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Acting together: the art of collective improvisation in theatre and politics

Abstract   The paper analyzes the concept of collective improvisation and draws out its potentials for social and political theory. Translating the ideas of collective improvisation from their original context in the theatre into the field of political thought, I argue that they offer a new understanding of political action by re-evaluating the concepts of dissensus (Rancière) and community (Nancy), as well as the ways in which politics as a system needs to produce collectively binding decisions (Luhmann). I conclude that the ideas inherent in the practice of collective improvisation, as it has been developed within the tradition of modern theatre improvisation, subvert our intuitive ways of thinking about politics and thereby offer an alternative model of being and acting together.

Keywords: collective improvisation, theatre improvisation, acting, political philosophy, political theory.

Introduction

When we talk about political action, collective engagement and protest[1], those three concepts imply that when we engage for something, or protest against something, we have a certain idea of a better state that the one that is now, we also have an idea of how the future will look like, and ideally we also have some kind of a strategy, a plan for a sequence of actions that will lead us to that better future.

Here I will present a specific point of view, where collective action exists *without* having an idea of where this collective action will bring us, so there is no specific vision of what the future will, or should look like.

This alternative way of understanding 'acting together' does not come from political theory, but from theatre theory, more precisely from a very specific theory of acting. The specific theory of acting I will be referring to here can be summed up under the category 'modern theatre improvisation'. Its beginnings were influenced by the popular theatre tradition commedia dell'arte as well as by avant-garde theatre experiments and were consolidated into a specific philosophy and technique of performing by several

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1   Refering to the wording of the conference *How To Act Together: From Collective Engagement To Protest* where this paper was first presented.

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'founding fathers': Viola Spolin, David Shepherd, Paul Sills, Del Close and Keith Johnstone. Since their first theatre workshops and performances in the 1950s, which took place partly in the UK and partly in the U.S. and Canada, the first improvisational troupes focused on collective improvisation not as mere acting exercises or tools to develop scripted materials, but made collective improvisation into an artform in itself, only made possible by a unique philosophy of collective creation and human communication. In the following decades modern theatre improvisation as a technique of performing has spread globally and developed – with some analogies to the genesis and the developments of jazz – into many variations: from mainstream entertainment to experimental performance and applied theatre, influenced by specific regional and institutional contexts, often also blurring the lines between different theatre genres as well as the strict division between classical and modern approaches to performances, and between scripted and non-scripted theatre. However, in order to show the conceptual potential of collective improvisation to political philosophy, I will here focus on what is specific to the tradition of modern theatre improvisation and not on its intersections with other theories of acting, other approaches to making theatre or any other approach to collective creation.

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First, I will outline the method and philosophy of collective improvisation, as it is practiced in the theatre (and more recently, also in film), in order to then translate it into the context of political theory and show how collective improvisation re-assesses the concepts of not only collective action, but also of dissensus (Rancière), of community (Nancy) and collective decision-making (Luhmann).

Modern Theatre Improvisation: Definition And Basic Principles

Modern theatre improvisation is a specific theatre tradition where performances are created through spontaneous interactions of performers, live in front of the audience.

As an acting technique, modern theatre improvisation encompasses a set of rules, principles and ideas of how to act together with other actors – collectively – on stage, with no script.

The development of collective improvisation in the theatre can be historically contextualized within the avant-garde attacks on the classical approach to theatre, on the roles and hierarchies within the classical theatre (author, director, actors). One of the new approaches to doing theatre (or art in general) that I address here is the collaborative approach to creating completely improvised performances, as it was pioneered by the workshops of the theatre

educator Viola Spolin in Chicago in the 1930s, continued with the first professional improvisational troupe The Compass in the 1950s, and developed by Keith Johnstone in the Londons Royal Court Theatre also in the 1950s.

Focusing on the difference between classical approach to theatre on the one hand and collective improvisation (as one of the theatrical counterparts to it) on the other hand, we can say that where in the classical approach there was a director, hierarchically higher than the actors and giving them directions on how they are to act (and how to act well), in collective improvisation the role of the director dissolves into a collective of actors who are equal in status and are directing their own actions themselves. Where in classical theatre there was an author of a script, in collective improvisation there is no script, the actors know no more than the fact that they will act together, but not what (until they have acted it out).

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The question is then, if there is no director, no script and the actors are just left to themselves, how can actors create a performance collectively?

The pioneers of modern theatre improvisation came up with the basic principles of collective improvsiation that performers rely on up to this very day:

1st Principle

The first principle of improvisation is that *the actor needs to 'say yes'/accept their own first impulse*. The actor who enters an empty stage makes the first action that comes to their mind, meaning that the first choice of action is always the best choice.

2nd Principle

The second principle states that you have to *'say yes' to your fellow actors*, that is *accept their actions as established reality* – do not deny what is said or done by other actors onstage. If another actor establishes something, be it physically or verbally, it is there.

3rd Principle

The third principle says: *take the active instead of the passive choice*. This means that you are free to choose onstage. You are expected not only to accept the reality established by another actor, but you also *have to establish additional things yourself*.

