

# KEITH JOHNSTONE'S THEATRESPORTS® AND LIFE-GAME® NEWSLETTER

Motto: Don't Be Prepared

## NEWS FIVE

APRIL 1993

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This issue contains four 'Theatresports essays' (not just one). These are: a description of *Gorilla Theatre* (my latest way of packaging public improvisation), an essay on *Meet The Monster* requested by (and distributed to) students who attended our International Summer School, an essay on *ArtSports* written for Sally and Tom Mueller of Ventura Theatresports, and (at the last possible moment) *Smoke Without Fire* - an account of the way that Theatresports was created, perhaps long overdue. K.J.

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### UPDATES

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#### Update On Narrative (Mysteries)

Detective stories offer a mystery to be solved, but so does every story. If we're shown a farmer looking at his cows then we want to know: "What's so special about a farmer staring at his cows?" Or if a story begins with a sailor pounding his head against the floor then we want to know: "Why is he doing this?", and we read on to discover the answer: perhaps the farmer's cows keep disappearing; perhaps the sailor is beating his head on the floor because he's discovered his sister in a brothel.

Events at the beginning of a story are seen as time-bombs: the Princess's promise 'explodes' when the Frog cavorts in her bed, the foot-print detonates when Crusoe sees the cannibals. This explains why the audience will watch happily as an improviser pretends to dust an armchair (or whatever) so long as he/she seems 'in control' and 'confident'. *Law: the audience will attend to any action, no matter how 'uninteresting' so long as the performer seems calm and/or purposeful, but they regard their attention as a loan that will be repaid.*

A secret contract between performer and audience says that there'll be a 'relevance' to anything that the spectators are asked to give their full attention. If you dust an armchair and then wave the lights down to end the scene they'll feel cheated; no matter whether you dusted it to music or began dancing about and managed to get a few laughs. They assumed they were watching a mystery, i.e. that the action of 'dusting the armchair' would lead somewhere, but no revolver was found tucked into the upholstery, and the dust did

not become so thick that you sneezed yourself to death, and the seat did not open up and swallow you.

It's depressing to watch someone pretend to 'vacuum' the stage, when you know that he/she is just trying to be 'funny', or 'cute' and that the action will lead nowhere. But if the vacuum sucks in the furniture, the city, the planet, the entire universe, until the improviser is confronted by a furious God who gets sucked in as well - that's interesting.

If actions have led nowhere, and if pointless scene has followed pointless scene, you may be still able to jerk laughs out of the audience but nothing will seem worth watching 'for its own sake'. This is why it's so difficult to win the audience back once you've 'lost' them. Why should they give you their trust if you keep betraying it?

#### Update On 'Whoring For Laughs'

Not all laughs are good laughs. If your partner picks up a brick and uses it as a 'camera', you can get a laugh by saying: "What are you doing with that brick?", but this lessens the audience's interest (if the improvisors can't take the story seriously why should the audience?)

Another reason for resisting easy laughs, is the need to create a benevolent audience, i.e. to unite them until they become 'one animal' with the laughter cracking out in huge unthinking waves. But if improvisors grab at every possibility for a laugh (like junkies who need their fix) the audience response becomes fragmented. It's easy to make some of the audience laugh by doing stupid things, e.g. drinking the water from the flower-vase when you're sitting in a restaurant, or by saying 'fuck' (which always makes some fools laugh - at least it does in Calgary) but this won't fuse the spectators into one huge creature that rolls over and just wants to be tickled.



Every theatre company has one member who is so anxious when sitting in the audience, that he/she laughs too loudly and at the wrong time. You know how disturbing this is, but in my opinion, a section of the audience that laughs all by itself has a worse effect. 'Whoring for laughs' - getting a laugh at whatever price - not only kills narrative, but decreases benevolence. People start thinking: 'O.K., so you think you're funny! So make us laugh!' and you can work ten times as hard and create less effect.

James Bolam once had part of the set of *The Knack* collapse on him when he was alone on stage. He looked at the audience and said: "What a household!" and by the time the audience stopped laughing the set had been fixed. K.J.

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**FOUR THEATRE-  
 SPORTS ESSAYS**

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**I. MEET THE  
 MONSTER®  
 (AND DREAM MENUS)**

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*Meet The Monster* is a variant of a game that people have been playing ever since Ig and Og invented it back in the caves. After I had reinvented the form I kept seeing something very like it in anthropological movies and it might best be described as a 'rite' or as an 'initiation' rather than as a 'play', since it involves taking two blind-folded volunteers through a 'guided trip'.

Its creation was inspired by Hugh Crutwell, the Principal of the Royal Academy Of Dramatic Art. He said:

"Some students can go through R.A.D.A. using technical solutions. You're always inventing new games; can't you devise some method that will force the actor to experience the role?"

One of these 'games' was *Meet The Monster* which does exactly the opposite (i.e. it forces the audience to experience the role). I was commuting each week to Dartington Hall (in Devon), and I 'constructed' the first *Meet The Monster* at the Hall (because the facilities were better). It caused some alarm - although not among the students - because it could induce states of deep absorption, i.e. trance. Poor Ruth Foster (who had invited me to Dartington)

was ordered to tell me that: "No one should even be out of control in a social situation!". I explained that no one ever is 'out of control' (unless their brain has been damaged or drugged), and that all that happens in *Meet The Monster* is that we take the control away from the individual and hand it over to the group, but it was decided that although it was O.K. for the Drama students to continue with this work, the Art students and Music students should be excluded. That night I woke up in the early hours and heard a 'bootleg' version being performed.

**Masks And Trance  
 (A Digression)**

I had encountered anxieties about trance-states during my work with Masks. Some people genuinely believe that if you change someone's appearance, and encourage them to behave 'differently', this can lead them straight to the mental ward. I suppose that's always a possibility, but no more than with any other mildly stressful experience (family quarrels, going on journeys, having to wash the car). Anything can precipitate a psychotic episode in an unstable person, but Masks exert their greatest effect on normal people. Anyone aberrant is unlikely to respond to mask work at all, because (by definition) misfits are the least suggestible. The real problem is that a 'possessed' Mask can be so frightening that the on-lookers project their own terror onto the wearer.

I'd never compel anyone to wear a mask - I'd let them make the decision for themselves - but if a student became alarmed (as when a pacifist discovered a ocean of pent-up rage churning about inside of him) I'd integrate the experience into 'normal life' so that he/she wouldn't feel 'different' or 'rejected'.

"That's fine," I'd say: "That's what's supposed to happen. Many people have similar experiences!"

I remember a *mime* class in which an actor pretended to be stroking an animal. "Continue with your eyes closed," I said, and she hallucinated a 'real' animal. She was terrified until I told her that such an experience wasn't unusual (although it was) and congratulated her on becoming so absorbed. This altered her 'frame of reference' so that the experience became positive, but I never thought - "Oh dear, teaching mime is risking my students' sanity! I'd better stop doing it!"

A Mask class is an ideal place in which to explore 'forbidden states', and the effects seem entirely beneficial - as has been reported from other cultures. Mask-work allows students to express forbidden parts of their personalities, and to let off 'steam' in safe surroundings.

Our anti-trance culture denies us some valuable experiences. I used to be astonished to find that I was a small boy sitting in a cinema seat, and that I'd been watching a movie. I could get halfway home before the imaginary pistol-holsters stopped banging against my thighs, and this kind of involvement - where you are 'in' the movie -



seemed quite wonderful, but the government paid people to teach me to be 'objective' and 'detached' and 'critical'. Joanna Field suffered a similar fate; she wrote *A Life Of One's Own* about her experience of being 'locked out' of paintings, and about her successful attempts to 'pick the lock' (my imagery). And I remember a conductor who said that he'd become so 'detached' from music that it just made him think of rows of little black dots moving up and down (one has to regard his plight as something to have been avoided).

### Word At A Time

*Meet The Monster* was a development of the word-at-a-time games that I invented in the early sixties. These were intended to stop my students from 'controlling the future', and they involved asking the players to compose sentences by adding a word each.

If you begin a sentence by saying: "Henry....." then you'll have some sort of continuation in mind, e.g. "Henry was late for work", but the next person to add a word may say: "Henry took a bath," and then the next person may say: "Henry took Betty to lunch", and the next person may say: "Henry took Betty to the study" and the next person may say: "Henry took Betty to task."

We might assume that the sentence was 'out of control', and yet it's easy to improvise articulate sentences, or paragraphs, or even complete stories using this method (although they will be a creation of the group, not of the individual).

It can be alarming to be involved in a story which is 'telling itself' (how do you impose censorship?) but each player has the choice of whether to develop the action or sidetrack it. At first each player will kill the story by being stupid, or ungrammatical, or by adding irrelevancies. If the story is about Henry taking Betty into his confidence then you can kill this idea by adding 'But' and the narrative will veer off in some other direction, or you can use strings of adjectives to avoid taking responsibility for choosing the noun: for example:

"Henry took Betty into his long, big, grey, enormous, vibrating, picturesque....."

(Do this and the audience will laugh, encouraging you to repeat this behaviour, but they soon complain that 'nothing's happening').

Allowing stories to develop 'by themselves', is more fun than killing them, so (with a bit of coaxing) students learn to take the story forwards to see where 'it' wants to go, instead of trying to predetermine everything (the method they learned at school). Stories 'create themselves' effortlessly if the players are fearless. The only requirement is that these stories should be grammatical, and that the players should be trying to make some sort of sense.

Word-at-a-time stories encourage spontaneity, and help the players to realize that they habitually block their own

ideas. You notice yourself substituting one word for another at lightning speed, even though the first word would have served just as well (or better).

I decreased the size of the groups, and I was soon getting the players to invent word-at-a-time stories in pairs. It was then obvious to say: "Act out the story as you tell it!" (although it took me about six years to see this 'obviousness'). Word-at-a-time games then became an entertainment, a way of acting out stories in front of a paying audience, for example:

"We ARE opening....."

They mime opening a door.

"THE door INTO an OLD house. WE walk TOWARDS the BASEMENT...."

They walk forwards and mime opening a second door.

"Now WE descend THE stairs INTO the DARKNESS....."

They mime walking down the stairs.

I asked one of the players to shut her eyes (her partner acting as guide and 'protector'). When your eyes are closed the events described are likely to be visualized in great detail. If the story mentions trees you see the moss on the bark, the sunlight on the leaves, the little animals, the toadstools, and whatever else your mind wants to conjure up. Maybe this doesn't happen to conceptualisers, but most theatre people are visualizers (or both).<sup>1</sup>

I tried this game myself to make sure it wasn't dangerous (this was thirty years ago and we were afraid we might drive people crazy) and the images are still vivid. We hauled ourselves up a vast damask table-cloth, and clambered across gigantic knives and forks, and managed to cut a slice of colossal fruitcake; the cherries loomed above me like psychedelic lanterns - I took one in my arms and I can still feel its size and weight.

But what would happen if both story-tellers closed their eyes and stayed in physical contact with each other? I appointed guides to steer them away from furniture, or from the edge of the lake, or from whatever other danger threatened. The story-tellers now reinforced each other's emotion. 'You' might not 'notice' that your partner was trembling, because your consciousness would be busy composing word-at-a-time sentences, but something 'in' you would notice, and would be strongly affected. Very likely you too would begin to tremble, and this would magnify your partner's emotion and drag him/her further into the world of the story.

The 'guides' (i.e. the students who steer the story-tellers away from danger) are listening to the story, so it's almost inevitable that they'll begin to take a more active role.

Lets say that the story-tellers mime opening a gate into a forbidden garden: it's very natural for the 'guides' to make the creaking sound of the rusty metal. And if bird-song is mentioned it's quite likely that someone will start adding bird noises, and that someone may waft a coat to create a breeze. If the story-tellers say it's raining, someone may



start flicking little drops of water onto their faces. If they describe the ground as 'covered in spiders', dozens of fingers may start scrabbling up their legs.

As the group become more skilled, so the 'visions' of the story-tellers become more vivid, and more trance-inducing. If the story-tellers mime flying they may be picked up and flown about. If they say that a monster is engulfing them the entire group may embrace them and crush them to the ground.

I was invited to a 'Virtual Reality' conference in San Francisco as 'an interesting person to have around' but when I got there they asked me if I could 'do something'. I ran a few closed-eye word-at-a-time scenes, which were just as much fun as anything the computers could generate.

### 'Nelson's Eye'

When I was a child we played a game in which objects were passed around in the dark - e.g. a peeled grape might be handed to you while being described as 'Nelson's eye', and so on. I'd also seen a trick in which you close your eyes while the chair you are sitting on is lifted into the air. You are led to believe that your hands are resting on the heads of the two people who are lifting the chair, but they are actually resting on the heads of two other people who are crouching lower and lower until you lose touch with them. You may be only a foot above the ground but you have the illusion that you are some eight feet or more in the air and you feel precarious.

The memory of such games inspired me to start collecting 'apparatus': branches, bubble-mixture, bits of fur, metal-sheets (to make 'thunder'), crinkly plastic (to imitate the sound of fire), 'bird-warblers', and so on. Such 'props' make it easier to deepen the experience of the story-tellers. Instead of miming 'petting a squirrel', they may now be touching a piece of fur which is wrapped around someone's hand. I remember a woman who screamed and then 'came out' of the story - the 'guides' had lowered a large wooden box over her head (to alter the acoustics) and when she had screamed the sound had bounced back at her from all sides.

In spite of such hazards, playing word-at-a-time games with closed eyes, and with a skilled 'chorus', is an experience not to be missed.

### The Guides Become Characters

It's inevitable (if the morale is good), that the Guides will begin to enter the story as characters (using distorted voices, and speaking from floor level or from high above, or through tubes). If the 'story-tellers' mime 'plucking an apple' they may be confronted by the owner of the orchard. If they try run away a dozen guards may seize them.

"Forget about the 'word-at-a-time' game," I said: "Let's have the Guides improvise the entire adventure!".

(From this point on, I'll refer to the 'story-tellers' as the 'volunteers', because it's now the guides who tell the story).

Common themes begin to emerge - even in groups that have no contact with each other. The 'volunteers' are killed (sacrificed), and are resurrected; burials take place and lights are flickered onto the story-tellers eyelids as they enter the afterworld. It was as if we were recreating the Eleusinian mysteries or dramatizing the *Tibetan Book Of The Dead*. I was reminded of a New Guinea peace-making procedure that involves choosing a representative from each of two warring tribes, fitting them up with symbolic umbilical chords, and having them 'born-again' as 'twins' by making them squeeze through a tunnel made from straddled legs, and prone, groaning male bodies.

