

Magdalena Szuster*

“Alchemy and smoke in a bottle” – contemporary improvisational theater in Poland and the United States

Part 1: (Re)defining Improvised Theater – the American and Polish Perspectives

What Does Impro(v) Mean Anyway?

The origins of improvisation are indistinct, and for most part untraceable. An academic endeavor to establish its beginnings would go unrewarded, as there is no one distinct inventor¹ of improvisation. This technique, or method, had been used as means of expression in art long before Spolin or Johnstone, and far away from Chicago or London. The Atellan farce (1 BC), secular entertainers and court jesters in China (10 BC), or the frenzied improvisations in Ancient Greece (600 BC) had preceded the 16th century *commedia dell'arte*² the Italian improvised performance based on scenarios and/or sketches. The renaissance of improvisation in the 20th century was largely brought about by experimental artists who used it as means of expression, communication and representation. As a tool, a vessel or foundation improvisation existed in theater (both formal and popular), painting, poetry and music. It was an important substance, and an interesting addition to avant-garde art.

The early avant-garde theater welcomed improvisation as a means in the process of developing plays and productions, or as a component of actor training, yet an independent improvisational format was yet to be devised. In the mid-twentieth

* Dr, University of Łódź, Faculty of Philology, Department of American Literature and Culture, 91-404 Łódź, ul. Pomorska 171/173; magda.szuster@gmail.com.

¹ The 20th-century “reinventors”, however, have been well documented in literature.

² As Edwin Duerr states in *The Length and Depth of Acting*, “At first, as choral leader of the dithyramb, a hymn usually honoring Dionysus, the Greek priest led a chorus of fifty in narrating, largely by improvisation, some incident in the deity’s life”. See: E. Duerr, *The Length and Depth of Acting*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1962, pp. 1–15.

century, the use of improvisation in theater was redesigned and refocused through the experiments of the impro(v) precursors: Viola Spolin in Chicago and Keith Johnstone in London/Toronto. It was then further developed by Johnstone as well as the next generation of improvisers, such as Paul Sills, David Shepherd, Del Close and Charna Halpern, to eventually emerge as an autonomous theatrical form known today as **improvisational/improvised theater**, **impro** or **improv**³. Therefore, in essence, impro(v) is understood as a structured, formalized and defined improvisation, an autonomous and distinct theater format comprising both long- and short-form formats (see Appendix 1⁴).

The designations of improvised theater

Yet impro(v) remains a controversial theatrical format among artists and critics alike. The professional antagonism towards improvisation as an autonomous entity, which is still prevalent in the theatrical world, is perhaps best illustrated by John Hodgson and Ernest Richards in the preface to the 1974 revised edition of their book *Improvisation*:

In the United States, perhaps more than in Europe, there has been a proliferation of professional and amateur groups eager to take the risk of presenting entire performances on improvised material. Such groups as The Wing in San Francisco and Theatre Machine in London spontaneously present scenes or a whole play from ideas drawn from the audience or from rough scenarios supplied by the director. There are now many more fringe groups who develop productions from improvisation sessions and recent years have seen quite large prices charged for performances of what seem no more than actor-training sessions or audience involvement in encounter group activities⁵.

Yet the professional improvisers claim that “improvisation is not some poor relation to ‘legitimate’ theater... It is an art form that stands on its own, with its own discipline and aesthetics”⁶. Thirty years later, Mick Napier, the founder

³ The terms **improvisational theater**, **improvised theater** and **impro(v)** are used interchangeably throughout the paper. I, however, make a distinction between **impro** and **improv**, as explained in section: “The question of terminology. The improv/impro debate”.

⁴ The selected instances of long-form (*The Harold*) and short-form improvisation (*games*) presented in Appendix 1 aim to provide concrete examples of the improvisational formats.

⁵ J. Hodgson, E. Richards, *Improvisation*, Eyre Methuen Ltd, London 1967, p. x.

⁶ Ch. Halpern, D. Close, K. “Howard” Johnson, *Truth in Comedy. The Manual of Improvisation*, Meriwether Publishing, Denver 2001, p. 14.

and artistic director of one of the most influential contemporary improvisational theaters (The Annoyance), whether or not familiar with the passage from *Improvisation*, humorously reforges Hodgson and Richard’s opinion on the then developing impro(v) by stating that “Improv troupes around the world force reasonably nice people to pay to see [improvisation as a performance product in and of itself]”⁷.

The designations of improvisation seen as “**pure** improvisation, that is, improvisation as a performance in and of itself”⁸, are plenty and various, but they all incorporate factors such as immediacy, collaboration and the role of audiences. Therefore, the definition by Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, which sees improvisation as

the 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 preconceptions⁹,

together with Dudeck’s view of Johnstone’s System understood as “an approach to actor training and theatre practice that encourages the intuitive, uncensored imaginative responses of the participants”¹⁰, may serve as a strong foundation on which one can build a more concrete understanding of impro(v).

A Polish company based in Wrocław, Cali na Biało, explain improvisation to their potential audience and fans on their official Facebook fanpage as “a kind of an interactive show. It is based on creating sketches live that rely on audience suggestions without a script”¹¹. This concept of immediacy is close to many improvisers both in the US and Poland. Napier’s idea of improvisation as “getting on a stage and making stuff up as you go along”¹² complements Charna Halpern’s view that “true improvisation is getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning”¹³ and that “strictly speaking, improvisation is making it up as you go along”¹⁴. A Polish impro group from Poznań, Zróbmy to!, underscore that, regardless of terminology, the rule for improvised theater is singular: “Improv... Improv... stage improvisation... theatrical-cabaret improvisation...

⁷ M. Napier, *Improvise. Scene from the Inside Out*, with foreword by S. Colbert, Heinemann, Portsmouth 2004, p. 1.

⁸ T.R. Dudeck, *Keith Johnstone. A Critical Biography*, Bloomsbury, London 2013, p. 4.

⁹ A. Frost, R. Yarrow. *Improvisation in Drama*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2007, p. 4.

¹⁰ T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹¹ *About*, Cali na Biało – improv, Facebook, <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/calinabialo/> [accessed on: 10.03.2016].

¹² M. Napier, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹³ Ch. Halpern, D. Close, K. “Howard” Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

There are many terms, but it all boils down to one thing – the actors not equipped with any scripts go on stage¹⁵.

According to Alan Pakosz of AD HOC, a comedy impro group in Cracow, “Impro means to create short or long improvisational formats on a whim, based on audience suggestions. Improvisation is solely limited by the laws of physics and the improviser’s imagination¹⁶. Although each format and instance of impro(v) has a set of predetermined rules and/or guidelines, freedom on stage is perhaps one of the most compelling features of this theatrical format. For actors, this liberty also translates into an opportunity to fully present their talents, as Christopher Last (Unexpected Productions) points out: “You get so much stage time as an improviser that I feel is not always afforded to scripted actors, everyone has to have the moment when they hold the stage. If you want to be out using your talents, it’s hard to find another gig that has as much opportunity for you”.

The other integral and indispensable element of improvised theater mentioned by Pakosz is audience participation. And while audience suggestions are crucial to most impro(v) formats nowadays, they are not essential. But regardless of whether a company decides to draw from the spectators’ suggestions to put on an improvised show, audience inclusion in the actual performance is compulsory. For Dudeck, the two integral components of impro are to “include the audience and have a good time¹⁷. Their importance was also observed by Helge Skoog, a Swedish actor who strongly affirms the role of the audience during an improvisational performance: “Impro is best live, you have to be there and feel the atmosphere¹⁸”.