4th Principle

And the last principle is: make meaningful connections between the elements already established.

(Johnstone 1979, Sweet 1994, Vilč 2015)

Re-visiting the Notions of Community, (Dis)Agreement and Collective Decision-Making

These very technical principles of theatre acting as described above, if we look at them more closely, also carry an implicit philosophy of human interaction, of the social and of the collective. What does this mean in terms of political theory? Let us look at the examples how collective improvisation offers the ways to rethink the concepts of community, disagreement and collective decision-making.

1. Community

Collective improvisation, as practiced across the abovementioned examples, creates a community of those who share improvisation as a common language of performing. This common language can be, in the most extreme case, the only thing the actors have in common. However, the technique of improvisation enables any two random actors to be and act together, without the necessity of any other intermediary (a script, a director, or even a common spoken language). Collective improvisation thus offers itself as an example of how to imagine a community that has nothing else in common but that which is happening in the moment – not a common past, not a common future. In order to act together, neither a common identity needs to be constructed in terms of some common substance nor is there a need to imagine a future scenario for being-together that we will all agree on now. (Vilč 2015: 166)

If we have escaped the trap of one single idea leading the way for everybody and consequentially having the need to erase and destroy everything that does not conform to it – still, the question remains: if collective improvisation allows for everybody to do what they want, doesn't the community of those who are acting together just fall apart? (Vilč 2015: 166–167)

This is exactly the question that Jean-Luc Nancy tries to answer when looking for a contemporary way to think about the community without falling into totalitarianism on the one side and liberal individualism on the other. To avoid falling into dispersed indiviualism, Nancy redefines how we understand freedom and independence. As he says, freedom and independence are never floating in a void but are always freedom *for* someone or something or independence *of* someone or something. (Nancy 1991) While improvising, a performer is free exactly because he or she is free to choose how to react to the action of their acting partner. But to have this freedom, the performer *needs* the acting partner who does this or that action in the first place. This means that the performers who are acting together can be free only *through* each other. Likewise, being independent of a script means that the actors

are not dependent on some voice, external to them, but on each other. (Vilč 2015: 167) This is a much more radical idea that that of a simple 'collaboration'. The ethical principle here is not that of collaboration or team work or the like – the principle here is that the first impulse of the first action or wish for an action comes from outside of me and not from myself. So a community, in a sense, comes before those who make it. (Vilč 2015: 155–156) It is on the example of collective improvisation – where individuals who are thrown into the same space and time give themselves as their only goal to make sense of it together – that we can imagine a community that would not be oppressive, on the one hand, and not be just a random cluster of individuals following their own interests on the other.

2. (Dis)Agreement

There are, roughly speaking, two ways in which to think about politics, and consequently, two ways in which collective improvisation can contribute to that thinking. One way of thinking about politics is to think in terms of the community – what makes a community, who belongs to it, who does not and what the systems of inclusion and exclusion are. In this view, the political act is always that of voicing some kind of disagreement: a disagreement as to how a particular community is identified and formed, the disagreement of those who have been excluded from that community, the disagreement about what the topics of common concern are at all. (Rancière: 2004)

As shown above, along the lines of Jean-Luc Nancy, collective improvisation gets around the problem of disagreement, since without script and without predefined roles, there is – strictly speaking – nothing to disagree about. If community comes before those who make it, if the first impulses for action come only through the other, even a seemingly negative or negating action will be accepted and integrated into the course of the ongoing interaction, changing its course as any other action does. However, one very basic specificity of theatrical training in collective improvisation must be mentioned in some more detail. The first skill to be acquired is getting rid of the reflex to reject or ignore actions by the fellow actors and subsequently the reflex to accept and further develop whatever is already going on is trained on a regular basis. Actors who begin their training in collective improvisation learn to listen and not to block impulses from their fellow actors not by any kind of ideology, but out of practical necessity: while improvising together, they quickly realize that by not listening and/or blocking, a common action can never develop, it stales in place, they prohibit any possible story to evolve and increase uncertainty and mistrust among actors. This is not an intellectual realization which would arise out of a theoretical discourse, but an emational, physical and intuitive experience that comes out of live interaction onstage.

Beginner improvisers learn through experience that in order to survive on-stage, in order to produce anything worth being a part of or watching, they need to support each other. Failing, misunderstanings and messing up are a part of the process and in the best case become, as any other element, a building block to what is to happen next. Teaching collective improvisation on the other hand brings at least two insights: first, listening and agreeing are skills much harder to acquire than ignoring and rejecting (which oddly enough seem to be the default states), and second, with proper training the former become the basis of any successful collective action and make it resilient to real or potential destructive forces, similarly to the logic of soft power.

In collective improvisation the philosophy of being together is postulated on the need to agree on *something* – this something could be *anything*, but there needs to be an agreement first if any kind of 'acting together' is going to happen. A group of people can come together to do a performance, and it does not have to be because they would gather to do a 'specific' performance with a 'specific' concept but can be just from the sheer fact that they want to *be* together and do *something* together. If this something could be anything, it means that the group has joined not because they already share a common direction or interest, but because their only common interest is to *find* a common interest. (Vilč 2015: 168) If we take a look at the method and the philosophy of collective improvisation, how does this happen? How does a group decide on anything?