### Dream Menus

Any group of Guides will gradually collect a repertoire of 'experiences' that can be 'served up' at short notice - ways to represent journeys by boat, and hailstorms, and so on. They learn to suggest tropical jungles by using vapour-sprays of warm water, plus intense light, plus clacking 'insects' that whizz past the volunteer's ears; or they may learn how to create a really good swamp by having a guide curse the proliferation of leeches, plus having the volunteers boots held down by people who are making squelching-noises.

'Dream Menus' are a list of such effects, plus a choice of genres. They allow volunteers to select experiences from a menu of possibilities (and this led directly to the invention of *'Meet The Monster'*) Such a menu might include:

- The Jungle
- The Swamp.
- The Elevator.
- The Burial.
- The Angel.
- The Submarine.
- The Future City (straight out of the movie *Blade Runner*).
- The Forest.

Possible genres might include:

- Science-Fiction
- Western.
- Romance.
- Detective.
- 'Lord Of The Rings'.

And so on. Effects should be graded so that the demands on the volunteers deepen gradually. Make too big a 'jump' and they will 'snap out of it', and 'come back to their senses', and it'll be more difficult to get them absorbed a second time. The same 'Effect' can be adapted for use in various genres: the submarine might do service as a 'space ship', the 'heat' of the 'Jungle' could suggest a 'Sauna'.

Find out things that the volunteers wish to avoid, and respect their wishes. If someone has vetoed spiders, don't tangle them in a web of scotch-tape (because he/she will instantly cease to be absorbed and the whole point is to maintain and deepen the absorption).



After a volunteer has selected a number of experiences, he/she is sent away for twenty minutes or so while the group 'cook the meal', i.e. while they link the items into some sort of coherent narrative (including off-menu experiences that they invent on the spur of the moment).

The best effects are often achieved by the simplest means. If a guide 'falls into a crevasse' and tip-toes screaming into another room, the brain will almost certainly ignore the information from the ears and 'place' the screaming as 'coming from below'.

Trivial devices can have profound effects. A student at Dartington Hall wanted to be a horse, and one part of her 'dream' involved locking her (blindfolded of course) into a small cupboard that we had 'carpeted' with straw. 'Grooms' made desultory conversation, and we clacked coconut shells outside the door to suggest hooves, and jingled bits of metal to suggest harness. I left her in there for a few minutes, and regretted that we couldn't have invented something better (I'd been trying to get a mosquito salve so that we could have added a slight smell of ammonia, and I'd wanted someone who could do a realistic neigh), but she was thrilled by her minutes of crouching motionless. She said that she'd remember 'being a horse' for the rest of her life!

Even before a *Dream* begins, the volunteer is likely to be in an 'altered' state. Imagine that you're waiting while a 'dream' is being prepared for you. You feel important, because you're the centre of so much attention, but you're about to put yourself into the groups' power, and you've told them things that you're anxious to avoid at all costs. This realization makes it difficult to read, or chat to people, or in anyway be at ease. You know it's going to be 'just a game' but nothing that ever happened to you - unless it was being operated on in a hospital - bears any relation to the experience you're about to undergo, and you may be trembling by the time someone comes to fetch you.

Lets imagine that while you're being blindfolded I tell you that you can escape by shouting 'Uncle' (or whatever). This may seem reassuring, but it increases your suggestibility by implying that you are likely to be overwhelmed by the experience. Knowing that you can shout 'Uncle' is seldom of any practical use, because if a volunteer goes into the 'dream state' the possibility of yelling 'Uncle' is 'lost in some other universe'.

This inability to protect ourselves from our imagination occurs when we get caught up in horror movies. If we could be objective about the acting and the 'special-effects', we might notice the zip-fastener up the belly of the monster.

There are infinite possibilities for *Dream Menus*. You could become Cortez, or Napoleon; or a version of *Hamlet* could be devised with you as the Hero. You could 'perform' brain operations, and save the planet, and/or become a 'wino' and sink into the 'dregs of society'. You could return to your school-days and wreak havoc on the teachers who

tormented you.

Alex Comfort wrote of a need for an 'emotional technology' as a counter-balance to our 'scientific' technology. *Dream-Menus* were a move in that direction, and they offered people something that they felt deprived of - why else should almost everyone who hears about them be so eager to experience them?

## The Bear

Here are my recollections of a 'Guided Dream' that took place when I began experimenting with these ideas twenty-five years ago (can I be so old?). A course for teachers had been arranged by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and on the last day I mentioned 'Dream Menus'. They were eager to try it (of course) so I asked a volunteer if he'd like to be an animal:

"I'd like to be a Bear!" he said, without the least hesitation.

"Would you like to be in a forest?"

"Yes."

"What would you like to happen?"

"I'd like to be hunted."

He was so enthusiastic about this that I said:

"Would you like to be captured?"

"Yes!"

"What would you like to avoid?"

"I don't like slugs and spiders."

"O.K. no slugs, no spiders."

"Would you like a swamp?"

"O.K."

"Would you like a religious experience?"

"Yes."

"How about an enchanted lake?"

"Splendid!"

And so on.

I helped the group to assemble a 'story' that included most of the elements he had requested. He had wanted to be a child again, so we decided that we'd put him to bed and then tell him that he was a Bear dreaming that he was a human child, and that because winter was coming he'd have to journey down to the valley (this migration wasn't important in the finished product). He would then meet a golden-haired 'Princess' at the edge of an enchanted lake (he liked blondes), and she would warn him about the Bear-Hunters. The hunters were to be heard in the distance and she would tell him how to escape. Later on, when he thought he was safe, he would fall into a pit, and be captured, and carried to the Village. Then the Bear God was to appear and transform him into a human being, and the villagers would choose him as their King.

There were about forty teachers, so I divided them into groups and made each group responsible for a section of the 'trip'. After about twenty minutes I went to fetch him, and they blindfolded him and removed his shoes and socks.

He was tucked up in bed by a 'Mummy' and a 'Daddy'



(we'd found some sheets and some pillows). They pretended he had a cold and that they were rubbing his chest with 'vick' (they held a minute amount under his nose). Thirty years ago it was normal for ill children to have 'Vick' rubbed on their chest; the smell was very important in taking the 'Bear' back to 'childhood'.

He was told that he was falling asleep and he began to breathe more deeply. (He seemed to be regressing very quickly - accepting everything without the slightest resistance). Eight people then carried him outside while a guide told him that he was a Bear who was dreaming that he was a human child, and that he was about to wake up.

Fur-strips were wrapped around his hands and taped around his wrists. I'd thought that this was rather a silly idea, but it had an powerful effect on the him, especially when he touched his face (perhaps because he was being distracted by a guide who was telling him that all Bears have to travel through the forest until they meet the 'Princess Of The Lake').

The forest was created by bird-song, and by 'wind rustling in leaves' sounds, and by damp-leaves under-foot, and by wet and leafy branches that the Bear had to push through (their operators kept creeping ahead so that he had to push through them again). He heard the Princess singing, and we had him 'emerge' at the edge of the lake by blasting extra sunlight onto his skin with mirrors, and by wetting the grass so that it felt damp to his bare feet. (if this sounds ridiculous, please remember that this isn't *your* dream).

By this time the Princess was crying, and he reached out and touched her arm:

"Ask her why she's so unhappy!" whispered a guide who was 'steering' him.

"Don't hurt me, Bear!" she said. A length of hair was brushed lightly against his face, and the light darkened as if she were standing over him. A touch of warm skin, a whiff of scent, a rustle of silk, and his mind had created the Princess in every detail.

"I won't hurt you," he said: "Why are you crying?"

"I've dropped my ball in the lake. Can you reach it for me, Bear?"

His 'paw' was guided into a tub of water (that had stones and disintegrating newspapers on the bottom) and a ball was pushed towards his submerged hand. We saw him a blind-folded man putting a fur-wrapped hand into a tub of cold water, but he experienced himself as at the edge of a vast lake (with the wind sighing through the reeds, and with strange water-fowl screaming), and he was with a Princess that his unconscious had built to his exact specifications. She thanked him for the ball and whispered that the King would have punished her terribly if she had lost it.

Something struck his 'paw'.

"A snake, look out!" she cried and he jerked backwards and had to be caught by a dozen hands.

She 'sucked out the venom' and dried his paw and hung a

magical necklace around his neck that had been made by Dwarves and that was inset with precious jewels. It was just a twisted circle of wire to us but what with his blindfold, and his hands wrapped in fur, how was he to know?

She was feeding him berries when dogs were heard barking in the distance:

"Run that way, Bear, and you'll be safe!" she said. It was at this point that I realized just how careful the group has to be to protect the volunteer, because although this was happening beside the Royal Shakespeare Company 'Theatre-Go-Round' rehearsal hut (with no field, no wide space, just a narrow strip of grass) the 'Bear' ran full tilt towards a wall so that I had to wrestle him to the ground (I'd be wise to such possibilities now). We incorporated the 'violence' into the story, and then the guides led him away 'through the trees', saying:

"Duck under this branch!"

And:

"Jump over this stream."

There were no branches and no stream in our world, but he believed in them absolutely.

The group responsible for 'trapping' the Bear had built up a circle of rostra and had stretched a painted canvas back and drop tightly across them. The Bear was led onto the centre of this, and the canvas was released, lowering him into 'pit' (the hole that had been left at the centre). The Bear growled and thrashed about as if he really was a Bear (don't think he was 'acting') and the 'hunters' cheered. The canvas released clouds of suffocating dust which worried us but it didn't worry the Bear. His necklace was taken away (amid ferocious roaring) and he was told to grasp a pole. His wrists and ankles were tied to it with scarves, and he was carried, still grasping the pole, by singing 'hunters', and laid beside a fire which projected heat onto his face (from a lamp), and which could be heard crackling (small sticks were being broken).

I was getting a bit worried because he was becoming eerily 'Bear-like'. He was introduced to the King by the Princess, and it was agreed that he should become human and be allowed out of his cage so long as he promised not to hurt anybody. The event concluded happily with his hands uncovered, and with his being permitted to touch and feel things (including the 'Princess').

His blindfold was removed during a profound silence in which we waited anxiously: had we done him a service or disservice? He found his voice and said: "That was the best thing that's ever happened to me!" (Where are you now 'Bear'?)

### Meet The Monster

Once a group is experienced at creating 'Dream Menu' it's easy to make the transition to 'Meet The Monster'. This is a 'Guided Dream' that is created for you by other people but there's no menu, i.e. everyone goes through the same



'Dream'. This must be one of the least commercial forms of theatre ever invented since sixteen or so guides are needed to take two 'audience members' through an adventure that lasts about fifteen minutes, but I see it as a way of improving the morale of a group. It does many of the things that sensitivity games are intended to achieve, and helps students to 'reframe' trance-states as enjoyable rather than alarming.

The exact form of *Meet The Monster* varies, depending on the skills of the 'guides', and on the 'apparatus' available, and on the limitations of the 'performance' space. Every location offers fresh possibilities, and these should be exploited: if a 'boat-trip' takes place in a laundry-room, then a washing machine might be used to suggest the propellers thrashing in the water, and if there was an electric fan it might be used to create a breeze.

### The Dartington Hall 'Monster'

I've presented several *Meet The Monsters*, but I'll describe the Dartington Hall version. We used two rooms at the corner of the courtyard opposite the Great Hall (one was downstairs, and one was upstairs), plus the passage-way and staircase that linked them, and a small patch of lawn, and a stretch of private road-way.

About thirty 'spectators' entered the lower room by crawling through a tunnel (I suppose that this was to disorient them). They were thanked for coming, and asked if they'd be willing to go in search of a monster (we had collected a few volunteers ahead of time, so we knew that at least some people were willing to take the risk).

Our first two volunteers - lets call them Peter and Janet - were introduced, and checked over quickly by a fake medical-team. They were praised for their courage, and then blindfolded, bidden 'God-speed', and allowed to exit through the tunnel (the far end was being squeezed in so that they had to push their way towards the voices that were whispering their names). Sometimes the volunteers were blindfolded separately so that they had no idea who they were paired with (a great way to meet people). They were helped out of the tunnel by two 'guides' who told them to remove their shoes and socks (the audience didn't see any of this - they were still being lectured on 'How To Kill Monsters').

Magical signs were 'painted' onto the volunteers' foreheads to protect them (actually we painted their names on them so the various guides would always know who they were dealing with). Peter was led across the lawn, and told to step over imaginary logs, and to duck under nonexistent branches, and so on. His bare feet were transmitting all kinds of information ('stone...stone.... grass....leaves....more grass.... crackly leaf....stone.....something squidgy.....' and so on). Meanwhile the guide was suggesting things that triggered his imagination, e.g. shooping away animals, helping him avoid 'nettles' etc.. "Careful!" said the guides,

and: "Step over here," and: "Keep away from the edge!"<sup>2</sup>.

The blindfold canceled-out Peter's usual way of perceiving things, and he had given up trying to guess where he was in 'everyday reality'. There was a smell of roses that aroused appropriate memories, and soft hands were steering him, and he could hear 'bystanders' commenting on how brave he was, and how grateful they were to him. At one point there was a burst of applause and cries of 'Long live the monster-slayer! Long live the monster-slayer!').

Meanwhile Janet had entered a small, disguised, space where she was pressed gently to the floor. Her blindfold was removed and she saw a robed figure wearing a beautiful mask of an old man. Maybe this mask could have been lit by moving flashlights, and there could have been strange graffiti on the wall behind him, or something weird could have been happening at the periphery of her vision - someone could have been weeping, or a child's voice could have been whispering the Psalm about "Yea, though I go through the valley of death"<sup>3</sup>. But Janet had no time to think about any of this, because she was being forbidden to turn her head and someone was holding it firmly and introducing her to the the old man:

"This is Grimdal, the only one who can save us! But now he's dying, and the only thing in the world that will cure him is the juice of a flower that grows in the cave of the monster. Will you get this flower for us?"

Had Janet said: 'No!' we would have replaced her with another volunteer, but no one ever did say: 'No' (they were too interested!).

Grimdal bowed slightly to Janet and 'his' Mask seemed to smile. As her blindfold was replaced she noticed that he was offering her a gold coin.