The quality of creating a performance here and now, which is momentary and elusive, might be the most important feature of independent improvisation. According to Randy Dixon, the founder and artistic director of Unexpected Productions in Seattle, WA, “Improvisation to me at minimum contains two elements, immediacy and collaboration. It is the skill of creating art out of nothing but one another”. And for Monika Nowogrodzka (Musical Improwizowany), impro is vital in the way that it “teaches mindfulness, being here and now, and boosts sensitivity”. Weronika Nackowska, one of the youngest improvisers in terms of experience that I had a chance to interview¹⁹, also acknowledges the role immediacy plays in both creating and witnessing an improvised show:

¹⁵ *Grupa Impro Zróbmy to! Czym jest impro?*, <http://kabaretmalze.wixsite.com/oferta/grupa-impro-zrobmy-to> [accessed on: 28.03.2016].

¹⁶ All citations in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are from personal interviews conducted by the author. See: Bibliography. Personal interviews – P.I.

¹⁷ T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

¹⁸ H. Skoog qtd. in T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

¹⁹ In May 2015, Nockowska enrolled in Szkoła Impro, a Warsaw-based improvisational training center (P.I.).

When I explain what impro is to people who don't have the vaguest idea of what we do, I tell them that we go on stage without a script, a plan, with no stage design. That we are creating a world, a storyline, an “aura” and a convention within which we operate, out of nothing. That we need to decide whether it will be slapstick, dramatic or melodramatic, what the story will revolve around – will it be a more defined, specific issue, or an utterly ambiguous and vague problem. That our role, the role of the improvisers is to be an actor and a playwright at the same time. And the playwright has to control the actor, and the actor has to control the playwright.

Collaboration and mutual inclusiveness of ideas on stage lie at the core of a successful improvised performance. For Dudeck, being benevolent (“in taking care of your partner, unleashing your partner’s imagination, etc.”), combined with striving for an agreement on stage in order to become “a part of the process that is unfolding”, are the foundations of improvisational theater. The agreement, commonly referred to as the “Yes, and”²⁰ rule, engenders the “group mind”, which in turn may help to achieve group consciousness. For Jason DeLeo (Education Director at Unexpected Productions), achieving such instances of communal commitment, in which everyone is completely engaged in the creative line, is a magical connection formed by improvisation:

Improv is like no other art; it's about finding something, creating in [*medias res*]. Tonight is a great example. To me it was 45 minutes of intense cooperation. We were all on the same page, doing it together, creating something that will never be seen again, and no one has any idea what we just did. I felt that that's the connection improv creates, and it's just so... magical.

The “group mind” achieved through collaboration is crucial to engage the spectators in the show. Melissa Reaves (Unexpected Productions) explains that when the actors are fully absorbed in the plot, the audience becomes equally immersed in the story – “the whole room's in”, she concludes. Dudeck also acknowledges “the power of improvisation to release someone from habitual, coded modes of behavior (i.e. the socially-constructed self) and psychological blocks that limit their ability to be fully present in relationships with self and others”. For her it is the power of Johnstone's work that has the capacity to “liberate our imaginative, artistic uncensored impulses. The split-attention exercises/techniques, for example, occupy the thinking/conscious mind so the creative, intuitive part can come out to play!”.

²⁰ Ch. Halpern, D. Close, K. “Howard” Johnson, *op. cit.*, s. 46. We will find the following description here: “Yes, &... is the most important rule in improvisation... [it] simply means that whenever two actors are on stage they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information”.

Immediacy and collaboration are among the most crucial aspects of improvisation and those most often deemed indispensable by experienced improvisers. Randy Dixon, for instance, recognizes that the three most important rules of improv are “Listen, Be Obvious, Be Present”. “Eye Contact, Eye Contact, Listen”, concurs Paul Mattingly when asked the same question.

The very nature of every truly improvised performance, regardless of the format, tradition, school and even location, lies in its inimitability – the unique and distinct character of a passing, unrepeatable artistic moment. Dixon observes that “a truly great improv scene is of that moment and that moment only. Like smoke, it lingers for a moment then disappears”. It will never be performed again, and unless recorded, no other audience will ever witness the process. Mattingly explains that “The impermanence of the art form is part of its magic. Most scenes in an improvisational set are not incredibly strong on their own but in the mix of the entire piece become something more. Improvisation is alchemy and lightning in a bottle and if you look at it too closely it disappears”. The transient aspect of improvisational theater is both an opportunity and a challenge to the actor. Dixon notes that improvisation “always presents new challenges to be solved. It’s always different”.

Comedy. The role of humor in improvisational theater

Impro(v), in popular mind, is inseparably connected with comedy. The actors are referred to as comics and comedians, and the performances are seen as comic skits and comedy shows. For many, improvisational theater is seen on a par with stand-up comedy (or in Poland with popular cabaret) and as undemanding popular entertainment. Although the improvisers deplore such an attitude as hurtful and detrimental to the genre, it is not entirely groundless. Most of the improvisational gurus claim that comedy is a side-effect of impro(v), or, like the authors of *Truth in Comedy*, that “improvisation was created to develop comedy for its own sake”²¹. It is in fact comedy that ultimately popularized the genre and made it profitable. Mainstream improvisation promoted by TV²² shows such as *Saturday Night Live*

²¹ Ch. Halpern, D. Close, K. “Howard” Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

²² The prospective popularity of improvisational theater was spotted as early as 1988 by UK’s Channel 4, which successfully turned a version of Theatresports, an impro form developed by Keith Johnstone, into a TV show called *Whose Line Is It Anyway* (WLIA). Ten years later, the show hosted by Drew Carey premiered on ABC and ran for ten consecutive seasons from 1998 to 2007, a truly outstanding running time for a non-reality show. Taken by the popularity of the show, Drew Carey produced two other improv TV shows: *Drew Carey’s Improv-A-Ganza* and *Drew Carey’s Green Screen Show*. While the former bore much resemblance to WLIA, the latter was less theatrical, a more “televisionized” version of a WLIA skit by the name of “Newsflash”,

or *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, which on the surface focus on humor, leave artistic merit discernible only to the eye of more knowledgeable audiences. Dudeck regrets that “still, not all theatre programs value improvisation equally partly due to its negative reputation still perpetuated by shows like ‘Whose Line’ and forms like ComedySportz or by Upright Citizen’s Brigade mantra ‘get the laugh at all costs’”. Both Dudeck and Johnstone believe that the show did more harm than good to improvised theater. “Keith refers to this show [*Whose Line is It Anyway?*] as ‘padding between commercials’. It is a very watered down, formulaic version of the Impro System. It is about getting the laughs, about playing games, and not about building relationships, fleshing out characters, and constructing good narratives”. But she admits that the show is entertaining, even if “it doesn’t do anything to elevate improvisation as an infinite process that has the ability to create profound theatre”. Dixon, on the other hand, does not feel so strongly about the TV program, and describes it as “Good improvisers in a really safe show”. He agrees, though, with Dudeck that it is a far cry from what improvised theater should be. “Whose Line is not designed to showcase story or meaning but rather the personalities of those on the show”. “I can’t tell you a single story I have seen on it. Just games. Not built for improv, but built for television”. Like Dudeck and Johnstone, Dixon also draws a clear line between comic improvisation and what fully improvisational theater should be, but does not believe it as a conducive derivative. Instead, he sees it more like a separate subgenre: “I don’t think the games were misused in the show – they were used to derive comedy which some live groups also do”, Dixon explains. Dudeck, on the other hand, scorns “comedic” improvisation:

Yes, improv produces wonderfully comic scenarios, comedic and absurd characters, and very, very humorous moments, but for me, improv training is ultimately about enhancing the theatrical process from beginning to end—in actor training, in the rehearsal space, in performance, and in the creating/devising of characters and new material.

