WHAT’S AT HAND

IMPROVISATION, GROUP FACILITATION, AND ‘AGREEMENT’ AMONG STRANGERS

A Critical Engagement Paper

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By

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ABSTRACT

*what’s at hand*: Improvisation, Group Facilitation, and *Agreement* Among Strangers

In this support paper, improvisation artist Jayden Pfeifer reflects on the history, creative process, and theoretical framework at the foundation of *what’s at hand*: a facilitated improvisation performance that engages the gathered audience as both spectator and participant, and promotes the teacher as co-performer. This paper outlines Pfeifer’s background and training as a performance-based improviser, teacher and workshop facilitator, and prairie-based interdisciplinary artist. Pfeifer’s practice-based research utilizes a methodology made up of five skills of improvisation - availability, listening, acceptance, support, expression - and examines those skills as they become activated in relationship to other humans to create *Agreement* between once-strangers. The performance piece *what’s at hand* engages two fellow improvisation-based collaborators in relationship with Pfeifer to develop an approachable and accessible participatory structure, within which non-performers can engage in supportive improvisatory acts. Pfeifer’s work seeks to create a safe and welcoming environment, while still encouraging the rigour and risk inherent in live performance. This support paper contextualizes the performance project with reference to literature on self-reflective teaching and participatory improvisatory performance praxis, examined through the lens of scholarship and contemporary practice in the field of Critical Studies in Improvisation.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>Ancestry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>Project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>Theoretical Satellite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Studio Photos, University of Regina, February-May 2017</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Project Sketchbook Notes</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

In this support paper, I will explore the framing and context of my Masters of Fine Arts (Interdisciplinary Studies) performance project. This project is rooted in my combined interests in improvisation and group facilitation, and the growing convergence of these two facets of my practice. This is an inquiry into whether I can use these two facets of my practice to create Agreement between once-strangers, through an experiential performance utilizing both volunteers and professional practitioners. By merging my performing and teaching practices, I am seeking to create improvised art that is at once spontaneous, relational, and rigorous. My suspicion is that marrying these disciplines will serve to develop and nurture healthy and robust relationships between strangers.

The research questions driving this project are:

How can I facilitate effectively while maintaining intimacy with my own moment-to-moment experience?
How can I create a rich, adaptive learning environment AND a community of improvisers with whom to share surprise and difference onstage?
How can I create a creative peer group with strangers using improvisation?
How can improvisation serve to create “Agreement” between strangers?

The pursuit of these questions is inherently interdisciplinary. My practice includes a shared focus between improvised performance and group facilitation, two side-by-side streams that inform and challenge each other. Experience tells me that teaching requires one to sacrifice the pursuit of mastery in one’s own performance craft, in order to instruct and hone the experience for others: to rest outside of the process, and not inside it. I am troubling this notion for myself, to discover if I can achieve the same joy and support that’s experienced in a non-performance setting, and inject it into a live performance; and, at the same time, assisting others in achieving that experience in order to create new channels of communication and connection between them.
To improvise is to be at one with what is happening in the moment; a giving over to that which is occurring right now, in “the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly”\textsuperscript{1}, as Spolin would have it. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz contextualize improvisation as that which “connotes artistic activities and practices that are spontaneous, personal, local, immediate, expressive, ephemeral, and even accidental.”\textsuperscript{2} It is immersion in spontaneous acts, and one’s relationship to this improvised space. I consider improvisation to be a practice of \textit{creating with what’s at hand}, a simple rendering of the improvisatory act, a perspective shared with me by Vancouver-based improviser and director Alistair Cook over coffee some years ago, which recognizes what is present, and how to adapt and create with it.

My understanding of improvisation has evolved over the course of my performing and teaching career, but was reinforced by a crisis of practice that I had in 2007, when my theatrical improvisation ensemble began its decline into non-existence. I would describe my Masters work, and ultimately my three-year academic trajectory, as the slow evolution out of this crisis, and my understanding of what was \textit{at hand} to address it.

In Chapter One I will trace my own history and evolution as a performer and teacher, and how these two roles have coalesced into what I now know as my improvisation practice. In Chapter Two I will outline my Masters performance project, \textit{what’s at hand}, and how I will deliver an embodied and inclusive performance that tests and responds to my strands of research inquiry. I will detail my research methods for this project in Chapter Three, and offer context into the values of improvisation that permeate those methods: availability, listening, acceptance, support, and expression. Finally, Chapter Four will explore the theoretical satellite that has informed my inquiries into improvisation, performance, teaching, community, \textit{Agreement}, and audience relationship, and will further unpack \textit{Agreement} as that which created through the


practice of availability, listening, acceptance, support, and expression in relationship to ourselves, another person, and a group.

Availing oneself and opening to possibility that one might see another human differently is vital and deeply important to creating empathy between strangers: “To take a stranger’s vantage point on everyday reality is to look inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives.”³ I believe in improvisation’s ability to change people, and the way they relate to each other, because I have experienced this fluidity of relationship as a performer and teacher. Creating spaces for interactions that are “deeply relational, profoundly contingent”⁴, is a simple method for encouraging growth in how we see each other. Improvisation can help illuminate and further understand these relationships through availability, listening, acceptance, support, and creative expression. The interplay and embodiment of these five skills are what I have come to know as Agreement. Navigating difference towards the creation of Agreement, and to being seen doing it, are radical acts that can incrementally affect change in ourselves and others. Improvisation has the potential to serve as this creative bridge between strangers.

⁴ Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, xi-xii.
CHAPTER ONE | ANCESTRY

“To gaze is in fact to look far off, toward the unapproachable, the not-at-hand. It is a look of dissatisfaction, peering behind, around, in back of, rather than directly at what is in front.”

I am a prairie kid, born and raised in the North end of Regina, Saskatchewan. My relatives hail from Melville, SK, in the South East of the province. My parents generously nurtured my artistic impulses, enrolling me in theatre classes at a young age and shaping our family vacations around the Saskatoon Fringe Festival. Their appreciation of live theatre was learnt, acquired. Yet, their creativity is abundant and astute. My mother’s home and garden, a constant project, dedicated to process and evolution. Her frugality and resourcefulness working hand in hand to furnish, re-furbish, and enhance every room – shifting the tone with the seasons. And my father, a trained carpenter, who possesses the art of tinkering, in the long tradition of skilled prairie craftspeople who can, given a workshop full of incongruent parts and pieces of metal, construct a solution to any problem, fit to conquer the sparse landscape in all of its bleak winter glory.

This family heritage, that shaped me in so many ways, also helped shape the definition of improvisation for me: creating with what’s at hand. This definition, akin to but not identical to Heidegger’s framing of the “present-to-hand”, demands reverence for the conditions that are. As Sherry Turkle asserts, “We live our lives in the middle of things.” Improvisation occurs from this place, from being simultaneously surrounded and aware, from a brute acceptance of what is and what is not, and from a commitment to make, create, imagine something, not from nothing, but from exactly what is.

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CHOSEN FAMILY

I have at various points in my artistic life felt lonely in my practice, as if I lacked the peer group to adequately challenge and bolster my daily artistic practice. I think this is a fairly normal occurrence in an artist’s life. For some it is brought about by the loss of a mentor, the upheaval of an arts collective, or the rejection of yet another application reviewed by a peer jury. It’s the moment the band breaks up. Or, to be more specific, it’s the moment right after.

For me, the moment was the disassembling of General Fools. The improvisation company that I had worked so hard to create with my peers, General Fools, was slowly ceasing to exist by late 2007 and this caused a crisis in my practice that provided me with the initial spark that would eventually become this Master’s project.

My love for the experience of improvising drew me to others who were like me, and I helped establish General Fools Improvisational Theatre in 1997 after my high school graduation. For the next 10 years, our ensemble thrived. We performed weekly shows in Regina, toured Canada and the USA to perform in festivals, worked as comedians-for-hire for corporate events, and offered workshops to those who wanted more access to the skills of improvisation. Our company embedded itself within the contemporary theatrical improvisation community in Canada, alongside companies such as Instant Theatre (Vancouver)\(^8\), The Sunday Service (Vancouver)\(^9\), Vancouver TheatreSports League (Vancouver)\(^10\), Rapid Fire Theatre (Edmonton)\(^11\), Loose Moose (Calgary)\(^12\), CRUMBS (Winnipeg)\(^13\), Bad Dog Comedy Theatre (Toronto)\(^14\), as well as dozens of other companies from across North America, Europe, and Australia. Our work

explored the creation of collaborative long-form storytelling structures, group dynamics (between performers and audience), high theatricality, commitment to the pedagogy of positive, forward-moving Yes And\textsuperscript{15} scene-building, and ultimately the creation of spontaneous narratives inspired by ideas drawn from the audience.

Historically, my realm of improvisation is most closely aligned with the competitive, game-based techniques of Keith Johnstone (author of “Impro”, founder of Theatresports)\textsuperscript{16}, and thematic long-form exploration of Charna Halpern and Del Close (co-authors of “Truth in Comedy”, co-creators of The Harold format)\textsuperscript{17}. The work also commonly translates group-focused training techniques into performance structures, such as Viola Spolin’s “Improvisation for the Theater”\textsuperscript{18}, and the ensemble-focus of the Canadian Improv Games\textsuperscript{19} as pioneered by David Shepherd (one of the creators of The Second City\textsuperscript{20} and founder of the ImprovOlympic Theater\textsuperscript{21} and the Canadian Improv Games).

Through my pursuits with General Fools, I became increasingly interested in the potential of improvisation to open another channel of communication between the performers, based in trust, mutual agreement, and the navigating of relationship through moment-to-moment interactions onstage. I noticed that improvising a common idea together helped soften barriers between myself and my peers, enabling - “a sensitivity to the creative impulses of others.”\textsuperscript{22} When I was creating theatre in the moment, I felt both vulnerable and validated by my ensemble. In turn, I felt a deep

\textsuperscript{15} Jeff Griggs, Guru: My Days with Del Close (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 45.
\textsuperscript{22} Michael Chekhov, To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting, 15\textsuperscript{th} edition (New York: Barnes and Noble Books), 41.
desire to listen and practice empathy for the vulnerabilities of those I shared the stage with.

But now, the members of my ensemble were moving on to a more vibrant arts-scene in Toronto, where creative opportunities were more varied and plentiful, or else on to livelihoods outside of the arts. I could still coax some veteran members of the company to perform for hire until 2012, but the company began its slow dissolution in 2007.

I felt displaced and disoriented without them. I had the sense that I, too, had to start over in some way, despite wanting to retain the energy and creative potential of our collective. As if I was the one who had moved to a new city and needed to commence the process of getting to know a new scene. How could I continue to pursue theatrical improvisation with the rigor and routine that I had been invested in without the support and engagement of a peer group?

DO WOLVES HAVE ALLIES?

Disoriented in my own city, I set out to look for allies in this strange mid-sized city called Regina. There were, in fact, many theatrical improvisers in the city, most of them a decade younger than me. Many of them were former students of mine through various programs: the Globe Theatre School where I was the Director; the Canadian Improv Games when I was the Regional Director for the province of Saskatchewan; or the University of Regina, when I was a sessional instructor. Between 2010 and 2015, in an effort to stay connected and active as an improver and community member, every few months I joined some of their ensemble performances, such as the monthly COMBAT Improv showcase or other one-night improv affairs.

My memories of these shows are feelings of impatience and irrelevance. Despite trying to embed myself as an equal, I was often asked to serve as a leader or mentor to the performers. I wanted to be a member of the pack, but was relegated to Alpha Wolf.

