

# KEITH JOHNSTONE



**THEATRESPORTS &  
LIFEGAME NEWSLETTER  
NEWS 6**

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KEITH JOHNSTONE'S

# THEATRESPORTS™

AND

## LIFE-GAME® NEWSLETTER

(Motto: Don't Be Prepared)

# NEWS SIX

## FUN WITH TILTING

(OR: FAST-FOOD KEITH)

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## Unlicensed Groups

When I invented Theatresports I took steps to protect the name. The royalties were a dollar per performance, (as opposed to a normal 'commercial' royalty which would be ten or fifteen percent of the 'take'), but it became necessary to raise them to three per cent because of the legal costs. Legal actions are to be avoided whenever possible, but lawyers are often necessary, and are very expensive. Almost all the Theatresports' money is spent on lawyers (none goes to me, and none to the operation of Loose Moose).

Some time ago Dennis Cahill asked a few groups if I should put Theatresports into the public domain. They were adamantly opposed to this idea, yet if this happened we could still have a Theatresports organization, but a more efficient one because there would be money to form an institute and to give scholarships.

If groups don't wish Theatresports to be in the public domain we have to consider the relationship between licensed and unlicensed groups. Groups who wish to play unlicensed groups usually contact the Moose for advice: we tell them that we think they should not play them, but that we won't veto this - it's not in my nature to veto anything. If you are a licensed group, it's up to you whom you play, because you should be in charge in your area, but I ask you to consider whether it's really in everyone's interest to play groups who refuse to be licensed?

On this point, Ed Alter (San Francisco) drew my attention to Mark Twain's account of Mississippi river boat pilots and their difficulties in forming an association. I recommend this to you also.

*It makes no sense that I and other people are spending hours and hours in meetings with lawyers, etc. in an attempt to keep Theatresports out of the*

*public domain if unlicensed groups get the same treatment as licensed groups - this is why I felt obliged to turn down an invitation to teach at the L.A. tournament.*

### ANY THOUGHTS?

#### The Bell

You can encourage positive attitudes by hitting a bell when a negative idea is used destructively (or gratuitously). The negative idea is then reversed:

"How was work?"

"Awful..."

DING

"Work was great!"

"What happened?"

"Nothing special..."

DING

"My new boss is really attractive."

"Did she come on to you?"

"Not yet..."

DING

"She was all over me!"

The bell makes it clear that such improvisers are 'driving with the brakes on'. The correction is so immediate that it's extremely effective, and even the knowledge that the 'bell' is in operation, makes for more positive interactions. The idea came from a tournament in Orlando.

("But Keith, you've missed the point: teams don't use it to fight negative ideas; they use it to be funny!")

"How do you mean?"

"You say: 'I'll get in the car,' and then the bell rings so you say: 'I won't get in the car' and the audience laughs."

"But then nothing happens! And there'll be a laugh anyway. If there's a choice, why not be positive? Then you'll cheer everyone up and you'll seem a nicer person. The bell is a wonderful training device - why waste it on trivia?"

## DON'T BE PREPARED

*This is the name of Keith's new book. Here is an extract:*

### Types Of Improviser

Bridgemasters select some point in the future, and delay reaching it (i.e. they build a 'bridge' to a destination that's only one stride away).

Buildozers crash uncaringly or unknowingly through other players' ideas and scenes.

Directors try to make all the decisions (wrestling for the paddle as the canoe drifts over Niagara). They order other improvisers about, they send them offstage, they criticize them mid-performance, and so on. This is O.K. if they're doing it from the bench in Gorilla Theatre, but it's unnerving if it happens in ordinary improvs.

Dullards make 'negative' choices.

Gagsters go for the laugh. If the audience is laughing they think everything is O.K.

Gilbsters resist any emotional involvement; this is typical of comedians (comedy treats terrible things in a heartless manner). They are often skilled at pushing the action forwards, but they remain detached.

Hysterics work in a state of high excitement. They are difficult to control because they talk incessantly, even if this means repeating the same phrase.

Passengers won't kill ideas, but nor will they 'drive' a scene forwards. Being a 'passenger' is a skill that every improviser should master - because sometimes it's fine to just float along.

Planners look ahead so as not to make mistakes. This makes them difficult to work with. Buddha says that planners are like dry reeds at the side of a lake - you try to grasp them but they crumble to dust in your hand because only the husk of them is there.

Shiners (e.g. 'Toad' from the *Wind In*

*The Willows*) want all the glory. Asked how the show went, they'll tell you how it went for them. If three actors stand in a line, parallel to the audience, the shiner will be in the middle. If they march off-stage the shiner will be in the lead. As they exit the shiner will be at the end of the line, waving to the audience - I've no idea how they achieve this.

Gagsters, Gilbsters, and Passengers, can be useful, but Bridgemasters, Buildozers, Directors, Dullards, Hysterics, Planners, and Shiners are an encumbrance.

Improvisers should not be at any of these extremes, but even good improvisers revert to 'type' when they get rattled.

### Being There (teaching acting)

My first students seemed quite normal until I asked them to improvise; many of them would then become 'over-strong', banging violently on tables, or patting their partners' shoulders with flat hands that did not yield to the contours.

If I walked into a scene they often failed to observe me, and their muscles felt as hard as wood. A player who tried to join a scene in progress was always likely to be ignored.

One day a genuine plumber entered a scene.

"Excuse me Guv', but where's the leak?"

They didn't hear him, so he moved closer.

"The leak! Someone phoned about a leak!"

He began to 'spell it out', miming for them, and speaking loudly:

"A, tap! You know! Leaking! Can't switch off!"

They might as well have been animated statues. Then he heard us giggling in the darkened auditorium, and we said "try the basement."

Afterwards I said: "Why didn't you acknowledge the



plumber?"

"What plumber?"

They were pleased that they hadn't seen him. One began explaining Stanislawsky's 'circles of concentration'.

"Look!" I said: "If you had really been canoeing down the crocodile-infested Zambesi, and a plumber had stroked across the water to ask you where the leak was - wouldn't you have noticed him?"

They opined that this might have caught their attention, but that 'real acting' meant being absorbed to the exclusion of all else.

From then on I began interrupting improvisers mid-scene to ask them what they were doing. To my astonishment, they always used the past or the future tense. "I just came in the door," they'd say, or: "I'm about to sit on the sofa," no one ever said: "I'm wondering where to sit!"

I realized that my own mind moved into the past or the future whenever I felt insecure ("Should I do this? Ought I to have done that?"), and that when I seemed to be 'listening' to someone I might actually be thinking up something 'clever' to say. My students were showing an extreme version of this behaviour.

I tested my theory by making them clamber over heaps of furniture while they played rehearsed scenes, hoping that this would force them to attend to what was happening (or risk breaking a leg), but they separated: 'moving' from 'speaking'; an actor would climb onto a wardrobe, say a line, descend onto a chair and say another line.

"Talk while you move!" I shouted: "Try to catch up with, or escape from your partner. Stay on the furniture, but never speak when you're not moving!"

The improvement was astonishing. They lost their 'stage' voices, and they interacted 'naturally', as if unobserved. The improvement was obvious to everyone, and thrilling for the performers.

Something similar happened when I made them improvise while they repeated nursery rhymes to themselves, or packed suitcases. Distracting their 'egos' allowed them to function 'naturally'.

I looked inward, and concluded that 'searching into the future or the past', was primarily a verbal activity. This led me to invent dozens of games that were designed to interfere with verbalization, many of which I later rejected, although they still crop up occasionally.

### Pink Shoe Of 'Perdition'

When a scene 'really sucks', some groups throw a pink shoe onto the stage (it isn't really called the 'pink shoe of perdition' but it's got some name like that), and then the audience is asked to stand up and sing "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" as in the Hallelujah chorus.

This takes away some of the pain and awareness of failure, because once the audience has sung Hallelujah, the failure is forgotten. The appeal of this is obvious, but I want failure to be exploited, just as it's exploited in sport. It's the shots at goal that don't quite succeed that make soccer exciting.

The pink-shoe removes the pain of the Warnings For Boring, and it limits their number. A ten-minute game earned about ten Warnings in the first show that our Summer School watched (startling the students because they were afraid that the rest of the performance might continue in the same way), and it would have been absurd to be singing the Hallelujah Chorus once every sixty seconds.

It's also a powerful signal that categorizes Theatresports as 'light entertainment', and tells the spectators to expect nothing but trivia. Now it's true that we are living and dying in a culture where even the news-readers are being told to make inconsequential chat - but I don't see why the whole of

Theatresports has to be submerged in the same universal mindlessness. Don't misunderstand me: I like elegant mindlessness, just as I like wallpaper, but I like other things as well.

Rather than dismiss the pink-shoe as a stupidity (on about the same level as inviting the audience to throw wet sponges at the performers), why not reserve it for any scene that's awarded FIVES? Of course this presumes that you aren't using celebrity Judges who usually give every scene a high score.

## DON'T BE PREPARED

(THEATRESPORTS FOR TEACHERS)

BY:

KEITH JOHNSTONE

### INCLUDES:

- Why teach Theatresports?
- Practical elements (e.g. rules, getting suggestions, ending scenes, etc.)
- How to teach beginners.
- Trouble with feedback.
- Games and teaching formats for Accepting, Status Transactions, etc.
- Telling Stories/Narrative Games (platforms, Heroes, Audience expectations, breaking-routines, etc.
- Students attitudes, defense mechanisms, types of improvisers.

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## FUN WITH TILTING

(OR: FAST-FOOD KEITH)

"Tilting" is only a few weeks old, but it's coincided with the Summer School, and as the students will be taking it back to their groups I'll explain exactly what 'tilting' is, and how to do it, and why to do it: the results can be spectacular, but if you don't get it right nothing will happen (I'll publish a revised version of this essay when we're all more experienced).

### Something rotten...?

I'm watching a Theatresports match in which there isn't one scene that I'd want to remember. If anything interesting happens someone will immediately say or do something so stupid that I don't care any more.

A team has just finished 'shoveling manure' (they had asked the audience for 'a barnyard chore'), and now the other team is asking for 'a household implement to commit suicide with'. These teams love trivia - after all it doesn't 'cost' them anything - but I long to hear someone say: "This scene is rubbish, do you mind if we start again?". But fat chance.

We've seen the suicide, and now a player is asking for a 'kitchen activity' (another invitation to trivialize the work).

"Making an omelet!"

"Great!" he says, putting on a cook's hat and pretending to be in a kitchen.

"Do we need eggs to make an omelet?" he says, believing that it's 'uncreative' to be obvious (as does his partner):

"No," she says: "You just rub tobacco and cheese together!"

His heart sinks (and she doesn't look too happy), but he accepts this lunacy. A Warning For Boring would be a mercy, but the Judges are sitting there like stuffed owls (there are no Hell Judges in



this performance!.

These improvisers applaud, and whoop, and leap about, and cheer each other - some have learned to whistle at excruciating intensity - but there's no calm, no 'space', no relaxation, and after this panic-stricken first half, things are likely to be worse, with the players too 'beat-up' to maintain the phony grins any more. We live in a society that's awash with trivia (great for the government), and the audience may not be expecting much, but can anyone be really happy when the players are fighting for control, and 'breaking-promises', and complicating everything, and accepting stupid suggestions, and censoring anything that anyone might care about?

Some spectators come for the jokes, and the 'witty', but what about those who come once and never come back? Unless *Theatresports* is more than an agreeable waste of time it may soon be just another fad - that 'stupid thing Mummy and Daddy did' - so I'll explain why public improvisation is so preoccupied with trivia, and then I'll offer 'tiding' as a way to make some rapid improvements.