"Reach a little further, Grimdal is further away than you think!"

The coin had just been dried after cooling in a bowl of ice.

"Treasure this gold coin," whispered a voice (all the voices on this journey were disguised): "You will need it on your journey."

Janet was led across the grass, just as Peter had been, except that her guides were thanking her profusely - the depth of their gratitude suggesting the magnitude of the terrors that were awaiting her.

Now Peter was being introduced to Grimdal, and was receiving his 'gold' coin. His guides explained that the next stretch of the journey was so difficult that he would have to be carried. He was lifted by about seven people, three to each side and one to support his head. They jogged 'on the spot', while sounds zoomed past (a tape-recorder was being moved past his ears at the moment that the recorded sounds dropped in pitch. This 'doppler' effect gave Peter the impression that he was being carried at immense speed.

He was set down on a soft surface covered in pine cones, and was distracted in some way while Janet was 'being carried'. Then they were reintroduced (still blindfolded of



course) and asked if they had their gold coins - this informed them that that they had both met Grimdal. They were told to crawl up a flight of stairs where new guides were waiting for them: "Go towards the sound at the top of the stairs!"

They crawled up side-by-side towards the eerie sound - we used a tape by, I think, Steve Reich, that was based on the repetition of a line of dialogue that was so distorted that it was impossible to decipher it. I chose it because it wasn't likely to fit any category that the volunteers were familiar with back in the sixties - or now even!

Janet and Peter believed themselves to be climbing alone, although their guides were just inches away, ready to protect them if there was a mishap. The building was familiar to them and yet the stairs seemed eerily extended (how could they guess that we had added a flight of portable steps?) A new guide had climbed a stepladder and was calling to them from above - which made it even more difficult for them to 'orient' themselves - and as they reached the top of the fake stairs arms seized them and carried them to a 'grassy meadow' where they were lowered onto a heap of grass clippings (the smell of cut-grass evokes vivid images). A tape-recorder playing bird-song was being circled around their heads, which gave a 'super-stereo' effect, but they were immediately distracted by guides who welcomed them and began to argue about whether to take them through the gnarled wood, or the swamp of snakes. To the volunteers relief they decided to go through the wood.

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Meanwhile, in the lower room, lectures on the monster were being given, illustrated by drawings, and blurred photographs, and water-damaged 'projections'. 'Experts' were interviewed, and maps displayed, and possible routes sketched out. All this was interspersed with reports of previous monsters, the Monster of Slattery Island for example:

"....Repulsive, outlandish, fierce, and very terrifying was the beast that arose there. It's front end was like a horse, with a glowing blazing eye in it's head, sharp, savage, furious, angry, keen, crimson, bloody, very harsh, rapidly rolling.....the tail fins of a whale on its behind, with iron nails on them, pointing backwards; they laid bare the surface of the ground wherever they went, behind the monster..."<sup>4</sup>

Some witnesses were confused, and others were obviously lying. There was no agreement on the exact nature of the landscape, or of the distances involved; but it was clear that the journey would be hazardous, and that the monster was huge (but whether it was hairy, or scaly, or leathery, or could fly, or breathe fire - all this was in dispute). Roarings and strange noises could sometimes be heard. After a quarter of an hour, or so, the volunteers returned (minus their blindfolds) and were given medals and a 'Hero's' welcome. Their altered state was usually quite noticeable. They were likely to be flushed, exultant,

confused, and often quite inarticulate. Meanwhile two more volunteers had set out 'on the journey', and the 'Advice To Monster-Hunters' was continuing plus interviews with the 'heroes' who had just encountered the beast.

When I presented *Meet The Monster* at R.A.D.A., the very first volunteers were strangers to us (I don't know how they had managed to gate-crash this private performance). As they 'returned to base' one flopped down on the floor and was 'beyond speech'. We covered her with a blanket and I saw Hugh Crutwell looking at me as if I was making people more 'emotionally involved' than he had perhaps intended, but I stayed calm and said things like 'great!' and 'that's only to be expected!' and she slowly recovered and said (like the Bear) that it had been a wonderful experience.

The visible effects of the 'trip' fail to deter subsequent volunteers (it may even encourage the younger ones) but they no longer treat the event so lightly. The next volunteers are very likely to be trembling as they're blindfolded (volunteers are taken through in pairs in order to exploit this effect. Having a partner makes them feel 'safer', but this 'safety' allows them to become more vulnerable).

After a few 'trips' had been completed, we 'stored-up' some volunteers, and allowed the rest of the onlookers (those who didn't want to volunteer) to exit quietly, and see what was happening 'on the journey'. People who had already been taken through were encouraged to help with the carrying, and to hold the branches for the forest, and so forth). It was surprising to see how many of the volunteers went through the trip quite uncritically, and how the simplest devices could have profound effects.

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Meanwhile: Peter and Janet are being led though the wood, rather than across the 'swamp of snakes', but the fact that this choice had to be argued implies that not just the swamp is dangerous. 'Burrs' tug their clothes, and sticks break underfoot. They tread along a narrow lane of plastic-sheeting that is strewn with sand and dead leaves (but through an unending forest so far as they are concerned).

The guides shout: "The cannibal birds have seen us!" and Peter and Janet are pushed down onto a pile of dead leaves: The guides fight the birds off bravely and put band-aids onto the 'wounds' of the volunteers - who have been prodded very lightly with blunt wooden twigs. Even as this is being done they are being hurried on, while being reassured that they're safe (the more sincerely you tell people that nothing dangerous is about to happen more you unnerve them).

The attack by the 'cannibal birds' looked 'childish' to the on-lookers (they just saw people 'cawing', and flapping hats around other people's heads), yet some volunteers said it was one of the most memorable parts of the trip; they had visualized sharp beaks, and sunlight exploding through the thrashing branches, and bits of flesh being ripped off their



companions.

Peter and Janet are taken separate ways. Peter is carried to a 'sideways room' that we built from bits and pieces. The guides lie him sideways on cushions with his knees bent. A chair is held sideways with its seat pressed against his bottom, and a plank is pressed against the soles of his sideways feet. His blindfold is removed and he sees an eerily lit (and disguised) figure who is sitting opposite him, and who is also propped into a sideways position, (more convincingly than Peter, but fortunately Peter can't see himself). Between them is a 'sideways table' that has playing cards and a 'cup of tea' glued to it (lumps of sugar are stuck to the saucer, and a spoon is sticking out of the 'solid' tea). This person is placing some playing cards onto the sideways table-cloth, playing 'patience' (these cards have 'velcroed' backs so that they stay where they're put).

"Are you willing to continue this quest?" asks the sideways person.

The volunteers always said 'yes' (or nodded if they were incapable of speech). As their blindfolds were replaced they glimpsed a 'red smartie' that was being handed to them (a little sweet made of sugar-coated chocolate). "Eat this!", they were told: "It will give you strength!"<sup>5</sup>

Peter bites or swallows his red smartie (a toffee or a 'boiled' sweet would be too persistent) and he is lifted from the chair and 'rushed' to the edge of a 'lake'.

Janet had arrived at this lake a few minutes earlier, and had used her gold coin to pay a ferry-man to take her across to the 'Island of the Beast'. She had been helped into the boat, i.e. on to an upturned table that rested on an inflated innertube (this table seemed as if it were 'floating' since it was responsive to every movement).

"Sit on the thwart and hold the tiller!"

Janet had clutched a length of wood that had someone holding the other end (and gripping it more firmly once the boat began 'moving under power' so as to imitate the resistance of the water).

"I'll start the motor! Keep the bow pointing towards the mountain on the island!"

The 'motor' had been started (i.e. a piece of cardboard was held against the blades of an electric fan) and Janet had steered as the water roughened and the wind strengthened (created by sheets of hardboard that were being flapped about).

"More to the left! Don't over do it. Watch out for that log in the water! Keep her on that bearing!"

Once beyond the shelter of the headland, occasional drops of 'lake water' had begun splashing onto Janet's skin. The suggestions given by the Boatman about 'steering around those rocks to the left', and his hints about the sinister island they were approaching, had made this boat-trip a splendid and convincing experience.

Now Peter is paying for his 'trip to the island', and Janet is carried off to experience the 'sideways' room. Reunited on

the 'island of the beast', they are told that they'll have to ascend a mountain by 'chairlift'. Peter is subjected to the party-trick of the chair that rises just a foot into the air. (He has no idea that that the heads that his hands are resting on for support belong not to the 'lifters' but to other people who are crouching lower and lower). Janet is being whispered to as Peter is 'ascending the mountain' (there always has to be one guide who continues to weave the spell).

Now Janet 'ascends the mountain', and alights beside Peter. Guides lead them along a 'causeway' made of slabs of damp slate, and a 'storm' is released using stereo equipment. Huge boards are flapped vigorously to propel the air, and grains of hail are bouncing off their exposed skin (did we use frozen-peas? I don't remember, but we used something!).

The guides are being very careful to protect the volunteers feet from damage by the 'rocks', and they are ready to catch them, should they lose their balance (no one ever did). They imply vast space all around, and terrifying chasms to each side. A guide 'loses his footing', and the volunteers are asked to hold on to him. They hear the ripping of cloth and the bursting of stitches, and they're left grasping an empty sleeve as he/she tip-toes away screaming. The other guide weeps, and tells them to stay put - that he's going to 'climb down to find the body'. Janet and Peter are alone, lost high up on a desolate mountain, clutching on to each other on a rostrum covered by stone slabs, and with the storm crashing and howling so loudly that it's difficult to make themselves heard. They're about eighteen inches above the floor, but with any luck they'll they feel that they're about a mile up.

Almost immediately - because we don't want to give them time to 'snap out of it' - they hear voices calling to them from about ten feet away (but the voices seem muffled by distance because their owners are shouting into soft hats).

"Hello there! Don't give up! We'll save you! We'll throw you a rope!"

This upper room at Dartington Hall has doors placed a few feet up one wall. These open onto a road (the room is built into the side of a hill and I suppose it used to be some sort of barn). These new 'guides' are shouting from this doorway.

"Grab the rope! You'll have to swing across the ravine!"

"What!" (Total disbelief!).

A thick rope has been fastened to a beam. It knocks against our Heroes until they manage to grasp it (this is easy to arrange because there are guides standing all around them).

"Swing across the ravine. The man first! Hold onto the rope! You can put your feet onto the knot, and swing over to us one at a time! Whatever you do, don't let goooooo!"

If this sounds dangerous, always remember that there are guides standing next to the volunteers, ready to seize hold of them.

Peter swings across the 'chasm' and is grabbed, hoisted up to the doors, and led outside, where he runs toward the



'cave' of the monster, never actually being touched by the guide who accompanies him. One of the few genuine 'sensitivity games' I invented at the *Royal Court Theatre Studio* involved running across vast open spaces with your eyes shut - guided by someone who stays near you. This, by itself, can be amazingly disassociating, especially if the guide alters his position relative to you, i.e. speaking from a prone position on the ground as you run past, or speaking now from ahead and now from behind, now from the left and now from the right. Try this in an open field or on a sandy beach, and you won't have to run far before you're not really sure which way is up: your body starts getting looser, and wanting to flop sideways and you move slower and slower until you're hardly doing more than running 'on the spot'.

Meanwhile, Janet has also swung across the 'void'. She is told that her partner is afraid to go any further, that she will have to proceed alone. She is lowered to floor-level - from the ledge in front of the open doors - thanked for her courage, and told to walk towards the monster's cave. The guides set her in the correct direction and she walks across damp newspapers that have foam-rubber underneath them so that the ground feels 'yielding'.

Female hands stop her, and a voice says: "Have you come for the flower?"

She has met 'the virgin of the cave' who offers her the choice of killing the monster, or setting it free. Most people choose to kill it, but not Janet.

"Walk towards the breathing" says the Virgin. "And when you feel its 'leash', untie it, and lead the monster out of the cave. Good luck!"

She moves towards a slowed-down and greatly magnified breathing - i.e. towards an amplifier. This 'cave' seems to be the dampest place imaginable, because unbeknownst to her, soap bubbles are being blown onto her skin where they burst. Her hands encounter a thick rope that is knotted to a pillar (two guides are moving the pillar so that there's no way her hands can avoid grasping the knot).

She unties the rope and can feel that it leads upwards - presumably towards the Monster's neck (the far end is tied to the top of a long pole which is moving about as if the monster is swaying its head).

Now she is distracted by the Virgin who materializes next to her.

"Don't forget the flower!"

The virgin guides Janet's hand to a flower which is being held from under a sheet of artificial grass.

"Pick the flower," says the Virgin. Janet snaps the flower's stem, and walks out into bird-song, and the sound of cheering, and of peasants singing and dancing. She has the flower in one hand, and the rope in the other - its far end is still tied to the pole which is being carried along behind her. The monster roars and 'jerks its rope'. She releases it, and hears it rampaging into the distance, snorting and roaring, as the peasants shout: "Never come back! Never come

back!"

She is taken to Grimdal, who seems to be already dead, but who revives as she 'squeezes the juice of the flower' onto him. Church bells ring out as her blindfold is removed, and Grimdal thanks her, and blesses her. She's given her shoes and socks and is sent back into the 'lecture' where she tries to give coherent answers to questions about her adventure.

Meanwhile Peter has met the Virgin of the cave, and has made the popular choice - to kill the Monster.

As he approaches the source of the huge breathing, and experiences the weird 'dampness', the 'Virgin' materializes beside him.

"There's only one way to kill it!" she says: "Throw this stone, and when it opens its mouth to roar, jump onto its tongue. Then crawl down its throat and grasp the jugular vein. Tear it open! It's the only way!"

(No one ever refused)

The breathing is enormous, and huge digestion noises are heard. Peter throws the stone which lands silently in a sheet held just in front of him. A gigantic roaring and a wave of air hits him.

"Now!" screams the Virgin, and hands push him forwards onto a large, soft, warm, slippery plastic surface. Her voice is screaming 'Be brave! Have courage!' as it fades into the distance, but his mind has to cope with sensory overload. There are mattresses under the plastic and the whole thing tips so that he slides forwards. The blindfold has allowed some sensitivity to light but these 'innards' seem utterly dark. Hairdryers and warm water have been heating the plastic, and semi-naked (naked for all he knows) bodies are forming a throat for him to slide down. There are huge slurpings and throbbings of blood. He wants to flail about but he's grabbed before he can hurt anyone, and a long 'Airship' balloon heavy and tight with hot-water is thrust into his hands.

