

Micetro

IMPRO

In the foyer of the Loose Moose Theatre Company is a banner saying "IF YOU'RE BORED IT'S OUR FAULT."

I introduced *Micetro* in the Summer of '95 in the first half of *Beginners'-Night* (with *Theatresports* after the interval), but within a few weeks it took over the entire show. At present we play it every Friday between eight-o'clock and ten-o'clock, and it's already spreading to other cities.

Micetro is an elimination game in which fifteen or sixteen players compete against each other until we end up with one lone '*Micetro*'. It's like a game in which model steeple-chasers are gradually moved across a board, their number constantly diminishing.

Two directors control the performance, and are responsible for the quality. This allows us to train players while they're front of the public, and lessen their fear of failure by blaming the directors when scenes crash and burn. *Micetro* suffers if the Directors *don't* interfere, because then the responsibility for failure is handed back to the actors. Of course, if a scene is wonderful, the directors should just let it happen (because then there's no blame to accept).

A performance of *Micetro* becomes more interesting as the game continues (the quality of the scenes goes up, and the interest in who will win increases). Players feel 'safe', and the feed-back from the audience, and the mid-scene corrections from the directors are far more effective than notes given at

the end of the show. And, of course, if the directors are competent (and determined to avoid silliness) they won't set up the sort of stupid and unplayable scenes that you get when you base the work on audience suggestions.

Origins Of *Micetro*

At a four-day Summer school I gave in Utrecht, tickets had been sold for a public performance by the students. I think the idea was that they should play *Theatresports*, but *Theatresports* is one of the most difficult Impro-forms. Twenty-six students of mixed ability were eager to take part. I didn't want to say to say things like: "You're good, I'll use you!" or "You're hopeless!" On the other hand, why should the audience have to watch incompetent improvisers for an entire show? I needed a way to gradually eliminate the weaker players, and this had to be partly a matter of luck (so that those who were rejected wouldn't take it personally).

I decided to call them up in groups, and set them 'challenges' and let the audience score the results from ONE to FIVE. Each player in a scene would receive the same number of points, and this would automatically create a 'injustice' because if one player became inspired, his/her colleagues would still get the same number of points. The opposite could also happen (i.e., a great player could be demolished by the incompetence of his/her partners), but on average, the better players would be gathering the most points.

A 'round' would end when every player had taken part in a scene, and I would soon start to eliminate the players with the fewest points until one lone *Micetro* would emerge as the winner.

This first attempt at *Micetro* lasted about an hour and a half, and the audience seemed happy, but most of them were the performers' friends. I had no idea I'd invented anything of value, until I tried it at Loose Moose.

The Scoreboard And 'Pinnies'

Spectators who are first timers have their curiosity aroused by a darkish board at the 'audience left' side of the stage. It says *Keith Johnstone's Micetro* across the top and it has sixteen horizontal grooves. These grooves are numbered from one to fifteen (allowing us to sometimes add an extra player who can be 'Zero'). At the left of each numbered groove is a oblong name-card, each with a player's name (we don't number the zero groove). These name cards will be moved to the right during the game according to how many points each player has earned.

The players wear numbered 'pinnies' (with the same number as the groove his or her name card is in). These allow the spectators to glance at the score-board and see instantly who is peril and who is secure. It helps if the directors refer to the players by number, rather than by name. Pinnies can be obtained from Sport's shops and are the ones you've seen athletes wearing. Ours are dark blue with white numbers except for one red pinny which is worn by last week's winner.

The Scorekeeper

The Score-keeper - who is friendly, but who does not behave as a comedian - welcomes the audience to the Theatre, and introduces the players. All fifteen cross the stage en-masse to congregate on the audience's left (in the three-foot wide moat that runs around our stage). This allows them to sink into relative obscurity (we don't light them).

The Scorekeeper explains to the audience that each player's name-card will be moved to the right, according to how many points (from one to five) that the audience award the scene that they are in.

He/she then introduces the two Directors (who are invisible to the bulk of the audience - they took their place in the moat at the front of the stage before the game started). In a more traditional Theatre they would be sitting in the centre of the front row of the audience. The Score-keeper explains that they

will be setting 'scenes' for the players and that the audience will decide what each scene was worth. He/she then draws attention to a red-light placed high up above the score-board, and explains that if it flashes it means that the 'teckies' who are watching the show are bored with the directors work, and are about to lower the lights.

The Score-keeper then displays a five dollar bill in a frame - handling it as though it was very precious - and explains that we'll be eliminating the players with the lowest scores, and that the last remaining player will get this magnificent prize. He/she (usually a woman because women tend to be more modest) then rehearses the audience in scoring the scenes, for example:

"If a scene was really horrible, utterly trivial and uninspired, you would applaud for a ONE. On the count of three - let's hear you!. Was that scene worth a one? One, Two, Three...."