### Inviting Disaster

First, I'll review some of the objections to 'Getting Suggestions' that I voiced at length in *News Three*.

1. Many are disgusting:  
"Give me an activity!"  
"Picking scabs!"
2. Others are openly hostile:  
"Give me an activity!"  
"Leave!"
3. Most are just attempts to be funny:  
"Who am I?"  
"Joan of Arc!"  
"And what am I doing?"  
"You're a talk-show host!"
4. The spectators may laugh, but that doesn't mean that they want to sit there while stupid suggestions are

acted out.

5. Even when suggestions are well meant, why should we expect the audience to be more skilled at setting-up scenes than we are?
6. Players see 'getting suggestions' as 'taking risks', but the same suggestions are shouted again and again, and as the players can always hear what they want to hear, where's the risk?  
*Theatresports* (and other forms of public improvisation) would be more enjoyable if there was a limit of three suggestions per performance.'

### Breaking Promises

It's unkind to be offered something interesting, and then have it snatched it away, but this kept happening at a performance that I attended recently:

"Give us a location!"  
"On another planet!"

Two 'astronauts' landed on a strange planet. We could legitimately have anticipated all kinds of adventures, but not that one player would gasp in horror and say:

"Oh no! It's my Mother!"

The planet could have been making them hallucinate, but no attempt was made to justify this lunacy. 'It's my Mother' got a laugh (as it was intended to), but the scene was ruined.

"Give us a country to base a scene on!"  
"Brazil!"

The average North American can't point out Brazil on a globe, but we might have anticipated a scene about 'Carnival', or about the rain-forest, or about the monstrous disparity between poverty and riches. What we got was a scene in which five players discussed uprooting Brazil and dumping it in the middle of the U.S.A.

"Where are we?"  
"At the top of a mountain!"  
This suggests climbers, Zen-

masters, encounters with bears, etc., but the improvisers discussed placing an international airport there. This absurd idea couldn't possibly have been in the mind of any of the spectators, but that's why they chose it.

"Where are we?"  
"In a desert!"

This may have been a comment on the poverty of the previous material, but a 'desert' suggests camels, or thirst, or Arab hospitality, or groves in the sand that send messages into space, and yet we were given a scene about paper-clips.

A 'shepherd' arrived, looking for his sheep. He should have found them, or we should have discovered what happened to them, but the scene became a science-fiction stupidity that had nothing to do with sheep. It was mostly about shit and urine (perhaps inspired by some subconscious memory of the sheep).

Scenes establish 'circles of probability' in which things can be expected to occur, but the average improviser selects ideas from outside this circle in an attempt to be 'original'. Had the shepherd found the sheep, the improvisers would have seen this as 'uncreative' ('He looked for his sheep and then he found them - so what?'). But breaking a 'promise' by switching to something quite different doesn't please anybody (see *Breaking The Fourline*, *News Three*).

It's fine if a search for lost sheep becomes a science-fiction fantasy, so long as it 'stays with the sheep'. The shepherd could have overheard them arguing about quantum physics and string theory, and they could have told him about the flying-saucer that made them super-intelligent. And then, if the shepherd had been astounded, we might have felt that 'something happened'.

### Too Many People

It's easy to sidetrack promises by the introduction of irrelevant material, but they can also be sidetracked by the introduction of irrelevant characters.

A 'brother' and a 'sister' are 'at home' when a third player crawls on-stage, apparently through the 'wall', and seemingly for no reason except that 'crawling on stage' usually gets him a laugh; and yet there had been a slight hint of incest, and the intrusion sidetracked this idea - even though incest is a popular theme on every talk-show.

Another scene starts with two 'roommates', and there's just the vaguest suggestion of homosexuality; instantly a hunchbacked 'Igor' lurches onto the stage; the audience always laugh at his 'Igor' impersonation, but his arrival side-tracks the scene, and 'nothing happens'.

The world's drama is based on interactions between two people (it's difficult to find a good three-person acting-scene because the third character is usually functioning as some sort of spectator), yet many Theatre-sports teams have every player on-stage in every scene. Waiting on the bench 'makes many players feel 'useless', especially as side-coaching is so rare (uplight players treat it as an insult). They forget that they should be looking for moments to wave the lights down, or for ways to rescue the scene, and they rush on stage as soon as they see the chance to get a laugh, or because they feel 'left out'. I saw a show recently in which even the 'off-stage' team were constantly on-stage (in the guise of 'being helpful').

One group told me that having the whole team in every scene was democratic because then everyone had an equal chance.

"But isn't it thrilling to see a performer alone on the stage having to sink or swim?"



"That would be 'shining'."  
Shining means 'showing off' (wanting all the 'glory'), but solo violinists or great jugglers are not 'shining'. It's thrilling to see a human being who is at the center of attention, and who is unafraid, and it's strange that groups should deny the audience that vision, or hand all that power over to an emcee.

### Making Things Difficult

I coached a Lunch-Time show, working with five experienced improvisers, and it was fun, and I was making everything as easy as possible (because that's my job), and yet when I saw them performing by themselves, they presented the same games in their most difficult form. Sometimes they 'sandwiched' them together in such a way that even a super-intelligent sheep would have screwed them up.

I had opened my 'show' with a competition in which the first player to use a word that included the letter 'Ess' lost the game ('Ess' is a common enough letter to guarantee that someone will screw-up, and yet not so difficult that it makes it impossible for the players to work well together). Let loose on their own they banned the letter 'E'. This paralyzed them ('E' being the commonest letter in the language). There were long pauses as they checked each word: this created no trust, no good-nature, no exhilaration, and no pleasure - and yet no one tried to rescue them.

Another game that we'd played at the Lunch-Time show had involved 'Speaking In Three Word Sentences' (this makes the players attend to what they're actually saying instead of just 'rabbling' on). A group of students decided to include the game in their own performance, but they played the One-Word-Sentence version: that I use to force physical solutions: they hadn't

practiced this, and they didn't know its purpose, and they failed utterly.

Long ago I invented a game in which one player dubs a voice for his partner (it's like a ventriloquist scene in which the dummy can walk about). This is excellent for developing a good rapport between the players, but I don't recommend it for use on the stage (because students expect too much of it). Yet the version that has become popular involves five or six players, all on stage at the same time, and each speaking for one of the others. This is so complex that the spectators can't follow what's happening (although they'll laugh at the stupidity). Asked if the game has ever 'worked', teams will say "Oh, it did once," but they can't remember exactly when.

It's been explained to me that 'making everything difficult' is the best strategy because 'improvisers should take risks', but some risks are just plain stupid. When a player asked:

"Who am I?"

Someone shouted: "Margaret Atwood!"

This player had never heard of Margaret Atwood, and yet she accepted the suggestion, and for the next few minutes everyone had a boring time (stuffed owl Judges again). Afterwards I said:

"Why play a scene as Margaret Atwood when you've no idea who she is?"

"I was taking a risk! Isn't that what you want me to do?"

It's like watching a diving competition with no water in the pool. "How's this for a riiiiisskkkkk!" SPLATT! Such carriage might be interesting for a while, but it would soon be as tedious as the matinees in ancient Rome (mostly exhibitions of throat-cutting!). Risk is exciting, but you can't claim to be 'taking a risk' when you fire a bullet into the roof of your mouth.

*Believing that improvisation has to be difficult is like believing that the best food is the hardest to swallow, or that great sex is difficult sex.*

### What People Want

Some improvisers expend huge energy on the stage. Others never stop talking (or they might have to listen). Yet others try to impress us with their cleverness.

"What kind of bird is that?"

"That's not a bird, that's a 'crib'. We call it a crib because it's very like a bird but it does everything backwards."

Players who create such absurdities are not brain-damaged: typically, they're 'sensitive' and well-meaning people who want to be admired for their 'originality', but it's like ordering Chinese food and being served with a flaming photograph of Chairman Mao.

"Look here! I ordered a pizzaz!"

"Our cook is famous for his creative ideas, Sir."

If I stop such players, mid-scene, and ask them what the audience want, they'll say: "They want us to open the parcel" or: "They want us to get into bed together" or: "They want me to tell her why I'm crying" And they're right, but these actions would threaten the status quo, so they 'back-off', preferring to gossip about 'dribs', or to 'make omelets out of cheese and tobacco'.

The terse descriptions of movies at the back of the TV guide suggest the kind of 'themes' that most people enjoy (and that we're not likely to get in Theatreposts). I'll list some of them:

#### Family

A teen-ager meets the father she never knew.

A woman discovers distressing secrets about her husband's past.

A rebellious youth locks horns with his new step-father

A teen-ager comes to terms with an

abusive parent.

A family member, presumed dead, turns up alive.

A poet suspects that his new wife may be a husband killer.

A father searches the red-light district for his runaway daughter.

A daughter accuses her parents of sexual abuse.

#### Crime

A religious fanatic takes a woman hostage.

A youth witnesses a murder but no one believes him.

A lovesick employee's obsession for a colleague turns menacing.

A cop pursues a deranged killer who was released through a legal loop-hole.

A woman assumes a new identity after stealing drug-money from her abusive husband.

A young woman learns that her seemingly meek roommate has deadly designs on her boyfriend.

An attorney is in danger when she realizes that her client is guilty.

#### The Supernatural

A murderer is haunted by his victim's ghost.

Experimentation with an Ouija board opens a pathway to pure evil.

A young girl, distressed by the impending breakup of her parents' marriage, makes a pact with the devil.

A medium raises a 'spirit' that she can't control.

#### Sex/Romance

A woman tries to find the ideal person to take her virginity.

A high-school student falls in love with his girlfriend's mother.

The lies told by a young couple to impress each other catch up with them.

A gigolo's new wife is shocked to discover that he can only make love in



front of an audience.

A student becomes romantically involved with her tutor.

#### Science Fiction

A killer cyborg arrives from the future.

A teacher wakes up with the ability to see into the future.

'Dr. Who' must battle with a mad scientist who creates killer robots.

A cop pursues criminals from the future into other universes.

#### Miscellaneous

An escaped mental patient poses as a doctor.

Two enemies have to work together to escape a trap.

A young boy and a runaway slave become friends.

An ex-wrestler who hates children becomes a bodyguard to a tycoon's precocious offspring.

A woman tracks down and kills the gang who raped her.

An embittered man seeks revenge on the lawyer responsible for his imprisonment.

These 'synopses' promise us that the characters will be altered (or they allow us to make that assumption). It's a safe bet that the ex-wrestler who hates children will turn into a lovable 'pussy-cat'. And why should we be interested in a young woman's discovery that her roommate has designs on her boyfriend, unless we believe that this will create vast transformations? And yet the chance of seeing such interactions in a Theatresports match is close to zero.

You might argue that the writers of these movies are more 'talented' than the average improviser, and yet these ideas are clichés. Or you might say that the improvisers are 'above' using such 'sensational' material, but better an escaped mental patient posing as a

doctor, than eight people in a desert discussing paper-clips.

These movie themes may strike us as vulgar, and sensational, but we could say the same thing about the themes of all popular art. Why shouldn't

Theatresports show a murderer standing over the bleeding corpse while seducing the widow (*Richard the Third*), or a guilty King tormented by his victim's ghost (*Macbeth*), or someone talking a Nun that unless she sleeps with him he'll kill her brother (*Measure for Measure*). And yet the average improviser rejects such Shakespeareanisms in favour of: 'erecting an international airport at the top of a mountain', or 'inventing a new cake recipe'.

