

BOOK REVIEW

IMPRO IMPROVISATION AND THE THEATRE

by Kieth Johnstone

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Reviewed by Hilary Blecher

Many 'well adjusted' adults are bitter, uncreative, frightened, unimaginative, and rather hostile people. Instead of assuming that they were born that way, or that that's what being an adult entails we might consider them as people damaged by their education and their upbringing.

Thus Keith Johnstone expresses the central thesis of his book. In order to eradicate these negative effects and to re-stimulate and encourage creativity he has developed a specialised programme of improvisations, games and techniques. While most of these have originated out of his work with the Royal Court Theatre, they are relevant to any teaching theory and practice in which creativity and spontaneity are valued.

Mr Johnstone's book is clearly influenced by his own youthful experiences and the disadvantages he suffered by censoring his own natural responses in an attempt to win the approval and acceptance necessary for success. Originality was a decided risk and inhibited by the fear of appearing stupid, failing or being ostracised.

He holds the existing social and educational systems responsible for encouraging the students to operate within the parameters of good taste and acceptability - to be self-consciously clever, to write elegant verse, to paint conventional paintings; to be concerned with presentation rather than content, with effects and results. Instead of extending individual potential this system deadens growth and cuts the adult off from all spontaneity and he is reduced to conformity and stereotype.

Johnstone's personal mission is to introduce techniques which will allow the participants in his classes to free themselves from cliché behaviour and thinking and induce them to rediscover that the greatest value and delight arises when they respond freely, openly and imaginatively to situations and relationships. He urges them not to try to control the result, not to aim for success or manipulate progress but allow themselves to operate off actual dynamics, stimuli and interactions that arise.

The fields in which he is most involved, those of theatre and creative writing, define his vocabulary and his approach: he relies on improvisation, mask and trance techniques, and status transactions to challenge the work beyond the mundane and the uninspired to that of original discovery and experience.

In his book Johnstone gives practical advice on how to handle improvisations, stressing co-operation, trust and the development of the participant's confidence to allow him the freedom to follow his own creative act and develop the improvisation

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His mask work is perhaps the most controversial aspect of his teaching. He works off a shamanistic concept of possession: each actor is required to discover the exact spirit which inhabits the mask through the induction of a trance-like state. He argues that this results in a duality analogous that in acting in which the actor becomes the character he is playing and yet at the same time maintains a controlling consciousness.

His description of the events and situations that arose in his mask classes seems to depend too heavily on his personal suggestion and interpretation: he has a strong belief in the immutable power of the mask to assume form and control the actions of the person wearing it. While mask work is of great benefit in freeing the individual and allowing the development of unique responses in the actor, Johnstone seems to have blurred the technical advantages and to have become too concerned with the experimental novelty.

A useful concept which he introduces is that of STATUS. For Johnstone all actions, movements and inflections imply an awareness of status: each person defines himself through the discrepancies in the status between himself and others. For example, a man who plays a low-status to his employer who plays high-status towards him, but who in turn may play low-status to a domineering wife. Status relationships also operate in regard to space. In one's own home one usually plays high status - in a cathedral or magistrate's office one plays a low status.

Johnstone suggests that all comedy is dependent on characters lowering and raising their own status and that of the other characters. The main advantage of status games and exercises is that they allow the actor a technique for structuring improvisations - "The status exercises are really crutches to support the actor so that instinctual systems can operate. Once again, however, Johnstone seems to overstate the case and thus weaken a truly useful and insightful concept. He suggests "that a good play is one which ingeniously displays and reverses the status between the characters. He severely limits the potency of a play such as *Waiting for Godot* when he claims that "if you observe the status, then the play is fascinating. If you ignore it the play is tedious".

While all Johnstone's theories and descriptions of his practical work are invigorating and fascinating, one feels that some of it depends on his particular personality and/or psyche for its ultimate success.

TEACHING TELEVISION

By Len Masterman

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Reviewed by Keyan Tomaselli

Gene Youngblood (1970) has written that "The world's not a stage, it's a TV documentary. John van Zyl (1977) argues, "We don't watch television, it

watches and guides us", and Kingsley Widmer (1973) warns "We may not choose to communicate but we shall be communicated with" Johan Grove(1977), who was responsible for introducing media studies into six Transvaal schools laments:

While teachers are parsimoniously prepared to use a film only when it suits their limited needs, to show the pupils the film version of their prescribed Shakespeare play, and then wax enthusiastic about how it helped them in their understanding of the play, they remain unaware of the rich potential of literary experience and teaching material that they are trampling underfoot. Through the teaching of film they could unlock and systematise for many of their pupils, and for themselves, many of those vistas shared with the masters of the printed medium by only a few readers.