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I stumbled awkwardly through this dynamic, wanting to support this intergenerational learning but craving the provocation and inspiration of a more peer-to-peer dynamic. I saw great potential in the young performers, and recognized my own journey in their present reality. I felt the connective tissue beginning to form between the performers on stage. But these moments of collective transcendence were few and far between and punctuated by long phases of unskillful listening and egoist posturing.

The gift of the creative ensemble is the license to engage in a reciprocal learning environment. By investing in one’s individual growth, we may urge one another to do the same. Together we can embrace one another’s strengths and weaknesses, transforming these various dimensions of the self into opportunities to practice sensitivity and adaptability. An improvisation ensemble is “expressive of a co-dependent relation between creative iteration (call) and the response of others to that invitation to speak and sound together.” Together, we hold space for one another to falter, fail, and eventually fly.

The image-sensation that captures my experience of creative ensemble is that of a flock of geese in cross winds: one gust carrying them up, only to have another gust lift them from this point even higher, and so on. Inspiration feels effortless, my mind at peace. I am simultaneously responsible for the group, and aware that I can relinquish responsibility to the group, “taking care of each other and being altered by each other.” Improvising in an ensemble that allows for bold creation feels like a combination of being in free fall and steady climb. With General Fools, there was an element of empathetic mind reading. It was as if even the subtlest offer, “a glance, a pause, a new or unexpected intonation, a movement, a sigh, or even a barely

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perceptible change of tempo – can become a creative impulse, an invitation to the other to improvise.”

I yearned for this level of connectivity and trust in my practice to return.

RON’S BIRTHDAY: AN UNSUSPECTING CLUE

*General Fools* was hired to perform for literally hundreds of corporate events between 1997 and 2014. One particular performance stands out both for its quintessential Saskatchewan aura and its surprisingly electric rigour and joy. We were hired to perform for the 50th birthday party of a man named Ron. Together, we drove the bleak February highway two and a half hours south-east to the one-time mining town of Estevan. We were warmly welcomed into an equally cramped and fluorescently-lit basement of the Elks Club.

At the family’s (our employer’s) request, the theme of the evening’s performance would be Ron’s life, a celebration of his work and family. Looking for ways to be responsive to the task, we featured Ron and his family members heavily in our scenewerk, jokingly at first, but with the increasing commitment of the audience participants, we ventured deeper into Rob’s identity. Together with the audience-performers, we took it upon ourselves to explore Ron’s fears, regrets, fantasies, and memories. They became, quite accidentally, Boal’s “spect-actors”, generously offering their insights and participation to help illuminate what was unique about their stories, and Ron’s. Despite the lack of performance experience in the room, the volunteers trusted that we would care for them onstage, and were generous and candid in front of each other. The evening was lush with laughter and even some brief tears.

In the midst of applause at the performance’s end, there was a mutual understanding in the room that together we had created something bizarre, rare, and oddly transformative for everyone present. Family members spoke about their experience afterwards, as we feasted on ceremonial KFC buffet. They thanked us for giving them a space to relive these memories, they laughed and teased one another for

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26 Chekhov, 41.
their sudden performativity, they pleased in the uncanny nature of the evening—its unfamiliarity and otherness. Driving home my fellow performers and I were joyful. We savoured the essence of the evening and waxed poetic about the potential of improvisation: the way everyone there could see and understand each other clearly… people don’t realize how creative they really are… I felt like there was no ‘them’ and ‘us’...

We had, through this experience, engaged a moment of profound dislocation with our own assumptions, our own Southern-Saskatchewan encounter with Appelbaum’s “stop”: a momentary arrest of time that draws our awareness to what we think we know, and our habitual understanding of our relationship to others.28 Lynn Fels expands on this notion of the “stop”, as a moment that “calls us to attention to what is hidden – a vulnerability, an intimacy. A stop offers new awareness of possibility, a recognition of who we are in relationship with others as if for the first time.”29 We broadened our sense of empathy towards one another. And, we had also broadened our sense of identity and self. By diffusing the boundary between performer and audience, we had somehow touched on a more porous definition of self and stranger, a “release in our encounters with the unexpected stranger, he or she who speaks to our heart, who surprises us, who resonates with the pulse of our beat, who reveals to us what perhaps we already have always known but not yet recognized.”30

It wasn’t until many years later, I started to intellectually understand the visceral excitement I was feeling that night. Clare Grant crystalizes this sentiment for me: “If we know, as audience, where we are, what it is that we are in, and what we have to do, but still with the thrill of not knowing what it will add up to, there is the potential for mastery and agency and the expansion of our own sense of our daily experience.”31

30 Fels, 57.  
IMPROV IS EASY

Many years later, with the experience of Ron’s Birthday still resonating somewhere in my body, I created another performance platform, dubbed Improv is Easy, which I occasionally performed at the monthly Regina improv showcase COMBAT Improv. This format involves improvising with a volunteer audience member. Together, we would construct an 8-10 minute narrative based on anything they felt like telling a story about. I would ask them questions about what they felt like performing, and would use narration, characters, and story structure to help bring their desires to life onstage. Like the performance in Estevan, we would play out their fantasies, fears, and hopes. I wanted them to feel in control, successful, as though the limitations were non-existent. My role was to follow their lead and to make them look fantastic for having tried something new. I placed my emphasis squarely on support, providing my scene partner with the appropriate amounts of creative opportunity and structure to make their role feel easy.

When I am performing in front of an audience, I feel as if I’m glowing. As if my enthusiasm is emanating slightly beyond the edges of my own body, what Eugenio Barba refers to as a “dilated body,” which is “above all a glowing body...the particles that make up daily behavior have been excited and produce more energy, they have undergone an increment of motion.” There is an inherent calm in the air, even in the riskiest of scenarios. When moments of chaos emerge, I feel access to hundreds of possibilities to embrace and adapt to it. I feel close to Johnstone’s assessment of great performers: “When a great improviser is inspired, all limits seem to disappear. Sometimes it’s as if there’s extra light on the stage, and the player’s outlines seem sharper.” At my best, I feel challenged by the other performers on stage and that I am

34 Barba, 53.
35 Johnstone, 341.
rising to meet that challenge. I feel as though no one in the ensemble is waiting for me to tell them what to do, nor are they holding back because they feel I can’t keep up. There is reciprocity of intent, and trust, between us. The sensation is that of becoming translucent, information and offers passing through me. Character choices, words, gesture, and narrative are threads of light that stream through the space and pass through my physical frame, sweeping me into the entwined threads from which the performance is woven. I feel as if I am not a creator of the work but a conduit for it. I can surrender to the experience with no hesitation while still constructively contributing: “The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future.” In my memory, these moments have been sublime.

Naturally, I desire to convey and share this experience with improvisation with fellow performers. The methods I employ (importance on physical choice making, encouraging supportive group structures, pushing the ensemble to tune their listening to a wider awareness of everyone in the room) are all towards the goal of creating the foundation for the potential of beauty to arise in a performance. When I have found personal and aesthetic beauty improvising, I haven’t needed to force anything to occur. I am surrounded by others who are also surrendering alongside me. Chekhov articulates this simply, describing dramatic art as “a collective art and therefore, however talented the actor may be, he will not be able to make use of his ability to improvise if he isolates himself from the ensemble, his partners.” The bridge to cross, (or rather, to build), is to find a sense of collective alongside those with whom I have not, as yet, had experience working. *Improv is Easy* gave me some more breadcrumbs to follow.

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37 Chekhov, 41.
FACILITATION

I am energized by groups. The practice of teaching, of explaining and modeling the skills of improvisation, adds fuel to the fire of my passion for my work. I have experienced countless workshops and classes that are physical, committed, rigorous, and that leave me with more energy than when I started. There’s a skill I teach in improvisation called *advancing*. It is one step past *accepting* (saying “Yes”). The goal of *advancing* is to give back, and to move the scene or story forwards by doing so. “An improvising ensemble lives in a constant process of giving and taking,” and the adage I use when teaching is *give back more than you got*. In a teaching role, when the students or artist ensemble are giving each other back more than they’re receiving, I feed off this in turn. Surrounding myself with committed individuals inspires me to re-dedicate myself to the core of my work; I want to give them even more.

Over the course of the last decade, and throughout my MFA, I have done a great deal of teaching improvisation in a variety of roles. As a sessional lecturer with the University of Regina Theatre Department, I teach courses on the fundamentals of basic theatrical improvisation, rooted in the skills necessary to perform stories and characters on stage in front of people. My students are individuals who wish to become actors, Arts-Education teachers, theatre-makers, or those who simply wish to become sharper on their toes. The skills of improvisation remain the same: making and accepting offers, listening, advancing on the choices of others, adaptation to the unexpected. In this context, there is a concrete goal: use improvisation to perform short scenes and games in the comedy-centric tradition of TheatreSports.39

Similarly, the courses I teach through *Dream Agreement* are most often for groups who are looking for forms and skills to help better their group dynamic and communication methods. From January 2014 to July 2015, movement and improvisation artist Johanna Bundon and I (as *Dream Agreement*) served as Artists-in-Residence with Heritage Community Association. Our work was teaching the skills of improvisation to

38 Chekhov, 42.
service-providers in the community (youth shelters, support groups for adults with acquired brain injuries, homes for women fleeing domestic violence), most often as one-hour workshops focused on gameplay to bolster trust and listening between participants. We have also taught these skills as professional development sessions to teachers with the Globe Theatre School, Government of Saskatchewan officials and policy bureaucrats through the EDGE Innovation camp⁴⁰, community service providers employed by Street Culture Project⁴¹, and coalitions of young activists through the NEXT UP program⁴². In these settings, improvisation takes on the mantle of *skills to better the way we work*. I take great joy in teaching in these settings, in the same way that I take great joy from performing with non-professionals. There is such surprise and delight present in a room full of humans who are trying this work on for the first time, and who are learning how to test their own boundaries and comfort zones. There’s always much laughter and sharing in these spaces, and I have been genuinely surprised on many occasions by how honest and vulnerable some of the participants have allowed themselves to be. The experience of giving over to the common goals of the group, of relinquishing control, can “free us temporarily from the burden of the future”⁴³. Safe surrender has immense resonance. It is very common, in these spaces, to hear comments about how shocked people were that they allowed themselves to participate at all, let alone with the degree of commitment and ferocity that some members show. These workshops always leave me with a sense that there is a common bond between humans that can be articulated and embraced if everyone in the room is willing to share a small piece of themselves. Being present when this occurs, and cultivating a space for it to emerge, is deeply rewarding and humbling.

Regardless of group makeup, the workshops all come from a common core of exercises and teaching forms. We spend a great deal of time in a circle, playing exercises and exploring principles that encourage eye contact and shared actions. These exercises often involve passing energy between us, focused through sound and action. They involve making noise, feeling foolish, stretching the physical space we each inhabit, and doing so while placed in a democratic circle so everyone can see each other at all times. Our focus is on broad and inclusive gameplay. The lineage of such theatre games are in the tradition of game-based theatre teachers such as Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, and Augusto Boal. As Boyd (a predecessor to Spolin) articulates, “the game eliminates irrelevancies and brings events into close sequence in such concentrated and simplified form as to condense in both time and space the essence of a complex and long-drawn-out typical life experience.” These workshops also involve re-inventing the actual room we use, through large-scale movement exercises, allowing the group to test their own biases about how to be in a group. We encourage students to move into open space, to take over any negative space they see, and to see the potential opportunities that exist when they are thinking in the moment. These strategies make up the basis of all my teaching, whether alone or in collaboration, and the last three years of teaching has really led me to trust this common base for all classes. The students and intentions of each group may be different and diverse, but with this developed understanding of the root skills of improvisation, I feel armed to adapt to the needs of any gathering of humans and still help them access their own unique connections to being in the moment. I will extrapolate on these methods further in Chapter Three.