"Break the jugular!" says a voice (or many voices) and he rips it, and hot fluid spurts all over his hands, seeming to have the stickiness and colour and odour of blood. It's only hot water, but by this time Peter's mind is 'filling in the gaps' with astounding vividness.

The monster roars and writhes and the entire 'throat' of bodies contracts around Peter, clamping onto him. The gigantic heart thumps to a stop and then the throat loosens just a little. There is absolute silence until peasant voices are heard saying "Cut him out!" and: "Get him out before he suffocates!". A chainsaw cleaves away at the 'flesh', and Peter is hauled out. The Virgin of the Cave welcomes him, and then he too picks the flower, and revives Grimdal.

I gave three women at Dartington the task of 'building the mouth' and when it was completed we put them through that part of the trip to 'test it'. Each woman emerged weeping, and holding her hands far away from her torso as if they were smeared with blood. If the mouth has that effect on its



creators, you can imagine that it may have made quite an impression on Peter.

Before being taken back to the room, most volunteers ask if they can meet the guide who 'fell from the mountain'. We let them do this and often they hug him/her as if the danger had been real.

As the guides become more experienced, they learn to implant stronger 'suggestions', and they continue experimenting with their roles. For example, the boatman might try being contemptuous of the volunteers:

"Ah, well, we won't be seeing you again, Sir!"

Or subservient:

"Tis an honour having you in my boat, God bless you, Ma'am!"

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Beginning improvisors often have no idea what the audience need from them, and a lot of what they do is irrelevant. *Meet The Monster* makes such obtuseness rather obvious. I've seen 'guides' try to create a forest by holding up branches as if they were flags - they weren't even rustling them! You may have to explain that nothing can be visually presented to the volunteers (except when intense light is being projected onto the blindfolds). And that to create a forest you have to hold the branches still so that they form a barrier. I.e. the guides have to understand that the point is not their 'acting' but the effect their actions have on the volunteers (an important lesson).

Each guide has to be taken through the trip at least once before they fully understand the power of suggestion, and especially of subliminal suggestions. Afterwards they should give 'feedback', explaining which things took them further into the 'reality' of the adventure, and which things made them more 'critical', i.e. they train their colleagues by telling them what 'worked', and what didn't work.

When people tell me that that 'Dream Menus' are 'dangerous', I ask them for evidence, and refer them to the anthropological data. After all, why should so-called 'primitive' people have all the fun.

Aug 92.

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## 2. GORILLA THEATRE<sup>®</sup>

(Aka: My Scene Impro)

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Four or five experienced performers take turns at directing each other in impro-scenes: If a scene is liked by the spectators the director is rewarded, but if it's disliked the director is punished (This game is not suitable for beginners because the 'player/directors' have to be skilled at rescuing scenes). Intended as a way to improve 'coaching' skills, Gorilla Theatre has become a valuable entertainment game.

### Origins

*Gorilla Theatre* is a spin-off from *Theme-and-Forfeit* which was a spin-off from the *Loose Moose All-Star show*.

The *All-Star Show* presented four of five improvisors (and a director) who entertained the spectators for a couple of hours. Our senior improvisors preferred it to *Theatresports*, but it was never as popular.

You can see impro shows that are entertaining, but there isn't a single scene you'd want to remember next day (or are able to remember next day!). And although you know that the improvisors may have strong views on all sort of subjects, these are very unlikely to be expressed in their work.

*Theme And Forfeit* was a device to coax the performers in the *All-Star Show* into expressing some sort of 'commitment'. We told the spectators that unless a chosen theme was incorporated into a scene they should yell 'forfeit', and that the 'miscreants' would then 'pay' one. At first the players earned forfeit after forfeit, but they soon became more skilled; if the theme was 'religion' a lover would remove his gloves to show that he had the stigmata, or the 'Three Wise Men' would arrive at an abortion clinic. The audience loved yelling 'forfeit' and sometimes we'd had to earn one deliberately (so that they wouldn't feel deprived).

This was good for the improvisors' technique, and as it led directly to *Gorilla Theatre* I'll explain it in more detail.

### How To Play Theme And Forfeit

Write out thirty forfeits on strips of paper (try not to base these on impro-games - we want to increase variety, not diminish it). Typical forfeits might be:

'Invent a limerick based on the name of an audience member.'

'Say good-night to each member of the audience at the end of the show,' (the improvisor stands at the door of the theatre shaking hands).



'Perform an athletic feat.'

'Become very old and reminisce about your days as a young improviser.'

'Expose a personal secret.'

'Improvise a creative dance to music chosen by the sound-improviser.'

'Serve at the bar during the interval' (a few minutes is enough).

'Act out your greatest fear.'

'Try to solve a riddle posed by an audience member.'

'Defend yourself to God!'

And so on. The players must now agree on a theme (don't ask the audience to choose a theme - they'll pick the one that gets the biggest laugh - usually the silliest).

Typical 'themes' might include:

'Saving the planet!'

'Guilt.'

'Education.'

'Crime.'

'Belief.'

'Proverbs.'

Justice.'

'Revenge.'

'Love' (plus 'Hate' after the interval?).

'Heaven' (plus 'Hell' after the interval?).

'Innocence' (plus 'Experience' after the interval?).

And so on. Explain that if any scene has not adequately expressed 'homelessness', or 'ecology' (or whatever was chosen) the audience must shout FORFEIT. The offenders will then 'pay' an individual or group forfeit - whichever is appropriate. (Use strips of one colour for individual-forfeits, and strips of another colour for group-forfeits so you know which is which).

This game forces the players to think in new ways; if the theme is 'ecology' it's not enough to just say: "We must do something about the garbage!": you need to quarrel with a lout who strews litter in the park, and wrestle him, and then place him conscientiously into a trash-basket; or perhaps you could meet a beetle waving a white flag.

### Taking Responsibility

When I directed *Theme And Forfeit* from on-stage it was my responsibility to find good 'endings', and to shout suggestions, and to interrupt to ask the audience what they wanted to happen next, and so forth. When I left the show (believing that it could function just as well without me) the players divided my role between them, taking turns at setting-up the scenes. I attended a performance (during our International Summer School) and saw that the players 'on the bench' weren't paying attention: they weren't even looking for good places to wave the lights down! This was disappointing, because I'd hoped that the students at our Summer School would see work of reasonable quality.

I gave notes, and suggested that the 'directors' who failed

to rescue 'bad' scenes should pay a forfeit, and that the directors of 'good' scenes should get some sort of recognition. *Gorilla Theatre* was born at that exact moment.

*Theme and Forfeit* had taught us how to use forfeits as a punishment, but the audience's applause had been considered sufficient reward. What I wanted now was some 'device' that could be velcroed (or pinned) onto the clothing of successful directors, and that would display the number of 'good' scenes they had created.

I bought some red-ribbons that had the word 'director' printed on them, and said that if a scene was judged to be successful we should award its 'director' one of these ribbons, and that whoever won the most ribbons would receive a symbolic prize at the end of the show (this prize had to be symbolic, i.e. of no monetary value, or there might have been a temptation for players to win by screwing-up their 'opponents' scenes). These 'director' ribbons worked splendidly, even though they weren't readable from a distance - seven-inch long strips of plain red ribbon would serve just as well.

I was sitting arm in arm with a life-size toy-gorilla when it occurred to me that the players could compete for the honour of winning a week with this creature. The 'working title' for this 'new-form' was *My-Scene Impro* but *Gorilla Theatre* sounded more fun (although we still print *My Scene Impro* in brackets below the title). The gorilla should be large enough to wrestle with. Ideally it should be about as big as you are.

We're saving up for a gorilla-suit so that the 'gorilla' can bound about the stage, and carry off the winner for a week of bananas and 'quality time'.

### How To Play Gorilla Theatre

1. Get a large soft toy gorilla, or dress someone in a gorilla suit.
2. Cut a bright red-ribbon into seven inch strips.
3. Buy 'golden' safety-pins so that the ribbons can be pinned onto the player's clothing
4. Write lots of forfeits on strips of paper and keep about thirty that win the players' approval (encourage them to be daring).
5. Hang this large sign to one side of the stage.....

### MY SCENE IMPRO THE PLAYER RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS SCENE IS....

.....and leave a blank where a players name can be inserted.

6. Print each player's name on a card that can be slotted into the blank space. These names should be large enough to be read easily from the back of the theatre).

7. Choose four or five experienced players.

8. (This one is a luxury) Ask two 's'noggers'



('scenographers') to improvise the 'scenography', arming themselves with beds, chairs, boats, potted-plants, lengths of fake railway track, lanterns that creak in the 'wind', fake 'tumble-weed' (for 'Western' scenes), and so on. (S'noggers need space to store stuff backstage).

9. Another luxury - employ a music-improvisor to add sound where appropriate.

10. The players (minus 'last weeks winner') introduce the show, and explain that if a 'director' sets up a boring or otherwise offensive scene the audience should yell FORFEIT. A s'nogger will then bring on the forfeits, and a player will read two of these aloud (as examples) and get the audience to practice shouting 'FORFEIT!'. When order has been restored, explain the ribbons, and rehearse mass shouts of 'RIBBON' (shouting in unison helps to unite the spectators into one huge beast that rolls over and wants to be tickled). Conclude these explanations by saying that a forfeit can't earn another forfeit, and that it can't win a ribbon either.

11. 'Last-weeks-winner' and the gorilla have been waiting off-stage. Introduce them and then place the gorilla in some position visible to the audience (or if you're using a scenographer in a gorilla suit, have him/her exit backstage<sup>6</sup>).

12. Play rock/paper/scissors to decide who sets up the first scene.

13. While a scene is being set up, another player (or the Gorilla) inserts the 'director's' name into the slot at the base of the sign.

14. 'Directors' can act in their own scene, can shout advice, can wave the lights down (or up), can shout suggestions, can do anything they believe necessary for the success of the scene.

15. We play for a couple of hours, including a fifteen-minute interval taken after an hour: if a scene is being set-up or is in progress when the time to end the game is reached, we wait until it's been 'judged' (and any forfeit paid), before declaring a winner.

16. If there's a 'tie', the winners play a one-on-one scene (a 'one-off Hat-Game perhaps).

17. The player who presents the Gorilla must stress that the winner is allowed to take it take home for 'an entire week' as though this were a great privilege (actually we leave the Gorilla to guard the office). The other players congratulate the winner, and the audience goes home (perhaps after shaking hands with one or all of the players).

### Current Forfeits

The best forfeits are popular forever, but others are tried once and then discarded. The players review the forfeits before each performance, and remove any that they object to, and add any that occur to them. I've already described some current forfeits; others, intended specifically for *Gorilla Theatre*, include:

'Stride arrogantly about the stage while the audience heckle and boo you' (a wonderful forfeit).

'Redirect that miserable scene so that it works!' (Another excellent forfeit).

'Get a 'firing-squad' from the audience and have them mime shooting you'. (Another player can drill this squad).

And so on.

Avoid basing the forfeits on improvisation games. We want them to add variety, rather than to be just 'more of the same'.

### 'Heat'

'Heat' is a wrestling term, and a valuable one (it makes you think quite differently about improvised performances). You've achieved 'heat' when the fans begin to roar and seethe like the audience at the Victorian melodrama. These days, instead of asking: "Were the scenes good?", we ask: "Was there much 'heat'?". Actually we ask both questions, but an incompetent performance can be wildly successful, so long as the spectators are seething and roaring. 'Heat' is usually generated, not by the scenes, but by the performers behaviour between scenes.

I recommend that improvisors observe how Professional Wrestlers excite their audience by pretending to be bestial, and lunatically over-confident (you didn't think they were really like that did you?). But there's an important difference between Wrestling and Gorilla-Theatre: improvisors who seem genuinely aggressive are likely to alienate some sections of the audience. It has to be clear that they are 'just teasing', and that their fake 'aggression' is an expression of good-nature. It can take several performances before some players can strike the right balance.

### Problems With Heat

The first *Gorilla Theatre* that I saw was generating very little 'heat'. The spectators were reluctant to abuse these nice people who were working so hard to please them, so there were few forfeits, and (paradoxically) even fewer ribbons.

At half-time I told the players that they'd understood the form of the game but not the spirit: "You're not giving the the audience 'permission' to roar and scream at you," I said: "You have to offer yourselves as 'targets'".

The men understood me, and in the second half they were awarded ribbon after ribbon, but the women received no ribbons at all, and they resented this male 'competitiveness'.

Women can be as competitive as men (although they tend to be more discrete about it<sup>7</sup>), but they had set up their scenes as if they were running an acting-class, making no assertions that their work would be as good, or better than that of their colleagues. I explained that there was no need to be 'gorilla-like', but that unless they assumed the role of confident and legitimate challengers, the audience would take pity on them and not consider them 'fair game'. They



altered their behaviour and earned just as many ribbons and forfeits as the men.

### Generating Heat

Derrick Flores - last week's winner - walked on stage with the Gorilla and 'threw down the gauntlet' by saying: "The simian will be mine again!" This set him up as someone the spectators had permission to boo and 'hate', and yet his manner, and his use of the word 'simian', demonstrated that that his 'aggression' was just a tease.

Another example: the spectators had 'forced' a director to pay a forfeit. The next director took over and said: "Watch this! I'll show you how to really set up a great scene!". This allowed the spectators to perceive her as someone who was willing to put her 'dignity' at risk, i.e. as someone who would not be heart-broken if they hurled abuse.

Some players can take this mock competitiveness to extremes and yet avoid giving offence. Asked to improvise a scene that would make the audience weep, the players just stood about looking miserable. The director (Dennis Cahill) was greeted by screams of FORFEIT, and he pretended to be indignant.

"Well the scene didn't make us weep!" shouted an audience member."

"I'll make you weep!" shouted Dennis, with fake belligerence. Later on he was booed by someone as he was accepting a ribbon, so he threatened to tie the man to his car and drag him around the parking lot. This threat was greeted with ecstatic cheers. The audience love to be controlled and dominated by the players just as much as they enjoy exercising control over them. When teenage Rebecca Northan quietens them with a firm 'Pay attention, class', they express nothing but pleasure.