The audience clap.¹

But let's say it was a wonderful scene, one that might stay with you forever. Would you give it a One?"

Silence - or maybe some 'wit' will clap.

"Was it worth a Two?"

The audience remains silent until "Was it worth a five" when they burst into applause.

It's important that the spectators are made to clap for ONE, because this gives them permission to be cruel. It's typical of Loose Moose that we want bad scenes to be given low scores.

The score-keeper then retires to his/her inconspicuous seat (only the performance area is lit by direct light).

Micetro Is Both Fair and Unfair

Micetro is unfair, in that all the players in a scene get the same number of points. A brilliant player can be in a scene that is ruined by an inferior player who keeps making stupid suggestions, and an inferior player can ride to glory on the skirts of a superb player; but the better players tend to be at the

end of the match, and as we never eliminate players after round one, each player has at least two scenes in which to 'make good'. Perhaps we could 'seed' the more experienced players - to prevent them being ejected in the group scenes - although I've never tried this.

But *Micetro* is fair in other ways. For example, the players are chosen at random, and this prevents the experienced players from ganging up against the inexperienced, or the men ganging up against the women. Women players get exactly the same crack of the whip as the men, which is not true of all Impro forms. About a third of Moosers are now women, and I think *Micetro* is partly responsible (many Impro groups have no women at all).

The Directors have two metal containers in front of them. One contains fifteen numbered metal discs, and a director picks two, three, or more of these, at random (unless just one player is left). For example:

"Can I have EIGHT, THREE, and FOURTEEN please."

The three coins clang noisily into the second bowl while players eight, three and fourteen leap onto the stage and wait to be given a situation to act out, or a game to play, or maybe they're just told to start something.

Micetro is an efficient teaching method. Players can be complete novices, and whereas in *Theatresports* their work would be doomed to instant failure, in *Micetro* the directors can interrupt to remove errors. Directors can restart scenes, can alter the characters, can add 'tilts' into the narrative, and so on, but they should not interrupt where they are not needed.

The Directors

Two Directors alternate in setting up the scenes - it's agonizing to be the sole director of a *Micetro* performance - but they are not in competition with each other, and they need to respect each other because they have to be able to crash into each other's scenes without causing offense. Often it's difficult for them to remember who set the last scene since

both were fighting to make it work. Of course, if a scene is going wonderfully, why intrude? And as the quality rises - towards the end of the game - directors intrude less and less.

Sometime the players will be asked to start a scene by scrubbing the floor, or by lying in bed, or by sitting on a sofa. Often a director will whisper to the other mid-scene 'Do you have anything', and if the answer is 'No' he/she will take over. At other times they'll both be directing. Sometimes they'll ask the players 'Do you have anything?' - especially in solo scenes.

The Directors determine how many players should be eliminated - if any - after each round, and in special cases they can say: "There'll be no elimination this round". After all, if there are twelve players on the board and just one of them is one point ahead, an elimination would end the game. Manipulating the eliminations allows us to end the game at approximately the time agreed (we start a little after eight-o'clock, and try desperately to be over by ten).

Playing The Game

One of the Directors begins the game by clanking a handful of coins at random into the empty bowl while shouting out their numbers. He/she might ask the players have an 'adventure in a forest' while playing the 'one-voice' game. If the scene gets nowhere, he/she may shout 'See a light!', or 'Shoot something!', or 'Realize that you're lost!'.

We start with scenes that involve handfuls of performers because we don't eliminate at the end of the first round, and yet we're in a hurry to get to the eliminations, because, whatever the quality of the scenes, the game itself doesn't get exciting until only about half the players remain. As the rounds become shorter (i.e. there are fewer players), the directors begin to set more two-player scenes. When their scene is over, the players go to the opposite (score-board) side of the stage, and the score-keeper comes centre and asks the audience:

"Was that scene worth a ONE?"

Probably there'll be silence unless the scene was really bad.

"Was it worth a TWO?"

Perhaps there'll be a scattering of hand-claps.

"Was it worth a THREE?"

Most of the audience applaud.

"Was it worth a FOUR?"

A meager scattering of hand claps - or perhaps none.

"That was a THREE," says the score-keeper, returning to the score-board.

Vertical lines are painted at intervals across the grooves and the score-keeper moves the card of every player who was in the scene THREE spaces along to the right.

The round continues, and some players are soon lagging behind the others. After each round, i.e. when all the players have crossed to sit to the audience's right, they rush back across the stage en masse. In our two-hour game (with fifteen minute interval), eliminations almost always commence after round two and continue after each subsequent round. Eliminees are thanked and applauded, as they cross the stage to exit at the audience's right, waving happily (all the players will have dashed back while the eliminations were being decided). As I type this it occurs to me that eliminees might remove their pinnies and hang them on hooks below the score-board as they pass it.)