The truth is that the movie-writers are trying to tilt the balance between the characters, while the improvisers are trying to maintain the balance between the characters.

#### Resisting Change

Here's a scene in which a Patient told his Doctor that he believed himself to be a Vampire:

"I have this terrible urge to bite somebody in the neck!" he said.

This was a promise that the Doctor would be bitten, or at least be in peril of being bitten, but the Doctor diagnosed a tropical disease that makes peoples' heads explode.

"And yours will explode at any second!"

The Patient staggered around, clutching his head, and the audience laughed. Before you dismiss this as utter foolishness, consider how efficiently the Doctor has achieved his aim of 'not being altered', even to the extent of making sure that the Vampire doesn't have a head to bite him with.

I side-coached another Vampire Scene - this time between a Vampire and Psychologist - and the Vampire wept, and said: "I want blood!" The

Psychologist offered him her neck, saying: "Oh, bite me, please!" (which got a laugh but the scene went downhill). I took it back to "I need blood!" This time she said:

"Have my cat!"

Not in a million Vampire movies will anyone casually agree to have their pet sucked dry by a Vampire (unless it's being offered by another Vampire), so I took them back to: "I need blood!" yet again, and told the Vampire to bite the Psychologist. This time she kept running around the table so that he couldn't catch her.

"Don't escape!" I shouted. "Be frozen with terror! Just get bitten! Scream!"

She did, and the audience's reaction was loud and enthusiastic, and the scene shot forwards like an arrow, but it would be wrong to see her as 'unintended' or as failing to achieve her purpose:

1. She had offered herself to be bitten as a way not to be changed.
2. She had offered her cat as a way not to be changed.
3. She had run around the table as a way not to be changed.

Afterwards she told me that when she said "Bite me!" she was giving the audience what they wanted. I explained that the audience were hoping that the interaction with the Vampire would alter her, but that after she said: "Oh well, bite me then," she was in exactly the same state as before.

"So I shouldn't have let him bite me?" "You should have been altered by the threat, but it looked like 'business as usual' - you looked like a wet-nurse for Vampires."

(If the Psychologist refused to alter, then the Vampire should have been altered; perhaps her therapeutic dedication could have reformed him (like the prostitute saint in Calcutta who 'converted' every client to godliness). Improvisers can 'fight' each other, or

bounce on trampolines, or breathe out great gouts of fire, but once the novelty has worn off the audience will still feel that 'nothing's happening' unless the balance between the characters has been altered.

"W"

When I first took my comedy classes into public, about one in three sessions would crash-and-burn. The spectators believed that everything was rehearsed, so they saw us as tasteless fools who had chosen to serve this garbage up to them. This was so humiliating that I fought tooth and nail to stop the work from collapsing into stupidity, and our performances often became a battle between the players, who wanted stability, and their director (me) who wanted instability.

I had begun with interactions between strangers, and I soon discovered that shouting things like: "Realize that you were at school together!", or "Recognize him as the man who attacked you!" usually had a good effect, but it was 'hit or miss'. I knew that change was important, but I was confused by players who would get sad, or frightened, or happy together. They'd find treasure, and shriek, and leap about the stage, seemingly mad with happiness, and yet I'd still feel that 'nothing had happened'. I'd still have to keep on poking away at the scene until 'it' happened, but it took me years to understand that this 'it' was a tilt in the balance that had been established between the players.

On a good night my improvisers could poke themselves (as it were), but on a bad night they'd cling to whatever stability they could muster. Scene after scene would spiral to disaster, but if I could force some instability into the work, the scenes would zoom forwards 'of their own accord' (which was how we liked it).



### Staying The Same

Our audiences 'know' that stability has to precede instability, so they're patient at the beginning of scenes, but this patience is seldom rewarded. Improvisers 'change', but usually by adding the same weight to each side of the balance. You can see this (literally) if you divide a class into twos, and ask each pair to have a mimed tug-o-war. Most of them will heave away at their imaginary rope for minutes at a time (refusing to be 'pulled'), and yet if the ropes were real these tug-o-wars would only last a couple of seconds.

Our best improvisers tilt the balance intuitively - if they feel secure - but a good tilt throws us into chaos, and our life-skills are dedicated to the avoidance of chaos. This is why it's so difficult to get beginners to be 'shot' (because they wouldn't want to be shot in life, and because they don't want to be controlled).

Every living creature is a hostage to fortune (let's hope you don't go blind while you're reading this paragraph), and yet most of us manage to achieve an acceptable degree of dullness. Being hit by trucks, or extracted from crevasses can be unpleasant, so we 'look before we leap', and we become great at having 'nothing happen'.

Keeping chaos at arms-length involves the creation of a false-self, a 'persona' that allows us 'get by' without being laughed at (or worse). This 'presentation' has to be consistent (because people become alarmed if we behave 'uncharacteristically'), and when strangers stare at us we want our mask to be absolutely impenetrable. 'Back-stage' at the zoo the gorillas go berserk if you look directly at them, but we humans stiffen-up (and become more symmetrical), or clown about (becoming very unsymmetrical). 'Stiffening up' says: 'This formality bears no resen-

blance to the 'real me', and 'joke-behaviour' says: 'I'm choosing this stupidity, so that I can remain hidden from you, and under my own control.'

Maintaining a consistent 'self' is stressful and there's a need to 'let off steam'. 'Carnival' was a traditional way to achieve this, but anything involving risk can 'take us out of ourselves'. We search for excitement that's survivable (balloonists expect a safe-landing, and dentists on safari don't expect to return minus a leg), but the safest, and cheapest, and least strenuous way to get excitement is to experience by proxy all those interactions that we'd be desperate to avoid in 'real life'. We achieve this by reading novels, or by watching plays or movies. We don't want to be kicked in the crotch but if we skim through the TV channels we can see someone doing it. Burning alive must be even worse but every night we see screaming stunt-men covered in flame - yet no matter how violent the explosions, or how deep the wounds, there's no payoff unless the characters are being altered by each other. To put it another way: normal people learn to resist 'leverage', and then 'take it easy' by watching other people having 'leverage' exerted upon them.

The audience's need to see the improvisers being altered presents a problem, because their scrutiny makes it imperative for the performer to 'save face' and present a 'consistent self'. Hence the avoidance of anything personal, and the overwhelming reliance on 'joke-behaviour'.

If an improviser says: "Marry me, or I'll jump out the window" the spectators will want to see this happen, or for his/her partner to yield to the emotional blackmail, but the response will almost certainly be an attempt to resist change: "Just a moment, I'll get my camera!"

Or:  
"Be my guest, we're on the ground

floor!"

There'll be a laugh, but it'll feel as if 'nothing happened'.

A player discovered a 'thief' who was 'stealing' furniture, and his seemingly 'moronic' reaction was quite brilliant in terms of what he wanted to achieve: "Splendid!" he said: "I stole this furniture myself and I need someone to 'fence' it for me."

This allowed him to stay 'detached' and 'consistent'; he didn't need to become angry, or frightened; he didn't have to wrestle the thief, or pursue him, or phone the police. It allowed him to stay 'in tact' (it would be difficult not to be altered in real life if you found a burglar in the house).

A good scene ascends from platform to platform, each step being engineered by a tilt, and when this is understood it becomes obvious that many improvisers have no intention of being altered by anybody. They thicken their shell until there isn't the thinnest crack through which we might glimpse the raw human being (this is even more likely to be true of players who work as stand-up comedians), but armour shouldn't be welded on, and an unyielding implacability can be a professional hindrance (a stage full of would-be Clint Eastwoods or Bob Hopes would be ridiculous). It's good to have defenses, but even 'stand-ups' (the good ones) allow themselves to be vulnerable; they don't aim a gun at the audience all the time.

The performer's resistance to being altered is bizarre, because the agony of the Hero is fake, whereas the player who tries to keep his character 'in tact' is very likely to be genuinely suffering - because it's horrible to be trapped in front of a bored audience. And why should improvisers be afraid of 'losing control' when choosing to be altered is just another way of exercising control? It's the hysterical player who clutches

desperately at any straw of humour rather than enter the void of the future who is really out of control.

A 'good idea' when a scene begins is one that helps to establish a balance, but once this has been achieved, a 'good idea' is one that 'tilts' the balance.

### Comic-Strips

Comic-strips give us an easy way to understand the importance of tilting the relationship. Often a character will look confident in the first cell, and confused, or astounded in the last cell.

Here's a strip in which a man throws a penny into a wishing-well. A 'Genie' conjures a woman out of the air for him, and he's delighted - until the woman leaves with the Genie. This makes us feel that 'something happened', and that the time spent glancing through the strip was not wasted. Had the man said: "Thanks very much!" and walked off with the woman, the Man/Genie relationship would have stayed the same, and we'd have felt that this transaction was 'a waste of time'. Of course, if a 'Leather Goddess' had chased him with a whip while the Genie was helpless with laughter, or if the woman had wished for an 'Adonis' to replace the man, this would also have made the strip 'worth bothering with'.

The movie themes that I listed earlier all imply that there'll be some interesting 'tilts'. For example, when we're told that an escaped mental patient poses as a 'doctor' we know that a major tilt will be the patient's realization of this:

"But why is it necessary to strap me to the table, Doctor?"

"Because God wants me to move your eyes to the top of your head so that you can always be watching him!"

The payoff for the spectators would be the terror of the patient, but in most Theatre sports, the patient would say some stupidly like: "Oh good! Then I'll be able to see when it's raining!"



### Side-Coaching 'Risk'

Let's say that one player is being a teacher, and that one is being a student, and that they're 'trying not to fail':

"You haven't done your homework, Brian," says the teacher, receiving an answer like:

"The dog ate it, Sir."

Or:

"I'm not Brian."

This negative behaviour shields them against change, and each will now try to say something clever, or stupid (there's no difference really), hoping for a big laugh so that they can wave the lights down.

Such a scene costs them very little - it's easy to relate as a teacher and a pupil, and say a few stupid or witty things - but from another point of view it costs them dearly, because even if they get a few laughs, the audience will dismiss this scene as a 'waste of time'.

If I were side-coaching them I would change: "I'm not happy with your homework, Brian," to: "Your homework is quite wonderful, Brian ..."

"Oh, thank-you, Sir!"

This would make them feel more vulnerable, but it would cheer everyone up, and there would be an increase in benevolence. Then I might say: "We have to know what the homework is!" and perhaps the teacher would say:

"I didn't know you were interested in science-fiction, Brian."

This stays with the homework, and defines it as some sort of English project.

"Well, Sir, I've been getting these dreams."

"But benevolent aliens infiltrating the schools to lead the pupils to a higher evolutionary level - did that idea really come to you in your sleep?"

"Yes, Sir. They had scales and very large eyes!"

This limits the range of permissible

utures (good!), and the audience will be waiting eagerly to see how this Sci-fi theme will tilt the balance. This is the exact moment when a third improviser will blunder into the scene, but if I was side-coaching I would thwart this, and let the scene continue. If these players have learned to accept ideas, but are still afraid of the 'future', the teacher is quite likely to say:

"I've had exactly the same dreams, Brian"

Now they can both get enthusiastic, and give the impression that they're working well together, but it'll still seem as if 'nothing happened'. It would be better for the teacher to say something like:

"Do you know what you are, Brian?"

"What, Sir?"

"You, Brian, are a natural telepath!"