For the past two years I have offered a class in the fundamentals of improvisation to a group of university students; a cohort which take all their classes together as a way of creating an interdependent support system, a means of encouraging them to continue their university education into a second year. This class has evolved into a very different class with different goals. The students and I quickly

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learned that being performers was not what they wanted. And so, together we adapted the syllabus to create an improvisation-based class, using many of the same games, but that would serve the goal of letting them spend time together and test their comfort zones in a safe environment. This class has taught me so much about how to deliver teaching in a setting that tests my preferences and habitual pedagogic patterns, and how the desires of the group, however counter to my aims, can be utilized as a means to deliver the same material.

In a group setting, I prize punctuality, rigour in the exercises, and frequently highlight the excellence of some group members. These engrained teaching tactics do not function as effectively in this setting. As a group, we ebb and flow through layers of downtime and malaise, and then celebration and mastery. Each class is a ride that truly tests my own learned patterns. And, like my experience performing without a collective, I often feel impatient and irrelevant in this classroom setting. So, I have begun leading the class by stepping back, and asking questions: *What do you want to improve at? When you are enjoying yourself, what are we usually doing? How would you teach this to someone else? And, how would you like to be graded?* Through trial and error, we have learned our version of how to absorb improvisation. Instead of the goal being to learn how to improvise, this group enjoys being relational with each other while in an improv class. My role is less to teach than it is to facilitate the environment for learning. In this, more fluid, relationship, the students “have to recognize what they are learning – and they have to take responsibility at some stage for their own learning.”45 This version of mentorship has taught me (or perhaps reinforced for me) that improvisation exists in all forms, that adaptation in order to discover it is key, and that the act of improvising does not belong to arts practitioners. The students are improvising their own strategies for learning and group navigation, with me and with each other.

The communities we teach through *Dream Agreement*, and my experiences working with this university cohort, have presented a new set of challenges and learning

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opportunities for me. Because the students are (most often) accessing the work through a recreational or life-skills training context, the desire to master the work does not surface as a priority. The impulse in the room is rarely to attack the exercises. Instead, they commonly want to try it out, and have the freedom to stop when it gets busy or too complex, or when practice begins to feel like repetition. Side-coaching and aggressive encouragement often translate as judgment or bombardment. In these spaces, I recognize my own biases towards momentum and high energy in an ensemble setting. The tactics I normally use to engage a group (side-coaching, energetic modeling, boisterous encouragement, gentle ribbing to prod students out of their comfort zone) rarely yield the effect I am used to. Maxine Greene postulates that a teacher may “only engage in the movement we have spoken of, at the side of his students, making efforts to constitute meanings-caring intensely about the kind of thinking going on and the choices being made…the teacher can only strain to encounter his students without objectifying them; he can only act to help them, as autonomous beings, to choose.”46 I have learned from these vital experiences that my own preference towards pushing a group or rallying with energy is not the way, it is merely a way.

CONFLUENCE

I have been inspired by the teaching practice of Dorothy Heathcote, whose engagement with young students is one of give and take. Heathcote’s Mantle of the Expert practice “sets up a supportive, interpretative, and reflexive community through a pattern of relationships and a net work of tasks, all embedded in a flexible context.”47 Heathcote endows groups with a trust that their instincts and knowledge, and ability to collaborate and reason, will guide them through group problem-solving in even the most foreign circumstances (i.e. how to build a bridge, start a thriving business, or overthrow a government). “Students are required to question, negotiate, compromise, compromise, 

47 Bolton and Heathcote, viii.
take responsibility, cooperate, and collaborate, all in the service of something beyond themselves.”

Through simple coaching and the asking of empowering questions, Heathcote manages to achieve her goal of galvanizing a group through role-play and dramatic inquiry. Rather than articulate an end point or ideal to achieve, she learns alongside the group, a “Teacher-in-role”, taking their lead on how best to mentor them. This pedagogical framework “engages the students both cognitively and affectively and requires them not merely to replay and repeat their existing understanding but to see the world afresh”, and in doing so, allows me to re-frame my own understanding of how to function effectively as educator.

When a workshop is flowing, the energy I use to teach is commensurate with the way the group engages with it. When it feels exhausting and difficult, it’s as though I’m trying to fight upstream against the existent current instead of listening to it. My strategy of fighting the energy does not work. Maxine Greene advises that the effective and self-reflective teacher “recognizes that he cannot tell another person how to live; nor can he demand that his students exercise their will and become, in their own way, volunteers.” And so, the question I’ve begun taking into these workshops is can you be present to the energy that is here, on this day, and teach from this place? This is the skill of availability (discussed further in Chapter Three), which has grown in my performance practice. To be at odds with this is to be in a constant fight with the present moment. When teaching my university course, I have found immense success in softening to the needs of the group NOW. Rather than trying to combat the energy in the room with my own biases, expectations, preferences, and desire for control, I am learning to enter the energy and to serve it.

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48 Bolton and Heathcote, viii.
49 Bolton and Heathcote, 30.
50 Bolton and Heathcote, viii.
51 Greene, 281.
AN EXAMPLE – Jan 17 2017

On this morning, I was teaching a listening game that involves clapping in a circle and echoing offers back to the individuals who made them. I love this exercise and often teach it with some excitement and flare. I could feel the group’s energy for the game wane after 2-3 minutes. Small conversations were breaking out, people were turning away from the circle, busying themselves with their own affairs. This is the moment when I would normally re-up on my energy to challenge the group, to rally them back to trying harder. Instead, I let it happen. We played the game through the chatter, the laughter, and the distraction. I breathed. I entered the energy that was present. I took in the present moment of what was happening: the students weren’t disengaged, they were just happy to see each other, and it was 9am and some of them were tired or hurried and distracted. I breathed. I took in the room. We continued the game. I asked them if they wanted to keep playing it. And to my surprise, they did. We started again. I accepted the offer the group was making. I made side jokes to the people nearest me, and did not react or “teach” when others did the same. Members left the circle to take a drink, or grab something from their backpack. I breathed. In hindsight, I realize that I was practicing a version of a breathing and mindfulness practice that I had learned through my work with the yoga and mindfulness teacher Michael Stone during our Heritage Community Association residency (which I will expand on in Chapter Three.) The game continued, and it was fine. The only thing that did not fit in the circle was my own preconceptions about success and failure in my teaching. Once I entered the energy of the group, those faded away and I was aware of what was actually going on. It felt easy, I felt energized, I felt inspired. I breathed again.

What does it take to hold the whole group, and to simultaneously be a member of it? I often talk of keeping the group whole, of creating a circle to be democratic, of trying to be aware of and “see” everyone. But this negates my own power in the group, and my anxiety about losing the group causes me to over-teach, to manufacture an energy that isn’t there in the hopes it will defeat the energy that is. This is a key error I am investigating, through the use of breath and acceptance of the present
circumstances, in my pursuit of creating moments of Agreement between those in the room. I’ve been shifting my understanding of what it means to be in an ensemble of creators. My former understanding was that of a cadre of like-minded, trained, focused artists who were working to create art together. Immersion within an ensemble of these individuals provides me with the creative space to make bold choices, and to feel supported in my failure. Perhaps this same level of commitment, risk, and Agreement is possible in all settings.
CHAPTER TWO | PROJECT

“To move from one reality to another is to experience a jolt, which reminds the individual of his presence as a perceiving consciousness.”\(^5^2\)

The project, *what’s at hand*, is an improvised performance in which I function as both a creative performer and facilitator for audience members who wish to volunteer their participation. The setting for the project is *Artesian on 13th*: an intimate, welcoming, and accessible space in Regina’s Cathedral neighbourhood. This location has been chosen because of the professional quality of its production environment, its history as a multi-use space for both performance and community purposes in Regina, and also because its relative intimacy allows for those assembled to see and hear each other well. It is the space where my comedy variety show *Red Hot Riot* is held, and my experience there has taught me that the venue is capable of encouraging both comfort and familiarity with the audience.

The seating is arranged in the round (audience in a circle surrounding the playing space). The invisible line that normally divides spectator and participant is not present. We are seated in a circle, and seating will be arranged no more than two rows deep, to allow for clear sight lines and ready access to the stage if the attendees wish to join the work. The audience is invited to sit on the floor, and cushions/mats are provided (or brought from home).

My two collaborators on the project are Johanna Bundon, a theatre and dance artist (and my *Dream Agreement* collaborator), and Jon Neher, a musician with a background in live theatre scoring. Both of these artists have extensive backgrounds as both improvisers and teachers in their respective fields, and share a similar passion for audience engagement and the community that surrounds their work. Our work is rooted in, and engenders, the improvisational skills of availability, listening, acceptance, support, and expression (discussed further in Chapter 3).

\(^{52}\) Greene, 18.
I am intentionally enlisting the assistance of the dynamic young improv community Hitchhikers Improv\(^{53}\) and COMBAT Improv, each of which has their own core company members and reliable audiences, in the invitation process for audience members to attend. Additionally, FadaDance\(^{54}\), whose annual improv-dance fundraiser COMBAT DANCE is currently in its 4th year, has been nurturing interest in improvisation in the city, and I see openness by this audience to improvisation in all forms.

Community groups with whom I’ve developed a relationship through teaching, such as Phoenix Residential Society\(^{55}\) and Street Culture Project, have been asked to encourage their clients and staff to attend. Listen to Dis\(^{56}\), an arts collective who promotes inclusivity through theatre workshops and projects with Regina’s disabled community, have also been enlisted to invite their members and stakeholders. I think that by asking them to help in the invitation process, I am attracting a new and diverse set of humans, who perhaps do not know my work, but whose intrigue for improvisation and collaborative theatre practice has already been stoked.

The communities that have formed through the past six years of regular *Red Hot Riot* performances, my monthly film-commentary show *TALKIES*, as well as the residual improv-appreciators who patronized the annual *General Fools Festival* from 2009-2014, will also be invited. These communities, familiar with performance and improvisation but also predominantly uninitiated as practitioners, will be invited through active social media channels to attend and participate to their degree of comfort. My hope is that they will trust that the risk of participation will result in a joyful experience.

The ideal situation is an audience who has varied ages, experience with improvisation, levels of education, and personal reasons for participating. If some members of the crowd have unfamiliarity with the unknown, there are an equally

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important cross-section of the audience who might, having been in similar situations before, model participation, impulse, and even confidence with the notion of improvisation. Their own demographics are varied, and the variation that is the most compelling to me is the variation in background and discipline. My own background in theatre, though strongly informing the work, is also navigating traditions of movement and music represented through the experience and careers of my co-creators. My hope is that immersion in a communal improvised experience, made up of practitioners, hobbyists, experienced audience members and the uninitiated, will continue the work of growing the love of and audience for improvised art in Regina.

The attendees are invited to join us onstage in the creation of an improvised work. No performance experience is necessary in order to participate. My preference is that the volunteers are not experienced improvisers; their lack of a pre-determined framework for performance is the very thing this project engages. They may choose to speak, play characters, make sound, move in the space thematically, create physical environments, or provide suggestions to inspire the work. They may also choose to watch. As the three performer-facilitators, our task is to harness the offers the audience is making, support those choices as fodder for improvised performance, and set them up for an experience of collaboration and creative expression. While also functioning as performers, we will ensure the audience volunteers are driving the impetus to action. Boal’s tradition of Forum Theatre engages a similar method of audience empowerment, and Boal stipulates that “when the spectator herself comes on stage and carries out the action she has in mind, she does it in a manner which is personal, unique and non-transferable, as she alone can do it, and as no artist can do it in her place.”