In the formative days of improv and improvisation, neither Johnstone nor Sills and Shepherd set out to create a comedy show. The authors of *Truth in Comedy* underscore that “the first improvisations performed by the Compass Players and other forerunners to Second City were not always intended to be humorous”²³, and add that it wasn’t until recently that improv became practically synonymous

which used the aforementioned green screen so that animation, sound and music were added post-production. The most recent improv TV show, also based on theater sports, *Trust Us With Your Life*, was aired in 2012 and sadly put on hiatus a year later.

²³ Ch. Halpern, D. Close, K. “Howard” Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

with comedy²⁴. They further state that “one of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is attempting to be funny”²⁵. Mick Napier, likewise, sees humor in improvisation not as an underlying factor but rather as a possible element, and humorously concludes that “[improv] can be funny on purpose or not funny on purpose. Quite often, unfortunately, it is not funny not on purpose”²⁶. Charna Halpern interviewed by Deidre Ann Davis explains that improvisation is

not about being funny. It’s about listening and saying yes to each other’s ideas and remembering and reconnecting the ideas. This is a real thinking man’s game. Wit is foam on the beer. You blow it away. There’s nothing there. We don’t need it. We need real thinking and we don’t want you to try to be funny because the humor doesn’t come from you making jokes. The humor and the laughs come from the seriousness of the scene. We have to do good scene work. If it’s truthful for us, we share the same world²⁷.

Kozłowski also believes that comedy is not a foundation of improvised theater and says that “the humor that comes from improvisation grows organically, through the simple act of complete agreement”²⁸ and Dudeck acknowledges that “even if the subject matter is serious, allowing humor to leak into the environment is part of Keith’s pedagogical approach”²⁹. What they strongly resist is the reduction of improvised theater to a comedy show whose sole purpose is getting laughs at all costs, which often seems to be the case nowadays.

It appears that a similar opinion prevails among Polish improvisers, who fear to be labeled as yet another comedy show aligned with cabaret and stand-up comedy. Paweł Neugebauer openly says that impro in Poland is neglected by the traditional theater, yet at the same time it is different from the popular comedy show³⁰. The dramatic actors I talked to share this attitude, if also admitting that they have had few chances to see an impro performance so far; for them, it remains a mediocre theatrical format closer to cabaret than to legitimate theater. Neugebauer further describes the status of improvised theater in Poland: “Klancyk’s

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 15.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 23.

²⁶ M. Napier, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁷ A.D. Davis, *Talking to Charna Halpern About Working with Del Close to Create Longform Improv*, “Splitsider”, 25.04.2012, <http://splitsider.com/2012/04/talking-to-charna-halpern-about-working-with-del-close-to-create-longform-improv-with/> [accessed on: 15.12.2015].

²⁸ R. Kozłowski, *The Art of Chicago Improv. Shortcuts to Long-Form Improvisation*, Heineemann, Portsmouth 2012, p. 2.

²⁹ T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

³⁰ *Warszawa. Felietony Mariusza Szczygła w adaptacji Klancyka*, e-teatr.pl – wortal teatru polskiego, Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/209489.html> [accessed on: 28.03.2016].

improvised theater is not a cabaret in the contemporary meaning of the word, it's not yet regarded as theater, but neither it is entirely stand-up comedy... Our shows are on the border of absurdity and challenge, our humor is very abstract"³¹. The actors affiliated with Klancyk underscore the difference at every possible occasion. In a description of their performance on the official website of Teatr im. Ludwika Solskiego (The Ludwik Solski Theatre) in Tarnów, they explain: “We are not a cabaret, we don't attempt to do a Polish version of Who's [sic] Line Is It Anyway, we're not stand-up comedians"³². It seems that, as in the United States, Polish improvisers begin to differentiate between improvised theater and comedic improvisation (‘improvizacja kabaretowa’), which is similarly promoted in the mainstream and on TV (*I kto to mówi*, a Polish version of *Whose Line Is it Anyway*, or *Spadkobiercy*, a partly improvised soap opera, both of which feature comedians and cabaret artists rather than improvisers). Even in a recent article on improvisation in “Glamour” magazine, the author underscores that “[i]mprovisation may be funny, but it doesn't have to be. Humor is the last goal of improvisation, although it is true that many comedy TV shows and TV series (*Rockefeller Plaza 30*, *Saturday Night Live*) use it in scriptwriting"³³.

The question of terminology. The improv/impro debate

Almost half a century after the major improvisational schools were established, the distinction between **impro** and **improv** remains as unclear as it is undetermined, both in Poland and in North America. This ambiguity may stem from the vast number of improvisational schools of various backgrounds, but also from the lack of systematized data collection and research. While Dudeck believes that the distinction is purely a matter of pronunciation³⁴ –

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” (1 m-prə-vī-'zā-shən) which is closer to the ō in “imprō”. Whereas in standard American pronunciation, the second

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Klancyk / TSK Przedmieście, Teatr im. L. Solskiego w Tarnowie, <http://www.teatr.tarnow.pl/spektakls/view/106> [accessed on: 13.09.2017].

³³ A. Kucińska, *Sztuka Improvizacji*, “Glamour”, issue 3 (155), p. 69.

³⁴ In a personal interview, Dudeck underscores what she sees as the erratic division between **impro** and **improv**: “**Impro**, on its own, is short for/synonymous with **improvisation**. Some mistakenly interpret **impro** to mean British-style improvisation and **improv** to be an abbreviation for American-style improvisation, but as far as I know, that is not true. It's a matter of phonetics and both **impro** and **improv** are abbreviations for **improvisation**”.

and fourth syllables receive more stress and the “o” has a very open “a” sound ... (im-prä-və'zā-shən). Therefore, the preferred use of the abbreviation impro in Britain and improv in America originally stems from phonetics. [...] impro and improv are synonymous³⁵

– improvisers seem to be divided on what impro and improv stand for.

In an unwritten tradition, the disparity between the two terms and the popular distinction lies in the origin of the form and its location. Whereas improv derives from the American tradition originated by The Compass Players, impro seems to be purely and solely Johnstonian. Evidence to support such a view can be found on official websites of North American improvisational theaters (see Chart 1) and in literature.

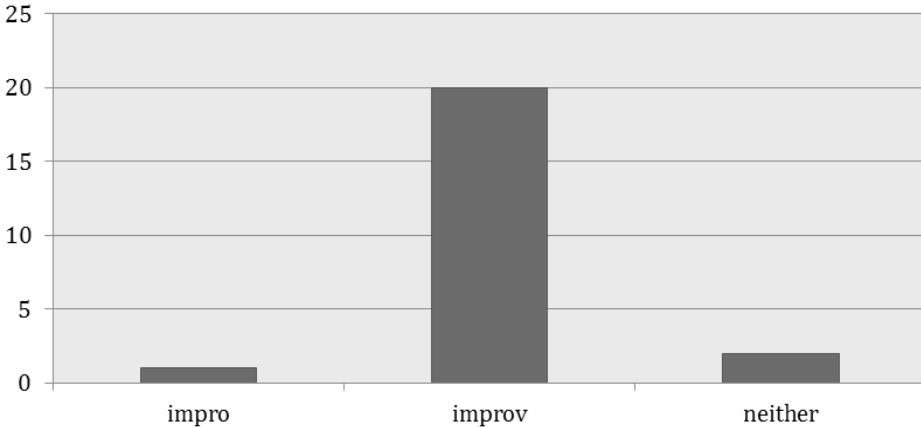


Chart 1: The use of **impro** and **improv** among professional improvisational groups in the USA and Canada³⁶

The twenty random³⁷ improvisational companies located in different regions of the US, along with the Canadian Improv Games, use the term improv, while the only institution which mentions impro is the International Theatresports Institute. Although this supports both hypotheses (Dudeck’s pronunciation explanation and the origin/location theory), the personal interview with Paul Mattingly, an actor, improviser (Second City and Improv Kingdom in Las Vegas) and improv coach, clearly shows how deeply rooted the idea of Johnstonian impro versus American

³⁵ T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁶ All tables and graphs in the text use information provided by the official websites and official Facebook fanpages of the discussed groups.