"Do you mean these dreams are somehow 'real', Sir!"

"Every moment of them, Brian!"

The teacher could then mime unzipping his face, and step out of his skin (maybe the snoggers' could rush in to give him bug-eyes and a tail). This would 'tilt the balance', and the audience would roar from sheer pleasure, but even now Brian could still minimize, or negate the tilt by saying something like: "Oh, Sir, you know you shouldn't remove your disguise during school hours!" or by unzipping himself and emerging as an identical alien.

Anyone can plod through a Teacher/Student scene and then wave the lights down - leaving us nothing to remember even five minutes after the scene ends - whereas this *Alien Emerging From The Teacher* tilt throws the players into unknown territory. Entering the chaotic future is the risk that the spectators pay to see, whereas risks like agreeing to be Margaret Atwood when you don't know who she is, or making everything so difficult that it's like trying to swim in a suit of armour,

are ways to ensure that the balance between the characters is not disturbed.

Coaches should take improvisers back to the moment that a tilt was rejected, and coax them to be altered by it (as in the vampire scenes that I described earlier), the aim being to replace the rewards of implacability with the pleasure of being involved in an interesting story.

### Tilt-Lists

Tilt-Lists give samples of the advice that I might give if I was side-coaching a scene: i.e., they are yet another of my attempts to keep me off the stage, and out of view.

Let's say that a woman and her 'date' are sitting on a sofa, drinking tea. I might try for a tilt by saying: "John Pounce on her and then apologize!" Such a suggestion could be used as one item on a Tilt-List for a 'First-Date Scene', together with suggestions like: "The brakes fall while you're both in the back-seat," or "Notice a small brain clamped to her spine as you fumble with her bra."

I wrote the first Tilt-Lists to liven up scenes that bored me, for example, *Strangers Meeting On A Park Bench*. There's always some interest in interactions between strangers, but when such a scene has been presented twenty or thirty times it might as well be scripted: the players enter, 'get to know each other', feed the birds, get friendly perhaps, and then wave the lights down (Theatre for the bland).

Here's our current *Park Bench* list (some of the tilts describe what happens, and others are just lines of dialogue).

#### *Strangers On A Park Bench*

One demonstrates his/her control of the weather. (And then loses control of it?)  
One buys the other's soul.

Platform: they feed birds. Tilt: one starts killing them.

"God (or Satan) sent me to find you."

"I'm a Bounty Hunter!"

One is a psychic who always knows what the other will say or do.

One asks the other to donate a kidney.

One explains that he/she is a visitor from the future.

"This was my favorite place before I died."

"I'm so lonely, but everyone I make friends with has bad luck." (Bad things start happening to the other person instantly!)

Play the two-realities game: "You think this is a Park, don't you? But you're wrong!"  
"I work miracles."

One tells the other that he's a visitor from the future.

Tilts should be either very specific, or relatively unspecific; for example: "I want to buy your soul" is a better tilt than "I want to buy something from you"; but on the other hand "I work miracles" is better than "I cure people," and if instead of "One starts killing the birds," the tilt had been: "One begins stamping on the birds," this would have limited the possibilities unnecessarily.

Players can agree on a tilt before they step on stage, or one can say: "I've got a tilt" (and take the responsibility), or a tilt can be 'thrown-in' mid-scene.

Let's say that the moment is approaching when the scene is about to be perceived as 'dull', and that the agreed tilt is:

"This was my favourite place before I died."

Don't prepare a 'lead-in', just say the line. Perhaps your partner could mime putting his/her hand through you, and stagger back in horror. If your partner is altered, the spectators will have the



feeling that 'something happened', and as the scene is now about death, and survival after death, it may even have some emotional 'weight' instead of being just 'trite'.

Here's another Tilt-List.

Someone Climbs In The Window

When You're Asleep

He/She mistook the window.

It's the person who tied you to the bed and went to Florida.

It's a fugitive.

It's a mad tattooist.

It's a psychic who has foreseen that you are about to be attacked. (And kills you to save his/her reputation?)

It's a hypnotist who forgot to remove an important post-hypnotic suggestion.

It's your long lost whatever.

It's some kind of bigot who wants to convert you.

It's someone intent on revenge.

It's the soul that never found you when you were born.

I'll improvise a scene based on the 'soul' tilt (because no one's tried it yet).

"Help me!"

"Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Help me in."

"What are you doing, clinging to the window ledge?"

"I climbed up the ivy!"

The 'soul' could lie about why it's there, saying it's in the wrong apartment, or perhaps it could pretend to twist its ankle so that you'd have to give it medical attention. It could be examining you, and your belongings, trying to make quite sure of your identity, before using the tilt, or it could say:

"Everything I've said to you is a lie! I'd better start again ..."

"If you can't give me a convincing explanation, I'm phoning the police!"

"I'm your soul!"

"What?"

"Your soul! Everyone has one -

except you."

"What are you talking about!"

"You were stillborn, so I gave you up, but they revived you, and they wouldn't let me try for another baby, they said it had to be you!"

"You're mad."

"Haven't you always felt that life was cold and bleak and miserable? Haven't you always known that you weren't like the others, that there was something lacking in you? Haven't your conscience always talked you?"

"Rubbish!"

"Aren't you saving up your pills so you can commit suicide?"

"It's a lie!"

"It's how we found you! Planning to kill yourself - that always brings people to their attention."

"Whose attention?"

"You know. The beings in the other world. 'Look!' they said: 'There it is! There's your body, and it's thinking of ending it all. Get up there and take possession.'"

"Up there?"

"Just a figure of speech."

"Keep away from me!"

Maybe the soul explains that souls leap into babies and merge with them when they're born. This could lead to the soul trying to 'leap' into you and knocking you to the floor.

"I can't get into you! It's because you're an adult. Perhaps it would help if we had sex!"

"No way!"

Perhaps you could threaten to shoot it if it didn't keep off, and perhaps you could pump it full of bullets but find that souls are immortal. Perhaps the memories of your entire amoral, and bitter, and utterly pointless life could overwhelm you, or perhaps the soul could add a new tilt by saying:

"The truth is I've been in Hell!"

"Hell?"

"Where do you think lost souls go?"

But I wasn't right for them. I wasn't kosher. I'd never been in a body you see, so they sent me back to unite with you, so that you and I could be the genuine article. Something worth the burning!"

Perhaps the soul could succeed in leaping into you and could continue in the scene as a voice from off-stage, and maybe it could find another soul already inhabiting you, and realize that it really had come to the wrong apartment.

Perhaps you could be a 'pro-lifer', enraged at the idea that souls only enter at birth, or perhaps the soul could end up as your valet - the possibilities are endless.

I'll 'improvise' another 'Stranger Climbs In Your Window At Night' scene using a different tilt.

"Who's there? Aught! What are you doing in my room?"

"The window was open so I climbed in."

"What? Do I know you?"

"Oh, no! It's just that the window was open. Brrrr! You're obviously a health freak! Where's the light switch?"

"You're a thief!"

"Not at all. Thief? Breaking and entering? Oh, no, the window was open, so I thought: 'why not climb in? See who's there? Make a friend for life.' Look! Read the motto on my T-Shirt: 'SAY YES TO ADVENTURE.'"

"Look, it's the middle of the night."

"I'll pay you!"

"Pay me? What for?"

"I'll give you money. Look, I've got pockets full. I'll pay you for your time!"

"I can't accept money from a total stranger."

"But we're not strangers - not any more. I'm Maurice, how do you do?"

"Er ..."

"And you are ..." (picks up envelope):

"... to Mr. Phillip Landerer!"

"Put that letter down!"

"S.W.A.L.K - that means 'sealed with

a loving kiss'. I wish I got letters like that! All right, all right, I'm putting it down."

"Look, turn away."

"What for?"

"I want to get out of bed and put some clothes on."

"You sleep naked? Oh, you don't need to be embarrassed in front of me - you've got such beautiful skin!"

"I told you to look away. Are you some sort of pervert?"

"Yes. I get sexual excitement climbing through windows. Just kidding. Careful with that zip."

And so on.

It's tempting to use the tilt right away, but tilts work best one at a time, and having a stranger climb in the window is already quite a strong tilt. Entering and saying: "Good evening! I'm your mad tattooist," or "I'm your lost soul," is less effective than delaying this information until later."

"Get off my shirt! You creased it."

"You don't need a shirt - those trousers are perfectly decent. And you've got such good skin."

"Give me my shirt - don't tear it!"

Probably a tilt would be needed somewhere about here:

"Where's the electrical outlet."

"What?"

"Ah! Here it is!"

"You wake me up in the middle of the night because you want to shave!"

"Shave? This isn't a shaver! I'm a mad tattooist!"

"Oh, my God!"

"The pain's quite bearable!"

"Help! Help!"

"Sissy!"

Maybe the tattooist wrestles Phillip to the ground.

"I saw you at the swimming competition last night. What skin I thought. What a perfect canvas for my art! I was too shy to speak to you, so I followed you, running from tree to tree. It took me hours to work up the courage



to climb in your window!"

Maybe he shows him exquisite samples of his work. Maybe Phillip agrees, or is paid, to have an eagle-head on his shoulder.

"Tattoos are the 'in' thing. Pop-stars have them. Royalty even. Why go to a regular tattooist and let some apprentice work on you when can you have the attentions of a real artist?"

Perhaps Phillip feels that the eagle is becoming larger than was agreed.

"Yes, but it didn't look quite right with just the head, so I'm adding the wings."

The scene could be developed in all kind of ways. Perhaps I could tilt it again by having the tattooist handcuff Phillip to the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"That's my wife who's been sending you those perfumed love letters sealed with a loving kiss!"

"Oh, no!"

"It'll go easier if you don't wriggle - how do you spell adulterer?"

And so on.

This scene has satiristic elements that would interest the average audience, but if it occurred by chance, someone would arrive as a policeman before the tattooing started, or Phillip would make jokes about selling advertising space. One advantage of Tilt-Lists is that the improvisers can say: "It's not our ideal! We're just using the list!" This gives them permission to create unusual scenes and to break taboos.

Here are Jason and Sean using a 'Two-Roommates' list. Jason is increasingly irritated by Sean's slobbish behaviour, and then he applies the agreed tilt and says:

"I've sold you!"

"Sold me. You can't do that!"

"You ought to keep up with the changes in the law, old son. Serve you right for voting conservative. Consider your debt to me paid in full!"

Sean is amazed, and then appalled, and then horrified as the doorbell rings, and Rebecca enters as an 'S' and 'M' queen.

"Is this the boy?"

Sean protests that he's a free-agent, but Rebecca cracks a whip (the sound being supplied live on the mike). Sean cringes as she 'writes a cheque' - well, you get the general idea. The audience feel that 'something's happening', and yet without Tilt-Lists it's unlikely that any improviser will ever be made a slave of another.

Tilt-Lists can be created for specific games. Here's one for 'Moving Bodies' (a game in which the players are puppets who are moved by volunteers from the audience).

#### **Moving Bodies**

One player gets the feeling that he/she is not in control of his/her actions.

One manages to see that the other is being moved - eventually seeing the audience? Is taken away as insane?

One realizes that they're in some sort of Hell where they have no free-will of their own.

One floats into the air (easy with enough puppeteers).

One accuses the other of making fun of the way he/she moves.