The project imagines the opportunity for the audience to express their own voices and actions, through facilitation, and that we perform alongside them, with both our experience and theirs at play together, and help to realize the potential of those actions.

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STRUCTURE

Once gathered in a circle the audience is given an initial welcome, including acknowledgment that this work takes place on Treaty 4 territory, and a thematic introduction to the event:

“Hello.
Thank you for being here.
I am Jayden, I am Johanna, I am Jon. (a brief introduction by each of us)
This is why we’re here: to create something improvised together.
Some ways we might do that are by telling stories, creating scenes, making sound, and moving around the space.
We’ve thought of some ways you may want to participate, and you may have some of your own.
However you choose to participate is correct.
All three of us will be involved, and you can be as well. We can’t do this without you.
Consider that you are already participating. Right now.
This whole thing, beginning to end, will take about an hour. Including this.
Let’s start simply.”

In keeping with the interdisciplinary task at hand, and in an effort to merge my two practices of performance and teaching, the project takes on a standard workshop format as its performance structure:

Introduction
Group warmup
Simple task (An improvised scene between myself and an audience member)
Re-definition of terms, check-in with group
Group game (A movement exploration based on a theme derived from the simple scene)
Augmentation of the game based on the offers made by the group
Reflection in pairs
Group debrief
Closing

Each of these chapters or movements of the performance helps the audience progress safely together through the “show” in much the same way a workshop group does: through articulation of the goals and opportunities at play, careful facilitation and
modeling, and the freedom to express and explore. Spolin names *audience* as one her “seven aspects of spontaneity.” She writes: “If there is agreement that all those involved in the theater should have personal freedom to experience, this must include the audience – each member of the audience must have a personal experience.” Spolin’s inclusion of audience is not, strictly speaking, meant to imply that they must also be onstage. In the case of *what’s at hand*, we are taking Spolin literally.

**REHEARSAL PROCESS**

Johanna, Jon, and I have hosted volunteer studio sessions that have taken place between March and June 2017, and have involved roughly 100 individuals over 6 workshops. Five of these sessions were held at the University of Regina in rehearsal halls, and the last was a work-in-progress version of the project, performed at *Artesian on 13* on May 10 as part the “Improvisation and Mobility” conference hosted by the Regina Improvisation Studies Centre.

The rehearsals involve gameplay (and game creation) with volunteer workshop members, in which I participate as a group member and facilitator. In the studio sessions held at the University, our aim has been to test our own ability to contextualize the tasks succinctly without over-explaining, while still endowing the gathered volunteers with the trust and comfort necessary for them to avail themselves to an organic and shifting process.

Lessons have been learned, debriefed, and integrated throughout this rehearsal process. At a session in early April, we discovered that participants were hesitant to engage with sound-making implements unless we first modeled this behavior, for fear of ruining the improvised movement taking place. This led us to add a simple instruction to our introduction: *however you choose to participate is correct*. At another session two weeks later, we learned that offering to hand out instruments to seemingly less willing participants was an effective way to invite participation from those volunteers who

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59 Spolin, 13.
needed an extra helping hand, or whose personal comfort level with volunteering tended towards offers that allowed them to stay seated or non-verbal.

**SELF/SPACE/GROUP**

We have begun each session with a group warm-up of roughly 20 minutes. This warm-up involves simple group exercises played in both a circle and open space setting, allowing us to tune and improvise with our voices, eye contact, bodies, and experiment with sound making. Warm-ups model the behavior that we will engage further as we improvise creatively as a group, and bring the skills of availability, listening, acceptance, support, and expression into the realm of pedestrian activity. The goals of warm-up serve as a convenient metaphor for the project as whole. To play and to be seen playing is the means and the end of the warm-up. Heathcote contends that “to retain one’s balance on this pedagogical tightrope lies in the initial selection of simple tasks. The early tasks must be within the range of their real judgments...” 60 This warm-up is key to the success of the project as a whole, as it engenders availability to three key relationships central to this project: self, space, and group.

The skill of availability is key to our work, and in my work it begins with some form of group action with the entire room of participants. The purpose of warming up is to become available—availing one’s self to the present moment, the process, and the persons at hand: "Improvisation promotes personal confidence and makes peoples accustomed to taking action, to activating their agency publicly and in relation to others. Improvisers have to be aware of the needs of others." 61 It seems a simple idea, though it is often easier said than done. Any one of a number of things might be happening when an individual enters a space. Though not necessary to shed previous experiences before entering improvisation—that would counter some of the integrity of working with what is at hand - the individual and the group are served by some facilitated warm up process.

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60 Bolton and Heathcote, page 190
61 Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, xv.
that in some way delineates the past from the present moment of experience, and to develop what Chekhov calls “the ensemble of feeling.”

Self - How do we become available to our own experience?

KINETIC ACTIVITY - I have found taking a kinesthetic route to this level of availability to be useful. Kinesthetic experience, which prioritizes movement and physical activity, augments sensation in the participants. The senses are always happening in the present tense. Therefore, by provoking a felt experience of the senses, a tactile experience of the present moment is called forward. The senses become a useful vehicle through which to foster a tactile experience of availability—an idea that may, for some, seem like an elusive notion. Barba frames this as “continuous mutation, growth taking place before our very eyes.”

A GROUNDING TASK - A familiar repetitive and activity is useful. Like walking, gentle bouncing, jumping, or even rubbing one’s hands together and then placing these warm hands on the floor or on one’s body (centre / thighs / feet). These simple, even familiar, grounding actions can be done without excessive concentration, hook the group into the first layer of availability, and softly assist participants in becoming “aware of the fact that repetition and difference are not opposites.”

DIALOGUE / NARRATIVE - Some guidance through inquiry can also augment the participant’s experience of the present moment. Can you feel the way your foot connects with the ground? Can you feel the sensation of movement when you walk quickly? Feel into the warmth of your body. Notice the rhythm at which you are walking.

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62 Chekhov, 41.
63 Barba, 52.
MODELLING PHYSICAL PRIORITY - A natural byproduct of opening this type of dialogue is that immediately there is value placed on the physical practice that we are undertaking together. This does some work to quickly shift or usurp preconceptions that improvisation is exclusively about being witty, smart, or funny (preconceptions that I have heard from many first time improvisers). And, though it may seem that a priority placed on the physical excludes those with accessibility concerns, we have taught dozens of students with a myriad of physical constraints including broken limbs, blindness, deafness, and paralysis using the same basic tenets of physical priority. A focus on the body is a focus on the body, or voice, you have, and not the idealized body.

CATHEXIS - Another byproduct is that the kinesthetic activity gives participants an avenue to express physically any cathetic energy that may be bound up in mental formations or worry about the newness of the circumstances, or what is yet to come. The physical evolution that begins to emerge does so because the “flow of energies that characterize our daily behavior has been re-routed. The tensions that secretly govern our normal way of being physically present come to the surface in the performer, become visible, unexpectedly.”65

Space – How do we become available to the room?

At this point, another layer of availability is brought forward. This layer of availability is about the space. Space is in an important container for group experience. The space is the first agreement the group makes—the choice to enter the space, and to stay in the space. The boundaries of the space in many ways govern the spectrum of choices that the members of the group will make and must therefore be defined, or at the very least noticed. This familiarity with space plays a role in making participants feel safe and secure. On a practical level it reflects a concern with the fire exits and route to the washrooms, the slippery places on the floor. On a formal level, it reveals the

65 Barba, 52.
idiosyncrasies of the space that might serve as points of inspiration to express impulse, or crutches that trap the forward momentum of impulse. On a more poetic level it invokes the playground, the schoolyard, or the arena, that must be noticed in full and recognized for what it is so that it can transform into other realities that the imagination will invite. From an expressive arts therapy perspective, Paulo Knill points out that, in this state, “Play has priority because in all other existential phenomena humans make a distinction between reality and unreality, while in play, even though there is a distinction between roles of play-things of imaginary character, the connection between reality and unreality has a purpose and makes a sense that breaks into the total reality of things.”66 This tending towards play, and getting to know the space, might be as simple as doing a visual inventory of the space; or a physical inventory, inviting the participants to walk or move in the space; or a verbal inventory, naming the objects, its details, and materials that one is noticing in the space.

Group – How do we become available to the others present?

Having felt an experience of self, the experience of sharing space, the group is ready to avail themselves to the group more deliberately. This layer of availability is about acknowledging all members of the group, “the ‘we’re in this together’ feeling inherent in an enterprise situation...”67 See the whole group and Take a look at the people that you are going to be working with are common prompts in this task. This can be addressed generally at first, through seeing and starting to bring in eye contact, and then more specifically, perhaps engaging in a shared action as a group (i.e. starting and stopping, clapping a shared rhythm, engaging in one shared action). The intention is to understand that the individual is a part of a whole, and to initiate the notion of acceptance, inclusion and ultimately availability to the whole group. “The game is a

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67 Bolton and Heathcote, page 169.
natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer—this is the exact time one is truly open to receive them.”

Here, Viola Spolin articulates what makes gameplay so essential to the teaching of improvisation: our minds surrender to the pursuit of a common task with a group, and we begin learning through doing.

Throughout the entire process, the facilitators are modeling and guiding the participants towards a particular sense of availability. This availability is expansive and non-judgmental. Though, as a group and individually we may be partaking in some tasks and even social exchanges that resemble the tasks and social codes of the external world, this is not the external world: roles and power structures that are prevalent in daily life needn’t be at play here, and the impulses which in many social situations are necessarily stifled, can be expressed here. Gary Peters frames this in a larger context: “It could be argued that the real pedagogical value of improvisation is not to enable the student (as self) to express him or herself (if they can do it they don’t need teaching!), but precisely the Other to express him or herself.”

It is the facilitator’s job to in some way convey that the codes of this particular group experience differ from other experiences, without laying claim to the importance or purpose of the work. Through the actions undertaken, and through the quality and spirit of the tasks undertaken, we work together in service of surfacing the other: “the teacher has much to offer the improviser, not in teaching them what to do with this material, but to bringing them to a proper awareness of what it is, of exactly what is there, of what they have at their fingertips.” I will invite optimal creative expression in the group, ideally to challenge the reliance on external models of participation (i.e. passivity). what’s at hand will create an alertness and appreciation for the newness of

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68 Spolin, 4.
69 Peters, 306.
70 Peters, 306.
this particular situation which could only come into being with this particular group of humans.

Simply by moving through these facets of a warm-up –self, space, group–we have in an indirect way honoured the discipline of theatre, which is an important part of the heritage of improvisation, acknowledging the formal elements of environment, character, and given circumstance / conditions / predicament.

OUTCOMES
COMMUNAL SUCCESS

As a key marker of the success of the enterprise, the audience would have an experience of being a part of a group. This might be the whole of the audience, or being an essential member of a smaller sub-group. They would leave the space with a felt and lived experience of this connection. Many individuals in the audience would have the sense of surprise and delight. Ideally, this surprise would be oriented inward, towards themselves, as if they had in some way surprised or delighted themselves with an action, an impulse, or a behaviour that was other than their habitual mode of expression, and felt it supported and validated by the whole. There would be a sense that “...we are watching people before us, not representing something but going through something. They lay their bodies on the line...and we are transformed - not audience to a spectacle but witnesses to an event.”71 The experience of being in the group may inspire some attendees to sit back, to observe, to bear witness to the improvised action but not to choose active participation. This, too, is an offer to the work, as “…to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker.”72 Their contribution to the whole is no less important to the health of the group, and is welcome.