³⁷ By accidental sampling (not a sample representative group).

improv is. In one of the interview questions, devised to explore what improvisation meant to the improviser, I asked, with no intention of making a distinction between impro and improv just yet, “What is impro?”. Mattingly, however, misunderstood my intentions, and replied that to the best of his knowledge “impro as I am familiar with that specific term is connected to *commedia dell’arte* and theater in which masks are heavily used. Keith Johnstone is one of the strongest voices and experts in this style”. Therefore, in popular, if sometimes inaccurate, understanding, the term impro in the United States serves to depict the Johnstonian form and system, while improv encompasses the whole of improvisational theater in the United States³⁸. Interestingly, ComedySportz, which is a direct heir to Johnstone’s Theatreports, or its rip-off, as Dudeck puts it, uses the term improv to describe its format.

For Polish improvisers, the distinction seems to be even more complicated and ambiguous. Most Polish companies use the term impro to describe their formats (see Chart 2).

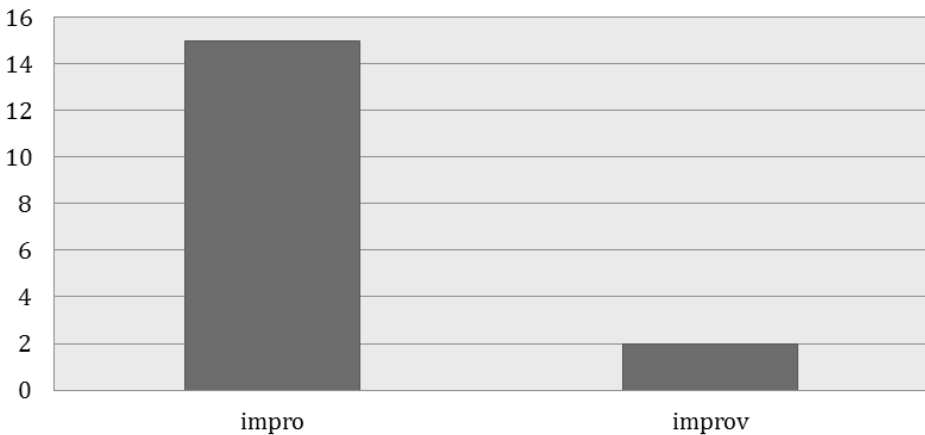


Chart 2: The use of **impro** and **improv** among professional improvisational groups in Poland

On the official website of the impro festival “Podaj Wiosło”, held annually in Gdańsk, the organizers explain that improv is an American word for impro. They do not, however, clarify the origin of impro. On their Facebook fan page, Antymateria, a comedy duo from Wrocław, translate impro (used in the Polish version) into improv in their English description. The Warsaw-based company Ab Ovo uses both terms interchangeably on its official website (though the full name of the company is Ab Ovo Teatr Improv). For Alan Pakosz, affiliated with

³⁸ Such a distinction is also used in this article.

the improvisational group AD HOC, impro also seems more domestic: “Impro or improv? Are you asking about an ideology or spelling? Personally, I am inclined towards impro. It is a more binding term to describe theatrical/comedy show improvisation. You can find improv West of Poland. And East? Perhaps improf?” When asked the same question, Marta Podobas (Musical Improvizowany), Kinga Kosik (Humbuk, Musical Improvizowany), Mateusz Lewandowski (Musical Improvizowany), Bartek Magdziarz (Musical Improvizowany), Weronika Nockowska (Musical Improvizowany), Aleskandra Markowska (Hofesinka, Hulaj, Hurt Luster, Musical Improvizowany) unanimously agree to impro, and add that they have never done improv. Yet again, improv is seen as an alien, estranged form, while impro is regarded as a familiar, recognizable format. On the other hand, all the actors are familiar with Del Close’s improv format the Harold, and some of the improvisers were trained at the iO, which advertises itself as an improv school.

Polish improvisers appear to have formed their own differentiation between impro and improv. While the latter is regarded as an estranged, unknown form of improvisational theater, impro has become domesticated and is now treated as a thing of our own. The fact that many Polish improvisational actors were trained by American improvisers (Markowska – iO and Annoyance, Pakosz – Baby Wants Candy, Trent Pancy, Lyndsay Hailey of iO) who use the term improv, seems to have little effect on the choice of impro over improv.

The **impro/improv** confusion may result from a lack of in-depth knowledge of the history of improvisational theater and unwilling ignorance of the improvisational traditions. The unstable understanding of impro/improv prevailing in Poland may be also a consequence of an erratic definition brought into general use in the formative days of Polish improvisational theater, a practice still propagated in the media today. In a recent issue of the “Glamour” Magazine in Poland, Angelika Kucińska in her article *Sztuka Improvizacji (The Art of Improvisation)*, describes improvisation to her readers as follows: “In a nutshell, improvisation is acting out scenes spontaneously, without a script. It requires good reflexes and thinking outside the box”³⁹. She then explains impro as “a specialist abbreviation, which helps to differentiate improvisation as a fraction of theater from, e.g., jazz improvisation”⁴⁰.

But no matter the origin or historical background – Polish improvisational theater is seen as impro by the improvisers themselves. The terminology has been picked up by the audiences and journalists and may become a standardized appellation. Markowska admitted that she is not fond of either of the terms:

³⁹ A. Kucińska, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

Recently, I’ve been dreaming of going back to the term theatrical improvisation [improvizacja teatralna]. Not only me, but many people, professionals, who have been improvising for a long time and love impro, would like that. We would like people to stop using the American abbreviation. This shortened form seems to me derogatory, in a way.

This shows that the identity of the Polish improvisational companies is still being sought for and developed. The number of different terms to identify a company and describe its format supports such a hypothesis (see Table 1 and 2).

Table 1: Polish improvisational groups and terminology

Terminology regarding the group	Name of the group
teatr improwizacji	Jesiotr, Hulaj
teatr improwizowany	wymyWammy, Przyjezdni
teatr improv	Ab Ovo
grupa teatru improwizowanego	Bez kleпки
grupa improwizacji teatralnej	Nieomylni
grupa improwizacyjna	Pod Pretekstem, ImproVizja, Tubajfor, MOVIEmy, Siedem Razy Jeden
grupa improwizacji	Peleton
grupa impro	Zróbmy to!, Defekt uboczny
drużyna improwizacji	Towarmia
skład ludzi do improwizowania	Improskład
załoga improwizacyjna	Abordaż

Table 2: Polish improvisational groups, terminology regarding performance

Terminology regarding the performance	Name of the group
improvizacja sceniczna	Fruuu
improvizacja teatralna	Klancyk
komedialna improwizacja	Klancyk
komedialna improwizacja teatralna	Hofesinka
występ improwizowany	Wyjdzie w praniu

While American and Canadian groups are more consistent in the naming of the genre (impro, improv, improvisational comedy), they are diverse when it comes to company description (see Table 3).