Improvisers at the Moose now feel that a scene without a tilt is hardly worth bothering with, and tilts occur 'naturally' in scenes that would once have been quite pointless. A team asked for some 'Canadian scenography' and received a white sheet spread on the stage (for snow) with a sled in the middle. My heart sank, because the same props have appeared several times, without inspiring anyone, but the players tilted the platform by saying that: "The Bible says that if we sled a witch off a precipice and he dies, then he wasn't a

witch!" And then the witch, hurtling towards annihilation, tilted the scene again by calling on the powers of darkness to drag the witch-hunters into Hell after him. Not the greatest scene I ever saw, but not the disaster that I'd been expecting.

Tilts offer the audience something amazing, compared to what's usually on the menu. I wouldn't want every scene to be based on a Tilt-List, but four or five such scenes in an evening add a interesting 'flavour' to the mix.

#### **Maximizing Tilts**

I intended to delete the 'mad tattooist' tilt, but I'd better keep it. After all, the value of any tilt depends on the way it's received. If you offer a hamburger to a starving prisoner and all you get is a polite "thank-you," then the tilt is ineffective, but if the prisoner is devastated by your kindness, perhaps even to the point of confessing, then it will have been a 'good' tilt. And then you can tilt again by eating the hamburger.

Performing in gibberish trains the ability to tilt (gibberish makes no sense unless it creates a change in you), and many games are based on tilting: for example, 'The Reversal Game' in which you say uninteresting things while being interested in everything that's said; another example is the 'Listening Game' in which you have to be altered by everything said to you. One of the most obvious tilt games is 'It's Tuesday', in which the players treat innocuous remarks as if they were tilts, e.g., someone says: "Hello ..." and you give this statement enormous leverage by becoming delirious with joy as you recognize the friend who you thought was killed on the expedition to Jupiter.

#### **Minimizing Tilts**

We humans are experts at negating tilts, so it's no use handing out lists and expecting us to improve (although it can

happen). For example, if the tilt in a Master/Servant scene is: "My daughter (son) tells me that you burst into his/her room last night ..." you can trivialize this, and perhaps get a laugh, by adding: "... again!" - which would imply that it's happening all the time rather than being a one-time outrage.

Here are some of the most popular ways to destroy tilts, or to diminish their effect.

#### **Refusing to be affected.**

Your partner tilts by finding a human-head in a parcel, but you say: "Oh, dear, not another one!", or: "Who is it this time?" or: "It must be for the family at number ten!". Your 'apologetic' may be amusing, but it'll be as if 'nothing happened'.

Another way to stay 'intact' is to already have the disturbing knowledge. If your 'Doctor' tells you that someone has implanted a control device inside your head, don't shout: "So, that's why our marriage has been going so well!" - just deflate the tilt by saying:

"Yes, I came to you because it needs adjusting."

If your lover tries for a tilt by telling you: "The truth is, my darling, that I can only make love successfully in front of an audience."

Just say: "Oh, that's no problem, I've sold tickets."

If you're asked to donate a kidney say: "Actually, I'm waiting for one myself" or: "I gave at the office ..."

You'll get your laughs, and nothing disturbing will happen, but this is not the way to become a great improviser.

*Adding equal weights to each side of the balance.*

Your partner becomes weird, so you become equally weird. The audience will think: "So they both became weird - so what?" but your coach will think: "How well they're cooperating!"



If both players are sad, or elated, or suspicious, or jealous, then we can be sure that someone is refusing to be tilted, i.e. one is aping the other so as to maintain the balance.

If your partner says: "Actually, I'm just visiting here - I'm from the future!", just say:

"What year?"

"Three thousand and six."

"What a coincidence - so am I."

This gets a laugh, and there'll be no threat to the status quo.

#### *Skipping the platform.*

Beginners might think it effective to begin a scene by screaming: "Doctor! Doctor! I've a device implanted in my head that allows aliens to control me!" but as no balance has been established this just squanders a good tilt.

The same is true if your partner begins by saying: "I am from the future! I must speak to Julius Caesar at once!" This is not a tilt, it's the start of a platform that will need to be tilted later on. Perhaps attendants from a mental hospital can arrive to capture this lunatic, and perhaps a further tilt can be achieved when you find that they're also from the future, but I'd prefer a less dramatic platform - something more stable.

#### *By making the platform suggest the tilt.*

A good tilt should be like dropping a boulder into a small pond, but improvisers who think ahead find it natural to 'lead-in' to a tilt (a form of 'bridging'), perhaps by discussing slavery before saying: "I've sold you," or talking about time-travel before saying: "Actually, I'm from the future!"

A Doctor/Patient scene begins, and the agreed tilt is to be the discovery of a 'control device' in the patient's brain. The power of this tilt can be minimized, by leading up to it. The Doctor says: "Are you still getting the headaches?"

And then:  
"And are you still having these dreams about being kidnapped by flying saucers?"

And a little later:

"Perhaps they aren't dreams at all - perhaps they really are inserting things into your head!"

Followed by:

"I'd better take a look!"

This is like throwing larger and larger pebbles into the pool as you gradually work your way up to the boulder - something that's far less impressive.

#### *By Changing Slowly.*

Other things being equal, players are more interesting when they're in states of transition, but tilts are most disturbing when their effects are immediate. If the tilt is "I've read your diary!" you can weaken it by having a minimal reaction, and then gradually increasing the intensity.

"You've been in to my room to read my diary, haven't you!"

"Yes."

"Ah! Did you read the sex-bits?"

"I copied them out."

"So you copied them out?"

"They were very educational."

"You read the bit about Mum?"

"She always liked you more than me!"

The plan is to increase the intensity of the reaction until there's a great explosion (start with pebbles, end with boulders). This allows the player to feel in complete control (rather than going down the rapids without a paddle) but it hardly functions as a tilt at all. It's a form of 'bridging' (i.e. having a fixed point in the future of the scene), a technique that makes improvisers feel safer but less creative.

*You stay unchanged by getting your tilt 'in' first.*

We decided that a scene would be

tilted when a man told his lover that he was homosexual, but she forestalled him by saying: "Of course I've always known that you were gay!" and the scene continued with 'nothing happening' until it was 'honked' by the Judges.

#### *Fun With Tilts*

The agreed tilt for a 'New Boy' in Hell scene was: "We're closing Hell down." The New Boy said snooty things like "It's a bit 'run down' here isn't it?" and this allowed him to take a detached attitude, and it set him up to change minimally when he discovered that Hell was bankrupt, or whatever.

"Don't prepare the tilt!" I said: "Start again, and be scared out of your wits."

This time a more 'positive' platform was constructed: the admissions clerk screamed in agony every fifteen seconds, Mark Twain was being forced to recite the works of Fenimore Cooper, and the New Boy was being screwed into a wine-press, but then a Demon stuck its head around the door to announce: "Six-o'clock. Hell's closing!" Everything began to be dismantled.

"Remove Satan's throne!"

"Vanish the lake of sulphur!"

"Get those snakes out of those sinners'!"

"Closing?" said the New Boy: "Until when?"

"Forever."

The demons 'aded away'.

"That's wonderful! But ... But what about me?"

The gusting wind died away with the last screams.

"Hallooo! Hallooo! Is anyone there?"

"Hallooo! Hallooo! Is anyone there?"

A lost soul in a total void is an excellent image for clinical depression.

"Do something obvious!" I said, and he provided a tilt of his own by starting to light a fire. This cheered him up a bit (the change of emotion 'confirming the tilt') and the lights faded on this beautiful

image of a lost soul lighting a little fire in a burned out Hell. (I could have made him burn himself to prove that he still existed, but why gild the lily?)

Yesterday I side-coached a similar scene (in some ways) in which Arthur told Barry that he came to the Park each day because the fresh air helped his asthma. I didn't want to sit through a scene in which one character was wheezing asthmatically, so I asked him to be more positive:

"Try saying: 'See that statue over there! That's me!'"

This led him to tell Barry things like:

"I used to own this park. This land was in my family for generations until I gave it to the town council ..."

And so on. Barry read the inscription that expressed gratitude to Arthur, ending with the dates: 1850 to 1877 (a 'random stupidity' that risked screwing up the entire scene) so I asked Arthur to say: "What year is it now?"

"1994."

"But that would make me over a hundred and thirty years old."

He blanched as he realized that he might be dead. He asked Barry to try putting his hand through him. Barry mimed putting his whole arm through, and became terrified. Meanwhile Arthur was realizing that his afternoon in the park had lasted for many generations. A voice from outside the scene said:

"Paazark closing."

"I'd better be going," said Barry, backing-off.

I added another tilt by saying:

"Discover that the gates are locked!"

Barry tried to get out of the gate, any gate, but they were sealed, and the walls were unclimbable.

"Paazark closing!"

Arthur was still trying to 'work things out'.

"But how come you can see me if I'm dead?" says Arthur. "Let me see if I can put my hand through you!"



Barry froze in terror as the hand 'entered' him.

"Park closing for all eternity!"

Barry suspected that he must be dead as well - and suddenly he remembered the accident that had snatched him away from his loved ones. The Park began to dissolve away as Arthur strode off, radiant, with Barry weeping and shouting: "Wait for me!" This scene made us laugh, but it had a eerie 'feel' to it that made it memorable.

"What was the agreed tilt?" I said.

"We didn't get to it."

The better the platform the more likely it is to create its own tilts (but beginners should use the official ones).

Two students at our Summer School (male and female) decided to be 'Strangers On A Park Bench', and agreed on the 'one player kills the birds' tilt. Their platform established that they were in the habit of naming their favourite birds: "That one's Tom!", he said, and she gasped: "But that's what I call him!" They found that they'd chosen the same name for each bird. This brought them 'closer' but it added the same weight to each side of the equation (so it wasn't a tilt). Suddenly she took out a 'blow-pipe' and 'shot a poison dart at a bird', and they watched it topple over sideways. This was the agreed tilt, and yet he hardly changed at all, he just seemed mildly disapproving.

"Protest!" I shouted: "Be outraged!"

He obeyed, and was so angry that I said: "Blow one at him!"

He mimed being hit by a dart, plucked it out, and continued his tirade, utterly unchanged, so I told him to die.

"Die?"

"Die! It's a poisoned dart! Drop dead! And stay dead!"

"But then I'll be deserting my partner. I won't be supporting her."

"Don't support her! Die and we'll all

identify with her plight!"

Two players began an Executioner/Victim scene by strapping a victim into an electric chair. The Executioner asked her if she wanted a last cigarette, but the relationship between them didn't alter.

I interrupted to say that this beginning had put the woman under his total control - what could she do, bound and gagged? - and that 'last cigarettes' were associated with firing squads, and wouldn't there be some witnesses (unless it was a private electric-chair that he'd built as a hobby).

"But how else could we start?"

"Don't start at the crisis. Create a normally! Arrive at her cell and tell her that you've saved her a piece of chocolate cake."

He did this and she told him that he was the nicest of all the prison guards.

"I know," he said, and the audience laughed (which he took as a signal that he was on the right track, but it allowed him to be unchanged). I interrupted and told him to say:

"Am I really?"

This also got a laugh, but it lowered his status and made him more sympathetic (we want improvisers to be vulnerable). They continue to build a platform until the moment for a tilt arrived.

"Tell her that it's the hour of her execution."

They both became very depressed - maintaining the balance.

"Don't both weep," I say: "Tell her it's your job!"

He became resolute, which made an excellent tilt, and then he tilted again by saying that he loved her and would help her escape - there was a lot of emotion (I felt quite tearful), and they agreed to meet outside the prison. He unlocked the cell for her and as she stepped out I said:

"Shoot her!"

He began a long 'bridge' to some distant 'point' in the future.

