necessarily indicate that we are still the same, since the experience of the play can influence other aspects of life. Applied method of theatre improvisation appears to be a great tool in the fields of youth and social work, learning and teaching, discovering and brainstorming, as well as being a wonderful starting point for working in different groups, where the end goal is not necessarily creating theatre content, but connection, specific skills or cohabitation.

Some main values, which we encourage on stage and with theatre improvisation, are:

1. cooperation
2. making mistakes
3. observing and listening
4. taking responsibility
5. taking risks

1. **Cooperation** in improvisational theatre means working based on the “Yes, and...” principle, which supposes that everything that happens on stage is accepted as real (we do not try to deny it or replace it with our own idea) and is upgraded with our own initiative. In other words, it is about the exchange of taking the initiative and supporting the initiatives of others.

Collaborating while working in groups carries a similar meaning – generally we accept everything that happens, and we enhance it. As mentors or leaders of the group we focus on the needs of the members and we proceed by putting them into the role of active participants, who not only follow the rules but take part in shaping the activity through suggestions and initiatives.

2. Since theatre improvisation is a process and a final product all at once, there cannot be any **mistakes** – everything that happens is simply a part of the story’s journey on stage. The principle of mistakes being a blessing, which open new topics and possibilities, is crucial for improvisational theatre. Being aware that we cannot avoid making mistakes while creating spontaneously can lead to discovering courage and taking risks on stage. Mistakes might not lead us to the expected end goal and straightforward result, yet they open new ways of researching

and new previously unseen stories. Mistakes can therefore be seen as a gift in several ways, since they keep us fresh and creative; they make us exceed our expectations and constantly keep us on our toes to respond to them in time. Mistakes are the driving force behind our development. At the same time, they release us from perfection, which cannot be achieved neither by an individual or a group.

Accepting mistakes in group work means taking responsibility, having a relaxed relationship with yourself and the circumstances in which you have found yourself in, and adaptability. The last one being especially important, since it releases the participants from the pressure of making mistakes, being perfect and doing everything “just right”. That does not mean we don’t strive towards quality in our work, it only means we do not focus completely on the end result, we let that evolve naturally through the process. We let mistakes be a part of the process, not a deviation from it. With a positive outlook that celebrates mistakes we can create a safer space, where the participants feel empowered to share their voice, opinions and ideas.

3. **Observing and listening** are skills which we often take for granted, yet in our daily lives we are preoccupied with so many things, thoughts and forces that pull us in many different directions, we tend to neglect them both. Actively observing and listening, where our main goal is not waiting to reply or react, is a very important skill on stage, which helps improvisors to appropriately react to our surroundings; to recognise the atmosphere, emotions and to take care of each other. Observing and listening highlights someone else, an interlocutor or a fellow actress, and thus redirects us from being focused solely on ourselves onto others. With that we also strengthen our ability of adapting and spontaneously responding.

Observing and listening is very important especially in a group, because it creates space for different voices and encourages the group leaders to provide this space for every participant. Only by observing and listening precisely do we recognise the needs of the group and its members, which we can then address with methods and a work programme. At the same time, it is an important goal for the participants to acknowledge the needs of each other and give one another their needed personal space.

4. **Taking responsibility** is especially important in improvisational theatre in regard to the relationship you have with your fellow actresses – the ones on stage, as well as the ones in the audience. Responsibility means taking care of another improviser even when we are unsure as to where this scene is going. It is crucial to have an understanding that to support a fellow actress and to attempt to enhance her idea with our own (without overriding hers) is one of the key concepts in theatre improvisation. We need mutual trust between participants, improvisors, who together leap into the unknown, to create collectively. Besides that, we need to take responsibility for our own stage decisions or mistakes, which we do not shy away from, but acknowledge, enhance and use. On the other hand, responsibility also means voicing your opinion in a privileged and visible way – on stage.

In groups we build on the awareness that we will take care of each other and ourselves. Taking responsibility for our well-being means that we understand our own vulnerabilities and are able to regulate our triggers and reluctance that can come up while working with plays and exercises, whose purpose is to get us out of our comfort zone.