It's worth making remarks like: "I will entrust you with this scene even though you totally screwed up the previous one!", or: "I can feel a ribbon coming on!" if you announce to a fellow player: "When this scene is over you will have the privilege of pinning the ribbon onto me!" the audience will be eager to 'trash' you, and yet, if the scene is good, they'll be just as eager to be-ribbon you.

If the 'setting-up' of a scene is incompetent, the players can say in fake amazement: "You're really prepared to take responsibility for this?". They should sound good-natured, but they're setting the director up for a probable forfeit. And if a scene starts to 'disintegrate', the players can banter with the 'director' for not rescuing them, and they can lead the shouts of 'forfeit'. Or the director can give up in mock despair and cry: "No more! No more! I give in! Give me the forfeit!"

The way that you receive a ribbon can also help establish a playful attitude: you might beam with pride, or shout: "They like me! They really like me!" Or you might 'rib' a colleague who has yet to earn a ribbon, or you might begin a fake 'Oscar Night' speech, saying: "I'd like to thank my Mother,

the Academy....." And so on.

### 'Themes' And 'Titles'

A director who has just watched a scene between two room-mates is very likely to set-up another scene between two room-mates (because that's already in his/her mind). Vampire scenes are likely to be followed by more Vampire scenes, or by Were-Wolf scenes - and this soon gets monotonous.

A way to increase variety is by calling for the 'Theme and Title Pouch' (this should happen from five to ten times during a two-hour game). The scenographers then bring on a pouch full of strips of paper. Each strip of plain paper has a story title written on it, and each strip of coloured paper has a theme written on it.

Base your scene on a title plus a theme, both chosen at random, and you are very unlikely to be parroting something that the audience just saw. Here is a list of current titles:

*The Way Out*

*The Angry Nun*

*The Forbidden Door*

*The Trouble At School*

*The Strange Neighbour.*

*In The Depths.*

*The Time Machine.*

*The Alien.*

*The Basement.*

*The Baby-Sitter.*

*The Slob.*

*Revenge.*

*The Deception.*

*The Birth.*

*The Insulting Sofa.*

*The Magic ring.*

*The First Day.*

*The Murder.*

*The Landlord From Hell.*

*The Idiot.*

*The Priest.*

*The Happy Penis.*

*The Corrupt Judge.*

*The New-Boy (Girl) In Hell.*

*The Insane Professor.*

Titles and Themes are reviewed before the game and added to or rejected, according to the mood of the group.

Themes might include:

*Education.*

*Saving The Planet.*

*Justice.*

*Religion.*

*Athletics.*

*Sex.*

And so on (see the earlier section on *Theme And Forfeit Impro*).



The title of *'The Disappointed Bridegroom'*, paired with the theme of 'Science Fiction' led a player to discover that he'd married an alien. And when the title *The Birth* was paired with *'Athletics'*, Derrick Flores went backstage and pushed the top of his head through a slit in the curtains to emerge onto the stage with agonizing slowness, accompanied by a ferocious sport-type commentary by Dennis Cahill. This was amazingly funny, but I guess you had to be there. *The Corrupt Judge*, plus the theme of *Religion* showed a Judge who was accepting a bribe, and who 'flashed-back' to the crusading zeal he'd felt as a young lawyer: an Angel floated in and offered to give him spiritual strength, and he offered her a bribe so that he could get into Heaven. *The Insulting Sofa* plus the theme of *Sex* inspired a scene in which a man arrived home with a woman who was very affectionate until the sofa began insulting him in a voice that only he and the audience could hear. She thought him insane, and fled as the sofa began to suck him into its upholstery (at the request of the 'Director'); then the player berated the sofa until a s'nogger entered and chased him around the room, using the sofa like a giant scoop (our impro-sofas have castors on the front and handles on the back so it's easy to run them around the stage).

### 'Running' The Game

After each scene a player (not its 'director') must consult the audience. Make remarks like:

"Was that scene really good? Or did it fall flat?"

Or:

"So-and-so really fought to save that scene but did he succeed?"

If the shouts of the audience are unintelligible, declare a draw. Do not conduct a re-shout (except in very unusual circumstances). A scene that is just average does not deserve either a forfeit or a ribbon, so if only a few voices are shouting, please ignore them - it should be the bulk of the audience that makes the decisions. Increase the interest by saying things like: "If this scene fails this will be so-and-so's fiftieth forfeit this season!": say it even if it isn't true. Or say - "Only ten minutes left in the match, and so-and-so still hasn't earned a single ribbon!"

The 'director' should be on-stage when his/her fate is being decided, and the ribbons should be presented on-stage; the spectators like to see their Hero being honoured. The pinning-on of a ribbon is an important moment. Never pin a ribbon onto yourself; always let another player (or the Gorilla) do it for you. And they should be pinned onto different parts of the costume because we want the spectators to notice that the successful directors are getting increasingly decorated. If the ribbons are bunched together it's difficult to see which director is ahead.<sup>8</sup>

Don't disparage the forfeits - either complain about them at the pre-game meeting (when you can veto them) or 'put up' with them. And never look as if you're so used to the

forfeits that you don't care whether you get one or not. If you really can't face a particular forfeit, read out something else: who will know? (this is one reason why players read out their own forfeits). Think of a forfeit that you would enjoy doing and pay that instead.

Other players can assist the 'director', e.g. by waving the lights down, but don't be 'too helpful': the audience has to 'believe' that you're competing against each other.

### Some Hints On 'How To Coach'

Gorilla Theatre is not for beginners, and even a good improviser may be a poor coach. 'Directors' need to understand the art of story-telling, and they must be able to identify the defences that the improvisors are using, and intervene to remove them.

#### *Eliminate 'Bridging'*

You 'bridge' when you avoid taking the obvious step. Nervous improvisors always like to have something 'in reserve'. Beware of this, and if a parcel arrives, and there's a delay in opening it, please shout: "Open the parcel!". If the players are moving towards some sort of love-scene and the phone rings, or an old boy-friend arrives, interrupt and take the action back a little way and say: "Get on with the love-scene!"

#### *Force Transitions.*

Up-tight improvisors resist change (especially change that is provoked by their partners). Force transitions by shouting: "Recognize her!", or: "Faint!", or: "Show him a photograph!", or "Weep!", or: "Pounce on her and apologize!", and so on. A male 'boss' interacted with a female employee who accused him of being sexist but the scene degenerated into 'gossip'. His 'director' should have shouted: "Make a pass at her!"

#### *Remove Defensive Blocking.*

"Is the door of that lion's cage supposed to be open like that?"

"Oh yes, it's always open!"

Directors should interrupt, and force a responses like: "Oh no! The lion's loose!" Then the action may move forwards.

#### *Enforce a 'positive' attitude.*

Many players protect themselves by being 'negative' (this 'positive/negative' terminology isn't very satisfactory but it's the best I've come up with). If someone says: "What a boring film that was," interrupt and get them to say: "What a wonderful film that was!"

If someone says "Coffee?" and the response is "No thanks", interrupt them and say: "Accept the coffee!"

#### *Combine Elements*

If there are two separate 'items' on a stage, the audience will want them to interact, and they'll want to see the players



being changed by the interaction. If there's a performer on the stage, and a book on the table, say: "Read something from the book!" (And then say: "Be altered by what you read!")

#### *Remove Canceling*

If the improvisors build a fire they're likely to introduce a shower of rain that will douse it. Don't let them cancel their work; let a Sasquatch be attracted by the flames, or have them accidentally start a conflagration, or tell them to cook something.

#### *Enforce Recapitulation*

Structure is achieved by cannibalizing events that were described earlier in the scene. The director should remember what has already happened, and get the players to 'feed it back in'. If someone escapes from an axe-murderer and arrives home, say: "Open a cupboard and discover the axe-murderer!". This will make the audience very happy.

#### *Suggest 'Corrective' Games*

For example: if the players are using 'gags' as a substitute for interaction, make them continue in gibberish, or in three-word-sentences. If they are refusing to be controlled by each other, make them use the 'He said/She said' game.

#### *Explore Latent Material*

Instead of exploring the material they already have, most improvisors prefer to drag in new ideas, i.e. they try to avoid the obvious in favour of something 'original'. Ask yourself: 'What does the audience want to happen?', and then try to make it happen. If a 'husband' and 'wife' have been pretending to watch a horror movie on T.V. and are now refusing to develop the theme of horror, shout: "Hear a strange noise from the basement!".

Sept 92

#### **Late News**

Gorilla Theatre is working well - we've been playing it for over six months now, and the quality of the work is often quite high (because scenes that might have fizzled out are being kicked into shape). But even when the scenes are of poor quality, this does not have a depressing effect on the audience (Why should it, since they can take immediate revenge?). Compared to other ways of packaging improvisation, Gorilla-Theatre is one of the best at creating warmth and good-nature and elation among the spectators.

I might try adding the ribbons and forfeits to a Theatresports game, rewarding or punishing the 'Coaches' according to the success or failure of their teams.

Our touring company (*Loose Moose On The Hoof*) has begun playing a three-person version of Gorilla Theatre because it's more dependable than 'Free Impro'.

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**3. ARTSPORTS®**  
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*"...the Eskimo is noted for his skill at verbal dueling. He engages in song duels in which two disputants hurl insults, lampoons, and obscenities at each other, much to the delight of their audience..."*

'Word Play' by Peter Farb (Knopf 1974)

#### **Why Not ArtSports?**

Theatresports is played in many countries and the fans are usually under thirty years old; many are still teenagers. Any art form that packs auditoriums with young people probably has a future, and if Theatresports, why not ArtSports? (By 'ArtSports' I include music, dance, painting, literature, and so on).

The great comic theatre of Europe used to be the improvised comedy (the commedia del arte). Poets in other cultures have competed by hurling rhymed insults at each other (I'm told that calypso players still do this), and classical musicians 'took on all comers' - there are stories of audiences weeping at the passion and conviction of Beethoven's improvisations and of his slamming down the lid and stamping out saying they were idiots. I haven't heard of visual artists competing with each other, not at the same time and space, but my English Impro-group (*The Theatre Machine*) used to improvise drawings en masse on huge sheets of paper, and the audience found it entertaining.

Perhaps you feel that 'artistic creation' is too delicate to expose to public view, but not all art is fragile and some artists are tough as nails

#### **The Nature Of Improvisation**

Improvised art used to co-exist with 'formal' art, but the Mask was forced out of the theatre, and the puppets were reduced to Punch and Judy shows at seaside resorts, and our music became so rigid that by Beethoven's time even the cadenzas weren't always ad-lib. Imperfections had been valued by Japanese potters, but we learned to disparage anything that has a 'blemish'.

*A sweet disorder in the dress,*

*Kindles, in clothes, a wanton-ness.....*

But we're taught that Art should be 'buttoned up'.

The pendulum began to swing back long ago, and now the Puppets have taken over television (together with improvised forms like quiz-games and talk-shows), and Impro-Theatre groups perform in every great city. And yet the old theories still dominate people's thinking - it's



generally believed that everything can be improved by being rehearsed - and public improvisation is categorized as a branch of 'Show Business'. People fail to understand that improvisation is a game, and that the point of any game is that the players risk total failure (otherwise we could improve 'soccer' by having bigger goals and smaller goalies). But Show-Business is certainly not a game, and tries to conceal failure with razzia-ma-tazz. If the 'set' collapsed during a musical, that would be a disaster, but it might be the high point of an Impro Show.

Well-intentioned people keep altering my work in the interests of 'greater safety', but the 'failures' in public improvisation may be just as important as the successes. Sport thrives on 'failure' - if a racing car exploded it would be absurd to turn the cameras away on the grounds that this was an 'error'.

No risk equals no game, (as T.V producers discover when they try to edit out the 'boring bits'). Imagine that you went to see God playing golf, and that he kept getting 'holes in one' - the novelty would soon wear off.

### Describe ArtSports

ArtSports would build on the experience of Theatresports, and of Gorilla-Theatre: there'd be a commentator /M.C. to introduce events, and cover any awkwardness, and a Music-Improvisor would 'lay in' music and sound-effects (where appropriate), and there'd be Judges to be hissed and booed.

Perhaps 'wheels' could be spun to select the 'challenges'. The Music-Wheel might stop at: 'The Best Variation Based On 'Greensleeves'', or at: 'Give a Thirty-Second Rendition Of a Famous Symphony Played On Kazoos'. The Art-Wheel might demand: 'The Most Convincing Portrait Of Your Opponent' in two minutes. The Story-Wheel might request: 'The Best Joke!', or: 'The Most Frightening Ghost Story On The Theme of....' (there'd be a pause while the 'Theme-Wheel' was being spun)....'On The Theme Of Justice'. A fresh theme would be chosen and the opposing team might be obliged to tell a ghost story expressing the theme of 'lust' (or whatever).

I imagine day-long events, or perhaps even three-day events. Prizes would be awarded for the best sculpture, or the best mural. Musicians would compete to see who could improvise 'the best passacaglia' on a given chord-sequence. Theatresports would be played, and poets would improvise odes to audience members, and comedians would hurl jokes at opposing teams.

Events would overlap: if the playwrights were boring the dancers might be amazing. If the poets were sunk into terminal despair, perhaps the comedians could be hysterically funny about the poets. Perhaps you could wander outside to see four teams of artists, each painting a mural on a different side of the building. We could involve sport, and problem-solving, and Jazz-Sports, and we could have one of those test-your-strength machines which ring a

bell if you smash a lever hard enough with a mallet. I imagine fire-walking, and gymnastics, and lightning chess, and the night-sky ravished by competing firework companies.

### But What About Quality?

When intellectuals complain that Theatresports creates nothing of 'lasting value' (although sometimes it does) I ask them 'what does a game of football create?' And I remind them that laughter is good for the immune system, and that it's therapeutic to shout and scream and leap up and down.

"But how do we know if a game's worth attending?"

"You don't! That's the the risk you take with any sport (even the very best teams can have a bad day); on the other hand - how do you know that a rehearsed performance will be worth attending? I went to see Ken Brown's *The Brig* because the reviews were so nasty that I guessed it must be really interesting (and I was right) but you can't rely on such strategies "

ArtSports would have the the advantage that many different kinds of events would be involved (i.e. there'd be lots of variety); and we'd sometimes adopt the Theatresports rule that: 'a Judge can stop anything that he/she finds boring'. As there are always three Judges, it's likely that at least one will be bored when you are.