"No, no, go back to the moment when I said 'Shoot her!' Shoot her now, no explanation. Justify afterwards ..."

He did but she stood there, willing to be 'wounded', but not to 'die'. She wasn't altered in the least (the wound was a purely verbal ideal).

"Just die!" I shouted and she dropped dead. He looked blank and said:

"Now what do I do?"

"Look calmly at the audience," I said: "And tell them: 'It's always kinder this way!'"

Once 'tilting' becomes part of your vocabulary it's less likely that you will deminish tilts 'inadvertently', and it's easier to give and receive notes. Coaches can say: "You tried for a tilt but you weren't changed!" or: "You changed together so that you could maintain the balance!"

### Challenging To Tilts

Challenges to 'the best tilt' are inadvisable because how can you explain tilting to the audience in a way that's immediately graspable? It would be better to challenge to 'the best scene directed by another player', but challenging to a tilt misses the point, which is that tilting should be part of any narrative scene.

Sometimes a tilt will get a huge laugh, and the lights will fade. My advice is not to wave them up unless the platform has been 'solid'. A good tilt can't save a feeble platform.

### Fun With Platforms

Improvisers who plan ahead can't create an interesting environment: if they're on 'an ocean liner' there'll be no sea-gulls hovering for scraps, no mountains of garbage being pushed overboard, no islands drifting past, no fog, no dolphins, no storm, no engine throbbing away in the bowels of the

ship. And they can never say, out of the blue: "Why are you reading a book on 'Do It Yourself' lobotomy?" Or: "The Captain's drunk!" Or: "Every time I take my hat off I fall over!" because they'd have to look ahead to see whether a lobotomy, or a drunk Captain, or a new form of vertigo would be appropriate.

The best players introduce arbitrary ideas, and justify them afterwards (if necessary). This allows them to concentrate on building a platform (which is fun), rather than planning (which isn't). Place them 'in a park', and they'll throw a stick for a dog, or comment on the drunk peeing into the fountain, or kick a ball back to a kid, or buy an ice-cream. At any moment one of these random ideas may blossom into an entire scene that will appear to be an inevitable consequence of what went before. But if beginners are 'in a park', they'll think so far ahead that the environment will have no 'existence' for them. I wouldn't want to insist on 'who, what, where' (because it's so limiting), but without a convincing platform they'll be like potters without clay. We need to know the weather, or how long is it until nightfall? Nuns on bicycles need to pedal past, a child has to fall into the lake, a policeman has to arrest a topless sun-bather, someone has to sell you drugs.

I'd force the park into existence by asking the beginners to say:

"Odd to find such a beautiful little park in the middle of an industrial area."

Or:

"Wonderful to see a park with so much sculpture in it."

Or I might get them to add mysteries like:

"Say: 'Do you know why it's forbidden to exit by that gate?'"

Or:

"Say: 'Have you noticed that someone is spying on us from the bushes?'"



Or let's say that beginners are pretending to be 'two roommates' - the most that's likely to happen is that one will 'make coffee' (i.e. will go to the side of the stage and return instantly with two 'steaming mugs'); and if something arbitrary is introduced it'll be intended to get a laugh, rather than added just for the hell of it. I'd side-coach them with arbitrary ideas like:

"Say: 'Guess what Mary's done!'"

Or:

"Say: 'I spent all bloody morning down in that basement!'"

This would force them to do more than just mark-time until the tilt arrives, for example:

"So what has Mary done?"

"She's moved her stuff in."

Or:

"What's up with the basement?"

"Three feet of water!"

If the players still weren't being playful I might ask them to say more specific things, like:

"A couple of Jehovah Witnesses came round. There's one in your room now."

Or:

"If you go in the bathroom you'll notice that the lid on the toilet is closed and there are a lot of heavy books on it."

Two students have chosen a 'New Boy In Heaven' list. We all have fantasies about Heaven, but what are their fantasies? All they give us is 'Betty' interacting with an admissions clerk in some sort of earth-type office. This would be O.K. if she demanded her harp, or complained that St. Peter was 'flashing' her, but they're not doing anything to express their vision of Heaven.

"Either make the place interesting," I say. "Or complain that it's so ordinary!"

"Have some strawberries," says the admissions clerk, trying to make Heaven a bit nicer. Betty mimes eating a strawberry.

"Not an ordinary strawberry!" I shout:

"These aren't Safeway's bouncing strawberries, these strawberries are six feet tall and succulent beyond belief" (Shades of Heronymous Bosch). Asked if there's anything else she'd like, she opts for a chocolate milkshake.

"This is Heaven," I say. "You can have anything in the universe!"

"Can I have Harrison Ford?"

Now the scene starts to be fun. They build a interesting Heaven with Angels doing wheelies on motorbikes, and fountains spewing out vanilla flavoured aphrodisiac (and so on). We get some insight into the kind of creatures they are, whereas left to themselves they'd have revealed absolutely nothing.

Two students take a 'New Girl In Hell' scene, but this Hell is just as boring as Heaven was: just a clerk at an admissions desk.

I start them again and tell the New Girl to scream in terror before she enters. This time she slams the door and leans against it as if demons are trying to push it open. The door is shaking and monsters are clawing and roaring at the other side of it.

"Do come in," said the clerk, politely. Then he shouts at the door. "Not yet! She's not yours until I say she is!"

The noise outside the door subsides and the hairy paw that was thrusting through the gap is withdrawn.

"Scream at something!" I say, and the New Girl screams at something in the corner. The clerk mimes blowing flame over it and says:

"Damned scorpions!"

"It was big as a lobster!"

"Oh, that was just a baby."

The scene degenerates into gossip, so I tilt it again.

"Scream at the clerk!"

She does and he says:

"Sorry, did my disguise slip for a moment?"

"You're Satan!" gasps the New Girl.

"Calm down, you'll soon get used to the way we do things," he says, breathing on his cup of coffee. "Just heating it up) - not that your existence here will be exactly pleasant. Well, what's it to be for starters? Lake of sulphur? Mosquito paradise? Critic's corner?"

The phone rings.

"Speaking! Yes, God, she's here.

Just checking her in ..."

He hands the phone to the New Girl:

"It's for you!"

"Is that you, God? Look, I shouldn't be here! What? It's true that I didn't believe in you then, but I believe in you now! Why did you want to be worshipped for anyway? No, of course I don't think you have low self-esteem. Look, I ... Hello? Hello? He's hung up."

"Not much use believing in him now! Anyone can believe in him once they're here!"

"Torturing people forever! That's so vindictive!"

"It's the system."

The 'director' of the scene throws in the tilt that he chose earlier - one of the devils has to be someone that the Hero was at school with.

"You're Janet," says the New Girl, recognizing the clerk. "You used to pull my hair every lunch-time!"

The scene switches to a school playground as people flood on to the stage like kids at playtime, skipping, running about, and so on.

"But this is just how it used to be!" gasps the New Girl.

"Yes, but now you're going to stay here for ever and ever!" laughs the clerk, twisting the New Girl's hair as the lights fade.

### Hidden Tilts

One way to get interesting scenes is to have the tilt chosen secretly by a 'director'. Players can't plan lead-ins to a unrevealed tilt, so they might as well

have fun building the platform.

You might expect minimal connection between the beginning and end of 'hidden tilt' scenes, and yet they usually give the illusion that they were generated by the platform (not by the tilt). For example, a bad poet was having his verses corrected by his daughter when the director told him to say: "It's time I told you about the family curse." The poet collapsed in despair, and said that for hundreds of years the men in the family had been doomed to be bad poets. Then he tilted the scene again by saying that the curse could only be broken by the eldest daughter ... and so on. The 'family curse' tilt was chosen before the scene started, and had nothing to do with bad poets, and yet the tilt was fully integrated with it.

Let's say that a player 'brings a stranger home', and that they're just exchanging pleasantries (establishing nothing about the space they're in). I might shout suggestions like:

"Admire her Elvis' poster!"

Or:

"Look at his Science-Fiction collection!"

Or: "See the skull on the mantelpiece."

These additions are random, and yet whatever the tilt, it can probably be made to 'fit' them (and this will probably happen automatically). I'll try three tilts from our 'You Bring A Stranger Home' list:

"Don't you recognize me?"

"Last night you asked for a sign from God - and here I am."

*The stranger is a saint who can work miracles.*

If you've established the Elvis poster, the stranger can say: "Don't you recognize me?" and turn into Elvis; or his being Elvis could be the sign from God; or a miracle-working Saint could divine Elvis's current phone number. Had your interest been aroused by



the Sci-Fi collection, you could become the unborn child who has traveled back from the future to confront its parent; or you could reveal the whole universe as a delusion which you are willing to turn off as the 'sign from God'; or you could become a robot Saint designed by aliens to take over religious broadcasting.

If there was a skull on the mantelpiece, the Stranger could hold it up beside his/her own head and say: "Don't you recognize me?" Or it could speak (as the sign from God). Or it could be the skull of Pope Urban the Eighth that the Saint wants to bring back to life.

Hidden Tilts seem perfect for Gorilla Theatre (in which the players take turns directing each other) but we don't begin our Gorilla Theatre season until September. I'll let you know how it goes.

### Preparing For The Tilt

If a mad tattooist is to climb in your window at three in the morning it doesn't help to precede this by discussing 'mad tattooists', and if the tilt is in a 'Roommates' scene is "I've sold you, please don't be living at a sugar-plantation in the eighteenth century; and yet there's nothing wrong with adapting the platform to the tilt, so long as there's no possible way that the tilt can be foreseen. For example, an intruder can praise your unblemished skin without diminishing the effect of the Mad-Tattooist tilt, and if the tilt is to be "I've sold you" there no reason why you shouldn't be fed up with your roommate who borrows money off you, and never cleans up.

Here's an example of a lead-in that strengthened the tilt. Peter Oldring displayed an amazing ability to attract and befriended the animals in the park; he mimed petting the pigeons, he 'juggled' the 'sparrows', he let the 'squirrel' run up one arm and around his shoulders and

down the other arm. A 'baby deer' arrived and he put his arm around its neck and cuddled it. This was enchanting to his partner, and he then explained that in his world the human beings had conquered their violent impulses and were at peace with nature (using the 'visitor from the future' tilt). His ability to befriend wild animals made his journey from the future far more 'credible', but this tilt could not have been anticipated, whereas if he'd led up to it by discussing time-travel, the 'boulder in the small pond' effect would be diminished.

Sometimes the 'director' will ask for a specific platform, while concealing the tilt. One scene began with the director asking for a sofa to be placed on the stage, back towards the audience. A man and woman were to be 'making out' on the sofa - the back of it concealing the fact that nothing indecent was happening, and they were asked to create a platform about having really bad sex. They created a wonderfully funny scene without any thought for what the tilt might be, and then the director threw in the tilt by asking the man to say:

"I was in a train crash at puberty, and now I can only get an orgasm if there's a train wreck."

The unsatisfactory lover repeated this, and described the impossibility of ever assembling the conditions necessary to satisfy him: the grinding of metal, the explosions, the hissing of steam, the shrieks of the whistle drowning out the cries of the victims, and so on - until he noticed that his descriptions had worked the woman into a sexual frenzy. Then they rushed off to the nearest railway line - etc."

This 'adults only' scene was hysterically funny, and it had a strong structure, but although the platform was planned as a lead-in before the scene started, no one could have anticipated the tilt.

So:

1. A lead-in that suggests the tilt is not recommended.
2. A lead-in which leaves the tilt 'unpredictable' is O.K.  
(I know that this doesn't fit in with theories about suspense, but I'm still working out the details.)

