

Keith Johnstone's Theatresports and Life-Game Newsletter

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Failure

I used to think that I should try to prevent the student from ever experiencing failure - I thought I could do this by always selecting exactly the right material, and by grading it in tiny steps. These days I think it's more important to teach ways of dealing with the pain of failure. I tell the students, "blame the teacher, laugh, never demonstrate a determination to 'try harder'."

Without failure, there can be no real game-playing. Think of tennis, of football, or ice-hockey - if every kick or swipe succeeded the activity would be pointless. People want to see a struggle involving sucess and failure.

The Lion Tamer removes his head from the Lion's mouth and towells the saliva off - we've all seen this, the Lion gagging on the hair-spray, the trainer acting his fear and relief. But suppose that the tamer had failed, and his headless body was running around like a chicken - would not this failure be the more interesting event? Of course it would - you'd remember it on your death bed ...

"Did I ever tell you ..."

"Yes Grandad !"

The audience likes to see failure, but they don't usually like seeing the performer punish himself. At school we learned that it was dangerous to sit in a Bhuddist tranquility. To placate the teacher we had to scrunch up, moan, drip sweat onto the paper, become a little blob of tension so that people could see we were 'trying'. Once we learnt to 'punish' ourselves by visibly suffering - then the teacher would leave us alone. The reason why so few people understand the value of failure, is that it's usually tied to this horrible self-punishment which is nothing to do with learning (muscle tension probably makes learning more difficult) and is purely defensive.

Suppose we have ten people on stage and we ask them to become one character, perhaps a Professor answering questions put by the spectators. This is a simple task, easy to train, but very impressive to the onlookers. With a little practise, and by a slow deliberation of speech, it's possible to do this without failing, but please don't do this ! The trick is to speak quicker, to speed up until you finally get a sentence tangled up - the audience almost always laugh and there's an unforced quality about the laughter, a whole-heartedness. No one individual feels responsible for the mistake so there's no need for any of the performers to punish themselves. These happy people screw up and yet stay completely good natured, and every spectator's heart warms to them.

From the beginning of his training the student should but be taught not to frown, not to tense up the muscles, not to sweat and moan and suffer when he 'fails'. No one pays money to see that ; we can get that at home.

Failure should be welcomed as an essential component of any game, and as an opportunity to show your generosity and good nature. Fail, and stay happy, and the audience think you're lovable, and charming ; they want to cuddle you and buy you drinks. Scowl, look pissed-off and full of rage, and you seem detestable, spoiled, self centered, unsportsmanlike. I've seen Wimbledon champions that I'd hate to be in the same room with ; ill-humour and malevolence don't really matter in tennis,

but such behavior is a disaster in the theatre where it doesn't really matter who wins, but where the spectators have got to have a good time, have got to relax and enjoy themselves, and should love and admire the performers.

Warning For Boring

Theatresports originally had three Warnings For Boring, and the actors were only thrown off the stage at the third warning. Finally we reduced it to one 'boring' call (still called Warning For Boring) which means that the performers must get off the stage immediately. Their work may have been fine at the start of their scene, so even though they've been thrown off the stage they should still be scored. Any one judge can give the Warnings For Boring (by honking the Bicycle Horn that hangs around each Judge's neck) but even he could award high marks. Any scene can become boring, but it may have been wonderful first.

Unfortunately, some groups have removed the Warnings For Boring. They feel that it's undignified, or that it spoils the work (which is already spoiled if it's boring), but the real reason is that they don't understand how to deal with failure. They indulge in hideous expressions of self-blame and/or hatred of the Judges, and the whole theatre becomes an unpleasant place to be in. If they'd stayed happy, friendly, then we admire them, and share in their good humour - and why should actors care so much? They will be back on stage soon, and they get their points anyway.

Hell Judges

This was my idea, but not my terminology. When the Hell Judges press a button, a red light flashes on and tells the public judges that at least some people in the theatre are bored. These Hell Judges are improvisors hidden somewhere further back in the audience.