72 Etchells, 17.
In addition, the space would be dynamic with choice-making and “play” as Etchells would articulate it: “Play as a state in which meaning is flux, in which possibility thrives, in which versions multiply in which the confines of what is real are blurred, buckled, broken.” And as facilitators, owing to the excitement and buoyancy of the group, we can recede into the group, as equal participants welcoming invitations to follow and support other initiators. Shit-disturbers would have a space where they could disturb and feel supported.

The journey would be somewhat uncanny. Perhaps this refers to an odd or unsuspecting narrative. Perhaps this refers to the fluid passage between movement, sound, and speaking. There would be one spontaneously agreed upon moment of silence or suspension. The sense would exist that “Something is happening–real and therefore risked–something seems to slip across from the private world to the public one–and the performers are ‘left open’ or ‘left exposed’.” An ending would emerge and be felt through the whole space. And the sense in the room would be that we had seen something new occur between strangers, and that it also felt pleasing to watch as a piece of entertainment.

During our work-in-progress performance for the “Improvisation and Mobility Conference”, the piece took on a wide range of holistic and organic turns, and was at times tentative and at times a seething mass of inspired bodies. We could not have imagined it would have emerged in the ways it did, and upon reflection we celebrated this result. The work defied labels; it simply came into being as the thing it was. Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz’ observations surrounding community building underline the importance of these experiences: “When categories collapse, creative community making begins. This idea is a baseline precept for understanding the ethics of cocreation.”

73 Etchells, 53.
74 Etchells, 49.
75 Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz, page xxxi.
SEEING OTHERS

It is easy to ignore others. Perhaps it has never been easier. It is not necessary to interact with other human beings in a meaningful way on a daily basis. A combination of advanced communication technology and growing ambivalence to the state of the world (and others in it) feels like it is driving humans apart from each other. These divides are only reinforced by the rhetoric and ambition of political bodies who utilize points of difference between individuals to sub-divide communities that may otherwise see each other as equals. It is easy to sow and seed division. It is hard to ease tension and appreciate the actual porousness of boundaries. Unification is big and messy and could require us to admit we don’t have answers and that we need help from others in order to achieve it. Division means we can say it is someone else’s fault and that the problem is the failing of others. The examples of this tactic are on display every day, easily accessible through any news network or political interview or twitter feed or comment thread. Blind hatred and fear of compromise exist healthily, and are encouraged to do so. This is the void in which improvisation must be encouraged, practiced, embodied: “In its most fully realized forms, improvisation is the creation and development of new, unexpected, and productive cocreative relations among people.”76

I have been in dozens of scenarios where I am working in close proximity to those with whom I (seemingly) have nothing in common. Teaching a workshop to marginalized women fleeing domestic violence. Playing story games with adults with acquired brain injuries who are food-insecure and require daily intervention to keep them functioning. Performing improvisational comedy to a room full of oil executives whose salaries make me embarrassed and whose daily choices at work affect the lives of everyone who lives on the planet. In these groups, I am a stranger. And yet, I have experienced what happens when we engage in a common task: Playing a circle game, offering spontaneous words and phrases back and forth, having a live conversation in front of hundreds of their peers about what we should do about this rhino that is loose in the museum. Theatre artist and author Chris Johnston writes that, “In a sense, we’re

76 Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz, page xii.
continuously searching through such pastimes for a solution to a problem. That is, the problem of the absence of social contentment.”77 Fear, self-judgment, anger, tension are all at play; we feel lonely, scared, judged, exposed. However, investment in the task at hand allows us to find each other in the dark. “We’re searching for a quality of community that might be found more easily on small scale than on a large. It can’t be legislated for...There’s something else required, a kind of alchemical mixture, a fusion of hearts and minds that is always beyond legislation or good deeds.”78 The trappings of our lives, struggles, successes, and contexts slowly drain away, and we are left with only what is happening between us in this moment: the game, the task, the story. I have felt the experience of seeing them, only them, and I have felt seen. I have felt necessary to them, and I have felt a necessity for them. Their presence matters to me. When these exercises or performances end, there is nearly always an after-effect of laughter, story sharing, handshakes, embraces, and also celebration from those gathered for having also been present. “It’s the admixture of something spiritual, a social, impulsive, voluntarist flexing of social muscles by people who are acting not to fulfill a government initiative but to realize a marriage between personal self-expression and desire to meld into and advance the interests of the group”79. In this moment, we are the same. We share a bond, an achievement, a story. Another word for this would be intimacy. While this intimacy is the ideal, it is admittedly rare and may only occur in fleeting moments, in fits and starts. While acknowledging that this does not always occur, the presence of this group intimacy is, for me, an ideal to work towards.

I feel everyone knows what it is like to be alone, in some way, regardless of class or status. We build defenses or points of view to combat loneliness or feelings of loss. The process of “seeing” each other can contribute to the discovery of what about the other is exactly like us, including feelings of loneliness, ineptitude, fear, and our vulnerabilities about admitting this. And, our empathy for those who feel as we do.

78 Johnston, 198.
79 Johnston, 198.
Lipsitz writes: “In a world where cultural practice is often reduced to mere recreation and ornamentation of otherwise unhappy lives, improvisation can serve as the source of new epistemologies and ontologies.” There is a layer of creativity available in this liminal, improvised space between us that I think is truly unique and teeming with potential to unite us. This middle-space is the town hall, the bedroom when the lights are out, the quiet café where secrets are shared between intimates. It is an otherwise inaccessible place where fixed perceptions and posturing gives way to adaptation. I do not think one can spend time in this space with others and come out unchanged. Something shifts, even imperceptibly. I have seen it occur and I have felt it. I need it. I think we all need it: “We cannot create a radically different future unless we learn to think differently about futurity.”

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81 Lipsitz, 15.
CHAPTER THREE | METHODOLOGY

“Yet art practice is more than a strategy; it creates and is created within a zone of production that is inherently unstable, open, and organic.”

I situate my methodology within the realm practice-based research. Baz Kershaw articulates this research as turning “away from abstract theorizing and scientific rationality in favour of action-based investigations oriented toward practical engagement in the world.” My desire to work on improvisation in an academic context stays afloat as long as I can be in the act of doing, and seeking meaning through hands-on engagement with my practice. Understandably, a research methodology that is practice-based is subject to serious critique. The overwhelming modernist bias in academia is difficult to reconcile with a practice-based research methodology. Chapman & Sawchuk point to the issues surrounding “institutions where scholarly forms of publication have been dominant, and where new bureaucratic exercises, such as the imposition of ‘metrics’ to measure and evaluate academic research across disciplines, threaten to introduce mechanisms that will impose new forms of standardization.”

Kershaw writes that the disconnect between practice-led research and academia exists “Because ‘hunches’—or, more conventionally, ‘intuitions’—problematize the well-worn modernist oppositions between mind and body, spirituality and materiality, creativity and rationality, arts and sciences, and so on, and can issue in aesthetic forms that confound those distinctions—whether through the raw economics of ‘production finish’ or even in hopes to prove a thing of beauty is a truth forever.” As an improviser and

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85 Kershaw, 115.
believer in the knowledge I gain while improvising, I have an affinity for what Kershaw calls ‘intuition’. I accept that there is room for my own experience within the study, and I embrace Sefton and Windle’s notion that “research, when combined with art, can open up routes of knowing and unknowing—to releasing ourselves from that which we think we know.” With a research method rooted in my work as an improviser, I can more fully embody and enact the research. I want to embrace both versions of my improvisation practice: my self as artist and my self as teacher.

I learn by feeling and interpreting while in the act, engaging “in a region where interrelationship is what matters, where everything grows together, living in terms of, taking account of, but not destroying everything else; where there is no distinction between weed and flower, useless and useful.” Rooting around in this other region, the one that is outside of old knowledge and doesn’t know the world until it is forming in the moment, is my pursuit. When participating in theatrical improvisation, I am researching what I feel and know, and also how I feel and know those things in relationship to the others present with me. Being in the moment, in the practice of the five values—availability, listening, acceptance, support, expression—is my research tool. My method of employing it is to be alive with the moment itself. I aim to create while supporting, and relying on the surprise and joy of others as my findings.

My research, whether in the moment or in reflection after a session has ended, then becomes about how best to articulate and contextualize the skills of improvisation (availability, listening, acceptance, support, expression) in a more relatable or more global fashion so that it is applicable to improvisers of all levels of experience. Engaging in this constant mining of what makes improvisation and improvisers tick is embedded deep in the core of what I’m trying to achieve through research, and Teaching is a method which allows me to always stay on the inside of this research. I’m aware of the inherent power dynamic that can be present with this method, and that my impressions of my research findings have the potential to become clouded with my own feelings

86 Sefton and Windle, 21.
87 Betty Jane Wagner, Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium (Washington: National Education Association, 1976), 166.
about what is and isn’t best for the group, or what they’re experiencing moment to moment. Gary Peters offers that “…improvisation is promoted, positively, as a valuable end in itself, as something to be taught. And this is the problem, whether it be as a way of teaching or the subject of teaching, improvisation…is, if not unteachable, then excruciatingly difficult to teach.”

Peters’ contention is that one cannot be taught to improvise, but rather “be made aware of what improvisation might be, what it might consist of and where it might be found.” I take his point that improvisation should be taught as a means of enriching the creative experiences and highlighting potential avenues for creation, and it is within this pedagogy that I would situate my own teaching practice. As a performer, I think there is unique and exciting creative product that can be nurtured through teaching improvisation, though teaching also demands that I not bind myself to an end goal for the students. I, too, am in research mode with them while instructing. I do not think it is possible to escape the presence of subjectivity here, and I work to ensure that my approach is collaborative with, and responsive to, what is actually occurring in a workshop setting. Specifically, I’ve been trying to use the lessons I’ve learned from my community-based teaching—those of pace, time, breath, listening—to alter the way I engage with improvised material in front of crowds. I choose to move and speak more deliberately, as though every phrase matters. I actively connect to my breath while performing, which slows my impulses and allows me to fully take in the offers my scene partners are making. I repeat internal mantras for myself—this is happening right now—to ensure that I do not begin to live in the future and engage in pre-planning what I might do two moments from now. When I am reacting to the choices my scene partners make, I keep coming back to moments I’ve experienced in a classroom setting for inspiration. In the past, I would have scrolled through memories of how past performances have gone, and what worked in those moments that could be useful to me with this new audience. Now, however, I find myself thinking about my interactions with my student’s choices, and drawing on them for inspiration.

88 Peters, 302.
89 Peters, 306.
Remember how “Glen” took so much care just to march back and forth across the room last week? Take that much time and care with this moment now. Additionally, my approach in these research sessions (and the eventual project) is as teacher and not director. I am not attempting to tell others what to do, but instead encouraging them to make their own choices through encouragement, coaching, and my own adaptations to their impulses: “There are no final answers, nor are there directives to govern every teaching situation. If he is to be effective, the teacher cannot function automatically or according to a set of predetermined rules. Teaching is a purposeful action. It must be carried on deliberately in situations never twice the same.”

My work with the university cohort, especially, has been deeply educational for me, particularly in learning how to augment and re-think my teaching philosophies to teach a group of individuals whose goals to take my class are more about obligation than interest. When this class is over, I am usually tired and burnt out. I feel as though I’ve run a half-marathon, and I could easily take the next few hours to rest. Comparatively, when teaching this same material to a class of individuals who really want to learn improv, I end classes with boundless energy and inspiration. The energy flowing my way from the students seems endless. But, in this setting, I often find I’m drained and fatigued after a workshop.