And anyway, what is quality in art? A seven-foot steel cube straight from the foundry? The Statue of Liberty wrapped in brown paper? We're 'placebo reactors' and when a 'Rembrandt' is identified as a forgery its value plummets as though the painting itself had altered.

We could at least hope that ArtSports would churn out some interesting decorations for the foyer, but the value of public improvisation lies in the process, and while there are no 'absolute observers' so far as 'taste' is concerned, most of us can agree that a process is good when the spectators are exhilarated, and bad when they're falling asleep. What's at issue isn't: "Would ArtSports create 'objects' of lasting value?" but: "Would the process be sufficiently entertaining to be worth paying money for?" And the next question is: "Would it be liberating for the artist?", to which we have to reply: "Which artist?"

Being present at the moment of creation is quite different than seeing the results in a polished form, and improvised art can some-times be better than rehearsed art. Writers may have to grind out each sentence painfully, but their finest work may flow effortlessly from the pen. A quick sketch by Constable can be thrilling, whereas a 'masterpiece' he sweated over can be turgid. And is it any wonder that Frederick the Third greeted 'old Bach' so effusively after he'd heard him improvise three, four (God knows how many) part counterpoint? I'm not trying to argue against 'Fine Art', but let's have 'Fun Art' as well.



## Vulgarity

An objection to Theatresports is that it's often vulgar and primitive, and this would probably be true of ArtSports (I hope so). Any popular art has elements that refined people find distasteful, but if vulgar and tasteless people were cheering their approval, and booing their disapproval - wouldn't they soon become expert? And wouldn't this mean that their taste had improved? And anyway, don't vulgarians deserve a share of Government grants: why should their tax-dollars be syphoned off so that opera stars can be paid gigantic salaries? I regard most contemporary art as elitist and/or sentimental, but I'd certainly attend ArtSports if I could yell and boo and shout advice.

## Who Would Be Interested?

Not everyone, but nor does everyone want to drive a racing-car or watch motor-racing, yet there's a huge audience for Motor-Sports. The advantage of giving up hunter/gathering to live in cities was that we can now support a huge variety of different activities and interests. We don't all have to like the same things any more.

Perhaps ninety-five per cent of artists would be appalled at the thought of their 'art' being turned into a rabble-rousing 'event', but what about the other five per cent? Some artists would take to ArtSports like ducks to water, and even shy artists might use ArtSports as a way of becoming more confident, but it's the natural extroverts, and especially those who are worried about the ivory-tower aspects of Art who I'd expect to 'muck in'.

Theatresports began with students but it soon attracted 'real' actors (*London Theatresports* played the *National Theatre*). I imagine that ArtSports would develop in a similar way. Some actors are still hostile - perhaps they've sat through terrible examples of it, or perhaps it frightens them - and yet many actors have benefited enormously (and have become famous because of it). Most Theatresports may not be not very good, but that's true of all art - you need a broad base to get a tall pyramid.

## Competition

Would it have been damaging if Stravinsky and Bartok had extemporized together in public? Or if Kokoschka and Max Beckman had competed against each other in public theatres? ("the best nude with an animal in quarter of an hour! Wait for it! Ready! Steady!.... Bang!"). Or if Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot had clambered up into pulpits to improvise alternate verses of a poem based on a theme given to the panel of Judges? (maybe it would have been boring, but wouldn't you have wanted to be there?). If Diego Rivera and Picasso had competed to see who could tread out the 'best' nude in the snow - would it have been difficult to sell tickets?

It's human to want to excel, and to explore the limits of one's powers, but the competition in Theatresports (and

presumably in ArtSports) has to be friendly, or everyone will have a sad time. What matters in popular art is not who wins, or loses, but the delight of the spectators. This truth has to be learned painfully, but it's a valuable maturing process. Improvisors have to realize that if one team wins this week, another will win next week (of course, a team that keeps on losing will have to take 'time-out' to improve its skills).

## Music-Sports

When we read of the boy Mozart being given 'tests' (for example, 'ground-bases' to improvise melodies on) we should realize that this was quite normal, and that improvisation was seen as a test of true musicianship (the adult Mozart was rather cool when the teenage Beethoven played for him, but he was bowled over when Beethoven began to improvise on a given theme). Musicians used to 'take on all comers', and from the perspective of the eighteenth century it would have seemed obvious that Stravinsky and Prokofiev should compete to create the best variation of a pop-song, or whatever.

A pianist named Gelinek was asked to 'take-on' a foreigner at a reception. "We must make mince-meat out of him" he said. The next day he was asked how the 'Music Sports' went:

"Oh," said Gelinek, quite subdued, 'I'll never forget yesterday evening! Satan himself is hidden in that young man. I have never heard anyone play like that! He improvised on a theme which I gave him as I never heard Mozart improvise.....He is....a small, ugly, black and wild looking young man.....his name is Beethoven....."

Carl Czerny reported that Daniel Steibelt ".....had prepared a brilliant improvisation, choosing as a theme the subject of Beethoven's trio. This outraged not only Beethoven's supporters but also the composer himself....He went in his usual, I must say ungracious, manner to the instrument as if half lunging towards it, grabbing, as he passed, the violin-cello part of Steibelt's quintet, placed it (unintentionally?) upside down on the music stand and from the opening notes drummed out a theme with one finger. Offended and stimulated at the same time he improvised in such a manner that Steibelt left the room before Beethoven had finished and refused ever to meet him again...."

Joseph Wolf loved improvising with Beethoven: "...sometimes they would seat themselves at two pianofortes and improvise alternately on themes they gave each other and thus created many a four-hand Capriccio which if it could have been put upon paper at the moment would surely have bidden defiance to time..... Beethoven did not deny his tendency towards the mysterious and gloomy. When once he began to revel in the infinite world of tone, he was transported above all earthly things - his spirit had burst all restraining bonds....Now his playing tore along like a wildly foaming cataract, and the conjurer constrained his



instrument to an utterance so forceful that the stoutest structure was hardly able to withstand it; and anon he sank down, dissolving in melancholy. Again the spirit would soar aloft, triumphing over transitory terrestrial suffering, turn its glance upwards in reverent sounds and find rest and comfort on the innocent bosom of holy nature."<sup>9</sup>

We think of eighteenth-century Music-Sports as an aberration of the times, but it may account for the 'effortlessness' with which classical composers worked, and for their close rapport with the needs of their audience. Perhaps the great flowering of Western music was encouraged by competitive improvisation.

Contemporary musicians still arouse a lot of interest when they compete (The Tchaikovsky Piano Competition, etc.) but I've never heard of classical musicians competing against each other directly. A 'battle of the pianos' might not be exactly 'high culture', but had it been normal for composers like Stravinsky and Bartok to 'fight it out' at such an event, there might never have been such a gap between serious music and the popular audience. And it might have made Boulez more prolific. Elizabeth Lutchens told me that there were only about two hundred people in the whole of England who 'understood' her compositions. I cannot conceive of such a situation occurring if Music-Sports had been a regular event.

### Story-Sports

Canada is the home of the Three Day Novel writing competition, so why not the two-hour Short-Story competition? Or why not the Instant Short-Story competition? The Alberta Playwrights' Network held an event at Loose Moose recently in which five playwrights wrote for an hour on given themes, and then our improvisors 'embodied' the results, and this was at least as entertaining as the average theatre production.<sup>10</sup>

Theatresports improvisors often create scenes in verse, and launch into epic poems, but teams of poets could probably do better - given a positive attitude.

'Word-Games' that we play now include:

Act out a story that you create by adding a word each.

Ask someone to create a poem from a set of rhymes.

Improvise scenes in which the first player to use a word containing an agreed letter loses.

Improvise fragments of stories alternately - first player who hesitates has to mime committing suicide.

'Type' a story while the other players act it out.

And so on. It might be especially interesting to play the 'What Comes Next' game with a panel of expert storytellers. In this game the 'panel' tell the performer what to do. And if the audience like the suggestions they cheer the panel, and if they don't - they boo.

Many writers are shy and lonely, but Story-Sports played in ideal surroundings might instill confidence in them and begin to coax them out of their shells.

### The Visual Arts

A frequent objection to ArtSports (from visual artists) is that time is needed to create work of any lasting value, but not all art benefits from meticulous execution. De Kooning might have been a wonderful competitor, and so might Matisse - had their 'status' allowed it.

Could even portrait painting be adapted to the needs of ArtSport? I don't see why not. If portraits were being painted in the foyer, the audience could come back to see their progress a week later, and the finished products could be exhibited behind the bar and people could say: "I saw the start of that portrait," or: "He really captured that model's expression," or: "her nose was actually a bit longer than that!".

But could we use portrait painting on a stage, competitively? Actual portrait painting would be too slow unless the audience were geriatric (although there are programmes on T.V. in which a painter completes a portrait in half an hour and someone must be watching them); but imagine six artists poised in front of six canvases: an M.C. says: "On your marks! Get set....." and then rips open a sealed envelope to read: "Create the best portrait of an audience member in two minutes and fifteen seconds!". Can you imagine the excitement?: People clambering over the seats to volunteer themselves, assistants placing them in position, the artists scribbling frantically, or giving up and wiping the canvas clean to start again, the huge clock annihilating the seconds, and then the winner being chosen by approbation. The results might not be astounding, but would such an event be dull? 'Yes,' if you'd seen it a hundred times before, but the artists would improve, and the 'forms' of ArtSports would evolve. Perhaps when you came back a week later there would be three artists working on each portrait, or they'd be painting in relays, or the artists might not be able to see the model, and would be working from someone else's verbal description (like a policeman assembling a picture from an identikit, or like Guino sculpting to the instructions of Renoir). Or the event might have evolved beyond all recognition, and there would be teams of make-up artists competing to achieve the best disguise of an audience volunteer in sixty seconds.

### ArtSports Would Evolve

I was told that it was stupid to ask performers to go on-stage without preparation and expect them to entertain an audience. But I discovered that even when scenes didn't work, the struggle was still worth watching (so long as the players kept a positive attitude). But it was necessary for me to keep thinking up new ideas so that the spectators would keep coming back to see what was happening. Anyone presenting ArtSports regularly would be under the same pressure. Somebody (me?) would have to spew out hundreds of Art-Sport 'games' so that the audience would stay interested. These 'games' are unimaginable now, but they'd seem completely obvious once they'd succeeded.



## An Arts 'Pentathlon'

*This section is a condensation of a proposal I made (via Helge Skoog) to Swedish T.V..*

This would involve either individual players, or teams of players. (preferably representing different cities or different parts of a city). Skill in at least some of the arts would be required, plus good-nature.

Each player or team has a 'pass-card' or can win pass-cards. These will be surrendered if he/she wants to avoid a particular event. These cards should be visible (perhaps hung around a competitor's neck?). Competitors are 'challenged' to various games, and/or achievements, these challenges are in sealed envelopes, and/or are decided by the spinning of a wheel, and sometimes they are issued by the Judges, or by the players themselves.

Let's say that the wheel stops at 'Stories'. The story-envelope might say: 'Compose a few verses on a topic given by the Judges', or 'invent a fable to express a given moral', or 'Tell a joke about an animal', or there could be general knowledge questions like e.g.: "Who married Nora Barnacle?"

'Poetry' challenges might include: 'Improvise the beginning of an epic poem on subject chosen by the audience (Shakespeare's clowns used to do this), or 'improvise a limerick based on name of an audience-member', or 'recite a poem that makes us weep!'

A 'Sculpture' challenge might be to 'pose three volunteers from the audience as a war-memorial'. Or to make the 'Best assemblage of twelve given objects'.

Other 'Art' challenges might be to the 'Best nude drawing of a volunteer from the audience' (the volunteer does not need to pose nude), or to: 'the best sunset in one minute!', or to: 'provide lightning illustrations to an improvised story using an 'overhead projector', and so on.

Musicians could be asked for: 'The best variation or arrangement of a tune sung by an audience member', or to: 'provide the best accompaniment to a story improvised in mime'. Players from opposite teams could improvise a rondo together, alternating the sections between the recurrence of the theme, or they might be asked improvise music to accompany a movie sequence, or to accompany 'no blocking' scenes in mime.

If 'Humour' were the subject, the players might compete to 'provide the funniest caption to projections of cartoons', or to: 'dub dialogue onto a scene from an old movie'. Maybe teams could improvise dialogue onto the same piece of movie, their opponents waiting out of ear-shot (who knows what games we might not invent!).

Vast murals could be worked on throughout the performance, illustrating topics like:

- The Rape.
- The Wedding.
- The Death-bed.
- School-days.

Etc.

There could be surprise-challenges. We could switch on the T.V. news, and ask a team to improvise a scene from it, or perhaps potters-wheels might be carried on-stage and a prize given to the audience member (chosen at random) who threw the best pot.

It's difficult to get a mass popular movement in the arts (even a genius like Joan Littlewood, failed) but the cross-fertilization of Art with Sport might be worth trying. Los Angeles could challenge New York, or Stockholm could 'take-on' Helsinki. Or you could begin on a small scale with Vulkan versus Balzac, and perhaps with just a few of the arts: cartoonists could illustrate the news as it was being received. Playwrights could be sent away for an hour to write scenes based on given characters and situations (to be performed hot off the word-processors) and so on.

## The First 'Mega ArtSports'

ArtSports is more than just a theoretical idea: the first 'mega ArtSports' was presented in 1987 after Steen Jensen had told me that he'd been commissioned (together with some other Aarhus artists) to stage some kind of 'spectacular event' in the 'Riding School' - a building that seemed to me to be far larger than the better known one in Vienna:

"Why not ArtSports?" I said, and explained the concept. He liked the idea, and so did his friends, and they challenged Copenhagen (Aarhus's traditional rival).

I arrived on the day of the performance, but I had to leave early to catch the last train back to Odense, so I didn't see the 'climax' (which involved some sort of clowning with vast inflatable sex organs).

A three-story wooden structure had been erected at one end of the hall (to be used as exhibition space and for 'viewing balconies'). In front of this structure were two roped-off circles where two sculptors were building massive abstract structures. Then there was a performance space, with seats either side, and with tall 'pulpits' at diagonal corners (these pulpits were used by comedians, one from Copenhagen, and one from Aarhus - each getting a lot of laughs at the rival city's expense). Beyond this, on the far wall were two canvasses, each over six meters high. An artist scabbled about in front of each, on mobile scaffolding, together with teams of assistants. It took many hours for these 'pictures' to be completed.