The public judges are reluctant to give a Warning for Boring, but it's O.K. to make errors because then the whole audience will scream and boo - which is fun, and a privilege worth paying money for. The secret Hell Judges feel no terror at pressing the button because finally it's up to the public judges anyway, and no one will boo the Hell Judges because no one knows they even exist.

At first the public judges tended to ignore the red light. Now they usually obey it. Improvisors seem to feel no hostility to the judges - after all the judges who appear to be throwing them off stage may just be following the red light. I know Hell Judges sound stupid, but try them. They're solving most of our judging problems.

One Major Problem

Some improvisors think the whole point of Theatresports is that it allows them to walk on stage and 'goof-off'. Gags and jokes may carry you for a short time (twenty minutes?) but if you want the audience to stay interested for hours then you have to improvise stretches of narrative. Once Theatresports degenerates into being just a 'wittery' then the end of the performance is usually inferior to the beginning. Even stand-up comedians can't rely on just 'being funny'; not if they want to hold the audience for long periods.

If players insist that the whole point is to make the audience laugh, then ask :

"Wouldn't you like them to weep at a sad scene ?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't you like them to boo the villain and cheer the hero ?"

"Yes."

"...make their flesh creep with horror ?"

"Yes."

Improvisors would like to be able to affect the audience in all sorts of ways : unfortunately, comedy may be all they know, and all the audience trains them to know. If you make a gag the audience will laugh and this laughter reinforces the behavior. The conditioning effect is very strong, because the improvisor is almost certainly in a state of anxiety, and the laughter provides instant reassurance. The pressure from the audience should be resisted. Often we should be worried that they'll exhaust themselves laughing and resent being forced to laugh. We have to have variety, and an evening of nothing but gags is like soup followed by soup followed by soup followed by soup.

Storytelling - An Up-date

There's a chapter on Narrative in my book Impro (1979) which deals largely with free-association and recapitulation. What I'll write about here is the way that improvisors destroy stories so that nothing should happen. The player has to be retrained until at all points where he would kill a story dead, he develops it. Once this has been mastered, the 'dull' improvisor will seem 'brilliant'.

What is a story ? Try this definition - a story establishes a hero and then torments him, physically or psychologically (I think that covers most of the world's literature).

Add to this my observation that most people react to fantasy dangers exactly as they do to actual danger, and it no longer seems so unreasonable that the improvisor should kill every story stone dead. He doesn't want to be tormented, even in fantasy.

Suppose I meet a bear in the local forests. My best strategy is to protect myself by creeping quietly away. I try to avoid the interaction. An audience would like me in peril - if I creep away from the bear they want me confronted by a she-bear with cubs.

In general I want to be in control of all interactions so that I can stay safe - I'm a survivor, and so are you (congratulations for being here to read this). I do not want to be held over Vesuvius in a paper bag, or tied to a log as it approaches the circular saw, but people would pay to see enactments of this.

I try to avoid interaction (unless I control it) but the audience want the bear to chase me up a tree, or corner me against an abyss. The interaction matters more than the danger. They'd be happy if I played chess with the bear, removed a thorn from it's foot, or for it to unzip and for my old friend the Game-Warden to step out.

Dramatists have an usspoken agreement with us. They present us with a hero, and then guarantee that something unpleasant will happen to him. Everyone understands this, at least at an unconscious

level. If the film opens with the hero (or heroine) standing at a bus stop, we won't be in the least surprised if a car screeches around the corner and machine-guns the queue. If nothing untoward occurs, and the hero gets on the bus, then we classify the line-up as 'introduction', and we presume that something will happen on the journey. We'd like him to fall in love with another passenger, or to open up the paper and see his own picture - preferably wanted for murder. If he just gets off the bus and walks home, then we'll catalogue all of this action as introduction, but it'd better be well done or we'll get restless. (I mean, when is Red Riding Hood going to meet the wolf?) If our hero enters the house, calls 'Hello Darling!' and finds the kitchen sprayed with blood, the canary impaled on a fork, and the cat in the micro-wave, then at this point we feel satisfied. We recognise that the writer is fulfilling the secret agenda.

To stay out of trouble means struggling to control the future, but lack of control is of interest to other people. If we step into the street without looking we may have an interesting (dramatic) accident, and find it re-played on the Evening News for other peoples delectation.