I kept asking Why is this? What aren’t they enjoying? Why aren’t they giving back? I have been investigating the notion for myself that if I am worn out from teaching, perhaps I’m using the energy in the room incorrectly. I am trying to manufacture an experience that is not actually occurring in the space, rather than becoming “more concerned with assisting the student to come to a more sophisticated and more intense understanding of their given situation.” Instead, I’m mentally conjuring a room full of committed and thrilled improvisation artists, and the energy I would expect from them. The process of manufacturing this in a group is labour-intensive and, occasionally, deeply frustrating. Even when there are group members

90 Greene, 69.
91 Peters, 306.
who are seeking this kind of rigour, those who do not share this goal can deflate the growth of the ensemble through simple negativity, lack of commitment, and social commiseration. However, this disconnect is not the fault of the students. I am not practicing the very foundational skills I am trying to teach. Instead, I am getting caught in a learned teaching pedagogy that is rooted in what I can see, rather than what I can feel. Dwight Conquergood explains that when we create hierarchies of knowledge through a “visual/verbal bias”, researchers lose sight of “meanings that are expressed forcefully through intonation, silence, body tension, arched eyebrows, blank stares, and other protective arts of disguise and secrecy.”92 The students are presenting me with a way in, but I am trying to teach someone else. I am not available to the events and humans in the space. Like Conquergood, I need to welcome in an epistemological hybridity of “analytical and artistic ways of knowing that unsettles the institutional organization of knowledge and disciplines.”93 When I see bodies closed off or lack of eye contact within the group, I have been interpreting it as disinterest rather than an offer of how to augment my behavior to suit the room.

I learned two key lessons about myself through teaching in the performance-noncentric settings of the Heritage Community residency and my university course: I gain great joy from seeing individuals experience improvisation for the first time, and I feel great envy for the degree of surprise and joy they experience. I have learned a great deal about how I teach, how others learn, and that many of my preferences are built on bias rather than fact. Overwhelmingly, the biggest lesson has been about time and pace. My job is to teach and facilitate which tends to put me on the outside of the experience, rather than immersed within it. What I want is to facilitate a safe and welcoming space for non-professionals to experience performative improvisation, while remaining a responsive, active participant. I’m a very on-the-floor kind of teacher; like Heathcote, I like to be swept up in the momentum of the group and instruct from my impulses, “frequently engaged in hopping deftly, sliding elliptically, switching abruptly, or even

93 Conquergood, 41.
bestriding the two worlds of fiction and reality."94 By being inside of what’s happening, I can track the next organic step the group requires. This is because I am feeling what they’re feeling, I can sense when a shift needs to occur because I can feel the intense pull in my own body when they feel it. I like this sensation, of teaching and participating all at once. Indeed, this is at the heart of my desire to create a collaborative performance project for my MFA.

I like a group to be working just on the edge of their capacity. This is the place where I feel the best learning occurs. When a group is comfortable, or efficient, they are also allowed to sit back and settle in. This may be positive for learning patterns or repetition, but if there is a new skill being developed it allows the group to remove risk from the equation. In my experience, the breaking point for most groups is related to pace and momentum. A group learning improvisation will often break a pattern to talk when they feel something has gone wrong (i.e. a beat has been missed or someone didn’t fulfill their inherent task), rather than maintain the momentum of the exercise through that discomfort. In these moments, I push for momentum and pace. I want them to continue through the mucky discomfort, to push their boundaries of self-acceptance and judgment. Neelands speaks of adaptive, ensemble-focused, supportive learning environments that are “at the heart of theatre, whatever the context”95, and that the desire is to “create a secure environment without ever being in a comfort zone. It gives witness to the power of the ensemble as a way of working to push young people towards new levels of collective social and artistic excellence.”96 In the end, I have found this framing to be very useful in teaching acceptance of error. Or, put another way, to teach that there was no error to begin with. There was only the thing that occurred. The game continues. It includes all happenings.

Viola Spolin writes that “A healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual

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94 Heathcote and Bolton, 30.
96 Neelands, 183.
participation and personal contribution. If one person dominates, the other members have little growth or pleasure in the activity; a true group relationship does not exist. This group dynamic, and the pursuit of a common task together, is what I’m seeking with the members of the gathered audience for my project.

FIVE SKILLS

My dual backgrounds as performer and teacher are rooted in responsive, group-focused gameplay and game creation, and have been deeply influenced by both my career as a performer and my Dream Agreement collaboration with movement and improvisation artist Johanna Bundon. Our respective practices have merged to create our own theory of how improvisation operates in a group, and how best to help others learn how to channel it. Our model of training involves a focus on five key skills, which we often call values, of improvisation. These values have also become the foundation of my performance practice, which I have learned to utilize and model while improvising with others, and are the filter through which I understand my dual practices:

Availability:

One becomes available to the process the group is undertaking. This begins by addressing any conditions or factors that are hindering an improviser’s availability, such as the space, accessibility issues, body language, personal emotions, or a personal agenda. Finding group availability is often as easy as playing a circle-based energy sharing game to promote eye contact and open channels between improvisers, or moving in open space together to allow the improvisers to assess the room and cleanse their palate from whatever came before this new mode of functioning together. To truly find agreement in the group, we must start from a place of being available to the process. Being present is not the same as being available. Rather, it occurs when we are “awakened to the moment; we become alert to the suspicion that something else, some

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other way of being in a relationship or in action, is possible.”

Availability ensures all improvisers are available to the creative process, the space, and each other, on this day.

Listening:

As teachers and performers, we listen to what improvisers are expressing (or offering). The goal is to learn the skill of hearing what someone is trying to express, whether those words were used or not, using active listening. Hearing one’s intention, reading body language and non-verbal offers, listening to the tone of the group as they speak, and being aware of which voices are not being heard. Robust listening often means we can share focus and can reincorporate each other’s ideas, and that the dynamics of expressing and listening are equally weighted throughout the group.

Listening is being aware of the offers being made, and their intentions, before reacting or engaging with them.

Acceptance:

Accepting each other’s offers is often framed as saying Yes, expressing positivity and a willingness to build on the offers of others. There is another piece of this skill that requires development. That is, the ability to accept those same offers whether we agree with them or not, and the vulnerability to embrace that others may not always agree with us. “The point is that reality does not exist for anyone as given, as independently there.”

Acceptance does not mean Agreement, but that others have a point of view and showing a willingness to engage. Acceptance does not mean complicity, but rather embracing the inherent value of offers while also testing, questioning and troubling them.

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99 Greene, 10.
Support:

This skill follows naturally from *Acceptance*, as we show support for an idea, a structure, or a line of inquiry in the room. Supportive improvisers demonstrate an ability to manifest an expanded version of their fellow improviser’s offers (often framed as “Yes, And”), but also using their own offers to clarify or heighten the offers of others. Support comes from a desire for action, and from a willingness to offer one’s own vulnerabilities to the group in order to create action collaboratively. Support allows individuals and groups to develop a relationship to an idea. Offering someone support means inviting both their strength and vulnerability in, and committing to support the group’s common intention to create action.

Expression:

Expression is action. Expression is an idea that has emerged through the group dialogue, or structure, manifesting in action, making one’s own expressive offers back to the group, and trusting that they will be heard and received by the group with the same skills that have been embodied thus far. Expression is the creation of appropriate action, an organic representation of what has transpired in the process of availability, listening, accepting, and supporting.

This theoretical model for improvisation and ensemble dynamic is born of years of experience working in improvisatory settings, on stage and in the classroom, and is the chief method at play for me in performance and facilitation. I have been actively practicing this model throughout my MFA studies, and integrating it at all levels of my practice. In doing so, I’ve affirmed it as the fundamental method of creation that I am engaging at all junctures.

**BREATHE**

Delivering classes with performance energy requires the group to return the energy back to me, closing the loop and keeping us engaged in an exchange of energetic offers. If I am pouring energy outwards, and receiving little in return, the by-product is
the same as a scorned performer after they leave the stage: frustration, discomfort, self-judgment, anger. In my project, I worry about trying to embody a certain degree of investment, receiving nothing back from the crowd, and trying to navigate this by upping my own energy and commitment to an unsustainable or uncomfortable level (taking over swaths of the show to “make it work”, blocking out subtle or vague offers out of judgment, or becoming increasingly manic onstage). In doing so, I will absorb responsibility from the crowd, as well as power. The purpose of the show is to create a performance work that involves the audience in an equal exchange of offers, and endows power onto the members of the audience. If I panic in the moment (fearing the show will “fail”), the show will undoubtedly take on a very different form: myself wielding all the control and the audience resigning themselves to watch because I have not set appropriate conditions for their involvement. How can I hold the whole group together, without over-teaching, controlling, or using my power over them? And, how can I deliver the same quality of teaching that I think is required, without relying on performance energy and the same trappings of commitment and exchange of investment?

The tactic I have investigated and learned to use most often is breath. While teaching, when I see the students turning off, or lacking commitment, or disconnecting from the material to talk to each or leave the room, I use it as an opportunity to enter deeper into the present moment. I inhale, take in the room, and exhale. I will sometimes do this a few times a minute, to try to ground myself in what is actually happening right now. I will ask myself: What is happening right now? How can you enter this moment and react with the energy that the room is giving you? How deeply do you need to enter what is happening so that this feels easy?

This tactic came my way through SIT UP REGINA, a mindfulness weekend and walking retreat that Johanna and I produced in May of 2015, as part of our Artist Residency with Heritage Community Association. Yoga and meditation teacher Michael Stone, whose work has increasingly merged with activist communities and social action causes, facilitated this weekend. This weekend started me down a path of discovering
how to use the tenets of meditation, namely a focus on the breath, as a means of keeping “contact with this moment, this experience, at this time, in this body.”

Stone’s framing of breath as a tool for immersion in the moment, while not rooted in a theatrical or arts-based context, drew me in. I spent the remainder of that summer working in studio on exercises that prized breath, and on learning how I could inhale inspiration and exhale inspiration as a means of remaining in the moment with whoever was in the room. This brought me closer to what Stone refers to as “intimacy”:

“Intimacy, in the form of complete interdependence, gives us a sense of being whole and being part of the whole. No separation.”

Breath makes everything possible. When teaching in these settings, I actively slow my breathing pattern to ensure that my compunction for action does not override the natural pace of the group. I intentionally inhale slowly before speaking. I choose to speak at a pace that is much slower and direct than my natural tone and timbre. I exhale deliberately when I’m done speaking. I focus all my eye contact on whoever is speaking in the circle, when normally I would be scanning the group for signs of change or inspiration. In doing so, I combat my own learned patterning and preferences. I slow myself to the more natural pace of the given assembly of humans, as opposed to pushing them to embrace a faster and more complex momentum. The patterning that I have learned over time is very informed by working in professional theatre settings, or by teaching groups who have a deep desire to improve and challenge themselves. My teaching practice with Dream Agreement has engendered the opposite impulse in me: What do I have to change about myself today to meet this group where they are at? What is happening in this moment, with these people? What might we accomplish today, together, that is not rooted in the future? I breathe. I re-commit to my own practice of being available to them, to listening, and to accepting whatever happens next. Whatever it is, whatever this group chooses, is correct for them now. My role is to bring myself to that, and to support their collective actions that result. The method,

100 Michael Stone, Yoga for a World out of Balance, (Boston: Shambhala, 2009), 175.
101 Stone, 175.
then, is to breathe, embrace intimacy, and create with *what’s at hand*: “The moment I speak of is not choice in the sense of deliberative reason but an action that choice itself stands on. That action is awareness.”