A lot was happening - I remember dancers taking over the performance space and Theatresports being played - but the strangest moment came when a Danish philosopher addressed the vast crowd from the top of the wooden structure. Everyone, including the drunks, paid rapt attention to his ten-minute dissertation on 'the philosophy of Theatresports', and then the mayhem continued.

The thousands of spectators - and the hours of T.V. time given over to it - made this a notable occasion; but it wasn't



the vulgar, clownish, anarchist ArtSports of my vision. The committee made it's decisions when I was in Canada, and it's members were wedded to abstract art: the huge murals were abstract, the large 'constructions' were 'abstract': the only representational art that I remember were some portraits and the inflatable sex-organs (this was Denmark where huge inflatable sex-organs are 'run of the mill').

It was like attending a Music-Sports event where there was only atonal music. It was fun seeing artists being disconcerted by on-lookers who asked questions and gave advice, and who were not at all passive in their attitude; but had the art been 'figurative' there could have been a more constructive interplay.

I would have selected those elements of art that are most crowd-pleasing (of course), but these artists believed in the result rather than the process (understandably), and this prevented anything revolutionary from developing.

I argued that the huge murals should illustrate some recognizable theme: 'the Battle Of God Against The Angels' perhaps, but it was too late. The designs had been worked out ahead of time.

I had expected challenges to be read out - to 'the best erotic painting' perhaps, and then for a cannon to be fired as a starting signal, and that there might have been an excited commentary, but there was no feeling of any sort of sport, or 'duel' taking place. It was like those inept Theatresports challenges to 'the best scene involving physical skill', or to the 'best use of verbal skills', challenges which are so all-embracing that the performers can do just about anything they like. A 'challenge' has no value unless it's to something specific, and the problem with abstract art is that anything will do so long as it's fashionable. A challenge to 'the best crucifixion' would give the artists something to get their teeth into, but a challenge to the 'best abstract painting' can't really function as a game at all. Few of the spectators can have cared about the 'abstracts' that were evolving on the gigantic canvases.

Instead of the huge abstract structures, it would have been more fun to ask the sculptors to invent the best imaginary animal, or the most beautiful 'tree'. But what we saw was a display of their individual taste, rather than an attempt to satisfy the Judges' requirements.

The other disappointment (for me) was that the artists weren't working *together*. Even if an artist had assistants, each work was still the vision of one mind, but ArtSports can't be really amazing until we see artists who collaborate as intimately and as minutely as expert Theatresports players. In my opinion, artists cooperating together in public would be a lot more interesting than artists working solo; we could watch them inspiring each other, and they'd get applause and laughs: 'great moves' could be cheered, and boring solutions could be hissed.

Long ago I invented some drawing games that allowed the students insight into their own defenses. The best known of

these is the 'Eyes' game - two eyes are drawn, and then the players create an impromptu drawing by adding lines alternately. Then they create a title by adding a letter each (before I hit on the idea of the 'eyes' the players just made boring 'abstractions').

Beginners usually scribble each mark, but they soon learn that it's more fun to be precise. Some are reluctant to take the lead (if you draw an ear they'll draw another ear) whereas some are too dominant - after drawing a leg they'll insist on adding the foot and the toes and then all the little hairs. And all beginners substitute would-be 'original' ideas for their first ideas: a hand will be about to make a mark when it'll suddenly swoop over to some other part of the image (so that you can actually see the self-censorship occurring, moment by moment). Substitutions, and the misuse of 'control' occur in Theatresports all the time, but the 'Eyes' game allows the players to see this happening (literally).

Such games demonstrate that improvised art can be entertaining, and instructive, especially when it's based on the sharing of responsibility. But at present, this 'sharing of control' seems alien to most artists (and is it any wonder when we remember how they are trained?).

### The Value To The Performer

I experienced many 'dead' years when I was unable to write a single sentence that satisfied me, but I believed that if I worked harder, and kept searching for 'better ideas' I would be able to smash my way through to some sort of spontaneity. I was like a prisoner trying to tunnel through a wall, not realizing that it was a granite cliff.

I decided that if I could release the talent of other people I might be able to unlock my own but it took me years to grasp the shocking truth that there are no 'good' and no 'bad' ideas; or rather, that any idea can be 'good' depending on where it leads (and how do you know where an idea will lead unless you follow it?). The advice I'd received about creating art had led me always to choose the most difficult route, but 'trying harder', and pursuing 'better ideas' had killed the Goose that laid the Golden eggs: the dribs and drabs weren't golden any more.

My beginning impro-students are in the same trap: they cling to ideas as if they were precious. And they keep hunting for something 'better', like the donkey that was always looking for a juicier clump of grass and wandered further and further into a barren wilderness. They don't realize that every mind contains a vast surging fathomless ocean of ideas to splash about in (as any meditator will tell you). Perhaps the most difficult concept for them to grasp is that ideas that seem original are always 'old hat' (or how would we recognize them as 'original'?) but that if they pursue the 'obvious', and cultivate 'effortlessness', then they will be perceived as original. Or to put it another way, since everyone already is original (i.e. unique), why 'try' to be?



Suppose you walk on stage and sit on a sofa. If you seem to be absorbed the spectators will watch you for thirty seconds - perhaps longer - because they're curious to know what's going to happen, but if you search for a 'good' idea to hold their attention you may be in trouble - because who can get 'good' ideas on the spur of the moment? And how can you select the 'best' idea without thinking of dozens of possible ideas and then eliminating all except one? And what a tedious process! It's very boring to watch performers who's minds have moved 'into the future' in search of 'better ideas'.

On the other hand, if you glanced at the floor and became interested in something that you 'saw' there, that action would hold the attention for at least another twenty seconds or even longer. And if you crouched down to investigate, and mimed picking up a small insect, a whole minute could go by, and not one of the spectators would be bored. Their continuing interest would depend, not on your 'brilliant ideas', but on whether you interacted with the insect (which they'd like you to do), or rejected the interaction (in which case they'd think you 'rather dull').

A blank canvas or a blank sheet of manuscript paper, or the empty screen of the word-processor can be just as intimidating as a bare stage, so I'd recommend improvisation training to anyone with a 'writers' block', or a 'choreographers' block' or a 'composers' block'. 'Mutual improvisation' can be of such value to actors that I can hardly believe that it could not be just as beneficial to other artists.

### Integration

What better way to keep in touch with the demands of ordinary (or extraordinary people) than to work in public while the spectators cheer or boo? And what finer way to release floods of ideas than working very closely with other artists - drawing alternate lines perhaps, or singing alternate notes? Art by committee is a disgusting idea, because ideas have to be agreed on, but improvisors learn to accept every idea without argument, so the process is additive rather than subtractive. And if ArtSports attracted hordes of eager young spectators, could that be altogether bad?

Had ArtSports been a regular event our 'serious' contemporary arts might not be so alienated from the mass of the people, and perhaps the spectators would be less easily palmed off with second-rate mush. I've been to 'private views' where everyone sipped their wine and hardly glanced at the paintings because they were afraid to reveal their ignorance. It's difficult to imagine the 'fans' of ArtSports being so timid.

Nov 92

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## 4. SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE<sup>©</sup>

(Or: Who Really Invented Theatresports,  
Daddy?)

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Imagine that you had enrolled in an acting course at Calgary University, and suddenly found yourselves playing Theatresports in public amid huge enthusiasm and acclaim - interviews in the newspapers and on television; people cheering you in the street; lots of glamour. And imagine that you had achieved this by using ideas that were the opposite of everything that you had previously accepted. This would have been one of the most amazing things that ever happened to you, and after such excitement, such ecstasy, how could you not feel that you had contributed to the invention of this wonderful game while it was being assembled around you?

I shared these feelings, and I feel in my bones that those first players of Calgary Theatresports were united with me in an extraordinary adventure; and yet, when I look back and remember why I invented each detail, and that I had directed such games long before I arrived at Calgary, I have to say that the idea that the first players in Calgary 'created Theatresports' is an illusion.

Rumours reach me, about the way that I 'cheated the people who really invented Theatresports'. You might consider that these accusations are too sordid to deserve a reply - after all I came to Calgary as one of the leading authorities in my field - but if just one disgruntled person nags on for year after year, the wounds, imaginary or real, will never heal. So here are seven 'grumbings' about the 'rat Professor who climbed to fame on the shoulders of his students'.

1. Keith knew nothing about sport, so his students had to put Theatresports together for him, and then he claimed it as his own.....

2. Keith had the luck to run into an amazingly talented group of students - as their later success clearly demonstrates - and these students .....etc.

3. Keith uses Loose Moose as a laboratory in which he can try out his ideas, and therefore he's exploiting the improvisors and owes them a share in the proceeds because.....etc.

4. Keith syphons off the income from Theatresports, and Theatresports suffers in consequence, and therefore....etc.

5. Keith wants us to play Theatresports his way, and owning the copyright (and the name) gives him the right to interfere; ergo - 'we' should have the copyright (this 'we' is never defined).

6. When Keith formed Loose Moose, everyone contributed the ideas equally, so it's only fair that the 'split' should be



equal.

7. Without the talents of those 'first' students, Theatresports would never have gone public, and Keith would never have risen to fame and fortune, therefore.....etc.

The issue is one of moral right, rather than of legal right, and I doubt that any of the players I first worked with in Calgary really think that I ripped them off, yet people (who were not in Calgary when Theatresports went public) seem utterly convinced that a great injustice was done.

Here's what happened (to the best of my recollection). Please write to me if I say something that you know to be untrue, and I'll publish your letters, or at least the relevant paragraphs (but I don't want to devote an entire Newsletter to the delusions of just one or two unhappy people).

.....

### **1. Keith Knew Nothing About Sport So His Students Had To Put Theatresports Together For Him.....**

Theatresports itself is the refutation of this, because apart from Judges who award points and penalties, and a score-keeper - it has hardly anything in common with other sports, so why the need for specialized knowledge. The only 'sport' that had a direct influence was Professional Wrestling, and I was the expert on that. (As far as 'forming a league', or 'arranging tournaments' was concerned, I'm sure I interfered as little as possible, but operating Theatresports is not the same as inventing Theatresports).

### **2. Keith Had The Luck To Run Into An Amazingly Talented Group Of Students.....etc.**

'Talent is procedure', and any group of students will seem wonderfully talented if a teacher can inspire them, and can work intensively with them, month after month. But these students were not hand-picked, were not the 'cream' (I hadn't auditioned them and nor had the University), and as no one was turned away the law of averages suggests that they must have been fairly typical.

### **3. Keith uses Loose Moose as a laboratory.....etc.**

I spend hours and hours each week at the University, so it makes sense that most of my ideas would arrive then, or during the months when I work at European theatres.

What usually happens is that I get an idea, and then I bring it to Loose Moose where people profit from it, and export it all over the world (like Tony Totino teaching the *Life Game* to Vancouver where I believe that they claim to have invented it). This process is never reversed.

### **4. Keith Syphons Off The Money From Theatresports, And Theatresports Suffers In**

### **Consequence.**

My lack of interest in money may seem weird (and to some people, utterly inexplicable) but the income from the Theatresports copyright has always gone into a separate Theatresports account and has been used for the benefit of Theatresports. None of it goes to me or to the Calgary teams. If anyone doubts this, please talk to Deborah Iozzi, our business manager. My great sadness is that so much money has to be spent on legal fees.

### **5. Keith Wants Us To Play Theatresports His Way, And Owning The Copyright (And The Name) Gives Him The Right To Interfere....etc.**

People often screw up my ideas and/or vulgarize them, but although I advise and exhort, I don't compel. And if people alter the game so much that it no longer resembles Theatresports, all I say is: "Change the name, and do your own thing!"

### **6. When Keith formed Loose Moose, everyone contributed the ideas equally, so it's only fair that the 'split' should be equal.**

This allegation deserves a detailed response, so please bear with me.

Calgarians were enthused, not by the 'creation' of Theatresports, but the 'debut' of Theatresports. The game was conceived some twenty years earlier when I attended Professional Wrestling (in the company of John Dexter and William Gaskill). It was obvious to us that the wrestlers could be replaced by improvisors, but improvisation was illegal in England, so Theatresports was confined to my improvisation classes. I'd pick three Judges, and sometimes I'd add a commentator and a score-keeper, and the 'Lions' would play the 'Tigers', and it was a very trivial, and infrequent part of my work; mainly because the English were too reserved to leap up and down and 'root' for their team (and to this day Theatresports has had little success in England for reasons that I presume are cultural).

The very first game in Calgary occurred in a class at the Department of Drama at the University. I wanted to teach the skills of accepting ideas, so I divided the class into teams, and chose Judges, and picked a score-keeper, and said that we'd throw out any player who killed an idea. I gave the impression that everything was new, because that was an efficient way to turn people on (I don't dare to do this nowadays and my teaching suffers in consequence), but can anyone really be claiming that: "Keith had no idea what to do so I took over and suggested that we divide into two teams and etc. etc.?" My students enjoyed the game (they were exhilarated almost beyond measure) but they didn't invent it.

I designed a more sophisticated version to use outside the classroom ('No-Block' Theatresports); if any member of the



on-stage team killed an idea, the other team took over. When I say I 'designed' this version I mean that I went away and thought it out and then 'sold' the idea to the players. This 'Ur' Theatresports was such an excellent way of training people not to block, that soon no one ever did block, and there were a lot of empty seats in the theatre.

Against some opposition, I switched back to free-impro (based on my work with the *Theatre Machine*) and I promised that I would devise a better game. This turned out to be the 'Warning-For-Boring' Theatresports (i.e. the 'regular game'). "Block all you like," I said: "But we'll throw you off unless you're interesting!" The opposition to this game was the greatest that I ever encountered at Calgary (because who wants to be told publicly that they're boring?). Every single person told me that I was crazy and that the 'no-blocking' rule was the heart of Theatresports. They were like nineteenth century physicists trying to hang on to the idea of the 'ether'. I used all my authority to push this game through, and it was accepted on condition that the Warning For Boring only came into effect the *third* time it was given. I can't believe that anyone who was there can have forgotten my struggle to get this new game accepted, so the question I would put to anyone who feels that I 'ripped people off' is this:

"Are you referring to the Theatresports that I scrapped, and that was invented in England when the first Calgary players were still in their prams? Or do you mean the version that I forced through against total opposition?"