5. **Taking risks** is one of the key concepts and values of theatre improvisation. We can make decisions on stage that we wouldn't be able to in real life due to their consequences. Even the most basic "Yes, and..." principle underlines a risk, since saying "yes" to something means that we are taking a step into the unknown.

One of the most important values of theatre improvisation is gaining courage through experience of improvisational games that we can translate into our daily lives, because some risk-taking is necessary in life and because we are often afraid of different things that can stand in our way or "raise our fear" (being seen as odd, childish, even crazy, being different, unaccepted, excluded etc.). By being exposed to different stage experiences and situations in scenes we re-examine everything we generally accept as a given. By accepting the initiatives of fellow actresses, we break our patterns and look for new solutions, new ways of seeing and new paths.

"Yes, and..." is the key principle of improvisational theatre. It enables collective creation, and it means that the fellow actresses will accept the reality of the scene (yes) and will enhance it (and). However, that does not mean that you are not allowed to say no on stage. It only adds to a more equal collaboration in scenes, because it dictates a more gradual discovery of the story and the setting of stage reality step by step with the help of everyone involved.

There are more values and guidelines of improvisational theatre but just by looking at the five ones, we can see it is about the values that shape a confident, collaborative and active individual, who is able to take

responsibility for her actions, can practice her listening and observing skills and can recognise and overcome her fears and unwillingness. It is thus not unusual that applied theatre improvisation developed alongside improvisational theatre, which explores the potential of improvisational theatre outside of the context of theatre and art.



How do you start using the theatre improvisation method in any way, shape or form?

One of the more attractive qualities of theatre improvisation art is its wide accessibility. To practice it you only need some empty space, chairs and people who participate in it. Of course, you also need the knowledge of improvisational skills, interest, willingness to do the work and trust – trust in yourself, in the group and the power of improvisation. That is why we recommend that you take part in some impro event in your local community: shows by different groups (secondary school, collegiate or adult impro groups), plays based on short, unconnected scenes, or longer forms. We also recommend active participation in improvisational theatre workshops, in conversations and debates about theatre and improvisation, and reading different literature about the subject (or using video materials). The more experience and background we have on the subject, the more confident and courageous we will be at implementing its methods in each context. If we are considering implementing theatre improvisation into the development of our own play, we need to ask ourselves about the main features that connect various scenes into a play.

In general, the method of theatre improvisation is similar to any other skill – the best way to practice it is through active participation, which can then be additionally supported by other methods (booklets, videos etc.).

If you already have some experience and wish to include a play or exercise into your work or use it to enhance other activities, we suggest you think about:

- **activity goal**

What is the purpose of the exercise? Is it to prepare a show, a movement break, to focus, to revise, to make an introduction into a given topic, to connect students in a classroom or a group, to strengthen speaking skills etc.? When you have a clear goal, choosing whether a given exercise needs amending, adapting or more specific instructions becomes easier.

- **the space and logistics**

How will you carry out the game? Will you remove the desks and make space for the game, or will you amend the game to sit behind the desk/on chairs? Will the whole class participate, or will they separate in two groups, where one participates in the game and the other one observes? Will you perform the activity at the start, the middle or the end of the lesson?

- **the values of theatre improvisation**

Regardless of the main goal, it is important that we always keep in mind the main values of theatre improvisation, because they encourage collaboration, accepting mistakes, equal participation, sharing responsibility, accepting, building upon etc. This is important because in that way we are creating a safer space, which becomes predictable in that the participants will be given appropriate support for their courage (and also limitations, if needed); the group will provide them with safe space and enable them to create a mutual story and test out different (risky) scenarios and situations.

What is a mentor's role in theatre improvisation?

In theatre improvisation the mentor or group leader has the task of securing a safer space. In the words of Viola Spolin, one of the most important improvisational pedagogues, we do not learn impro, we experience it or rather we do not teach impro, we enable it. So, the biggest contribution of a group leader is to create a space for participators to explore in, to express themselves and respond in any way, shape or form – and it's the mentor's job to encourage and guide them, not to limit them. That sometimes means that the mentor needs to play with her own status – she admits to not knowing everything, owns up to her mistakes and is the picture of vulnerability, courage, sensitivity and honesty. Therefore it is recommended for the mentor to regularly participate in trainings, to enrich her experience, confidence and awareness that teaching improvisational theatre or teaching with theatre improvisation is a great method for the participants to “open up”.