Table 3: Selected American improvisational groups terminology

Terminology regarding the group	Name of the group
Theatre	iO, National Comedy Theatre, The Annoyance, The Groundlings
Theater	Madcap, Magnet, Peoples Improv Theater
theatre company	Dad's Garage, Loose Moose
improv theatre	HUGE
improv comedy theatre company	Spectacles Improv Engine
comedy theatre	Acme
comedy troupe	Comedy Corner
comedy theater	iO, National Comedy Theatre, The Annoyance, The Groundlings, Philly Improv Theater, The Playground Theater, Under the Gun Theater
improv and sketch comedy team	CHiPS Improv
improv comedy troupe	Ncrowd

While the Polish terms ('skład ludzi do improwizowania', 'załoga improwizacyjna') defining a company strike one as more creative than the rather classical American and Canadian choices (theater, troupe, group, team), we also see that, whatever their tradition or location, improvisational groups define their identities freely and instinctively. There is no established set of rules as to what distinguishes an improv theater from an improvisational comedy theatre, or troupe. In Polish, even the subtle morphological difference between teatr improwizacji and teatr improwizowany (perhaps best translated as improvised and improvisational) does not affect the genre or the formats shown. The addition of comedy or komediowy/a in all likelihood serves to underscore the entertaining element of the shows and to attract audiences. Yet since most improvisational formats nowadays are comedy-based, such measures seem unnecessary.

The plethora of nomenclature associated with identifying and clarifying the terminology in the area of **impro(v)** is a direct consequence of the lack of systemized categorization in the field. And a lack of academic interest here results in a freedom going beyond mere terminology. For Bartek Magdziarz, an ensemble member of Musical Improwizowany, this liberty is almost rebellious: "If you're unhappy, you can paint a picture, make a sculpture, go to a tango class, et cetera. But you know, it's always just painting, or sculpting, or theater, or jazz. Impro, on the other hand, is punk rock".

The absence of any sanctioned, predetermined classifications, an absence that enhances liberty in experimentation, is also observed in the number of new original improvisational formats commonly created by improvisational groups worldwide.

Part 2: Contemporary Improvised Theater in Poland and the United States

The development of improvised theater in Poland

Improvised theater is a relatively new genre in Poland. The first improvisational companies were established between 2005 and 2010, but their heyday is most likely yet to come. Although the impro(v) boom can be observed in the mid 2010s, it remains somewhat of a niche form of theatrical entrainment, and its popularity, although close to devotional in some quarters, is still rather off-stream.

While both Johnstonian and Spolinian improvisational systems (which in time developed into individual theatrical forms) are an outcome of many techniques, inspirations and years of experimentation, impro(v) in Poland is an imported good. The channels through which it was brought to Poland are many and intricate⁴¹.

Half a century after the The Compass Players first showed their improvisational performance to an audience, and over forty years after Keith Johnstone toured England with his first impro troupe, The Theatre Machine, the first Polish improvisational group, was established. In 2005 Klancyk performed their first impro show in Warsaw. In 2009 there were still only a few groups whose core competence was impro(v). Since 2010, the interest in improvisational theater has been steadily growing, which is reflected by the amount of impro(v) groups recently founded (see Table 4).

Table 4: The list of impro(v) groups (still existent) established in Poland between 2004 and 2015 (by year)

Established in	Name of the group
2009 and earlier	Ab Ovo Ad Hoc Inicjatywa Sceniczna Fruuu Klancyk Siedem Razy Jeden
2010	Improv.pl Narwani z Kontekstu ŻBIK
2011	Afront Improkracja Odszkodnia So Close

⁴¹ Since Polish impro(v) is still a genre in the making, further research into its domestication is highly recommended in the future.

Table 4 (cont.)

Established in	Name of the group
2012	BCA Flash GIT Bez Klepki Hofesinka Impy Jesiotr Pod Pretekstem TERAZ Tubajfor Zróbmy to
2013	Teatr Improwizacji To Mało Powiedziane ImproVizja Muzyczne Chwile z Maćkiem i Krzyśkiem Nieomylni Peleton słabo TO widzę Sufin/Młynarski wymyWammy
2014	Abordaż Drużyna Improwizacji Towarmia Teatr Improwizowany Hulaj
2014	Defekt Uboczny Pan Wigwam Przyjezdni Histeria Cali na biało Improskład Środy z impro PIP Show Wyjdzie w praniu Impro Atak ImPerwersja
2015 (until September)	Dwutakt – duet improwizowany Antymateria Improbrać Poławiacze Pereł Impro Teatr Bezczelny Grupa Sic MOVIEmy

Today, Warsaw, Gdańsk and the South (Wrocław and Cracow) are Polish impro(v) centers, with a few other groups scattered around the country (see Table 5).

Table 5: The list of impro(v) groups (still existent) established in Poland between 2004 and 2015 (by city)

City	Group
Warsaw	Ab Ovo Afront Defekt Uboczny Dwutakt – duet improwizowany Bez Klepki Hofesinka Improv.pl Impy Klancyk Muzyczne Chwile z Maćkiem i Krzyskiem Pan Wigwam PIP Show Przyjezdni słabo TO widzę Sufin/Młynarski
Warsaw	Teatr Improwizowany Hulaj Wyjdzie w praniu
Gdańsk	Abordaż Histeria ImPerwersja Improskład ImproVizja GIT MOVIEmy Peleton
Wrocław	Antymateria Cali na biało Improkracja Jesiotr Narwani z Kontekstu Nieomylni

Table 5 (cont.)

City	Group
Cracow	Ad Hoc Grupa Sic So Close Tubajfor
Lublin	Impro Teatr Bezczelny Odkocznia Poławiacze Pereł Środy z impro
Zielona Góra	Inicjatywa Sceniczna Fruuu Siedem Razy Jeden
Łódź	Impro Atak Bylejak
Poznań	Zróbmy to Improbrać
Bydgoszcz	wymyWammy
Konstancin Jeziorna	BCA Flash
Olsztyn	Drużyna Improwizacji Towarmia
Opole	Teatr Improwizacji To Mało Powiedziane
Szczecin	Pod Pretekstem
Toruń	TERAZ

The first improvisational groups in Poland were created autonomously, many of the founders being largely unaware of their peers. Joanna Pawluśkiewicz, an improviser (Hurt Luster, Musical Improwizowany, Sobota Wieczór) and an impro instructor, is a co-owner of Klub Komediowy, a home to many impro groups in Warsaw and to the only impro school offering regular impro classes in Poland. “Joanna went to Chicago to study script and sketch writing at Second City. She didn’t know anything about impro before she left. She took impro classes in the USA and it wasn’t until she got back that she learnt of Klancyk” – claims Markowska.

Klancyk is the first improvisational group created in Poland. In 2006 a group of students of Akademia Teatralna (The Theatre Academy) in Warsaw founded a students’ society. “Our interest in improvisation was ignited when our friend came back from Portugal and said: Listen, there is such a thing as impro, which is very popular in the West, and in Poland no one has tried it yet. Maybe you’d like to take a closer look at that”⁴². The idea was compelling, and Klancyk was

⁴² B. Młynarski qtd. in: M. Gruszecka, *Klancyk w Krakowie. Teatr, w którym nie ma scenariusza*, wyborcza.pl Kraków, 5.12.2015, <http://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/1,44425,19297474,klancyk-w-krakowie-teatr-w-ktorym-nie-ma-scenariusza.html> [accessed on: 13.09.2017].

soon founded by the eight Theatre Academy students. They first performed a few nights per month in comedy club Chłodna 52, later in Powiększenie. Now, they put on a show every Friday at the Klub Komediiowy in Warsaw.