In case there are still doubts, I'll take you through the main features of Theatresports, and explain why I invented them.

Penalties - after the first public game the spectators crowded onto the stage, shaking our hands and slapping our backs, and shouting that there had to be penalties. But who decided the form of these penalties? Anyone who knows me will tell you that getting players to sit beside a score-board with a paper bag on their head has to be one of my ideas - because it's both insane and practical, and makes no difference to the outcome of the game at all! Other people were trying to invent penalties that would handicap the offending team (of course), but I was looking for a way to absolve the improviser who was tasteless, or disgusting, or unsporting, so as to return him/her quickly to the 'good graces' of the audience.

Some of our fans used to leave once the result seemed inevitable. We discussed this problem, but the solution - that the losers should kneel down and let the spectators throw custard pies at them - was clearly my idea (because I didn't have to do it). And would anyone but me make such a crazy suggestion?

Theatresports was based on a struggle for 'free-time' in which to clock-up points. This was because I wanted the audience to see more of the 'hottest' team.

The players soon realized that the greater the number of scenes they presented during the free-time, the greater the

number of points they could earn, so the free-time degenerated into a series of 'one-liners'. I solved this problem by inventing 'time-points' (the Judges' points were multiplied by however many minutes that the scene lasted - a two-minute scene that was awarded four Judges' points would earn a total of eight points, whereas a thirty-second scene earning four Judges' points would have been awarded a total of only two points). These time points became irrelevant when Jim Curry suggested that we should 'challenge', not for an agreed amount of stage time, but for the right to present just one scene (this stuck in my mind because it was so rare for an improviser to make an acceptable suggestion about the game, rather than about ticket-prices, or the running of the 'League' or whatever).

Who thought of the name Theatresports? I did. And the name for the Theatre company? Who else? (And the term 'Loose Moose' sounded a lot crazier then). The only idea that I remember someone else contributing (and several of us had been discussing the problem) was letting the coin-toss determine who should have the right to make the first 'challenge', rather than having it introduce ten minutes of free-time.

I think that covers most things.

### **7. Without the talents of those 'first' students, Theatresports would never have gone public and Keith would never have risen to fame and fortune, so he owes us.....etc.**

I don't know about fortune, but I already had 'fame'. I'd worked at the *Royal Court Theatre* for its most revolutionary decade; I'd been an Associate Director there and I'd run its script department and its Theatre Studio. I was well known as a playwright and as a director. I'd taught at leading Drama schools in Europe (and for years at R.A.D.A. and I could be teaching there still if I hadn't emigrated). The British Council sent any distinguished foreign visitors who wanted to see 'new ideas in drama-training' to watch my classes - there was almost always at least one person sitting at the back and taking notes - so I quickly gained an international reputation as the teacher who was creating new ways of working, rather than as someone who 'handing on' the work of other people. Calgary University imported me purely on my reputation, and I believe that I'm still the only professor (out of eight hundred or so) who has no degree. So Theatresports did not drag me out of obscurity, and in many ways it's been damaging to me because although it's only a very small part of my work people assume that it's all I do.

After I decided to stay permanently in Canada, it was then natural for me to co-found the *Loose Moose Theatre Company* (together with Mel Tonken who could see no other way to get me to direct him in plays). Once Loose Moose existed, there was pressure from about thirty improvisors (my University students) to be given stage-time.



As the show I was presenting only involved myself and about five improvisors, Theatresports was an obvious solution, especially as the game was already being played at lunch-times at the 'Secret Theatre' at the University, and we had already planned to introduce it sometime at Loose Moose.

### Running The Group

I constantly said that I was not a democrat, and that if it came to the crunch I would have the final decision. This must have rankled, so it can hardly have been forgotten. Formal discussions were often quite unproductive. I called one so that we could agree on a set of 'official' rules, and I've heard people cite this meeting as 'proof' that the group contributed the ideas that lay behind Theatresports, but they forget that the disagreement was total, and that we continued with the old rules. (There are official rules, but these were written out by me alone - and checked over by Dennis Cahill).

Some players (always the men) complained that my ideas were accepted so automatically that they never got a 'look-in' (which is a fair indication of who was inventing things). I tried to put this to rest by demonstrating over and over again that that was an illusion, and that no one else's ideas were hitting the dust as regularly and speedily as mine.

Some of the men would argue violently for a idea, not because it excited anyone, but because it was 'their idea'. This made it difficult for them to notice that my ideas were submerging at the tiniest hint of opposition, only to be replaced by more ideas, until one would evoke a mass enthusiasm - at which point they'd say: "You see! Keith's ideas are always accepted!", and complain about my 'charisma'. I treat ideas as an ocean to splash about in, so it was easy to find one that I liked and that other people would also like, but players who had learned to regard their own ideas as precious were likely to become isolated and aggressive. One valuable player became so enraged that his colleagues demanded that he leave the group (I went to see him twice a week until I could get him reinstated). Aggression makes a group difficult to run, but if we were all sweet and loving people we'd be less likely to create interesting and dynamic work - research on soccer teams bears this out).

Loose Moose is open to anyone who wants to make changes (there are always unfilled 'slots' in our programme available for innovators to experiment in) and it's irritating that the new ideas still come from me, even though I'm old now, and presumably about to crack up.

If any Calgary players reading this article still have the *idée fixe* that someone else invented Theatresports, please think back to the time that I left the game for ten-months. Some players were convinced that they could alter and improve everything, but the audience gradually fell away. No

viable changes occurred at all, and in the end I was asked to come back because everyone was fed-up with democracy (i.e. with endless discussions that never got anywhere). As soon as I took over the audience numbers began to climb again, and new ideas were introduced.

### So Why The Smoke? (Or: The Reluctant Guru)

Claiming to have invented Theatresports can be an effective, and obviously rather addictive way to make yourself seem important, but how can we account for the people who say: "I wasn't there, but I feel impelled to speak up on behalf of the people that Keith cheated!" I was discussing the oddness of this with Dennis Cahill when he told me of a conversation he had with a player who came to the group long after Theatresports went public, and who stayed with the group for years, and yet still persists in 'biting the hand that fed him'. What struck Dennis as bizarre was the statement that:

"It would be O.K. if Keith had just kept the money and bought himself a big car - that would have made it alright!"

The answer may lie in anthropology. For example, Malinowski wrote that:

".....the whole of tribal life is permeated by a constant give and take; .....every ceremony, every legal and customary act is done to the accompaniment of material gift and counter gift....."

Many (or all) human societies have complex behaviour relating to gratitude (for extreme examples look up 'potlatch ceremonies'). A gift can be like a barbed hook driven deep into the gullet: a way of forcing an unwelcome tie between the giver and the recipient.

I see gift-giving as genetically controlled (like flirting behaviour or the relation between excretion and territory). Fifteen years back a colleague took a class for me but I still remember that I'm indebted to him. And recently another colleague took me to lunch at the Faculty Club, and there's no way I can forget this (until I return a similar favour). I experience my behaviour as 'petty', but I can only rid myself of this sense of obligation by 'giving something back', although I can diminish the feeling by obligating somebody else. Thirty years ago I was given some money by a friend whose writing had suddenly become successful, and when I try to give money to other artists they usually resist me until I say: "Think of it as Arnold's fifty pounds!", and then they accept. This handing on of the gift always makes me feel warmer towards Arnold.

Consider the one-sidedness of my relationship with Loose Moose. I have given my life's work freely to the players at Calgary, believing that if I can 'empty myself' without reserve, new ideas will rush in to fill the vacuum. I'm the unpaid President and Artistic Director of the company (this can eat up acres of time), and I give free classes here, and I write and direct plays, and so on, but I receive nothing in



return. And unlike the players (who may be geologists, or mail-carriers, or cooks, and so on) I do not find this a refreshing change - because improvisation is what I do all day long anyway!

I don't want to be a guru - because once you're a guru people start to rely on you instead of searching into themselves - but I can't avoid the role entirely, and transactions with gurus are supposed to involve the exchange of some sort of gift: students give money, or fruit, or sixty-four Rolls-Royces. And if your Guru gives you a mantra and you 'forget' to pay him, he can arrange that every time you repeat it unpleasant things will happen to you (is there any limit to human gullibility and mendacity?<sup>11</sup>). But I don't receive anything back, or expect to receive anything, and this breaks the rule that there should be 'reciprocity', and perhaps gives a few people an intolerable feeling that they rationalize as injustice.

Seen in this light it's not so odd that I'm criticized for not buying myself a big car, and it explains some other weird things. For example, Mark Mckinney once arrived at my house, unannounced, and spent the afternoon taking my piano apart and changing all the pads on the hammers and strings (even though he'd never heard me play this piano). Mark can now say: "I changed the pads on his piano", and know that this has symbolically 'wiped the slate clean' and (even though the piano went back to its real owner two days later) I still feel differently about Mark than about the people who give nothing in return. I'm not saying that early Loose Moosers should give something, but when some of these people bad-mouth me so persistently for year after year and presumably will continue doing so into their old age, this does suggest that there are very powerful unconscious forces at work. I gave them something that changed their lives: I introduced them to something that will be a source of entertainment and knowledge forever. Maybe they're forced to project bad intentions onto me, to save them from being overwhelmed by intolerable gratitude.

Supposing I had taken a salary from Loose Moose, and charged people to join, and made them pay extra fees to take classes - is it possible that anyone would now be claiming that those first players were 'ripped-off'? Perhaps the only way to stop some people from vilifying me year after year is a ceremony where they give me an old boot, and a battered alarm clock, and a loaf of bread, and thus symbolically remove the hook that stuck into them when I gave them a gift and accepted nothing in return.

### But Who Invented Gorilla Theatre, Daddy?

*Gorilla Theatre* was intended as a way of training Theatresports Coaches, and it rapidly became one of our preferred forms of improvisation - the *All Star Show* is now devoted entirely to it - and it does exactly what I designed it to do, and yet when I remarked to someone: "Well at least no one will be saying that I stole Gorilla Theatre from the

players!" I was told that the many of the ideas actually had come from the improvisors. "Great!" I said: "But what the hell were they?" My friend thought for a while and found one example.

"Just a minute!" I said: "Someone did suggest that, and you tried it out when I was away, and when I came back we all agreed it was a bad idea and we rejected it!"

"Oh yes....so we did!"

"Tell me another idea that someone else contributed?"

There wasn't one, and yet this player had felt quite sure that they had created Gorilla Theatre largely by themselves. When something generates great excitement, and when everyone is deeply involved in making it a success, it's tempting for them to believe that they also invented it.

• • • • •

March 93.

### RANDOM NOTES (1992)

*The Big-Time Late Show* died - probably for lack of dedicated writers and we haven't replaced it. Our touring show, *Loose Moose on the Hoof* is getting lots of bookings, but it's difficult to find expert improvisors who have time available

We gave our first workshop for teachers this October. It went well but we lost money on it. Alberta teachers play Theatresports in the class-room but they are often ill-informed. We hope to correct this by publishing an 'Advice To Teachers' book in the near future.

Zackery Quinn broke her shoulder falling through a trap-door while playing an elf (in *The Elves and the Shoemaker*). She went to hospital still wearing the ears which led to her being given instant attention and treatment. (She's fine now).

### Should Individuals And Teams Be Invited To Tournaments?

Calgary were invited to send a team to the Bay area Theatresports Tournament, and at the same time two of our players received separate invitations.

It may have been assumed that these two players would appear as part of the the Calgary team, but we try to give tournament experience to all our better players, and it doesn't automatically follow that our 'star' players will be on every team. We try to treat everyone fairly. We say "X went to New York, so we ought to give 'Y' a chance," or we say: "Z' has never been to a tournament, but she's made great progress, so let's include her." To add the players to our official team just because they have received separate invitations would have screwed up this system.

We were only offering to pay part of the players' fares, and the situation resolved itself when our all of our players either became unavailable, or too poor to subsidize the remainder of the airfares. So in the end no one from Calgary attended the Bay Area Tournament.



This experience taught us that that personal invitations should not coincide with official invitations. And it seems common sense that no one should represent an official Theatresports Group except the Team selected by that group.

If there are any other thoughts on the matter I'd like to hear them.

1 The closed-eye version should not be introduced until the stories seem to be 'writing themselves' i.e. the teacher should wait until the technique has been mastered.

2 People in this culture wear shoes most of the time and their feet are tender, so it's important that that they don't stub their toes. Being blindfolded, while receiving instructions about where to place your feet holds your attention onto the present moment, and makes it more difficult to maintain an 'objective' and 'critical' attitude

3 This would be the same sort of subliminal over-loading that Bunuel wanted, but was unable to afford, when he filmed the fight in Los Olvidados(?) and yearned to have a whole symphony orchestra pumping away in the unfinished parkade seen in the background.

4 *A Celtic Miscellany*, Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951

5 I remember one volunteer who said afterwards (re: the sideways room): "There was something really odd about that part of the trip!" We took her back to see it and she was amazed that the 'room' had been built sideways. This may give you some idea of the uncritical state that a willing and suggestible volunteer can get into.

6 Someone wearing a gorilla-suit could present the forfeits, and pin the ribbons onto successful players, and perhaps change the players 'name-boards' and help with the scenography, but Gorilla-suits are uncomfortable and you'd need a masochist for this.

7 The answer to the famous question that baffled Freud ("What do women want?") is that they want everything that the men have. And why not?

8 Make a fuss of the first ribbon, but don't allow the ribbon-pinning to hold up the show. Ribbons can be pinned on at the side of the stage while the next scene is being set up.

9 Ignaz von Seyfried, Quoted in Beethoven and his circle, AmSCO Music Publishing Company, New York, 1974

10 Since writing this essay I've taken part in such a Playwright's Sweat Shop. It's bizarre to have to write for three quarters of an hour knowing that your text will be performed as soon as it's been xeroxed! I haven't had so much fun for a long time.

11 See 'MANTRA Hearing the Divine in INDIA' by Harold Coward and David Goa, Anima Books, 1991.

### Alec Guinness (on Guthrie):.....

He hated readings of a play before rehearsals began and did his best to avoid them. The first day I rehearsed with him he spotted me marking my script and immediately demanded to know what I was doing. "Marking in the move you've just given me, Mr Guthrie". 'Don't,' he said. 'Waste of time. If I've given you a good move you'll remember it: if bad, you'll forget it and we'll think up another.' I have never marked my script since.....

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