This may also include unforeseen, delicate situations so it is important that the mentor acts based on the principles of accepting and enhancing (“Yes, and ...”), and responds to the atmosphere and needs of the group.

With educated mentors, who are prepared to teach with theatre improvisation in mind (accepting mistakes, being brave, playing with statuses, accepting their own limitations, are relaxed but focused, take part in activities, play etc.), any group can safely take part in improvisational theatre. They can discover any type of topic through such approach – it all depends on decisions and set goals.

Improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation in Slovenia

In Slovenia improvisational theatre started developing at the beginning of the 1990s. The main improvisational stage was in Culture and Arts Centre France Prešeren (KUD) in Trnovo. Today different artistic and creative groups take care of the programmes and projects, one of them being Association for culture and education IMPRO, which overlooks a few of the main programmes of theatre improvisation in Slovenia. The most known programmes of theatre improvisation in Slovenia are:

- Impro liga, a programme and competition in improvisational theatre for students and adults,
- ŠILA – School impro league, programme of improvisational theatre for secondary school students,
- MIŠ – Little impro school that encourages improvisational theatre and impro education in primary school,
- Bodigatreba+ - an educational programme for everyone, who wish to become an independent mentor of improvisational theatre.

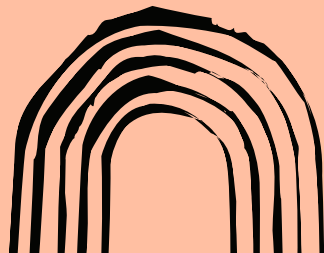
One of the biggest achievements of theatre improvisation in Slovenia is the programme ŠILA – School impro league, because it facilitated the existence of programmes that have become a part of the regular curriculum in Slovenian secondary schools, which contain the elements of improvisational theatre. Gradually, we can see more theatre improvisation being included in youth work, in the development of group leaders and teachers and others. We wish to see improvisational theatre and various methods of theatre improvisation to become widely renowned and acknowledged in cultural and artistic spheres, as well as the educational field, because we are aware of its benefits when creating communities and empowering individuals.

You can watch the highlights of the workshops, and the thoughts on theatre improvisation and improvisational theatre in the video:



Theatre Improvisation and Inclusion

Authors of the chapter: Jošt Cafuta Maček and Veronika Hana Grubič



Improvisational theatre methods are focused on celebrating differences and variety, which help us with our core performative mission. Different multi-layered characters are the basis on which we build interesting interpersonal relationships and interesting stories, scenes. Due to that, the exploration of being different, of deviating from the norm is accepted and even celebrated in improvisational theatre. However, we need to be aware of the possibility of making a caricature out of certain groups or lifestyles and should be aware that we can be amiss when oversimplifying because we can end up with misconstrued characters and less accepting communities.

Improvisational theatre is able to research different societal themes through its adaptable theatrical form. If theatre in general is known as the mirror of its society, then we can say that the improvisational theatre with its immediate reaction can be the societal “daily news”. This form of performative art enables us to constantly reevaluate societal norms and situations of vulnerable groups/individuals, who are often limited by the established frameworks of institutions and society – if only we gather enough courage.

In recent years, theatre pedagogues who work with theatre improvisation are more active in the field of inclusion, since we recognise the vast potential of theatre improvisation in building more inclusive groups. We can also see that these methods are helping us address the themes of accessibility and recognising peculiarities of individuals and social groups.

Methods

Methods that we use address some of the most universal topics, feelings and concepts. That is why it has been shown time and time again that we can create a safer space for homogenic as well as heterogenic groups due to our adaptable approach to work. Fear persists that – based on the wide variety of topics we address – one of our most powerful tools would turn into a double-edged sword; that we would overlook special demands and needs of a

particular group because of acknowledging the universal human perception. Mentor carries the responsibility of constantly trying to find the right balance between the two. She does so with the support of the mentor community who oversees additional trainings in recognising the needs of different social groups – not to limit the mentors but to add to their work with groups.