Two years after Klancyk began work in Warsaw, a very different improvisational group was established in Cracow. AD HOC was founded by a group of actors and comedians led by Alan Pakosz. Pakosz took his very first steps as an improviser in 2007: “I started with cabaret skits featuring interactive/improvised elements. I found this really cool and started searching. I found Whose Line..., a program which fascinated me and made me want to try my hand at such improvised formats onstage”. Pakosz affirms that he was not aware of any other improvisational groups at that time in Poland and describes the difficult situation the group found itself in when they tried to persevere in this new theatrical form:

At the beginning our development was based mainly on intuition. When we started, there was no improv in Poland; we are one of the first three Polish groups. So we drew inspiration, of course, from Whose Line?, coming to our own conclusions. One might say that Johnstone in England, Spolin in the US and we in Poland, unaware of the high society of improv, fumbled with the matter, learning step by step what works on stage and what does not. Probably this unawareness made us try a little of everything.

In 2010 impro in Poland was still largely unrecognized, but a few workshops were available to performers interested in the form. “The impro world became more accessible. There were teachers from abroad, books, recordings, and so our knowledge became more systematic”, Pakosz says. Katarzyna Michalska, a professional actress attended one such workshop conducted by Arek Ziętek, artistic director of an improvisational theater in Berlin, Interkunst e.V. Seeing great potential in the technique, Michalska convinced a group of professional actors and musicians (Wojciech Medyński, Agnieszka Bajer, Jan Aleksandrowicz-Krasko, Piotr Miazga, Robert Kibalski, Piotr Wesołowski, Jacek Stefanik, Michał Głowacki, Piotr Wyżykowski, Andrzej Perkman) to form Ab Ovo Teatr Improv in 2010. She soon began cooperation with the Canadian improv group Uncalled For in order to learn and explore improvisation through classes and workshops.

The emergence of these three groups, although largely independent of each other and somewhat accidental, set an interesting, and enduring, pattern followed by subsequent improvisational troupes. The first impro(v) groups in Poland were created through two professional lines – actors/musicians (Ab Ovo) and comedians (AD HOC). Klancyk is an example of a third, theater amateurs and enthusiasts line⁴³.

⁴³ The founders, however, were students of the Theatre Studies Department at the Theatre Academy in Warsaw. Amateurs in acting, maybe, but they were armed with vast knowledge in theater and performing arts.

As there are over fifty improvisational groups and theaters in Poland now, thorough research into their origins would be needed to establish the backgrounds of the improvisers and the circumstances in which the troupes were created in order to examine to what extent the pattern prevails. However, since in the formative days of Polish improvisational theater knowledge of the format was essentially environmental and passed on mainly by the word of mouth, the two traditions of theatrical (actors and musicians), and comedy improv (cabaret artists, comedians, stand-up comedians) are in many respects still quite visible (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6: Selected improvisational groups in Poland established by comedians and stand-up comedians

Name of the group	Members	Background
AD HOC	Alan Pakosz	Grupa Teatralna Quorthon, Teatr KTO, Kabaret PUK
	Aneta Stokes	Kabaret Który, Kabaret PUK
	Michał Prochniewicz	Teatr KTO, Kabaret PUK
	Jan Malinowski	Kabaret UCHO
	Michał Ociepa	Kabaret UCHO
Siedem Razy Jeden	Przemysław Żejmo	Kabaret Jurki, Kabaret Teatr Absurdu ŻŻŻŻŻ, before Kabaret Ciach
	Janusz Pietruszka	Kabaret Hlynur, Kabaret Słuchajcie
	Katarzyna Piasecka	Kabarecie Słuchajcie, stand-up comedian
Siedem Razy Jeden	Wojciech Kamiński	Kabaret Jurki, Kabaret Teatr Absurdu ŻŻŻŻŻ, before: Kabaret Miłe Twarze
	Leszek Jenek	Kabaret Teatr Absurdu ŻŻŻŻŻ, Kabaret Ciach, stand-up comedian; before: Barszcz z Krokietem, Potem, Paka
	Mateusz Czechowski	Kabaret Ziarko, Ciach, Hlynur; before: Kabaret Forma
Improkacja	Krzysztof Ryś	Kabaret Ymlańt, KWIK
	Tomasz Marcinko	Kabaret FczFartek
	Artur Jośkowiak	Kabaret Nic Nie Szkodzi, KWIK, Improkacja, impro coach
	Dobrosława Bela	Kabaret Nic Nie Szkodzi, KWIK, cabaret impro coach
Zróbmy To	Dorota Godlewska and Jędrzej Godlewski	Kabaret Małże

Narwani z kontekstu	Maciej Gliński	Kabaret Chyba
	Piotr Gumulec	Kabaret Chyba
	Jakub Krzak	Kabaret DABZ
	Adrian Hrehorowicz	Kabaret Nic Nie Szkodzi, KWIK
	Krzysztof Wilkosz	Kabaret DABZ, Kabaretu Ścinka!
Improskład	Wojciech Tremiszewski	Kabaret Limo, Teatr Wybrzeżak, theatre group Muflasz
	Szymon Jachimek	Kabaret Limo, Teatr Wybrzeżak, theatre groups: Muflasz i Pracownia Prowincja, I kto to mowi
	Kacper Ruciński	stand-up comedian
Fruuu	Kajetan Suder	Kabaret Grubasy; before: Kabaret Bez Reszty oraz Kabaret z Górki
	Michał Malinowski	before: Kabaret Bez Reszty, Kabaret z Górki
	Paweł Pieniążek	cabaret impro coach
Improbrać		Kabaret Czesuaf, Czołówka Piekła, Wyjście Ewakuacyjne, Z Nazwy

Table 7: Selected improvisational groups in Poland established by professional actors and musicians

Name of the group	Members	Background
Ab Ovo	Katarzyna Michalska	professional actress, founder of Teatr Niepotrzebny
	Jan Aleksandrowicz-Krasko	professional actor, dubbing actor
	Agnieszka Bajer	professional musician
	Wojciech Medyński	professional actor (Teatr Syrena)
	Robert Kibalski	professional actor (film)
	Piotr Wesołowski	professional actor
	Michał Głowacki	professional actor, dubbing actor
Impro Atak	Jacek Stefanik	professional actor, musician, comedian (Grupa Rafała Kmity)
	Lilu	professional musician
	Jolanta Jackowska	professional actress (Teatr Nowy, Łódź)
	Kamila Salwerowicz	professional actress (Teatr Nowy, Łódź)
	Wojciech Oleksiewicz	professional actor (Teatr Nowy, Łódź)

Table 7 (cont.)

	Michał Bieliński	professional actor (Teatr Nowy, Łódź)
	Piotr Gawron-Jedlikowski	professional actress (Teatr Nowy, Łódź)
Musical Improwizo- wany	Kinga Kosik	professional actress, comedian
	Aleksandra Markowska	musician, mime
	Joanna Pawluśkiewicz	scriptwriter
	Marta Podobas	musician
	Agata Sasinowska	professional actress
	Mateusz Lewandowski	professional actor
	Bartek Magdziarz	professional actor
	Maciej Nawrocki	professional actor, dubbing actor
	Weronika Nockowska	musician
	Monika Nowogrodzka	performance artist

The background of the improvisers has a profound impact on their performances and formats. The ‘cabaret impro groups’ are naturally more inclined to create comic skits and get laughs while the ‘professional actor groups’ pay more attention to acting proficiency on stage and to ensuring the continuity of the plot, although comedy is also an important ingredient of their performances. This was very noticeable at the first improvisation festival “3 2 1 Impro” in Konstancin-Jeziorna, organized by Ab Ovo in 2011. A different festival in Cracow in 2014, Improfest, showed, on the other hand, that the groups with a cabaret background are less prone to experimentation with long-form improvisation, preferring games and short extemporised skits. This observation is a simplification, but a helpful one in understanding Polish improvisation today.