### A Sense Of Place

I had expected that Tilt-Lists would encourage the creation of strong platforms (because why plan ahead if you already know what the tilt will be?) but platforms are built from arbitrary ideas, and the average player wants reasons for the stuff that the mind spews out. If you're having a picnic, why not set it at Stonehenge, or on a hill where a cult has gathered to await the end of the world? But to the average player, such arbitrary ideas represent a 'loss of control', and he/she prefers to picnic in some generic field, and the platform is seen as a 'period of walking' before the 'real business' of the scene arrives, and this leads to very brief platforms and to predictable 'lead-ins'.

If a scene starts in a prison cell it feels 'safe' to sit on a bench, looking miserable, but why not read the graffiti, or throw a book at a rat, or play with your pet spider, or thumb through the book of rules, or ring for 'Room Service' and have a guard come in and beat you up? Such elaborations make it likely that the scene will develop its own momentum, whereas if the cell has no dimensions, no 'substance', then what else is there to do except think ahead and plan what should happen next? It would be better to pace out the dimensions and discover that the walls are moving inwards, or to investigate the window and notice that someone is flashing you a message, or perhaps a brick might come loose and you'd find a notebook hidden behind it. Without such arbitrary 'stuff' improvisers are like

bakers without flour, or sculptors without stone.

'Place-Lists' are my latest way to encourage vigorous platforms (they're even newer and less 'tested' than Tilt-Lists). They give ideas that are intended to help establish environments, and the players take them into the scenes like 'scripts'.

Here's one list that two 'hunters' might use. (Many of these suggestions can also function as tilts.)

#### In The Forest

- Like a cathedral - sunlight filtering through.
- Name carved into a tree.
- See a ladder beside a tree.
- See spikes driven into trees by opponents of the forest industry.
- Moss on the weatherward sides of trunks.
- Garbage.
- Ants. Snakes. Spiders. Birds. Flowers. Mushrooms. Berries. Cobwebs.
- Vines to 'Tarzan' on.
- Tracks.
- A view over the valley.
- A KEEP OUT fence.
- Snap mosquitoes.
- Some mosquitoes are so big you have to punch them and then stamp on them.
- Animals approach you. (Feed them? Receive a message? Kill them? Run away?)
- Bears.
- Tracks in the ground.
- A smell of smoke.
- Poems pinned on the branches?
- Polluted trees dying.
- Chase butterflies.
- Ruins of an old homestead.
- Snares. Pitfalls.
- A wounded animal.
- Warm ashes in a campfire.
- A gingerbread house.
- Blood-stained clothing.
- Human skulls on stakes.



- Hunters hunting you.
- A hermit/holy man.
- Preachers.
- A fugitive from a coven.

If this list does no more than inspire the players to eat berries and slap a few mosquitoes, this is still more than we get in the average forest scene.

Here's a list that two 'lovers' might use.

#### In Bed

- Bread crumbs.
- Wrestling for the sheet.
- Fluffing the pillows.
- Someone in the block of flats opposite watching you through binoculars.
- The 'wet spot'.
- Getting comfortable (e.g. position of embracing arms?)
- Setting the alarm.
- Something hidden in the bed: beer-bottle, cold hot-water bottle, vibrator, pornography, alarm-clock, book of spells, Bible, etc.
- Noisy lovers on other side of wall.
- Alarm goes off.
- Someone is thirsty (your child in the next room?).
- Impotence.
- Noises 'downstairs'.
- "Throw-down your weapons and come out with your hands up!" (intended for next door?).
- Don't realize you're dreaming.
- The bed catches fire.
- Picture falls off the wall.
- Cramp.
- Put your back out.
- Hotel desk phones at 3 AM: "The airline's sent your luggage; do you want it brought up?"
- Room service.
- Kneel and pray before sleep.
- People banging the wall telling you to keep it down.
- Groan the wrong name at a critical moment.

Even a smidgen of these suggestions will give 'being in bed' more 'substance', and if anyone attacks you for introducing a distasteful idea (like the 'wet-spot') you can absolve yourself by saying: "Blame Keith, it's his list." Like the Tilt-List, Place-Lists can increase the player's permission to explore taboo material.

Here's a Place-List for being in Hell:

#### In Hell

- A lunatic bureaucracy (a Kafka Hell?).
- Screams.
- Raffle tickets that let you escape (just teasing).
- Sinners on racks.
- Sinners with funnels in mouth and stuff being poured in.
- Teachers forcing people to learn things they don't want to know.
- Punishment collars.
- Eyes gouged out. Limbs sawn off.
- Incredibly polite demons.
- Sinners forced to watch bad Theatresports forever.
- Excellent company.
- Don Juan without a penis.
- Dental drills on sound track (and elsewhere).
- Gigantic hands coming through curtains to slap sinners down and drag them off.
- Giant syringes."

I agree that these Place-Lists may become clichés, but it's a cliché every time someone in a 'kitchen' opens the 'fridge', and better a cliché than nothing at all (Lindsay Anderson once wrote on a wall that "a cliché is a truth uninformed by feeling"). But make new lists, and refresh the old ones.

#### Objections

When people first learn of the existence of Tilt-Lists, they conceive them as a way to avoid 'having to really

improvise', but a good tilt makes it impossible to fall back on 'what worked last time', so it would be more accurate to say that improvisers who don't tilt are just paddling about, whereas confirming a good tilt (being altered by it) is like being hurled into a raging ocean.

There is also a fear that players will repeat these Tilt-Lists (and Place-Lists) until they become clichés. In scene after scene people will be saying "I'm your soul," or "I've sold you," until we're all sick of it.

We can prevent this by pinning the Tilt-Lists on the greenroom wall and asking anyone who uses a tilt to write the date beside it. Players should also write their own lists because mine express my inner world, and yours will express your inner world (at least they will if you type them quickly). When platforms generate their own tills, the best of these should go straight onto lists.

(Judges should reject snopworn tills.)

#### A Selection Of Tilt-Lists

A tilt is an opportunity, that has to be seized. If you're in Heaven and the scene is tilted by your realization that you've no sex organs, be delighted that all that 'trouble' is in the past, or be so outraged at this anti-sex attitude that you take the elevator to Hell. If your 'child' says: "Some dreams must be real, Mummy, because I found this in bed this morning!" the audience don't want you to say: "Oh it's a feather that must have worked its way out of the mattress," they want it to be a whistle made from a finger-bone, or a book of spells, or a 'ray-gun', and when you laugh and pull the trigger they'll want the side of the house to be blown off. Whatever the tilt, they hope that it will create a change in the balance between the characters, and the coach should make sure that the opportunity is

seized.

Many tills sound disappointing until you realize the transformations that are offered. Scanning ahead I notice "You Meet The God of A Sacred Glade". That doesn't look much fun, and as no one has tried it yet, other people probably think the same, and yet the God could punish you for ill-treating her animals, or force you to worship her, or to turn you into an animal so that she can hurt you down - and that might be very interesting.

Anyway, take a look at these lists to get the general idea. Please remember, that they're not intended to work in isolation, that their purpose is to destabilize a platform."

#### Strangers on a Park bench

- One demonstrates his/her control of the weather. (And then loses control of it?)
- One buys the other's soul.
- They 'feed' birds. One starts killing them.
- "God (or Satan) sent me to find you."
- "I need help to repair my space ship."
- "I'm a Bounty Hunter!"
- One is a psychic who always knows what the other will do or say.
- "I need someone to donate a kidney." (Try this on someone who has been trying to convert you.)
- One explains that he/she is a visitor from the future.
- "This was my favorite place before I died."
- "Everyone who talks to me has bad luck." (Bad luck things start happening to the other person.)
- The two-realities game: "You think this is a Park, don't you? But you're wrong!"
- One starts to undress.
- "I work miracles."

#### Child Going To Sleep At Night

- "Daddy, you'd better go now or the



- thing under the bed (In the toy-cupboard?) will get you."
- "Are dreams real, Mummy? Because this was in the bed with me when I woke up!"
- "I don't want to go to sleep, Daddy, because the demons make me work for them." (Blisters on his/her hands?)
- "Grandad tried to put his thing in me."
- "If you don't shut up and go to sleep the monster will get you."
- "The TV said that the world was going to end at midnight."
- "The children at school said you're a witch."

**Someone Climbs In The Window When You're Asleep**

- He/She thought this was his/her window in the apartment block.
- It's the person who tied you to the bed and went to Florida.
- He/She is the person who's been stalking you.
- It's someone on the run.
- It's a mad tattooist.
- It's a psychic come to warn you that you are about to be attacked. (He/She kills you to save his/her reputation?)
- It's the hypnotist who forgot to remove an important post-hypnotic suggestion.
- He/She is your long lost whatever.
- Someone wants to convert you.
- It's your soul that never found you when you were born (it's why life has seemed awful, or 'numb').

**Prison**

- The prisoner is innocent (the guard did the crime).
- One is an arsonist who starts fires telepathically.
- One has been sent to rescue the other.
- One is religious and God rescues them both.
- One is a hallucination ("You think I'm

- real don't you?").
- One is your older self who has traveled back from the future (to rescue you?).
- It's time for your execution.
- "You need a protector in a place like this. And I'm going to be it!"
- Prisoner 'mind-swaps' with guard.
- The guard offers to escape with you.
- The guard smuggles you a letter.
- "I've got you a present for your birthday."

**New Boy In Hell**

- "There's one way you can get out of here right now!"
- "We're closing Hell down."
- You meet a demon who was at school with you.
- Satan wants to have sex with you.
- They discover that you never did anything wrong, so they phone Heaven. 2nd tilt: Heaven is full.
- You're sent back to complain about the poisons cozing down from above.
- "We're starting the lottery - here's your ticket!" You win and you're back with your family. No - it was just a trick to tease you.

**Vampire/Werewolf Scenes**

- "I think I'm a Vampire (Werewolf), Doctor."
- Vampire (Werewolf) wants psychologist to make him normal.
- Depressed Vampire/Werewolf wants to surrender.
- "Where is it you go during the day?"
- "I've had enough of these Werewolf fantasies, and I'm going to beat some sense into you!"
- Your perfect lover admits that he/she is a Vampire/Werewolf (wants you to 'stay over' at full-moon?)
- "Augh! Full moon tonight! I thought it was tomorrow!"
- "Chain me up and don't come back until daylight!"

**You Bring A Stranger Home**

- "Don't you recognize me?"
- "Last night, you asked for a sign from God. Here I am."
- The stranger is a saint who can work miracles.
- It's a magical being who rewards you for your kindness.
- It's someone (the ghost of someone) that did an injustice.
- It's the kid you bullied at school.
- He/She proves you are the guest. You realize that it's true and that you have to leave (even your dog barks at you?).
- "I've been stalking you."
- He/She wants to shoot someone from your window.
- "I have this power over people. I don't understand it - I just snap my fingers and ..." (SNAP FINGERS!)
- He/She confesses to a crime against God? Satan? Is pursued by evil spirits?
- The stranger is from outer-space (or from the future?).
- "I'm in disguise because I want to know what people really think of me."

**The Baby-Sitter**

- Find photos of dead teen-agers, plus newspaper-cuttings about the murder of baby-sitters.
- You hear someone moving about in the house.
- A voice in your head says: "Kill the children!" (On P.A. System?)
- Your friend arrives, and you do the 'knife' game."
- A friend of the family arrives to stay the weekend. The house is isolated. It's a storm. You let him/her in. (2nd tilt: he/she doesn't know the family.)
- "If Joe rings, tell him you're living with me."
- Man: "If Susan rings, tell her you're living with me."
- The sofa 'comes on' to you (voice on P.A. system).