Working with different target groups

As we have already mentioned, it is important to continuously train and gain new active experience through various workshops in order to effectively carry out workshops of theatre improvisation or improvisational theatre. More often than not we take a seemingly simple exercise, which we have carried out at a workshop, into our group and get different results from the ones in a controlled workshop environment. There are many and often unclear reasons as to why one exercise may work in one environment and fail in the other.

Leading improvisational theatre workshop is a live process, which we form together with our participants, so it is impossible to predict all the possible scenarios of what may occur. We can outline very clear goals and note down all the exercises, but then we get to the group we are working with and all the preparation goes out the window. Group work is an unpredictable process that demands our own adaptability and flexibility. If we are unsuccessful in the leading of an exercise and are not reaching the set goals, we understand that as part of the process which is reciprocal: it is important that we as mentors remain open, because our group is shaping us all the time, the same way as we shape the group.

There are no straightforward answers to the question of how to lead a workshop or mentor a group. It is important to continuously strive towards creating safer space, where every individual can explore her own creativity and that

we are ready to examine the purpose of various exercises and games to work with individuals and groups of various sizes and motivations.

Forming safer space and groups

When forming a group, it is important to be aware that every group is made of individuals with different experiences and wishes. In improvisational theatre it is paramount to have a sense of trust between the participants, because only then can an individual relax and dares to question her own personal boundaries and thus get a chance to create interesting, complex character and relationships in theatre scenes.

Although theatre improvisation relies on its performative foundations, the building of the environment for quality creation starts off the stage – between participants in the workshops and their relationships. Exercises to develop the basis of improvisation carry vast potential to create a safer environment and it is the mentor's job to recognise, address and develop these potentials inside the group. Due to the numerous junctures between the techniques of creating a safer, more inclusive environment and the techniques of theatre improvisation our work enables the development of more tolerant and inclusive communities without the fear of losing sight of its primary mission, theatre production.

When we plan a workshop, we need to ask ourselves, how motivated will the participants be to work and why they are attending the workshop. If it is part of their compulsory curriculum, then we first introduce ourselves, present the timeline of the day and take the time to create a safer space before we start with the exercises. This is especially important for (but not limited to) heterogenic groups, because participants often experience shame and other negative emotions. This is a completely normal part of the process, because we are more exposed due to the games and exercises, unusual body movements, making and celebrating mistakes, which are all typical for theatre improvisation – all that often addresses our defence mechanisms.

To create a safer space, it is important to constantly check in with our feelings. That can be very general, but we can also be very precise and focused, which leads to better evaluation during the process. During a multi-layered exercise, we can do a check in of participants' feelings after every stage of the exercise and give them space to share those feelings. As mentors, we should voice our own feelings as well, since we cannot expect honesty from participants, if we are not honest with them.

We often start improvisational theatre workshops with exercises for social dynamics. They give us a great insight into group dynamics, while enabling the participants to share personal experiences in a playful manner, which creates a more relaxed atmosphere in the group. The process of creating a safer space moves quicker in homogenic groups, whereas in heterogenic groups we need to dedicate more time to that, and we need to lead the group at a slower pace, with smaller steps.

Exercise for social dynamics: D'you love me?

The exercise is performed in a circle. One of the participants stands in the middle and asks another randomly chosen participant "D'you love me?". The latter can answer: "Yes" which makes her neighbours exchange places in the circle. The participant in the middle tries to take the place of one of them before they do. The person can also answer: "No, but I love everybody who <insert random quality, characteristic>." In that case, every participant in the circle that matches that description needs to change places. The participant in the middle tries to take the place of one of them before they do. Since the circle has one less space than the number of participants, there will always be one who is left without a place. This person then stands in the middle and carries on the exercise.

Improvisational theatre workshop demands a certain level of sharing personal feelings from their participants and it can happen that we provoke a response that might be deemed negative in wider society. Therefore, it is important that mentors constantly supervise and recognise if somebody is experiencing difficulties. If so, we can offer such individuals a different role than the rest of the group (they can become the observers, have different tasks etc.). If we are working with the group long-term, we need to pay attention to the formed behavioural patterns and to the ways of exceeding them. For example, the participants who tend to be in the role of observers get dealt bigger and bigger responsibility. Even if we take baby steps, it is important to encourage progress.

Every group is different and carries its own set of rules, so we cannot always be prepared for everything that might occur. However, we can learn from every relationship and thus expand our available tools that enrich us and help us transform the fear of working with different groups into passion for learning.