There are certainly other factors one would need to take into account to provide more viable results. One such factor is sources. As Pakosz admitted, AD HOC began by reproducing the games they saw in the American TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, while Ab Ovo participated in various professional workshops since day one. Alan Pakosz, the *spiritus movens* behind the impro troupe AD HOC, has since participated in a number of professional impro workshops and courses⁴⁴. Other Polish

⁴⁴ (2012) with the British group Mischief – Improvised Comedy Theatre in Cracow; (2013) with the British group Racing Minds in Cracow; (2013) with the American group Baby Wants Candy in Edinburgh; (2014) with the Swiss improvisation coach Gerald Weber in Bern; (2014) with the American improvisation coach Lyndsay Hailey from iO Chicago in Warsaw; (2015) with the American improvisation coach Noah Levin in Cracow; (2015) with the French improvisation coach Flavien Reppert in Bydgoszcz; (2015) with the American group Baby Wants Candy in Ed-

improvisation comedians and actors have also drawn from other foreign sources. The first Polish improvisational school, established two years ago at Klub Komediiowy in Warsaw, combines various techniques and traditions the instructors were exposed to during their training in New York and Chicago, where they studied under professional coaches at Second City, UCB, iO and The Annoyance Theater. From these influences emerged an amalgamation of different formats, techniques and methodologies, which are taught to the next generation of Polish improvisers.

Moreover, nowadays, the groups not only train together and know of each other but their members also know one another personally. The growing world of improvisational theater in Poland is still rather small, and every newly founded group is met with curiosity and enthusiasm within the field. Klancyk admits that “we are getting in touch with them [new Polish impro groups], we’re trying to build an ‘impro environment’”⁴⁵. It is also common for members to cross-perform. Pakosz, for instance, makes a guest appearance in improv jams or is a special guest in other groups’ shows. Paweł Najgebauer and Joanna Pawluśkiewicz perform in a number of groups across Warsaw⁴⁶. Jacek Stefanik, who began his improvisational career with Ab Ovo, has recently started his own impro group in Łódź, Impro Atak. And Pakosz was involved in a different enterprise: “When I lived in Warsaw, I started the Impro Projekt in order to keep practising improvisation. It then turned into Impro Kolektyw Przyjezdni. When I returned to Cracow, I had to leave the group despite being its co-founder”. The recent improvisational boom in Poland has given the performers an opportunity to train and practice with a number of other improvisers, who already have their own set of influences and experiences.

This results in various amalgamations of styles and influences, and ignites experimentation within the genre, which in turn explains why impro companies in Poland are now quite eclectic. The heterogeneity is achieved both through the foreign inspirations (professional workshops run by English, Canadian or American improvisers) and various domestic influences. Improvisational theater is a genre in constant development, and there is no final status quo as its aim, but further investigation into Polish formats and styles, into its traits and features, would nonetheless help to understand how the genre is being adopted on foreign grounds.

inburgh; (2015) with members of the European organization Ohana in Ljubljana; (2015) with the American coach Trent Pacy, the Irish coach Orla McGovern, the Canadian coach Ashley Comeau and the Israeli coach Rod Ben Zeew in Barcelona (P.I.).

⁴⁵ Klancyk / *TSK Przedmieście...* [accessed on: 13.09.2017].

⁴⁶ Paweł Najgebauer – Klancyk, Hofesinka, Sobota Wieczór, PIP Show; Joanna Pawluśkiewicz – Jacek Stefanik, from Ab Ovo, founder of Impro Atak (P.I.).

American improvisers – stories, backgrounds and traditions

In the United States, a country with over half a century of experience in improvisational theater, the backgrounds of the improvisers are very different. Somebody like Theresa Robbins Dudeck might flinch at the thought of AD HOC's intuition-based approach, mainly because Johnstone's Impro System is grounded in theory and its author is clear in his pedagogy about the importance of understanding the theoretical foundations of every exercise and each technique. "Keith's methodology is grounded in theory which allows students to not only experience but to understand why the experience matters"⁴⁷. In a personal interview, she further affirms that "Without understanding the theory, teachers risk compromising the improvisational process". Johnstone himself professes in his no longer published manual *Don't Be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers* that "Just as every scientific theory implies a range of experiments, so each improvisation theory implies a set of games. We have to know why the games exist, or they'll be misused"⁴⁸. Before taking up impro, Dudeck was exposed to a number of traditions and influences:

I had one class in improvisation in my undergraduate theatre program. The professor used Viola Spolin's text, *Improvisation for the Theater*. After moving to Los Angeles in 1995, I began studying with the late, great Avery Schreiber, who was an early member of Chicago's famed Second City and also studied with Spolin and, therefore, opened my eyes further to Spolin's work. I discovered Johnstone in 2001 when I was given his book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. Avery instilled in me a love for improvising, but it was Johnstone's book that ignited a desire to make the research and application of improvisation my life's work.

Before performing on his own, Randy Dixon was similarly involved in a lot of improv training, and experienced various concepts stemming from a number of improvisational schools and traditions.

I was 15 years old, and a friend of mine, Dan Aldon, who was 16, wanted to take improv classes and he didn't want to take them by himself. "I'll go if you drive", I told him. So we drove to a church basement in the University District. Four weeks into the class I thought to myself "this guy is teaching this class, but he has no idea what he's talking about". So I decided I needed to find a better teacher. Eventually I did find

⁴⁷ T.R. Dudeck, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴⁸ K. Johnstone, *Don't Be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers*, Loose Moose Theatre Company, Calgary 1994, pp. 1–2.

such a teacher, who was involved in the beginnings of this company and she invited me to join them. And that’s how it all started.

Roberta McGuire was my first big teacher; she came from Chicago, she was in Second City. Through Roberta, I started working with Del Close. And through Del I got exposed to Keith Johnstone. Eventually, we were the first Theatersports in the United States.

Working with Del we did Heralds and long-forms. We were then looking for something for a bunch of people to do together, and Del was pretty much out of it, so he recommended Johnstone, who had just written *Impro*. So Keith came down and started Theatersports. In 1983 we started to do the show, and for a number of years a lot was driven by Keith because Del was useless, because of drug addiction. He then started to clean up, and became more useful as a teacher and mentor. Then I worked with Paul Sills.

Even from an American standpoint, Dixon and Dudeck seem to be walking encyclopedias of improvisation. Few living improvisers have had such rich experience with the forerunners of the genre. Yet all of the actors I interviewed in the United States were exposed to improvisation in their teens or while in College. Paul Mattingly, for instance, told me: “I began improvising at 17 when, at a summer camp, I was introduced to short form improv games and I fell in love. I did plays and children’s theatre from first grade forward. I majored in Theatre in college until I dropped out to become an actor. Then I joined Second City”. Jason DeLeo, has an entirely different background, yet he too tried improvisation at school:

I acted in high school and did musicals and all kind of stuff, and I was going through a divorce, and I was dating an artist, and she’s like, you know what’s your problem, you need something creative in your life. And we saw a show here [Unexpected Productions], and they said, we’re doing classes. And I thought this could be fun, and it was 2008. And it’s been fun ever since. It turned into a social thing, and then a job. I am an Education Director here.

Polish and American improvisers in contrast. Experience matters (?)

With the exception of Klancyk, there is no other improvisational group in Poland with over a decade of experience in impro(v). The members of Musical Improwizowany declare between three and a half (Markowska) to “nearly a year” (Podobas) of experience in improvising. And although some of the American members of the improv groups may have similar experience in professional improvising, they were exposed to the technique much earlier in life and, more im-

portantly, have an improvisation guru on site with a few decades of practice. The exposure to and the presence of such a mentor undoubtedly moves the group in different directions. The American groups have most likely already tried out the forms and techniques the Polish troupes are currently probing. However, since the Polish audience is also relatively less acquainted with the genre, the experiments may yield very different results in a new environment driven by different traditions and built within a diverse culture. Although the Polish companies tend to rely on the workshops run by professional improvisers from abroad, the experiments tried on the Polish audiences may take the well-known formats to entirely different places. The groups are not scared of experimenting with popular impro(v) games, and often build their own forms out of the original formats.