102 Appelbaum, 16.
CHAPTER FOUR | THEORETICAL SATELLITE

“The unexpected stranger knocks on our door, and upon opening, we learn
that the stranger is us. How now do I respond? And you?”103

AGREEMENT

“We rationalists perceive the reality of being members of a community in the reality of works understood and realized; we perceive the community itself as a work”104, says Alphonso Lingis. Lingis goes on to argue that we are viewing community incorrectly, through a lens of ownership and objectification, as something to be formed or possessed. We act in an effort to arrive at community; to finally achieve this thing that we idolize and desire; to get something done, or perhaps to be done with it. Lingis illustrates another community, one that is not steeped in what we want to build or lay personal claim to: “This other community forms not in a work, but in the interruption of work and enterprises. It is not realized in having or in producing something in common but in exposing oneself to the one with whom one has nothing in common: to the Aztec, the nomad, the guerrilla, the enemy.”105 Community, for Lingis, exists in the vulnerabilities and frailties of others, and in our collusions and collisions with them. Community exists in disruption and confrontation with difference, with what Lingis calls “the stranger”106.

Community is a really big tent, and has become a buzzword that lacks meaning and specificity for me. Petra Kuppers refers to community as having many faces and

105 Lingis, 10.
106 Lingis, 11.
roles to uphold, “as an ideal, a marketing tool, an experience, a hope and a problem.” Community evokes pre-existing social structures that have been used to draw together types of people, such as a classroom of students, or a group of individuals with the same diagnoses, or those who live in proximity to each other in a given neighbourhood. Often, community-based practice is enacted by installing an artist’s work into an existent community, like workshops for community association members, or stakeholders at a service provider. The result is artwork created for, or with, pre-existing or composites groups identified by the core organization or cause.

And so I have been pondering this other community of Lingis’, and what is meant by this term, in relationship to my city and my practice, and how to engage with the stranger. In our attempt to build structures of recognizable performance and archotypical characters and stories, I see the performer and viewer often functioning as Lingis’ “rationalists”. The performers aim to be understood and make something, the viewer sees it realized and validates the effort. We have made something together. We call it community, or shared experience, but it is also structural and tangible and ownable. The community we create with a viewer is a work. Lingis’ “Aztec”, his “nomad”, isn’t present onstage. I think the stranger in the space is the unbridled impulses of the others onstage in this interaction. If I want to experience true difference and grow my other community, then I need to invite the stranger into the process. The exposure of the impulses to one another is where this other community can be negotiated. When we are admitting to our impulses onstage, we are entering into disruption and exposure. Our impulses have something in common when we shape them to meet in the middle somewhere, when we become immersed in the navigation of impulse and reaction, alongside each other, this other community. This middle space is where we may reckon with our own internal emotions, insecurities, reactions, truths. This middle space, for me, is Agreement.

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In the past, when I have talked of engendering Community, I have meant Agreement. Viola Spolin often uses a similar term, group agreement\textsuperscript{108}, as the starting place for successful improvisation: “There must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played.”\textsuperscript{109} By contrast, I imagine agreement not as a location to begin or end, but an organic entity conjured through the practice of availability, listening, acceptance, support, and expression. When we are practicing those values, in relationship to ourselves, the other, and the whole, we are living in agreement. This is not a contract that lives in perpetuity, but rather a suspension of boundary between equals for the time we are together. Agreement allows us to engage with each other, attempt something, fail safely, and to witness others undertaking these same acts. Agreement is dynamic in its form, unique to the individuals who are present, and includes the contexts that those individuals are bringing to the group. I think improvisation is being used to practice agreement, rather than build community. In a room of others, engaging in being available, listening, accepting, supporting, and expressing allows us to develop agreement between strangers. And it does not ask that we become one thing by the end.

Spolin imagines agreement as an agent to “remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open the way for harmony”\textsuperscript{110}, not unlike what Lingis perceives as the pursuit of the “rationalist”: to build something, reach a goal, close a loop. I see agreement as that which includes dissonance and difference. It is a practice of “attending”\textsuperscript{111} to each other, as Johnstone puts it, despite difference, because it allows for the personal experience as well as the group. Not an end-goal, or a product, but a practice. Agreement asks us to attend to the other, the group, and ourselves without insisting that we share a label or a pursuit. Agreement is the thing that could bridge people together, rather than the thing that we assume already does.

\textsuperscript{108} Spolin, 5.
\textsuperscript{109} Spolin, 5.
\textsuperscript{110} Spolin, 11.
\textsuperscript{111} Johnstone, 13-14.
And so, beliefs about time and space, and even personal memory and experience, become blurred. The spectators are no longer spectators, but instead they become embodied hosts for the experience of others. They are, in essence, performing each other’s experience as “The fourth wall disappears, and the lonely looker-in becomes part of the game, part of the experience, and is welcome!”\textsuperscript{112} This new liminal space engages them (and me) as a participant in a place somewhere between artist and audience. I feel empathy for the experience of being a person I’ve never been, or in a place I’ve never been, because I’ve been invited there through play with a stranger. There is an ethereal in-between where my experience and that of the audience co-exist. We find ourselves reflecting on what we thought we knew about the world and the context in which we operate, in the liminal space that improvisation evokes: a softening towards, and connection to, empathy and vulnerability.

The kind of moment-to-moment immersive experience that performers and spectators create together in an improvised performance setting is in some ways analogous to what Nicholas Bourriaud calls \textit{aura}: “the aura of art no longer lies in the hinter-world represented by the work, nor in form itself, but in front of it, within the temporary collective form that it produces by being put on show”.\textsuperscript{113} Work of this kind troubles common beliefs about time and space and, in doing so, draws each different participant into both a creator-audience and collaborator-performer relationship with the work. Additionally, it engages us in the act of \textit{not knowing}, and allows us to become active participants in the \textit{aura} of the artistic experience: “Every particular artwork is a proposal to live in a shared world, and the work of every artist is a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations...”\textsuperscript{114}, to quote Bourriaud. Despite this analogy, my work here is not rooted in the context of relational aesthetics, as I am also encouraging the creation of performance-based, improvised narratives and stories, which live between fiction and non-fiction, reality and fantasy. The aim of my work is to

\textsuperscript{112} Spolin, 13.
\textsuperscript{113} Nicholas Bourriaud, \textit{Relational Aesthetics}, (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002), 61.
engage the audience as an active participant in the creation of the improvised act along with me. When paired with strangers engaged in the process of not knowing, an exploration into moment-to-moment experiences comes to life. In this sense, our shared performer-spectator goal is “not just asking what this show is about, but what it is that is going to happen in the space: what will take place in the company of the audience, within the course of the work? The question is ‘What’s going on here?’ rather than ‘What is the story here?’” Put another way, have we found ourselves in agreement? If so, anything is possible between us.

THE SCENE

Randal Rogers, in discussing philosopher Roberto Esposito, describes community “As something that must be sought but can never be arrived at, community identifies a process of becoming that must ultimately fail as its status shifts over time to always evade full realization. Yet we must try to fulfill its promise.” This intangibility with community is something I am increasingly growing more comfortable with in my practice, and I share Rogers’ assessment that it is something pursued yet perhaps never realized. There is beauty here. It speaks to the efforts, often fruitless, of organizers and volunteers and family members who desire the completion and realization of their efforts to protect or support loved ones and neighbours. They too are seeking an actualization of a process, one that can never come into being. I want to craft the work in a way that allows the assembled audience to enjoy it as a piece of entertainment and not solely as an academic exercise or community-building exercise. Entertainment (the piece existing as a subjectively enjoyable piece of improvised theatre) matters because it serves a greater goal for me. My practice grew from a healthy community of improvisers around me, and a robust audience who believed in the inherent value of what we were creating. For nearly five years, our company sold almost 300 tickets per show; we packed the house week after week. At the time (1997-2002), there were few

115 Clare Grant, 355.
events or regular opportunities for high school aged humans to gather in one place. Social media did not yet offer a means to connect or search for events, or invite others to shows they may enjoy. General Fools offered a consistent opportunity for young audiences to meet up, partly for the show and partly just to see each other.

The positive by-products of these gatherings cannot be overstated. For the performers, we were offered five years of consistently warm audiences who allowed us to fail, over and over, in our pursuit of quality performances. A scene was created. Will Straw describes scenes as “cultural unities whose precise boundaries are invisible and elastic.”¹¹⁷ A dynamic and living communal organism grew from these shows, a malleable scene that was “able to evoke both the cozy intimacy of community and the fluid cosmopolitanism of urban life.”¹¹⁸ The audiences shared common reference points that were drawn from the shows and interpreted into inside jokes and convergence points in conversation. Spectators created shirts and hats, and smaller improvisation groups of their own named for references in our shows. The space we used (an auditorium at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum) became a place where live performances were a regular occurrence, whereas until we started performing there it was used almost exclusively for museum programming. Many young artists told us that the idea of creating a company and performing in front of each other no longer seemed out of reach, because the support they felt in the room seemed palpable enough that they could tap into it themselves. The relationship between audience and art, which began as a desire for entertainment, evolved into something personal. Clare Grant articulates this relationship: “A transaction takes place in which, if the infrastructure of the exchange has been thoroughly imagined and then established, both parties pass through a liminal phase and into a new understanding of a public exchange.”¹¹⁹

To me, what is important to keep in mind is that the audiences gave the shows a try early on and liked what they experienced, and they came back. Their return to the space, their commitment to the ritual of attendance, encouraged the same in their

¹¹⁸ Straw, 248.
¹¹⁹ Clare Grant, 354.
peers, which allowed a community around the show to grow and flourish. They came for the show, but they came back for the experience. In time, the experience became the source.

My need for a peer group of strangers is driven because of a lack of a ‘scene’ akin to that which helped me develop as a young performer. If I was living in a city with a critical mass of performers and performing houses, I would feel more comfortable letting a project like this function as a one-off experiment, because I would not feel the responsibility to help engender the scene. However, I feel that every offer needs to be one that can be built on towards a greater goal. Each piece should make a contribution to the potential of the scene.

Johnstone asserts, “Those who say ‘Yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say ‘No’ are rewarded by the safety they attain.”¹²⁰ I seek the conditions that make saying Yes easy. The ubiquitous popularity of Johnstone’s own competitive improv format TheatreSports, (over 125 member companies producing shows constantly all over the world¹²¹), especially because of its audience participation component, serves as a keen example of what is possible when saying “Yes” is championed as not just a tactic, but a result. Attendees will see strangers risking themselves by improvising onstage at this project. Possible reactions would be for them to experience fear, repulsion, curiosity, or (ideally) empathy. These are all completely acceptable reactions, but they are unlikely to engender an interest in attending improvisational art in future if they do not also enjoy the experience of being present for the show. If the show is entertaining, joyful to attend, the interest in attending work of this nature in the future is heightened. I want to offer an experience that makes it possible for them to engage in future, that keeps them coming back. In doing so, the group of strangers who are improvising together will have offered the spectators a glimpse into the potential joy and celebration that can come from being vulnerable with

each other in public, and used that energy to encourage others to either do the same or attend a future performance to witness this happening again. They will have contributed to the garden from which the scene can prosper. I think that when we see people trying, and capable of failing, there is an inherent understanding that we are all just trying, and are all capable of failing. This includes me, especially if I am taking my lead from those with whom I have no prior experience in a performance setting. It is in this place of risk and adaptation that I expect my research to bear fruit. I am curious about how much surprise I can bear as a participant while still assisting in the growth of others, and what the corollary experience for the volunteer may be. I am interested to free myself and my audience-strangers to commit to Boal’s notion of trespass: “To free ourselves is to trespass, and to transform. It is through the creation of the new that that which has not yet existed begins to exist. To free yourself is to trespass. To trespass is to exist. To free ourselves is to exist.” Can we see each other while performing? Can we feel validated and empathetic to one another? Can we trespass together?