The number of participants

We need to keep in mind the number of participants while planning a workshop, because that has a direct effect on maintaining attention in the group. We also need to be aware that despite the number of participants, each person should feel addressed, heard and accepted.

With a larger number of participants, we recommend you choose less complicated exercises that can be explained in a short and succinct manner. We explain the exercise to the whole group, then we divide the participants into smaller groups to perform the exercise. The mentor should constantly rotate between the groups and help with additional explanation or even join in the exercise. Bigger groups also benefit from exercises in pairs. They enable participants to learn about each other. Exercises that encourage participants to

share positive life experiences are beneficial to the group dynamic and see to the feelings of stronger connection in the group, albeit bigger.

With a lower number of participants, we need to be prepared to lead the workshop but also participate in it a lot, since quite a few exercises demand a higher number of participants.

To maintain the rhythm and participants' attention we often carry out exercises that demand different group sizes, different organisation and encourage participants step into the role of active participants as well as observers.

Different types of exercises

Since every participant is unique, we recommend implementing different types of exercises in workshops. Only then will we address different needs, and every participant will get a chance to find the exercises that make her feel comfortable and those that challenge her.

Exercises in a circle

We often begin workshops with exercises in a circle. In that way every participant has an equal chance of participating and actively engaging without feeling too exposed. Exercises in a circle give us the ability to see each other and work especially well in bigger groups. It is also important to note that every spot in a circle is equal to the other.

Exercises in pairs

Working with a partner can evoke more intimacy than group work, which we need to consider when we suggest such form of work. We can start with the exercises that do not include touching and we can let the participants choose how far away they will stand from one another or even choose not to maintain eye contact. With every partner switch we can intensify these

components, while observing the participants and amending the instructions when needed. Comfort zone can vary from one participant to another, which is why it is recommended that we do not judge others by our own standards, but simply observe them and adjust our expectations.

Individual exercises

Individual exercises are a good addition to the whole process, providing the workshop is being carried out in an appropriate space where every participant has enough space.

The participants can perform the exercises in their place, or they can walk around the room if the process is more dynamic by nature. In both cases, half of the participants can sit and observe, while the other half is actively participating in the exercise. After the exercise is done all can express their view of the performance. After the reflection both groups exchange places.

Each group we work with is different, and even if we work with the same group for a longer period of time, there will come a time when we can achieve set goals through a given exercise and times when that won't be possible. While using methods of theatre improvisation it is important to be adaptable, to closely observe the group and its individuals, paying special attention to how they are feeling, and to accept the participants' initiatives and respond to them.

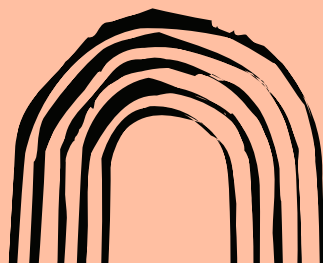
By taking part in this international project, we have once again realised that in order to achieve wider inclusivity we must constantly learn. The biggest progress is achieved by observing, making mistakes, reflecting, evaluating and talking to workshop participants.

You can watch the highlights of the workshops, and the thoughts on theatre improvisation and inclusion in the video:



Theatre Improvisation and Social Responsibility

Authors of the chapter: Olivija Grafenauer and Eva Jus



Modern theatre improvisation with its values and techniques offers us many possibilities to address societal topics and to pursue goals rooted in activism. Most of that is connected to previously mentioned topics – the possibility of connecting groups for the purpose of reaching mutual goals, playfulness, connecting associative flows and spontaneity – that the use of improvisational techniques implement into our work with the groups, be it heterogenic or homogenic. And what is even more, improvisational techniques help us find ways and solutions that we never even thought of. It is not a coincidence that modern theatre improvisation developed in space and time, when people were looking for ways of liberating themselves from the shackles of rigid societal norms. The development of improvisation went hand in hand with social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. However, that does not mean that the values of theatre improvisation, like social movements, do not carry traps, which we need to be aware of, especially if we wish to use its techniques for socially beneficial purpose.