Polish impro(v) has also challenged the dependency chain. While in America impro(v) techniques and games are used in an actor's training, and the choice of pursuing a career in improvisation may be spurred in the process, in Poland, actors and comedians "discovered" the format much later in their careers. It was never a means to their goal, but an end result, which they encountered while already equipped with stage education and experience. Hence the actor-impro(v) dependency (one needs to be experienced in improvisational techniques to become an actor/comedian) has been reversed in Poland (one needs to be an actor/comedian to become a successful impro(v) performer). With the growing popularity of improvisational theater in Poland, the tendency is bound to change, but looking back, it can seem that the Polish improvisers reinvented the wheel. With constant experimentation and adaptation, however, it will be very interesting in a few years to see how and into what this metaphorical wheel will have been shaped.

APPENDIX 1: Selected examples of long-form and short-form improvisation⁴⁹

1. Long-form improvisation

1.1. Harold

Harold is a long format, and consists of a number of sub-formats. It basically consists of 3 components:

1. Scenes, with 2 to 4 players
2. Games
3. Monologues

The format starts with a suggestion from the audience – this could really

⁴⁹ Unless noted otherwise, the appendix uses information provided by the Improv Encyclopedia [online]. See: <http://improvencyclopedia.org/> [accessed on: 13.09.2017].

be anything. Players will start associating around the suggestion, and then an opening game is played. In this game, a lot of associated elements round the audience suggestion are presented. The opening game might be a song, a monologue, or simply a group association based on the audience suggestion. The idea is to use the elements and themes that come up or about in the opening game in what follows.

Then follow 3 rounds of scenes, all based on the themes found in the opening game. Each round exists out of 3 scenes, all unrelated, but each loosely based on the themes and associations from the opening game. Since these themes originated for the same audience suggestion, the audience will (hopefully) feel some links between the scenes.

After the first round of 3 scenes, an improv game is played; this game is unrelated to the 3 scenes played before. Then, in the second round, each of the 3 previous scenes is continued, and more or less obvious links between the scenes start to emerge. This is again followed by an improv game, and then the 3 scenes are played into a conclusion.

It's quite possible that in the third round not every scene is continued; scenes may disappear or even merge with one another.

A Harold can be played with a decent number of players (up to 12 or so), players can act in multiple scenes, as the same or as different characters. A Harold can be played with or without props, with or without directors.

Whether one sticks to the 3 rounds or not is really not relevant; anything and any combination of games and loose scenes that finally more or less come together can be considered a Harold.

2. Short-form improvisation

2.1. *ABC Game*⁵⁰

Improvisers play a scene in which EACH sentence they speak begins with the next sequential letter of the alphabet from A to Z. For instance, one improviser may speak three sentences: sentence one begins with the letter A, the second with the letter B, the third with the letter C. A second improviser may then speak but his first sentence must begin with the letter D, next sentence with the letter E, etc. This game is best played beginning at the letter A and ending on Z.

Variation: The audience chooses a letter and/or you may go through the alphabet as many times as necessary to complete the scene.

Variation: Instead of each sentence beginning with the next letter, each LINE of dialogue spoken by a character must begin with the next letter. In the example

⁵⁰ See: *The Living Playbook*, www.unexpectedproductions.org/living_playbook.htm [accessed on: 13.09.2017].

above, one improviser will begin their first sentence with the letter A, all following sentences may begin with any letter. The second improviser begins their line of dialogue with the letter B, etc.

2.2. *The Party*

One player plays a character that is having a party. The other players will be the guests, and the audience provides us with who the guests might be. Of course the host does not know who the guests are. His task is to guess who the guests might be, based on hints the guests offer. The game is over as soon as the host has guessed all guests.

NOTE: a version of this game called Party Quirks was used by the American TV show *Whose Line Is it Anyway*. In episode 1, season 1, the game involved quirks such as 1) a guest in a slow motion fight scene 2) an accident prone circus performer 3) a foal being born (*Whose Line Is It Anyway*).

2.3. *Freeze Tag*

Two actors start an improvised scene. At any point in time another player can call Freeze. This player then tags out one of the 2 actors, and takes his place. Both players then start a new scene, justifying their positions.

Notes: The way this improv game is played quite often goes a bit against good improv, as many groups hardly take the time to develop a story line. If played this way, it's more a game of wit, and you would probably use it early in a show as an audience (and player) warm-up.

Alternatively, you can take your time and play every scene for several minutes, see what develops, and only at the end of each scene tag into another scene.

To avoid preconceptions, see Blind Freeze. See also Space Jump for an extension of this game.

2.4. *Only Questions*

A scene is improvised, in which any sentence used by the players must be a question. Players that use statements instead of questions are boo-ed out by the audience (audience yells 'Die') and are replaced by other players. New players need to take over the character of the players they replace.

Notes

Although questions are quite often frowned upon in this game the idea is to build a story. That implies that any question should be giving information, and should be (implicitly) advancing on the information already available. Evidently, the next player should implicitly accept any information that was given in the previous question(s).

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Chart 1: The use of *impro* and *improv* among professional improvisational groups in the USA and Canada

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Chart 2: The use of *impro* and *improv* among professional improvisational groups in Poland

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Magdalena Szuster

„Alchemia i dym w butelce”: współczesny teatr improwizowany w Polsce i Stanach Zjednoczonych

(Streszczenie)

Artykuł jest próbą uchwycenia i opisanego współczesnego teatru improwizacji poprzez analizę jego cech, definicji i elementów teatrotwórczych w celu scharakteryzowania i usystematyzowania gatunku. Zestawienie i porównanie różnych aspektów impro(v) w Polsce i Stanach Zjednoczonych pozwala nie tylko spojrzeć na teatr improwizacji poprzez pryzmat próby jego “przeszczepienia” do tradycji polskiej (która korzystała z improwizacji jako narzędzia artystycznego, ale dotychczas nie wynosiła jej do kategorii osobnej formy teatralnej), ale również ukazuje eksperymentalną elastyczność tego gatunku w obrębie różnych tradycji i struktur kulturowych. Oparty w dużej mierze na wywiadach środowiskowych z rodzimymi i amerykańskimi improwizatorami, artykuł ten stanowi swoiste studium przypadku *in medias res* współczesnego teatru improwizacji w Polsce i USA.

Słowa kluczowe: impro; improv; teatr improwizacji; teatr improwizowany; amerykański teatr popularny; teatr eksperymentalny; Del Close; Keith Johnstone; Charna Halpern; Mick Napier.

Magdalena Szuster

“Alchemy and smoke in a bottle” – contemporary improvisational theater in Poland and the United States

(Summary)

The article is an attempt to capture improvisational theater as a modern dynamic phenomenon through analyzing its features, definitions and traits in order to characterize the genre and to systematize the current state of knowledge on the subject matter. By comparing and contrasting various aspects and notions of impro(v) in Poland and the United States, the study not only looks at the theater of improvisation through the prism of the “relocation” of the form from its original grounds and implementing it in within a different tradition, but also shows the experimental flexibility of the genre within different cultural traditions and structures. Based largely on interviews with Polish and American improvisers alike, this article is an *in-medias-res* case study of the contemporary improvised theater in Poland and the USA.

Keywords: impro; improv; improvisational theater; improvised theater; American pop theater; experimental theater; Del Close; Keith Johnstone; Charna Halpern; Mick Napier.