**CITY**

My standard position on this relationship between my practice and my city has been to connect improvisation to community building. Some of the core tenets of improvisation (listening, acceptance, collaboration) are easy to invoke when discussing that which builds community. In my work with community-based arts practices like *Dream Agreement*, it feels like we’re trying to get at something inherent within the human condition that aligns between improv and an interconnectedness that helps engender community, between social acts and creative offers. At the *Improvisation and Mobility Conference*, held at the University of Regina in May 2017, keynote speaker George Lipsitz asked us to instead consider this work as “arts-based community

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making."\textsuperscript{123}

My ultimate goal (and ultimate joy) when engaging in improvisation is for the creative endeavour to be active and practical and in-motion. To be shifting and changing and \textit{doing} something. Gaining access to the amazing minds and vocabularies of thinkers and theorists was opening my eyes to the worlds of possibility improvisational practice offers, but I could not turn off the intangible restlessness that came with not being able to grab it, try it, test it physically. I need to know through doing. To be experiencing, as Tim Etchells would articulate it, \textit{investment}: “To be bound up with what you’re doing, to be at risk in it, to be exposed by it. As performers we recognize but cannot always control these moments–they happen, perhaps, in spite of us”\textsuperscript{124}.

I am most fulfilled in improvisation when I am wrapped up in what’s happening now, and simultaneously aware of what I’m risking and the risks of others. I want the exposure and the moment-to-moment tension that accompanies being left open to what might happen next. Etchells writes that even the simplest action can mean a performer may “be at risk, ‘left open’, leaving me open too...not representing something but going through something”\textsuperscript{125}. This experiential aspect of live performance is at the root of improvisation, in that the experience is (ideally) being shared by both artist and audience. They are collaborators in the work, both left open by the other’s presence.

I think improvisation’s capacity to nurture creativity and \textit{agreement} lies not in what it does, but what it could allow individuals the potential to do. That is, to be confronted with difference, to see the stranger and offer the stranger back. Regina, as a city, exists as an odd in-between space (figuratively and geographically) in Canada: Too big to be a town, not big enough to be \textit{actual} city, it affords enough opportunity to offer

\textsuperscript{123} George Lipsitz, “The Creative, Political, and Academic Potential for Improv to Mobilize Communities” (presentation, Improvisation and Mobility Conference, Regina, SK, May 13, 2017).
\textsuperscript{125} Etchells, 49.
a glimpse of what modern urban living could be like, but not enough opportunity or perspective to be considered savvy and functional. Outsiders ask “why we would want to live in this place between other “real” and “true” places—in the gap, as the joke goes, between Calgary and Winnipeg, to be looked down on, literally, as one flies over”

The practice of improvisation can offer something unique in this place. Regina is not seen as part of a national community of true cities. Regardless, as a member of the city, improvisation has taught me to embrace and love Regina’s faults and frailties. It disrupts my structures and impulses; it does not allow me to build whatever I want when I want. My impulses are the stranger to my City, and I am learning to see those obstacles as the other community.

I think that improvisation offers language and entry points for all individuals to enter into relationship with the city in this way, or with the vulnerabilities of the other individuals here. Not necessarily to create something together, but to be aware of the existence of others. This may be the very reason why many artists leave this place and seek greener pastures in more dynamic art scenes: to feel included. Rather than engaging in a desperate attempt to be acknowledged and included as “rationalists”, I feel that the humans in this city can achieve this by engaging improvisation as the field on which to collide with the strangers already in their midst; to be in Agreement together.

Etchells asks, of performance: “Will I carry this event with me tomorrow? Will it haunt me? Will it change you, will it change me, will it change things?” I can’t articulate what change denotes other than from a personal position, it is too big and means everything and nothing. However, over time I have felt changed by improvisation, by its ability to teach me how to be open, stay open, be judged and disrupted and provoked. And it has made me love my city. It has the inherent tools to do the same for others, whether in performance or just as a schematic of core skills to engender communication and agreement. Improvisation and Regina offer each other something the other does not inherently have. The city offers up the individuals who

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126 Rogers, xii.
127 Etchells, 49.
can be seen for who they are, and improvisation offers back the method to disrupt (and accept) what is there: “Community forms when one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one. One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one’s forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice. Community forms in a movement by which one exposes oneself to the other, to forces and powers outside oneself, to death and to the others who die.”

128 Lingis, 12.
CONCLUSION

“It teaches us to make ‘a way’ out of ‘no way’ by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances. Improvisers work with the tools they have in the arenas that are open to them, in order to imbue the world with the possibility of making things right again.”

The act of improvising has much to offer in regard to my understanding of human interactions, how I listen and react to others in a place like this. I think the act of improvising puts me in state of embodying relationship with others, and can teach me how to listen, to be vulnerable (safely), and to engender agreement with others.

Academics and practitioners of improvisation often speak of its ability to draw connections between the act onstage and the human context within which it is taking place. In most improvised performance (dance, theatre, music, or an interdisciplinary practice), there are seeds of inspiration that are drawn from the audience present or some intangible stimuli that is discovered in the moment. They may solicit words or phrases of inspiration from the audience, or adapt and reshape their movements and gestures based on reaction from fellow performers or spectators. In all improvisation, though, there is an ongoing desire to present aesthetically-crafted creation that is rooted in what this moment is offering to the process; to be, in essence, a conduit for present experience, or life as art. The feedback loop of spectator to performer is one familiar to improvised performance.

For me, the key to this relationship between spectator and artist is the vulnerability of not knowing. The ability to find comfort in the unknown allows me to cast my gaze wider towards the questions and insights that might occur, rather than the ones I know will occur if I follow a path that has always worked or that others have told me to pursue. Chris Johnston writes that the medium of improvisation “has the capacity to show us to ourselves. It can reveal the shadows, surprising us horribly...it can trip us 129

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129 Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, xii.
up and demonstrate that we’re not who we thought we were. And if we’re honest enough in that moment, we can get to appreciate that we don’t know the world or ourselves that well. This is the moment of potential research. At that moment, the old knowledge is found lacking. There is another self to be seen, and improvisation is the conjuring exercise.”

Boal, through his use of theatre games and ensemble training, worked to engage and energize the spirit of action amongst his peers. Boal saw that theatre often functioned as entertainment, but only because it has shifted away from its intention as an art form for all humans to enact and participate in. “The theatrical profession, which belongs to a few, should not hide the existence and permanence of the theatrical vocation, which belongs to all. Theatre is a vocation for all human beings: it is the true nature of humanity.”

Boal’s theory and process makes use of “aesthetic games, image techniques and special improvisations whose goal is to safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation, by turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions.”

John Cage pinpoints a similar, though reversed, relationship between art and the human condition: “Theatre takes place all the time wherever one is and art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case.”

A standard performance in Boal’s form allows the audience to voice their problems, agonies, and critiques with their lives or communities, and to then play their experiences out onstage with improvisers. Fellow spectators may provide solutions or alternate readings of the scenario, and the scene will be replayed with a myriad of tangents and tactics. What is key to the success of this theatrical model is the willingness of the artists and audience to avail themselves of their vulnerabilities, and to risk laying bare their insecurities before their peers in the room. To be in the act of not knowing, and to be open to the possibility that something unexpected, and potentially

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132 Boal, 14-15.
disruptive to their current frame of reference, may occur. “Theatre denotes conflict, contradiction, confrontation, defiance. And the dramatic action lies in the variation and movement of this equation, of these opposing forces.”\textsuperscript{134} The borders between individual and society are being manipulated and bent through the relationship between player and audience. At some point, though, these two groups become the same thing: The performer receiving direction and insight from the audience, and the audience enacting performance to more deeply understand their place as active spectator, to create what Boal would call an \textit{aesthetic space}. “The aesthetic space thus comes into being because the combined attention of a whole audience converges upon it; it attracts, centripetally, like a black hole...it is abetted by the simple presence of actors and spectators who connive in their acceptance of the theatrical codes and their participation in the celebration of the show.”\textsuperscript{135}

I intend to engage with other humans in the creation of this \textit{aesthetic space}, through the creation of performance that allows for \textit{agreement} between strangers. In the past, I would access this relationship by embedding myself with trained improvisers whose experience allows them to make creative and inspiring choices that I cannot expect. I would default to performing with, and teaching for, people who want to see and learn improvisation. That comfort could, I fear, turn to artistic lethargy and disconnection. These new lines of inquiry, however, engender in me an enlivened sense of how to use my dual practices of theatre and education to both make art and facilitate the space for others to do the same. The surprise and joy of my experiences teaching with \textit{Dream Agreement}, my cohort at the University of Regina, and performing with community members have opened new channels of inspiration and intrigue, and this Masters project has highlighted and tested my limitations and abilities as an improviser and facilitator.

\textsuperscript{134} Augusto Boal, \textit{The Rainbow of Desire} (London: Routledge, 1995), 16.
\textsuperscript{135} Boal, 19.


Johanna Bundon (left) and Jon Neher (right), mapping out possible methods of moving bodies in the space - February 8, 2017
Above: Rehearsal codes being articulated through shapes (Feb 8, 2017)
Below: Early stage notes on an Opening Address (April 26, 2017)
Above: Questions asked of studio session volunteers (April 27, 2017)
Below: Johanna and Jon working through a rehearsal plan (April 26, 2017)
Above: A list of simple ways to engage storytelling (April 26, 2017)
Below: Collection of teaching phrases we commonly use (May 3, 2017)
Above: Preparing the space for a studio rehearsal (May 9, 2017)
APPENDIX B | PROJECT SKETCHBOOK NOTES

![Sketchbook Notes Image]

- **Draft #1**
  - Agent 1
  - Unit + 3rd Lead
  - Organ Payment

- **Clock/Timer**
  - Clock: 4
  - Clock: 5

- **Speakers**
  - Speaker 1
  - Speaker 2
  - Speaker 3

- **Microphones**
  - Microphone 1
  - Microphone 2

- **Space**
  - Unknown
  - Circle

- **Boundaries in the Space**
  - Boundaries 1
  - Boundaries 2

The right amount of novelty.
Movement

Stack the participation

River
Space
Form

Relate

3 + 4 = 5
mount
- talk about anything
- I felt nervous
  + a bit unsure

- I am a human
- 2
- and now a friend
- again also can go.

- what big got nintendo
  have to argue when angry
  trust.

(see. closed)

THANKS

1 -> 2

I wish it is too much to put it.
I think it needs a good time
Anthony Brown Block

[1.30 min]
STRUCTURE - MAY. 3/17

1. Intro (Jayden) 3

2. Warmup (Joh, Jon, Jay) 12

3. Improv is Easy Trust
   Initiation Choice 8

4. Debrief/Breakdown
   - terms & conditions
   - what just happened?

5. Agreement Awareness 20-25
   - Support
   - React

6. Closing/Exit/Pairs Reflection 5 Listening
   - Was there a moment that you were curious about? - supported
   - Frustrated

7. Q + A
A drawn figure, used by Johanna Bundon and Jayden Pfeifer (*Dream Agreement*), to articulate the relationships between Self, The Other, and The Group.