Traps of the “Yes, and ...” principle

The vocabulary of theatre improvisation promises a lot about emancipation, social responsibility and engagement, but we need to be careful not to expect spontaneous socially progressive results from it. It has been shown that seemingly progressive principles such as “Yes, and ...” can be a double-edged sword. On one hand it demands acceptance of fellow improvisors and their impulses and using their ideas to build scenes or simple stage actions. On the other hand, this principle served as an excuse for dominant figures, who could resist any kind of opposition of other improvisors. In other words, if the leading figures abduct the “Yes, and ...” principle they can use it to oppose any kind of change that comes from the inner circle. If you don't like how they treat women or marginalised groups, you are a bad fellow actress. Are you bothered by the attitude towards nature or a bad joke about a socially important topic? You don't understand and don't support a good joke or even more, you are oppressing your fellow actresses. That is why it is necessary to keep in mind that the sole use of theatre improvisation and its principles is not enough to achieve

the socially important goals. It is necessary for the group that uses the theatre improvisation techniques to reach an agreement on values, that it brings into the improvisation, just as in real life and all social structures. Only then can our work with the use of theatre improvisation for socially progressive goals truly begin.

Theatre improvisation can also be used to cover different social themes, while bearing in mind its traps, because we can amend it to different circumstances and explore relationships and the environment through play. That can be achieved with playfulness, accepting shame, listening, widening our field of associations and knowledge, role play, transcendence of problems into the surreal, which provides us with a different outlook, and more. In theatre improvisation different exercises are constantly developing and foundations for different disciplines, which are open enough, are being formed, in order to easily cover numerous social themes.

An example of the use of improvisational theatre to address a chosen social theme

An example of a useful play to cover themes is an associative circle with a determined topic (in the project we used the topic of environmental issues). The participants exchange associations, and we encourage spontaneity and building upon each other's ideas, which can help us develop new ideas and expand our views on the subject.

Freeze frames: The participants use their bodies to create a "picture" with no movement. We can adapt the number of participants, but it is important to take the time and discuss each frame – what are the elements of the picture, how are they connected, what the whole picture represents ... With this exercise we are already expanding our associative circle and are trying to observe our issue in different situations and look at it from different points of view.

With exercises and scenes that we introduce at our workshops we can begin to cover a specific theme and offer the possibility to improvisors to get to know each other, to share their opinions, to connect and to trust one another.

The improvisors also learn how to take responsibility for their actions in our improvisational theatre workshops, be it through exercises that encourage listening, observing and collaborating, and do not usually work without having everybody's attention, or through scenes, where the improvisers choose and build (together with fellow improvisers) characters, relationships, text and are responsible for scene content or even show content later on. By playing in scenes the participants get the chance to test out their ideas and opinions in various circumstances and situations. That is how they learn to present their views in different ways, adapt them and include them in different situations.

One of the options is to search for solutions with improvised scenes, which can be open or closed, can have sometimes more and sometimes less limitations, rules and stipulations. Open form means having access to a wider circle of associations on a specific social issue, a wider angle, myriad of situations that the issue refers to, different opinions etc. With the help of a closed form (more rules) and more defined roles we form a space to explore the topic in greater detail solely in one situation.

Switch: an exercise, where one of the participants “conducts” the scene by saying “Switch”. Every time the improvisors hear that, they need to change their last idea. The conductor/mc provokes the performers to look for solutions that may not be the most natural to them, or the first they think of.

Theatre improvisation for subverting established narratives

Modern theatre improvisation helps us discover the dramaturgy of our daily lives and realise that that social relations, statuses, social gender and similar categories are not externally imposed, but continuously emerge as a result of human interactions.

We have already spoken about the traps that blindly following the “Yes, and ...” principle can bring about. It is the main principle of improvisation which enables us to build a scene on what has been offered by our fellow improvisers, but it can also lead to feeling incapable of rejecting offers that we do not consider appropriate, that confirm the established social order and patterns that we want to push against, etc.

That is why we should think of “Yes, and ...” principle as a “Yes, I heard and saw your offer, I accepted it as a stage fact AND have decided to reject all the values that it brings and will continue the scene as a rebel.” Sometimes all these stage actions will be perceived as a “obstruction”, as a rejection of your fellow actress’ offer, but it is crucial to understand that as long as improvisors build upon the given offer, it is not about blocking the scene or the fellow improvisor, but simply rejecting the values that the offer brought into the scene.