In 1975, the Transvaal Education Department introduced a Matriculation qualifying course to begin in Standard eight, entitled "Media Studies". A sub-section of the English syllabus, the course was introduced initially on a trial basis in six high schools. Since, apparently, little cooperation was forthcoming from SABC-TV, the curriculum development department of the TED concentrated initially on full length features and, when these proved too demanding for the pupils, short films and featurettes. The Department itself developed study guides under the guidance of Johan Grove, a former English teacher. Since media studies were a relatively new phenomenon, even at South African universities, teachers of this course started at a disadvantage, particularly as little resource material or text books were available. Of significance then, is the publication of Len Masterman's book, Teaching about Television.

Some of the results of the TED media studies project are reported in Christie (1979), while two MA theses are in progress: "The Theory and Practice of Film Film Study at Secondary Schools Level. A Study of Film Language and the Filmic Presentation of Plot, Character, Space and Time" by Johan Grove through the Wits School of Dramatic Art and Willem van der Walt's "The principles and Practice of Screen Education in High School English" being done through the Dept. of Education at Cape Town University.

While the direction of media studies in Transvaal schools is couched in the mode of literary criticism, this is in itself a disadvantage for it only introduces the media pupil to a small segment of media understanding. It perpetuates the traditions of a print oriented educational system and restricts film or television criticism to within the literary mode. Masterman's book, however, offers a more comprehensive paradigm which would be of benefit to those teachers involved in the media studies programme.

Teaching About Television has been written against the background that children spend more time watching television than they spend at school. The book offers a detailed guide, in both theoretical and practical terms, to the development of a critical awareness of how television works and communicated, to the schoolchild.

Considerable attention is given to the clarification of current theoretical debates in media education and a conceptual framework for the schoolchild is developed. The traditional argument that school time would be wasted in the study of a trivial medium such as television is countered by Masterman in his argument that what is said on television is less important than how it is said. Stuart Hood's introduction makes this point clear:

What pupils who are taught about television should be come aware of is that television has a language of its own with which values are suggested, attitudes reinforced and statements conveyed about society, the family, male-female relationships. The language is a complex one consisting not only of words but of gestures. The way a shot is framed, the way the opening titles are designed, the way an announcer is dressed, the way the studio is furnished. In short, he sees television as a conveyor of ideology - an ideology which is the more effective, the less easy to challenge, if the viewer is convinced that the medium is transparent. For ideology on television depends to a large degree on the impression that its images are as apparently unmediated as water, gas or electricity appear to be when we turn on a tap or switch on a light.

Against this background, the author sets out to demystify the process of television. Questions of classroom organisation and teaching methodology are examined in detail. The author provides a series of introductory exercises in perception and decoding designed to prepare students for an examination of the complex set of images which constitute television programmes. The chapter on Television News offer ways and means of producing a news programme in the classroom, and then of decoding bias and distortion in actual news broadcasts. This section sets out to debunk the notion that "television news items are delivered to the public by a neutral observer who passes on the news items with no factual distortion at all" (p.77). Other chapters deal with the study of various programmes ranging from football, Tomorrow's World to Mastermind and Porridge. Exercises in programme planning are suggested, first for a single station, and later for three competing stations. Through such simulations, operating under differing constraints, the student will learn the significance of specific schedules - commercial, social and political. Approaches to the production and study of "The Interview", "Television Documentary", "Television Commentary" and "Serials" are offered in a comprehensive chapter entitled Aspects of Television. The final chapter, Social, Political and Aesthetic Education Through Television underlies the fact that teaching is both a social and political activity. The social, aesthetic and political attitudes of children are moulded and guided by television, from the News to the situation comedy. If this process is not identified by both teacher and pupil, the real relevance of television will be missed.

Although this book deals primarily with British originated programme material, much of which is denied South African audiences through the Equity ban, the underlying principles in television analysis and practical television work can easily be adapted to the study of South African television in the classroom. Whether such analysis is desirable in terms of the prevailing ideology is a moot point, but at least a start has been made in the TED media studies course, if only in a literary mode.

A perusal of current media research will show, in South Africa at least, that the intellectual moment for media studies at school level has arrived not to mention the study of communication at university level. Many of the latter are purely service courses, and would do well to examine Masterson's book. Teaching About Television is a significant contribution and is recommended to teachers in television and media studies.

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