The future is terrifying whenever we feel we've 'lost control'; when the SS-Men are hammering on the door, or when the Doctor tells us we've got a brain tumor, or when there's a screech of brakes from where our child is playing in the street. The future is also terrifying to the improviser when he performs on stage, or even in the studio, or even alone in his room practising.

To sum it up :

1. A narrative is a device for inflicting torments on the hero.
2. The improviser is likely to kill any story because he uses his everyday survival training to nullify the situations that occur on the stage.
3. If we re-train him, and make him go forwards at the exact moment when he would retreat, we'll see him as a 'natural story-teller'.

All you have to do now is watch improvisors and stop them acting as survivors - force them into trouble by taking away all their keep-safe techniques. However, for lazy people, I'll describe the techniques used by most improvisors.

Common Techniques For Wrecking Stories

The easiest way to examine these techniques in action is by playing the game What Comes Next. In it's simplest form, an actor goes on stage, says "What comes next?", and someone in the audience tells him.

"What comes next?"

"The phone rings!"

The actor picks up the phone and says :

"What comes next?"

Almost certainly - unless you've been training the game - someone will say :

"It's a wrong number!"

I call this Cancelling.

"What comes next?"

"The phone rings again."

"What comes next?"

"It's another wrong number."

The audience will laugh at this, but the story isn't going anywhere. It's as if the spectators making the suggestions want the story to begin but are unwilling to take the responsibility for it. Finally someone will say something like :

"There's a knock at the door."

I call this Sidetracking, because we still don't know who's on the phone. Being Original is a wonderful way to Sidetrack a story, and even get praise for your imaginative powers, for example :

"What comes next !"

"A ton of jello falls on you."

The original action was answering a phone. The obvious development for someone to be phoning up. This refusal to say who's on the phone is related to something we call 'Wimping'. You Wimp when you refuse to define what's happening. Lets suppose that the phone has been answered and that it's not a wrong number.

"Some one says 'Hallo'."

"What comes next."

"You have a conversation."

This is a Wimp because the story can't develop until we know who the improviser is interacting with, and nothing is being added. No one will take the responsibility of clarifying what is going on, or making any bold statement.

Another way to kill stories is by searching for Conflict. Very few people understand that Conflict can be a way of preventing anything from happening. Let's say the audience has told you to go to the phone :

"What comes next?"

"The phone is stuck to the cradle."

This is brilliant but stupid ; It's Original, it's a Wimp and it's a Conflict, yet no one will notice that the action has been completely Sidetracked. All this havoc is achieved in one short sentence. People think that Drama means conflict, but conflict can be used to develop the story, or to kill it stone dead, i.e. -

"Take this basket of cookies to Grannie dear."

"No I won't. Piss off. I'm fed up doing things for you!"

This is Conflict, and it's Original, and it attempts to Cancel the action, and it's also a Gag (see later). The audience will laugh, reinforcing this behavior, but either Red Riding Hood is sent to her room, and nothing happens, or she's forced to go, and we've lost all sympathy for her, and if we don't care about the Hero why should we be interested in her story ? For that matter, King Lear and his daughters could have just thrown stones at each other, but that wouldn't sustain our interest for very long.

Improvisors will often use Instant Trouble as a way to kill stories. If you walk on stage and

begin a quarrel or a fight, this can protect you from any real interaction.

"Like to swim ?"

"You're always pestering me !"

Even if the conflict does lead somewhere, your Negativity will still help protect you :

"That your Dog ?"

(Aggressive) "What if it is ?"

"Well, it's just eaten my child."

"That kid should know better than to interfere with that animal !"

This aggression means that you remain 'in Control', but we don't pay to see you 'in Control' (other things being equal). The point to understand is that there are improvisors who will always respond in a negative way. If you begin a story with, "What comes next ?", they'll say "

"The ceiling falls in !" Or "You have a heart attack !"

Instant Trouble can be a way to get the audiences attention - in street performances, for example - but treat it as an introduction. Kafka began a story with the Hero waking up transformed into a gigantic beetle, which is a great image, and certainly Instant Trouble, but it doesn't exactly lead into a great narrative.