Similarly, we can understand the “Switch” principle that allows us to say “Switch” when we get an offer (ours or fellow improvisors) that is not in accordance with the values we wish to highlight. It is a play with associative flow. We know that our unconscious functions based on the path of least resistance, which means that it can carry ideas which are a part of set thinking patterns and flows, but when we challenge those, we dive deeper into the unconscious and unlock new and truly innovative solutions for social issues. Since the whole process is in a form of a play, we don’t feel the pressures that we usually encounter in our daily lives, when faced with similar challenges.

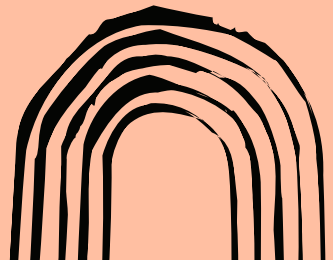
The playful side of the process enables us to find solutions that would evade us in our serious and real lives.

Improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation offer us many possibilities and methods to cover difficult social themes in a more relaxed way with different groups of people. However, we need to be careful not to affirm social inequality through seemingly progressive methods, but try to overcome it.

You can watch the highlights of the workshops, and the thoughts on theatre improvisation and social responsibility in the video:



Conclusion



This publication shows and opens the door to thinking about improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation as methods to explore creativity and to address different groups and social issues, while highlighting the traps that may occur in these methods.

Improvisational theatre is a live theatre form that is always developing. The same goes for pedagogical methods that stem from it. We hope that the publication has made you question as much as it has given you answers and the new insights will cause you to join many more workshops, shows and other events in improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation. We hope you continue to expand your knowledge. We suggest that your next step involves attending additional local courses and other improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation events.

We wish you a successful and playful implementation of improvisational theatre and theatre improvisation into your own work!

See also

Various courses of theatre improvisation pedagogical methods in Slovenia are carried out by Pionirski dom - Center za kulturo mladih and Društvo za kulturo in izobraževanje IMPRO that offer several workshops and trainings for educators, youth and culture workers.

www.drustvoimpro.si

www.pionirski-dom.si

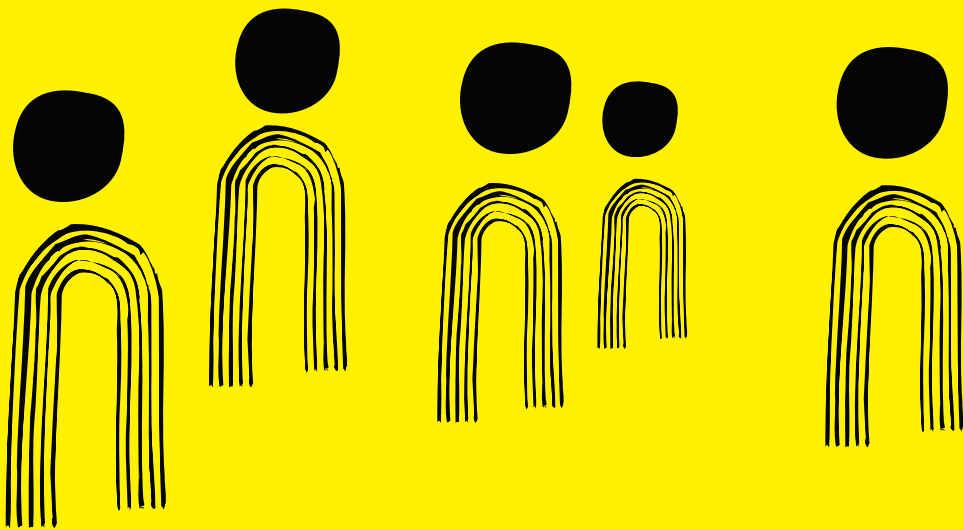
Additional literature on improvisational theatre
and theatre improvisation can be found at:

<https://www.drustvoimpro.si/impro-digitalna-knji%C5%BEnica>

Creative movement for School, Art and Life:

https://www.youngtheatreonthemove.com/files/brochures/4/file/YTOM_2021_ENG_FINAL_web_2_compressed.pdf





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