**Hunters**

- A wounded animal pleads for its life. (2nd tilt: It gives you a wish?)
- You release an animal and it thanks you.
- A hunter is hurtling for mines. (2nd tilt: he discovers that you are one.)
- "You may wonder why I brought you out here."
- One shoots the other (or himself) accidentally.
- Shoot a human instead of an animal. Bury him: find him in your truck. Bury him: see him trying to thumb you down at the roadside. Go to a 'shrink', and he's in the waiting room. Go to confession: he's the priest. Be admitted to mental hospital: he's one of the attendants. Arrive in Heaven: he's in charge of admissions. Demand an audience with St. Peter ... etc."
- Platform: "Actually the animals enjoy the sport!" Tilt: someone or something shoots at them.
- Meet the God of a sacred glade.
- Shoot an animal. Then your partner says: "I didn't think you earthlings were serious." He/She does the 'knife-game,'" and emerges as alien. Gives you a running start.

**Roomates**

- "All these women you bring home: could I share one?"
- Discover roommate is an alien.
- Discover roommate has been replaced by an identical impostor."
- This isn't an apartment! This is a mental hospital.
- "Why do I have to leave you alone in the apartment? No one ever comes or goes. What do you do in here?"
- "You've got to give me an alibi!"
- "I've read your diary."
- One partner slept with the other's lover.
- Your roommate stole from you (sold your possessions?).



- "My sister (brother) told me what you did!"
- "Where is it you go every full moon?"
- "I've sold you."
- "I've been secretly in love with you, and it's driving me crazy!"
- "You really believe that you met me for the first time when I answered the 'ad'?"
- "Why's the bathroom covered in blood?"

#### Family

- Platform: phone for call-girl. Tilt: when she arrives, it's your sister.
- Platform: you're a bed-ridden teenager. Tilt: ask Dad (or Mum) to get you a call-girl.
- You discover your sibling (child?) parent? is homosexual.
- Dad's been abusing me."
- Master: "The truth is, Perkins, that you're my son (daughter)."
- Servant: "I found this birth certificate in the attic. Sir, why didn't you tell me you were my Father?"
- Servant: "Why are you so nasty to me. Dad (Mum)?"
- My daughter (son) tells me that you burst into his/her room last night.
- "It's time I told you about the family curse."

#### One Partner Comes Home Late

- She's pregnant. (2nd tilt: "It's not yours!")
- He/She has found out about your infidelity. (Dis honesty? Perversion? Crime? War crimes? Serial rapes?)
- "That serial killer - you know it's me?"
- The latecomer ran over a pedestrian and drove on.
- The latecomer has prostituted him/herself for the first time.
- "I bought a gun. Want to see how it works?"
- "I'm a robot that he/she had made to exactly resemble him/her."

#### Crime

- "You're the lawyer who 'put me away', and I'm going to kill you!"
- "Let's see that scar (tattoo, birthmark, etc.). You're the one who attacked me!"
- Kidnapper with victim. Tilt: it's the wrong person.
- Kidnapper with victim. Tilt: the victim recognizes the kidnapper.
- "I've been offered money to kill you."
- A rejected child confronts the parent who rejected him.
- A client must eliminate an attorney who has discovered his/her guilt.
- "Can you get drugs for me, Son?"

#### Psychologist/Patient

- "You're the psychologist? Oh, no, I'm the psychologist!"
- Psychologist realizes patient is a killer.
- The psychologist is a mental patient (the asylum has been taken over by the inmates?).
- Realize psychologist is trying to kill you (kill him/her to save your life).
- "Stop that!" - Endow psychologist with being perverted.
- "I'm pursued by demons!" (Demons enter that are invisible to psychologist).
- Man recovers memory - He's someone else; they had misidentified him.

#### Lovers

- "You're married, admit it!"
- "I'm in love with your Mother." (Father? Brother? Sister? Identical twin?)
- "I'm only dating your brother (sister? parent?) because it gives me a chance to see you."
- Platform: lover ties you to bed. Tilt: you recognize who he/she really is.
- One is on the run. (Criminal? Peace activist? Werewolf?)
- "I found these panties under the pillow. They aren't my size."

- "Robin loves me now, and there's nothing you can do about it!"
- One will abandon the other unless a condition is met.
- One is horrified by the other's pornography. 2nd tilt: he/she gets to like it.

#### Sex/Romance

- A woman tries to find the ideal person to give her virginity to.
- "You don't realize it, but I've already made love to you."
- Discover distressing secret about your mate.
- "Your (wife/husband) and I love each other."
- Your date removes his gloves and shows you the stigmata.
- "I work miracles."
- A driver falls in love with a hitch-hiker (who takes him to hell? Who destroys him?).
- Someone sent me this photograph of you naked with George (with Mary? With my wife? Husband? Sister? Dentist?). Second tilt: "I sent it to you!"
- Trying to undo her bra: "What's this small brain attached to your spinal cord?"
- New wife (husband) is shocked to discover that her (his) mate can only make love in front of an audience.
- A student becomes romantically involved with her tutor.
- A woman shelters a fugitive.

#### Scene With a Beerie (Small Voice Game)

- "Will you step on me please."
- It wants to surrender.
- It wants to live with you (for the winter?).
- It's a fan. (Of your poems? Of your golf? Of your paintings? Of your fight against pollution?)
- It believes that you are God and it wants you to give it some laws.
- You killed its brother (father, sister, ad

#### lib.)

- It's so proud of its 'resistance' that it wants you to test a spray on it.
- It wants you look something up in a book.
- It wants you to explain what it's here for. What's its purpose in life?

#### Teacher/Student Scene

- The teacher shows the parent the child's obscene drawings. 2nd tilt: the parent did the drawings.
- The teacher seduces the student (or vice versa).
- "I'll do anything to get an 'A' in this class!" - "Anything?"
- "I saw Jesus in a vision and he told me education was immoral!"
- "Give me an 'A' or I'll say you fondled me!"
- "You can't punish me, Sir, because I've sold my soul to the devil (because I'm dead already? Because my Dad will fire you? - Put a contract out on you?").

#### Science Fiction

- "This is just a hologram. Peep through the curtains and see what's really out there."
- Mother was impregnated by aliens. Father: "That's why I can do THIS!"
- A time-traveler is being pursued by the time-police.
- "I need help to repair my spaceship."
- "I'm from a parallel universe. I need to mind-swap with you." 2nd tilt: Time-barrier Cop arrests him (leaving Hero in the wrong body?).
- "I'm not veiled because of Basil's death. I'm veiled because of the failure of one of his experiments."
- "I demand to see the Professor! I have proof that he's created a killer robot."
- A killer cyborg arrives from future.
- Astronauts on new planet. They dig in the ground and the planet roars in agony (rage?).



## Miscellaneous

- Platform: looking for 'treasure'. Tilt: You find the waters of life. 2nd tilt: Test its effect by stabbing someone who dies. 3rd tilt: See sign warning that the fountain has been polluted.
- "I'm your homeless person."
- A woman tracks down and kills the gang (person) who raped her.
- Platform: at a grave. Tilt: The dead person arrives to comfort you (or for revenge?).
- Platform: at a grave. Tilt: It's your own gravel! 2nd tilt: You arrive home but no one takes any notice of you.
- "This doesn't taste like veal!" (Human flesh)
- Your penis insults you (some other organ?).
- The phone rings - it's someone watching you from the apartment block opposite your window.
- Platform: renting an apartment. Tilt: "I put the advert in the paper especially for you."
- You are masturbating when a priest climbs in the window.
- "I know who you are (what you are?), and I understand your need to hide!"
- A Hitch-hiker forces you to take the road to Hell.
- A Hitch-hiker won't let you stop when the police flag you down.
- Platform: Two male (female) astronauts with a cargo of frozen women (men). Tilt: Recognize two names on the list. 2nd tilt: Thaw them out.

## In Conclusion

Great improvisers walk onto the stage, with 'blank' minds, and 'go with the flow'. The 'river' takes them, and swirls them about, and tilts them through rapids and over waterfalls, but they know, even at an unconscious level, that none of this is real, and that they're in the hands of God, or the Great Moose, or some other module of the

brain. Their attitude is the opposite of those 'beginners' for whom the demons on the stage are every bit as threatening as the demons in real life, and who fight desperately to remain unchanged.

Practice doesn't necessarily make perfect - sometimes it just thickens the shell - but if tilting becomes part of our vocabulary we can oppose the conscious intention of the performer to tilt, against the unconscious forces that impel him/her to obstinately 'stay the same'.

1 'Hell Judges' are fellow improvisers who sit at the back and either press a button to suggest to the Lighting Imp. that a fade-to-black might be a good idea, or press another button that suggests to the official Judges that enough is enough. Hell Judges are more accurate than the official Judges, because they have no responsibility. The official Judges make their own decisions, but the knowledge that the Hell Judges are bored is likely to prompt them into doing something.

2 Accepting suggestions does not make the audience believe that you're improvising - nothing makes the audience believe that you're improvising.

3 Our Judges can intervene when promises are broken by saying things like: "You were challenged to a scene about nuclear power, but you're presenting a knitting competition! You really want to do that?" But many groups allow celebrities, or other inexperienced people, to judge, and all they are allowed to do is to supervise the coin-toss and award points.

4 Seneca says they were boring.

5 'Snoggers' is short for scenographers.

6 Each player insists on a different locale for the scene. One player is persuaded that the other is right. "That's a bush!" "No, it isn't! It's my sofa!" "It does look a bit like a sofa ..."

"Try sitting on it. See? Don't tell me a bush would be that comfortable!"

7 People seems to know intuitively when the moment for a tilt has arrived. One moment a platform can be enthralling, but the next everyone will say - at the same moment - "Tilt now!" as if they'd been born with the knowledge of when to tilt a scene into the chaotic future.

8 'Bridging' is the insecure improviser's habit of building a bridge to some point in the future that could have been reached in one step.

9 She could be Superwoman, or a very bad conductor, but I'd still like a more

stable platform to launch the scene from.

10 "What's the difference between 'tilting' and 'breaking the routine'?"

"A tilt is a break of routine that tilts the balance between the players."

11 This 'sex and train crashes' tilt came from my once reacting about a Hungarian who had that problem back in the thirties and I think was responsible for the deaths of a lot of people.

12 Giant hands and giant syringes are some of the advantages of having your own space.

13 Many of these individual tilts are still untried, and they could be applied to almost any scene (i.e. they're generic tilts). Secretly choose any tilt that interests you, get the players to improvise a platform, and then throw the tilt at them. If they confirm it - by agreeing to tilt the balance - they can almost always make it seem integral to the scene.

14 See footnote 6.

15 This is a 'substitute for sex'. Open a box of special 'knives'. Admire them. Each player stabs a knife into his/her forehead and then drags it down the face and body and one leg to make a 'slit' (screaming all the way). Recover. Place your fingers into the 'slit' in forehead and pretend to peel the skin back so that a different head emerges. Peel all your skin off and emerge as an insanely gleeful monster. Maybe panic as the Parents are heard returning?

16 This 'sequence' can last for at least twenty minutes, if the players are inspired.

17 See footnote 15.

18 The clinical name for this insanity is Capgrat's Syndrome (if you want to know.)