Ask two improvisors to interact, and to accept each other's ideas, and they'll very likely start a Game of some kind, or they'll dance, or jump up and down. They seem to be interacting but nothing is developing. Games, or Agreed Activities are a common way of Sidetracking, both on stage, and in life. You can play cards with someone once a week for years and years and still know nothing about him.

"What comes next ?"

"You dance."

I might not interrupt here, because the dance might lead somewhere, but it's probably being used as a substitute for real interaction.

"What comes next ?"

"You both play chess !"

I'd probably interrupt and suggest something else :

"Say, 'There's something in the attic I've been meaning to show you'" - or something similar.

Games are a form of Hedging. Hedging is a very common way to screw up stories. Imagine you've been asked to fire someone. You'll probably start a scene this way :

"Come in Smith ... I suppose you know why I sent for you ?"

"No Sir."

"Ah ..."

At this point you'll feel quite confident, because you've a point in the future that you can always reach if your invention fails you. Very likely you'll talk on for minutes, clarifying the situation, making it inevitable that you have to fire him, perhaps going through his whole working history, and the firms history and this Gossip might be entertaining, but in my view you're refusing to develop

any narrative at all. Supposing the scent had started this way :

"Sit down Smith."

"Yes Sir ?"

"You're fired !"

"Why Sir ?"

This interaction is much stronger, because once you stop Hedging, the future is a complete blank. Excellent ! The audience know they'd never have played the scene that way - they're all experts on Hedging, Wimping, Being Original and so on, and they'll admire your courage in throwing away the lead lifebelt. We can all Waffle on for hours with absolutely nothing happening at all, but people don't pay money to see this.

An effective way to kill interaction (i.e. Narrative) is by Gossip.

"How's the garden ?"

"Oh fine. Could do with some rain."

"True. Well, be seeing you."

I define Gossip as talking about something happening at some other place, or some other time. You can do this without really interacting with your partner at all. When theatre people said (back in the twenties) that they were trying to drive literature out of the theatre, I presume they really meant Gossip. Let's drive it out of improvisation except when we need it for contrast.

The commonest way to retain control of a situation, and to prevent or slow down interaction is by Blocking. (see 'IMPRO')

Here's a common way for a scene to start :

"Tea ?"

"Coffee."

Instantly there's a conflict between the improvisors. This offer of tea seems so trivial to be threatening, and yet bad improvisors will not even allow that much control to be taken away from them. Blocking is a form of Cancelling.

"That your Dog ?"

"No."

Whatever was intended by the questioner has now been thwarted. The audience may even laugh (they like seeing people thwarted) but now what ? If you say :

"Don't I know you ?"

The answer will almost certainly be "No !"

"Did the parcel come ?"

"No."

"I like your haircut."

"I'm bald"

"What day is it ?"

"I've no idea."

This is how some people actually do improvise.

I've written at length on Blocking in 'Impro', but that book dates mostly from the sixties. Years after I became well known as an improvisation teacher I suddenly understood that even if you remove the blocking, many students will then resort to Negativity. Suppose someone mimes painting their nails - if you say :

"You sure made a mess of that !"

... Then you accept the painting of the nails, but you stay in control. If you were positive, then your partner would have control :

"You painted those nails well."

"Like me to do yours ?"

Being Negative slows things down, or stops them dead, and it's the students initial reaction when you force him not to block.

"What comes next ?"

"You watch T.V."

"What comes next ?"

"There's nothing on T.V. that interests you."

It would be better, in training to forbid such negative suggestions. For example :

"The T.V. fascinates you."

This is much more likely to generate interesting narrative.

Gagging - in my definition - is getting a laugh, or trying to get a laugh by attacking the story and destroying it's reality. Radio comedians will do it by referring to the script :

"Paganini !"

"What ?"

"Paganini !"

"Let me see that script !"

Rustle of paper.

"Paganini ! That's page Nine you fool !"

And so on.