3. Decision-Making

Here we come to the second way of thinking about politics – politics as a system that enables a group to come to collectively binding decisions. (Luhmann 2002) Any community needs to be able to make decisions about common concerns, and the different ways in which this can be done are classified as different political systems. In collective improvisation, in the context of artistic practice, we are not necessarily talking about political communities, but more technically about systems of decision-making. However, this offers interesting insights into how we understand power, hierarchy and policy-making on a broader scale. A first analogy that comes to mind is that of hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical systems of cooperation and decision-making. In a classical account of improvisational theatre, there is no script and no director, nobody has any priority in deciding anything and the actors are free to act as they choose.

If we take a closer look at who makes decisions in collective improvisations and how these decisions relate to the distribution of power within the group, we could say that every individual is empowered to decide. But – this empowerment is only possible because all the others are *actively listening*, paying

attention to what one will do, so that they can find their own reaction, their own way of relating to what is being acted out. In the practice of collective improvisation, decisions are made not only in real time but are being made by many who are simultaneously constantly tuning in to the decisions of the other actors. However, in collective improvisation, taking the initiative is extremely important – that is, not only accepting what is happening but also taking a step further, adding new things, either by taking the next step in the same direction or completely changing it. Collective improvisation without such initiative does not work, but the role of the initiator is not fixed – the role of the initiator is constantly jumping from one actor to the other. The analogy to anarchy would be fitting if we assume that it implies that a hierarchy between actors is not set in advance and that no kind of hierarchy is being preserved throughout the performance – the analogy to anarchy would also be correct, if it implies that there is no hierarchy at all. If anarchy means that there is no leader, the analogy to collective improvisation is justified, but, at the same time, to presume that in collective improvisation there is no order would be false. There is no pre-set order, but there is an *emergent order*, which becomes evident in retrospect, after the performance is finished.

Since in collective improvisation there is no author and noone to prescribe the order of events, improvisers are trained to respect the principle of lining up one event after another in such a way that they establish connections between each subsequent action. The 'Yes, and' principle expresses this basic rule for how a common direction, and more specifically, a common thread can be taken up through collective action, even if there is no overall leader to give orders and make order.

To be able to let a certain order emerge out of collective action, to line up one event after the other, one action after another and make connections between them, requires from the actors one paramount skill – listening. It is only through listening, through caring what the other actors are doing and saying, without reserve, that collective improvisation can 'work'.

The more actors there are, the less one needs to actively initiate, say or do, and the more one needs to *actively listen*. As two or more actors stand in front of each other, not knowing what the other will do next, the uncertainty diminishes with each subsequent action, as the terrain of the improvisation becomes more and more defined and the actors begin to recognize patterns, possible directions, and narrow them down. At some point, the actors acting together will connect on a level of the so-called 'group mind', where the expectation and the enactment of what is going to happen next becomes the same for everybody involved. In moments of such flow, everybody seems to be thinking the same thing and following exactly the same plan – even though there is none. (Vilč 2015: 169–171)

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Conclusion

The type of understanding of agency and action, as described through the basic principles of modern theatre improvisation and its theoretical implications, lets us rethink some central concepts in political theory, such as community, dissensus and collectively binding decision-making. By doing so, the basic principles of modern theatre improvisation enable us to articulate an alternative approach to political practice as well by abstracting them from their performative context. The result of this procedure sums up a political philosophy of being and acting together in the following manner:

1. A community is not formed out of those who share the same interests, but out of those whose only common interest is – *to find a common interest*.

2. Political subjects do not grow out of the sum of those who were left uncounted, were overseen and overheard, of those who disagree – but they grow out of the sum of those who agree to agree on something.

3. Decisions are always provisional: they are made quickly, but they are also abandoned quickly, when necessary.

4. The highest virtue of politics is not being able to speak, but being able to listen.

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Delati zajedno: umetnost kolektivne improvizacije
u pozorištu i politici

Apstrakt

Rad analizira pojam kolektivne improvizacije i mogućnosti njegove primene na
društvenu i političku teoriju. Tvrdim da nam prevođenje ideja o kolektivnoj im-
provizaciji, iz njihovog izvornog pozorišnog konteksta u polje političke misli, otva-
ra nova razumevanja političkog delovanja, preosmišljavanjem pojmova neslaga-
nja (dissensus) (Ransijer), zajednice (Nansi), i politike kao sistema kolektivno
obavezujućih odluka (Luman). U zaključku tvrdim da nam ideje inherentne prak-
si kolektivne improvizacije – kako je razvijana u tradiciji moderne pozorišne im-
provizacije – podrivaju intuitivno mišljenje o politici i time pružaju alternativni
model za zajedničko bivanje i delanje.

Kjlučne reči: kolektivna improvizacija, pozorišna improvizacija, delanje, politička
filozofija, politička teorija.

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