Waiting at the other side of the stage after your scene is completed allows the spectators to see exactly how each round is proceeding. And they like it when just one player remains (because they identify strongly with any player who has to do a solo scene).

Players who are not part of a scene will often help the work on-stage (we're friendly people) - by providing scenography perhaps. Sometimes a player will become part of a scene. For example, if two players are 'getting married' maybe an unchosen player will rush in to become the Minister. If an unchosen player has entered from the audience's right, and has played a role - and hasn't been thrown off by the directors - he/she may be asked: "Do you want to be considered as part of

that scene?" This decision must be made before the audience vote, creating an interesting moment when such unchosen players try to guess the audience's response. If their answer is 'Yes!' they cross to the audience's right and get whatever score the scene receives. If they say 'No!', they return to the moat at the audience's left, i.e., into the pool of players untried in that particular round.

Every large group of improvisers includes people who believe themselves better than they really are - perhaps because of their seniority in the group. These dive into *Micetro* with great enthusiasm, but if they never get past the interval, it becomes obvious that the audience isn't impressed with them. Some stop playing, but most reassess themselves. Once they have a humbler attitude they're likely to improve.

Ending The Game

When the Judges have declared a *Micetro*, i.e. when only one player remains, he/she and the Scorekeeper come centre, and the Scorekeeper says:

"All those who think that our *Micetro* does not deserve this five-dollar bill, clap now!"

A few 'wits' clap.

"But, if you believes that our *Micetro* has really earned this five-dollar bill, clap now!"

The whole audience clap, and cheer, and the *Micetro* is hoisted on the other players shoulders and carried off in triumph while triumphant music plays, and bubbles rise around him, and our mirror-ball rotates, and our follow-spot follows him/her out. Then the *Micetro* and the scorekeeper bid the spectators farewell at the entrance of the Theatre.

What The Players Learn

I would have invented *Micetro* many years ago if I'd understood that the audience would so often be in agreement about the quality of a scene. Having spent my youth at London's Royal Court Theatre where we were awash in controversy, I would

have assumed that the audience response would be diffuse, that some people would be clapping for ONE and some for FIVE, but *Gorilla Theatre* - in which the audience award bananas or forfeits according to their opinion of a scene - taught me that the bulk of any real audience will almost always be of one mind (unless they're academics). If a scene is wonderful, a few people may be clapping for FOUR but almost the entire audience will clap for FIVE. And if a scene is dreadful the audience will applaud for ONE, and with just a smattering of applause - if any - for TWO.

Our audiences tends to get hysterical towards the end of the evening, and to give scene after scene a high score (because they admire the players and want to go on watching them), but before that ecstasy is reached their judgments are usually spot-on. I've always argued that the knowledge is in the spectators - and been despised for holding such views - so it's pleasant to have it borne out week after week. ²

Micetro improves the players' technique rather quickly, because the feedback from a united audience is so very convincing. The average public improviser judges everything by whether he/she gets a laugh, but our audiences will laugh and then award a low score - because even though they were amused they still felt that the scene was a waste of time. Sometimes a scene with hardly any laughter, but which moved the audience emotionally, will get a FIVE. I've always argued that the laughter is a Will-o-the-Wisp, and that audience's don't want players to kill stories for the sake of an easy gag and *Micetro* confirms this opinion. The players learn what the audience wants (it's easy in any Impro class to demonstrate that the average improviser has not the slightest idea what the audience wants).

There are now players who earn perfect scores, i.e. every scene they were in was awarded a five (in spite of the built-in unfairness). The last *Micetro* I saw - a couple of weeks ago - had a *Micetro* with a perfect score, and the two runners-up were just one point behind him. Such examples helps to steer

beginners away from random stupidities and towards emotional involvement.

In Brief

I wrote the bulk of this essay over a year ago, but it's now clear that *Micetro*:

1. Encourages solo scenes (these are almost unknown in public improvisation except in the work of my English Group *The Theatre machine*.)

2. Encourages pathos. Anything that makes the audience a little weepy gets a high score.

3. Encourages story-telling - the audience are reluctant to give high scores for goofing-off unless it's absolutely inspired, but they tend to give FIVES to scenes that have a competent structure.

*****K.J.Mar97

1..If the audience cheer, the score-keeper should stop them, saying that cheers don't count (ten people cheering can have more effect than fifty applauding).

2 Any intelligent director watches the audience on the first night, knowing that when it reads it's programmes, or unwraps chocolates, something is wrong. When they are raptly attentive, you know the work is good. My point is that the audience know when to unwrap chocolates and when to pay rapt attention. Therefore they have more knowledge than the directors who are only guessing. Lenny Bruce understood this. He said that taken individually each member of the audience might be a tasteless idiot, but when they react *en masse* the audience is a genius.