Improvisors often take 'don't Gag' to mean 'Don't be funny !', but there are plenty of ways to get laughter while respecting the narrative. Gags are used to kill narrative, which is why they're useful for ending scenes - you get a big laugh and end the story, but please don't get a laugh by destroying the reality of a story when it's still developing. Sometimes a gag is so funny that it's worth destroying a story for, but it's difficult for the improviser to assess this properly in mid-flight. Bad improvisors are afraid of stories so if they happen on a gag when they're going to use it. If you're paddling towards an island in a rubber dingy you could get a laugh by puncturing the dingy, but don't do it deliberately, and don't do it at the expense of never getting to the island. I see improvisors making gags, and then nothing happens. The audience think : 'Thanks for making us laugh, now be funnier', and the imprvisors are suddenly like drowning men grasping at straws. Everything seems empty, uninspired, amoral, second-rate, and derivative, even though I know how good the improvisers could be if they'd stop torpedoing themselves.

What Comes Next is described in Impro under the name Working People, but it's the analysis of the suggestions made that makes it really useful. Train the players to avoid :

1. Cancelling - Little Red Riding Hood was about to leave the house when Grannie phoned up and said 'Don't come.'
2. Sidetracking - She set out with the basket of cookies and stopped to throw stones in the river. Soon a raft came by and she hopped on ... etc. (anything rather than meet the Wolf !)
3. Being Original - (Originality used as a way of sidetracking) - Little Red noticed something grey moving through the trees, at that moment she entered a time warp which took her back to the sixteenth century ...
4. Wimping - This is usually a refusal to define i.e. Little Red met a big, huge, hairy, grey, friendly ... animal ... in the Forest. (I swear that Improvisors will operate in this way, removing the foundations of the story by refusing to define the things they are interacting with).
5. Conflict - (when used to freeze the action).

"What big teeth you have Grandma ?"

"What's wrong with my teeth ?"

"Well they are big !"

"Let me see the mirror. My teeth are fine."

"They're ugly."

"Rubbish."

And so on.

6. Instant Trouble (Instant Conflict) - Little Red stepped out of the front door and the Wolf gobbled her up.
7. Games (Agreed Activities) - Little Red Riding Hood gets to the cottage and she and Grannie play table tennis all afternoon.
8. Hedging - "Now you know Grannie's not been well, and she lives on her own. I've told her it's silly but she won't listen. She's got arthritis, and it's difficult for her to look after herself ..." And so on. Mum may never get to the point of actually giving Red Riding Hood the basket.
9. Gossip :

"Do you remember when I sent you with that basket of Cookies to Grannie ?"

"Oh yes, I met the Wolf !"

"Yes. That was before we had his head hung over the mantelpiece."

"I told him what big teeth he had."

"And he gobbled you up. The kettle's boiling, I'll make some Ovaltine."

"And it was a terrible shock to meet Grannie inside him."

Here Gossip is used as a substitute for action.

10. Blocking - "Are you going to see your Grannie, little Girl ?"

"I don't have a Grannie !"

11. Negativity :

"All the better to gobble you up with."

"Oh well, if you must. God ! Wolves are so boring."

(This response is also a Gag)

12. Gagging - (see above). Little Red is a Black Belt and hurls the Wolf all over the room. i.e. she stays out of trouble.

As you probably realise, all of these techniques (perhaps with the exception of Gagging) can be used to enhance a story rather than to kill it. It's usually very clear when an improviser is working against narrative, and, with practise, easy to correct him.

A story is like an arrow fired into darkness, and most people will try to deflect it, block it, destroy it, before it gets anywhere, and they do this with wonderful speed and ingenuity. They should not be allowed to offer this as proof of their 'lack of talent'.

Competitiveness

If the teams get too competitive - i.e. the score becomes more important to them than the success of the actual game, and they take no pleasure in the work of their opponents, try scratch teams, picked on the night.

Another method that will help (although it's drastic) is to decide which team will win before the game starts - perhaps picking the final score and seeing how close the Judges can get to it.

Ending Shows

I've suggested that five actors walk on stage, each with a score card, and that the audience be invited to clap as each number is held up (Theatresports is scored from one to five). The card that gets the most applause is the score that the audience gives to the whole evening. The audience is surprisingly generous so far.

In Haste

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